

xgirl's x-files fanfiction



collected works

1999 - 2001

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foreword

It was suggested to me by the first person who read *Crossing Lines* that I should consider turning it into a "novel type" publication. At the time, I hardly knew if I would be writing any more fanfic at all, never mind shooting for something on such a grand scale. As the saying goes, "funny how things turn out" because as I put my collection of completed fanfic into this volume, the total amount amazed me. Significant other authors have written reams more than me, but I just never realized that what "little" I had managed to create would add up to so many pages.

My fanfic "career" began in September of 1998 (or March 1999, depending on interpretation) and ended, for all intents and purposes, in June of 2001. It was a unique experience that I will treasure for a long time to come. I'm ever grateful for the modest bits of success that I managed to achieve and to have been given supportive feedback, recognition and encouragement from the very first moment. Whether it was the thrill of discovering that people were recommending my stories on various message boards, or the surprise of not once but twice having my work selected as the "fic of the week" at a fanfic archive, it's safe to say that I've had a memorable time.

One of life's certainties is that hobbies and interests will always come and go. It's not often, however, that one's mere hobby can have a lasting impact on others around the world. These stories are my contribution to the world of TXF fandom. I hope you'll enjoy reading them as much I enjoyed writing them.

xgirl@mindless.com, October 2001

Crossing Lines



The line between friends and lovers can be a difficult one to cross, especially when there are other unresolved issues...

Fox Mulder swiped at his forehead with the back of his hand, wondering if their new office was just a tiny bit on the warm side, after all those years of little or no heat. Their official quarters — above ground, finally — had windows; so maybe it was just the feeling of the sun shining in on him. Or maybe the air was stifling in a different sort of way. He looked up from his stack of brand new file folders and glanced across the room at his partner, who sat at her desk, fingers poised silently over the keyboard of her computer. Silent, that was the thing. What was she so suddenly absorbed in?

It was only their second day back at work after taking two weeks off. Once the official hearings into the matters of the Dallas bombing and their subsequent journey to Antarctica had been completed and the X-Files reinstated, Dana Scully had booked herself a vacation to San Diego to visit with her brother and his family. Everything seemed to be in order, but the intensity of their most recent adventure had definitely left Scully with a feeling of needing to be normal again. She also felt a need to be away — for a short time — from work and from Mulder. She wanted some time to think, to make some decisions, and ultimately clear her head.

Mulder had followed her lead and had actually gone away for the better part of a week, renting a cabin to do some writing. He had decided that it was a healthy move, one that was well-timed, given all that they had gone through in the past several months. He somehow seemed to sense that this was to be truly "off" time for the both of them. He did not turn on his cell phone, nor did he call Scully from his retreat. He spent most of his hours writing longhand in a journal, something he had done on and off throughout the years since Samantha's disappearance.

He had come in early on Monday morning — yesterday — refreshed and ready to go back to work. He felt better than he did a few months ago, when the fire that ravaged their basement office had left him feeling as destroyed as his files. Truth be told, he didn't think that he was capable of having any more feelings after the shock of that day. Combined with his own increasing disillusionment, it just seemed like it was time to call it a day, call it a life, crawl into a hole and die. Now, after Antarctica, he sensed a small renewal coming on, with new battles to fight and some semblance of hope that they might actually win some of them. What he wasn't prepared for, was the quiet tension that was now filling their new office.

Oh, it wasn't anything dramatic or overt, just palpable enough to make him focus on it for the past day and a half. It was an unfamiliar feeling. One of the most satisfying aspects of his partnership with Scully was that he never felt uncomfortable around her, not from the very beginning. He always knew something was up when the comfort level dropped. Scully herself appeared to be sufficiently renewed, with no visible signs of what had happened to her, but her conversation had taken on an almost formal tone. No, that wasn't it either. Scully had simply shut off a part of herself again.

He continued to eye her over his stack of files. They had been told to re-organize and re-build from scratch. Scully was in charge of sifting through their set of computerized backups and Mulder was attempting to put together a rudimentary manual filing system. It was all very mechanical work, no analysis involved. So why had she stopped and what was she so engrossed in? She didn't even notice that he had stopped making noise also and was watching her in complete silence.

Jesus, he hoped that she wasn't reopening old wounds by actually reading reports from some of their old cases, or her cases, for that matter. A sudden nauseating wave of guilt washed over him as he thought back to how he had insisted that he needed her to go on with his quest. Although he had also later told her to go away and be safe in private practice, sometimes he wondered just how selfish he was being. Did Scully really need to be back in the midst of all this alien conspiracy claptrap? Did she really want to be here or was she here because he wanted her to be here?

They had still not addressed what had happened between them in the hallway at his apartment that night. Strangely enough, it was not foremost in his mind at all times. It didn't really bother him that they hadn't talked about it. It was actually quite like them not to do so. He could think of any number of moments in their past that probably should have been talked about but had been left alone. He didn't like to admit it, but a part of him was grateful for that. He sighed in exasperation, wondering why he was such a coward that way. Why did he constantly feel like a 17-year-old when it came to dealing with Dana Scully, the woman?

Scully looked up upon hearing his sigh, seemingly awakened from some daydream. "Something wrong?" she finally said as she locked eyes with him.

"Penny for your thoughts, Scully?"

"I think I'd need more than a penny for these thoughts, Mulder." She said it with a sad smile, looking at him almost wistfully.

"Well, it's almost that time, I could buy you lunch in return for some edification." He tried to smile more cheerfully for her, but the shadows on her face were causing him some concern. When she didn't answer right away, he continued, "Really, Scully, you were sorta far away there. You weren't digging into any unpleasant stuff, were you? We're just here to catalogue, not to go down memory lane."

"No, actually, I just finished the D's...it's just a little hard to concentrate. I feel strange. It's like I've been here before and I don't want it to play out in the same way again." She seemed suddenly forthcoming, but had turned her gaze away from him.

"I think I know what you mean. We've been closed down and restarted before and I don't want to travel in that same old circle again." Actually, Mulder was pretty sure that things would be entirely different this time around, at least for the next little while. He hadn't told Scully, but his sources had revealed to him that while the X-Files were indeed reinstated and presently in their hands, they weren't assured of keeping them. They were naturally the ones to bring everything back to order, given their past history with the division, but Mulder had a strong suspicion that a certain agent was going to make good on his promise to run him out of town, so to speak. Without anything concrete, however, he had determined that he and Scully would simply cross that bridge when they came to it. Ultimately, they were the best team for the job, a fact that would prove itself in time anyway. Almost absently, he added out loud, "I'll make sure we don't."

Scully looked up at him and gave him that same sad little smile. She initiated her screen saver and got up. "Let's grab some lunch from the truck and go for a walk."

Mulder grabbed his suit jacket from the back of his chair and extended his arm towards the door, motioning Scully ahead. He followed closely behind, locking the door after them. Something told him that the walk would consist of some heavy duty talking as well.

* * * * *

Scully put down her sandwich, swallowed her mouthful and looked off into the distance. To her left, Mulder continued to chew, wondering why he was having difficulty tasting anything. It was

apparent that she had something to say, and for once, he was perfectly willing to let her find her own time.

"I enjoyed myself in San Diego. I almost thought I wouldn't, you know, after what happened the last time I was there." She looked at Mulder, signaling that she was okay and that it wasn't a taboo subject. He nodded briefly, thoughts swirling through his brain. "Everything seemed so homey, so ordinary, so everyday-ish. I mean, I sat in my sister-in-law's kitchen and saw the calendar marked with bake sales, fund raisers, committee meetings. There were kids' drawings taped to the refrigerator."

"And you didn't have one single conversation about killers or aliens or back-sucking flukemen," Mulder added softly, smiling as he glanced sideways at her.

"I guess our work is really bizarre when you think of it that way."

"What's happening, Scully? Are you feeling more and more like you need to settle down and do the white picket fence thing?" It wasn't as if Mulder didn't think about the same thing — for her, anyway — every so often.

Scully turned quickly to him, wanting to see his expression. "I don't know, Mulder, maybe I'm getting old. Does that make sense?"

"Well, if you're getting old, I'm getting older." He gave her another sidelong glance, losing himself temporarily in her cool blue eyes. He chose his words carefully before continuing. "I suppose though, being male, I don't quite feel the magnitude of time passing in the same way as some women do. Are we talking that biological thing here?"

"No, I don't even think that's it. I mean, I have friends who choose to remain single and childless. So I can't say that I feel that life has shortchanged me. I mean, things have happened to me that I didn't have a choice in, but I did choose my work. It's just that other people have other lives outside of their work..." [... and over the past several years, I've lost whatever life I used to have...] Mulder could almost hear her unfinished thought. It prompted something else to pop into his mind abruptly.

"Scully, when you came over to tell me that you were being transferred to Utah, was that ever an option for you? I mean, I know you said you'd resigned, but did you ever for a minute think about accepting the transfer?"

She looked at him, studying every detail of his face, before shrugging slightly. "I really don't know. All I can remember was the jumble of emotions rolling around inside of me. It was like I had lost total control of my life... no... no, I don't think I considered it at all. I think I was really ready to quit."

They looked at each other in silence for a moment, both sensing that their subsequent close call that night was going to be relived in one way or another very soon.

"And yet you changed your mind..."

"Mulder, I know we've both said that if we quit, they'll win. Does that necessarily mean that we lose? Is it that cut and dried? Over the years, I've seen things and learned things that I really, really would rather not have seen and learned. Do you ever feel that way sometimes? That none of this is real, that it can't be real? I mean, it boggles my mind how far removed I am from the ordinary lives that I see around me."

"Is that what you want, Scully, the gift of an ordinary life?" It was Mulder's turn on the sad little smile.

"This isn't just about what I want, Mulder. It's not that simple." Scully shook her head slowly, taking a small nibble of her sandwich.

"Then what is this about? I'm a little confused. Remember when I told you to go and be a doctor while you still had time? What was that, not even a month ago? That's when you gave me that 'we quit, they win' speech. But I meant what I said." Mulder took a deep breath, stilling fears that were

still very much at the surface. He dropped his elbows to rest on his knees and gazed down at his shoes. Pausing just long enough to make sure that his voice was normal, he continued. "We've learned enough over six years to know that this 'thing' that we're fighting extends far beyond what's here and now. But honestly, do I ever think it's unreal? Sometimes I just don't think that we make any difference...I mean, we survive these battles and they obviously mean for us to survive them. It's all a big game. But if we quit this game...do we lose? I don't know, Scully. I just know, by default, they would win."

"I understand that you still need answers, 'the truth' as you so often put it. But have you ever thought beyond that? Like about what happens after?" Scully leaned forward to peer at Mulder's face, trying to read him.

Fox Mulder could only think back to the truths that he had supposedly learned over the past year. His sister Samantha. Scully would find that one ironic, if she only knew: Samantha was the one who had the ordinary life. Samantha had experienced worse hell than him, but she had still managed to craft a normal existence for herself. And the truth about alien life? What he saw in Antarctica had refueled his beliefs, but until that moment? For the better part of the past year, he had convinced himself that the question wasn't important enough to answer. Maybe unconsciously, he had been trying to deal with the concept of "what happens next", knowing that he had never thought that far ahead.

Straightening up, he turned to smile at Scully and attempted to lighten the mood. "I'm just looking for that pot of gold, Scully, I don't know how I'm going to spend it or what I'll do if it turns out to be fool's gold."

Mulder's characteristic self reproach even in those simple words was not lost on Scully. She reached out and placed an open hand on his knee, a gesture that for some inexplicable reason, warmed and saddened him at the same time. "I think that's what I need to know, Mulder. I need to know what happens after we stop playing this game. I need to know that there will be an end somewhere down the road."

* * * * *

Dana Scully had spent a considerable amount of time just being by herself in San Diego. She had taken long walks on the beach, trying to come to terms with the feelings that had begun to overwhelm her over the past year. Somehow, without her quite knowing when or why, she had gone from feeling a certain "agreeable something" for Mulder to feeling full blown love for the man who had been her partner for more than six years. Six years. The mere thought of that much time passing at this point in her life was particularly depressing. She knew she wasn't prepared to wait even half that much time any more. But she was at a loss as to how to broach the whole situation.

She knew that Mulder had feelings for her beyond their working partnership. It didn't take a near kiss to convince her of that. But even after all this time, she wasn't at all sure what kind of feelings he really had for her. She didn't know if she was some kind of mother, sister, or lover figure to him. It didn't help that most of his demonstrations of affection towards her had always occurred at some moment of crisis: I'm dying, Mulder; I'm quitting, Mulder. In her darkest moments during the past six months, her feelings had begun to ache within her like a tangible physical pain, to some degree even worse than her cancer had been. She couldn't even be sure that it hadn't started to affect her work. She could not ever remember a period of time in which she had refused him so many requests. At the same time, his strangely cavalier attitude towards her during their cases leading up to the closure of the X-Files had been hard to take. Oh, she knew that he was suffering under the collapse of his belief system and had characteristically struck out at the person closest to him. But while she had no problem dealing with that kind of situation in the distant past, in recent times, their combined pain was too much for her to handle alone.

Even before witnessing their office after the fire, she had already thought seriously about leaving. What else could she do? What does anyone do when feelings became inappropriate and impossible? It had gotten to the point where she thought it would be less painful to leave than to stay. Then the entire business of the Dallas bombing brought everything to the forefront and presented her with a tidy exit. But even as she stood in his doorway announcing her plans, she

knew she was wrong; it was going to hurt like hell to leave. And the tears. She so rarely cried in front of him. Even when her father and then her sister died, she was staid and composed beyond all reason. And yet it had taken all of her resolve not to break into a million pieces right there in the hallway after he had expressed his need for her to be at his side. Never mind all of the times she had found herself weeping for seemingly no reason during those several preceding months.

After their safe return from Antarctica, they had seemed to be on a mutual emotional high. She had declared to him that — his fears for her life aside — she was prepared to stick it out with him once more. After all, they now had an even stronger reason to stick together, didn't they? Or did they? A few days removed to establish the mundane details of a new X-Files Division and an ensuing two week vacation later, Dana Scully was just not sure. And this time, she needed to be sure, in no uncertain terms.

* * * * *

Fox Mulder opened the door to his apartment, kicking off his shoes as he proceeded through to his living room. He stabbed at his answering machine and stooped to peer into his fish tank. An inconsequential message. His latest batch of fish were still mobile. He shook a few flakes at them and then lowered himself slowly onto the couch, his coat falling open around him. He leaned back and closed his eyes.

He hadn't stopped thinking about their lunch conversation all afternoon. They had worked quietly for the remainder of the day and though it seemed that some of the tension had been relieved, it was not all together back to normal; at least, not for Fox Mulder. "I need to know what happens after we stop playing this game. I need to know that there will be an end somewhere down the road." The words still echoed in his mind, along with his reply, "I'm not entirely sure what you mean."

Scully had gotten up at that moment, motioning for them to walk. She merely requested that he think about it and that they would continue the conversation later. She reiterated that she was back voluntarily and was not in danger of leaving, but that certain things had to be different. They completed their walk in relative silence, both knowing that although there was so much to say, the confines of a lunch hour just weren't going to accommodate them. But it was a start.

Mulder opened his eyes and glanced at the clock. Almost nine. He vaguely remembered stopping by a sandwich shop to read a newspaper and have a light supper, but where had the time gone? He took a deep breath and got up, leaving his coat behind. A shower would feel real good right about now. He opened his closet and then removed and hung up his suit jacket and pants. Throwing his shirt and socks in a laundry bag, he padded barefoot towards his bathroom.

He stood amidst the clouds of steam from the hot water that pelted down his back, sending soap suds swirling down the drain. How many times had he stood in this same shower entertaining thoughts about Scully... countless times? Many times it was like now, hot water fanning raw heat over his body as he wondered about her, worried over her. On other occasions, he stood here under cold water, in an effort to tame his body's reactions and stem the tide of illicit thoughts it sometimes had about his partner. In truth, those moments puzzled him. It really wasn't as if sexual tension sizzled between them on a daily basis, although he knew they had their moments. It was just that he saw them as being so much more than that, he didn't like those reactions to cheapen what they had. Dana Scully was not a release for him like his videotape collection. But it didn't take his skills as a psychologist to diagnose their relationship as being odd in a big way. From his vantage point, he knew it was a social anomaly. [We don't see other people, but we don't have a romantic relationship. We are bothered by the idea of the other seeing other people, but we are not involved with one another. We care about each other, but not in that way.] How much was truth and how much was self delusion on both their parts? Meanwhile, it did not escape Mulder that over six years had passed since they were first partnered. No matter what sort of strange circumstances they were involved in, that was a long time. For the second time that day, he wondered: was it fair to her, this hold he seemingly had on her?

Nobody had ever directly or indirectly asked him, "Do you love Dana Scully?" Not even Frohike had ever gone so far. He briefly wondered what he would say. Would he be able to lie about it? He was

never that good at lying. Does she love you? He turned and lifted his face to the water, wincing. He wouldn't be able to lie about that either. Unquestionably she loved him; he just didn't know why. Nor could he pinpoint the moment when it first occurred to him in no uncertain terms. But there were enough instances when she let her guard down, purposefully or not, that he could see it in her eyes. Her love, from its tentative beginnings to its current rollercoaster levels of intensity, had always made him feel whole and human in a way that he never thought possible. It was a totally natural reaction for him to bask in that warmth and to feel paralyzed and lost when he was removed from it.

He knew he posed a fanciful facade to others around him. While there were enough rumors floating around about him and Scully and just how close they might be, he also knew there was a certain segment of observers who believed that nothing was happening. Because they believed that Dana Scully wasn't his type and that Fox Mulder was still chasing every nice looking skirt that passed his way. In a way, he perpetuated that belief. Not by actually doing it, but he knew that with the briefest of his attentions, many females at the Bureau would fall to his feet. Fox Mulder was not a stupid boy. He was quite aware of the powers of his persuasions; sometimes he didn't even have to say a word. But it was a game to him. It was a game he even played with Scully, but with different results, which was why he respected her even more.

["But do you love her, G-Man?"] Jesus, the voice sounded annoyingly like Frohike.

"Shut up," he muttered out loud.

As much as he hated to think along those lines, here again, he wasn't stupid. He knew where that lunch conversation was going, what Scully hadn't actually put into words but was no doubt asking. The "game" and the "end" had little to do with work and much to do with their personal lives. She's telling you she'll continue to work beside you, but it can't be like it was before. She'll stick around as long as... as long as what? As long as there was a promise of something more? His head was starting to hurt.

He turned off the shower and swept a towel over himself, wrapping it around his waist as he stepped out onto the mat. He wiped the condensation from the mirror and peered at his face. Was he ready to be honest with himself and answer some difficult questions? For Scully, he knew he would do anything. Including not reacting like a 17-year-old.

* * * * *

Fox Mulder settled in for the evening, remote in hand, flipping through the channels. The sound was turned down so low that he couldn't really hear what was being said, but he was losing himself in the visual images that passed before his eyes. The sound of his phone ringing brought him back to earth. He got up, picked up the entire set from his desk and brought it back to the couch with him.

"Hello?"

"Mulder, it's me."

"Hey, Scully. Is anything wrong?" He looked at his watch: it was shortly after ten.

"No, no, nothing's wrong..." [Has it been so long since I've called him out of the blue like this? He thinks there must be something up. Did I ever initiate these calls? When did I stop having those wonderfully inane phone conversations with him? Maybe he was the one who did all the calling...maybe he just stopped and I didn't even notice until now.]

"Scully?"

"Hmm?"

"Did you want me to start?" He heard something resembling embarrassed amusement at the other end.

"Sorry, I was just thinking —"

"Good or bad thinking?"

"Well, neither, really. I just came from my mother's —"

"There's nothing wrong with your mom, is there?"

"No, no, nothing like that. Mom's fine." Even over the phone, she could almost feel him flinch at the word. "I mean, she's great. She hadn't seen me since I got out of the hospital and then I took off to San Diego, so... she just wanted me to visit, you know how moms are."

[Oh Jesus, when did Mulder last hear from his mother?] Her pause grew a little long and she realized that she was holding her breath. Her partner put her out of her misery by chuckling softly.

"It's okay, Scully. And yes, I know how your mother is. So, you were thinking?"

"About our conversation at lunch today. When you said you weren't quite sure what I meant...were you saying that you might have some idea or was that just a request for me to be more specific?"

"A little of both. Look, I know enough has passed between us for me to hazard a good guess, but now's not the time to make the wrong assumption. I don't think either one of us needs any additional humiliation or embarrassment. We're not good at this." Without the benefit of seeing his face, Scully had a hard time with the seeming harshness of his words. She decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"Can we talk about it?"

"Now?"

"If it's too late —"

"No, that's not... you don't actually want to do this over the phone, do you?"

"No, I'm not far. Would you mind if I came over there?"

"Of course not. I'll put on some tea."

"See you in a bit."

Mulder sat holding the phone for several seconds after Scully disconnected their call. Had he been expecting her to resume their discussion so soon? In a way, yes. While neither he nor Scully undertook to delve into their private lives all that often, on the rare occasions when it happened, they tended to get things out of the way rather quickly and painlessly. No, check that — this time, it wasn't going to be painless. By no means.

* * * * *

He put back the phone and looked out the window. Scully wouldn't be long. As his thigh touched the cold edge of his desk, he realized that his attire was a little inappropriate for their meeting. Underwear and t-shirt would not cut it. He rummaged through his hall dresser and pulled out a fresh pair of jeans, pulling them on as he ventured into the kitchen to boil some water. The kettle was just beginning to whine when there was a soft knock at the door.

When Mulder opened the door, he was struck by the somewhat unfamiliar image of her standing there, carrying a paper bag from the corner store. She was wearing a light blue anorak, over top of an oversized white t-shirt and black jeans; flat shoes. Her hair was pinned back to one side with some sort of comb. She looked so unlike Agent Scully right then, her entire body so devoid of her usual steely presence that Mulder felt a strange urge to wrap his arms around her protectively. Instead, he simply stepped aside and motioned her in with a welcoming smile, adding wickedly, "What's in the bag — economy box of Trojans for tonight?"

Scully gave him that patented "look" that she always gave him in response to those sorts of comments. "Don't make promises like that even lightly, Mulder, I might hold you to them," she responded smoothly, handing him the bag as she stepped into his apartment.

"Well, Scully, that won't be a problem because I have my own supply that's much —" he paused as he took the bag from her and reached inside, frowning as his fingers came into contact with the contents, "— much closer to room temperature than these..."

"It's ice cream, you moron."

Mulder smiled genuinely as he closed the door, knowing that their ability to exchange friendly repartees with one another was always a good sign. "What, are we going to do this the girly way... drown our sorrows in high calorie junk food?" He lifted the small pint container out of the bag.

"Is that what you think girls do?"

"Well, I hear a group of them at the Bureau has gone through gallons of ice cream on me alone." He started walking towards where she stood in front of his couch.

The man has no shame, Scully thought to herself, then added as an afterthought: he's probably right though. "I don't think that's something to be proud of, Agent Mulder. Anyway..."

"Anyway, what?" He had advanced to the point of invading her personal space once again, holding the container of ice cream close to his chest.

"Anyway...if only those girls knew what I know about you."

"And what's that — all those nasty, annoying, insufferable things that you've grown to hate about me?" It seemed like he had stepped even closer, if that was at all possible. Scully found herself staring directly at the label on the ice cream.

"No." She had bought the good stuff. One hundred percent all natural, no artificial flavors or preservatives. "No, all the good things that I've..." She tilted her head up to look into his face, putting an end to their little game. "All the good things."

There it was again. When did this start, Mulder found himself asking silently. When did it start that, whenever a pause followed anything resembling a tender comment between them, that he felt this overwhelming urge to kiss her? Did she have the same urge? Actually, she looked more like she'd been hypnotized the way she was staring at him. He stepped backwards and waved the pint of ice cream in front of her face.

"I've seen you with larger containers for yourself alone, Scully. Did you mean for me to join you?" He turned and disappeared into the kitchen. Scully soon heard him opening drawers and cupboards noisily.

"Of course. It's enough for the both of us; I'm not always a pig." Mulder's head peeked around the corner and gifted her with a wonderfully spontaneous grin. In no time at all, he reappeared with couple of spoons and a dish of ice cream in each hand.

She had taken up a spot on the couch, at the far end away from the window. One leg was tucked up underneath her and she had kicked off her shoes. Mulder handed her a spoon and one of the servings of ice cream, and then sat in front of her on the coffee table. He worked his spoon around the ice cream for a bit, tasted it, nodded his approval, and then looked up and said, "I'm sorry if I sounded a little abrupt on the phone, it didn't quite come out like I wanted."

"You're entitled. And like always, you were right." She waved off his incredulous look and continued. "Mulder, we're never ones to beat around the bush when things get really serious between us and I don't think we're going to be different now. The sooner we talk about this..."

It was a long enough pause for Mulder to chime in, "I agree. But let's first decide what 'this' is." When she didn't go on, he plodded forward, quoting her words back to her, "I need to know what happens after we stop playing this game. I need to know there'll be an end somewhere down the road."

"Yes." Just yes. She wasn't going to clarify it for him. She had made the overture and wanted him to extend something in return.

"Okay, Scully, I'm putting myself on the line here. My guess is that you are not talking about the X-Files, but about what happens to us — personally, to you and me — now, next year, whenever, and if there might be something..." It was Mulder's turn to trail off. This was hard, and she wasn't helping. He looked up at her and found her staring into her ice cream. Her free foot jangled nervously in front of him.

"Do we want a life, Mulder?" He was puzzled. Was this the royal "we" that doctors liked to use or did Scully really mean 'you and me'?

"A life would be nice, yes. I'm not entirely sure that I don't already have one, or that you don't. But, and I'm not trying to be dense here, if you're talking about us —"

Scully's entire body almost lifted off the couch as she interrupted, "You're not trying to be dense? Mulder, we were this far away from kissing each other and God knows what else a few weeks ago! What was that supposed to be? Were you just sending me off, saying goodbye? I don't think so! And don't tell me you were trying to express gratitude for our partnership, 'cause you wouldn't have done it that way if I were a man!"

Something about the last part of her tirade made her consider for a moment. She chuckled slightly and added, "Or maybe you would, I don't know." She looked at him, her face almost pleading for answers.

"Not overlooking the fact that it was, I believe, a mutual moment, I can only speak for myself." He put down his ice cream on the coffee table beside him and came over to sit beside her, facing her, matching her position. Here goes nothing, he thought. "Is this what you want to hear? The woman in my life was about to leave me. She had literally turned on her heels and was walking out of my life. This woman had come to define my very existence for the past several years and I had never told her just how important she was to me. Not in an FBI, work-related 'thank you very much for backing me up' kind of way, but in the way that a man and a woman come to see one another over time. I respect this woman so much that I've held back every physical impulse I ever had about her...all because my impulses would probably be misunderstood." Mulder stopped. What was with the third person treatment? Was it that difficult to say 'you'? He was suddenly aware of the thick silence hanging over the room, interrupted by the sound of his own breathing as well as hers. She was looking at him expectantly. He continued, "But I couldn't let you walk away without letting you know. I didn't think I had any hope of making you change your mind, so I just reacted. No big mystery. Maybe I just had to let you know that I knew. That I've known for a long time. And that I've considered myself lucky beyond description to have been the recipient of those feelings." He stared into her eyes and nodded to add emphasis to his words. "So, no, it wasn't a goodbye gesture. It was a stay with me gesture."

"Stay with me as my partner, or stay with me in general?" she whispered. Okay, so she was putting him on the spot. She had to ask him while she still had some nerve.

"Later for that. It's your turn. You haven't told me what was going through your mind at the time."

Scully counted off ten full seconds before she spoke. "Well, like I told you that night — I almost didn't come here. I didn't know if I could handle telling you that I was leaving. But in the end, fairness won over. I knew I couldn't just go and not tell you in person." Scully jabbed at her ice cream and took a deep breath. Her eyes were bright when she looked up and continued. "Somewhere, somehow, I started to have feelings for you that I couldn't deal with. They made me want to run away. And yet, presented with the possibility of acting on those feelings, I wasn't strong enough to run away. Look, Mulder, you've just finished telling me that you knew all along how I felt, what else can I say? Here I thought I was being so secretive." Her face revealed her obvious despair. "When I realized what was happening, I just thought, why has this taken so long? Why is it still so hard?"

Mulder looked uncomfortable. The move to kiss her that day had seemed so natural, but now the very idea made him squirm. "Because...because I've never been convinced that I'm good for you, or good enough for you. I didn't want to wreck what we had. I felt sufficiently blessed just to be with you as much as possible. Beyond a certain point, I've never thought that we have much of a chance for a normal future. The selfish part of me just couldn't stand the idea of letting you go. But the simple fact is, I don't deserve you. And what's more, you deserve so much more than what I am, what I could ever be."

"And just what kind of person do you think you are?"

"I suppose you want me to be positive, right? Well, I consider myself intelligent and all the other good stuff that goes with that. I have people's best interests at heart... I have good manners and I can be polite — your mother seems to like me." He felt his heart expand at the depth of feeling he saw in her eyes. He knew he had seen the look before, but he also knew that more often than not, she tried to hide such expressions from him. But here, right now, she was doing the complete opposite. It made him want to laugh and cry all at once. "God, Scully, I do think that all in all, in spite of myself sometimes, I'm basically a good person. I know this. But I can't deny — and neither can you — that my life is filled with excess baggage and loose ends and I'm forever tripping over them. I'm almost 37 and I still have unresolved parental issues. I'm not a strong person, you — you've always been the strong one. Me, I could be called unstable. I've considered offing myself more times than I can count, even during the time that I've known you. I'm emotionally stunted..."

This was a bad idea. "You're going the wrong way with this," Scully interrupted softly, her eyes filling with tears. The light was slowly disappearing from his face.

"...I don't know how to love..." It came out as a mere whisper, in a tone that indicated he had surprised even himself by saying it.

"No, no, you're wrong about that, Mulder. You only think that because you've never received love in the same way as you're capable of giving it. I know that as well as I know you." And what does that say about me, she thought to herself, I never let on, I hide from him. But he knew anyway. She reached out and took one of his hands in hers, infusing it with her warmth. She could swear that she felt his blood rushing inside of him and felt her heart pounding in anticipation.

"How do you know? How can you know that, Scully, when I do everything in my power to push you away? I do this all the time! Haven't you noticed? How perverse am I to toss casual innuendo at you for years, and then, when I finally seem to break through, I...I don't know how to deal with it...and I just end up hurting you. How can you love someone like that? I've been hurting you for months now, Scully. I know it and I don't know how to stop it. So how can you say I know how to love?"

She was only barely aware of the tears that were tracing their way down her cheeks. She was floored by the realization that Mulder knew exactly what he had been doing to her. How could it happen that he knew so much and she knew so little? Seeing her reaction, Mulder grimaced and removed his hand from her grasp. He knew he had to go on, though, he couldn't risk letting her think that he was anything more than what he was.

"I know how to need and I know how to want. I'm good at both. I've caused you pain time and time again by needing you so badly, manipulating you to come back to me over and over. I don't dare show you how much I want you, but that would be easy enough. Scully, I just don't feel like I ever give you anything in return. I don't know if I'm capable."

"But I never really let you give me anything in return, Mulder. That's my fault, it's my need to protect myself. I know you try, but you tend to try when I'm at my worst, when I don't trust myself to let you in."

Mulder looked up, a deep hurt evident in his expression. "Don't trust yourself or don't trust me?"

"You know I trust you." This was so *deja vu*, Scully thought. Somewhere in their past conversations, she could swear that she had been taken to task about this. Did he have a real problem believing that she trusted him?

"I know you say it easily enough and I know you think you mean it when you say it."

"But you don't think I do?" Where did this come from?

"Not all the time." He looked away from her. "Probably not in a long time."

"How don't I trust you?"

"Like you say, when you're at your worst, you close yourself off to me. When you're troubled by something, unless you've thought it all out and decided that it's safe to share, you don't call on me —"

"— And you trust me more than that?" She regretted her words the moment they left her mouth.

He turned his attention back to her face and spoke his words precisely, each one renewing a familiar and unpleasant stinging sensation at the back of his eyes. Christ, he felt like a bundle of nerve endings. "I trust you implicitly and will always trust you in a way that no one else in this universe will ever be able to lay claim. I would open myself up to you heart, mind and soul in a second — you only need to ask." His hazel eyes turned dark and haunted as his voice fell to a whisper. "You've never really asked."

Dana Scully opened her mouth to reply, to cry out that he was mistaken, but she knew that in an overall sense, it was true. She couldn't think of too many times when she'd ventured to ask a personal question that would really open up his truest feelings and thoughts to her... and well, only once in recent memory. Conversely, there were many times when he'd tried asking her similar and often strange questions, only to be discouraged by her scientific replies. No wonder he stopped trying. No wonder all he could do was withdraw into his work.

Mulder read her face perfectly. His words came out with a little more anger than he had hoped. He sprang off the couch abruptly. "What, the time you asked me 'have you ever thought seriously about dying'? Well, maybe you should have asked me that more recently. The answer's more interesting when you have a death wish."

Scully's hand moved to her mouth, as if to close it. She didn't need his memory to know what he was referring to. That question had been one of those rare occasions for her, when she had actually wanted to get into something that was deep and meaningful and not work related. They were stuck in the woods for the night, Mulder was injured, and they were far from safe. What was his answer again? Something about the Ice Capades? God, what did he say just now?

"What do you mean, 'a death wish'?"

"I don't know what else to call it. In the last little while, I've had a lot of close calls, even for me — came this close to being executed, even —" Scully's eyes widened at this. The undercover case. Due to the nature of the work, Scully had not been privy to the final report. Mulder never did tell her about the events leading up to his escape. "— held hostage at gunpoint. None of it mattered. I was almost fascinated by it."

He threaded his way through some boxes beside his desk and took up a spot by the window. "But when you first asked me that question, Scully, I wasn't ready. What was that, our first case after your recovery? Hell, it wasn't even a case, we were supposed to be attending a goddamn conference. Only I had to break the rules again and there you were — right in the middle. That wasn't supposed to happen. Not so soon. I couldn't even begin to understand why the cancer had gone into remission, which was all well and good except for one thing. If it could go away just like that, what...what would stop it from coming back? I couldn't answer your question then because I was so damned sick and tired of thinking about dying. About you dying. It was all I could do to pretend to be glib and turn the conversation away from that." He turned towards her, the light from the street lamp outlining his face, revealing the tightly held emotions that threatened to spill over. "The fact that you didn't get the answer that you wanted that night had nothing to do with trust. It had everything to do with me trying to stay sane."

Scully couldn't speak. She wanted so desperately to say something, but felt crushed into silence by the weight of his words. She thought she might be crying, but she wasn't sure. She stared mutely as Mulder came towards her. He knelt in front of her, wanting to touch her and be assured that everything was still okay, that she was still whole and not an apparition that would disappear into the night air. He grabbed her hands and pressed them between his, studying them as he continued.

"Scully, I can't pretend to understand what you went through when you were sick. I felt like I was being kicked in the nuts on a daily basis, and all I knew how to do was crawl back for more. As a doctor, I'm sure you know the price that family members pay, going through that kind of ordeal. But who was I? 'One sorry son of a bitch' in the words of your brother, a raving lunatic who thought an alien cure was just the ticket." He swallowed and blinked rapidly in response to the

increasing pressure constricting his throat and prickling at his eyelids. He was walking along the thinnest line of control he had ever experienced, but he was determined to hold himself together. He silently prayed that Scully would keep her distance. Holding her hands was all he could take for now, and that was only because he had initiated it. He knew what would surely happen if she were to make a move towards him, to try to comfort him. He couldn't remember the last time he felt so close to losing it. Oh yes he could: outside her hospital room just after he told Skinner that the cancer had gone into remission. For all its distance, the grief that came flooding back was painfully raw. "I was an outsider every time your family was around, but they couldn't tell me that my pain wasn't just as great, or that my loss wasn't going to be so much greater. No matter what happened, they still had each other. I only had you."

He was consistent that way, in his fear of losing her. That was the one truth about Fox Mulder that Dana Scully knew and could count on at all times. Only she had never stopped to think about what her miraculous recovery had done to him. How, in cheating death, they had somehow forgotten to exorcise the demons that had been raised during her fight with cancer. It was becoming clear to her now — as she watched him relive some unspeakable pain — that he had opened a door to Hell during that period and no one had closed it for him. More importantly, she hadn't closed it for him.

In medical school, she remembered having discussions about how people's psyches are affected by recovery as well as by death. Humans typically make deals with their personal demons when loved ones are gravely ill. They make life-altering plans for when the person is finally gone. They make their peace. But sometimes, a miracle happens and the person recovers. Obviously, happiness and disbelief are the first reactions to recovery, but other less easily understood emotions can also come into play quickly. Questions concerning whether a price was paid and how it will be collected. Was the devil in fact now in possession of the soul that had been put up as an offering for the cure? Those desperate pleas and promises made in the darkest of hours become difficult to meet in the cold light of day. Passionate individuals tend to have problems sweeping aside such bargains, and Scully knew that Mulder was nothing if not passionate. Dear God, why hadn't she thought about this before? How could she have let it go on for almost a year?

It wasn't that she had been blind to his predicament. She was intimately familiar with the gaping wounds on his soul. She just didn't think to connect it to her getting over her illness. In fact, at times, she thought grimly, it had taken all she had not to shake him and demand to know what was dragging him down to such hellish depths. She had been convinced that having her cured was his primary objective. She had thought that things would be so much better once the ugly spectre of cancer was removed. The disintegration of his beliefs had been unexpectedly devastating to the both of them, but Scully had not made the connection that other things may have affected his ability to bounce back. As the year wore on and her feelings for him grew, he kept slipping farther and farther away from her grasp. All she could feel was the pain of that increasing distance. She was feeling it now.

She removed her hands from his and started to reach out for him. Although her movement was not at all abrupt, Mulder jerked backwards to avoid further touch, sending himself to the seat of his pants and onto the floor. He grimaced as his back connected against the unforgiving edge of the coffee table. Ignoring the sudden physical pain, he managed to choke out, "Don't — please don't..." He sat back, legs splayed out in front of him, one arm on the coffee table, his other hand moving to cover his face.

"Oh, Mulder, I'm so sorry. I should have known." Her voice was thick with emotion.

There was a long pause before he asked, in a very small voice, "Known what?"

"I've been very remiss. I just now realized that you were ready for me to be gone when I had the cancer...but I came back."

Something about how she phrased those words struck Mulder to the core, and proved to be his undoing. Implosion was inevitable now and he knew it. He managed to whisper, "But I wanted you to come back..." before taking a gasping breath, feeling his entire being crumple under the anguish that he had been holding back for months. He was at once mortified by his weakness and thankful for the release. The doctor in him knew the importance of the latter. For that long-lost dispirited

soul named Fox Mulder, however, it was just further proof of how powerless and needy he really was.

"I know, I know...come here," Scully whispered shakily, once again aware of wetness on her face and her quickly blurring vision. His overwhelming display of grief frightened her. This had to be beyond what he normally carried with him.

Mulder could barely hear her words. But there was no mistaking the warmth of the arms that were pulling at him. He sucked in a ragged breath and fought for control. But there was Scully's voice again, soothing and almost commanding. "Don't you dare fight this. This is not something to keep, Mulder, let it go. Everything will be all right if you just let it go." She slid down to the floor onto her knees and drew him sideways until he was leaning into her shoulder. Then, just as she had done for him two years ago by his mother's bedside, she held him as he wept.

* * * * *

Scully stood at the entrance to Mulder's living room and watched him in silence. She was fairly certain that he was going to be okay now; at least, as okay as Fox Mulder was ever going to be in this lifetime. He had finally confronted the guilt and the fears stemming from her illness, and she had managed to convince him to stop punishing himself for whatever noble promises he had made during that time that were impossible to keep. Amazingly, his face was now calm, with only a hint of redness around the eyes as evidence of the cathartic experience that he had just been through in the past half hour. She allowed herself a moment of unreasonable jealousy; she could never manage to look quite that good after a bout of crying like he'd just had. In fact, she had been glad when she checked herself out in his bathroom mirror that she had removed most of her daytime makeup before going over to her mother's.

As it turned out, Margaret Scully had played a large part in convincing her to call Mulder tonight. Sometime during the supper hour, she had pinned down her daughter and asked her just how long she was willing to suffer in silence. Scully had been totally unprepared for the question, although she knew immediately what her mother was referring to, since it was not the first time the subject had been raised. She wasn't sure if her mother had ever believed her when she said that she and Mulder were "just friends". She was aware of the fact that her mother and her partner had been extremely close during her disappearance four years ago, and that he had shared some significant confidences with her during those months. On the one previous occasion when Scully had asked her mother about the nature of those conversations, she had been told, "Why don't you ask Fox?" When she asked her mother again tonight, Mrs. Scully changed her reply slightly, adding, "I think if you're honest with him, you'll get a favorable response. In fact, I know you will."

She cleared her throat as she walked up to him, wondering if he had fallen asleep. His eyes fluttered open easily though, and he leaned forward on the couch to take the facecloth that she held out for him. "I thought you might like this. I've got the water going for tea again."

"Do I look that bad?" At least some of his humor was returning; that was a good sign.

"Actually, if you want to know the truth, you never look that bad." She smiled and sat down beside him as he wiped his face with the warm cloth. "I just always like the feel of something warm on my face after..."

He turned to her with his freshly scrubbed face and a wry smile, "After what, bawling like a banshee?"

She didn't answer, but patted his shoulder. She felt him take a deep, shuddering breath. "Jesus, Scully, I feel like I've been draining the life out of you. We used to have happy moments, where have they all gone? I don't want you to be mired in my gloom for the rest of your life, I can't live with that. Love isn't supposed to hurt."

"The whole concept of 'not supposed to' is a tricky one in actual practice. Like bad things aren't supposed to happen to good people. While I don't necessarily subscribe to the theory that 'love hurts', I know that it does sometimes. We wouldn't feel the exhilaration of the good times if it weren't for the balancing of the bad stuff. But when it's really love, we don't feel guilty about the

bad times, we don't run away from the bad times. I think they have to be embraced in the same way as the good stuff because it's all part and parcel of who we are and who we choose to love."

"And where does that leave us?"

What did he want her to say? On the one hand, she had been exposed; after all, Mulder had more or less said that he knew she loved him. But despite the gamut of emotions that he had just entrusted her with, she was still in the dark. Just what exactly did Fox Mulder feel about Dana Scully? She wasn't leaving until she found out. "Are you saying that you love me, Mulder?"

Scully's heart lurched at the sight of the fresh tears that immediately sprang to his eyes, but he seemed to have them under relative control now. "Scully, I don't know if you'll ever understand the totality of what I feel for you. I certainly don't. When they put that chip back in your neck and there was no change, I promised myself that if I ever had the chance to see you healthy again, things would be different. I'd make sure you have a normal life...just like you said to me this morning. I'd stop needing you, stop holding onto you. Stop trying to pretend that I could offer you anything. Stop you from loving me."

"That was your deal with the devil? To make me well and then you would leave me?"

"It wasn't like that. And no matter what I tried, I couldn't do it. I went from needing you to pushing you away. Scully, you've become my entire world without me even realizing it. Every sappy cliché about love you've ever heard in any song is true when it comes to how I feel about you. Do you remember what I said to you that night, about making me a whole person? That's what you do for me, Scully. And I can't imagine being able to do that for you in return. So to say I love you seems woefully inadequate to describe what I hold for you in here." He placed his open palm over his heart. "But regardless of how I feel, I'm not —"

"There are no guarantees in life, Mulder, you know that as well as I do. And none of us can make choices for others, we can only do so for ourselves. You can't tell me how to feel. It's way too late for that. And please don't fool yourself into thinking that I've stayed with you all these years just to make you feel loved. I'm not that altruistic. If I've managed to contribute something essential and important to your life, you can be sure that you've done the same for me.... Mulder, look at me." He turned towards her slowly. "You give me reason to live. I didn't even know how to put it into words until just this second. I think it's why fate keeps bringing me back to you. By rights I should be dead and you know it." A tear escaped his control and rolled down his cheek. He shook his head slowly, partly in disbelief, partly in denial. She continued, "I know we have something complicated here, and it can only get more complicated given who we are and what we do. But we can't go back. I wouldn't want to. I couldn't. I won't."

The strength of those words echoed in his brain. He remembered hearing something similar in the recent past, and knew without a doubt that Dana Scully was a woman who knew her mind. The kettle whistled from the kitchen, breaking into their silence. Mulder made a move to pull himself up from the couch but Scully gently pushed him back. "I'll get it."

Two mugs and some tea bags were already out on the kitchen counter. Scully opened up some cupboards in search of honey, feeling pretty sure that Mulder had some amid his meager supplies. She was successful upon hitting the bottom shelf of the cabinet beside the refrigerator. Normally, they both took their tea black, but she figured that some sweetness would be welcome right now, to soothe the soul if nothing else.

When she returned to the living room, she found Mulder staring into his dish of now melted ice cream. Accepting one of the mugs from her, he said, "How do you women actually get around to consuming anything in these sessions of yours?"

"Well, in general, we're a lot more emotionally healthy than you men. I would guess that the average session is usually not this intense." Scully regained her position at the end of the couch and looked at him over her cup of tea, her expression suddenly very serious. "Mulder, we can't let this happen again. Between your trying to protect me and my insistence on hiding from you, we get nowhere. I should have known better, but so should you. How could you let yourself go on like this for the better part of a year? I mean, my cancer wasn't just a bad dream that one of us woke

up from that the other didn't know about. It really did happen. Technically speaking, it's still happening. We should have talked about it."

"There was never a good time. It seemed so morbid. You were going on with your life. It was easier to think it wasn't real. Hey, I'm the trained psychologist and I didn't know. It didn't occur to me for one second that I would be the one not to recover from your illness. And then, as other things happened, I couldn't tell where the pain was coming from anymore." He tasted the honey sweetness of his tea and nodded his appreciation to her. "Like so many times in my life, I just lived with it. But I didn't like what I was doing to you."

"You weren't really doing anything to me. In fact, it's only just become clear to me now what this has been all about. It's been a night of many revelations, Mulder." At his quizzical expression, she explained, "If I didn't care about you, nothing you feel would have any impact on me, not your happiness, not your sorrow, and certainly not your pain. Over the past year, all that changed. I started to feel what you feel. The things that made you hurt, have made me hurt. It's just that, sometimes it hurt a lot worse because I wasn't sure how you..."

"And now?"

"And now I know that at least some of what I feel is reciprocated —"

"All of it, Scully. And quite possibly more, I'm just no good at packaging it up and offering it to you."

"So now I know that no matter what happens, what we have is not easily threatened. I have faith in it. In us."

Her words echoed repeatedly in his mind, drawing him back to a certain moment in a certain hallway. That moment was still hanging out there, still largely unaddressed. How were they supposed to go forward from what they had almost started? Was it still up to him to make the next move? Were they supposed to make it together? He could come up with no suitable answers for himself. What happened that night had been total reaction on his part. He hadn't done any thinking or planning. The possibility of Scully leaving him had pushed him to the edge of an emotional precipice. Proceeding solely on the fact that she loved him, he had dared believe for a moment that her love would be strong enough to survive his love for her. He had let himself feel it, and had been ready to share it, all of it. But now, it wasn't something that he could readily do all over again, especially without benefit of a similarly catastrophic situation. [Jesus, I'm being that 17-year-old again.] He stole a sidelong glance at Scully and saw that she was simply drinking her tea, not seemingly in any hurry to resume their conversation.

Mulder took a long sip from his mug and got up. He started to pace the floor in front of her. He had no easy way out, like he did that night. This time, he couldn't simply react and decide, well, consequences be damned. Unfortunately, in his normal state of mind, he wasn't capable of throwing caution to the wind when it came to Dana Scully. In his normal state of mind, he would never be able to deal with the real life consequences. He cleared his throat, prompting Scully to look up.

"I'm not sure I know how to bring this up, Scully, but...well, it's the main reason why we're here, I guess. Do you agree that what happened between us out in the hall was a result of extreme circumstances?" Scully nodded slowly, prompting him to continue, "And...and do you also agree that we are now back in less extreme circumstances? I mean, everything else being equal — and not to say that I'm ignoring what happened — we're sorta back on the same page as before, aren't we?"

"Yes, one could put it that way. Although with a lot more knowledge and understanding, I'd say."

"Yes. Yes, I agree. Scully, I don't want us to go back to hiding the obvious from one another — not that it would be possible now anyway — but I guess what I'm trying to say is that we haven't technically crossed any lines yet."

"And you don't think we should."

He stopped walking and looked down at her. He didn't know what to make of her tone. "Not now. But definitely not never. How does that make you feel?" He tried to keep his face as neutral as possible, but he knew that he was holding his breath waiting for her answer. His heart was thumping triple time against his chest.

"I think I might feel the same way, if I understand you correctly."

"Are you sure? Honestly?"

"Thinking I haven't trusted you completely is one thing, Mulder, but you haven't ever thought I've lied to you, have you?"

"Are you saying all those 'I'm fine, Mulder's were real? But that's not the issue right now; I'm not keeping score. I just need to know that this is a choice that we're both making. Tell me what you feel." He extended his hands down to her. Without hesitation, she closed her fingers around them and felt herself being pulled to her feet. They stood facing one another, hands joined, a comfortable distance separating them.

"This afternoon, well actually, when I was in San Diego, I had made up my mind that I couldn't go on like this anymore. I was committed to our work, but I needed to know where our work ended and where we began. If we began." Scully looked down at their joined hands, suddenly feeling very vulnerable. "This silly game between us has gone on way too long. It was fun for awhile, but I hated the feelings of jealousy... I hated how I was starting to feel like a jilted lover who had no chance in the world with you..." Her words, laced with fresh pain, trailed off as her voice broke.

Mulder could count on one hand the number of times Scully had let herself express something so spontaneous in front of him. He could see how much it had cost her to make that admission. An agonizing twist of pain settled into the pit of his stomach as he suddenly realized to what extent she had been hurting over the past several months. "Scully, no, how could you think —"

"I know better now. It's taken years, but it hasn't been a waste of time. But like I said before, we have to progress. We can't go back." She forced herself to look up at him again, determination back in her voice and on her face.

"I don't want you to misunderstand what I meant just now. It wouldn't make sense to go back. But like I keep trying to tell you, we're heading into territory where I can't be counted on to take the lead. Right now, without taking this any further, you are the best thing that's ever happened to me." There was no mistaking the emotion in his voice, the resoluteness with which he was defending what they already shared, and its importance to his life. "It would kill me to screw that up...for a kiss, a quick roll in the hay, whatever. But this isn't to say that I don't want those things; I don't want you to misunderstand that either. After all, that was me out there, and I really don't know where I would have stopped if Mr. Bee hadn't interrupted us."

His expression softened as a shy grin spread across his face. Scully actually laughed.

"I like the sound of that, Scully. It's been so long since I've heard you laugh. That's another reason why I think it's important for us to take the time to enjoy normal things, like normal people. I mean, on the one hand, we know each other so well, but on the other, we know so few details. I'd like to start knowing more details. This must sound so crazy to you — especially coming from me — but just because we've been slow getting to this point, doesn't mean we should go fast now."

"It's not crazy, Mulder, I understand what you're saying."

"Are you sure?" he asked again. He tried not to dwell on the fact that understanding what he was saying was not quite the same as agreeing with what he was saying, but he wasn't going to worry about semantics right now. He would trust the spirit of her message.

She stepped up to him, entering into his personal space like he so often did to her. She stopped just inches from his chest and tilted her head upwards. "Yes. All I need for now is for us to be honest with one another. As long as we acknowledge that this exists —" she gestured the air between the two of them "— that's enough. For now."

Mulder placed one hand on each of her shoulders and pushed her back slightly, scrutinizing her face. "You understand that I'm not trying to avoid anything."

"I know. We're both in this, Mulder, it's not just you and it's not just me."

"Well, I'm still going to have to charge you with a very important responsibility, Agent Scully."

"What's that, Agent Mulder?" Her voice barely a whisper, Scully moved her hands up to grab hold of his arms, as if suddenly needing them for support.

"This, all of this, will be totally under your control. You know the stakes as well as I do. I'm sure we've both thought about this in the past, but precedent shows that we would never be allowed to work for the Bureau in the same capacity if we became intimately involved. It wouldn't matter what our solve rate is or how highly they think of us. Once we make that choice and cross that line, things have to change. And keeping it a secret is not an option I'd like to consider." His eyes took on a dark green hue as his gaze penetrated through to her very core. "So."

"So?"

"At whatever point if you feel that what we're sacrificing isn't worth it, you let me know. It doesn't matter if that's next month or next year. I'm leaving it in your hands. I trust you to make the right decision for the both of us. Just...just make it before I turn 40, okay?" With that, he smiled and pulled her to him, holding her close, feeling her warm breath against his chest.

Something about this felt very right, Mulder thought, gently moving his hand up and down over Scully's back. She must have had the same thought, as he felt her arms tightening their hold around him. They had had occasion to hug each other like this in the past, but there was always that element of tentativeness, a kind of anxiety over stolen moments between two people who could only afford to let their guard down for a brief instant. He would always feel that moment of awkwardness, however minute, once the contact broke and the walls necessarily came back up. But he wasn't feeling it right now, and he was fairly certain that neither of them ever would again. They stood like that for several minutes, listening to the respective life forces within their closely held bodies.

Finally, Scully pulled back slightly, arms still around his waist, and gave him one of her rare open smiles. For a second, he almost thought he was staring at her from a hospital bed again. Although, now that he thought about it, the last time he saw her from a hospital bed, she seemed more sad than happy. "Well, Mulder, this is a change for us. All this openness and sharing and neither one is us is being hauled away in a straight jacket. That can only mean good things for the future."

"Maybe we're getting better at this already."

"Well, if that's the case, wanna play a game?"

"What kind of game? All I have are a deck of cards and those afore-mentioned condoms."

"Not that kind of game." Scully felt herself uncharacteristically turning color, and spun on her heels to turn away from him.

"Hey, is that what I think it is? It is! My dear Dana, I don't think I've seen you blush at one of my comments since — since never!"

At hearing her given name, one that he hadn't used in a very long time, Scully felt obligated to reply in kind. "Well, Fox," she said, pausing pointedly. It was only the second time in her life that she'd addressed him by his first name. She noticed, however, that outside of a raised eyebrow, he wasn't putting up any objections this time. She kept her back to him as he persisted in his attempts at turning her around. "Never have those comments cut so close."

As if realizing for the first time how things had really changed in terms of the possibilities presented by his offhand remarks, Mulder felt his own face flush, just as he finally succeeded at stilling Scully's movements. He was pretty sure she could tell just who was blushing now, but he went on doggedly, "You know, over the years I've said enough questionable things to you to land

me in front of Congress many times over. You've been a good sport throughout, and getting damn good at it yourself. But if —"

"Don't ever stop, Mulder. It keeps life interesting. And it's probably the only way I can tell you're not an alien bounty hunter." She reached down to the coffee table and picked up her mug of tea, then sat down again. "Anyway, are you interested in this game?"

Joining her on the couch, Mulder looked at her expectantly and nodded. "Do tell."

"Well, it's somewhere between 'twenty questions' and 'truth or dare', sort of. Except it's three questions and just the truth. To test how comfortable we really are. Taking turns, we each get to ask three questions and the other must respond truthfully. But you have to be careful: whatever you ask me, I can turn around and ask you and vice versa."

"What happens with the last question? I mean, the person going last gets to ask the most ultimate, mind-blowing, earth-shattering question and won't have to answer it in return."

"Luck of the draw, Mulder. We flip a coin to decide the order." Scully went into her jacket pocket and pulled out her wallet. She dug out a coin and offered it to him. "My coin, you toss, I call. Winner goes last. "

Mulder flipped the quarter expertly and slapped it down on the back of his hand.

"Heads," she said.

He removed his hand. Heads it was. "Okay, Scully, be gentle with me."

"Fine, but you're asking the first question."

"I haven't thought of one yet."

"I'll go warm up our tea and you can think about it." She gathered up both mugs and had just turned to leave when Mulder touched her arm lightly.

"Hey, Scully?" He looked like a little boy, about to ask for something he wasn't sure he deserved.

"Yeah?"

"To answer your question from before," he paused for several seconds, staring at her to the point of making her uncomfortable, "it was...stay with me...in general." Although his expression was of complete bashfulness and almost childlike innocence, his tone was incredibly sexy. She found herself flexing her fingers around the mugs to make sure that they wouldn't clatter to the floor.

She responded with a shy smile. "Thank you, Mulder. I needed to hear that."

With that, she disappeared into the kitchen. He heard her call out shortly, "I'm going to have to boil up another pot of water here."

Mulder saw the kitchen light go on, then leaned his head back and yawned. He felt pleasantly tired; that old familiar sleepy feeling after a good lay or a good cry. And how truly pathetic was his life that he had more recent experiences with the latter than the former? Ah, well, his time would come. Or rather, their time would come. He heard the familiar strains of the Eagles' "Best of My Love" coming from the kitchen; Scully must have turned on the radio. The good old classic rock station. It suddenly occurred to him that both he and Scully were children of the '70s, a fascinating and now suddenly fashionable time in history. Could they have been friends? Being three years apart in age, it probably wouldn't have been likely. As the decade came to a close, he was headed off to Oxford. She would have been just starting high school. He smiled at the image his mind conjured up, of a teenaged Dana Scully, dressed in the appropriate clothing of the day, with a flippy little Charlie's Angel hairdo. Would she have looked anything like that? Who were her friends? When he got right down to it, there were just so many little things about her that he didn't know. Things that, by rights, after six years, should be common knowledge between two people who were supposedly as close as they were. Where was he to start asking questions?

Scully leaned in towards the clock radio on the counter, watching the minutes tick by. It was one of those old ones that actually had a mechanism to flip numbers to mark digital time. She imagined

that Mulder must have had this in his bedroom as a teenager. As she stared at it, she realized that what he had said earlier was right. While they both professed to be best friends, there were many "best friend" details that neither of them knew. It was all doubly strange when she considered some of the rather intimate details that they did know... like each other's preferred sleep attire, or the contents of their toiletry bags. Such things became common knowledge with the amount of time they spent on the road and the occasional need for one of them to pack up for both while he finished an interview with local authorities, or she completed an autopsy. Stakeouts and long car and plane trips had made sleeping in close quarters a routine thing. They were two people who hesitated at the intimacy of using first names, but who had, in the course of their work, seen each other naked. Scully felt herself blushing for the second time that night as that rather fresh memory popped into her head. She could not remember details given her condition at the time, but she was fairly certain that in the time it took to clothe her, Mulder had seen all that he could have ever wanted to see. She sighed, casting it off as payback for all the times she'd had to administer to him when he was in the altogether.

She pulled herself away from the counter and walked quietly back to the front room. She stood at the entrance and watched him. He was sitting back with his eyes closed, a quirky little smile on his face. It reminded her of the various times that she'd watched him sleep. Mulder didn't sleep much, but when he did — and didn't have nightmares — Scully was pretty sure that they were the rare moments in his life when he felt no pain. She would have to change that. Over the next several months, she wanted them to be friends who worked together rather than coworkers who were friends. It was time to put themselves first for once. Mulder was right. They had not seen very many happy times in recent memory. Even their close moments had become sadly bittersweet, each one marred by an unspeakable weariness. Work had become all encompassing and in their spare time, they had taken to running away from one another in their own unique ways. It was a wonder how two such intelligent human beings could function in such complete denial. Now that the uncertainty was finally lifted, she could bear to look back, but she didn't hold herself any less responsible for the mess they had almost become. She realized tonight how close they came to giving up on each other. Never again.

She couldn't help but feel an extraordinary respect for the man she had come to love despite all odds. She knew he wasn't used to pursuing relationships with women the way he was doing with her. It was normally pretty effortless for Fox Mulder to have his way with females; she had seen it with her own eyes. By now, Scully knew that even she herself would be a "no challenge", easy conquer for him. But she also knew that even if she were to break with all tradition and tell him precisely that, it would have no effect. It was obvious that Mulder wanted to go the old fashioned route. She found that so strange and yet so right at the same time.

The whistling kettle broke into Scully's thoughts and summoned her back into the kitchen.

He was glad that she had agreed to move forward slowly, although something told him that she had agreed more for his sake than for hers. Mulder was fairly certain that Scully had traditionally been very careful about relationships, just as he historically had been quite willing to jump into them without much thought. That they now appeared to have switched roles did not surprise him. Fox Mulder was not normally a "look before you leap" kind of person in any sense, but he was plainly aware that he may as well stop living if he ever did anything to jeopardize what he had with Dana Scully. While he was relieved that their feelings were now out in the open, he knew that he could only process so much at once. He hadn't come right out and said it, but all in all, the bee did them a great favor. He considered himself lost to his passions the moment he made the move to kiss her. He realized that they quite likely would have wound up doing the wild thing had fate not intervened. He was pretty sure that Scully would not have stopped it. But there was no doubt in his mind that the timing would have been a big mistake.

He wanted them to have time to enjoy being comfortable together, without the complications of jumping into a full-fledged relationship with a capital "R". The unfortunate truth about crossing lines was that it rarely worked both ways. You can't uncross and you can't undo. And he wanted to explore everything he could on one side before moving on to the other. And if that meant that he would not get a chance to kiss her for another six months or whatever, well, he'd have to live with

that. Nothing about this evening had convinced him that he was wrong about not deserving her, but he was once again swayed by his partner's conviction. This time, the conviction was that she was the master of her own heart, and that she freely gave it to whomever she pleased. That certainty, confirmed by everything that had transpired on this night, filled Mulder with a strength and a faith that he had never before felt in his life.

When his question finally came to him, it struck him like a hammer. What did Scully say earlier, that it was a night of many revelations? Certainly it was going to be nothing short of that. He looked at his watch; it was approaching midnight. Time to get this game started.

"Hey, Scully, come on out here...I'm ready to play!"

End

When



Night-time thoughts about commitments made...

Very Early Wednesday Morning
Fox Mulder's Apartment Hallway

"I've never walked you to the elevator before, have I?"

"No you haven't, Mulder... and it's kinda sweet, unless you plan on doing this from now on."

"You have a problem with that?"

She smiled and said softly, "It's just not us."

"I can't see myself doing it anyway..." he said, returning the smile. He stepped back from her slightly and leaned against the wall, hiding the elevator buttons with his body. He glanced down the hall, unable to resist returning to that moment. She followed his gaze, instinctively knowing where his thoughts were. She became so immersed in reliving the memory herself that she started visibly when he spoke again. "Does it seem like a million years ago?"

"No... no, on the contrary, I remember it like it was yesterday."

Mulder turned to look at her once more, trying to reconcile the fact that the woman in front of him had so nearly been lost to him after that moment. It was strange how he remembered every last second of their prolonged discussion in this very hall, but the specifics of the following four days — outside of his time inside the alien ship — were fast becoming murky.

"Want to know something?"

"Always, Scully."

"As I slipped in and out of consciousness, I had this vague feeling of being picked up and carried by the paramedics. All the while, I knew something was horribly wrong. But all I could think about, all I could do, was hope and pray to God that no matter what happened, I would still remember this. That this memory wouldn't be taken away from me. And it wasn't. As I held you out there on the ice, I remembered..."

Her face flushed at the disclosure. She looked away from him and back again down the long hallway.

In danger of being overwhelmed by his emotions once more this evening, Mulder pushed the down button for the elevator. It really was time to call it a night. He reached out and wrapped his arms around her for one last hug, pulling back quickly to plant a kiss on her forehead. "G'night, Scully."

The elevator announced its arrival with a short "ding" and opened its doors.

She lifted her eyes to his one final time and stepped into the elevator. "Night, Mulder."

I'm lying here blinking in the darkness at my clock radio, seeing the red numbers change ever so slowly. It's now showing 2:20. She left over twenty minutes ago, so I assume — lack of traffic and all — that she's safe at home by now. I almost asked her to call me when she got home. Fortunately, the thought of doing so felt strange enough that I didn't. I can only imagine what her response might have been. One thing's for sure...I'm probably going to lie here for quite some time yet. Not sleeping. Which is not unusual in itself, but on the one hand, I really feel tired. I should be sleeping. But my mind is racing with thoughts of tonight. And I think my mind is going to be racing with thoughts of this night for a long time to come.

I knew what her question was going to be. I knew the question that she wanted to ask but didn't. I'm not sure I know why she didn't, though. I would have asked. If it had been my turn — knowing that she wouldn't have a chance to ask me back — I would have gone for it. Instead she copped out on the both of us and asked if we could start meeting once a week "just to talk".

This, despite the fact that I almost heard the question falling out of her mouth. I almost wanted to answer it regardless. I could hear her voice asking it in my head, even as she later stood in my doorway, saying goodnight in that never-before-heard tender voice that sent vibrations through my shorts. ["Mulder, when did you know?"]

Many things would be implicit in that question. First and foremost, when did I know she loved me? Then, when did I know I loved her? Perhaps also, when did I know how impossible it was to fight? And the thing is, I'm not sure I'd even know how to begin answering that question. But it would have been the final thing to bring "out there". Lay it all out on the table as they say.

How would I have answered such a question? Let's see. There was that conversation in the car when I was staking out Tooms. There was just something about her that night...something different. It damn well made me uncomfortable. So much so that I uttered that ridiculous thing about making my parents call me Mulder. Good one, that. It's made her avoid calling me "Fox" again until tonight... what is that? Five friggin' years? Didn't matter that everyone around her has called me by that God-forsaken name at one time or another. But that night, the way she said it. It made me want to jump her. Then that bit about not putting her life on the line for anyone else but me. What the hell was that, Dana Katherine Scully? What could I do but play along? Played the "iced tea and love" thing to throw her off. It didn't really work, but it got me the upper hand again. God knows what would have happened if it had been iced tea. On my way home that night, even though I almost was delirious from lack of sleep, I kept seeing her face. Could she possibly have any sort of interest in Spooky Mulder? How? Why? And then the next day...well, she flat out lied for me. I had known her to be "by the book" to that point. Talk about your revelations, Scully....

Even so, if that had been the only time, I would have eventually let it go. After all, who knows what motivates the female mind sometimes. Least of all Scully's mind. All of that could have been a mothering thing. She wanted me to get some sleep, right? Take care of myself, that kind of stuff.

So when did I really know? When we were shut down the first time. She chased after me with more than just professional interest. What did she say to me that one time? About how it would be more than a professional loss if I were to leave the Bureau? Like that didn't reveal a whole shitload! She kept after me despite what I assume were my first attempts at pushing her away. You know, that thing that I do for her own good. That thing that causes her pain. Contrary to what some people may think, I didn't pursue psychology at Oxford just to pass the time. I did learn a few things. And while there's still that matter of physicians being unable to heal themselves, I am aware of most of what I do. And the reasons why I do them. It's just a matter of admitting it. Self analysis can be pretty ugly.

I missed her during those weeks. It was a strange feeling that I had never felt before. Couldn't identify it. I couldn't tell if I was missing something that I had just gotten used to. Like the idea of her being by my side. That partner thing. Or if it was something else. But before I had a chance to play too many more head games with myself, Duane Barry happened. That's when I really knew, about me anyway. Or — more accurately — that's when it sort of occurred to me. I wasn't to the point of admitting anything yet. All I knew was that I wasn't feeling the mere grief that came with

losing a good FBI partner. I was feeling the agonizingly hopeless pain of losing a lover that I never had. It was then that I realized what it was about me and Scully. I loved her too much to ever let her love me in return. It was too dangerous.

I've lived by that rule for the past three years. I think, in some sense — tonight notwithstanding — a certain part of me always will.

* * * * *

"Tell me about your life, Scully."

"That's not a question, Mulder."

"No? Well, here's a question. Does your life ever seem lonely? I mean, I really don't know, but I hate that it might be. Because of me."

"Are you saying that your life is lonely?"

"I asked you first..."

* * * * *

I'm crawling into bed and the familiarity of it is comforting. But I wonder how much sleep I'm going to get tonight. What a night it's been...

I should have known that getting into a "game" like that with him would be serious stuff. And of course, am I surprised that we ended up not playing by the rules? No. Mulder never plays by the rules. From his first question — or was it observation? — I knew that it wasn't going to be an innocuous give and take of something like "What's your favorite animal?" Where on earth did he get that "lonely" thing? And the weird part is, that wasn't even his first choice for a question. It was something that — for some unfathomable reason — just popped into his head. I think I actually saw it pop into his head when I brought in our tea. Something in his expression changed when he looked at me.

And good God, how was I to answer that one? Yes? No? Maybe? All three were true, to some degree. But I have problems with this whole loneliness business. Or what some might perceive as loneliness. I've lived most of my adult life on my own, without roommates even. And I've liked it. I like having my own space, my own time, my own solitude. To me, being alone has nothing to do with being lonely, unlike what some people think. But then I don't imagine that's what Mulder meant. After all, he's seen me go from having the occasional date to — to what? The same monk-like existence that seems to define his life, I guess. I mean, we know each other well enough to know for a fact that there have been no important relationships in either of our lives for several years now. Have we both been inexplicably waiting for one another? I can't even answer that for myself. I don't know that I've fended off all other interest just to wait for him. I really and truly haven't had much opportunity to meet anyone. But I must admit, I've not been wanting to change that either. Haven't taken any steps to rectify the situation, so to speak. But have I been lonely in the wait? Sometimes, I suppose. On the odd night, I sometimes wondered "what if".

But for the most part, because it's Mulder, I haven't really felt lonely. Even when he's not with me, I feel his presence. I suppose ten or more hours of contact on a regular daily basis tends to make me live quite easily with the status quo. I've felt many emotions "because" of him, but loneliness? I don't think so. Maybe — unconsciously — I've always held this sliver of hope that things would be different for us someday.

Anyone hearing his statement would have found it profoundly egocentric: "Because of me." As I've had occasion to say to him more than once, not everything in my life is about Mulder. But maybe that's almost a technicality. Almost a lie. Because most everything in my life has become about Mulder. He has infiltrated areas of my life that I never thought possible. Areas of my life that I never knew existed.

* * * * *

I thought it would be hard to talk to her about things that I've barely been able to admit to myself. But I learned tonight that there's nothing that I won't tell her if she ever asked. Nothing. It's kinda weird and should leave me feeling naked and vulnerable, but it doesn't. It feels safe. I think it's that trust thing that I've somehow managed to give her since the very first moment she stepped into my office over six years ago. I don't immediately trust anyone. I still haven't figured out what it was about Scully. Even as I suspected her motives — accused her of being a spy, even — I seemed to have that uncanny feeling that I could trust her. Maybe that was my inherent spookiness showing through again. I just knew.

Of course, I don't know what possessed me to spout that loneliness stuff at her. I mean, I saw her come out of the kitchen with the tea and suddenly... I don't know. My original question flew out the window. It was the same feeling I had when she appeared at my door a few hours earlier. She seemed so fragile again. So breakable. Nothing that I normally dared associate with Special Agent Scully. But I suddenly had this image of her sitting at home by herself. Night after night. Trying to dig her way out from under the crap that I continually heaped on her. The thing is, Scully's always been there for me. Even when she doesn't want to be. Even when her instincts tell her to run far away. It's a loyalty that I'm pretty sure I've abused. Several times over the past few months I've heard her say no. No, she wasn't about to go out on that limb for me again. Especially not without so much as a goddamn thank you; I can be such a prick sometimes. To make matters worse, I played dirty. Went over her head. I'm not proud of it but I won't deny doing it. For me it was the only way. To escape whatever pain I thought I was feeling, I dug deeper and deeper into the work. In many ways, Scully did the opposite.

But the more I distanced myself from her, the worse it became. Not to mention I hated myself for it. I remember thinking about her on one particularly — what, "lonely"? — and self-loathing night. With the help of a choice bottle of booze and some disgusting videos, I beat myself into mind-numbing oblivion in more ways than I care to remember. That night, I wondered what she would think of me if she really knew me. Knew what I was doing. And in some pathetic and depraved sense, I wondered whether she did the same thing herself. Whether — as a result of her unfortunate association with me — there were nights when she was left with nothing but a shell of herself. With nothing inside. I wanted so much for that not to be the case for her. Because even though there's nothing inside, the aching continues. You think you've emptied yourself of everything, but the loneliness never goes away.

That thought hadn't occurred to me again until this evening. And I needed to know.

* * * * *

"So what's next?"

"Why me, Scully?"

"Is that your question, Mulder?"

"Yeah, I know I'm over my quota for this game but..."

"Doesn't matter, I guess, so long as you know I still have the last one."

* * * * *

It kills me that Mulder has been used and abused by the women in his life. And were I to be completely honest, I'd have to admit that there's a certain part of me that wants to make them all hurt for what they've done. Whatever they've done. Which leads me to my other significant unasked question of the night: Diana Fowley. I didn't ask this one for a different reason. I desperately want to know, but I've sensed that he's not ready to tell. And maybe I was also afraid to ask. I do believe that he will tell me about her in his own time. When the time's right. That probably won't be for me to decide, but I can respect that. I'm betting that the story will be interesting and worth the wait.

When I met Phoebe Green, it was still early in our partnership. I surely had no claims on him then. Not that it stopped her from irritating the hell out of me. The dislike was almost instantaneous from the first second that I saw her. God only knows why she felt it necessary to treat me like some sort

of pathetic competition for his favors. No way that I could stack up against her and she knew it. She was the non-stop leggy sort that I had always imagined was Mulder's "type". She even had a brain. If he had wanted her in the least, it would have been no contest. But he didn't want her. He had learned his lesson on that one.

Over the years, it seems like Mulder has taken all of his bad relationship experiences to heart. And accepted the blame for them himself. They've somehow left him convinced that he's not worthy in some way. That his all-consuming quest for Samantha — and I remember that conversation in Oregon when he told me that "nothing else matters" — left so little for anyone else. What he said earlier tonight, about not knowing how to give of himself to love me, made me hurt for him. Not worthy of being loved? Not you, Mulder. Never you.

So why him, he asks. Some questions just don't have clear answers. I could list all of the things that I admire in him, but mainly, I think I love him because he's Mulder. Flawed as he is, I could live forever and never meet anyone like him again. Underneath all those complex layers, Fox Mulder is the epitome of honest simplicity. That's a challenge to find no matter where you look.

* * * * *

Scully loves me. Funny how I've known it for so long but it's never felt this good before. Maybe because it was always something fleeting to me. Something so ephemeral that at any moment it might not be there any more. So open to being destroyed by one more bone-headed move on my part. One more impulsive decision or crackpot theory. Funny how that's never stopped me from making them. Or maybe not so funny. It was simply that belief that she would be better off without me. I've gotten very good at pushing her away and drawing her in at the same time. Now I have to learn to stop doing it.

As great as this feels, it's also damn scary. Because for as much as I've hurt her in the past, we've now opened up the potential for me to hurt her so much more. When I say that I'm not good at this, Scully, I mean it. My parents weren't like yours. I never had the benefit of seeing anything overly loving between the two most influential people in my life as I grew into adulthood. This is aside from the fact that family life went to hell in a handbasket for awhile after Samantha was taken...

But what's the answer to the mystery of why Scully feels the way she does about me? Despite my having known for a long time that she loves me, every time I've considered why, I've drawn a blank. I've been involved with a few women in my day, but I've not loved many of them. And quite frankly, from the results that I've seen, none of them have ever really loved me in return. Surely not Phoebe. And not Diana, even though she obviously cares about me in some warped sense and maybe even wants me still. But that was never love, or things would have turned out differently between us years ago. So I have no frame of reference as to what would make me appealing to Scully. And the fact that we are so inherently different makes it doubly hard to understand.

Her meandering answer to my question didn't really clarify things for me, either. How did she end up saying it? Something like she loves me because I'm me...? Oh hell, maybe that's good enough. Not like I could ever explain my feelings for her in actual words either. I suppose that's why they're called "feelings".

* * * * *

"It's getting really late, Mulder, I think I better make my way home before I turn into a pumpkin."

"I think you're getting your fairy tale facts mixed up. Cinderella doesn't actually turn into a pumpkin."

"No? Well, it's been a while since I read it."

"You're not forgetting something are you, Scully? You won the coin toss...you have one last question that's supposed to be the question to end all questions."

"Are you sure you're ready for that?"

* * * * *

God knows I wasn't. But I almost asked him. It almost came out. When did you know, Mulder? When did you know that I loved you? (Was it before I even knew?) More importantly, when did you know that you loved me back? Tell me it wasn't just at that moment of you almost kissing me in the hall.

But I didn't. I couldn't. It would have been too much too soon. So I swallowed those words, before they had a chance to leap from my mouth. He knew, though, given my botched job at concealing it. I could tell he knew. The thing about Mulder is that when he's not specifically out to hide something from me — which is most times — I can read him like a book. He lets me do this, I guess. It's his way of letting me know that he trusts me. He lets me in in ways that I've never been able to give him back in return. But I'll work on that. I promise.

For some reason, he almost wanted to tell me. I could sense that, but I don't know why. Why he would have wanted to go into some long detailed explanation. Because I don't think he'd be able to pinpoint the exact moment. But in any case, I wasn't ready to hear it. It wasn't the right time. I wanted to ask but I really didn't want to know. Even now, in my mind, I can hear Mulder saying, "That's so you, Scully." The fact is, I may not even be ready to explore the concept of when I first knew.

Would it be a surprise to you, Mulder, if I admitted that I felt something from the very first day? I didn't have to look far beyond that slightly condescending facade of self-protection to see someone that I wanted to get to know better. Maybe it was the intriguing combination of vulnerability and strength that I saw as early as our first case in Oregon. I know he doesn't believe that he's a strong person. I've always suspected that he thought that and tonight he actually said so. But you're so wrong about that, Mulder. How can anyone survive what you've had to face in life and not be strong? So what if it's not the typical macho male strength that's so worshipped by your gender. In my opinion, that fact has been your saving grace. You would have self-destructed long ago if you were the macho male type. No, Mulder, your strength lies in your childlike ability to trust basic emotions and instincts. And you know to give in to them when needed. I envy that.

So I can admit that I felt something from the very beginning. (That's no big revelation, Dana.) But when did I know that I actually loved him? I really don't think there's ever a specific moment when something like that happens, so I honestly don't know. But I've heard it said that when you lose someone, someone else comes into your life. Or you let someone else come into your life. Not meant to replace the departed individual, of course; just a realization that someone else is there. Knocking at the door. Asking permission to come in. I was strangely accepting of my father's death, but when it looked as though Mulder might follow him, I went uncharacteristically ballistic on our suspect. The intensity behind those feelings at the time shocked me. It felt as though something had crept up behind me and swallowed me whole.

And with each time that I very nearly lost him, I became more and more consumed by this "thing". The honest truth is, I don't think I've ever been in love with anyone. As dysfunctional as Mulder's relationships seem to have been, I think he's at least felt those emotions. I never have. So for the longest time, I didn't know what they were. I've since accepted the fact that being in love involves a tricky and complex set of emotions. Particularly when one decides not to act on anything.

Then again, Mulder has always confused me where his real feelings are concerned. While some might think it pretty much says it all when a man literally goes to the end of the earth to rescue you, with Mulder, that could have been just another day at work. He made the comment in the hallway that he owes me everything while I owe him nothing. There have been times when I've wondered about that. Like how much of what he's done is actually meant as repayment, and nothing to do with love. But that's horribly unfair, I know. Even if half of what he feels for me is a mere fulfillment of "need", I have to believe that the other half is love. Knowing full well that he hasn't received much in return for what he's given in the past, I can't really hold that against him.

So I guess I'm really not able to answer that question of when I first knew. I can only admit that I've probably been in love with him for a long time. As in, for many years. But I can pinpoint the precise moment when I finally realized that I could no longer hide it from myself. Not two seconds after I learned from the guys who Diana Fowley was, I had to admit finally that I had fallen in love

with my partner. And it was too late to decide whether or not it was a good idea. Something drastic had to be done.

As surprising as it might sound, the chain of events that followed hard upon us turned out to be my savior. The disbandment of the X-Files, the brief change that it gave us, the Dallas disaster, the conversation in the hallway, the brush with death, the events of tonight...it's brought about a welcome change of pace to a many-years-too-long mating dance. Even for two people as sorely lacking in experience as we are.

Neither one of us may be good at it, Mulder, but we'll learn. Together. Slowly.

* * * * *

Wednesday Morning 7:00 am
J. Edgar Hoover Building

"Good morning."

Mulder was sitting at his desk, already up to his elbows in file folders. He looked up at her, his eyes slowly traversing the entire length of her body. "And a good morning to you too...how'd you sleep?"

She dropped her briefcase on her desk and flipped the switch on her computer. "Not too great. How about you?"

"Not a wink." He continued to observe her movements, a smile growing on his lips.

"How do you feel?"

"Never better. You?" The famous Mulder grin broadened.

She stared at him for a long moment before allowing a hint of a smile to grace her lips.

"Pretty damn good, Mulder. Now where's my coffee?"

End

Reparation



Love DOES mean having to say you're sorry...

Friday Evening
Dana Scully Residence

"Scully...Scully!" Mulder fumbled with his set of keys, trying to find the one that would lock her apartment door, seeing as how she had no apparent interest in doing so. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his partner dash down the hall and around the corner in the quick seconds that it took him to finish his task. Damn, those little legs could move when they were determined. She was out the front door and marching down the front walk of her building by the time he caught sight of her again. "Scully!"

Not five minutes ago, he had called her from his cell phone, as he stood at the entrance to her building. The line was picked up and then quickly disconnected. When he called back, he got the standard message that "the cellular customer you are trying to reach is unavailable right now". Yes, Scully had call display and knew it was him. The only logical conclusion he could draw was that she didn't want to talk to him. Not that that would ever stop Fox Mulder. He had learned that one from Dana Scully herself.

Scully knew that her barely five-foot-two frame could not outrun her six-foot tall partner for long. It wasn't even her intention to try. She came to an abrupt halt and turned to face him, forcing him to stop suddenly and come within inches of knocking her down.

"Why'd you hang up on me?"

She ignored his question and looked at him somewhat defiantly. "Mulder, go home. I don't want to deal with this now."

"Deal with?' What's to deal with? For months now we've been meeting every Friday night to talk. Now when we really need to talk, you're running away? Isn't that supposed to be my move?"

"Might you be taking this a little too personally?" She couldn't hold back her words; that was precisely the reason she didn't want them to talk tonight. She was in terrible danger of saying and doing all the wrong things and history showed that when that happened, he tended to do the same, in spades. They didn't need that, not so early in their new "understanding".

Mulder's eyes narrowed at her. "That was an unfortunate choice of words."

"Oh, really —" She misunderstood. Oh, God, here was angry Scully, much worse than runaway Scully.

"— When I first used them," Mulder interrupted before the woman he loved could completely blow her top at him. He put his hands on her shoulders and held her firmly in place. He could practically feel the heat of her anger coming off her in waves, although it was gradually subsiding. They must have looked like a strange pair to passersby, standing as they were along the sidewalk in an

intense face to face confrontation. She, in her "power walking" exercise wear, sneakers, and a gray hooded fleece pullover; he, still dressed in his suit from work.

"Scully, of course everything between you and me is personal. I was a total ass to say that to you. I'm sorry I said it and I'm really sorry I said it in front of the guys."

"Why did you say it in the first place?"

Well, that was a good question. A damn good question.

* * * * *

24 Hours Earlier
FBI Headquarters

Scully and Mulder walked out of Kersh's office in silence after being dismissed. They continued without words until they reached their own office, such as it was. The impersonal open area workplace was empty of other agents, as it was now well past six in the evening.

"So, what do you think, Scully?" Mulder ventured, noting that his partner had said little to him in the past twenty-four hours and was growing increasingly reticent. She hadn't so much as met his eyes in conversation during the afternoon's extended meeting with Skinner and Kersh.

"Was that just a week from Hell or have I finally turned the corner into madness?" Her voice was tight and simmering with barely controlled emotion. Still, there was no direct look from her as she reached into the lower drawer of her desk, searching for something.

Mulder looked at the general area of the top of her head for a long moment and then offered uncertainly, "I... don't know what to say to that."

"Really? Don't you have all the answers, Mulder?" There, finally a direct look. To Mulder, it felt like a slap in the face, but at least her eyes were finally connecting with his. Right this moment, however, they were glaring icy blue eyes: exactly the sort that must have inspired the "Ice Queen" moniker in her academy days.

"Whoa, wait a minute here, Scully, what's with the attitude?"

"I don't know...maybe it has something to do with the fact that every time we meet up with another clue to this government group conspiracy to hybridize humans with aliens, you —" She stopped, as if hearing it for the first time and unable to reconcile how utterly ridiculous it sounded. "Well, let's just say that it brings back some unpleasant memories — memories that I technically don't even have, Mulder — and I wonder why we keep chasing after these carrots that they dangle in our faces. I mean, it's ludicrous! I can accept that some of this evidence is scientifically sound, but if we're to believe these stories, there's something like a half a dozen other-worldly types running around right under our noses trying to sabotage our species!"

Skeptic Scully was back in business, Mulder noted, which was perfectly in keeping with her mode of operation. Whenever she became alarmed or stressed out, it usually manifested itself in that way. But there was also some other emotion beneath her current ranting and he wanted her to be honest with herself about what it really was.

"Moreover, every time this happens, you see fit to take off on a wild goose chase and come back with some cryptic piece of information that's vague at best...while at the same time you manage to invalidate whatever evidence, intuition, or feeling that I may have!"

"I don't do that," Mulder replied quietly. He didn't need to be hit over the head with it; yes, he had been an absolute jerk to her since the CDC incident at his apartment. Still, her overall condemnation of him was inaccurate and she knew it.

"No, not always," she conceded, sighing as she sat down heavily.

Mulder sat down also and pulled his chair close to the front of her desk. "I searched Diana's apartment."

"Why? Did you think she'd be careless enough to leave something to be found? If she is part of this plot and if she has even half the brains that you attribute to her, well... Look, Mulder, I don't want you to misunderstand. I know where your loyalties lie; I don't question that at all. This is not some juvenile competition between Agent Fowley and me. I just have a bad feeling about her and it kills me that you don't trust my judgement on that." She held up her hand to Mulder's attempt to reply. "Whatever you're going to say, just remember that some things can't be unsaid."

With that, silence overcame the room. Mulder studied Scully's desk blotter intently. She stared at him, willing him to look at her. When that failed, she grabbed her briefcase and got up.

"Since we're 'unsuspended', I assume it's business as usual until the powers that be come to some sort of decision regarding our possible reassignment. I don't suppose it'll happen overnight, so I still have those off-site interview sessions tomorrow. I'm going to go straight there in the morning, so...well, I guess I'll see you Monday."

She gathered up her coat and quickly left, not wanting to know if he even got up to try to stop her. Which he didn't.

* * * * *

Thursday Night FBI Headquarters

Fox Mulder jerked upright, awakened by the sound of a vacuum cleaner being started in the hallway. He had fallen asleep at his desk. He forgot for a moment why he was still at the office, but the fact was, he was in no hurry to check into a motel room either. His apartment was still off-limits and would be for the remainder of the weekend. Last he checked, he was told that it wasn't likely to be as dramatic as what they originally thought. He wasn't in danger of losing all of his belongings after all. But the inconvenience was the pits. Even more the pits was the unexpected turnaround of events. He had supposed that under the circumstances, Scully would have offered her spare bedroom to him, but that was probably as likely as an icestorm in Hawaii right about now.

God, why didn't he just apologize to her? [Well, because she said that some things just couldn't be unsaid, that's why; that was an apology-stopper if I've ever heard one.] Yes, but he definitely made things worse by staying silent. Damn that male ego. He groaned loudly and got up from his chair, stretching his aching muscles. All this because of Diana Fowley. From the moment Diana was recognizable under her enviro suit, he could feel Scully's blood pressure rise. She continued on a steady boil all the way to Fort Marlene's and then into that infamous decontamination shower. What an experience that was...not. He stood for a moment and thought back to yesterday.

"What do you mean, we're going in there together?" It was Dana Scully at her flabbergasted best.

"Sorry, but the facility is built this way and we can't have one of you wait for an hour while the other goes in. There are two entrances from the locker area; they'll take you to two separate sides."

Mulder had been the first to go in, being able to shed his clothing and inhibitions much more easily than Scully. She was barely talking by that time, taking up a position at the other end of the locker room, just off the other entrance to the showers. For both their sakes, Mulder had disrobed quickly to allow her some privacy. But he almost laughed when he reached the shower area and saw how "separate" the two sides were. Yeah, Scully was going to love this.

He heard her come in on the opposite side, but throughout the whole process, they neither spoke to nor looked at one another. It was only when the water shut down that he had stepped forward and turned around, allowing himself to sweep a meandering glance over her. She saw him look at her and seemed resigned to it.

Things had gone steadily downhill from that point forward. What he wouldn't give to relive the past two days again. Perhaps then he could make an active choice not to be the dog that he had obviously ended up being to her. It definitely wasn't intentional. These incidents affected him in much the same way as they affected Scully. He had his own memories to deal with whenever the

conspiracy reared its ugly head. Since his supposed meeting with Samantha last year — about which he had only told Scully this week — he had more or less stopped focusing on the issue of her abduction, believing that she was presently living a normal life. While it hurt that she obviously wanted nothing to do with him, he believed her to be safe, at least, in some sense. Now, apparently, the latest and greatest news was that it hadn't been Samantha after all. Scully was right, what was the point in chasing after these ever-changing truths? It was like running around in a house of magic mirrors. Did he really believe that Armageddon was imminent for the planet the other night at the hangar? Why did it matter? If everything were true, wouldn't he and his loved ones be better off dead?

He slipped quietly out of the office and took the elevator down to the parkade. His car was the only one on that level, not a surprise considering it was after eleven. As he slipped behind the wheel, he was suddenly overcome by the weariness brought on by the past several days. He really hadn't slept much in the last forty-eight hours...maybe a night at the motel wouldn't be that bad after all. A real bed; that was a bonus. He would have preferred it to be Scully's bed — at least her spare one — but there was no chance of that any time soon unless he took steps to fix things. He knew that with the new agreement they had regarding their relationship, she wouldn't be taking it upon herself to fix this one. It would be strictly left up to him.

He started the car and headed off towards the nearest motel.

* * * * *

Thursday Night
Dana Scully Residence

Dana Scully tossed and turned in her bed, eyes wide open despite her body screaming desperately for rest. Her mind was racing far too fast to consider sleeping. She absolutely hated the feeling; it was reducing her to a teenager and she was never one to wax poetic about her teenage years. She was reliving the most nightmarish aspects of high school: the waiting-for-phone-call/churning-in-the-stomach utter power that someone else had over her. Actually her partnership with Mulder had always raised a certain memory in her mind. In her first two years of high school — which were amazingly spent at one place — she had a close friendship with a male classmate. They were never romantically involved, although they did go out on a few occasions. It was a situation where one or the other may have felt something more but neither party really wanted to jeopardize things by changing them. To this day, however, Scully could remember the pain she felt whenever he actually had a "real" date with someone else. Was she feeling the same thing here with Mulder, about a several-years-over relationship with Diana Fowley?

She turned over onto her side and stared out the window into the semi-darkness. But was it really over? [Maybe that's really what you're afraid of, Dana. That it's not over, that he still has feelings for her and might respond to her somewhat obvious interest.] It had been several months since they talked into the wee hours of a Wednesday morning, clearing the air about how they felt and where they were headed. While it hadn't solved or resolved everything, it had been an uplifting event for the both of them. Things still hadn't been easy, especially after losing the X-Files in the way that they did and having to deal with the subsequent work that had been assigned to them, but she had found some strength in knowing that they were now about so much more than just the X-Files, or just work. They had managed to achieve a new level of comfort that was a refreshing break from the ill wind of the past year.

Diana. Agent Fowley. Diana. Did he always call her Diana? Was there never a moment in their lives when they were just Mulder and Fowley? To her absolute disgust, Scully felt her eyes well up with hot tears that couldn't be held back. She wasn't going to give even her internal teenage psyche the satisfaction, however; no sobbing allowed here; she just let the tears run silently down onto her pillow. It was bad enough she felt the strange urge to retch every time she heard her call him "Fox" in that way that she had. But this wasn't about names, because Scully knew that Mulder had actually called many agents that he worked with by their first names. Reggie, Jerry; good God, he had even referred to "Alex" in conversation back when they were separated. They had never

discussed it, but Scully knew that they each felt something intensely personal about using their respective first names. Personal, there was that word again.

She sat up and reached for a tissue, blowing her nose loudly. Last thing she needed was to be puffy and red-eyed in the morning from both crying and lack of sleep. The scientist in her tried to remind her that she was being extremely silly. Here she was getting upset over something trivial and inconsequential. After all, she had real evidence to support whatever bad feelings she had about Agent Fowley...she was not to be reduced to some object of puerile rivalry.

Damn Mulder anyway. He was the real reason why any of this was coursing through her brain at the speed of light at two in the morning. From his attempts to shut her up when they were being "debriefed" by that Fowley woman, to his feigned gasp upon hearing her evidence, to his accusation of making things personal...God, was it possible both to hate him and love him so much all at once?

Scully flopped back onto the pillow, throwing her arms out across the expanse of the bed. [I shouldn't have left him like that. Now it's going to be difficult. And tomorrow's Friday, and I made a point of implying that I didn't want to meet with him as usual.] She groaned and flipped onto her stomach, forcing her eyes closed and commanding sleep to come over her.

* * * * *

Friday Morning
FBI Headquarters

Fox Mulder stared alternately at his phone and at the list in front of him. More background checks. Of course, he was now behind, considering how he had taken some time off, first of his own accord and then with the brief suspension. Why couldn't Kersh have kept them suspended until they officially decided on the X-Files reassignment?

He rearranged the piles of papers on his desk absently, picking up the receipt from last night's motel. He'd have to submit that for expenses...he hadn't had many expenses to submit in a while now, given their homebound work. He thought back to last night and how he had hesitated when the guy at the front desk asked how many nights he needed the room for; "one" was his final answer. How he was going to fix things so that he wouldn't need any more motel nights was another challenge altogether, but he had all day to think on that one.

He turned around to look over at Scully's spotless desk. True to her word, she hadn't come in to the office. The off-site work was only three blocks away, however, and he could easily meet her there for lunch. No, lunch wasn't going to solve anything. They still had their normal Friday night date; or rather, Mulder figured — despite her words — they still had their normal Friday night date.

He jumped in response to his ringing phone.

"Mulder."

"Agent Mulder, is Agent Scully there with you?" A.D. Skinner.

"No sir, she's already gone on her assignment. What is it?"

"Oh, I forgot. That's going to take up the rest of her day, isn't it?"

"I believe so."

"Just wanted to let you know that there's going to be an official hearing this afternoon regarding your reassignment to the X-Files. It's probably unlikely that either of you will be required to attend, but if needed, I guess you're going to have to represent both of your interests. I'll get in touch with Agent Scully to see if that's all right with her."

"Is this just a formality, sir?"

"It looks that way. Quite likely by Monday morning you'll be moving back into your old office."

"What about Agent Spender and Agent Fowley?"

"Actually, we've been unable to reach either one of them... I'll be in touch if needed, Agent Mulder."

[Unable to reach them... what a surprise. Spender's probably off somewhere puking up his guts over his lineage.]

Mulder released the call, downed a swig of coffee and picked up his list. Guess it was time to earn his keep.

* * * * *

Friday Afternoon
FBI Headquarters Parking Garage

Scully pulled into her usual parking spot and turned off the engine. From here she could see Mulder's vehicle so he was obviously still in the building. He hadn't called her all day and she hadn't called him. They were fully into their respective male/female roles this time. She reached up and pressed her fingertips against her temples, trying to erase the increasing pain she was feeling in her head. Mulder couldn't be blamed for that, unfortunately; it had just been a bitch of a day and with each interview, she had become more and more ornery. She just wasn't in the proper frame of mind to deal with anyone today.

After hearing from Skinner that morning, she had thought it would be a good idea to come back to the office on the pretense of finding out if there was any news regarding the X-Files reassignment. But here she sat, unable to move from the car. The events of the day had drained the last bit of energy out of her. What had seemed like a good idea in the morning was now impossible to carry out. She just didn't have the strength to take on Fox Mulder right now. Not without possibly losing control and creating even more issues between the two of them.

She should just go home, change into something comfortable, and go for a long walk.

* * * * *

Friday Evening
Dana Scully Residence

"Why did you say it in the first place?"

She looked and sounded tired, like she had barely slept. [Look what you're constantly doing to her.] At least she no longer looked like a powder keg about to go off.

"Look, Scully, we need to talk — and not out here. If you don't want to go back inside, let's go down the street to a coffee shop or something." He tried not to sound too much like he was pleading, but this wasn't going to go on for so much as another hour.

"I have a screaming headache, Mulder, I can't take any more coffee."

"Then let's go inside." He released her and moved his hand down to her arm. "Please."

She turned and walked slowly back up the walk. When they arrived at her apartment door, they both turned and looked expectantly at one another.

"What?" Mulder asked, puzzled.

Somewhat sheepishly, Scully replied, "I have no keys."

"In a hurry to leave, were you?" He smiled at her, fishing his keys out of his pocket and retrieving the required one. Before he unlocked the door, however, he peered closely at her face, wanting to smooth her hair back and feel her cheek against his hand. Instead, he asked, as sensitively as he could manage, "Bad day?"

"Matches the rest of the week."

"I'm sorry; it probably didn't help that we left things up in the air like that yesterday."

The way he was staring at her was, well, dangerous. [Reason number two we shouldn't do this now.] She looked away and nudged his arm. "Open the door, Mulder."

He did as he was told and then stepped aside to allow her to pass through. He closed the door behind him and leaned against it. Scully got as far as the front of her couch before turning around. Her face was a mask of confusion and frustration, but it was perfectly readable to Mulder. He had to admit, he was getting better at identifying her emotional undercurrents, the stuff she tried to keep under that outer layer of professional detachment.

He approached her slowly, maintaining eye contact the entire time, and hesitated for only a moment before he gathered her up into his arms. He hugged her tightly, feeling extremely gratified when she returned it with the same intensity rather than raising her knee at him. Equal parts of guilt and fear swirled through his brain as he opened his mouth to speak. "This isn't to mean that everything's okay or that we don't need to talk, Scully," he whispered to the top of her head, "Just that I love you and don't want to see you hurting, especially not because of me. There's already been too much of that over too many years. Don't let me keep doing this to you."

She was crying silently into his jacket. He had known it would happen before it even started. He had also known, from observing her face outside the door, that one of the reasons why she didn't want to see him tonight was that she had been afraid of exactly this. Still. After all they had been through and all the talking that had gone on over the past several months, this expression of — did she think of it as weakness? — was something that Dana Scully still preferred to keep to herself. It was one of those old habits that Mulder knew would be difficult to break; hell, he had a fair share of those himself. He could only try to make it easier for her, as he tried to do just now. Get it out of the way before the talking started; that had been his plan. As he held her, feeling the slight tremors that emanated from her small form, he congratulated himself for finally doing something right in the past forty-eight hours.

Several minutes later, she shifted in his arms. Turning her head up and laying her cheek against him, she mumbled, "Sorry."

"No, the only one who gets to apologize tonight is me. That's the rule."

"I shouldn't have walked away yesterday; that was bad. Power tripping."

"Well, you sure don't need to do that, Scully. You know who holds all the power in this relationship, don't you?"

"Why doesn't that make me feel any better, Mulder?" She allowed herself a small smile as she looked up at him.

"'Cause I'm a bastard. A jerk. An insensitive fool —"

"You don't have to embarrass yourself any further; you're all of the above. But do you know why?" She extricated herself from his embrace and sat down on the couch. He removed his jacket and joined her at the opposite end.

"Yeah, I know why. But I also need you to know why." He was suddenly serious. Just as suddenly, Scully noticed how tired and drawn he seemed to be. [We've both been through the grinder again. Only this time we were stupid enough to be at odds with each other too.] "I treated you badly at The Lone Gunman, and again, I'm sorry. It's just that I get crazy whenever this same old shit hits the fan." He shook his head from side to side, running his hand through his hair in exasperation. "I really don't know what to make of that bit about Samantha last year not being real. She certainly seemed real. I've based every action I've taken over the past year on the certainty that it was her. I've left her alone as she wanted, even though with each passing week, it hurt that she didn't want me in her life. What an ending to my supposed life-long quest.... And now it's like I'm no closer to finding her. I don't know what to feel, except that — more and more — I'm certain that I will find her."

"I think you will too." Scully thought back to their meeting with Cassandra at the hospital, remembering the poorly hidden agonized expression that flickered over her partner's face when Cassandra brought up the subject of Mulder's sister. No matter what other complications had

entered into this conspiracy over the past several years, Scully could never forget that Samantha was still at the heart and soul of Mulder's search for the truth.

"Diana makes me crazy too, but not in the way that you may think. There's history there, but you and I, we also have history. A lot more, in fact, than I ever had with Diana."

"I was never your lover," Scully murmured, her eyes looking off somewhere towards the fireplace.

"What makes you think Diana and I were lovers?"

Scully brought her gaze back and rolled her eyes at him. He returned a slight smile.

"What can I say, Scully, there are — unfortunately — a few of those in my past, just as there are in yours. What I'd like you to understand however, is that Diana is no more significant to me than any of my other ex-lovers."

"Then why the slack? It's like you don't have any concerns about her motives, nothing...You've never given anyone else that same benefit of the doubt."

"Scully, she's always been a good agent. Maybe I didn't say it right, or maybe the moment was already totally out of whack or something, but when I told you that I 'know' her, I meant in an FBI sense. But you're right...it's been awhile. And I had no right to insinuate that you were proceeding on invalid grounds, or that you were wasting my time. Looking back, it seems like I was the one who was making it personal." Mulder looked away from her and focused on some far away spot on the wall. His expression betrayed a certain sadness when he continued, "I've thought about this all day, and maybe it's total self-delusion, but my belief in Diana stemmed from the fact that I find it hard to believe that everyone that I've ever cared about or who's ever cared about me — present company excepted, of course — ultimately has a part in this hidden agenda against me. How's that for a little bit of hopeful optimism from paranoia boy?"

He leaned his head back and dug the heels of his hands into his eyes, feeling ambushed by the sudden tears that burned there. They sat in silence for several moments before he turned back to her. "I'm just playing Diana's game, Scully. If she's working with them because they think I'll trust her, well, then she becomes the best way to access further information. I have to use that for as long as I can."

"What convinced you?" Scully asked quietly.

"I should have been convinced by your evidence but stubborn bastard that I am.... I was convinced by Poppa Spender's impromptu visit to her place when I was conducting my search. He said he was looking for poor Jeffrey, but I'm pretty sure young Spender and Diana don't socialize in that way, if you know what I mean."

They looked at each other for a long moment, each wondering what the other was really thinking; each yearning for the ability to read minds like Gibson Praise — for just this one time — to make it easier to share some of the feelings that were simply impossible to verbalize.

"What is it?" Mulder asked softly, reaching a hand across to tap her knee.

"I don't want to beat this to death, but — for my curiosity, okay?"

"Whatever; ask me." He sat back, arms out and palms up in an offering to her.

"When I called you, you said you were with Diana. What did you do, wait for her outside her apartment?"

"I waited for her inside her apartment."

Scully raised her eyebrows in response.

"I let her know I had to be sure I could trust her. I even told her I ran into Old Smokey, since I figured he'd probably mention it to her at some point."

They exchanged another meaningful look between them; Mulder was sure he sensed some Scully radar with this one.

"She kissed me." It seemed the appropriate thing to say, under the circumstances. It didn't matter to him one way or the other, but he didn't want this to get back to Scully in some unfavorable way at some future date.

"Hmm."

"Hopefully that's not important."

"No."

"I'm sorry I accused you of that personal crap. After all, I should count my blessings that you take any personal interest in me."

"Yeah, but you weren't really wrong.... I guess she makes me crazy too."

"Still, it didn't need to be said. Whatever your motives, I should know by now that you have my best interests at heart. God, Scully, why didn't you just slap some sense into me? Would have given the boys an even better show."

"Like that wasn't already a totally shameful display..." Scully seemed genuinely embarrassed now that she thought back to their words and actions.

"They're smart lads," Mulder added, grinning.

"What did they say to you, Mulder?" Scully asked, with the barest hint of a teasing lilt in her voice.

"Oh I got a firm verbal lashing. Langly asked if there was something going on between us that they should know about. Byers was just uncomfortable. I think Frohike said something about taking care of you himself if I wasn't up to the task."

"God." How horrifying. "What did you say?"

"What do you think I said? I was in full confrontational mode, you saw me. I told him to 'f' off."

"Oh, that'll convince 'em nothing's going on."

"Yeah," Mulder chuckled as he recalled the scene. "Remind me to call them; I should apologize. But, hey, we do trust them, right?"

She smiled, shaking her head at the same time. Then she jumped up suddenly, as if remembering something important.

"Mulder — your apartment. They haven't cleaned it up for you already have they?"

"No, why?"

"Where were you last night?"

"At one of my special motels. I was waiting for your invite to come here but it didn't materialize." He was obviously making fun, but Scully seemed a little flustered at having forgotten that he had been without a home. "Hey, I'm kidding. It's me, I could have slept in the car and been fine with it."

"Do you have clothes?"

"I keep a bag packed in my car, remember?"

"We've been off the X-Files for months and you still do that?"

He shrugged. "Maybe it was an omen."

"So what's the status on your place?"

"Sunday afternoon, from what I understand. If my neighbors don't circulate a petition to get me out once and for all."

"And what will you do until then?"

"That depends on you, Scully. I have a bag outside, I'm housebroken, and I promise to behave." He looked at her playfully, awaiting her response.

Now there was a face that could implore Scully to set fire to herself. Talk about dangerous. Were they up for a weekend together like this? On the other hand, could they afford not to, considering what they had just been through?

"Go get your bag, Mulder. I'm going to change and then maybe we can go out to eat."

Mulder grinned and headed for the door. Just as he stepped out into the hall, he also seemed to remember something suddenly and called back to her, "Oh hey, Scully — at all interested in what's happening with them X-Files?"

She poked her head back into the living room. "Do you have news from the hearing this afternoon?"

"Skinner called me. Seems it was a short hearing. He actually backed us up this time, Scully. We're back in business as of next week."

She approached him slowly, a small smile on her face. She hadn't anticipated the overwhelming emotion that she would feel upon hearing those words. But she should have realized by now that the assignment meant just as much to her as it did to Mulder. She opened her arms to him and caught him in a hug much like he had done to her earlier. He was the one to break the embrace this time. Holding onto her upper arms, he bent down and kissed her. Intentionally, it wasn't anything long or passionate, nothing more than just a brief touching of lips. Certainly much less than what he had attempted all those long months ago in his apartment hallway.

"What was that?" Scully said when they parted.

"That? That was a kiss."

"I know that, Mulder."

"Then why'd you ask? I can do better, but I think that's all we're allowed for now."

"Who did you say has the power in this relationship?"

"Special Agent Dana Scully, ma'am."

"Then shouldn't I be the one to say what we are and aren't allowed?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Just checking. Go get your bag, Mulder; you know where the guest room is." With that, she turned and headed down the hall to her bedroom. Mulder heard the door close before he made his exit. It promised to be an interesting weekend.

End

In My Life



An anniversary brings back memories both light and dark...

Fox Mulder stared at the calendar in his hands, his eyes fixed on a certain date that he had surreptitiously circled so lightly in pencil that it was barely noticeable. Yes, he was renowned for his memory, but it didn't mean that certain dates didn't sometimes slip right by him. He had missed the event enough times in the past, although not because he had actually forgotten. At least a couple of times it was because he really didn't know how to bring it up, silly as it sounded. It never ceased to amaze him how the most mundane things had often proved to be the most difficult to address with Dana Scully.

But things had improved. Improved immensely, to be honest. The thought made him smile, really smile. Without question, he had been a lot happier over the past half year — definitely less morose. People that he only occasionally came into contact with at the Bureau had even commented on it, embarrassing as it was. But he had to admit that with the exception of the big fiasco that took away and then gave them back the X-Files, life was pretty livable at the moment. And he didn't need to be too 'brainful' to identify the reason behind his new outlook on life: Scully. Everything was Scully.

Everything had always been Scully, but in the past, he had spent most of his spare hours trying to reason with his feelings. He allowed himself the pleasure of loving her from a distance, but he had drilled it into his brain that she should never have to "suffer" from it. It didn't escape him that the results of his efforts were mixed at best. In his crusade to save her from himself, he had managed to make her suffer all the same. It was just that he had always figured that hurting her in that way was preferable to the inevitable hurt that she would be faced with in any other kind of relationship with him.

When the proverbial push came to shove, however, Mulder couldn't fight it anymore. A brief moment in his hallway — a moment forever frozen in time in the minds of two partners who had given each other their all over a period of six years — and everything turned upside down. Try as they might, they couldn't let this one go unnoticed like they had done with virtually every other hormonal moment in their past. It hadn't been easy to strip away all pretensions and face each other with simple naked emotion. But the both of them had managed to come to the mutual conclusion that to ignore what had happened would not only be impossible, but ultimately detrimental to their partnership. So they decided to take things slowly and let the pieces fall into place naturally. As Scully had termed it, "time to be normal".

They laid down some ground rules regarding how to proceed, making a pact that work would always remain work. That was particularly important now that their work had returned to normal on the X-Files, where circumstances often conveniently landed them in some motel at some remote location. Mulder smiled again as he thought back to the past week when they had "played house" in an undercover assignment in California. He was sure he had turned a noticeable shade of red when Skinner first told them of the case and what it would involve. As it turned out, however, he

had enjoyed the opportunity to tease Scully every chance he got, knowing full well that she was obligated to spurn him in return. Lord knew he would only be one tenth as cocky if he ever thought she would take him up on his offers.

Their only concession to the burgeoning relationship was a series of regular Friday night "dates". They were always casual occasions in casual places: neighborhood diners or coffee shops, his place, her place; intentionally staying away from anything formal or fancy. They would spend the evening talking about everything but work. It had been a surprisingly daunting task for the both of them at first, but Mulder knew that even Scully — forever the consummate reserved professional — had warmed up to it in grand fashion.

He closed his eyes briefly and leaned his head back, the calendar still in his hands. A practiced ease between the two of them had been renewed ever since their weekly get togethers began. The pain that had almost taken up permanent residence in his soul last year — the same pain that had caused him to lash out even at Scully on occasion — had dissipated considerably. He couldn't quite put it into words, but he felt safe. Grounded. Calm. For the first time in his life, he knew and understood that Dana Scully wasn't about to leave him.

He opened his eyes at the sound of someone speaking. No mistaking that voice. It was real and in the same room with him.

"Mulder, what are you doing?" Good God, how did she just come into the office without him hearing? In response, he managed to look surprisingly guilty for someone who wasn't doing anything.

"What do you mean?"

She tilted her head to one side and gave him an all too familiar how-can-I-make-this-any-clearer look.

"I mean, I wasn't doing anything." He smiled broadly at her.

"Technically, no, you weren't doing anything but you had your eyes closed and a goofy look on your face. And you didn't even hear me open the door." She stood in front of his desk and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Sorry, but I gotta enjoy my goofy moments when I get them. I guess I was just really thinking, Scully."

She nodded and sat down in the chair facing his desk. "Sure, fine."

"Whatever," Mulder added, pushing back in his chair and setting his feet up on the desk. It suddenly struck Scully as an endearing pose, one that she hadn't seen for a long time, particularly in this office. Her expression softened considerably as she managed a small smile at the look he was giving her. "So Scully, what are you doing this Saturday?"

She raised her eyebrows at him. "Saturday?"

"Yeah, you know, the day after Friday. Which is the day after tomorrow."

"Well, I don't want to commit myself one way or the other, Mulder; what did you have in mind?"

He seemed not to take her teasing in the right way, despite his having initiated the whole tone. "If you have plans, it doesn't have to be Saturday."

"God, Mulder, am I that dry and humorless? I was joking. What did you have in mind? Are we rescheduling Friday or something?"

"Friday?"

"You know, Friday: the day after Thursday. Tomorrow."

Mulder looked at her and then down at the calendar he was holding in his hands. He seemed temporarily lost in his thoughts, almost confused. "Uh, yeah. Yeah, I would like to do that, if you don't mind."

Scully's eyes narrowed at him suspiciously. "Like that doesn't sound like a decision you made right this second, Mulder."

"Well, yes and no. I mean, I have a few things that I have to get ready and I didn't realize that..." His voice dropped off.

"That what? That Saturday came after Friday?"

"Something like that."

"Are you going to let me in on what this is all about, Mulder?" When he hesitated in answering, she noticed that he was fidgeting with a small desk calendar. "What's with the calendar?"

"Do you know what this Saturday is, Scully?"

She looked at her watch in response. Today was the 4th, so Saturday would be the 6th. The 6th of March. March 6th. As in March 6th, 1992. Everything stopped suddenly in Scully's world as she realized what her partner was drawing to her attention. Before she realized it, she had uttered his name in a surprisingly tremulous and tender voice, "Mulder..." Her eyes were moist by the time they looked up at him in surprise.

"Aw, Scully, don't — it's supposed to be a happy occasion. At least, I think it is." He dropped the calendar and reached an arm out for her as he hurriedly made his way around the desk to her side.

She recovered quickly, patted the hand he placed around her shoulder and smiled up at him, "Of course it is. I just, I can't believe I didn't think of it myself...and, and to have you remember it..."

"What, am I not capable?"

"Well, you never have before."

"Things change. It was never easy before. Hell, it wasn't easy just now!"

"That part I don't understand, Mulder. Why would it be so hard for you to tell me that it's our seventh anniversary this Saturday?"

He turned to look at her directly before paraphrasing his previous answer. "Because things have changed." And immediately, Scully knew what he meant.

* * * * *

Mulder had known that he wasn't going to find a suitable card even before he headed into his first card shop of the night. He had now been to four stores and the cards were beginning to repeat themselves. Even the specialty shop he had just ventured into left him empty-handed. And he wasn't quite ready yet to contemplate the thought of having to compose a personal note for the occasion. Still, he couldn't spend the rest of his evening running around card shopping. He had to go home and plan his "presentation" to Scully.

He walked back to his parked car and got in, unconsciously slipping his hand into his jacket pocket and fingering a small object that he had been carrying around with him all night. About two weeks ago, it was the subject of a rather unsettling dream that had awakened him in a huge sweat. It was actually the dream that reminded him of where he had hidden this thing a few years ago. It was something that he had meant to hold for her, to be presented at the right moment. Needless to say, there hadn't been too many right moments in their lives, and over time, Mulder had basically forgotten about it...

* * * * *

It was November of 1994. Almost three months to the day after Scully had been taken from her apartment, she had mysteriously reappeared at Northeast Georgetown Medical Center, looking like death warmed over. The object of what could only be imagined as hideous experiments, she had been cast off to die, but not in some remote place where it may have gone unnoticed. She was cast off to die right under his nose, so that he could suffer from the knowledge that her demise was ultimately his doing, that her involvement with him was what had resulted in this outcome.

It didn't take two minutes after Mulder had been dragged off by hospital security staff that day for him to duck into the nearest bathroom and empty the contents of his stomach in a gut-wrenching vomit. He hadn't heard the diagnosis yet, but somehow he knew that she had suffered a fate worse than death. For a few moments, that seemed even worse than having her be missing.

It was later that same day that he found an attractive young woman standing at his partner's bedside, dangling a small piece of crystal over her still form. At Mrs. Scully's appearance, he learned that she was Scully's sister. Nothing like his Scully, this Melissa. No, that wasn't really true. They had shared a strength and passion that he envied to this day, even though their belief systems were obviously different. He himself had been too overcome with grief and guilt to accept any of the unconventional faiths that Melissa was expounding. Despite Fox Mulder's predilection for "extreme possibilities", this was one time when reality mocked him for even thinking about it.

In the months that passed after Scully's recovery, Mulder could not bring himself to talk to her about the period of time during which she was missing, or when she was in the hospital. He could tell she wanted to know, and had obviously been told just enough by her mother that she was curious. It wasn't an intentional desire to hide anything from her; it was just his way of healing. A dark place, Melissa had said. He had been in a dark place for three months, reliving her phone call to him every night in his sleep. If it hadn't been for regular contact with Mrs. Scully — and having to extend a certain amount of hope to the woman whom he had come to love like a mother — he didn't know what would have happened. Obviously, Scully knew of his closeness with her mother. He wasn't sure, however, if she had ever learned of a similar, albeit shorter, association with her sister.

He drove to the hospital on autopilot that night, after deciding — or having been indirectly convinced — that revenge wasn't going to resolve anything. When he reached his destination, he found Melissa sitting at Scully's bedside.

"I'm glad you came." Melissa obviously wasn't the sort to dwell on past moments. Either that or she was just extremely understanding. No mention would have been made of their earlier conversation at his apartment if he hadn't brought it up himself.

"You're right. I owe her this much."

"It's not really a matter of owing, Mulder. It's a matter of living with yourself, regardless of what the outcome might be. And if, in the meantime, whatever forces in the universe conspire to bring her back to us..." Her voice trailed off, and she threw up her left hand in despair. The crystal that she had been carrying flew over Scully's prone form. Mulder managed to catch it before it fell to the floor.

He turned the object over in his hands, examining the way it was catching the dim light of the room.

"Dana thinks it's silly too," she replied to his unvoiced question.

He looked up at her, his expression softening just a touch. "I guess, at times like this, we really shouldn't be arguing over what's silly. We have to believe in something."

"What do you believe in, Mulder?"

There was a long pause before he answered, a long moment in which he desperately tried to summon up some memory of any support system from his past that he could hold onto. He couldn't think of anything and finally just stated resolutely, "I believe that this is not her time."

Melissa got up from the chair and walked around the bed. She patted Mulder's arm as she passed him. "I'm gonna go see how Mom's doing, maybe have a lie down. Are you staying for awhile?"

"I'll stay with her through the night. You two probably haven't really slept. I'll come get you if there's any change."

"Thanks."

"No...no, thank you." Their eyes met in knowing acceptance and she smiled at him. "Wait a minute, your —" He held up the crystal that he still held in his hand.

"Keep it. It can't hurt, right?"

Melissa eventually returned around five in the morning to find him asleep in the chair beside Scully. After his first refusal to leave, they sat and talked for the next couple of hours until exhaustion finally overtook him and he headed for home at around eight.

When he arrived back at his apartment, he discovered that his visitors had made no secret of the fact that they had indeed come and gone. He remembered collapsing in the doorway to his living room and weeping uncontrollably for what seemed like hours before eventually waking up in the early afternoon, still curled up on the floor.

He found the crystal in his jacket pocket a few days after Scully awoke. He put it away for safekeeping during the subsequent cleanup efforts at his apartment. Not a year later, after Melissa was fatally gunned down, Mulder had entertained the idea of giving it to Scully. He couldn't immediately locate the thing at the time, however, and the right moment soon passed.

* * * * *

Mulder put down his cup of coffee and picked up his pen again. Early morning shoppers milled about the food court, creating a steady hum of noise that wasn't helping his concentration as he balled up one napkin after another. He had a breakthrough last night regarding his card problem, when he came across a picture of her that he had obviously taken on their first case together in Oregon seven years ago. It was a very different Dana Scully, longer hair made straggly by a horrendous downpour, looking for all the world like an innocent twenty-year-old about to learn the mysteries of life. He realized then that he had found his "card". So early in the morning, he had come out to join the Saturday morning shopping mall crazies and purchased a picture-holder card. He now sat on the outskirts of the food court, nursing a cup of coffee as he tried to compose just the right message to acknowledge seven years together.

He wasn't interested in creating a mushy message, but he did want something honest and personal. He had toyed briefly with the idea of a poem but decided that it wasn't the right occasion. After all, he hadn't done it for her birthday and a working anniversary certainly seemed like less of a reason to do so.

He flipped the card over to stare at her picture once again. He seemed to hear himself speaking to it and hurriedly grabbed another napkin to capture the words in his mind. Within seconds, he was transcribing the words onto the inside of the card.

* * * * *

Dana Scully sat at her kitchen table, staring at the speckles of dust dancing in the sunlight that streamed in from her window. Her Saturday newspaper was open but unread in front of her. A freshly brewed cup of coffee sat by her side. It was the first Saturday in a while that she hadn't slept in until ten o'clock. Normally an early riser even on weekends, their recent Friday night talks had been running rather late, making it a bit of an effort to get up early the next morning. It was now nine, but she wasn't expected over at Mulder's for another two hours.

A part of her still couldn't believe that her partner had undertaken to commemorate this event. And how could seven years actually pass so quickly? Her brow furrowed as she thought about it in greater detail. Seven years was precisely one fifth of her life. One fifth of her life had been spent by the side of this unique individual named Fox Mulder. A man she was now irrevocably entwined with, unable to shake — physically, emotionally and psychologically. Whether she liked it or not, he was as much a part of her as the very air that she breathed.

Their recent decision to explore possibilities for the future had changed a lot between them, bringing about new and different challenges. There were so many things about relationships that seemed paradoxical. Neither one of them could boast of any extensive experience in that area, so misunderstandings — while fewer — still occurred. On occasion, it was difficult to separate work from "not work", despite the best of intentions. It was sometimes not a good thing that they both

possessed inherently strong personalities. In the past, it hadn't been an issue to speak their minds. Now, occasionally, she felt one or the other hesitate to do so. Or, worse yet, they would disagree and then not know how to assimilate that disagreement into their private lives.

Through painful lessons, they had learned that it was worth the effort to make amends. Both of them were extremely protective of their existing partnership and the good things that had brought them to this point in their lives. They occasionally had to remind themselves that their relationship already had a solid foundation that couldn't be destroyed by a cross word or misunderstanding here and there. It wasn't their intention to get this far only to be derailed by relatively trivial matters. But they were, as the saying goes, only human. And as she had told him many months ago, "If I didn't care about you, nothing you feel would have any impact on me."

Scully smiled to herself as she took a sip of her coffee. She remembered asking her mother how she seemed to make it appear so effortless to get along with her father. Her mother had surprised her by answering that it was never effortless. A successful relationship always entailed a great deal of hard work. It was merely a matter of picking and choosing the right battles, getting past the stuff that wasn't important, and always keeping in mind that you love this person....

She had talked to her mother just last night. Shortly after Christmas last year, Scully had confided in her mother about the new developments between her and Mulder. Therefore, these days, the second thing to come out of Margaret Scully's mouth upon hearing from her daughter was, "How's Fox?"

"He's fine, Mom. We're both fine. Things are going well."

"You know, you might want to suggest maybe coming over for supper some evening, Dana. What is he doing for Easter?"

"I'll mention it to him. But we seem to be sort of cautious when it comes to spending major holidays together."

"That's nonsense."

"I know. Small steps, Mom."

"Well, nothing like you young people today making things more complicated than they need to be."

"Yeah, I guess so. But every once in awhile he surprises me just the same..."

* * * * *

Scully walked off the elevator and headed down the hall, just as she had done hundreds of times before. As was usual these days whenever he was expecting her, Mulder had left the door to his apartment wide open. She stepped through and closed the door behind her, following the noises she heard coming from the living room. Peering in, Scully couldn't stop an ear-to-ear grin from spreading across her face at the sight before her. Fox Mulder — wearing his sexy glasses, no less — was kneeling on the floor in front of a tray full of slides. A slide projector sat on his coffee table. It felt like a strange case of time travel, back to 1992, with the details not quite right. They had been in his office then. He'd been sitting down and dressed more formally, examining slides over a lit surface, and....and she could almost feel the same electricity humming through her as she did that day when he shook her hand. She remembered thinking, "God, I didn't know Spooky was so attractive". She remembered all of it like it was just last week. But she couldn't quite identify the sensation that was enveloping her entire body right this minute, however. It was an odd feeling of liquid warmth, one that also succeeded in making her shiver. Luckily he was too preoccupied to notice.

"Mulder...did you steal that from work?"

He looked up at her, gracing her entrance with a matching grin.

"'Steal'? That's such a harsh word, Scully. I borrowed it."

"I must admit, I haven't had the pleasure of seeing one of your slide shows in a long time. Not since your vampired cows, I believe." She stopped short in the midst of sitting herself down and

looked up suspiciously, adding, "Although, I'm almost afraid to ask what the subject matter might be, since we're not at the office."

"Ah, Scully, if I wanted to show you something naughty, I wouldn't necessarily have to be away from the office." Devilish grin now.

"No, no, you wouldn't. I remember what's in that bottom drawer."

"That's not what I meant, but anyway..." Mulder seriously enjoyed making her blush these days. He didn't even have to look up to know that she was. It was not something he had been particularly successful with in the past, but recently, he discovered that it was a new power that he had over his partner.

She, on the other hand, was becoming increasingly frustrated by her erosion of biological control over such matters.

Mulder finished arranging his slides and snapped the tray into place. "There. We're ready to take a walk down memory lane. But first..." He reached under the coffee table and retrieved a small box. It suddenly occurred to him that it bore a suspicious resemblance to a ring box. Realizing that he was still on his knees, his brain registered what the entire scene was starting to look like and he quickly scrambled to his feet.

"Mulder, what is this?"

"Well, when someone gives you something wrapped in a box, you usually open it to find out."

"You made a point yesterday of saying that this wasn't a gift exchanging occasion," she protested. She didn't want a gift from him — especially not in a small box — if she didn't have something for him in return.

"I know. But this isn't a gift, really."

"It's just wrapped up to look like one?"

"Seriously, Scully. I didn't go out and buy this. It's something I've been holding for you. Something that I think is really yours."

Intrigued, Scully quickly tore off the wrapping on the box and opened it. A crystal.

"Mulder, is this some sort of running joke?" Her voice couldn't hide a slight tone of annoyance.

He looked truly confused and mildly hurt. "What do you mean?"

"What do you mean, what do I mean? Last week? Crystals, UFO conference, where 'Rob' and 'Laura' supposedly 'met'?"

"Oh, God, Scully, no." He sat down at the end of the coffee table, careful not to disturb the projector. He removed his glasses and faced her, speaking very slowly and clearly, "I knew another Scully woman who was into crystals and stuff like that."

Her eyes immediately dropped from his face to stare at the contents of the small box. "Melissa..."

"She told me that if you look into it the right way, you can see forever." Which was the reason he felt it appropriate to return it to her on this occasion.

Scully slowly picked up the crystal, holding it up to the sunlight. Somehow, she knew exactly where this came from, the time it came from. She took a deep breath and started to speak from some far off place. Words and impressions that had been formed long ago, but unvoiced.

"Shortly after I came to, I asked about you. I remember Missy looking at Mom and Mom looking back at her and they really didn't say anything for a moment. I panicked. I — I had just found out the amount of time that had passed and for a second, I had this horrified thought about what might have happened to you. I remember sitting up suddenly and demanding to know where you were. That's when Missy said that it was probably because of you that I had awakened. She said that you were so positive that I wasn't gone from this world that you must have brought me back

by sheer force of will." Their eyes met and they were both surprised by the range of emotions that lay bare in them.

"God, Scully, she was attributing something to me that just wasn't there. I was a basket case. I certainly wanted you to come back to us, but basically they were the beliefs of a madman at the time." He spoke quietly, not wanting to go too far back into this particular memory with her.

"I don't know, Mulder. Missy said that she couldn't understand what your belief system was based on, but that it must have given me strength to continue."

"I had the strength of your beliefs'," he whispered as his memory kicked in.

"Didn't you ever wonder why I said that?"

"I — I don't know. Somehow it didn't really matter. You were back."

"How did you come to have this? I mean, obviously Melissa gave it to you...?"

"As part of her efforts to save me." He felt his thoughts turn elsewhere, but for his sake as well as for hers, he didn't express it. There was no point. The both of them had always had difficulty absolving themselves of blame when it came to Melissa's death. If he beat himself up over it, he would be doing the same to Scully.

"What do you mean?"

"I was a ticking bomb about to go off. Our friend Mr. X had given me information about the people who had done this to you. I was essentially waiting to assault them or die trying when Melissa came over to tell me that you had taken a turn for the worse. I was so screwed up I basically told her I had more important things to do. She let me have it. And I ended up by your bedside for the night instead." Mulder reached out to take the crystal from her hand. Staring deep into its multi-faceted interior, he continued, "When I first ran into her, she was dangling this over you. Within seconds I think I had brushed her off with some idiotic comment about her new age leanings."

"I did that to her all the time." Their eyes connected with a seemingly identical thought, followed by a mutual reassurance.

"Anyway, as she left me that evening, she told me to keep it. Said it couldn't hurt. Scully, if it hadn't been for her that day, I'm sure I would have been killed."

Scully didn't want to think about that possibility. She had a hard enough time with Mulder leaping into dangerous situations on a regular basis without considering outcomes that might have been. She changed the subject slightly.

"She liked you, you know."

"God knows why." Mulder laughed weakly, handing the crystal back to her.

"What are you saying? I like you."

"You know, Scully, the truth is, you wouldn't like the person I become whenever you're in danger." They shared another significant look, their own brand of unspoken communication speaking volumes.

"I remember her saying that... your single-mindedness was a powerful force to contend with, but that you were disarmingly vulnerable at the same time. Somewhat like a lost little boy successfully masquerading as a sophisticated G-Man." Scully thought back to a rather lengthy conversation she had had with Melissa while she was still in the hospital. Missy had been quite curious about her and Mulder's relationship. Despite Dana's insistence that nothing was going on, Melissa couldn't help but push for more — after all, what would possess a simple partner to act the way Mulder had acted?

"If she used those words, she was remarkably kind."

"Did you..." Scully's voice trailed off, suddenly uncertain and almost shy.

"Did I what?"

"Did you ever feel any kind of connection with her? I mean, I always thought you two, you know..." Scully seemed uncharacteristically stuck for words.

"No. I mean, I don't know. What exactly do you mean?"

"I always thought... that you guys would have been a good match." Her revelation came quietly, her eyes on the crystal, avoiding direct contact with his.

"So why did you never set us up?" Mulder deadpanned, enjoying her discomfort. "Could it be that you knew even then that you had the hots for me?"

"You're really horrible, you know, Mulder."

"Sorry. All kidding aside, Melissa and I got along fine once I crawled out of my hole and gave her a chance. She had her own brand of Scully mystique that... yeah, in other circumstances, I may have been attracted to." With a mischievous look that she had never seen before, he added, "Same with your mom."

Mulder ducked to avoid a flying cushion launched from Scully's general direction.

"I'm not trying to avoid talking about this, Scully, I want you to know that." He sighed, turning serious as the smallest hint of a frown settled on his face. "I know you're curious about those months and I can only guess that your mother has been about as forthcoming as I've been. But I think you can understand how difficult it is for us to go back to that time and —"

"I do understand. I can't imagine what it would have felt like to go through even two weeks of that. Mulder, believe me, it's not that I'm morbid or anything. But I'm missing that piece of my life, and I feel like even those who are close to me have been unable to share with me their lives from that time."

Mulder let out a shuddering breath as he replied softly, "I never thought of it that way."

Knowing him better than he knew himself, she backtracked a little as she anticipated his change in tone. "I'm sorry, I'm not being fair."

"No, no, you're perfectly within your rights to want to talk about it," he said softly, an unspoken promise in his voice. "I'll make you a deal, okay?"

"What's that?"

"Let's take this up the next time we meet. Today, well, today is mostly for happy memories of the past seven years. We do have some, right?" he asked, smiling at her.

"Well, I gather from this," she said, gesturing over the coffee table, "that you've found them."

"Yes. We've amassed quite an eclectic collection of memories in our time with the X-Files, Agent Scully. If you'll make yourself comfortable, we can get the show started."

She got up to go into the front room. At the doorway, she stopped and turned back towards him. "Mulder..."

"Yeah?"

"Thank you for this." She indicated the crystal. "I don't have a lot to remember her by from that period in her life, and well... thanks."

"You're welcome, Scully."

They stood and stared at each other. Further words were unnecessary. It was obvious that each was conjuring up memories of a certain vivacious redhead whose life had been needlessly cut short. Scully broke eye contact when she turned to slip off her jacket. Before hanging it over the back of one of Mulder's chairs, she took something out of her pocket. He watched her as she walked back into the living room. Pointing to what she held in her hand, he asked, "Is that for me?"

"Yeah. I thought a card would be appropriate, considering we've never..." She stopped speaking as Mulder reached around the end of the couch and produced a white envelope.

He handed it over to her, taking the one she carried in the process. "You first."

Moving in smooth unison, they both sat down.

Scully took the card and looked at him for a long moment. Her hands were shaking ever so slightly. She looked at the front of the envelope, noting Mulder's familiar scrawl: "Happy 7th" was the simple message. It wasn't as if she was expecting anything earth-shattering to be revealed by the card. In fact, whatever message it might contain, she was sure that she likely had the same thoughts in her card to him, more or less. But there was no denying that it was a significant step for them to sit down and actually celebrate the passing of another year of working together.

"Are you going to open it or what?"

She was startled out of her reverie by Mulder's teasing inquiry.

"I mean, if you're preparing yourself for a gift of money in there or something, you're going to be awfully disappointed."

"Just let me do this my own way, Mulder."

The envelope wasn't sealed. She lifted the flap out with her fingertip and carefully removed the card. He wasn't sure what to make of her expression when she saw her likeness on the front, but she didn't seem annoyed at his choice, which was comforting.

"God, it's hard to believe that this was ever me," she whispered, almost wistfully. This was the "pre-everything" Dana Scully. The Dana Scully who had accepted an assignment to keep Fox Mulder on a scientific leash. The Dana Scully who — on her first case with the same Fox Mulder — had immediately decided that he was a passionate, truth-seeking soul with whom she had a definite "connection". Maybe opposites do attract.

As she continued to stare at the picture, lost in her thoughts, Mulder had to know. "Do you miss her?"

She looked up at him, almost as though she had forgotten that he was there. "No, apart from the ways that we all sometimes miss the days of innocence." She gave him a slight smile and opened the card. More Mulder scrawl. Her eyebrows raised ever so slightly at the salutation of the message. Not "Scully", but...

Dana:

As I look back on the past seven years, it is with sadness that I realize that the girl in this picture no longer exists as she did back then. But it is also with hope that I realize nothing ever really stays the same and yet with each passing year, there has been a comforting strength and constancy in our partnership. Thank you for the difference you've made in my life. Looking forward to the next seven.

Mulder

Mulder knew that Scully was a fast reader. He was no slouch himself and had long ago attributed that common trait to the fact that they both likely had a lot of reading to do during their academic years. But here she was either reading the message repeatedly or she was simply not looking up. Scully knew precisely when to put his mind at ease, however. At the sound of him shifting in his seat, she murmured, "You've got quite a way with words, Mulder. Another hidden talent?"

"Like what?"

"Well, since they're hidden, I wouldn't know." She finally looked up, carefully composed, but not so composed as to give the impression that she hadn't been affected by his message.

"By the way, that probably should have said, 'looking forward to the next seventy years', but I was being careful in case it fell into the wrong hands."

"In seventy years, Mulder, I'll be a hundred and five."

"I guess that means you'll have to give up running around with a lunatic like me."

"You'll be almost a hundred and eight."

"So? What's your point?"

Scully sat back and tucked her legs up under herself, an introspective expression settling over her face. "Is this how you imagined life would be, seven years ago?"

Mulder looked around his apartment. "Not like this. I thought I would have found Samantha by now, for one." At seeing Scully stiffen slightly, he waved a hand at her. "But I also thought I'd be a lone wolf forever, too. I couldn't have imagined — wouldn't have dared imagine — someone like you entering my life and actually wanting to stay for such a long time." Scully was watching him silently, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Mulder did not disappoint, despite his fundamental fear in asking. "How about you?"

"I don't think I've ever had any preconceived notions about what my life would be like or should be like. It's not my way to dream about such things. But I definitely thought that the X-Files was going to be just another stop along the way, one of many assignments that would be given to me at the FBI. So in that sense, whatever I imagined life to be, this isn't it. But on the other hand, whenever I think back to the day that I met with Blevins about this assignment... Mulder, I don't even want to know what my life would have been if I hadn't taken this journey with you."

For either of them to say honestly that they didn't regret certain things in their past would have been a lie. It was still a regular weekly task for Mulder to move beyond those times and not to embrace the blame for them. But perhaps for the first time in his life, he accepted reality for what it was; accepted the truth as Scully saw it. She had never denied that they had both paid the price on several occasions. But she was also telling him very plainly that life with him was still an experience not to have been missed. His ability to take that message for what it was — without stringing along extra ifs, ands or buts — was clearly a result of the healing that had taken place within him over the past several months. Thank you, Dr. Scully.

He looked at her in partial wonderment, partial enlightenment. The ravages of the past seven years didn't seem to be the least bit evident on his face today. For a second, he appeared to be almost as young as the man she had met all those years ago. Leaning towards her, he spoke softly, "Despite everything, Scully, we're really okay, aren't we?"

She reached over and squeezed his hand firmly, feeling her heart expand with the action. "Mulder, I think we're definitely more than okay."

End

Soul on Soul



Sometimes a big cup of cappuccino helps identify how we sabotage ourselves and the ones we love...

Dana Scully looked at her watch and then out the window again. He wasn't that late, but it was definitely the case that he'd normally have been there already. Her giant cup of coffee was already half consumed. It was six-forty, Friday evening. They had parted early that afternoon, he to a meeting, she to Quantico to do an autopsy. They had arranged to meet here, a small cafe three blocks from her apartment. Several weeks had passed since their last talk, and a lot had happened since then to make tonight potentially troublesome. Interestingly enough, she had been the one to suggest that they make an effort to return to their routine. But then again, it was she who had effectively derailed it too, several weeks back.

She thought back to a warm March afternoon, when they had celebrated seven years of working together. At the time, they had just been reassigned to the X-Files after several gruelling months of ego-stomping grunt work. But they had persevered. Both in their careers and in their private lives. Since being back on the X-Files, however, life had been oddly stressful to them. After so many months away, she had been sure that the reassignment would be the glue that further bound them to one another. She was pretty certain that Mulder had felt the same way. It hadn't turned out to be the case, however.

They had been somewhat testy with one another lately. In itself, that was nothing new. It had happened quite a few times throughout their partnership, for various reasons. But for it to surface now was somewhat puzzling, given that their relationship was never more clearly defined than at present. Whenever it had happened in the past, she knew that they had been striking out at each other out of frustration. For being so wrapped up in their work that their individual selves became blurred. For the support that wasn't always there. For the comfort that wasn't always offered. For the questions unasked and therefore unanswered. For the dark nights unfulfilled... God, where did that one come from?

Scully took a deep breath and sat back, pressing herself to the back of the booth. It was a strange thing with her these days, this need to stay extremely professional, occasionally interrupted by an almost hormonal need for relief from their self-imposed cage. She was too young to be going through menopause but that was the closest description she had for what she sometimes felt. Mulder had been patient as usual for the most part. But she could tell that he felt the barely hidden tension emanating from her. She could sense his confusion.

He had every right to be confused, all in all. Lately, she would retreat from him one moment and inexplicably return the next. He would try to take her cue and back off but she could see that the behavior hurt him. That they hadn't been meeting off hours all that often did not help the situation. That she chose not to discuss the personal aspects of the Padgett case had become an unspoken issue between them. Last week, however, as she lay in a hospital bed receiving treatment for the

fungal attack they had both suffered in North Carolina, she retraced their recent steps and decided that it was time to talk again.

As gruelling a case as that was, she had been thankful for it in the end. The hallucinations had led her to think more about what was important in her life. They demonstrated to her almost too vividly how much she had changed during her association with Mulder and the X-Files. How, while the disbelieving skeptic act had its value, it had to be tempered with an open mind. The most alarming aspect of the hallucinations, however, had been the reality of facing life without her partner. The details of her experience had faded considerably after the first twenty-four hours, but the utter emptiness that she had felt — reflecting the sobering knowledge that precious time had passed unspoken into eternity — remained with her and haunted her. It made her decide that she had to stop sabotaging what they had and somehow put it into forward motion again. She had no idea what she needed to do to bring them back to the same page, but she hoped — as usual — that it wasn't too late. That this time, Mulder hadn't given up.

The front door opened and she saw her partner step inside the small coffee shop. He strode purposefully towards where she sat — although not seeming to meet her glance — and continued to walk right past her.

"Mulder!"

He turned quickly and looked back at her in surprise. Grinning sheepishly, he slid into the booth opposite to her. He shook his head and said, "That must have looked pretty silly... you usually select seats closer to the back."

"Preoccupied?" Noticing his state of dress, she frowned. "Were you with Skinner all this time?"

"Yeah. The meeting went on and on about budgeting changes with respect to expense claims...can't say I was paying much attention though."

"Well it could be important now that we're on the road so much again."

"Maybe. But I've never given that stuff much thought before, so why start now?" He nodded towards the mug sitting in front of her that was almost dwarfing her body. "Any chance of getting something in a more civilized size, Scully? What is that anyway?"

"French vanilla cappuccino. It's to die for, you have to try one."

He made a face in response. "Kinda girlish, don't you think?"

"A certain kind of coffee is considered girlish, Mulder? How easily is your manhood compromised anyway?" She took a quick sip and looked up, adding, "Don't answer that please."

He didn't need to answer. The look on his face was comment enough without words. She shifted her gaze to the waitress coming their way. Trying to ignore him, Scully pointed to her mug and said, "He'll have one of these."

Mulder looked up at the young girl and smiled. "Got any size other than the 'mega large' cup?"

"No, that's what they come in. But you'll appreciate every last drop, I guarantee it. Ask your girlfriend."

Mulder looked over at Scully and said softly, "Yeah, she's already given me her recommendation." Turning back to the waitress, he said, "Thanks. That'll be all for now."

He watched her leave, then turned back to face his partner. "So how did your autopsy go?"

"Nothing special. We expected as much, given there was nothing outwardly suspicious about it. Tox results will be interesting, I guess."

"You think she was poisoned?"

"Well, we've both mentioned that as a possibility, right?"

"Yeah, it's just that it's a different m.o. for this guy. Unless we're totally off about the suspect."

"Wouldn't be the first time that someone's confessed to a crime that he didn't commit."

Small talk dispensed with, he reached over and took one of her hands away from the mug she was cradling. "Well, girlfriend, where do you want to start?"

She frowned slightly, staring at his thumb making small circles over the top of her hand. "This feels strange, Mulder."

"What, this?" Puzzled, he released her hand immediately.

"No, no, that's not what I meant," she said reassuringly, quickly recapturing his hand. "I mean this 'we need to talk' thing is strange."

"Well, I thought we were doing pretty good there for awhile."

"I know. It's my fault."

"No, it's not. It's nobody's fault. Not like we're obligated or anything."

The offhand way in which he made his statement chilled her. She looked up at his face but couldn't find anything equivalent in his expression. "But we are...aren't we?"

The soulful reflection in his eyes was all he could give as a response. He certainly didn't have the words to do so. Obligated? Theirs was the most unconventional relationship in the universe, so who could tell what was an obligation and what wasn't? Besides, they had agreed that work — particularly so soon after getting the X-Files back — couldn't be allowed to suffer in any way because of their off-duty lives. Not that Mulder himself didn't think "screw the work" more than once recently. The energy required to keep separate work and private lives — and, as it turned out, separate work and private personas — was simply sapping him.

Hadn't she just made an observation about him being preoccupied? Mulder hadn't paid much attention at the late afternoon meeting simply because he had been preoccupied, with events both past and present. He knew that at a distance of a few years, some things could and probably should be interpreted as ancient history, no matter how much they mirrored current life. Other things, well, he wasn't so sure about, especially when they hit home in those old familiar ways. He never did appreciate being shut out by her, and had lately felt further disillusioned by her unending ability to find new ways of accomplishing it. Obligated? Mulder decided that only Scully knew for sure.

The waitress reappeared with his coffee, interrupting his thoughts. He looked up at her and gave her the same polite smile he had given her before. "Thanks." Turning back to the downcast face across from him, he said, "So Scully, this is to die for?"

Thankful for the brief respite, Scully offered a small smile and raised her own mug to her lips. "Taste it. You tell me."

His face, as always, told the whole story. "Hmm...that is nice." He took a moment to glance around the small coffee shop. "You and I have never been here before, have we?"

"I don't believe so. I mean, I've been here myself on occasion, whenever I feel like drowning my sorrows in a big vat of cappuccino. I can't speak for you. But no, I don't think we've been here together."

Drowning my sorrows. The words resonated in his ears almost painfully, although in context, there was really no reason for them to do so. He knew he was experiencing a sudden wave of insecurity, brought on by too much thinking, too much introspection. Goddamn meeting. Before he could stop the urge, he heard himself blurting out rather pathetically, "Am I still doing things wrong, Scully?"

His question definitely took her by surprise. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, it's not like it's a secret that I've done a lot of things wrong where you're concerned...and that's got nothing to do with this whole guilt complex that you think I have. All I'm saying is that — for me, anyway — things have been a lot better since we had that talk. This afternoon, it suddenly occurred to me that maybe that hasn't been enough for you."

"Why would you think that?"

He knew why he thought that, but he just couldn't bring himself to say it. She had asked him to leave it alone. He hated not knowing, but he also knew that until she decided that she was ready, there was no pushing it. But that incredibly mind-numbing afternoon at his apartment when she clung to him as though she still feared her life's blood would be taken from her was fresh on his mind these days. Amid her tears, she had uttered those proverbial "three little words" to him for the first time. But it had been such a frightening moment that all he could do was crush her against his ribs. It was all he could do not to break into pieces right along with her. After she had calmed down, she whispered that she didn't want to talk about it just yet. He had respected her need for privacy, given what she had been through. But that hadn't stopped him from wondering just what sort of chord his psycho neighbor had struck in her. Why — if Dana Scully loved Fox Mulder — she would give someone like Padgett the time of day. Obviously, the only conclusion he could come to was that he was in some way not meeting her needs.

He took a healthy gulp of his coffee, feeling the heat burn its way down his throat. "I left this up to you, Scully — the whole decision thing regarding us. You can change this any way you want, at any time...just let me know."

"What are you saying, Mulder, that I can choose to walk away from this?"

Jesus, where did that come from? That's not what I meant, he thought, but if that's what you want.... Unfortunately, he heard himself voicing only the last part of his thought. The look on his face was one that Scully hadn't seen in some time.

"No, I don't want," she interrupted, anger and frustration clearly evident in her tone. "Look, Mulder, don't put me up on some God-forsaken pedestal. I can be just as screwed up as the next person. Padgett fascinated me in some weird and strange way. He messed with my head. But don't go thinking I wanted any part of what he was describing."

Mulder stared at her, dumbstruck. Now who was the spooky one?

"Don't give me that look, either. You think it's some big secret that it's on your mind? You've been walking on eggshells around me ever since that happened. Of course I know it's on your mind. But Mulder, don't go analyzing things to death. I can't explain what it was about him, because there was nothing about him. It was just different. Not something different that I want in my life, just different. Besides...."

"Besides what?" Mulder finally asked, after a long pause in which it didn't look like she'd be continuing. He felt out of practice. When did they last have one of their Friday night talks? The first interruption to their routine was when she had begged off because of the Padgett case. He had given her that, if not so much for her sake as for his. In the ensuing weeks, travel and work seemed to dominate their schedules, even on the weekends. With the X-Files back in their possession, it almost seemed like everything was conspiring to keep them at arm's length from each other.

"I told you I loved you, Mulder...I don't know if you heard me." He could barely hear her now, she was speaking so softly.

"I did hear you. I would have responded, but I didn't think I could hold myself together long enough to be coherent. You scared me, Scully. Frightened the crap out of me. Not with your words, you understand, but you."

"You were scared...but you weren't jealous." This time her voice was even softer, barely audible.

"Excuse me?" He thought he heard, but he wasn't quite sure.

"Nothing...it's juvenile."

"Do you think I'll think less of you if you say something juvenile? I mean, I hope not. Because I'm sure you know things about me that could be described as disturbing and I really wouldn't want your opinion of me to change because of that."

How was it that this man could oscillate from being a little boy to being a psychologist in mere seconds? Positive that her face had flushed a deeper shade of red than he had ever seen, Scully willed herself to repeat her previous mumbling. "I said...you weren't jealous."

In the silence that followed, Scully felt herself growing smaller and smaller. She envisioned herself small enough to drown in her now essentially empty coffee cup, big as it was. At the same time, she kept her eyes down, feeling Mulder's stare boring into her. Finally, after what seemed like minutes, he spoke.

"No, no I guess I wasn't."

Not really what she wanted to hear, either. She looked up, however, needing to see his eyes now. She imagined the gears turning in his brain underneath the carefully composed face.

"Scully, to me, jealousy presupposes some element of possession...I don't feel like I have that. I don't imagine I could ever possess any part of you. To have been jealous, I'd have had to think that Padgett was claiming something that was mine..."

She succeeded in sitting still enough so that the tears swimming in her eyes did not fall as she gazed unseeing at the Heinz ketchup bottle. But the pain she felt that afternoon when she thought her heart would be ripped from her did not compare to the clenched pain she felt around that same organ right this minute. He didn't mean to hurt her and she knew it. Or maybe he did and she deserved it. In any case, his words felt like little knives slicing into her soul. Scully knew that jealousy was a problem for her. It seemed natural to associate it with a significant depth of feeling. That Mulder never seemed to display any jealousy had always caused her to doubt that he any similarly deep feelings for her. She just couldn't figure out where this insecurity was coming from, this seeming need to test his emotions. Especially now. After all that had been said — and she knew she had no reason to doubt his sincerity on any of it — why did she push them into that awkward situation with Padgett? Why did she have to see him? In some twisted way, it had been a replay of Ed Jerse all over again. Mulder hadn't been jealous then either, even though he probably harbored at least some small suspicion that she had slept with him. Then, as with Philip Padgett, Mulder had shown no emotion other than a thinly veiled anger...almost as if his only wish was that she should make better choices.

He reached across and gently tapped her hand with two fingers. "Hey."

She flinched at his touch, enough movement to send two tears on a simultaneous slide down her cheeks. She heard him take a long slow breath as he sat back in the booth, his hand closing over hers on top of the table. She carefully wiped at her eyes with her free hand, feeling his grip on her other increase in strength.

It was somewhat fitting, he thought, this table between them. An obstruction. A physical manifestation of their relationship, in a way. Did that make any sense within the psychology that he knew? He had to admit, he really didn't know too much about the dynamics of male/female relationships; it hadn't been a particular area of interest for him. Recently, he had been wishing that he had read more about it. But whether or not it made any sense didn't matter, not really. What mattered was that over the past month or so he had felt the increasing presence of a third party, just as he knew that Scully did also. It had made him do some heavy duty thinking about their situation. Something significant was causing them to step out of sync with one another. Something that had jumped up between them, screaming to be heard, craving attention. Attention that neither one of them knew how to give.

"I almost think at this point that we should close up some of these cans of worms before opening up any others, but maybe what we need to do is to throw everything out into the open." It was his turn to speak so low that she had to strain and lean forward to hear him. She had no response to his words, however, prompting him to continue, "You don't doubt my feelings for you, do you?"

She shook her head quickly, the question itself dredging up too many emotions for her to trust herself to answer with words.

Mulder smiled slightly and squeezed her hand, adding, "Good. And you're not having second thoughts about this?"

"No," came the whispered reply.

"Then I have to ask, Scully, what are you looking for? I told you before, I'm not good at this. I don't know what you want, what you need. And my fear has always been that even if I did know, I wouldn't know how to give it to you... but the fact is, you're not telling me."

"Mulder I don't know what I'm looking for, or even if I'm looking for anything. I know you're still wondering about Padgett, but —"

"You know why?" He sat forward, taking both of her hands in his. "I'm nobody's fool, Scully. I know there are better people out there for you than me. There are days when I think my being with you is strictly borrowed time until you find someone better. And I wouldn't hold it against you if that were ever the case. But damned if you don't pick the strangest ones. I puzzle over the Philip Padgetts and Ed Jerses of the world because I don't know how to deal with them. I don't know what to make of them, because... Christ, Scully, how can I say this? They're definitely a lot stranger than I've ever been accused of being. Not exactly the type to bring home to Mom, you know what I'm saying?"

It suddenly occurred to Scully how her rebellious forays must appear to her partner, how unflattering the comparison must seem. How could she have expected Mulder to be jealous of men like that? She felt an insane urge to laugh out loud, except that the harsh reality of her situation wasn't at all funny. After all, how could she begin to explain to him her seeming jealousy of herself, her professional self? Or how she sometimes felt this need to push away from the straight-laced FBI agent and be interesting to someone as a normal woman? Or how she needed confirmation that Fox Mulder loved Dana Scully, not Special Agent Scully. Or how she feared that once he got to know the real Dana Scully, she somehow wouldn't measure up to the person that he had come to know through work.

What was she looking for? He had a right to know, obviously. But did she know herself? Was it simply attention that she craved? From just anyone? Or was she so needing affirmation from Mulder that she willingly snapped it up from anyone who offered? How pathetic was that? The truth of the matter was, she could never see beyond her work in terms of defining who she was and what she wanted. People — men — who noticed her as something other than a doctor or FBI agent invariably drew her in because she needed to see what they saw. And unfortunately, she didn't really have a whole lot of experience where that was concerned.

"I don't pick them. They seem to pick me. And not many men pick me."

Mulder's grip on her increased once more as her words appeared to slice through him this time.

"Is that why?" The low husky tone of his voice betrayed the emotions he felt at her disclosure.

She seemed to understand his cryptic question, quietly replying, "I don't know. Maybe."

"Since when did you have such a complex?"

"I don't, I mean — I'm not exactly in an environment that allows me to enjoy being a woman. I mean, God, female agents don't even want the gender issue to be brought up. And sometimes you get good at your job. You get accepted. And that's a good thing. But after awhile, the flipside is that you don't get any feedback whatsoever on, on..."

She couldn't continue. Dana Scully was rambling. Talking about herself in that detached second person fashion that she was prone to do when emotionally distressed. And as much as she trusted Mulder, this was not a good topic of conversation. He came to her rescue, however, gentleman that he was.

"— On the fact that you're a desirable woman who might actually be seen that way by a man?"

She didn't answer, but the way in which her gaze immediately dropped spoke volumes. He reached over and lifted her chin with his forefinger.

"Sweetheart, I'm here. I've always been here. I thought I told you that." His chosen term of endearment made her want to cry for real. That it sounded so natural coming from him was surprising, given that he had never said such a thing to her before. He continued, "And of all the choices that I could make in this world, not a one of them comes close to being the woman that you are. But if it's me, if I'm not good enough —"

"Mulder, why do you keep saying that?"

"For the same reason that I asked if I was still doing something wrong. You say that we're working towards something here. Something permanent I hope, but lately —"

"We've been out of touch." They could still finish each other's sentences; that was a good sign. "I don't know what role I'm supposed to be playing. I feel myself wanting more from us. And then I realize it's the middle of the day and I should be concentrating on doing some report and —"

"And what? We're so damned efficient and dedicated that we can't let our feelings have a moment in the middle of the day? What kind of sorry people are we?" He smiled at that, trying to lighten up the moment.

"The same sorry people we've always been," she replied in kind.

"But that's just it, Scully, we may be the same sorry people that we've always been, but our circumstances have changed." He turned serious once more and seemed to be reaching into the back of his mind for some prepared speech. "We can say we don't want it to affect our work until we're blue in the face. But that doesn't change the fact that it will. Everything's changed since last fall. Sometimes I look at you from across the room when you're interrogating a suspect and it just occurs to me that I want to kiss you. Or you tell me in your usual rigid scientific way that my theory sucks and it suddenly feels like a slap in the face." He held up his hand as Scully opened her mouth to protest. "No, let me finish. That's not an indictment of you or me or us. I'm just saying that some things have changed, period. We can fight it and not get anywhere, or we can accept it and just learn to live with the feelings."

"We still have rules to play by...."

"Rules? What rules?"

"Well, for one, keeping work separate."

"I understand that, Scully, but we've been going overboard. I think the past few weeks have given us a good amount of proof on that. We don't need to force ourselves to do a one eighty just because we're on the job. I don't think it's in us to be that unprofessional. We just might have to consider that some of what we say to each other over the course of work may now have a different impact on us than before. A more personal impact. I know we've both been having trouble with that, but that's something that we have work out for ourselves."

She opened her mouth as if to say something and then appeared to change her mind. There was something else, though. Not so much a rule as a methodology, Scully thought to herself, this slow progression thing that they had chosen for their relationship. All in all, it was turning out to be the right choice, but that didn't make it any easier to navigate around the obstacles.

"Scully?"

"Mulder, I know you said that I was in control of this and the thing is, I agree with taking it slowly, but..."

"There should be no 'but' there, Scully. It's in your hands; if it's not right, change it."

"That's easily said, Mulder, but it borders on being unfair. Whatever I choose to do, it also affects your life."

"Well, what is it that you want to do?" he asked curiously, sitting back in his seat.

"I want us to move forward again. We've been at a standstill." He leaned forward in a movement to protest, but she gave him a knowing smile and squeezed his hand to stop him. "You've tried. It's

me. I need to know that despite our differences, we can still be good together, like we are in our work. I need to know that our differences won't destroy us."

"How can you say that, especially after last week? If it weren't for our differences and our understanding of those differences, we'd be dead. You said so yourself."

"I know. And last week helped me a lot to see this for what it is. I know I have to stop pulling away and looking elsewhere. I mean, it's not that I even look elsewhere..." She let the thought drop, then smiled sadly as a certain irony hit her. "Funny how the tables get turned. When we first agreed to this, I thought for sure that you'd be the one to stumble around."

He shot her a look of mock indignation, but the trademark boyish grin that immediately followed warmed her heart. "So I've been doing better than expected then?"

"I don't know how you put up with me." She lowered her head, turning her attention to their joined hands.

Mulder lifted her hand with his, bringing it and her gaze back up to where he could look directly into her eyes. "Talk about turning the tables...that's supposed to be my line."

"I just think that I've given you more than enough reason to give up on me."

"I can't. I love you." He said it so matter-of-factly, it made Scully wonder about his claim so many months ago that he didn't know how to love. Even though she had raised the issue of acknowledging their situation, she ultimately hadn't been the one to take any chances on them. What Mulder said before was true. It was up to her. She heard him continue, "And unless you actually tell me to go away in so many words, I'll do whatever it takes to stay."

* * * * *

It was ten after one in the morning. Another evening had flown by, another crisis resolved...or reasonably averted. This time it was his turn to get into the car and make the cold drive home. He hated that drive. Hated the moment of leaving her, hated crossing over the threshold of his apartment when he got there. As Mulder cleared off the coffee table, he wondered if she ever felt the same way. She had been strangely quiet over the past half hour or so. Not uncomfortably so, and certainly not in a closed off sense, but he was starting to wonder if she had something to say but just couldn't decide whether or not to say it.

As he put their mugs in the dishwasher, he noticed her lingering in the hallway, a pensive expression on her face. Well, it had been another of those evenings, after all. All things considered, they had both held up rather well. Maybe that was the inherent strength behind the relationship that neither of them had yet recognized, or more accurately put, that neither of them had yet come to trust completely.

He scrubbed his hands clean and was wiping them dry when he heard her clear her throat. When nothing followed, he asked, without turning around, "Something wrong, Scully?"

There was a significant enough pause for him to take an extended deep breath before turning to look at her. Since she still didn't appear ready to answer, he prodded her gently once more, "Come on, Scully, I'm about to go. If there's something you need to say —"

"Can you stay over tonight, Mulder?" There, she had said it. It was now, as the saying went, 'out there'.

He couldn't pinpoint any specific type of emotion in her voice. It was very controlled with just the tiniest hint of uncertainty, which was understandable given the nature of her question. But she wasn't exactly speaking to him over the phone, and in person, it was quite clear to Fox Mulder that Dana Scully wasn't able to pull off the poker face tonight.

"I thought we had agreed..." he started absently and then trailed off as he caught the changing emotions flickering across her face. [...not to stay over at each other's place...] No, no more rules. Something in her eyes told him that this was an important request and not just a suggestion to

save him a tiring drive home. He smiled reassuringly and nodded towards the apartment door. "I'll go get my bag."

When he came back in shortly, she had still not moved from her position just outside the guest room. He looked at her inquisitively, not sure what to make of this unexpected turn of events.

He dropped his bag and walked over to her, leaning one arm on the wall beside her. "What's the matter?"

"Would — would you mind sleeping in my room?"

"In your bed?" God, his tone sounded so incredulous. Smart thinking, Mulder, make it sound like she shocked the hell out of you.

"Look, Mulder, I'm not making moves on you, if that's what you're thinking. The invitation doesn't extend to anything more than what I've just said: sleeping." Her voice reflected a wry amusement at her partner's reaction.

"Together. In your bed."

"Yes. We've had closer sleeping arrangements in much less comfortable places before."

"Right, but we've always been fully clothed, too."

"Well, let me clarify something here, Mulder, I don't recall saying that this invitation is 'clothing optional'. I know you have pajamas, I've seen them."

The tension suitably eased, he grinned. Scully's expression softened to one that could be described as mildly playful, not to mention relieved.

"Can I use your shower then?"

"By all means...just don't take all the hot water, I'm going in after you."

"After I'm out or after I've started?" he called out after her as she disappeared down the hall into her room.

"Don't mess with me Mulder, I saw how shocked you were just a second ago."

By the time Scully emerged from her shower, Mulder was already under the covers, taking up the left side of her bed. The room was dark, lit only by the street lights outside her window. He was laying on his stomach, face turned away from her. He was still enough that Scully thought he might already be asleep, as she carefully climbed in beside him. She was comfortably settled against her own pillow when she felt him turn over.

"Scully?"

"Hmm?"

"Just wanted to warn you before I do this..." He rolled over towards her and captured her in his arms, spooning himself around her body. He felt her stiffen at first, but she quickly recovered and relaxed against him.

Still, she had to ask. "What are you doing?"

"I'll be damned if I'm going to sleep in the same bed with you and not touch you all night. It just doesn't work that way. Besides, would you say that you're capable of self control?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, so am I. At least my brain is, you may have to excuse or otherwise ignore other parts of my body."

She had to smirk at that. He continued to speak into her ear, his words literally warming her.

"To paraphrase what you said earlier, I'm not making moves on you." He tightened his hold around her stomach, feeling her arm move up to cradle his. "But don't assume that I'm unfamiliar with the need, Scully. It's one thing to say that we're not going to jump into a physical relationship, but I

think we took the wrong turn when we somehow decided that anything physical is off limits. We don't always need an excuse. I think you know what I'm saying. It's why you asked me stay tonight, isn't it?"

She didn't answer right away. Mulder thought back to the beginning of the evening — it felt like such a long time ago — and his earlier question to her: what are you looking for? Special Agent Dana Scully was tough as nails and was capable of taking control of all sorts of situations without thinking. What he had discovered over the past several months was that Dana Scully the woman was very different in many ways. She didn't like to specify her needs and wants in normal everyday life like she would in, say, an autopsy room. Unlike her FBI agent alter ego, the Dana Scully he held his arms right this moment was loathe to be direct about her feelings. Asking him to stay over — to share her bed yet — was her way of answering his question tonight.

"Sometimes...I just want to be held. And occasionally, I need to know that someone wants to hold me."

"Someone...anyone?"

"Maybe that's part of my problem, Mulder. I want it to be you, but..."

"But our self-imposed rules make it hard. Actually, Scully, I would love to do this more often, but you don't exactly encourage it."

"I know. I'm not sure how to set boundaries for us. I end up putting up walls. And the more I want to allow, the more I feel this need to pull back."

They fell into a prolonged silence, each one considering the meaning behind the words she had just spoken. Maybe they should be put on a signpost as a reminder for the two of them.

"Are you afraid of me?" His voice, even and without trepidation, broke through the stillness.

She had never considered that possibility. It seemed absurd. Her first instinct was to say no, of course not, but maybe it was also entirely possible that some part of her was. Fear existed in many forms, after all. But the man who asked this question was currently in her bed, arms and body wrapped tightly around her, his very breath warming her ear. There was no way she was afraid of him. Here in his arms, she felt truly safe. It was where she wanted to be.

"No Mulder, I think I'm afraid of me."

"Well, that makes two of us. Any ideas on how I can have a relationship with you, without you?"

That would be the ticket, Scully thought, a smile spreading across her face. She patted the arm around her stomach and murmured, "Go to sleep, Mulder."

"Night, Scully."

And they slept.

End

Two Steps Back



It's hard to move forward when demons from the past keep haunting...

August 14, 1999

Kroner, Kansas

The metallic reflecting ball spun twinkling starlights around the room above them as the music continued its swing down memory lane. Dana Scully felt a brief twinge of nostalgia as she looked up from her plate of food and observed her partner at the buffet table, refilling their punch glasses. For a moment, high school didn't seem like such a distant memory after all. Of course, the idea of her being on the arms of someone tall, dark and handsome at the time was a bit of a stretch, but how could a girl complain about living that one out in real life? Mulder was certainly no slouch in that category, as had been made clear during this unusual case. No, strange case was a much better descriptor. With even stranger people. Nowhere had she ever encountered a bunch who were so intrigued with her and her partner as a potential couple. Surely they were nowhere near that obvious?

"What's so funny, Scully?" He handed her a plastic glass filled with the requisite red liquid.

"Nothing, why?"

"Well, not like I'd ever object to seeing your face light up in that special way that you have, but you're grinning like you have some big secret that you can't wait to share."

"I am not. I was just thinking, though — isn't this all rather timely for you? It's been twenty years since your high school graduation, hasn't it?"

He made a face, his features scrunching up in an appealing sort of way. "Yeah, but don't remind me. It's weird to think that it's been twenty years since anything in my life, if you know what I mean." He stabbed at the remainder of his potato salad with his fork and then looked up at her again as another thought quickly followed. "Do you ever wonder when you stopped being a kid, Scully? Does it feel different?"

"Are you asking because you don't know?" An amused look crossed her face as she tried to imagine Mulder as a kid.

"Maybe. I don't think I feel different. I don't know what this says about me, but in many ways, I feel the same as I did at seventeen..." He shrugged, the gesture almost bashful.

"I think that's on the acceptable side of normal, Mulder," she replied softly, answering his need for reassurance.

"Really? Do you ever feel that way?"

"Sometimes, I guess. I certainly understand what you mean, in any case. Look at what we've witnessed in the past couple of days...behavior that's certainly reminiscent of teenagers, don't you think?" She cocked her head towards the newly matched couple on the dance floor.

"Well, Scully, you and I both know that matters of the heart are not always easily handled in a grown-up fashion." His eyes scoped out the dance floor momentarily before settling on her face in a prolonged gaze. Probably not unlike the ones that Holman Hardt had accused him of sending her way.

With nothing to add to his astute comment, Scully instead concentrated on returning his gaze measure for measure.

And the lights continued to spin above their heads.

* * * * *

"So Mulder, when can we blow this hick town?"

Scully tossed the room key on top of the dresser and plopped herself down in the chair by the window. They had finally managed to say their goodbyes and convince their gracious hosts that they had eaten their fill and were just wanting to get some rest. Good thing. She wasn't sure if she could have listened to any more of Sheila's stories. The woman had begun to grate on her nerves.

She reached over and cranked up the air conditioning as far as it would go. She had felt uncomfortably stuffy all night long. Now that all was seemingly well with Holman, the rain had dissipated and all that remained was a humid stickiness that promised heat for tomorrow. With any luck, however, they could be on their way out of Kroner by early morning and perhaps be back home in time for Sunday night supper.

Following her into what had become their room, Mulder closed the door behind him and looked apologetically at her. He removed his jacket and tossed it onto the bed. "The best I could do was ten-thirty. I know that's not soon enough for you and it might take us the better part of the day to fly back to D.C., but...I'll make it up to you, Scully."

"How?" She was only half faking the disappointment in her voice. But before she could focus on being sulky, she felt herself being hauled to her feet as Mulder grabbed her hand and yanked her from her chair. "What are you doing?"

"What I wanted to do all night...dance." He immediately clasped hands with her and encircled her waist with his other arm, assuming the position as though he had done this many times in his dreams.

"Mulder, there's no music."

"In my head there is."

"Care to share it with me?"

To her amazement, Mulder leaned in close to her and began singing into her ear. "And thanks for the times that you've given me, the memories are all in my mind..."

"The Commodores, Mulder?"

"You're very good, Scully."

"Well, I only heard it playing not an hour ago..."

"I wanted to show everyone there just who was three times a lady, but we were on the job, technically speaking. Now that we're officially off duty —"

"— This isn't part of the 'making it up to me', is it?"

"Maybe. Tell me what you and Sheila talked about when you went off after her?"

"That was girl talk, Mulder. We don't repeat that to anyone."

"Yeah right, and that's why women don't gossip. Give it up or I'll crush you in my arms." As if to prove that he was capable — and not that Scully had any doubts — he tightened his hold on her until she was feeling way too much of his heat. She started squirming to get loose but decided against it when it appeared that she was making matters worse in a slightly embarrassing way. Or at least, it should have been embarrassing. Apparently he wasn't taking it that way tonight. Mulder leaned his head back to catch her eye explicitly and grinned wickedly at her before declaring, "That feels good, Scully."

"Mulder...you're getting too close for comfort here." She tried once more to put some distance between themselves, succeeding only in pulling her top half away from his. He tucked their joined hands to his chest, holding her in yet closer by the waist.

"Really? Then stop struggling and tell me what you and Sheila talked about."

"You, okay? We talked about you."

He surprised her by relaxing his hold immediately, releasing her from the warmth of his body. She let out an involuntary noise that sounded like a cross between a whimper and a sigh; scarcely audible, really. Mulder peered down into her face but received no further reaction to either confirm or deny what he thought he had heard. He decided to leave it alone, saying instead, "I gathered as much. What about me?"

"That you're a good kisser, apparently. So she says."

"How would she know? I didn't exactly kiss her."

"Well, from where I was standing, it looked like you were involved." The memory of that rather ridiculous moment brought a smirk to Scully's face.

"Scully —"

"— I'm just kidding, Mulder. You should have seen your face." Her smile broadened as she further recalled the strangely arousing image of that lipstick smudged mouth. "Really, you should have."

He chose not to relive that somewhat embarrassing moment, going instead for the interesting possibilities offered by its aftermath. "So Scully, what did you have to say about that particular opinion? About my being a good kisser, that is."

"I assured her I had no empirical evidence to support her claim," Agent Scully remarked in her most scientifically unbiased professorial voice. She tilted her head back and looked up into his face, catching a new and oddly unsettling combination of amusement and desire in his eyes. She had a casual thought about looking down to see if he had recovered yet, but he held her gaze firmly.

Scully was surprised when she heard the next words spoken between them.

"Why is that?"

She was surprised mainly because the words apparently came from her mouth. It also occurred to her that they had stopped swaying to his imaginary music, although they were still positioned in one another's arms. They stared openly as the seconds ticked by.

"You sure you want to go there, Scully?"

She wondered if he knew what he was capable of doing to her with that voice of his. Something entirely sinful had somehow managed to wrap itself around its normal gravely edge, making her knees go weak. Good thing they were standing still.

"Why not?"

Again, the words came from her mouth. And once more, they surprised the owner of that mouth. From what she could figure, they had also surprised Mulder. Dana Scully felt like a fly on the wall, removed from herself, watching the sudden and strange drama unfold. How far would this go?

"Because you're in charge. Because you're calling the shots. And if you say go, we go." It was a gentle reminder, full of support for whatever she might decide, but also loaded with warnings that he wouldn't be the one to stop them if she chose to go for it.

She stood and blinked at him for a few seconds, then disengaged her hands and arms from his and backed away. He watched with interest as she found the foot of the bed and sat down heavily.

"It was the weirdest thing, Mulder, listening to her talk about you like that. And then I heard myself describing our situation to her without actually identifying us. I mean, our private lives are no one's business. Even if there was a truth to tell, I would be stupid to tell it. So it wouldn't have changed what I said to her. But for the first time, I really thought about why we...haven't..."

"Kissed?"

"Yeah. I mean, beyond..." She was embarrassed, no denying that. But she was being truthful about her feelings — as she had recently promised to him — and that was typically a painful exercise for Dana Scully.

"Beyond kissed?" He was having fun with her. "That's easily fixed, you know."

"It's been almost a year." It was a statement essentially made to herself. As though she were trying to convince herself that it was time to take this huge step forward.

He sat down beside her. "I know. Long time to wait for a kiss. I mean, I know I'm good, Scully, but it may not be worth a whole year's buildup." She chuckled at his self-deprecating humor.

"Well, I must confess, I'm getting just a bit tired of seeing everyone else kiss you. That, and of course, the desire to check out Sheila's claim. You know, more empirical evidence for the case file." A little bit of humor might just go a long way in helping matters, Scully thought as she forced herself to look directly into Mulder's face. She marveled inwardly at how odd she felt, how totally unlike herself.

"I like that. Nothing like making it official FBI business. So what's stopping you?"

As it turned out, the question itself stopped her in her tracks. She was suddenly back in her apartment, on her couch, with "Mulder's" face moving towards hers. The peculiar expression on her own face at the moment, however, puzzled the real thing who was sitting beside her.

"Something wrong?"

"No, nothing. It's — it's just that that was what Eddie Van Blundht basically said before he...well, before you broke down my door."

"Ah. So Eddie and I have something in common after all." He took a moment to search her eyes, looking for any minute sign that she wasn't wanting what he thought she wanted. He couldn't find anything that remotely said no, and knowing her tendencies, decided that he didn't need to wait for a spoken invitation. Or for her to make the first move. "I think we might have some important differences though..."

Mulder leaned in towards her slowly, draping his left arm over her shoulder. His other hand groped for her forearm. He pulled her gently towards him until their lips met in that exquisitely sweet touch that they had allowed themselves the pleasure of enjoying only a few times before. Upon contact, he began to explore new territory by gently increasing the pressure, bringing his hand up to the back of her head. Her mouth soft and pliable beneath his, he parted his lips deliberately and deepened the kiss. Not resisting in the least, she soon opened her own mouth to his, capturing his lips between hers. Mulder responded by rolling his tongue in a slow and sensual caress of her teeth. The long-absent but instantly recognizable sensation of blood rushing in his ears began to weave its familiar torture. If this was going to stop at just a kiss, he had to work fast. Tentatively, his tongue sought out hers, barely touching at first, then both quickly descended into a passionate mimic of their earlier dance movements. He exhaled a low groan into her mouth when she grasped the back of his neck and pressed herself closer to him.

It was a hungry exploration unfettered by the relative lack of spontaneity. Scully would never have thought that their first real kiss would come as a result of actually discussing it beforehand. But as she continued to give as good as she got, she now knew that spontaneity was not a requirement for fireworks between the two of them. The dizzying electricity that they were generating was overpowering and proof enough for her. The hot taste of his mouth on hers, going far, far beyond a feathery, chaste touch for the first time, melted her insides and was starting to impair her ability to think straight. God, how long had it really been since someone had done this to her? She felt heat emanating from parts of her body that she was not normally even aware of, creating a strangely intoxicating sensation. Soaring temperatures notwithstanding, however, she knew from the sounds that they were both making that someone had to call a halt to this activity soon. And she was still in charge.

"Mmm...Mulder." More surprise. Her breathy utterance of his name was in response to his sudden break with her.

Mulder dropped himself backwards onto the bed, chest heaving slightly under his shirt and tie. He took in her somewhat glazed expression, amused and gratified by the fact that Dana Scully's present breathing pattern consisted of a series of little pants that didn't seem to be supplying her with enough oxygen.

"You're gonna be the death of me tonight, woman, but yes, you are still in charge," he responded to her unvoiced question. At her continued silence, he assured her lightly, "No obligation to buy, Scully, that was just a sample for the benefit of your evidence gathering. You can put it in your report...be descriptive, I'm sure it'll give Skinner a thrill."

At that, Mulder rolled himself off the bed and headed for the bathroom, leaving Scully still sitting at the foot of the bed, staring at his retreating form. At the sound of the shower being turned on, her brain cells seemed to awaken again. She inhaled a deep breath and let it out slowly. Empirical evidence was always good. Especially the kind that stood well on its own, without requiring further analysis. And she didn't need to do any further analysis to know that Sheila — despite her obviously "inferior" sample — was right.

* * * * *

When she later emerged from her turn in the bathroom, Mulder was sitting up in bed, on top of the covers, dressed in the same t-shirt and sweat pants that he had worn to bed yesterday. He had apologized to her last night for not bringing any pajamas, but he simply had not anticipated a need to bunk together. Scully, on the other hand, was just plain thankful that she had packed a sensible pair for herself.

As usual, he was in control of the channel changer. At her approach, he gave her a quick onceover and then paused at a particularly steamy scene courtesy of their free movie service. Scully carefully folded back the sheets on her side and slid underneath them, trying not to pay attention to the sights and sounds coming from the TV. When it seemed to her like he had lingered long enough, she turned her head very slowly and deliberately towards him and gave him a look. Her eyes fell to his mouth as she felt a momentary tingle course through her body at the memory of their kiss. He returned a teasing grin, making her at once all hot and cold and not at all looking forward to what he had up his sleeve.

"So Scully, where do you imagine we'll end up doing it for the first time?"

She had anticipated — expected, even — some smartass remark to follow that brief spell of shared voyeurism, but this was not it. "Excuse me?"

"Come on, I know you've thought about it." He hiked his body around, leaning on his right side, allowing himself to look straight at her profile. His conversational manner of speaking and casual interest made it seem as though he were asking her how she chose her shoes in the morning.

"Good God, Mulder, we don't have to share every intimate thought that we have, you know."

"Us? Never. You're not ready for that. I'm just curious about this one."

"Why?" She supposed herself lucky that he hadn't asked what her preferred position was.

"I dunno. Maybe because now that we've cleared another hurdle, we might want to think about the rest. Or maybe I just want to know how far off my fantasy might be."

His fantasy? Scully groaned inwardly. "Okay, so tell me and I'll let you know if you're close."

"That's no fair. Or fun."

Silence.

"Okay. You know that storage room two doors down from our office?"

"You have us doing it at the Hoover Building?" Actually, Scully had to admit — to herself, anyway — that the office thing was always a bit of a thrill to think about. Such thoughts had kept her awake through more than one dull meeting over the years.

"Well, no, I know we wouldn't — too many eyes and ears — but it's just a thought I've always had."

"Always had?" Maybe this could get interesting, if she could only turn it around.

"For a long time," he said, shrugging one shoulder in an offhand manner, like it was no big deal and no big secret. "But obviously I'm not even close, so you may as well tell me yours."

Their eyes locked for a long moment during which Dana Scully wished she were somewhere else. She wondered if she looked as overheated as she felt. The subject of this seeming inevitability between them had never really been discussed, which was not a surprise. Normal people didn't talk about it, did they? Wouldn't it just happen? Somehow she had expected that, in this area at least, perhaps some semblance of normality might actually take over in their relationship. That they — like almost everyone else in the world — might just someday do what came naturally.

Lately, however, Mulder was really pushing the envelope when it came to this sharing business. To his credit, it was undoubtedly a result of her promise to him that she would try to be more open. Not that there hadn't been many times when she wondered why she had uttered such a thing. It seemed like the thing to say, however, after they had spent the night together a few months ago. Nothing had happened outside of actual sleeping, of course, which was the original intent. She had been feeling particularly alone and vulnerable and — having been encouraged by Mulder to specify her wants and needs — decided that she wanted to spend a night in his arms. The next morning, she had promised him that she would try to be more forthcoming about her feelings. Since then, he had been engaging her in this on-going game.

As she continued to stare at him, however, an understanding suddenly dawned on her, jogging her memory as to what this might be about. Once upon a time, he used to ask her all sorts of outrageous questions. Then it stopped.

"Okay, Scully, let me have this at least... you have thought about it, right?"

Being able to read that tiny subtle change in his demeanor — virtually unrecognizable to anyone else on the planet — had always been Dana Scully's downfall. As soon as it registered with her, she couldn't refuse him anything.

"Yes, of course." She had to remind herself to keep her head up, although she was now mostly focused on the TV rather than on his face. Not that that made it any easier, considering what it was that she was watching. "It wouldn't be at my place, or yours..." Seeing his raised eyebrow out of the corner of her eye, she elaborated, "...too many eyes and ears."

"On the road somewhere?"

"No," she said quickly, before either of them could look around the room.

"Not my place, not yours, not here. Where does that leave?"

"Somewhere else, of course. Not like it's FBI business. Some place where we might have a mountain view, with a blue-green lake, at a nice resort or fancy hotel."

If she was expecting further innuendo or remarks, they weren't forthcoming. Mulder merely smiled in appreciation of having been told, adding softly, "That's a nice thought, Scully. You should make sure that's how it happens."

His eyes lingered on her face for a moment before he turned his attention back to the TV and began flipping channels again. He seemed satisfied that Scully had finally understood.

* * * * *

Dana Scully opened her eyes and looked around in the darkness. The clock was on Mulder's side, so she couldn't tell what time it was without partially getting up. Something had awakened her, however, and her first guess had been that her partner wasn't sleeping well. He appeared to be dead to the world, however, and it looked like he hadn't moved in awhile. But the room was quite chilly now as the air conditioner continued to hum away noisily, sending frigid blasts of dry air across their heads. Maybe that was why she woke up — it was too cold. She decided that she would have to make her way over to the window to turn up the thermostat.

She sat up and waited for a few more moments as her eyes adjusted to the light, or rather, the lack of light. Luckily, the curtains did not fully overlap, allowing a very narrow slit of moonlight to pass over the foot of the bed. She carefully made her way to the air conditioner and turned it off. The silence that followed was highlighted by Mulder's steady breathing, providing her with a comforting sense of security.

She stepped back and was preparing to get back into bed when she felt a liquid warmth sliding onto her lips. Good grief, it was so cold that her nose was running. She headed for the bathroom, closing the door behind her so that she could turn on the light. Before she could reach for the box of tissues on top of the counter, however, she caught a glimpse of her face in the mirror and let out a horrified gasp. Blood. Her nose was bleeding.

Fox Mulder woke suddenly to the sound of muffled cries and the very real feeling of arms and legs assaulting him. Groggy from a deep sleep, his first instinct was simply to fend off the attack, before his training took over. He stole a quick look at the clock beside him, grabbing for his weapon on the nightstand. It was 4:56 am. His senses came to him immediately, however, as he dropped his gun to the floor and turned on the light. Scully was still kicking underneath the sheets but her cries were now escalating into screams that would undoubtedly attract unwanted attention should he fail to calm her.

His first attempts at grabbing for her limbs were entirely unsuccessful, unprepared as he was for her enormous strength at resisting against being held down. Intermittent with her screams were uncontrollable bursts of tears that wrenched at his heartstrings. It was such an unsettling sight that he had to fight down a nauseating sensation that was quickly rising from the pit of his stomach. Some deep dark part of his psyche told him that this was supposed to be him, not Scully. Forcing himself into action, Mulder gathered up his strength and finally caught her flailing arms. He held her steady, tucking her face against his chest to muffle her cries. After one final attempt to kick him away, she seemed to relax as some part of her registered who it was that held her. With that realization came a renewed torrential flood of tears. What the hell was all this about?

"Scully?" His voice reflected the sickening fear that he felt. The sound of her crying was reaching a high-pitched intensity. "Jesus, Scully, you're having a nightmare..." At least that was what he hoped it was. He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her none too gently, not caring what the proper protocol was for waking individuals from such a state. In any case, it wasn't happening fast enough for him. "Dana!"

That seemed to do it. As quickly as she had been overcome, she recovered, pulling away from him and looking around in confusion. "Why are you here? Where are we?"

Mulder refused to let go of her arms, negating her attempts to shake him off. "Scully...relax. We're in Kroner, remember? A cow came through the roof of my room..." He would have laughed if he weren't so scared. Nightmares were nothing new to him and a few times Scully had been witness to them herself, but this was something entirely different. Even during their first cases back from

her abduction, he couldn't recall her having any difficulty sleeping. At least not when they were on the road together anyway.

"Oh God..." He finally released her arms, letting her cover her face with her hands.

"Scully?"

She looked up at him, fully awake and functioning now, although her expression betrayed her less than successful efforts at suppressing tears of relief. His own emotions teetering on the edge, he responded by pulling her into a tight hug. Scully buried her face against him, allowing his familiar scent to ground her. Several deep breaths later, her pulse gradually returned to normal. She turned her head, laying her cheek against his chest. At the sound of his racing heartbeat, however, she became aware for the first time just how alarmed he was and must have been.

"Sorry, Mulder...I didn't mean to scare you."

"No, that's okay, that's okay...as long as you're okay now." He looked at her, still questioning.

"Bad dream... I was being taken for tests. Strange thing was, my mind was screaming, but it was like my body was willingly walking into it —"

"It didn't feel or sound like any part of that was 'willing', Scully."

"What do you mean? What did I do?"

"You have no idea?"

"Just that I was being taken by doctors — standard generic white surroundings, sterile, no details — they were explaining that the tests had to continue. I was following along, although I didn't really want to go...that's all I remember. Did I hurt you, Mulder?" She suddenly went into doctor mode and began examining his arms for scratches or bruises.

"No, no, of course not. Don't worry about me. You don't remember struggling to get away?"

"No... I mean, the very idea is horrifying...it doesn't surprise me if I was struggling, but..."

Something flickered across her face. Some spark of knowledge. Mulder frowned, keeping his eyes on her as he reached down to the floor to retrieve the blanket and sheet that had fallen over the edge of the bed. "You have any idea what this is all about?"

"Isn't that your department, Mulder?" It was a feeble attempt at humor that failed miserably. She lowered her head in an attempt to escape his intense scrutiny. God, this was so unexpectedly embarrassing.

"I'm not an instant dream interpreter, Scully. You'd be able to make a better guess about this than me." He leaned forward to look at her more closely. "In fact, I'm betting you might know, period."

"It can't be as simple as all that, but it can't be a coincidence either." He could barely hear her, even in the quiet stillness of the night.

"What can't be?"

Scully gathered up the bedding that he had recovered and wrapped it around herself tightly, sitting up against the headboard. She looked at him, then turned her eyes front, staring at the dark and silent TV screen.

"I have an appointment with my oncologist at the end of the month."

Mulder swallowed hard at hearing the words, his mouth going dry in seconds. The very thought of what that could mean left him lightheaded. He was suddenly extremely thankful to be sitting on a bed.

She turned back to him briefly, noticing his pale countenance. This was definitely not information that she preferred to share with him in the middle of the night, but it was obvious to her that it was likely the root cause of her nightmare.

"I used to have these appointments quite routinely — you knew about them — when I first went into remission. After the first year, they were scaled back to once every several months. It'll be six months since my last visit this time, but the difference is, they're planning a full spate of tests this go-around. It's normal procedure." She recited the information as though she were talking about a patient or a case rather than herself. Mulder knew that there could be two very different reasons for this attitude.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm telling you now."

"Yes, after scaring the shit out of me."

"I said I was sorry."

"That's hardly my point, Scully."

Was that disappointment she heard in his voice? She probably should have told him when the appointment was made. She herself had spent several agonizing hours thinking about it after her doctor called. The previous appointment back in February — at about the time that they got the X-Files back — was so routine that it came and went without any great panic. But she knew that six months later, she'd be due for an extensive observation to ensure that she was still stable and progressing without incident. It was coming up two years since her remarkable turnaround. With the knowledge that she'd have to be subjected to some unpleasant tests, she had pushed the entire idea to the back of her mind until a couple of weeks ago when her appointment was confirmed.

"Look, I didn't feel the need to concern you with this until the time came. I wasn't going to not tell you. Is that so wrong?"

"It is if it's on your mind enough to cause you the level of anxiety that I just witnessed."

"But it's not. I — I don't know what to say...I don't know what brought that on." Something was amiss here, Scully thought. Why would she freak out like that all of a sudden? It just didn't make any sense. "I need a drink of water. Go back to sleep, Mulder. I'm fine."

Mulder couldn't suppress the shudder that sent cold waves through him from head to toe. He watched her disappear into the bathroom, then pulled the covers over himself and fell back against his pillow. Scully was fine. Of course, if history chose to repeat itself, that could mean basically anything.

* * * * *

August 15, 1999

Dana Scully's Apartment

It had been an uneventful drive back from the airport. Scully slept the whole way, or pretended to sleep; it was one or the other. On the one hand, given the previous stressful night, Mulder was more than happy that she was able to get some rest. On the other hand, she had also slept through the various plane rides on their trip back. Conversation had been brief and perfunctory for much of the day, focusing on work-related matters. He had taken the opportunity during their flight layover to do up their official report for Skinner.

Looking back, if Mulder didn't know better, the morning had had an unmistakable 'morning after' feel to it, but without the fun of a 'night before'. He had gotten up quietly to go out to get some breakfast for them and upon his return, there was a noticeable chill in the air. Not hostile or anything like that, just discomfotingly quiet. Scully had looked a little worse for wear; not that he was surprised. Neither of them had slept much after their early morning awakening.

All in all, it was a mode that he was well familiar with from the past: that self-preservation instinct of Scully's kicking in after having been so emotionally exposed. It was merely the price that he routinely paid for being allowed to pick up the pieces. But given their recent progress, it was unexpected treatment. To be honest, it was a hurtful blow to him, that she would subject him to

that old "let me deal with this myself" routine. The fact that so much had gone on over the past twenty-four hours also made matters infinitely more interesting. So many possibilities for what she might be obsessing over.

But it was now many hours later, he was carrying in her luggage — when did he start doing that anyway? — and he didn't quite know how to proceed. She had grown more and more remote as the hours wore on. Rather than slowly opening up again, as he had been expecting and as was her usual pattern, she seemed on the verge of a total shutdown. At this point, he was either going home for a restless night of wondering if something was up or he was going to stay and find out what this was all about. Neither option was going to be painless. To make matters worse, he was suffering from a raging headache, a condition exacerbated by the fact that his most interesting conversations today had been one-sided ones inside his own brain.

He dropped her bag beside the couch and turned to her. "Maybe I should go out and get some dinner for us..."

"Mulder, I think I'd like to be alone tonight, if you don't mind." That wasn't the answer he had been expecting.

"Why?" The question was asked very quietly, but his underlying tone was harsh, catching her off-guard. He was surprised by his own seemingly short fuse.

"Why? I have to tell you why?" Her face registered surprise to confusion to anger in less than two seconds. Apparently he hadn't cornered the market on short fuses. "Since when did this require —"

"Is this 'need to be alone' thing because something happened between us last night that you can't deal with or what?" The throbbing in his head increased tenfold all at once at having to ask the question. Undoubtedly it would increase even further with her answer.

"What are you talking about?" He was so far off in his diagnosis that she honestly had trouble pinpointing what he meant.

"Damn it, Scully, you know what I'm talking about —"

"— I just want to be alone." She turned away from him and started walking towards her bedroom.

"I'm asking you why!" Jesus, that one hurt his head. He couldn't recall ever raising his voice at her like this regarding something so personal, but for once, Fox Mulder was intent on not letting her have the last word and only say in this...this whatever it was. The only trouble was, anger directed at Scully only translated into pain for him. It had been like that ever since he could remember and would probably forever and always be like that. This woman routinely turned him inside out emotionally. It didn't matter if he merely sat in some dark room somewhere like he usually did, stewing over the fact that she had shut him out for the umpteenth time or whether he took to yelling at her like he was doing now. His anger would somehow turn itself back on him and skewer his heart. "Don't do this to us, Scully." He stopped short of saying 'don't do this to me'.

"Don't take us two steps back again."

The plea in his voice struck her deep to the core, awakening just the right amount of guilt and anxiety. Scully stopped and turned around slowly, her expression indicating that she had just been reminded of something that she had previously blocked from her mind.

"You remember that? You remember telling me how we do this 'one step forward, two steps back' thing? For the longest time, I thought it was me who did that to us. And it probably was. But Scully, it's still happening, and I don't think it's me any more."

"You don't understand." It was a pathetic and lame rejoinder, she knew, but she was suddenly feeling shell-shocked and had no reserves left for him.

"No, I guess I don't." He felt the quiet anger claw its way back and found himself turning towards the door. He forced himself to stop mere steps from it, however, short of reaching for the doorknob. "Fine, Scully. You want me out? Say the word. I'll go."

Scully moved towards him, rubbing her hands over her face in a weary gesture. She could imagine that in the past, a similar war of wills would have resulted in Mulder walking out the door. And she would have stood her ground, however shaky it was. She would have told him to go for the sake of her own pride. Actually, more than likely he would have walked out without waiting for her answer. But the stakes had never been higher, and Scully knew that she couldn't continue subjecting him to this. He didn't deserve it, not after all the effort that he had put in on their behalf. But that didn't make what she had said any less true: he didn't understand. He didn't understand that she wasn't backing off because of their kiss or the fact that he had witnessed her nightmare or anything even remotely like that. He didn't understand that perhaps this one time, she did have a good reason to keep him in the dark for awhile. But in the end, it wasn't worth him walking out on her, under the mistaken impression that she had even more intimacy issues.

"Sit down, Mulder."

He didn't make any attempt to move from his spot on the carpet, although he did turn around to face her again.

"Can we sit down please?" Scully repeated, motioning to the couch.

He took a seat at the end closest to where he had been standing, frowning when she chose the armchair for herself. That was an unusual move. How far away did she need to be, and why? He brought one leg up onto the couch and turned towards her, feeling strangely adversarial. He waited for her to speak.

"I had an 'incident' last night."

For the fact that it was such an anti-climactic statement, she looked and sounded apprehensive. He didn't think that her revelation merited any sort of reply, but she also didn't seem in any hurry to continue, forcing him to say something to encourage her along.

"I know, Scully. I was there."

"That's not what I meant. I guess I should be more accurate and say that I had two incidents last night. You were unfortunately on the receiving end of the second one."

"What are you talking about?" He pressed a couple of fingers to his right temple, squeezing his eyes shut momentarily in an attempt to block out the increasing pain of his headache.

"Apparently sometime before that, I had gotten up to turn off the air conditioning." As she spoke, it almost seemed to Mulder as though she were trying to establish details of what she was describing. As though she hadn't lived through it herself, or couldn't quite remember.

"And?"

"And I was getting back into bed when I felt something on my lip. I went to the bathroom thinking I was going to blow my nose but.... it was blood."

"Scuh —" He couldn't even finish saying her name. In the next few seconds, he had to remind himself to breathe.

"I guess I just cleaned up and went back to sleep — although I don't know how. I must have thought it was a dream. Guess that pretty much explains the nightmare, doesn't it?"

"How do you know it wasn't a dream?" His voice sounded raspy to his own ears.

"Because when I went back to the bathroom to get some water, I saw the tissues lying there. It was real."

She still had not quite controlled the wavering in her voice, which was enough for him to know that she was sufficiently alarmed. He also instantly had a greater understanding of her behavior and the reasons behind it. But with that understanding came another flash of anger, although he was very mindful to keep it as contained as possible.

"How did you manage not to tell me about this?"

"I couldn't. I can't explain to you what I was thinking or feeling, but I just couldn't. That's why I said you didn't understand just a moment ago. I'm not even sure I do."

"You just got back into bed and said nothing," he stated pointedly. "How was that possible?"

"I don't know, all right?"

His head pounding relentlessly now, Mulder silently berated himself for badgering her. First things first. "Do you have an aspirin or something on you?"

"What's the matter?"

"I have an enormous headache going on right now and I don't expect it'll go away by itself now that you've told me this."

Scully walked over to her briefcase and plucked out a small container of pills. She checked the expiration on it, was satisfied, and handed it over to her beleaguered partner. Mulder quickly popped a couple without benefit of water, a feat indeed considering how his mouth felt like the Sahara Desert. In spite of everything else going on, it didn't go unnoticed by Scully, who wordlessly went into her kitchen to get him a glass of water.

"I don't know what's worse... me getting upset with you for thinking that you were all screwed up over something trivial, or you withholding this from me in the first place," he said, after downing the water and nodding his thanks. His eyes followed her every movement as she returned to her chosen seat.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to drive you around the bend, but I didn't know how to deal with this. I thought until I knew, there was no point in telling you. I mean, really, Mulder, what good does it do you to know?"

"If the shoe was on the other foot, wouldn't you want to know?" His voice was tight.

That seemed to hit a nerve. She pulled herself back into the depths of her chair, wrapping her arms around her raised knees. He needed to touch her, but her present body language indicated that she had distanced herself for a reason. He changed the subject slightly. "What are you going to do?"

"Not like I have a lot of options. Obviously, I have to get checked out as soon as possible and hope that nothing's changed."

"I mean, in your medical opinion — what ..."

"It's not exactly my area of specialty, Mulder. I mean, a nosebleed in itself can be fairly inconsequential. But with my history, it's not something I should brush off."

"No, of course not. How early can you rebook your appointment to?"

"I'm guessing Tuesday morning. It's probably too late for tomorrow."

Mulder shifted in his seat slightly and dropped his head against the back of the couch. He stared at the ceiling for several seconds, memorizing the textured pattern on it.

"God, Scully, you know what I've been thinking all day, don't you?"

"I can imagine. I'm sorry, Mulder. I think — like you said — the shoe would have to be on the other foot for you to realize why it was difficult for me to say anything."

"So why did you stop me from leaving just now?" He turned his head towards her.

"Because no matter how much I didn't want to tell you about this, it would have been worse to have you go away thinking I was shutting you out because of what happened last night."

"You're okay about last night?"

"Yes, I'm fine with it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

It seemed as though the twenty questions treatment had stopped, for now anyway.

"Mulder, I need you to understand that I'm grateful for your patience. I know that it would probably take a lot on my part to make you leave and I feel incredibly lucky about that. I'd hate for you to think that I'm forever on a mission to test your limits."

"I don't think that. But you sure make me wonder sometimes."

During the silence that fell over them, Mulder remembered her comment upon coming back into her apartment and wondered if he should leave. He didn't want to and he didn't agree with it, but under the circumstances and knowing her as well as he did, he would certainly respect her wishes if that was what she wanted. He considered for another moment, mapping out in his mind how the next several days might proceed, wishing he could fast forward a week down the road. He decided that for right now, what he needed was to hold her.

"Come over here, Scully." He sat up straight again.

She hesitated for a long moment before approaching slowly, eventually sitting down beside him, close but not touching. Mulder reached out and pulled her up past his outstretched leg. He was disturbed by how tensely coiled and rigid her body was, as though she were consciously trying to hold herself together. She didn't put up any resistance, however, when he basically lifted her and turned her around, propping her back up against his chest. It allowed them to be physically close but not face to face. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her snugly against him.

"I think I understand your dilemma, okay? But this can't happen again. You have to tell me these things. If we can't deal with this stuff together, we're not making much progress."

She nodded and then they both fell silent again, lingering in the moment, appreciating the warmth and comfort offered by the simple therapy of touch. It would be enough to get them through the shock of this day.

It suddenly occurred to her that she hadn't been prepared for this. This 'difference'. When the worst of her illness hit approximately two years ago, Mulder was still just Mulder. Her partner at the FBI. She wasn't downplaying his importance in her life, or the fact that he had feelings for her even then — just as she did for him — but that was when it was all unsaid and unshared. Unconfirmed. Uncommitted. What existed now was completely different. There was just so much more to lose now. So much more that had been hard fought for and won. Potentially so much more to leave unfinished simply for the fact that so much more had been started.

Two years ago, she had fought tooth and nail to live, in large part because she couldn't bear the thought of leaving him behind, worrying over how he would blame himself for what happened. Today, she felt a twinge of something more selfish. This time, she wanted to live for herself, to enjoy what they finally had the courage to create. She couldn't be denied; not now.

Scully turned her head to look at him, intending to express something to let him know how she felt. In the second that it took for him to meet her eyes, however, her resolve — along with everything else that had been holding her together — crumbled away into nothingness. She opened her mouth to speak but instead began to cry.

Dana Scully just couldn't stop surprising herself this weekend.

* * * * *

August 17, 1999 7:30 am

J. Edgar Hoover Building

Fox Mulder walked up to his desk and snapped on the lamp, illuminating his immediate work area. It was no secret that this had always been his office, but that didn't mean she wasn't part of its very essence. While outsiders likely couldn't see any obvious Scully influences, his own powers of observation could count any number of them pervading the room. The mere fact of knowing that they were around was a comfort to him during the days and nights when she'd be occupied

elsewhere and he'd be left alone in the basement. It suddenly occurred to him that there used to be a time when he actually enjoyed being alone in the basement. Little wonder that he could still find solace here whenever he was troubled.

As usual in such times, he was drawn to the words on his poster. Not the original, but not important. The thing about it that attracted him in the first place was still alive and well. Most people typically took one look at it and pegged him as some UFO nuthouse, but then again, most people didn't think beyond mere images and catch phrases. They couldn't possibly guess that the words held a significant meaning for him in a much deeper sense. That in reality, it really had nothing at all to do with UFOs. The word 'want' had caught his attention when he first saw it. A want: expressing a wish or a desire. And while he knew that wishes or desires sometimes flew in the face of everything that made sense, it was also no reason not to cultivate them. The message had originally been his guiding light, of course, for finding Samantha, but in recent years, it had also been a growing expression of his hope for something more with Scully. He wanted to believe that — perhaps against all odds — he might someday be able to make a near normal life with her.

Yesterday had tested that belief in a serious way. He had called her in the morning, to ask how she was doing. Did the appointment get rescheduled? Yes. When? Tuesday at eight am. Would she be gone all day? Yes. Did she want him to tell Skinner? Sure. Did she need him to go with her? No, that wasn't necessary. With nothing much else to report, the conversation didn't have very far to go. There was an awkward moment when it came time to hang up, with Mulder not wanting to impose by asking to see her. Sadly, he had gotten the distinct feeling that she didn't want him to be immersed into the old "Scully has cancer" grind by asking him to come over. He didn't have the strength to assert himself, so that was how it ended. He spent the remainder of his day nursing a pot of coffee at his kitchen table, halfway to convincing himself again that he was incapable of offering her anything. One part of him chastised him for not insisting on seeing her. Another part congratulated him on his cowardly choice to stay away. Neither half was giving him much credit, one way or the other.

He just truly didn't know if he was expected to sit through the next several days with her, agonizing over just how much care and attention to dispense. Scully was definitely not the sort to be fussed over and he had been well trained over the years to keep that sort of behavior to a minimum. Had that changed now that they were more than just work partners? Was she expecting him to fight harder to stay around and play the part of the attentive boyfriend? The irony of the situation was not lost on him. Right this minute, he had to admit that he didn't know what to do, how to behave, what to think. So he stayed away. Trouble was, Mulder didn't truly believe that they were better off apart for any reason.

Chances were that Scully would be fine, as she was so fond of saying. But he couldn't even quote odds to himself at this moment to appease the pain and fear. What kind of odds could he come up with when there was no precedent? While there was no good reason to think that she wouldn't be all right, there was also still the mystery of what had caused the cancer to go into remission in the first place. That her specific cancer was essentially the type that was inoperable had not changed. Should something be found at this point, their most horrifying nightmare would return instantly, and he could not imagine how they would handle that.

Once upon a time, his greatest fear had been to lose her to this inexplicable illness. Today, the simple thought of reliving that fear terrified him.

* * * * *

August 17, 1999 10:30 am

Trinity Hospital

Mulder peered into the waiting room and saw her tiny form sitting near a corner, intently concentrating on something that she had laid out across her lap. She seemed to be dressed in normal pants, but she was wearing one of those standard hospital issue tops that tied up in the back. Her face pale and adorned with less than her normal makeup, he had to convince himself that she was just naturally fair and not sick. No matter how hard he tried to keep them at bay,

recollections of her being in similar circumstances came alive in his head, causing the painful lump in his throat to slam upwards again. It had been hard enough before, dealing with the blame, the guilt, and the self-doubt. He wasn't so sure that he had saved any strength to face all this again, were the situation to arise anew. He took a deep breath, readied himself and opened the door.

Scully looked up at hearing the door open. At first her face registered surprise, but then she smiled at him, quite nearly shattering his attempt to steel himself for the moment. He quickly walked over to her, leaned down and kissed her cheek, whispering, "Hey sunshine, how's it going?" His voice was not as steady as he would have liked it to be.

Scully reached for his hand as he sat down. She frowned slightly as she peered closer at his face and into his eyes, seeing the turmoil underneath.

"Mulder, I'm okay." She had meant it reassuringly, but it was her turn to be surprised by the unevenness in her voice. He pulled at her arm, forcing her to turn around in her chair to face him.

"Are you sure, Scully?"

She inhaled and exhaled deeply before speaking again. "Yes. Yes, I'm sure. At least, I'm sure about what caused the nosebleed. I'm still waiting for other tests to be done, but...I don't want you to worry about this."

Mulder had had a hard enough time dealing with her illness when they were just partners. While she was pretty certain that he was no longer totally consumed by guilt over it, she knew that it would still be difficult for him to see her life interrupted in such a way again. In fact, she suspected it would be harder now, for the insanely perverse reason that — on the basis of their new relationship — he might now feel obligated to be the protector. The one to provide the comfort; the one to provide the strength. And despite the fact that Scully held her partner in the highest regard, she suspected that it was not a role he felt confident playing. In all honesty, she didn't even want to burden him with having to play it. He had done more than his share in assuming responsibility for their relationship up to this point. She couldn't throw this on him as well, no matter what he might feel or say to the contrary.

"Scully?" Mulder's voice broke into her thoughts, bringing her back to the present, back to the pale green walls of the waiting room.

"Hm?"

"I was asking, what was the deal with the nosebleed?"

"Oh, Dr. Zuckerman asked whether I had recently experienced drastic changes in air pressure or temperatures... Mulder, it seems our weather friend managed to wreak havoc on me too, I guess. Combined with the prolonged plane trip getting out there, the atmospheric anomalies in Kroner were apparently sufficient enough to cause my delicate and already damaged tissues to give out momentarily. Supposedly it happened to me when I came back from Antarctica too. It's really no big thing."

"That's it?"

"Well I know that sounds a little strange, but yes, that's it. At least so far as could be determined by this morning's examination. I have blood work that's yet to be done and then yet to be analyzed.... We're not going to know everything today, Mulder."

"How often do you get the full battery of tests done?"

"These ones haven't been done in about a year."

"Was that wise?"

"I'm not going to start second-guessing the decisions of my doctors. They've been extremely capable, not to mention accommodating to some of our more outrageous suggestions."

For the first time since he and Scully agreed to begin pursuing a deeper relationship, Fox Mulder felt the heavy burden of fate and destiny on them. He hoped that he hadn't been under the

mistaken impression that they had all the time in the world. Could that ever be the case? Somehow he had succeeded in sweeping aside as near impossible the threat of her cancer returning. How realistic was that?

After a good five minutes of silence, during which she realized impatiently that she had no idea what might be running through his mind, Scully tried a different approach. "Why aren't you at work, Mulder?"

"Skinner told me to take the day off; he sends his best wishes, by the way. I gotta drop by the office later on to pick up a new case file that's he putting together but he says that it's nothing that can't wait another couple of days to get started."

"Anything interesting?"

"I don't want to talk shop right now."

"Well, you don't seem to want to talk about much, Mulder."

Another minute or so of silence passed before he spoke again.

"I missed you yesterday." He turned towards her and looked directly into her eyes, catching the barely perceptible flash of emotion that crossed her pale face at hearing his simple declaration. So, she thought, here was the new Mulder again — taking the bull by the horns. Wanting to play hardball, no doubt. "You're still hiding from me, Scully. Why is that?"

"I wasn't hiding." She also wasn't convincing. It made Mulder wonder why Scully never tried harder whenever she attempted to pass off a bald-faced lie. Without thinking, she added, "Besides, you didn't try too hard."

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't try very hard to see me, if that's what you're getting at." He heard her loud and clear this time.

"Scully, I don't claim to know much right about now, but I do know you. And yesterday I got the clear impression that you wanted me to stay away."

"It's just easier for you that way." She looked down at the floor, instantly regretting where the conversation was heading.

"Don't presume to know what would be easier for me, Scully; I don't dare make that assumption for you. You have no idea what it feels like to sit here any more than I know what it feels like to be where you are. I don't need you to protect me from this." The words tumbled out quickly, more quickly than he had intended, but he didn't appreciate the veiled accusation. Unfortunately, he had now provoked exactly the sort of reaction that he didn't want from her.

"Neither do I." Her response was sharp. She looked up at him quickly, her eyes pinning him with laser blue coldness. The look was enough to pierce him with shards of virtual ice. He flinched inwardly, but refused to be goaded into an angry exchange.

"You never have needed my protection, Scully. Not from anything. Occasionally you've needed my rescue services, but that's about the extent of it." And if anyone ever asked him, he'd admit to being hurt about that one, but it was merely a sad fact of life that he'd come to accept. "But that's not what I'm getting at. I'm not offering protection..."

The defiance that had appeared without warning disappeared just as quickly as her expression transformed itself into something tender and apologetic. The honest sincerity that came through in the delivery of her partner's last statement — along with the fact that he had not taken her bait — made her feel ashamed. Of course Mulder meant something else. It had been so long since she'd been on the receiving end of anything like that, however, that she automatically assumed otherwise.

"I didn't mean that," she murmured contritely.

"Sure you did. Maybe not with such vehemence, but.... It's true, so how could you not mean it?"

"It's just that I don't want you to feel like you have to be different with me..."

"Haven't we been through that already, Scully? It is different. Hell, you can't tell me that you're not feeling something else here that wasn't here two years ago."

"No, that's not what I mean. I've been sitting here thinking that this is probably a fact of life for me, Mulder. This on-going back and forth thing with doctors and checkups and hospitals. And I don't want your life to grind to a halt each time because of it. I think that's why I couldn't tell you before, especially after the other night. I need to know that you won't see me differently."

"See you differently'?"

As someone that you can't possibly imagine making love to, she thought, surprising herself yet again with her own frankness and audacity, however unspoken. "Like I'm some fragile sick thing....I don't want you giving me that 'poor Scully is dying' look."

Mulder blinked and turned away quickly, wondering if he was doing precisely that.

"I'm not unreasonable, Mulder. If you're afraid, I need to see that fear. But everything else — well, everything else is just life for me." Her pronouncement came with the air of someone making the connection for the first time. Maybe she hadn't realized it herself until now. "And if you want to hang around, this is the whole of who I am."

"So what do we do?"

"We go on with life as usual. We go on with work as usual. Maybe you can go back to bugging me with stupid sports trivia whenever you stop by a hospital to see me. I don't need you to be different, Mulder. I just need you to be you."

They exchanged a meaningful look, obviously thinking about how they had performed the hospital bedside visits for one another all too often in this lifetime. Maybe all of this was a fact of life in more than one sense.

"And I need you to stop hiding."

"And I'll try to stop hiding."

"Scully —"

"Mulder, the day you promise me that you won't take any more wild and crazy chances on your own, maybe allowing me a say in decisions that might potentially endanger your life, then —"

"Okay, okay, I get your point. I'll accept your nasty habits if you'll accept mine." He pointed to the glossy folder that was still on her lap. "So Scully, what are you looking at here?"

"Travel brochures. Did you know there's a travel agency downstairs in the lobby?"

He shook his head no, waiting for her to continue.

"The woman there said that the location has actually been good for her. Seems a lot of people — once they get the good news that they're all right — go on dream vacations as a celebration of life and renewal. And those who don't get good news sometimes feel the need to go off and reconcile things in their life. She's an interesting lady. We talked for a bit and then she gave me these."

"Planning a trip, Scully?" The incredibly morbid part of him wanted to know if it would be a celebration or reconciliation trip, but he refrained from asking. There was a significantly long pause before she answered.

"Well, I'm sort of keeping my eye out for nice resorts with a mountain view and perhaps some blue-green lakes. You never know when they might come in handy." She smiled at him, but he also saw sudden tears fill her eyes and instinctively knew why they were there.

No one ever battles Fate and wins. But then again, Fate wasn't always the bad guy either.

When he initiated that flippant little conversation a few days ago, it really was just for fun and games. Right now, though, he desperately needed reassurance that the mountain view and blue-

green lakes were still within reach, still within the same sphere of reality that they presently occupied. Would mere determination be enough for them to find their way back?

"How're we gonna get there, Scully?" he asked quietly, suddenly aware of how powerful their silences were becoming. Without warning, tears that he had been holding back for the past two days sprang into his eyes, blurring his vision.

"One step at a time, Mulder." She opened up her arms to him as he leaned over the armrest of his chair, burying his face into the crook of her shoulder. He felt her hand on his back, stroking lightly, then heard her whisper into his ear, "Just keep me pointed in the right direction."

End

Truths Untold



Love, fate, and a whole lot of unspoken truths separate our heroes after the events of The Sixth Extinction...

The Healing Waters: Prologue

September 2000
Jasper, Alberta

Fox Mulder closed his eyes and lifted his face to the early morning sun, feeling the warm rays caress his skin with a skillful lover's touch. At the same time, the light breeze that ruffled through the leaves on the tree branches overhead made the hairs on his arms stand on end. The opposing sensations were decidedly appropriate for his mission of the day. In his fingers he held a small box, inside which was a gold band that he had neither seen nor touched in over ten years. It was time to perform a simple ceremony with it.

He opened his eyes to the unbounded majesty of the Rockies in the not too far off distance, set against a solid blue sky with nary a wisp of cloud. The mountains reflected off the clear emerald water that lapped rhythmically in front of him, the magnificence that was the aptly named Lac Beauvert. Literally beautiful and green. His eyes traversed the edge of the lake to the large cabins standing adjacent to the golf course. He settled on a specific ground level, end unit suite. He closed his eyes once more, searching his memory for that idyllic image of the woman he had left sleeping on the king size bed over an hour ago.

Just as he finished recreating in his mind the picture of the familiar pale face settled comfortably against the white pillows, he felt his world begin a slow spin backwards in time. Back to a time when the gold band had been around his finger.

"I don't want it back. Keep it."

"Why? What would be the point?"

"Consider it a talisman, a symbol of sorts. That's what it really is, anyway, isn't it?"

"Well, right now, it's a symbol of something that's not true."

"That can always change."

"We've been all over that —"

"Hear me out. I'm asking you to keep it as a symbol of what you deserve. I've known a side of you that thinks you have to keep paying the price, from here to eternity, and it's just not true."

"What do you mean?"

"Let this be a reminder to you that there's someone out there who loves you the way you deserve to be loved. Keep it until you find her. Will you do that? On the day that this lucky woman realizes what she's got, maybe you can have a ceremony with it. Toss it into the river, bury it in the park... burn it in a bonfire. It'll be a sign that you've found what you want. Let me leave you with that, at least."

"Talk about dramatic endings..."

"There are no endings, Fox. Just beginnings. And you and I, we'll have another beginning someday."

"And what makes you say that?"

"Life is all about love and fate. I love you; I know you don't believe me, but that hasn't changed. And maybe, just maybe, you're fated to be with me."

"Well, I think I'm fated to something, but I'm not sure if that's it. I know what you mean, though... I have this feeling that we'll cross paths again. Who knows — maybe even as adversaries."

"We could never be that."

The sound of a distant splash broke through the quiet stillness of the morning, bringing his world spinning back to the present. Birds chirped noisily above him. He heard voices from someone making a room service delivery to a nearby cabin.

Mulder opened his eyes and looked down into his hands in puzzlement. The box was gone.

* * * * *

Truths Untold

October 1999

Washington, DC

"Dana?"

Someone was calling her. It was a very familiar voice, but where was she?

"Honey, are you sure you should be driving around?" It was her mother. She was at her mother's house. In the front foyer.

"I'm all right, Mom, just a little preoccupied. I'm sorry, I'm in a bit of a rush."

"What were you saying about Fox being in the hospital?"

"I have to go to South Africa, Mom —" Ignoring the question, it was like she was on a mission and had no time for details.

"South Africa? Why? Dana, what's going on? You're not making sense." Not only that, Margaret Scully was having a difficult time even establishing eye contact with her daughter.

"It's a long story and I have no time. I — I just need you to be there in case something bad happens and I'm not back yet."

"What do you mean? Come inside —" She tried unsuccessfully to lead her daughter into the living room.

"I don't have time, Mom, he's in the psych ward and they don't know what's wrong with him... he can't speak and he's uncontrollably violent."

"What? How — how did this happen?"

"I don't know. I was in New Mexico... I'd only left him for the day —" And he called that Fowley woman instead...

"But Dana, I don't understand — what's in South Africa?"

"Maybe my only lead. He first showed signs of strange brain activity when he came into contact with something that was brought over from there. I have nothing else to go on. I have to find out where this thing came from and why it's doing this to him. The doctors say if something isn't done soon, what's happening inside his brain is going to kill him."

"And you're leaving?" Experiencing a momentary sense of detachment, Scully realized that she had never seen her mother quite so dumbfounded.

"Mom, I can't help him here."

"But you can be there for him."

"That's not going to make him better."

"Is that your responsibility to him, Dana? To make him better? What if you can't?"

That simply wasn't an option.

"I don't know what else to do..."

"What would he want you to do? Honey, if I understand you correctly, you're saying that he may not be here for you to come back to —"

"No! I mean, that's not my plan...that's why I need your help."

"What do you mean?"

"I need you to call this person tomorrow morning and tell her who you are." She pressed a folded piece of paper into her mother's hand. "I've left her messages in every way possible but she's on shift right now; I can't get ahold of her. She'll be able to keep you posted as to Mulder's condition. If she tells you it's time — and you know what I mean, Mom — you have to call his mother for me."

"Good Lord — why hasn't she been called already?"

"He doesn't want her to know."

"Dana, how can you possibly know this if he can't speak?"

"I'm saying his FBI file has strict instructions not to call his mother. Ever since her stroke, he's... I'm his emergency contact. And I'm not supposed to call her unless his life is in immediate danger."

"And you don't think this qualifies? We're talking about his mother."

"I know, Mom, I know. It's not time yet. But I know that can change tomorrow or the next hour. I don't plan on being gone long, but it's going to take two days just to get there and back. I could be gone a week and I don't know at this point if I'm going to have any way of contacting you. I need you to do this for me, Mom. Mulder needs you to do this."

It was never Margaret Scully's intention to deny what her daughter implored her to do, whatever the request. And doing anything she could to help out her partner was also a given. But somehow she couldn't help but think that Dana was going about it in all the wrong ways at this most critical of times. She would never forgive herself if something were to happen while she was gone.

"You know I'll do anything for you, honey. But please remember — there are times in your life when it's right to do what your heart says, not what you feel obligated to do."

Scully's resolve not to cry in front of her mother — because she knew it would reduce her to that elemental child inside of her — gave way as soon as she fell into her mother's arms.

* * * * *

She started at the sound of something clattering in the next room.

She was no feeling her mother's warmth. She opened her eyes and found herself in what seemed like unfamiliar surroundings. In the darkness, Dana Scully blinked away tears, feeling the well-worn surface of soft leather beneath her cheek. She could smell its signature scent, intermingled

with a comforting masculine fragrance that she did find familiar — she was stretched out on Mulder's couch.

In a second, she was able to collect herself and remember that she had heard a noise in the next room. She threw off the jacket that she had been using as a cover and quietly made her way to the doorway of Mulder's bedroom. The nightlight that was plugged into the outlet near where she stood bathed the room in a soft warm glow reminiscent of candlelight. She wondered briefly when Mulder had started sleeping with a nightlight on. As she looked in, she could tell that he hadn't much changed from the last time she had checked on him. His left arm was dangling over the edge of the bed, however, and Scully could see that he had flailed about somewhat in his sleep. The sound that she had heard had obviously been that of the plastic pitcher and cup crashing down from his nightstand. Luckily there hadn't been much water left in either of them.

Standing there in the darkness of his apartment, she was reminded of her last conversation with him just before all proverbial hell broke loose. When she called here and a familiar-sounding woman had answered his phone. How many agonizing hours had she spent since then, trying not to dwell on whatever it was that had possessed him to call Diana Fowley that day? She still didn't know what had happened here that night before he was taken to the hospital and ultimately sent into the psych ward. Had Diana helped him like she said she did or did she somehow initiate the whole chain of events? Scully supposed that she would never really know. Maybe Mulder remembered, but it wasn't like she was going to ask him any time soon.

She heard him muttering and ventured into the room, approaching his bedside quietly. She wondered if his temperature had gone up and moved her hand forward to touch his forehead. She was totally unprepared for and surprised by the way he suddenly latched onto her wrist.

"What are you doing?" he said harshly, gritting his teeth and applying even more strength to his hold on her.

Scully took a deep breath and was about to answer until she realized that he was actually asleep. She willed herself not to struggle, not to make any sudden attempts at yanking her arm away. After a brief moment of silence, she leaned in close and whispered into his ear.

"Mulder, it's me. I'm not going to hurt you. You're having a dream."

It took some time for the vise grip on her wrist to relax. When it did, Mulder opened his eyes and stared up at her listlessly. For a second, Scully thought he had returned to some semi-catatonic state. A few moments later, however, he dropped his hold on her and turned his head away.

Scully knew about the emotional swings that sometimes plagued patients after brain trauma. If this was the extent of it, then it was an encouraging sign. Nothing violent, at least. That part of it was gone and hopefully gone for good. Not that she had ever really thought that Mulder could be violent towards her, but after what she had witnessed in the psych ward, it was a frightening possibility that she was glad she wouldn't have to consider any further.

"Sorry."

"Don't be." She sat down on the side of the bed and turned slightly to place her hand over his chest on top of the covers.

"I didn't know it was you."

"Mistook me for one of those other women who come wandering through your bedroom?"

He turned back towards her and managed a half smile, a heartwarming sight for Scully despite the incredibly haunted face it occupied. There was definitely some real emotion behind those dark eyes; what she saw was not just the confused synaptic misfirings of a recently overtaxed brain. She had a good idea of what it was that he had just been awakened from. That oddly remorseful combination of guilt, regret, and fond remembrance mirrored in his eyes was something she had come to recognize instantly. It was his Diana look.

It was obvious that the woman would continue to trouble them both for some time to come. And the worst part about it for Dana Scully was that she didn't even have the option of hating her with

the same passion as she had had just ten days ago. Unfortunately, sometimes death does that. Extinguishes passion. Buries truths as much as it exposes lies.

As if following her train of thought, Mulder reached for and clenched the fingers of her hand tightly in his, once again seemingly oblivious to the force of his grip. Scully flinched ever so slightly, but kept her focus on the wall in front of her, concentrating on a discolored patch of paint.

"Where've you been, Scully?"

Was his tone just a touch accusatory? She couldn't decide whether she would be more surprised if it was, or if it wasn't.

"Up the coast at a bed and breakfast. I told you; I took two days' leave for some R & R..."

"Well, no, you didn't exactly tell me. You left me a message."

"You didn't answer your phone."

"I was here. You knew I was here. I'm off work; why'd you call my cell?"

"Habit, I guess, Mulder. What is it, you don't believe me about where I've been?"

It felt stranger than strange to be sitting here on his bed, in the darkness of night, feeling the need to piece together things that weren't broken. It hadn't been Scully's plan to make it seem as though she had run out on him, but she could understand all the reasons why he would think so. All the same, she had merely acted on behalf of her own well-being. For once in her life.

"I'm just wondering what else it was."

"What else would it have been?"

"I have no idea. You've been different —"

"Different?"

Mulder raised himself up onto his elbow and leaned towards her. He caught and held her gaze in the dim light of the room.

"Different. First of all, I've barely seen you, Scully. Five days recovering in the hospital and I saw you twice. You show up at my doorstep for a brief moment — completely blow me away with your behavior — and then I get a message telling me you're gone for two days. You're telling me that's normal?"

Well, Scully thought to herself ruefully, they had apparently not taken anything important out of his skull; he was still as sharp as ever.

"Mulder, I spoke with your doctors. I made sure you were okay to be by yourself —"

"Scully, you're not assuming I missed your medical attention, are you?"

Fortunately, he didn't look as exasperated as he sounded. He continued to stare at her in silence for several seconds. Scully wanted to say something, but didn't know what. Having him be alive and well was her number one priority; she wasn't about to apologize for that. As for the rest of it, she just wasn't sure she could trust herself to discuss it now.

"I missed you. That's all," he finally said, reaching for her hand again. "I've had too much time to think, and no one to share those thoughts with... not to mention I've been worried about you."

"Worried about me? Why?"

"Because I thought you were a bit overwrought the other day and by the time I could think again, you were gone. Why do I get the feeling you've been avoiding me?"

"Don't be silly, Mulder. You left me with a lot of paper work at the office...I didn't exactly carry your load when all this started happening and taking off for five days clear across the world didn't help. I had a lot to catch up on —" She stopped talking, mainly because she heard how unconvincing her words were, even to her own ears. However, as the seconds wore on, the

questioning silence that hung in the air became oppressively heavy. She pressed forward, trying it from a different angle. "Mulder, when you were in the hospital, your mother was there the whole while. I thought it would be nice for the two of you to share some quality time alone. God knows your mother shouldn't have to visit you in the hospital just to get some quality time with you."

Mulder eyes dropped as he tried to imagine what it must have been like for Scully to contact his mother. He remembered having a heated conversation with her over his new policy a couple of years ago when they both updated their respective wills. She hadn't entirely agreed with his logic or his reasoning, but in the end she had agreed to his terms.

"Thanks for calling her, Scully. I know that couldn't have been pleasant."

She didn't want to relive those moments any time soon either. "Did you two get a chance to talk much?"

"No, not really. It's not our style, I suppose. She did most of the talking, bringing me up to date with what's happening with friends and relatives that she keeps in touch with." His words were tinged with a melancholic tone of resignation, despite the fact that he had brightened up somewhat with the recollection of his mother's visit. Scully watched the varied emotions play over his face as he continued, "It's a bit strange between us; I must admit... I love her and I know that she loves me, but mom and I — we both seem unable to deal with the fact that precious time has passed. Continues to pass. Neither of us really knows how to pull what's left of this family closer together. Then again, I don't even know if that's necessary or if she even wants it. She seems fine with her lot in life."

"Did you ask her about your disappearance from the hospital?" Scully asked gently.

"Yes. And she told me as much as she knew, or as much as she wanted to tell me. But I really think it was one of those moments in life for her where you really don't have much of a say in what happens. I was dying. Someone told her that I could be saved. What's a mother to do?"

Scully squeezed his hand in a gesture of understanding.

"Anyway, before she left, I promised to go up and see her for Christmas. Got any plans over the holidays, Scully?"

"Not as yet. We usually don't get all that settled until Thanksgiving. I heard Mom mention that we should all go out to California this year."

"Oh. That should be nice for all of you.... Speaking of your mom, thanks for telling her to stop by; she made me feel embarrassingly fussed over. You never told me she makes such a mean chocolate pecan cookie."

At the mention of her mother, Scully suddenly recalled what she had been awakened from, just a few short minutes ago. She got the distinct feeling that she had missed out on something that her mother had been trying to tell her in her moment of distress. Mulder caught the immediate change in her, even in the semi-darkness.

"You don't look rested, Scully."

"I don't feel rested."

"Well then, that begs the question of, what does R & R stand for in your book?"

"I thought it would be good to take a couple of days to re-energize, to think about everything that's happened. To find my own space again and clear my head. But the fact is, I still feel so confused that I don't know if a six month sabbatical would even do it for me."

"Welcome to my kingdom, Scully."

"You don't feel this way."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know. Because you don't have this desire to fight what you see with your own eyes...you're not like that. You want to believe. Me? It's like I see it and I want it not to be true. Or maybe I want it to be true and it's not and I can't believe that it's not."

"Listen to yourself, Scully. You've progressed. You now seem to be fighting yourself just as much as you've ever fought me..." Seeing that she was genuinely disturbed, he added, "Hey, I don't mean to make light of it. But you've been through a lot, and it's okay to feel confused." He paused and frowned slightly, suddenly uncertain about whether or not they were on the same wavelength. "What exactly are we talking about anyway?"

"You name it... the possibility of alien life and where along the scale my own faith lies. And the sixty-four thousand dollar question is, how much more wrong can I possibly be about everything else in between?"

"Scul —" He threw aside his comforter, swung his legs over the side of the bed opposite to her and stood up, all much too quickly. He grimaced as the pain lanced through his head. "— Ow!"

She was by his side in an instant. "For heaven's sake, Mulder... You've had brain surgery. And you've been lying here since before seven and it's now one-thirty in the morning — you can't just bounce out of bed like that. Why is your bandage off, by the way?" She eased him gently back down into a prone position.

"I didn't need it anymore. Did you say it's one thirty?" He looked around in sudden confusion, as if only now noticing that it was dark throughout the apartment.

"Yes. What time did you think it was?"

"I didn't think it was any time. Just — if I've been out since before seven and it's now one thirty, what are you doing here, Scully?" He shifted himself up into a sitting position again and snapped on his bedside lamp. They both squinted against the sudden offending light.

"You left me a message, remember? To come over tonight as soon as I got back. I haven't even been home yet. But you weren't answering your phone nor your door, so I let myself in." She took in the fact that he was fully dressed — jeans and socks included — and frowned. "I assume you only meant to have a brief nap or something... but you weren't having an easy sleep and your forehead felt hot. I thought you might be coming down with something."

"So you're just waiting on me?"

"No, as a matter of fact, I fell asleep on your couch."

"Scully, you don't have a pillow or blankets or anything —"

"I'm fine, Mulder."

"Not that there isn't plenty of room in this bed, too — unless you think I might be contagious."

"Well, I don't know if you actually have anything, but that wouldn't have been appropriate."

Mulder's face fell. "Appropriate?"

The word hung between them like a hospital bed curtain. Not allowing much privacy on either side, but a solid barrier in any case. Seeing his reaction, Scully immediately regretted having used it. But all things considered, she didn't have much left with which to censor her thoughts before voicing them. At one-thirty in the morning, this was likely as good as it was going to get.

"You mean like doctor/patient appropriate? I've got news for you, Scully, I'm not your patient. And I'm okay now, aren't I? Last I checked, I hadn't transformed into something so hideous that you can't bear to touch me again. Least I hope not. And it's not even like I'm suggesting that you should crawl under these covers and jump my bones or anything like that."

Normally, a twinkle in his eyes or a certain inflection in his voice would tell her that he was putting her on, but this time there didn't seem to be anything to indicate that he was really joking.

"So what are you suggesting?"

"Forget it." He sat up straight and swung his legs over the edge of the bed again. This time he sat still for several seconds. "I guess I was just expecting something else. Something more. Hell, maybe even you were expecting something more..." He glanced over at her quickly and decided that he really didn't want to pursue that line of conversation. "Look, Scully, I'm not really myself right now; this was probably a bad idea. I don't think we should be talking now."

"Well, it's way past time to decide that."

He got up and started to pace slowly but deliberately beside his bed. Scully suddenly noticed the dark circles under his eyes; he certainly appeared to be less well than when she had seen him just three days ago.

"What's up Mulder? You don't look much rested yourself."

"I haven't slept much since I left the hospital. They must have had me on something while I was there, to help me sleep."

"You should have let someone know —"

"I don't want any more medication, Scully. And it's not like I don't sleep, just not restfully."

"What do you mean exactly?"

"I keep having these dreams that seem so vivid as to be real. And they're not normal random dreams, they're repeats of dreams that I've had before, or they're dreams about actual past reality."

"Are you having nightmares?"

"No. Not really, anyway. But I'm constantly reliving parts of the past two weeks in my head every time I fall asleep."

Scully felt a shiver run up her spine. Did he just imply that that didn't constitute a nightmare?

"Are you cold?"

"Just a bit...I can go get my jacket —"

"Get under the covers, Scully. Please. Make yourself comfortable, I'm going to get some water. You want anything?"

"No thanks."

Hesitating only briefly when Mulder paused to make sure that she was following orders, Scully pulled back the blankets on the left side of the bed and climbed in. First time for everything, as the saying went.

As she settled back against the pillows, she found her thoughts drifting back to Diana Fowley again, to their last conversation. As a last ditch effort, she had tried to appeal to her supposed love for Mulder, telling her that she should do for him what he would do for her in a second. At the time, she thought that Diana had no nerves for her to hit, and was angered by the other woman's quick dismissal of her plea. She remembered pursuing Diana out into the hall after her unceremonious exit, grabbing her by the arm and spinning her around. Scully subsequently let loose with an accusation of how her method of "thinking" was failing Mulder, how it would guarantee losing him forever. She hadn't been expecting an emotional response...

"Don't lecture me about loss, Agent Scully. If fate had even given me half of another option, I'd still be his wife. That's not something that's ever going to be possible again. So don't you dare tell me that I don't have his best interests at heart."

Scully peered out into the darkness beyond Mulder's bedroom door and considered the irony of the moment. How many answers still remained hidden out there in the dark? How many would forever remain so?

Her own amazement in check once more after that revelation, Scully had in turn been surprised by the depth of feeling that she saw in the other woman's eyes.

"I can tell how much you guys really talk. You think I'm the devil's disciple but you really don't know anything about me, do you? How black and white is your world, Agent Scully? I could deliver him into your arms and you'd still think I had ulterior motives. So how about we stop wasting my time and you can let me get back to what needs to be done?"

Scully had largely ignored her outburst at the time, especially when it appeared as though she hadn't succeeded in changing her mind in any significant way. In fact, she had hardly given the encounter a second thought until Skinner informed her of Diana's death a few days ago. For some reason, she wanted to be the one to tell Mulder. It hadn't worked out like she'd expected, however, as she thought back to that afternoon; how she had been so uncharacteristically overcome by the situation when she appeared at his door. It was somehow made worse by seeing his smiling face under that ridiculous Yankees cap. She was suddenly overcome with feelings for him, regret for Diana, confusion over Diana's past relationship with him, and uncertainty regarding their own future. The battle to hold her words and thoughts together was lost before she could even begin to fight.

She had meant to comfort him, not the other way around. It wasn't her turn to grieve and she shouldn't have been there to take when she should have been the one to give. And in the end, she had also meant to kiss him on the lips but something inside her redirected her aim at the last second. No wonder Mulder was perennially confused. And for quite possibly the millionth time, she couldn't blame him. Over a year later, she was still at the helm of a relationship that she didn't quite know which way to steer.

Diana was dead, but one thing hadn't changed. Dana Scully still had many questions that she wasn't ready to ask. And many feelings that she wasn't ready to deal with.

* * * * *

Mulder stopped just outside the doorway to his room, remaining hidden in the shadows. He found himself experiencing a sudden spell of dizziness as some sort of twisted reverse *deja vu* overtook him at the sight of Scully in his bed. Another dream versus reality moment. Except that he was in the bed — his deathbed — with the image of Scully — young and beautiful still — approaching him. He was reflecting on what had been a surprisingly full and satisfying life, and was amazed that he had not thought about her more over the years. Seeing her again made him realize what she still meant to him. But then suddenly she was admonishing him. Accusing him. And then just as suddenly she disappeared as the world around him began its final descent into an incontrovertible hell.

"No..." He leaned back against the wall and slid downwards slowly. He eventually hit the floor with a dull thud, more than enough to shake him out of his momentary lapse.

"Mulder?" Scully was out of the bed in a flash.

"I'm okay."

"What do you mean, you're okay? What was this?"

She took the miraculously unspilled glass of water out of his hand and helped him to his feet. He really didn't seem to be impaired at all, as he pulled away from her and walked back to his bed without assistance. "Nothing, just... a flashback or something."

"You said you weren't having nightmares. Are you having them while you're awake?"

"No. I've had nightmares before, Scully, I know what they are. It's not like I'm waking up screaming in a cold sweat. At least that's usually what's involved."

"But they're obviously bothering you in some way...even when you're awake."

He crawled back into his bed, pulling the covers back up on his side. He left her side open for her. She followed his lead and sat down again, but faced him this time. She handed him his glass of water and asked, a bit hesitantly, "So what exactly are these dreams, Mulder?"

"I told you. They're replays of dreams that I had while I was out, while they were operating on me."

"There must be more to them than that for them to be affecting you like this."

"Not really. I mean, I also have dreams of what happened before that while I was in the hospital. When I was awake but unable to speak." Noticing that her eyes were down, he looked past her into the shadows.

Scully fiddled with the corner of the bedsheet as she considered her next question. A lot more hesitantly, she looked up at him and asked, "Am I in these dreams?"

He seemed to think for a long moment before deciding to answer.

"Yes," he finally said. "A couple." That I keep having, Mulder thought to himself.

"What are they about?"

"Well, I sort of alluded to one the other day when you came over. The world has been overtaken by aliens or whatever and I'm in bed unable to do anything about it. I think I'm dying of old age or something like that. I'm all alone when you suddenly show up — looking just as you do now, no older — and you start telling me that I've taken the easy way out, forsaken our work, and that I should have continued the fight. That's when you saved me. Like I said, you were the only one in that alternate reality who told me the truth..."

"Alternate reality?"

"I don't know what else to call it. It was like I lived this whole lifetime in another reality where everyone that I thought was —" He was going to say 'dead', but that wasn't entirely correct, "— gone from my life, were all back. I was taken from the hospital and plunked smack dab in the middle of some impossibly perfect suburbia where I saw Deep Throat again — had dinner with his family even." His expression was one that Scully hadn't seen too many times in her life. It was accompanied by a detached peacefulness and serenity in the way that he spoke.

"And you said you found your sister in this alternate reality?"

"Yes. And her family."

Long pause.

"You lived a completely normal life?"

"More normal than I could ever see myself being." He hoped that she wouldn't ask him for any details beyond that. Because if Dana Scully was plagued with being unable to ask Fox Mulder about certain private matters, Fox Mulder was plagued with something similar yet entirely different. As long as she were to ask, he felt duty-bound to answer. He didn't quite know where this sense of obligation came from, but ever since they had taken that step forward, it had been there — as difficult as it was sometimes.

"Were you happy, Mulder?"

Their eyes met for a brief moment as she seemed to ask him if he would be able to identify what being happy really felt like. His answer surprised her.

"Yes. Yes I was. Until those last moments when the world was crumbling around me and everyone had died. That's when you came to me and told me that I was a traitor, that I had failed to finish the battle and —"

"Well, those are dreams for you — they're always just a little 'off' in the end result." She tried unsuccessfully to suppress her annoyance at the seeming reverence with which he was relating his dream interpretation. "Look, Mulder, plain fact is — if I ever thought that you had a chance for a happy life where you got your sister back, I'd hardly be appearing at your bedside to admonish you about shirking your responsibilities to the X-Files. Don't give me that credit, because I wouldn't have said that."

"But that was what brought me back, Scully."

"Mulder, it was just a dream."

"But you were right in the dream. It was my recognition of who you really were that made me come out of whatever it was that I was in."

"Mulder, they didn't take you to kill you. It's never been their intention to kill you or they would have done so a long time ago. They did what they did to you for whatever reason and then left you there to be found, by me or whomever. You were in better shape when I found you than when you were taken from the hospital. So it wasn't some dream image of me that clued you in and brought you back to life, heroic as that may sound.... Because the fact is, nothing that I did was heroic. I couldn't do anything for you. Jesus, I couldn't even find you without help. In the past, I've always been able to track down what was needed to help you. This time, I travelled to the other side of the world to look for answers that I couldn't even begin to understand. It got me nowhere. All I could do was stand aside and watch you die."

Mulder didn't know what to say. Was she upset because she couldn't save him or because she came so close to losing him? In an automatic gesture, he reached out to put his arm around her. Amazingly, she pulled away from him, surprising him even more.

"What's the matter?"

"You were wondering if there was another reason why I took off these past couple of days."

"And?"

"When I came over the other afternoon, I intended to be the one to offer support. You know, under the circumstances.... It basically turned out the other way around."

"And was that so bad? You hardly ever let me do that for you, Scully."

"I know. I know, but it wasn't about me and I didn't think it was fair for me to turn it into some big crisis about how lost I was in my beliefs. That's why I went away. It was clear that I needed time to figure out for myself what had happened, but I also wanted you to take some time, to process all this and to deal with it in whatever way you need to... But I didn't know all this was happening to you, or I wouldn't have left you alone."

"I'd only been home one night when you came over. Didn't figure the dreams would last this long." He shrugged in that familiar gesture of 'hey, I'm used to it.'

"I don't mean to brush aside what you think your dream means. I remember what you said years ago about dreams being akin to answers to questions that we haven't learned how to ask. But sometimes, Mulder, don't you think that dreams are just, well, dreams?"

"Of course. But when I keep having them like this and they don't really change, I can't help but think they're trying to tell me something."

Dana Scully gathered up all of her resources and asked.

"So what is it they're trying to tell you about me?"

Many thoughts and emotions seemed to cross his mind before he committed to an answer. And when he finally spoke, he seemed to use carefully chosen words.

"That you'll always be there for me... but not necessarily to save me, Scully, because that's not why I need you. Just that you'll always be there to help me find my way home."

What was it about the dead of night that made one's emotions so much sharper and more highly charged than at any other time? Swallowing down her urge to cry, Scully cleared her throat before asking her next question.

"And the rest of it?"

Mulder considered that if the Scully part of his dreams meant something, then the other parts had to mean something too. But it wasn't so easy to categorize the remainder of it. And he wasn't sure he wanted to verbalize it, even if he knew.

"I'm not sure. Maybe it has to do with choices made in life and how we have to live with them."

She was pretty sure that they both knew what it was that neither one of them wanted to discuss too deeply at this point in time. On the other hand, she really needed to let him know something.

"I'm really sorry about Agent Fowley, Mulder."

He turned to her in surprise, wondering what had prompted that comment. After a short beat, he decided to take it as merely something that she felt she had to say.

"I know that. So am I."

"Do you know if there's a service planned?"

"I called the Bureau to find out. Her family requested that her body be sent back home. Diana herself had left instructions on file not to have anything done in the event that..."

Mulder let the thought trail off and considered for a moment. Someday, he'd have to sit down and tell her the whole story. But not tonight. Especially not tonight. He was still hoping that he would know when the right moment came. He looked at her and wondered what she was thinking, what she wasn't asking. Apparently it wasn't the right time for her either.

"So no, no service."

* * * * *

Fox Mulder gasped and jerked awake, his heartbeat pounding in his ears. A quick glance to his left revealed the back of Scully's head against the pillow; she was thankfully unaware of his sudden movement. He turned back to stare up at the ceiling, trying to slow down his breathing.

Same dream. Same image of her gliding towards him in that black negligee. Same ritual of that consuming kiss of unrelenting hunger which would then be followed by feverish foreplay and a fierce, animalistic coupling, replete with moans, screams, and cries. Same primal sensations of wanting and needing release dominating his spirit. He didn't have to lift up the covers to know that his pathetic body had already begun to respond to this dream as it usually did. Fortunately this once, he had somehow managed to awaken in time to save himself from total embarrassment and humiliation. He squeezed his eyes shut against the shameful tears that threatened to add to his silent agony.

Strange that he had never awakened in the middle of that dream before. More significantly, he had done so in the middle of saying "I love you". That was another thing that was different this time — the words no longer rang true to him, in this most surreal of dreams. Maybe it was a sign that this would all end soon. Maybe it was a sign that he was losing his connection with this other life that had tempted him so.

Neither the Diana in his dreams nor the real Diana that he encountered in the hospital could profess her love for him enough times. With his newly acquired mental powers, he was able to determine that she actually meant it. That fact surprised him. The other truths that he was able to discern didn't surprise him, but the fact that she loved him did.

On the other hand, it had disturbed him beyond mere words and feelings how much Dana Scully couldn't bring herself to say those same words.

He was thankful that they never got around to discussing the other dream that he kept having about her. The one of her visit to the hospital upon her return from South Africa. When she had to convince the doctors to let her in to see him. His dream sequence would always begin well in advance of her actual visit. He'd be back in the rubber room, yelling. Convinced that he was dying. Discovering without humor that life's biggest joke on him was to demonstrate just how wrong he'd always been about what it felt like to die. The raging storms that assaulted his brain night and day terrified him beyond his screams. He would call for her, but she never came. Some minute part of

him trusted that she was out there trying to find answers, but all he could focus on at the time was that she was gone.

And when she finally appeared by his bedside, he wanted desperately to hear the words from her that Diana had been saying to him. The words from Diana hadn't meant much to him, true though they might have been. He had been wanting to hear them from Scully. Believing that if there was truly nothing to be done for him, she wouldn't let him slip away into this darkest of nights without telling him that she loved him. In the end, he heard her think the words, but they didn't come out. That little bit of reality — since relived again and again — had left him with a persistent ache that couldn't be nullified even by her emotional display at his doorway three days ago.

He slid up quickly into a sitting position, holding his breath as he did so in that familiar childlike way of attempting to minimize the effect of his movement. He couldn't sleep here beside her knowing that he might repeat that scandalous dream again, with God knew what sort of results. It was back to the couch for him once more. As he flipped aside his covers, Scully stirred, turning over onto her back. Responding to a compelling urge that tugged from deep within him, he leaned down over her face and whispered, "I love you, Scully."

His words seemed to trigger some reaction in her, as she took a deep sighing breath. He made sure that she was asleep before easing himself out of the bed, taking his pillow with him.

Maybe it was enough that he said it.

* * * * *

Dana Scully had the sensation that someone was in the room with her. She opened her eyes and turned over, catching sight of her partner leaning against the window, looking outwards.

"Mulder...how long have you been standing there?"

"About ten minutes. I thought the smell of coffee would wake you," he said, pointing to a steaming mug on the nightstand.

Scully sat up, instinctively pulling the covers up to her chin. "Thank you. Did you sleep at all?" Sometime in the early morning, she had awakened briefly to discover that he had left the bed.

"Enough. Wanna take a drive out to the beach, Scully?"

"The beach?"

"Yeah. It's not the best weather, but it looks like it might still be an okay day. We can go for a walk in the sand."

It was somewhat of an odd request, but nothing that she would seriously object to, truth be told. It would give her a chance to stop associating the beach with horrific memories of South Africa, anyway. "Any reason why?"

"I'd like to tell you a story, Scully. About a little boy and his sandcastle spaceship."

He turned around and looked directly at her. Something in his expression had changed since last night. It was a good change; the darkness was gone. Instead, she saw and felt a comforting reconnection. One that immediately delivered an outpouring of warmth through to her very soul. It was that familiar sensation that she always thought had the power to strengthen and cripple her at the same time. Right now, it was confirmation that the walls on both sides were down again. Might things be back to normal between them?

She had to smile, in response to her own thoughts as well as to the unabashed emotion that gradually radiated across Mulder's beautiful face.

Normality. What a concept.

End

Reconnection



A day at the beach, sandcastle spaceships, and a sense that all is well again...

It was a dreary day to be at the beach, Scully decided. It had rained overnight and from the glowering impression of the skies overhead, it was a distinct possibility for today also. The humidity created a ghostly effect over the water, enveloping their immediate surroundings in a monochromatic blue-gray haze. But she was here with Mulder, and that was what mattered. That he was alive and well and able to be anywhere with her was what mattered. Once more, she had to breathe a huge sigh of relief for the fact that he did not seem to be suffering from any disastrous side effects as a result of his mysterious surgery, vivid dreams notwithstanding. The latest round of torture in Fox Mulder's life was apparently over.

She pulled her jacket in more tightly around her and began a slow amble from the car. She had been leaning against it while taking in the sights in front of her, with Mulder being her focal point. Immediately after she had put the vehicle into park, he had gotten out, making a beeline for a large rock about fifty feet in front of them, seemingly drawn to it by some irresistible force. There he had sat since, gazing out at the waters of the Atlantic.

The long ride out had been fairly quiet. He dozed off a couple of times, obviously lacking more sleep than he had thought. But as far as she could tell, he had slept soundly and uneventfully. She ventured to ask why he had left the bed in the middle of the night, but all he said was that he had awakened and couldn't get back to sleep. She suspected that he wasn't telling her the whole truth, but it wasn't really important. The only thing that was truly important was the fact that the big pieces of their lives seemed to have fallen back into place. And today, she was determined that they were going to do nothing but relax and get away from the past two weeks. Her problems were not going to be problems and whatever Mulder wanted to talk about would be fine with her.

She approached him slowly.

"Hey. You've been sitting here for almost five minutes. Wanna walk?" She paused in front of him, standing between him and the barest rays of sunlight that were attempting to peek out from under the low rain clouds.

As her shadow crossed over his line of sight, he looked up at her in surprise, almost as though he had forgotten that he hadn't come here alone. But his face slowly lit up as a wide smile made its way across his lips. He held out his right hand towards her, palm up, his intentions and invitation clear.

Scully returned the smile and reached out to take the proffered hand. She tugged on it lightly, prompting Mulder to raise himself up from the rock that he had adopted as his own. As he led them down an embankment to find a route closer to the water, it almost seemed to her like he was taller today, but she soon realized it was just because she was not in her usual workday heels. She gazed at their joined hands with interest, thinking how odd it was that each milestone reached

between the two of them held such significance for her. While they had certainly initiated more contact over the past year, strangely enough, actually walking hand in hand had never presented itself.

"What are you thinking, Scully?"

"That this is nice."

"Tells you something about us, doesn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, how our lives revolve around work. How much time we spend on work stuff. And how much we actually don't do when we're not working. Not to say that I should be able to walk around with you like this at the Hoover Building, but you realize, Scully, in the past year, we haven't been anywhere where we feel like we can do this."

"I think that's been intentional, Mulder."

"Really?"

"Well, it's not like we've been advocating any sort of standard dating behavior." She looked up at him, enjoying the quirky expression on his face that indicated that he didn't quite know what to make of her comment. "Doesn't make it any less nice, though," she added quickly, before he had any ideas to read more into it than she had intended.

He stopped and stared out at the haziness over the water.

"This is exactly like it was."

"Like what was?"

"My dream." He shifted his gaze to her face and smiled reassuringly. "Yeah, I know, Scully. You're thinking, when is he going to lay off about the dreams? Don't worry, I'm not reading your mind again, I just know you."

"Mulder, it's just that —"

"This was a good dream, Scully."

"Oh? Did Santa come early and leave you many gifts?"

"No, but now that you bring up the subject of gifts, the birthday fairy did remind me that you owe me a present." It was his turn to enjoy the befuddled expression on her face.

Mulder had historically eschewed birthday presents with almost as much vehemence as the events themselves. He had to be joking.

"I'm kidding," came the confirmation. Suddenly turning serious, he added, "I haven't changed any, have I, Scully? I mean, it would probably be impossible for me to know, but I don't seem to be different to you, do I?"

She turned and stepped in front of him, taking his other hand in hers. "No Mulder, you're not different. That's something that we're all profoundly grateful for. Whatever they did — whoever it was that performed the procedure — was very good. There's nothing that indicates that there's been any permanent damage."

"So I guess this proves that I've got a hard head, right?"

"Believe me, I didn't want this kind of proof. Speaking of your birthday, though —" She stopped when she caught the face that he made at her. "What? You were the one who brought it up."

He shook off the hold she had on his one hand and swung her gently back to his side, resuming their walk. They trudged along slowly, their shoes not offering the best grip on the wet sand.

"You've always wondered why I hate my birthdays, Scully... look at all the nasty things that keep happening in the same general time frame. I must be cursed."

"Well, that aside... I had a killer present for you, but since it was time sensitive, it's all for naught now."

"Time sensitive? A cake that went bad or something?"

It was her turn to make a face at him.

"It took some major finagling, Mulder, but I actually had World Series tickets for you... well, for us."

"Really?" He definitely seemed impressed.

"You missed out big-time."

"So have I turned you into a baseball fan, Scully?"

"Well, Mulder, it wasn't like I ever hated baseball or anything like that."

She didn't really answer his question, but he was feeling quite content in the moment and didn't need to pursue it. He inhaled a deep breath, slowly savoring the unique essence of the ocean air around him. There was always something freeing about being amid the sand, surf, and cool moist breeze of the beach. Being here with Scully, being able to feel her hand in his, knowing that he was alive to enjoy one more day with her, was enough to push aside all of the horrors of the past couple of weeks.

He squeezed her hand, feeling his heart swell when she returned the gesture immediately. They walked in silence for several minutes.

"Mulder?"

"Yeah?"

"You were going to tell me how this scene looks exactly like a dream that you had..."

"I still can't get over how much this looks like it."

"Does this have anything to do with that story that you mentioned this morning?"

"The little boy and his sandcastle spaceship? Yeah..." His couldn't help but smile even at his own description.

"I must admit, that doesn't quite sound like the kind of dream that you'd be having...unless at some point some girl pops out of said sandcastle."

He gave her a look of "ha, ha" and squeezed her hand again, harder this time.

"It came to me last night, which was surprising because it's not one of the dreams that I keep having... but it was something significant to that alternate reality that I described. But there was more to it than that. It was like a bridge — a connection — between who I am and who I was in that other life. A dream within a dream, simple and yet so complex at the same time. I had several versions of this same dream, and I could never totally figure out what it meant."

He paused to stare at her, as if searching in her eyes for clues.

"So tell me about it."

"The earliest I can remember, it was just a boy playing on the beach. I'm sitting on a rock, at a distance, watching him. There's no one else around; it's all ours. It's strange, because I don't get much of a chance to get out to the beach, but I had this overwhelming feeling of belonging there. Hours would pass and I'd just sit there and watch him play. It was peaceful. Sometimes he would acknowledge me, sometimes not. He always seemed to be aware of my presence though. One time he walked up and spoke to me, but I don't remember what he said."

"What did he look like?"

"Your average six year old boy — sorta cute, I guess."

"What I'm asking is, did he remind you of yourself as a kid?"

"Ooh, Scully — pushing the envelope to find some deep meaning in 'just a dream'?"

She ignored his teasing tone and replied dryly, "Well, it only seems to me like the most obvious connection if you're looking for a meaning. Doesn't imply that I'm prepared to say that this has any meaning beyond perhaps you wanting to go to the beach and build sandcastles, Mulder."

He glanced over at her, silently grateful for the chance to hear that signature Scully skepticism again, despite what he knew was going on in her own head.

"Oh well. In any case, I don't think he was meant to be representative of the 'physical' me."

"Now who's pushing the envelope? Next thing I know you're going to get religious on me."

"Don't mock what you don't know, Scully. That whole sequence of dreams that I had while they operated on me might end up being very spiritual to me... whenever I figure them out."

"Okay, okay. Back to the boy. Not representative of the 'physical' you, but...?"

"Well, maybe I should describe the whole thing to you first." He bent down and retrieved a broken shell from the sand. "By the way, Scully, we can't walk along a beach without playing 'find the perfect seashell', so here's a start. Each one we pick up has to be better than the last."

He examined the pitiful looking fragment for several seconds before handing it to her with a flourish and a smile. Dana Scully suddenly felt twenty years younger, like a teenager on a first date. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. By the way, you realize that proper dating protocol demands that you keep that as a memento forever?"

"Of course, I'll start up a memory box as soon as I get home, Mulder. I'll be counting on you to fill it."

She wished that she could read his mind as he suddenly appeared thoughtful, nodding slowly at her suggestion. Just as quickly, however, he turned his attention back to the subject at hand.

"Anyway.... this kid, he'd be building this rectangular object and repeatedly the surf would come in and take out a portion of what he'd constructed. This goes on and on. Sometimes I'd go and tell him that it's okay, he can start over. And sometimes he'd just automatically begin again on his own."

"And this turns into a spaceship?"

"Yeah, all of a sudden, or so it seemed. Like I said, Scully, I don't recall having this dream at any time other than when I was out — I've remembered it, but not all of it is a vivid memory, unlike those other dreams that I keep having. What I remember seems to jump from the boy not getting very far beyond making a big cube, to him standing on top of this structure that looks like a real honest-to-God spaceship. Big, huge. But you know, it was strange because he called it a UFO."

"Strange because...?"

Scully had the vague notion that what Mulder was describing sounded exactly like what she saw in the sand and surf of the Ivory Coast. Except that her spaceship had been real. In the end result, however, it was just about as fleeting as Mulder's sandcastle.

"Because he actually used the words. Most little kids wouldn't say 'unidentified flying object', would they? That's quite a mouthful."

"No, I guess you're right. 'Spaceship' would be my first choice of a word if that's what it looked like."

"Exactly. Anyway, when I walk up to admire his work, he starts kicking at it, destroying it. I ask him why he's doing this, and he — he tells me it's my spaceship and that I'm the one destroying it... because I was supposed to help him and I didn't. In my next clear memory of this dream, we're working together, finishing it off. It becomes this giant, triangular ship. The sun's coming

out, it's warm, the kid's happy and smiling, and I'm feeling content like I've never felt before in my life."

Scully reached up to brush her hair out of her eyes, holding it back as the ocean breeze suddenly whipped her red tresses around her face. She marveled at Mulder's expression as he gazed back at her — it was that same peaceful look of reconnection that he had surprised her with this morning — and wished that she could grab hold of this moment for him and capture it for all eternity.

"You're seriously wondering what this means, Mulder?"

"Humor me, Scully."

"I'm not making fun, it's just that if you're looking for a meaning, isn't it —" She gestured with her hand.

"Obvious?"

"Well, the part that has you feeling content while building a spaceship can't be any more obvious, can it? It's symbolic of your life's work, everything that you've stood for, for the past however many years."

"I got that part of it. But the boy —"

"My guess is that you were right about him the first time — he's not your physical self. I think the fact that you saw a boy implies youth... he's the energy and innocence of your quest, that defining piece of your life that'll never grow old. This life, as you say, as opposed to that other life that you were living in your dreams. Perhaps he embodies your spirit, the part of you who'll get up and go on no matter what they do to you, the part of you who'll always keep believing. That's very childlike, hence the image of the boy..."

"But do you think it means that only I can continue the work? That's a lot to hang on me, isn't it?"

"I don't know; maybe it doesn't have to be. You said that he basically constructed the whole thing without you, but that he became happy and content when you finally came to help him finish it. Maybe it just means that the work requires your unique touch or involvement to succeed the way you want it to... it might be the idea that if you don't have a hand in creating your own dreams, by your inaction, you're destroying it, or at best, allowing someone else to shape it for you."

Scully decided that the look on Mulder's face must be his imitation of her expression whenever he laid out a wild theory on her.

"Come on, Mulder. You lure me out to the beach on a chilly gray day on the pretense of telling me a story and you end up making me play amateur psychologist... What am I getting out of this?"

"You, Dr. Scully, are getting tremendous insights into your partner. I don't tell my dreams to just anyone."

"Yes, but why do I get the feeling that your devious Freudian brain is taking everything that I'm saying and performing some sort of twisted psychological surgery on it?"

"Me?" She had to admit, Mulder did the innocent routine very well. Not to the point of making her believe him, but to the point of making her want to do other unspeakable things to him.

"Yes, you. Tell me, Mr. Oxford Degree, what do you think this dream means? And don't tell me you don't know."

"Honestly, Scully?" The teasing was suddenly gone, replaced by a soft, reflective air. "I just think it's filled with some of the most memorable images and feelings that I've ever had in my life. And I wanted to share them with you. That's why I called it a story. I mean, I don't doubt that it's some sort of subconscious reminder that I'm meant to be here, doing my thing, chasing UFOs... whatever that really means. But for once, that idea didn't get depicted to me as something to ridicule. Or worse yet, as something useless that I've wasted half my life on. For once, it was raised up as something beautiful and exhilarating. Maybe even rewarding. That's kind of like someone coming up to me and validating my existence after thirty-eight years."

This time it was Scully who initiated the light hand squeeze. He turned to her and smiled, bringing them to a halt.

"When I had this dream again last night, it felt like a rebirth, a sign of some sort. Confirmation that I'm doing the right thing. That I've made the right choices.... So tell me, Scully, am I experiencing some weird form of post-traumatic stress?"

"If that's the case, Mulder, and it makes you feel this good, I wouldn't mind some of it myself."

Their eyes met in one of those rare, open moments where neither of them bothered to hide anything. Scully noted that they hadn't shared a direct lip-to-lip kiss of any sort since their 'experiment' in Kroner. Was he waiting for her to make the next move? Did the one from a few days ago make the grade or did it not count?

Mulder was seriously thinking about kissing her when he became distracted by shadows moving above them.

"Hey look, Scully. Up there... the sun's coming out."

Sure enough, within minutes, a break in the clouds permitted the midday sun's rays to shine down on them as they continued their walk, hand in hand.

* * * * *

After about an hour of exploring the shoreline, their conversation had reduced itself to just a few words now and again, a smile here and there. They had settled into the mode of simply enjoying one another's company, basking in the comfort of being away from their responsibilities. It was just a day at the beach, a touch of normality in a couple of otherwise unconventional lives.

They were lying back against an incline in the sand, taking a break, mesmerized by the waves rolling in and retreating. An assortment of seashells were arranged on top of a rock beside them. He had just made a move to stretch his arms over his head when he noticed her trying to stifle a yawn.

"Tired, Scully?"

"Yeah, sort of. Sorry about that..."

He laughed.

"Why should you be sorry?"

"Well, I'm not exactly being the life of the party."

"Can you manage just being the life of the picnic?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I figure we can make our way back to the car — yes, I know it's a long way, and on my better days, I'd carry you, but you're going to have to make it on your own this time. I figured we can take a power nap, take twenty minutes or so to recharge the ol' batteries, and then I can make us lunch."

"You brought food?" He had managed to impress her, he could tell.

"Yes. There's everything you need for a picnic packed in the trunk."

"So that's why you wanted me to take your car.... When did you have time to do this?"

"Didn't require much time. Mom did some shopping for me before she left so I had a stocked fridge filled with stuff that I could actually make things with — you know, unlike my usual 'prepared' bachelor food. I've got everything I need to make us some fancy sandwiches, there's some fruit, and even a tiny bottle of fake bubbly from a gift basket that the boys sent over. I threw everything into a cooler while you were getting ready this morning."

"The boys sent you a gift basket?"

"A 'get well' thing. Do you think it's a weird choice, too, or is that just me?"

"It's borderline weird. That's definitely not within their normal gift-giving patterns."

"What do you think it means?"

"Do they know about us?"

"Only everything that I've told them... kidding, Scully. I haven't said a word."

"But how stupid are they?"

"I think we've had this conversation before: not very."

"So you're thinking what? That this basket was meant as something for us to use?"

"Well, let me assure you that I've never received the 'crackers, cheese, and fancy spreads' treatment from the Gunmen before, Scully." Upon seeing her furrowed brow, he added, "What do you expect, anyway? They've probably got our places bugged."

"They wouldn't dare!"

"Actually, you're right. For all his bravado, Frohike would crap his pants if he so much as thought about the idea of invading your privacy like that."

They both fell silent for a moment as they pondered the peculiar images conjured up by his last statement.

"I have a question, Mulder." There was just the slightest hint of flirtatiousness in her voice to make him sit up and take notice.

"What's that?"

"Let's just say that fifteen years down the road, we're sitting here —"

"Still?"

"Again, Mulder.... Would you continue to have surprises like this for me?"

"Well, that depends, Scully."

"Depends on what?"

"Whether I'll have had any luck in getting you between the sheets in all that time."

She rolled her eyes but managed to smile in spite of herself. She turned and started climbing up the sand bank, murmuring as she went, "Always a price to pay with you guys..."

"Hey — don't forget your shells."

* * * * *

It had started to rain heavily by the time they could see his car in the distance. After determining that he felt well enough to do so, they ran the rest of the way. The sound of rain coming down on the roof of the car was comforting once they were in the relative dryness of the vehicle.

"So, Mulder, do you have a towel among your picnic supplies?"

Seeing her with the rain-drenched hair and clothes brought back strong memories of Oregon. She no longer looked as innocent nor as young, of course, and her fate had been forever changed by her association with him all these years, but the essence of what made her "Scully" remained uncompromised.

"Mulder?"

"Oh — towel, yeah. I have a couple that I was going to use to spread out our picnic on, but I suppose drying ourselves is probably more the order of the day at the moment. I think you're volunteered to climb back there and get into the trunk. Thank goodness for the pass-through backseat..."

"Why me?"

"I'm too big to climb over the seat —"

"What's to stop you from getting out of the car and accessing the trunk in the usual way?"

"Listen to this downpour, Scully. We can barely talk in a normal voice over this rain. Just opening the trunk is going to soak everything."

She had to admit that he was mostly right about the volume of rain that was coming down. Resigned to taking the leap over the front seat, she removed her shoes and then shrugged out of her wet jacket, tossing it into the back. She noticed Mulder eyeing her appreciatively and decided for perhaps the fifth time today that there was really nothing wrong with him.

"Okay, Mulder, have it your way."

As she went over the seat, she could hear him murmuring under his breath, "Promises, promises." She responded shortly by throwing a towel over his head.

"Here, you can go first. I don't think we need to get both of them out; these are huge."

She sat back and watched him this time as he eased out of his windbreaker and tossed it over the seat towards her. Ever mindful of his recent surgery, he carefully ruffled the towel over his hair, leaving him with a very spiky 'do'. The shorter styles that he had been favoring lately didn't require much attention at least, Scully thought to herself absently. In no time at all, he was handing the towel back to her.

At the last second, he withdrew it and asked, hesitantly, "May I?"

"You want to dry my hair for me, Mulder?"

"If you don't mind."

She didn't answer with words, but acquiesced by turning around and facing the rear of the vehicle. He reached over and covered her head with the towel. She closed her eyes, listening to the pounding rain, feeling the vibrations it sent through the car. Mulder applied a gentle rubbing motion to dry her off just enough so that water was no longer dripping. He pulled the towel from her head and draped it around her neck, patting it down around her shoulders to absorb the dampness that had soaked through her jacket. He then took one end of the towel and wrapped it around a section of her hair, rubbing it between his hands. He repeated this action slowly and precisely until he had worked his way from one side to the other. When he finished, she felt him run his fingers through her hair in a combing action, starting from the back of her neck all the way up over her scalp. Unexpectedly, it gave her the shivers.

"There. Done."

"Thank you," she replied quietly, wondering if he noticed her trembling. If he did, he was ignoring it.

"Feeling dry enough to come back up here and steal forty winks?"

"In a second. Why don't you start up the car and turn on the heat... let it warm up a bit? I'm going to grab the other towel so that we can use it as a blanket."

"You want heat out of this baby? That could take some coaxing, Scully..."

"Work on it, Mulder."

As Mulder busied himself with the car, Scully reached back into the trunk and retrieved the dry towel. She was in the process of hanging up their jackets when she remembered something. Reaching into her pocket, she rescued two almost perfect seashells. They were entirely different from one another, one a large scallop and the other a smaller spiral — what were they called again — whelks? She wiped the remaining grains of sand from them carefully and placed them both on the back dash. She sat back and considered how — at the time that they found each of them — they had challenged themselves to find a matching pair.

She understood now how totally appropriate it was that they hadn't been able to do so.

When she turned around, she saw Mulder smiling at her in the rearview mirror. Something about his expression told her that he understood too.

End

Acceptance



Coping with loss often involves tearing down walls in a big way...

Dana Scully snuggled down under her blanket for the evening, book in hand, music in the background, dishes in the dishwasher, and a pint of ice cream by her side. It was a simple reward for a grueling week. And although she was alone, she was grateful for that also. There were times in one's life when it was just easier and preferable to be alone and she knew that Mulder had been feeling that way since his mother's funeral service. Friends were important at such times to provide support, but the bottom line was that true acceptance of death only comes to individuals on their own, in their own time.

He had been in and out of the office throughout the past few days despite his having taken the week off. He seemed okay as far as she could tell, but it wasn't as though they had shared any quality moments together for her to determine if that was actually the case. If anything, he seemed to be in a state of perpetual numbness, neither feeling nor "unfeeling".

Scully cracked open her book, some new thriller that she had picked up during the post-Christmas sales. Three pages later, she realized that she hadn't retained any of what she had supposedly read. It was Friday night and she didn't know where Mulder was, what he was doing, what he might be thinking. She had managed to go through the whole day without calling him but now that he hadn't called her either, she was just a tiny bit concerned.

Her phone rang. Talk about a nexus...

"Hello?"

A pause, then, hesitantly, "Scully?"

"Mulder — where are you?"

She could hear the slightest sound of tightly controlled breathing over the connection, but not much else. Wherever he was, it was extremely quiet.

"Is anything wrong?"

Still no answer.

"Talk to me, Mulder."

He must have picked up on the alarm in her voice. She heard him clear his throat. "How soon can you get here, Scully?"

"That depends. Where are you?"

Somewhere where he wasn't supposed to be, obviously.

"Mulder?"

"I'm up in Connecticut..."

"I thought I told you —" Well, it didn't much matter what she thought she had told him; he was there already. At his mother's house. Tormenting himself in any number of ways, from what she could ascertain. "Look Mulder, I'm out of here in ten, okay?"

"Thanks, Scully."

As was their habit, they broke off the connection without saying goodbye.

* * * * *

Hurricane Mulder had hit the outskirts of Greenwich...

At least that was the first impression that came to mind as Scully peered into the living room window from outside his mother's house. Pictures were off the walls and leaning against every available vertical surface, boxes in various states of fullness were scattered all over the floor, and pieces — various knickknacks and display objects — were gathered in groups along every horizontal surface she could see. Apparently he had been here for some time.

She couldn't see the man of the hour himself, however, among the chaos. He hadn't heard her knocking or ringing at the front door, either. She took a final look and went back to the front porch, meaning to call his cell when she thought to try the door. It was, of course, unlocked.

The house was eerily quiet and cool, in stark contrast to the fact that almost every light appeared to be turned on.

"Mulder?"

She passed through the set of french doors and carefully picked her way through the veritable maze that she had viewed from the window. The back patio door — the one he had used to escape from her during another crisis when she was here with him — hung open. Outside, she finally found her partner, fully reclined on a chaise swing, gazing up at the sky. She noted that he was rather poorly dressed for the weather, wearing only jeans and a thin white t-shirt.

"What are you doing out here in the cold, Mulder?"

"Scully — hey. You made good time."

"Yes I did. It's freezing out here."

"The cold helps."

He sat up and turned around to her slowly. She instantly wished that he hadn't, because there was no way that she could have prepared herself to see the despairing emptiness stamped all over his face. He looked like he'd been alternately drinking and crying all day. Just thinking about it felt like a punch in the stomach, setting off a familiar sting across the bridge of her nose.

Scully took the glass that he cradled in his hands and held it up to the patio light, then sniffed it.

"It's just water, Scully. I stopped drinking the hard stuff hours ago. Didn't do anything for me but make me sick anyway."

"All right, that's enough. We're going in." She swiped at her eyes quickly with her free hand and reached for his arm. He pulled away from her but stood up, making no protestations as he followed her obediently back inside. He stood in the center of the room and squinted against the brightness as Scully closed and secured the door behind them.

"Why'd you come here by yourself, Mulder? I told you I'd help you with this."

"There was no need for that."

"Then why am I here?"

He had no answer for that other than maybe the pitifully simple one of needing her.

"I'm only thinking that maybe you're taking this on too soon. What's the rush?"

"I'd rather not drag it out."

"That's fine, Mulder, but you didn't have to face this on your own."

"I had to try."

Scully was genuinely puzzled. "Why?"

The pained look on his face turned into one of absolute exasperation, tinged with anger.

"Don't you get it, Scully? Sometimes, just sometimes, I'd like your life not to be about shit like this —" He waved his hand around the room. "And even if you honestly don't mind that you're constantly being dragged down into my muck, I don't happen to like it!"

He turned away from her towards the nearest wall and slammed his fist against it, creating a noise that made her jump. He tried to take a deep steadying breath before continuing, in a barely audible voice, "But how pathetic am I...? Not like I could do it alone. I wasn't even sure I could last through the night here without you..."

Still facing the wall, he sank slowly down to his knees and began to tremble. Scully couldn't determine right away if he was merely cold or whether it was something else. She felt strangely rooted in place where she stood, unable to go to him. When he finally spoke again, the grief that resonated in his voice pierced her to the core.

"Why didn't she tell me a long time ago, Scully, if she knew? What am I believing now? That this is the final truth? The end... spirits and bodies travelling as starlight?"

Scully watched the scene unfold like an observer at a play. She was at a loss for words, at least for any words that might make a difference. This was too much for her all at once after her peaceful drive up. She hadn't counted on him being as despondent as he seemed, but then it was hardly unexpected. Outside of that emotionally draining night that she had spent at his apartment, he had been playing the part of the brave little soldier. He stayed around for the conclusion of the case despite his request to be relieved of duty. Then when he got home, he organized the funeral service and attended to the inevitable pile of endless paperwork. Even during the talks that they'd had on their trip back to Washington after the case wrapped up, she had found him to be amazingly healthy for the amount of turmoil that had been thrown at him. She knew that something wasn't quite right about it, and was expecting that the other shoe would still drop, that the full effect had yet to hit.

"You believed it that night in the woods. What's changed since then?"

There was a long period of silence in which he didn't reply.

"Mulder, for as long as I've known you, you've had an uncanny way of instinctively knowing what's true and what isn't. What I saw in your face that night was a clear and honest acceptance that whatever you experienced back there was real. As difficult as it must have been, you believed it. It gave you what you wanted, the knowledge that it's finally over."

She watched as he sat down on the floor, digging his fists into his eyes. She wondered if he had been going through this same cycle all day, fine one second, falling apart the next.

"She's never been here, you know?"

"Who?"

"Samantha. She doesn't know that Mom and Dad split up, got separate places."

"Mulder —"

"She has no memories of this place. No memories of Dad's place. The only home she knew isn't even ours anymore. There's so little to tie us together anymore."

Scully approached slowly and found a bare spot on the floor beside him.

"There's your summer house. You still have that."

"Yeah, that's the only thing. Costs a mint in upkeep every year, but we've hung onto it because of that. It's our only common connection to the past."

"What are your plans for this place?"

"Movers are coming late Sunday afternoon to take the packed stuff to Quonochontaug. The lawyers are taking care of the rest, putting the house and remaining contents up for sale. I can't afford to keep this, not even for Sam."

Scully didn't know what to make of this renewed fixation on Samantha, how healthy it might or might not be. It had always been one of her deepest held wishes that Mulder might someday be reunited with his sister, but she had also always known that the odds were slim after twenty-some years. And now, after this case, there just seemed no possible way, despite the fact that she fully understood Mulder's present pain and alcohol-induced confusion. She herself had been left with that same niggling thought: all those encounters over the past several years — what were they really about? Was the mystery of Samantha culminating in ghosts and spirits any more believable than an end with aliens and their supposed conspiracy? In Scully's mind, they still had no real proof, no body. They had seemingly traded one fable for another. On the other hand, if it was enough for Mulder to be convinced to let go of his lifelong obsession, it really didn't matter what she thought...

He was speaking again, sounding almost normal now.

"Have you ever thought about how easy it is to talk to people that you grew up with? Even when you haven't seen them in years, just because you have shared memories..."

She considered carefully before responding. "Shared history is an important bonding factor, yes."

"Mom and I never really talked all that much over the years, but whenever we did, the conversation would invariably lead us back to something that happened when I was a kid. Now I've lost everyone who knows anything about who I was back then."

He dragged the nearest box over and peered inside. "Everything that's in here, everything that I see or touch in this house, there's something about it that only Mom and I knew. Stories that only we could tell. And there were some that only she could tell. She was supposed to have the chance to tell them to Samantha, Scully. And Samantha was supposed to have the chance to hear them. I wasn't supposed to end up being the keeper of all this history..."

She reached over to put her hand on his leg and was mildly surprised when he quickly pulled his knees up to his chest, wrapping his arms around them. His body language had never been clearer to Scully. For whatever reasons, he wasn't wanting to be touched.

"I never thought this would happen, but I should have. When she had her stroke, that could have been it. But this, this is different....I never thought that she'd make a choice to leave me all alone."

"I'm sure that wasn't how she saw it, Mulder." If only I could believe my own words, she said to herself as an afterthought.

"How the hell else could she see it?" He flinched at the force of his own anger.

"I told you — she saw how you let things consume you. It was to spare you the further pain of seeing her suffer even more. And, of course, it was to spare herself further pain. You know that it hasn't been easy for her either, and it wouldn't have gotten any better as the illness progressed."

"All I know is that I didn't do anything to make it better for her."

"What could you have done?"

"I don't know. I've never known, or I would have done it. She was never able to tell me..."

"But doesn't that mean that there's nothing you could have done?"

"I always thought she had something to tell me about whatever it was that Dad was involved in, and about who she — about who she knows. But for some reason, I was just never able to find the

right way to get it out of her. I always got too angry. Too obsessed with my suspicions. I always ended up accusing her. In the past couple of years, we just stopped talking about it."

"Surely that was a mutual decision on both your parts. It wasn't just you."

Mulder dropped his head on top of his knees, rocking back and forth slowly. "Why didn't she talk to me, Scully? If she really knew what happened to Sam, and if she really wanted me to go on with my life, why did she leave it for so long? Why couldn't she tell me while she was alive? That doesn't make any sense..."

Scully thought back to the smoking man's comment about "kindness" and shook her head from side to side slowly. "I'm no expert, but sometimes, it just doesn't work out that way. People often make decisions that we can't understand, for what they feel are all the right reasons."

She watched him, her heart breaking for the new pain that he was feeling, the pain that she knew he'd eventually encounter, along with the questions that he'd continue to have about who had supposed knowledge of what and when. It puzzled her too, the overwhelming evidence that pointed to his mother knowing all along — at least in part — what the real story was, what had actually concluded so long ago.

Mulder lifted his head at the continued silence.

"I think I still need answers, Scully. Even if I know that she's gone and never to come back, I still need answers."

"I know you do." So do I, she thought to herself, feeling a sharp pang of sorrow as she remembered suddenly how she still had no answers regarding Melissa. "But you know that none of the answers that we're looking for are easy to come by. I think, sometimes, for our own sanity, we have to accept the answers that we have while we search for better ones."

"I'm tired of searching. Every stone we turn over has three more underneath."

"You say that now, but for as long as I've known you, digging for answers has been your specialty."

"My specialty? So how come I was led so far astray all these years? How did I get dragged off onto all these wild and crazy tangents? All this time..." He dropped his head back down to his knees and drew in a shuddering breath.

"Don't turn this into some personal failure, Mulder, that won't help you —"

He looked up at her, obviously wanting comfort but still keeping her beyond his self-made barrier.

"What will help me, Scully? I've been asking myself that all day long and I've come up with nothing. All I get is this image of my mother, in this house, all alone, getting ready to do what she thought she had to do. Deciding that this was her only choice. Leaving me a cryptic message that may or may not tell me anything."

"Time is what you need, Mulder. That's why I question you coming up here by yourself like this."

"Maybe I just needed to find out what it really feels like to be that alone. At the end of the road with nowhere to turn, in the way that she was."

"You'll never be alone. You know that."

"People are constantly disappearing from my life, Scully. You know that. Maybe I'm meant to be alone."

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"You don't agree that people drop like flies around me?"

"I don't know how you expect me to answer that, Mulder."

"Just, yes I agree, or no, I don't."

They stared each other down for several seconds before Scully gave in, got up, and walked away. She went to the window and closed the curtains, trying to occupy herself with some manual task while deciding what to say next. He beat her to the punch.

"There are times when I think it'd be better if you just left and pursued some other life somewhere safe."

Patience and understanding was one thing, but that remark made her angry. "Better for whom?"

"For you, of course."

"That's a lie. It'd be better for you. So that you can finally stop fearing all the things that might happen."

That one came out much too quickly for her to consider whether or not she should have said it. She didn't mean it, after all. In fact, she really wouldn't be one to say that Mulder was afraid of very much at all. Or if he was, he would never be the sort to allow fear to stop him. It was something about him that — while terribly annoying — she actually admired.

However, her comment seemed to have had the benefit of awakening him from his funk.

"Is that what you really think?"

"No. Not unless you really think it'd be better if I left you."

He gazed up at her briefly, long enough to let her know that he didn't believe it.

"What I really think is that you've been wallowing in this for long enough today, Mulder. I can help you with the packing now or we can get an early start tomorrow morning. Your choice."

He looked at her, seeing the compassion on her face, her desire to comfort him. He couldn't trust what he was thinking or feeling, however, to accept any of it. When he called her earlier tonight, he had wanted nothing more than to hold her and perhaps be held by her, but the thought of doing so now was frightening to him. He had gotten to the point where the hurt seemed to have been numbed somewhat; he didn't know what would happen if he were to seek any type of refuge in her arms.

She looked at him and saw that his face appeared weary and resigned for the moment. No longer quite as anguished as when she first saw him, but still far from well. She remembered the cycles of pain and numbness that she felt when her father died, and could only imagine what it would feel like to lose her mother also. She had always believed that children, regardless of age, forged a unique bond with their mothers. In a relationship as complex and as difficult as Mulder's had been with his mom, she could only guess at the agonizing depths of what he must be feeling, the hurt mixed in with the understandable anger that was only surfacing now.

The clock on the wall chimed loudly, interrupting their thoughts. Mulder stood up and did a quick survey of the room.

"So, Scully, I don't see your overnight bag anywhere in this mess of mine. Did you bring one?"

"It's still out in the car."

"Give me your keys. I'll go get it."

She watched as he went out the front door. She hadn't moved from her spot when he came back in with her bag and dropped it beside her. He stood in front of her, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"I think it's late enough to call it a night."

"That's probably a good idea."

"There's a room ready for you upstairs. Yellow bedspread."

"Okay. I'm going to hit the shower first, though. You're going to be all right, Mulder?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine."

Scully frowned slightly but picked up her bag and headed upstairs. Was it her imagination or did Mulder just give her her standard treatment?

* * * * *

Scully came out of the bath and peered into Mulder's room. The bedside lamp was on. The bed was turned down but it did not look as though anyone had disturbed it since. She felt a cool draft and pulled the belt of her robe tightly around herself as she quietly made her way to the top of the staircase. There were no lights on, but she could make out a dark form huddled at the bottom of the stairs. The front door was wide open, allowing the cold night air to sweep into the house. She went down to him and put her hand tentatively on his shoulder. He didn't move away this time.

"I thought you were going to call it a night, Mulder. Please, get some rest. Everything will still be here tomorrow."

"Isn't that moonlight something, Scully? I remember seeing it like this a few days before Christmas." Actually, even on Christmas Day, it was still a sight to behold. He remembered sitting here in this very same spot, having gone through the whole day waiting for her to call. She never did. She had promised to, but the call never came. He never brought it up, either, outside of giving her a slightly biting "Merry Christmas" greeting during their first case back the following week. Sometimes he just didn't know what she felt about where they were headed.

"Yes it is, but it's very cold and I don't think you want to risk getting sick if you intend to go back to work next week."

"Was it clear where you were at Christmas?"

"Yes, yes it was."

"Did you look at the moon?"

"Yes, but I didn't fixate on it." She didn't really want to think about Christmas. She knew that he was bothered by the fact that she didn't call him like she said she would. But what he didn't know was that it hadn't been the best of Christmas mornings for her. Her mom had let the cat out of the bag about her and Mulder's progressing relationship and brother Bill certainly hadn't warmed up to the news. No way could she have gotten to the phone that day, and if she had, she wouldn't have trusted herself not to let on what had happened.

"Is that what you think I'm doing? Fixating?" His normally vibrant voice sounded dull and lifeless.

She closed the door and locked it; Mulder remained seated on the bottom riser, watching her. The moonlight coming through the window reflected off the tiled floor, providing enough illumination for them to see one another's faces. God only knew what sort of thoughts he had been revisiting while she was in the shower, but she could tell that they couldn't have been good ones. His eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"Come on up to bed, Mulder."

She stepped past him, but paused when he got up and turned towards her. They were eye to eye as a result of their tiered positions on the stairs. She knew instantly that he was moving in to kiss her and she knew that it was going to be a kiss unlike all others that they had previously shared. It wasn't going to be anything playful or experimental or even gentle. She knew that this was going to be a raw exploration of sexual need that would invade her spirit and awaken her deepest of desires. In short, it was going to be totally inappropriate for the moment that they were in.

And yet Dana Scully could feel her body responding instantly to the mere thought of the potential behind this kiss. Was it the seduction of the moonlight? The way he was consuming her with his look? She was almost appalled by the churning in her stomach and the latent heat pooling in her lower regions. She had not experienced this reaction while in the presence of a man for such a long time that she was afraid Mulder would see it in her face.

Fortunately — or perhaps unfortunately — Mulder was too consumed himself to see much of anything clearly. He connected hard against her lips, open-mouthed, his tongue searching for hers immediately. The connection wasn't really rough, but it was slow, deep, and persistent, surpassing anything they had ever tried before. One part of his brain reminded him that this was not a good idea. But another part told him that this time, it really was Scully's turn to take charge. If this wasn't what she wanted, she was going to have to stop it. And if by some chance she did want it, it was going to happen, pretty or not. At this very moment, Fox Mulder felt nothing other than a singular desperate need for something to dull his pain. For life to give back a little for everything that had been taken away from him over the past two weeks. Hell, for everything that had been taken away from him over the past twenty-six years and counting. As pathetic as it probably seemed, right this second, he wasn't even above accepting pity sex from his partner. Not that that would ever be the case anyway, would it?

His hands roamed her body, at first doing nothing more than caressing innocently over her robe. He soon found his way underneath its front opening, however, loosening the belt around her and exposing her pajamas. As his hand swept across her chest, it suddenly occurred to the both of them that she wasn't wearing a bra. Not odd, considering that she had just gotten out of the shower and was ready for bed. But it definitely added a bit of spice to the situation. Before Scully could consider what sort of spice it would add, Mulder had already cupped one hand over her left breast, his warmth seeping through the cotton fabric to her skin as he moved his fingers around in a slow massaging motion.

Scully squeezed her legs tighter together, feeling like she needed their combined strength to keep her from toppling over. She felt sure that actual steam was escaping off the top of her head. As she clamped her legs together, something else also became apparent to her when her underwear bunched up uncomfortably. The tell-tale warmth had turned into actual wetness.

"Oh, God, Mulder —" She broke off their kiss for a moment to take a gasping breath, punctuated by a low moan as he completed the circular exploration of her breast by teasing her nipple with the tip of his finger. If this was any indication of what their ultimate experience would be like, Dana Scully was almost afraid of what might happen if either one of them were to take off some actual clothing.

"Just go with it, Scully..." His voice was low and hoarse, his lips and tongue needing to be linked back to hers. He recaptured her mouth as his hand continued to travel down her torso. He moved slowly and precisely, holding her tightly against him with one hand at the small of her back, caressing gently with the other as he proceeded downwards.

Mulder had been thrusting at her hip periodically, but by now it had become a regular motion that went beyond simple pleasure. He was starting to feel painfully confined, with the unfortunate result that the sexual aching came close to being replaced by mere aching. The little voice in the back of his head told him that there was only one solution for that. The hand that had been exploring the general area of Scully's navel automatically reached down and tugged at his fly. He didn't have much luck in pulling it down, due to his condition. He didn't quite realize what was happening or what he was doing until he felt her small hand on top of his, closing over the fingers that were fumbling with his zipper. They both stopped breathing momentarily, still lip to lip.

She couldn't believe where her hand was. But if she didn't stop him now there would really be nothing much more to stop. So there she was — their joined hands on top of his groin — and she could actually feel his organ pulsating beneath them. But that wasn't the end of the surprise yet. Before she could figure out how he could manage it so quickly, he had switched positions with her. His hand was now on top of hers, guiding her as he rubbed her palm rhythmically against his growing erection. He moved his mouth away from hers, trailing kisses down the side of her face, down to her throat, neck, and shoulders. She shuddered and sagged against him as her knees gave way. He leaned into her smoothly to compensate, keeping her balanced between himself and the wall.

"Jesus, Scully...it feels so good when you touch me like that..."

He kept her hand right where he wanted it — stroking the rock-hard stiffness that was now throbbing painfully and demanding to be released — while he found the top of his zipper once more. Although Scully felt her own mind grow alarmingly fuzzy, she knew she had to stop him now. Really. Stop him or wrap her legs around him. One or the other.

"Mulder, this isn't the right time —"

"Yes it is —" The sound of the zipper being ripped down sounded like a crack of thunder in the stillness of the night. Scully yanked her hand away and grabbed his arm.

"Mulder, no..."

"Scully, yes..." She could feel his whole body shaking uncontrollably as opposing halves fought for control. Incredibly, he was still doing a admirable job of holding her up.

"No —"

"Yes, Scully, yes..." His voice broke and trailed off into a choked sob as he finally tore himself away from her, crying. "It'll take away the pain. I want the pain to stop... you said that's what she wanted... I need you to help —"

Tears filling her eyes, she watched helplessly as he collapsed against the banister. He slid down into a sitting position, one arm over his face. His other hand, inside his jeans now and seemingly possessed by a mind of its own, was pumping feverishly. She found the image gut-wrenching and disturbing, but there was also no denying that it was excruciatingly erotic and arousing. The sight of Mulder essentially masturbating in front of her made her want to touch herself, to appease the dull, heavy ache that had taken control between her legs, the ache that was fast becoming the single most dominant sensation in her whole body.

She swallowed hard and attempted to concentrate, forcing herself to keep her eyes up and willing her legs to support her weight.

"Mulder? Mulder, look at me." His arm dropped as he obeyed her instruction. He looked at her, but by his glassy expression, it wasn't likely that he was really seeing her. "You're sitting here in the dark, in your mother's house, up to your ears in memories. It has to hurt. I know it does. I wish I could wave a magic wand over you to make the pain go away, but I can't do that. I can't do that."

She made her best effort to breathe normally as she bent down near him to gather up the belt of her robe that had been discarded during their energetic scuffle. He picked it up and handed it to her, staring blankly as she wrapped it around herself to close up her robe again.

"I'm sorry, Scully —" It came out as little more than a whimper, as though he expected to be flayed for his behavior.

She crouched down across from him, staying carefully at eye level.

"Don't be. You understand me? You have nothing to be sorry for. Look, Mulder, I want you to know something. If we were to do this now, I'd live the rest of my life without regrets. I would die a happy person. But I know you. I know that you have something different for us in mind. I'm stopping it right here because I know that deep down, you don't want this to happen now. Not this way."

She saw his face slowly regaining clarity as she spoke. Inching closer to him, she reached over and tugged at his arm, stilling his movements. From his reaction, it was clear that he had no inkling of what he had been doing with his hand.

"But I can help you, Mulder. If there's something that I can do for you, to make you feel better, I'll do it." Her voice seemed shaky and uncertain, yet there was also no mistaking the underlying Scully determination in it.

For the first time since this whole bizarre sequence began, Mulder became aware. Aware of the tears in her eyes, the tears that were tracing down her face as she made this extravagant and unexpected offer. What exactly was she saying, anyway, and did she mean what it sounded like? The very thought brought a renewed rush of tears to his own eyes, accompanied by a strong urge

to retch. What was he doing? Since when did the desire to reconcile himself with his mother's death involve making moves on Scully — never mind attempting to jack off in front of her?

Belatedly mortified, he put both hands to his face, muffling his words as he spoke. "I just needed you to be here tonight, Scully. I'm sorry about all this."

"I told you — don't be. Or maybe I should be the one apologizing — I didn't mean to play along like that just to say no. Believe me, I didn't want to. It's been so long, I'd forgotten how fast things can move." She pulled gently at his hands, revealing to him one of her most brilliant smiles ever, even through the tears. They both considered what she had just said.

"'Things'? Are you making a funny, Agent Scully?" Mulder couldn't resist.

She smiled again and nodded slowly, extending her arms out to him. He returned a lopsided grin that hung on for a moment before his face crumpled and the tears returned unbidden, unchecked. This time — unlike that dreadful night at his apartment when he alternately sought comfort from her and then violently fought off her ministrations — he simply let go. As Scully held onto him, rocking him gently, she thought back to what she had always learned in the past about there being a time for tears and a time for laughter. Somewhere in all that there would also be a time for love. There had to be.

* * * * *

The aroma of coffee was strong and seemingly very close to his nose. That was odd...

Mulder opened his eyes to the sight of Scully hovering beside him, waving a cup of fresh coffee back and forth. He smiled and swept aside his covers to make room for her to sit. "What are you doing?"

"Returning the favor."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, several months ago, you made me coffee in bed... I know, I know, it seems like neither one of us is domestic enough to take on the whole 'breakfast in bed' challenge."

"Well, I'm not much of a breakfast person anyway."

"Have you eaten much all week, Mulder?"

"Let's just say that I'm not wasting away."

"I haven't checked out what sort of food supplies we have here, but I'm game to cook us up a light brunch." At Mulder's pensive expression, she let the thought trail off. He was abnormally pale, but there was no longer any evidence of trauma or pain. "How are you feeling?"

"Rested; I actually slept. Not much different otherwise, unless you want to count embarrassed. Lucky, maybe."

Now there was an intriguing choice of a word for Fox Mulder. "Lucky?"

"Yeah, I think so. Lucky that my partner accepts no end of outrageous behavior from me. Lucky that she cares enough to offer to make me feel better in a way that I would never ask. Lucky that she'll drive to another state in the middle of the night just because I call. And that's just from yesterday. Want me to go on?"

"You'd do all that and more without even blinking, Mulder."

"Yeah, but that's me. Thanks for coming out, Scully. I probably didn't get a chance to say that last night in between my morose conversation and my trying to maul you."

"Neither part was all that bad, Mulder. I don't know how many more times I have to tell you that."

"I promise it'll be nicer next time."

"Nicer? What if I don't like 'nicer'?"

Mulder was surprised by how bold Scully often was these days. It was somewhat jarring, although he appreciated it all the same.

"I can do it whatever way you like, Scully."

Oh, I'm sure you can, Scully thought to herself. Memories of last night came back to her so vividly that she could almost feel them.

"I didn't hurt you last night, did I? I mean, I hope I wasn't too rough..."

"No, no sir, you weren't. It was all just — it was 'all good', I believe, is the correct expression."

Her face colored as she said the words. When she turned away from him, he sat up and reached for his coffee, noticing the mug for the first time. Basic wildlife theme. This one had a fox on it.

"Where did you find this mug, Scully?"

"It was just there, in the cupboard. I figured it couldn't be any more appropriate. Why?"

"I remember Mom and I having this conversation one afternoon...one of our more irreverent conversations, actually, interestingly enough. That same old lament about why Dad had to name me 'Fox'. I was complaining that I couldn't even go out and buy myself a simple mug with my name on it. You know, all those personalized things that you can find out there for every Tom, Dick and Sally. Anyway, the next time I showed up here she served me my tea in this thing. Said I was right."

"That's a sweet story." Good, Scully thought to herself. He's perhaps moved on to thinking about the happy times and not so much hanging on to the regrets. She saw him smile sadly as he examined the mug from all sides before switching his focus back to her again.

"Life goes on, is that what they say?"

"That's what they say, Mulder, and it does. Fortunately or unfortunately. It all depends on how you choose to view it."

"And she's also in a better place?" It didn't seem so much a question as a desire for confirmation.

"What do you think?"

"I'd — I'd like to think that she's found peace somewhere... in a happier place than what she was forced to occupy in this world. I might never understand what she went through, but that's what I'd want for her."

"Then that's where she is. Sometimes faith can be as simple as that."

"Is that enough...for the both of them?"

"It is for now. Like I said last night, we'll keep searching. Only we'll keep everything in perspective; it won't rule our lives."

It would still take time, as she knew perfectly well from personal experience, but Scully could see in his eyes that the worst of it was over. For all the blows that fate kept pounding on this tortured soul, she knew that he would always find the will to return. She had always believed in his strength, even when he didn't.

"Thanks, Scully. For everything." He reached over and patted the top of her hand. She felt a distinct thrill at his touch this morning. That was different. Interestingly different. So different that she felt herself blushing again. Time for a new topic.

"I didn't notice any of your stuff in the bathroom up here. Have you not brought in your bag yet?"

"I took over the downstairs bath."

"Well then, let's get you cleaned up and shaved while I see what's in the kitchen for food. We have a long day ahead of us."

She led the way out of the bedroom and headed down the stairs. It looked like a nice sunny morning outside.

"So, Mulder, why did your father name you 'Fox'?"

From behind her, she heard him respond, "You don't get to hear that story until after we have real sex, Scully."

She stopped and turned around, causing him to halt in mid-step, almost losing his balance. His face was otherwise inscrutable as he awaited her reaction. As for Scully, she knew that her choice of a response was going to be pivotal in Mulder's acceptance of what happened between them last night. Given that, there was only one response that she could make.

"Really? Can't wait."

End

Just Breathe



Sometimes the easiest things in life are still learned the hard way...

"I'm not going to lie and say that I don't know what's holding me back. I know what it is. But that doesn't help me in being able to bring it up with him... and I think it's because I know it should be a closed book. It's not fair that I should be asking him to open up old memories that can't change anything now. It's in the past and it can't come back. I should be able to let go."

"Why is it that you don't, if that's what you think?"

"Because I'm afraid that — regardless of whether or not the past can come back — I'm not the one he would have picked if he'd had a choice, or the chance."

* * * * *

Fox Mulder slammed the apartment door shut behind him, the force of the action reverberating beneath his feet as he took the few short strides necessary to reach his living room. He slumped down into his couch and tossed his jacket at the chair across the room, watching moodily as it missed the intended target and slipped off onto the floor. How fitting. He leaned his head against the back of the couch, closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath, exhaling it slowly. His hands were pressed open on the seat to either side of him, palms down, long fingers spread apart. It was as though he could barely control their urge to rip into the leather upholstery.

He hadn't felt so angry in a long time. That the anger was directed at his partner did not help matters. That it didn't feel like real anger only served to increase the tension within him. How could he be so angry at Scully, he thought incredulously? Never mind how the anger could continue to burn with such blazing intensity when she had been reaching towards him for understanding all day long. It wasn't often that Dana Scully gave him the puppy dog face, but that was a pretty damn close approximation of the type of glances that he had been seeing out of the corners of his eyes all day. It was all he could do to avoid looking at her directly until this afternoon, when they eventually came up empty searching for C.G.B. Spender's plushy office. He sighed at the vivid memory of her expression upon walking into the vacated premises. Why the hell had she been so surprised? He would have bet real money on the outcome of that one. Real big money....

"You may be right. But for a moment I saw something else in him. A longing for something more than power, maybe for something that he could never have."

[Yeah right. Look into the devil's eyes and tell me you see anything other than what he wants you to see...]

"Turn around, Scully."

"What?"

"I said turn around!"

Reacting instinctively to the urgency in his voice, she did as he requested. She immediately felt his hands on her, one holding her shoulder, the other pushing her hair up roughly and exposing the back of her neck. There was a moment of silence in which time appeared to stand still as she realized what he was doing. It made her blood run cold in the turn of a mere second.

As quickly as the examination began, it was over. He backed away from her, satisfied with what he saw, but overwhelmed by an odd combination of relief and anger.

"I just thought... I thought that he might have put you under and removed the chip. Like maybe he wanted it for some other purpose. You were gone long enough; I mean, you must have slept at some point in time —"

She knew that she must have looked guilty as the reality of his words washed over her. With all these other possibilities entering into the picture suddenly, she felt numbed and unable to put up her usual mask. It was such an abnormal position for her to be in, feeling this need to explain and validate her actions to him.

"— but thankfully there isn't a fresh scar."

"Mulder, I don't think —"

"I'm going home, Scully. There's nothing here. Or at least if there was, there's not anymore."

With that, he turned and left her standing in the middle of the room....

Mulder couldn't help but think back to the number of times that he had held that reviled man against the wrong end of his gun. And how it was always somehow the thought of Scully that made him avoid pulling the trigger. Never in his wildest dreams could he imagine her taking off for a ride through the countryside with him, leaving herself open to whatever kind of Godforsaken trickery he had up his sleeve. Mulder had already been quite appalled a couple of months ago when Scully intimated that she had had contact with the smoking man regarding the truth behind the search for Samantha. If he remembered correctly, she hadn't answered him directly when he had asked her about whether she had actually contacted the mysterious C.G.B. Not that there seemed to be much doubt now. Just another of those occasions when he dropped by her apartment for a visit, perhaps? Like her landlord had witnessed several times?

Mulder suddenly felt a tight clenching deep within his soul that didn't quite seem like anger anymore. What was it? Betrayal? Bitter disappointment?

Wrapping his arms around his stomach, he fell over onto his side and drew his knees up to his chest slowly.

Why did it feel like everything was falling apart?

* * * * *

"How's the work relationship?"

"No complaints really. In fact, we seem to get along better at work than off work these days — there's none of that unspoken stuff that seems to get in the way. After so many years, we're well familiar with one another's 'buttons' and know how to work them. We still push the wrong ones on occasion — I'm not sure if we can help it — but at least we both know what sort of reaction to expect. Professionally speaking, I think we've hit some sort of super-efficient plateau. But our personal life has cooled off. Ever since his mother died, he's sort of pulled back... and it's not even like I'm saying that it's a concern; it's not. He's doing remarkably well for all that's happened to him over the past several months."

* * * * *

Mulder opened his eyes and brought his hand up to check his watch. Half an hour of lying here in a semi-fetal position was definitely enough. There were obligations yet to take care of before the night was out. He reached for his phone and punched in some numbers from memory.

"Mrs. Scully?"

"Hello, Fox.... there's nothing wrong is there?" Poor woman. I bet she hates getting calls from me, he thought to himself.

"No, no, ma'am. I'm actually calling to apologize. Every time I phone you it's either with bad news or to make you worry. I don't mean to do that."

"No apologies are necessary. Although maybe if you'd call once in awhile just to say hello, you can start to even out all those bad ones. I don't like it that I get tense every time I hear your voice, either." Her sense of relief seemed to carry right through the telephone wires into his apartment. "By the way, I didn't get the chance to ask the other day... how are you doing?"

Margaret Scully had been one of those who had left him a detailed voice message expressing her condolences at his mother's death a couple of months ago.

"I'm doing okay. Thanks for asking."

"That's good. I'm here if you ever need to talk, you know."

"I know. And I appreciate it... I'm actually checking to see if Dana called you yesterday."

"Yes she did. In fact, I think she used the words 'Mulder will have my hide' if she didn't."

"Not far from the truth.... " There was that tightening in his chest again. Mulder had a sudden thought. "Say, Mrs. Scully, do you still take those evening walks around the neighborhood?"

"As much as I can. Am I to take it that you might want to join me for old times' sake?"

"Absolutely. Is tonight too short notice?"

"No, tonight's fine. Say seven thirty thereabouts? Have you eaten?"

"Don't worry about me; seven thirty's good."

"I'm looking forward to it. I'll talk to you soon, Fox."

"See you, Mrs. Scully."

* * * * *

"What evidence do you have that he's still thinking about her?"

"It started last fall, when I found out some surprising things that may or may not be true. At a critical point in his life — he was close to dying, actually — he had visions, dreams. He later explained to me that he experienced a taste of life in another reality. What 'could have been'. He didn't tell me in so many words, but it's not like he was very good at hiding it from me. He told me about living a normal life, and it was clear that it hadn't been with me. I was only the nagging influence who came to him at the end to tell him to get off his butt and go back to work."

"He said this?"

"No, no, that's me. Sorry. Poetic license."

* * * * *

Fox Mulder had liked Margaret Scully from the moment that he first met her, as ugly as the circumstances had been at the time. Little had he known then that it was the start of three long months of ugly circumstances. But in the end, he had been thankful for the opportunity to get to know this extraordinary woman who was also his partner's mother. He had never met Scully's father and therefore didn't have any personal knowledge of him, but he could definitely see from her mother the source of Dana Scully's resiliency and strength.

They had taken a break from their walk and were sitting on a park bench, watching some neighborhood children play in the distance. She noticed in their amiable silence that he had taken to staring down at his shoes and ventured to take a chance.

"You're angry with her, aren't you?"

He glanced over at her, embarrassed that he was that obvious and slightly disturbed that he likely wouldn't be able to manage even a little white lie. So he decided to go with the whole truth.

"Mad as hell."

And hurting like hell for even saying it, she thought as she glanced over at his expressively sad face, so uncannily reminiscent of the one she had first seen so many years ago, which then reappeared week after horrifying week for what seemed like another lifetime.

"That's allowed, you know. Feeling angry, I mean."

"But —" I love her, he wanted to say. And even though he couldn't get the precise words out in front of her mother, his face gave most of it away. He knew it. And maybe it hadn't even been a secret to her for a long time. In his most fragile moments back when, he had once said something to her about wondering "what might have been if we'd met under different circumstances... if we weren't partners." He wondered if she still remembered.

"I know, dear. It's still allowed. So what was all this about? Can you tell me?"

"She didn't say?"

"She just told me that she trusted someone that she shouldn't have trusted. That when you found out, you were too disappointed for words. And that she really wanted to forget about the whole thing... I didn't press it. She hardly ever tells me about work; you know that."

"She took a stupid chance — put herself in danger. And I know I've done that myself in the past, but that was the past. She didn't like it and I haven't pulled one of those on her in ages. And I don't think I've ever done so with the man that she took off with..."

"Who is this person?"

"Only the single worst constant in our lives over the past eight years. A man who quite possibly has the power to snuff out either one of us on a whim. For some reason, though, he's never done it. I sometimes think he actually wants to protect us for some perverse reason."

"So she was never in actual danger, then?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Scully. She really didn't tell me what happened. I don't suppose she told me much more than she told you, actually. And I hate playing 'fill in the blanks'. But the worst part of it is, this isn't even the first time in the past several months that she's had contact with him. She may have sought him out. And as far as I knew, I didn't think that she had ever even spoken to him before. I thought this man came to me and me only. I just don't get it."

"She would never do anything intentional to betray you. You know that, don't you?"

"I know," he whispered, surprised that he could barely find his voice.

"But that's not why you're angry, is it?"

At his non-response, Margaret Scully continued, "You know, Fox, my daughter is very committed to her work. To the exclusion of almost everything else in life. She once told me how that was the case with you, and how difficult it was to match your dedication."

"This wasn't work."

"Maybe it wasn't in the strictest sense of the word, but why would she have taken such a chance if it didn't have some bearing on the work that you do?"

Again, Mulder had no answer.

"We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. But you should probably talk to Dana about it. I think she saw a reaction in you that she's never seen before and neither one of you knows how to deal with it."

There was a moment of silence before he found himself asking a question that had been laying low in the back of his mind for a long time.

"What happened last Christmas, Mrs. Scully? At Bill's?"

At the sudden change in topic, it was her turn to be stuck for an answer.

"What exactly do you mean?"

"We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to." He smiled at her, enough to make her return it.

"Fox — I think I told you this a long time ago. Whatever we discuss is held in the strictest confidence between you and me. Even Dana knows this. But I think you need to be more specific about what you're asking."

"I shouldn't; forget I brought it up. I think I'm just looking for excuses."

"Talk to her. Talking is the easiest thing in the world."

"I know that."

"Then convince her. It's worth it, isn't it?"

"Not if she doesn't think so..."

"What do you mean by that?"

Margaret Scully peered into Fox Mulder's face and saw a hint of an expression that she had only seen once before. On the day that she had asked him for his help in picking up a headstone that she had ordered for Dana. It wasn't a decision that had been made lightly. She knew that it must have been terribly unsettling for him to have faced reality in such a harsh manner that afternoon, but from her point of view, it was time to move on with their lives. She had come to terms with the fact that her daughter was gone. Stopping him from sinking deeper and deeper into false hope and helpless despair was at least something that she could focus on for the sake of those who had to go on living.

Back at the house after he had dropped her off and stored the headstone in the garage for safe-keeping, she discovered him leaning against one of the trees in the backyard, as though needing it for support. In all the months that he had been coming to her with his weekly reports, he had always managed to put on a brave face. Not that he was ever false with her, but she knew that he was always careful not to appear defeated, even when it was clear that he had every reason to be. Despite the emotional encounters that their meetings invariably turned into, she never saw him break. Except that day. That day, under the bright sunshine, amidst the sound of children playing in the neighborhood, she saw Fox Mulder as near to crumbling as he had ever been during those horrible weeks.

Unable to look directly at her even after she had finally loosened his grip on the tree and turned him around, he simply let her hold him for several long minutes. Remaining uncharacteristically wooden, it was truly one of the few times in his life when he succeeded at refusing to cry. But she could feel him using up all of his body's resources in his attempt to hold everything in, like a child holding his breath.

The face she saw now had matured over the years, with more than just age. Sadly enough, the remnants of shattered innocence that she recalled from back then were now totally non-existent. The realization was balanced, however, by the fact that he was more open to her now than he was then. Even though they had not had much exposure to one another in recent times, the bond that they had forged years ago had grown into something strong all by itself.

"Fox, what do you mean?" she repeated, extending her hand towards him, ultimately resting it on his forearm.

"Sometimes I think that — she doesn't have much hope for us... And I won't stand in her way if that's how she really feels. I mean, if that's the case... I think we both deserve better."

"But you don't know how she really feels."

"You don't understand. I used to be sure that she didn't feel that way. I'm not sure anymore."

"Because of this?"

"No, because of a lot of things. And this..."

He looked at her directly before continuing. "It scares me."

* * * * *

"Just the one dream, Dana? While he was ill?"

"No... I had more or less come to terms with that one from when he was sick. But there have been others. One was recent. We were flying to or from California, I don't remember which. He said things while he was asleep, that... well, let's just say that by his actions and reactions when he woke up that it was pretty obvious what he had dreamt about."

"Can you truly hold him accountable for what he dreams?"

"No, but he's the one who's always held the opinion that there's some deep meaning in them."

* * * * *

Mulder paused at the building directory kiosk and ran his index finger down the panel, searching for Kosseff & Associates. He nodded to himself when he confirmed that his memory had served him right. A few years had passed since he had last been here, and he couldn't even place exactly what it was that had prompted his last visit.

He glanced casually around him, noting the ground floor businesses — a photocopying service and a small pharmacy at the front, what appeared to be a small cafeteria in the back — and then headed towards the elevators directly in front of him. Once inside, he pressed the button for the tenth floor and watched the numbers fly by on the display.

The hallway leading down to his destination was quiet; not surprising since it wasn't even nine o'clock yet on a Saturday morning. Just as he pulled open the heavy oak door, someone stepped out.

"Sorry."

They had been so close that had she not spoken, Mulder was certain that they would simply have passed one another without a second glance. But there was no way that he wouldn't recognize that voice. He let the door go as he turned around to see that familiar form walking down the hall.

"Scully?"

She stopped and turned on her heels. "Mulder?" She had the look of 'I've just been discovered' on her face, a look that Mulder didn't quite know how to interpret.

"What are you doing here?" they both asked simultaneously.

She took it upon herself to answer first, although she didn't move from her spot. Mulder, however, was closing the distance between them. "Maybe the same thing you are."

"Oh? I was coming in to get a referral."

"I — had an appointment."

So there it was. He had finally succeeded in driving her to the shrink's couch. And it wasn't even his...

An oddly familiar sensation hit him at the base of his gut. It was something that he hadn't experienced in a long time and its sudden return was an unwelcome reminder of how much time had passed and how little progress had been made.

"Are you rushing off anywhere right now? I mean — do you have time for a coffee or something?" There was no way that they could simply pass this one off with a "nice seein' ya" and a wave.

"Aren't you going in, Mulder?"

"I told you, I was just coming in to get a referral. I can come back later."

He could see her thinking, considering. The pause grew a bit long, or was that just because his own thoughts were racing?

"So where do you want to go?"

"Downstairs is fine, unless you have a preference for something else."

One almost uncomfortably long look at one another later, Mulder attempted a smile and automatically placed his hand at the small of her back, guiding her towards the elevators.

* * * * *

They walked away from the self-service checkout line with their coffees in silence. Scully took a careful sip, and then ventured a sidelong glance at her partner. For someone who had suggested their current activity, he wasn't making much of a contribution.

Of all the people in the world that she could have bumped into. How many times had she come here in the past, not even thinking of the possibility that perhaps he frequented the place as well? The office upstairs was her sanctuary from "real life", somewhere where she could speak openly and freely about her deepest desires without wondering if the person she was revealing herself to would "know" who and what she was actually describing. It felt different and odd now that she knew Mulder came here as well. To top it off, she was just not ready to share any of it with him, as awful as that sounded — even to herself. This current difficulty between them was certainly an unanticipated and unwelcome diversion. She had been seeking help to sort out something else entirely, something that she was ultimately prepared to share with him. Unfortunately, this latest turn of events had managed to place the focus on the wrong issue.

To say that it had been a bad week would be laughable, if, in reality, she could laugh about it. The level of awkwardness and discomfort between the two of them had stretched beyond bearable over the past five days. And the really strange part was that neither of them seemed to want to take the next step. Scully could think of numerous occasions in the past where one or the other of them would take the initiative to make necessary amends. This time, they both seemed willing to let the proverbial elephant in the room crush them.

They headed for a nondescript table in the far corner, away from prying eyes and ears, and sat down opposite one another.

Not looking up from his coffee, Mulder finally broke the silence. "So when did this start, Scully?"

"Seeing a therapist?"

"Yeah." He wrapped his hands around the styrofoam cup, silently cursing it for not transmitting any heat to his suddenly cold fingers.

"A long time ago, but it's not a regular thing. I saw Karen a few times at the Bureau over the years. But eventually I had things that I wanted to discuss that I didn't feel right discussing with her, especially not at work. She told me she ran an outside shop and, well... I come when I need to talk."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Was it wrong that I didn't?" It was starting to annoy her that he still had his head down, refusing to meet her eyes. There had already been too many days of that sort of treatment over the past week.

"No, I guess not."

They each paused to take a sip of their respective coffees.

"What's your connection?"

"I originally met Dr. Kosseff after my first psych review when I was with Behavioral Sciences. She got to know my background and I expressed an interest in keeping up with the scientific aspects of my training. She introduced me to her team of associates and every now and again, I got involved

with studies that they did, in my spare time. But because I know the staff, I wasn't too keen on the idea of talking to any of them on a personal level. So I came by today to get a referral."

He finally looked up, but his gaze was focused on the view of the parking lot outside the window to her left.

"You know the staff here?" Her tone was almost overly casual, not something that would fool her partner, she knew.

"Haven't been here in years, Scully. I don't think you have to worry that whoever you're seeing knows me." His eyes finally swung back to her face.

"Well, not that it really matters. I'm sure that professionally speaking —"

"Violating a confidentiality like that would not be taken lightly."

"What made you come here today, Mulder?"

"I'm not really sure, which is kinda the reason why, I guess. It was officially 'suggested' by the Bureau that I do so after the events of February, but I had been delaying it. After this past week, I figured it was probably time."

"So what you're saying is, everything that happened concerning your mother and your sister weren't enough to send you to seek help but my little excursion with Cancerman was?" She couldn't keep the incredulity out of her voice.

"Something like that." His eyes grew dark; his expression was otherwise stubbornly inscrutable. It succeeded in putting her on the defensive, a state that Dana Scully knew that she didn't handle well.

"Do I need to beg you for forgiveness on this or have I scarred your psyche so badly that apologies won't even suffice?"

"I don't think you have the right to be angry here, Scully. Or sarcastic, or whatever the hell it is you're trying to be."

To say that she was surprised at how he came up swinging against her little dig was an understatement. Mulder was hardly ever one to raise his voice at her, but she had no problems identifying the heat of suppressed anger beneath his words.

"So let me have it, Mulder. Speak your piece and let's see if we can get past this —"

"What were you thinking?"

"Can you be a little more specific?"

"How's this for specific — what was the point of that half-assed, piss-poor excuse that I managed to check out in less than five minutes? Alarming your mother in the process, I might add — was that your way of not telling me? Your way of ensuring that I wouldn't go after you? Or was it in fact some strange signal to ensure that I would go after you? Tell me which one it is so that I'll know next time."

"Are you sure that you have the right to be this upset when it's no worse than countless incidents that you've pulled on me over the years?"

"Don't even go there, Scully. Understand that I've made an honest effort not to do any of the things that have ticked you off in the past. You've made your dislike of my running off on you abundantly clear to me. But never — never — have I hauled off and trusted someone like C.G.B. Spender. And for what? Some altruistic claim to cure the world of its diseases? How naive or egomaniacal are you?"

She disregarded the sting of that hurtful accusation, one that he probably didn't mean.

"I wasn't being either. You keep telling me to be open to extraordinary possibilities and this was exactly that. I carry around a chip in my neck that may or may not be keeping me alive. What he described didn't seem so beyond the realm of credibility when it was brought up to me." She

looked directly at him before continuing, "I thought it was my chance to prove something about our partnership."

Mulder blinked in confusion, his brief anger dissipating as quickly as it had arisen. "Prove? What is it you feel you have to prove?"

"That I contribute more to our work than just the annoying scientific rebuttals that you've grown so tired of."

"That's nonsense — you do contribute more than that. How can you even think otherwise? Am I still behaving like such a jerk that you think I take you for granted or —"

"No, that's not it."

"Then what is it?"

"There are times when I don't quite feel like your equal, Mulder. And before you say anything, it's not your fault and it's nothing that you can 'fix'. It's just something that I feel. My problem. It's part of the reason why I'm here... upstairs. I know that the work that we do on the X-Files is equally mine by virtue of the fact that I've spent so many years at it, but in the end, the keeper of the sword, so to speak — is still you."

Mulder looked at her, mystified with where she was going with this.

"I thought that I had a chance to contribute something real, something concrete to the cause. The smoking man came to me and told me that I could only have access to this information if I didn't tell you about it —"

"And does that still make a lot of sense to you, or do you just not realize how dangerous it was, what you did?"

"I do know. Hell, Mulder, I wired myself —"

"It wasn't even a live wire... how would that have been helpful if anything had happened?"

She had no immediate answer. Mulder sat back in his chair and placed both hands flat on the tabletop in front of him.

"Why do you feel you have to prove anything to me this way, Scully? Or better yet, of all the things that you could prove to me, why this? Why put yourself in danger?" His throat constricted around the final question that he wanted to ask. Why trust him?

"You may not think that I have any sense of adventure, Mulder, but what he proposed was... intriguing. Maybe I was thinking too highly of myself, but I thought that I could handle it. It wasn't like I was his prisoner, or held hostage. I was free to leave at any time."

"I can't believe you're still taking it so lightly..."

"We face danger like that in our work almost everyday —"

"This was not about work!" he whispered fiercely, sitting forward so quickly that the table shook beneath his grip.

She hadn't seen that kind of fire in his eyes in a long, long time. So long that she couldn't recall when she had last experienced anything like it. But the look softened almost immediately after his outburst.

"And if you really think that it is, or if you think that's why I'm upset.... well, then, I don't know what to think."

* * * * *

"Did she have an importance to him in any way other than personal?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did she work with him?"

"Oh yes, it was a long time ago though. From what I know of it, they worked quite well together. They were well matched; they had the same 'feel' for things. Unlike..."

* * * * *

It was almost ten o'clock and their cups were long emptied. Silence had taken over most of their "conversation".

"Why are you here today, Scully?"

"I've been coming in every two weeks for a few months now."

"So nothing specific triggered this visit?"

"Not really. Although... I wasn't sure how to fix this between us. You've been really quiet the past couple of days."

"I didn't think it was up to me to start the ball rolling."

Another heavy moment of silence settled between them.

"Do you remember, Scully, when you were in the hospital just before your cancer went into remission that I told you about coming in one night, wondering about what I should do regarding a 'deal' that had been offered to me?"

"Yes."

"It was a deal that had been offered by Mr. Spender, back when we didn't even know him as Mr. Spender."

"What was the deal?"

"He wanted me to come work for him... since the Bureau at the time was going to prosecute me for murder, anyway. I told you that I left you that night deciding to take the deal, but do you have any idea what made me change my mind after that?"

"No, what?"

"I heard your voice that night, as I was trying to get to sleep. You said that it's preferable to sleep with the fishes than to sleep with the devil. I know, I know... it doesn't even sound like anything you'd ever say, but I heard you loud and clear."

After another lengthy period of silence, he heard her say softly, "I'm sorry, Mulder."

"For what?"

"Everything."

Something resembling an ironic chuckle was his response. It wasn't very often that Scully apologized for anything, but this time, it was obvious that she didn't even know why she was apologizing. On the surface, Mulder didn't know whether to be amused or offended. Deep down, however, he was just sad.

"Why can't you talk to me about things, Scully? We've made so much progress but sometimes it's like we're back at square one."

The look on her face revealed the confusion, frustration, and worry that consumed her on having to explain herself. She knew that she wasn't ready to do so, yet to leave him with nothing was not an option right now. She could only be honest with what she felt at this precise moment.

"When you get right down to it, Mulder, I've never felt so exposed and yet ultimately so hidden from someone as I feel with you. I think it gets easier, but then it's like another new barrier pops up in this maze that we're in."

He leaned in close across the table. "Why do you persist in making this so hard?"

"Because sometimes it just is."

"No it's not. It's easy. If you really want it, it's easy. Easy as breathing." He got up from his seat, pulling his coat on quickly. "Just breathe, Scully."

He gave her a look that seemed to contain every emotion possible to be felt, ending with a lingering sadness and resignation. He half-turned, pausing momentarily as though he had something else to say. But whatever it was, he decided against it. Scully watched in surprise as he walked away, through the exit and out to the parking lot. Through the window, she saw him enter his car and stared in disbelief as he pulled out without a moment's hesitation.

And Dana Scully was suddenly left with the bizarre and painful thought that she no longer knew how to breathe.

End

Truths Revealed



Does death extinguish passion and bury the truth forever — or is it a whole lot more complicated than that?

"Is he aware of how you feel about her?"

"In a way, he must. I haven't been able to bring myself to talk to him about her; you know that. But when it comes to feeling threatened by the women in his life, I have this habit of overreacting. And unfortunately, it's usually so obvious that it's not something I can hide from him. So he must know in that respect."

"Do you think that makes him hesitant to bring it up with you, knowing how you might feel?"

"I'm sure it does. And I know what that means. It means that at some point, I have to take responsibility for clearing the air myself."

* * * * *

Dana Scully leaned back in the driver's seat of her rental car, patiently waiting to be directed into the appropriate stall. An airport maintenance crew was doing some repair work in the rental return parking lot, creating a bit of confusion for travelers this Sunday afternoon in San Diego. Normally, the delay would have annoyed her to no end. Despite having grown accustomed to airports and the associated aggravations of air travel, she still found the experience stressful. Today, however — despite also finding out that her flight back to D.C. was going to be late — she was grateful for the extra quiet time to herself. Even if she was doomed to spend it sitting in an idling car waiting for a parking spot, it was nice to have a moment alone finally.

It had been a long couple of days, without even considering the gruelling work week preceding it. And while she loved her brother and his family, more often than not, her visits ended up being mired in that familiar, unpleasant tension brought on by her life choices and her work. It didn't even matter if nothing was ever openly said about it. She could tell — just by her brother's expression — what he wasn't saying that he really wanted to say. Ever since their near fiasco at Christmas last year, Bill had been quite willing to skirt around the topic of her relationship with Mulder. In fact, he was getting quite good at not even mentioning his name to her, except to ask perfunctorily how he was doing.

Truth be told, if it hadn't been for her mother, she wouldn't have even made the visit. After their recent run of cases, a weekend to herself would have been much more appreciated. Or maybe a weekend of trying to think of a way to bridge the ever-widening gap that was forming between her and her partner on a personal level. In an unprecedented move for even two such repressed individuals as themselves, neither she nor Mulder had made any mention of their surprise Saturday morning meeting about a month ago, when they literally ran into one another outside Karen Kosseff's office. The shock from having been unceremoniously "dumped" in the cafeteria had left her glued to her seat for thirty more long and agonizing minutes that morning, totally unable to

move. When she came into the office the following Monday, however, Mulder already had his face buried in a new case file and the first words out of his mouth had nothing whatsoever to do with what had transpired two days earlier. So she decided to follow his lead and act as though nothing significant had happened.

A display of mutual stubbornness, perhaps?

Or maybe it was a test and she was failing miserably.

Whichever the case, life just wasn't peachy these days. While Mulder's anger had dissipated since having his say that morning, something still wasn't right between them. And he still wasn't doing much talking outside of work related matters. To her utter dismay, she had even allowed her vexation over his detached behavior to overcome her better judgment. The most notable incident occurred a couple of weeks ago, when she had agreed to come in to the office on a weekend to hear about a new case. Not that Dana Scully could understand even in hindsight what had caused her to be so absolutely and undeniably hostile to him, but there it was. He subsequently flew off to England to pursue the case on his own, leaving her — rather ironically — to embark on one of the most peculiar personal journeys she'd ever taken in her life.

When he arrived home a couple of days later, she made it a point to apologize for her unspeakable rudeness. But something about the way in which he just brushed it off — as though it hadn't happened, much like the Saturday morning encounter weeks earlier — was worrisome.

And even though her apology eventually led to an unusually open discussion between the two of them that night — at least on her part — there was still so much that she wanted to reveal to him, and so much that she wanted to ask in return. But the truth was, exactly as she had related to him that morning in the cafeteria, sometimes it was just difficult. She didn't feel ready to know that she might be right about her concerns; that there was, in fact, still someone between them. Someone who stood between them from virtually beyond this world.

Scully jumped in her seat and turned abruptly in response to someone rapping on her car window.

"Sorry, ma'am, didn't mean to startle you. We'd like you to back it up and turn to your right over there."

Her eyes followed in the direction where his finger pointed. She saw the intended parking spot and nodded absently.

For as long as the weekend had been, it seemed as though she had just been here, picking up the car after having flown in from L.A. She and Mulder had just concluded yet another California-based case, prompting her to take advantage of the situation and drop in on her brother for a visit. She never told Mulder her plans until the last minute, making for an oddly uncomfortable exchange, one that had continually replayed itself in her mind all weekend long....

"So whose turn is it to book the return flights?"

Mulder stopped in front of his room, flipping through his wallet in search of his magnetic card key. It wasn't often that they actually stayed in hotel rooms with interior hallways, never mind those with high tech security features.

"Yours, but let me do it." Scully stopped in front of the adjacent room.

"Why?"

"Because I'm not going back to D.C. just yet."

"What do you mean?" Surprised, he stopped in mid-motion, the card inserted halfway into the electronic lock.

"I'm going down to San Diego. Turns out Mom was talking to Bill and mentioned that I've been in Southern California a lot lately. You know, Mulder, the real X-File is why so many of our cases this year have brought us out here...." She stopped, sensing that work was suddenly the farthest thing from Mulder's mind. "Anyway, uh, I've sort of been waiting for one of these cases to wrap up close to a weekend so I can take a Bureau-sanctioned side trip to visit with my brother and his family."

There was a moment of thoughtful silence before he said softly, "Well, it's good that you keep in touch."

"I'm going to call right now. I'll get you on the next flight back to D.C."

"When are you coming back?" He tried to sound casual in how he was asking but couldn't tell if it came out that way.

"There's a flight on Sunday afternoon. I'll book it now, too; let you know the particulars. Can you pick me up at the airport?"

"Of course."

"Okay, then." She turned her attention back to getting her room door unlocked, struggling with the unexpectedly stubborn card that simply wouldn't give her the green light.

"Dana?"

It was her name, of course, but in a way it sounded extremely foreign to her. That he had used it purposefully was obvious. Just one of those moments when he made an intentional decision to address her as such, for whatever reason. Likely because he knew it would shake her up and give him her full attention. It usually worked that way. In fact, she was mildly irritated at how he succeeded in doing so every time. After all, it was only a first name, for Christ's sake. But because he hadn't used it in anything other than a joking manner for quite some time now, Scully found herself hesitating before turning to look at him.

"Yes?"

Another long moment of consideration.

"Pass along my regards to Bill and Tara when you see them, will you?"

This time it was Scully's turn to pause. Mulder had just made a definite and obvious attempt to draw a line between work and personal life. She studied him for a brief moment, trying without success to ascertain which way his thoughts were going. In the end, she just smiled reassuringly and answered, "Of course. Consider it done."

Mulder pushed his card in fully and turned the lever to open his door. He half-gestured, half-waved towards the inside of his room with his hand. "I'm gonna — pack. Call me when you get the flight details."

With that, he disappeared inside. Scully heard the soft click of his door closing as hers finally yielded to her efforts.

* * * * *

John Byers left a tip on the counter and turned away from the bar. He scrutinized the room quickly and then walked towards a small corner table, his drink in hand, a ready smile on his face.

"Hey, Mulder — thanks for meeting me."

Mulder raised his glass of iced tea in a salute as the other man sat down opposite to him. "No problem. So where are Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dee? I can count on one hand the number of times I've seen any of you guys apart."

"I had to get out. Think about things. I'm not sure they'd understand."

"And **I** would? I'm flattered."

"Well, Mulder, short of calling Agent Scully, I don't have too many options here."

"Scully? Now you've intrigued me. What's up?"

"I got a note the other day. From Holly."

"Holly?" It didn't seem to ring a bell for a moment, despite the fact that Byers had emphasized the name. But then, the look on the younger man's face clarified the memory for Mulder. Not really Holly, but Susanne. He leaned in closer and whispered, just to confirm, "Modeski?"

"Yeah."

"Is this the first contact you've had with her?"

"Uh huh. In almost a year, ever since we left her in Vegas."

"So where is she?"

"The envelope was postmarked Paris. Says she's moving through Europe right now. There wasn't much detail, but she did say that nothing out of the ordinary has happened and that she feels safe."

"So why didn't you think the boys would understand? I mean, they know more about your last adventure than I do. I'm sure they'd be happy to hear that she's okay."

"Oh, I don't doubt that. And — and I will tell them at some point. Just that —"

Just that we're men and this is so bloody hard, Mulder thought, pitying poor Byers while at the same time trying to deal with the sudden paralyzing twist he felt in his own heart.

"Don't you ever think that there's gotta be more to life than just this?"

Mulder couldn't help but laugh. Mostly out of irony perhaps, but maybe just a tiny bit out of real humor also. "You mean that after awhile, the excitement of what we do just pales in comparison to the mortgage payments and boy scout meetings provided by life in the white picket fence world?"

"Something like that."

"All the time, Byers. And even though I know that the 'full version' of that dream probably isn't for me, I sometimes wonder if I even have what it takes to move a step in that direction."

"Yeah, well, it's not something that I suppose Frohike and Langly really think about, you know what I mean?"

"Ah." He took a long sip of his iced tea and then studied Byers' expression carefully. Mulder had always considered him the "lone" Lone Gunmen of them all. Not quite belonging to the same extremes that his cohorts seemed to represent, yet not quite out of place among them. And yet if there was any person out of the four of them — himself included — that Mulder could see settling down and living an actual normal life, John Byers was that man. "Do you find yourself thinking that you want a life with her? Is she 'the one'?"

"Well, Jesus, Mulder, don't you sometimes think that you want a life with Scully maybe?"

Byers' face colored ever so slightly when he realized how brazen he sounded. Mulder, however, didn't react in any way to make him feel like he had overstepped his bounds, showing him nothing more than his usual poker face. In fact, the barely perceptible tightness in his voice when he finally answered managed to reveal much more than his expression.

"I have a life with Scully. And at times I think it's the most frustrating life in the world, but at least we're in the same time zone and can work on it."

That didn't sound especially promising to Byers, but he didn't want to push this silent understanding he and Mulder shared about "the Scully thing". He never asked specific questions about the two of them, but from answers such as the one that he just got, he sometimes had the feeling that Mulder wouldn't object to having someone to talk to either.

Byers reached into his pocket and palmed something, then brought his hands back up onto the table. Mulder eyed him questioningly, a distinct look of surprise crossing his face when Byers opened up his right hand.

"She gave me this when she left last year."

"Well if that isn't all the rage..." It was barely a whisper. But he actually hadn't meant to say it out loud at all.

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing." Mulder stared at the small golden band for a moment, his mind circling to recapture a memory long pushed into the dark recesses of his past. After warring with himself for a few seconds, he blinked and looked up to see Byers staring back at him patiently. "You want to find her, Byers? Wear this ring for real and make it mean something?"

"I don't know. There's a part of me that thinks she'll eventually find me if we're meant to be, but then there's another part of me that doesn't want to wait another ten years to find out, one way or the other."

"I don't suppose you're asking for advice?"

"Not specifically, but I wouldn't be unwilling to listen if you had any to give."

"I don't think I'm at all qualified to give any. But I know what you mean; I don't even want to wait the first ten years.... Here's some advice for the both of us, my friend. Give yourself a time limit. Tell yourself that by this date — whatever it is — you're going to take some action: start searching for her, move on and forget about her, whatever. I'm starting to get the feeling that things only take ten years when you let them take ten years."

The sound of a cell phone ringing broke through the thoughts of both men.

"Mulder."

"Hey. It's me."

Speak of the devil herself.

"Where are you?"

"At the airport still. We're only just about to take off now, so it looks like I'll be about an hour late."

"A little after eight thirty then?"

"Is that all right? I can always just catch a cab."

"Not like it's past my bedtime, Scully. It's not a problem."

"All right, well, I'll see you later."

"Scully?"

"Yeah?"

"How was your visit?"

Short pause.

"It was all right. I'll tell you about it later."

Well, Mulder thought to himself as he clicked off the phone, if you don't, I'll be asking.

* * * * *

Settled into her seat with a varied selection of reading materials close at hand for the long flight ahead, Scully leaned back against the headrest and closed her eyes in preparation for takeoff. Despite the usual airplane noise and distracting sounds of conversations around her, the fact that she was flying solo from the west coast brought back clear memories of one of the few times that she did so — right after Christmas of 1999...

At the breakfast table on Christmas morning, Dana Scully concluded that mothers — bless their sweet and well-intentioned little hearts and souls — just couldn't keep secrets when it came to their daughters' love lives. That she could understand this fact didn't make the ensuing experience any easier to take, particularly as she was seated directly opposite to brother Bill and had to

endure his looks throughout the remainder of the meal. Luckily she had a buffer of sorts with the presence of her other brother and sister-in-law, even though their curiosity was almost equally discomfiting. All things considered, she just wasn't ready to talk about it in roundtable fashion in front of her family. Of course, everyone except Bill was willing to let it go at that.

He managed to recruit his sister's assistance to do the breakfast dishes while everyone else gathered in the living room to wait for the gift opening to resume, watching the kids enjoy their new toys in the meantime. The door to the kitchen had barely swung closed when he started — albeit relatively calmly and quietly — with his protestations.

"You know, all this time I thought those naysayers were off their rockers when they spouted this crap about the year 2000 and the end of the world and all. But now — you and Mulder? It has to be true, right? The world's coming to an end? I mean, nothing short of that will convince me of why this is happening."

"I'll ignore that, thank you very much... aren't you overreacting just a bit? It's not like he's asked me to marry him —"

"Not like any of us would be wondering what your answer might be if he did. Really, Dana, of all the men in the world —"

"In case you hadn't noticed, Bill, all the men in the world haven't exactly been beating down my door." In fact — she thought rather humorously to herself in spite of the strangely hurtful moment — Mulder was the only one who had ever done that. Beat down her door, that is. Literally.

"Don't give me that. You know exactly what's happened. How much you've totally disregarded any possibility for a normal life over the past ten years. Ignoring how much time has passed and pushing aside any attempts that we've made to bring it to your attention. That's why it's ludicrous that you're entertaining thoughts of wasting even more time with this... Mulder."

"What exactly do you have against him, Bill?"

"Are you serious, Dana? You have to ask?"

"Yes. Yes, I do, because I don't know. Or if I might suspect, I don't understand how you can still feel that way. Nothing that's happened to me or to this family has been his fault. And the fact is, you don't even know him beyond what you think he's done to me."

"All I know is that if you hadn't been with him in his insane pursuit of God knows what —"

"I'd have been doing something else just as dangerous. I'm an FBI agent, remember?"

"And what about that, Dana? How does the Bureau allow you guys to have any sort of relationship? I can't imagine that's condoned."

"For now, it's none of their business. It's not like we're making out in the hallways. For your information, we haven't done anything."

"Oh please, spare me the details of what you have or haven't done, okay? Look, I know you don't think I'm showing it all that well, but I have a lot of respect for you and the decisions that you make in life. I don't know if you'd ever intentionally get involved with someone who's going to do you harm, but... I don't know him, like you say, but at the same time, I don't think I'm being unreasonable either. It's not that I suspect him of being an axe murderer or that he actually means to put you in danger. Hell, as little as I've talked to the man, I even believe that he does care about you. But I don't know how he cares. He's so driven —"

"That's much of what I admire in him."

"'Admire'? Jesus, do you even know how you feel about him?"

The exchange came to a halt as two equally strong Scully siblings stared at one another, one surprised that perhaps he had hit onto something significant, the other not wanting to carry on the conversation any further because it had just taken on a new and different complication.

"Dana, I want you to have the chance to love someone — and to have someone love you back — in a way that'll see you through to old age, not just through to the next alien-chasing case. I'm not convinced that Mulder's the man for the job. Or that he even knows what to do with the job. And you've said or done little to convince me otherwise."

"I wouldn't know where to start, Bill."

"Start anywhere, Dana. Just convince me."

The sound of jet engines revving up brought her back to the present, back from memories of her clumsy, futile attempt at explaining her feelings to her brother. As the plane moved forward on the tarmac, she was struck by a sudden flash of insight that seemed so simple as to be obvious. It finally occurred to Dana Scully that it wasn't Bill that she needed to convince.

* * * * *

"What bothers you the most about the increasing distance that you've felt?"

"That I don't know how she feels anymore.... Maybe she actually prefers the ambiguous games that we used to play, I don't know. Or maybe she's had a taste of what a relationship with me really entails and it's not what she wants. Or it could just simply be that I've read her wrong all these years and she never did love me in that sense."

"Do you really think that's possible?"

"That last one? No. I don't often read people wrong. And six years of reading Scully had resulted in some pretty consistent observations long before I ever made a move. But it's because I don't often read people wrong that I'm all the more convinced that something's changed in how she feels."

"What are you prepared to do about it?"

"I don't know. I guess that's partly what I'm here to find out. But the bottom line is, I'm not going to spend my life chasing after someone who really doesn't want to be caught by me. That's not what I want out of life. That's not what I'd want for her, either."

* * * * *

Mulder stole another sidelong glance at his partner's preoccupied face and pulled the car over at the next available opportunity. He shifted the vehicle into park, sat back, turned towards her and waited.

Thinking something amiss, Scully quickly turned in all directions to assess the traffic. Seeing nothing other than cars whizzing by as usual, she looked at him in amazement and asked, "What's the matter?"

"Us. We're the matter."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't ask me that. You know what I mean. These days I can't tell if you tolerate me or just plain hate me. It's aggravating and I need to know. I need to know how to fix it. Or if we can't fix it, I need to know that too."

Despite the way that his words seemed to tumble out nonstop, his impression was that she understood both his meaning and motivation. However, the expression that he saw on her face — whether she intended it or not — resembled vague accusation, like he should have known better about something.

It was a look that he had been seeing far too much of lately.

"Dammit Scully, what is it? Why do you let your brother get to you like that? That is it, isn't it? Every time you come back from seeing him, you're distant."

"It's got nothing to do with Bill —"

"Then who or what's it got to do with?"

As they sat and stared one another down, something clicked into place. Whether it was a decision made or an irrevocable step taken, Scully knew that the time was finally at hand, regardless of whether she — or he — was actually ready for it.

"It's got to do with the truth, Mulder. The truth that you haven't told me."

He was stunned. No less than if she'd clobbered him over the head with a bat.

"The truth that I haven't told you?" He parroted back at her when he finally found his voice again. "What truth is this?"

"The truth about Diana." She said it calmly and evenly, in much the same way as she imagined the woman she just named would have done.

He continued to stare at her, seeing real emotions flitting back and forth underneath the calm surface, knowing that this wasn't just something that she had pulled out of a hat to avoid further confrontation. Knowing that, in fact, this was going to be the confrontation that they had both been avoiding since Agent Fowley's death in the fall. Knowing how hard it had been for her to bring up the subject to him, finally.

And yet — sometimes — "knowing" just wasn't enough to alleviate pent-up anger and frustration. Obviously not hers and certainly not his. In fact, he was in serious danger of losing control entirely.

"I can't believe this. You mean to tell me that all this — everything that's been making you run hot and cold on me over the past few months — is about a dead woman?"

"No, it's not. It's about a life that could have been —"

He interrupted her impatiently, "Didn't we have this conversation already?"

Her eyes narrowed in puzzlement. "When?"

"The other weekend, when you told me about your doctor friend and how maybe we only have one right path to take in life."

"That is entirely different —"

"How is that different? Just because I haven't gotten myself all screwed up over who he might have been to you?"

"No." Her face turned a deep red as a combination of frustration and embarrassment flooded over her inexplicably. "The difference is that I told you about him."

"But you knew Diana!"

"Not as well as you did, apparently."

"And what do you really mean by that, Scully? Is that just something to make me feel bad for having slept with her before I knew you, or what? I thought we've been all over that too."

"We've been over it without actually getting into it. Mulder, I know you had real feelings for one another. It would be easier if I believed that she really was just one of the bad guys out to get you the entire time. Or if somehow I thought that you never loved her at all. But I know differently, and yet all you've ever done is hide it from me. Even in death, you can't talk about her —"

"Even in death, you can't leave her alone!" He clenched and unclenched his fingers around the steering wheel and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I understand where you're coming from, but you also have to understand where I'm coming from. It was never part of my grand plan to go through the rest of my life without talking about Diana — but you, Scully... you really haven't been giving me much of anything lately to make me think that you're still interested. Like I said, I don't know how you feel anymore."

She saw him swallow hard after that last statement, as though hearing his own words had caused him unexpected pain. It would have been understandable, since those same words had just triggered genuine panic in her. It was questionable whether she ever really had the advantage of time, but she certainly no longer had the luxury of being able to proceed slowly. She had the

distinct impression that if she didn't take action now, something precious was going to die a painful death right here on the car seat between them.

Scully extended her hand towards him slowly, letting it drop onto his forearm. His tightly clenched muscles rippled beneath her fingers.

"Can you take us back to my place so we can talk about this, Mulder? Let's not do this here on the roadside, okay?"

* * * * *

The unnervingly silent drive back to her apartment was uncomfortable but ultimately provided a welcome respite. It gave them both the opportunity to cool off, take stock of their situation, and decide how best to proceed. By the time they sat down in front of Scully's fireplace with cups of hot cocoa beside them — the evening had been unusually chilly for May — they appeared willing, if not entirely ready, to settle whatever issues needed settling.

They joined one another on the floor, half facing the glowing flames of the small fire and half facing one another. He was leaning back against the heels of his hands, his long legs outstretched and crossed in front of him. She had her knees drawn up close to her chest, with her hands clasped in front. There were no lights on except for a nightlight in the kitchen; Mulder had been the one to turn off the floor lamp once Scully finished with the fire. He knew that the semi-darkness would be welcome. It was always much easier to talk without being under the bright lights of interrogation.

"Before I forget, Bill and Tara wanted me to return your hello."

"He did?"

Their eyes met knowingly for a brief moment before Scully turned her attention back to the fire.

"Well, he asked how you were doing. I told him about your mother and he... he wanted to pass along his condolences."

Mulder kept his eyes focused on her face, acutely aware of the fact that it made her uncomfortable.

"He knows about us, doesn't he?"

A quick darting glance indicating surprise and several seconds of ensuing silence was his answer.

"You told him?"

Scully reached for her mug and took a careful sip before replying ruefully.

"No. Mom did. Not quite foreseeing or understanding how it might be taken, obviously."

He played a long-held hunch...

"Last Christmas?"

... and could tell that he scored a huge bulls eye. Not bad for a guy who eschewed target practice.

"Jesus, Mulder, you're not just spooky, you're scary."

"I'm flattered, but you obviously don't realize how much you're capable of telling me sometimes without actually saying anything."

"But —"

"Look, there's not a whole lot that could have explained why you were so closed off when you came back from San Diego last December. That and the fact that I never heard from you on Christmas Day when you said you'd call. Not to mention the look on your face after I kissed you on New Year's Eve..."

"What look?"

He watched the varied emotions play across her face as he continued.

"I wish you could see yourself sometimes, Scully. You think you have this mask that you hide behind — and for those who don't know you like I do, it probably works — but you don't succeed with me as often as you'd like. I haven't been imagining all this ambivalence... something has either changed your mind about us or you're struggling to convince yourself that this is what you really want. Well... I don't want you to do that. If this isn't what you want, then I think I deserve to know. In real words. Real soon."

"Mulder —" An unwelcome obstruction suddenly formed within the narrow confines of her throat, stopping her from uttering another syllable.

He sat back and waited, determined not to be affected by her reaction.

She took a well-measured breath and recovered sufficiently to say, "Is this —" she paused and gestured generally with her hands, indicating herself, "really what you want?"

Mulder thought for a brief second that he might seriously have to consider shaking this woman to make her come to her senses.

"Are you putting this back on me, Scully? Am I the one who's not sure? Are you positive about that?"

"Bill thinks that you and I might be... confused about what we feel for one another. Whether or not that's the case, the last thing I want is for either one of us to be obligated towards something that we really don't want."

"That's what I just said."

"Then what's our answer?"

"Well my answer is that I'm not confused about how I feel. I admit to having had years of confusion before we ever talked about trying to make a go of this, but not since and not now. I guess that just leaves whatever answer you and Bill might have."

She felt the sting of his jab and thought it was well-deserved.

"Bill has nothing to do with us."

"I'm glad to hear that, Scully."

"It's just that I've always been told that when you feel too close to be objective, you have to listen to what others around you say. It's not often that the whole world is wrong and you're the only one who's right."

"Since when did Bill become your 'whole world'? And are you saying that anyone who knows about us would think badly of this arrangement?"

"Nobody knows about us, Mulder. I really don't know what anyone else might think."

"Before we even care about what others might think, maybe it's time for us to consider what we think... where we want this to go. If we really care about us, it's time we paid us some attention and gave us some priority. If there is an 'us'."

"You're right. But we still have to get something out of the way first. About what I said in the car... I really do need to talk about Diana Fowley, Mulder. I need to know the truth about something that she said to me. And maybe — maybe you also need to know the truth about how you really feel."

He heaved a weary sigh before replying, equally intrigued and annoyed by her last comment.

"Fine. Where do we start?"

"Anywhere. It doesn't matter."

"Where would you like to start?"

"Well... I know you dream about her. I've been there when it's happened. Like you're fond of saying, it must mean something."

The dreams. Those cryptic answers to life's elusive unasked questions.

"I've dreamt about you too, but I guess you were never around for those, huh?" Mulder swallowed down his irritation and reminded himself that it was a small price to pay if they could finally put this to rest. If it meant revealing some unsettling truths, so be it. Perhaps the fates had decided that this was the time for that long delayed talk. "When I was in that coma, whatever it was... I had a lengthy, detailed dream about living a life with her."

"I know."

He looked at her questioningly for a brief moment, but it didn't take long for both sides to know instinctively that — even though he hadn't specifically revealed it to her at the time — she had guessed correctly.

"Those first few days after I came back home, I kept having parts of that same dream over and over again. I think I told you about it... sort of. Then they basically stopped for awhile..."

"But it still happens."

"Maybe it's an x-file. Look, Scully I can't understand why it's happening but then I don't see it as being particularly meaningful either. Really, I don't."

"But it might be. Maybe it's because you haven't laid her to rest, Mulder. For some reason, you haven't let her go."

Her words had been carefully chosen, as though she were opening the door for him to confess that he still loved her. That, if it were only possible, he'd want to make that life with Diana a reality.

He read her thoughts perfectly.

"I'm not in love with her, Scully. You have to know that."

"I want to know that. You have no idea how much I want to know that."

"But I'm telling you that."

There was nothing about his delivery that would have made her second-guess his words. He was not just earnest, he was matter-of-factly earnest; as though he were explaining some indisputable truth like the fact that the sun rose every morning. In that sense, she couldn't understand why that niggling element of doubt persisted.

Maybe it was because sometimes people just didn't realize that they still held torches for ex-lovers.

Or maybe it was something much simpler and more complicated.

"Were you ever married to Diana, Mulder?"

Scully had a brief disconnected thought that her therapist would have been proud of how she finally took the initiative. Now if she could only convince herself to breathe normally while she waited for his answer.

Fox Mulder sat in silence, staring blankly at his partner's face. Oddly enough, the question of where she even got such an idea didn't occur to him. He was suddenly rendered speechless by a montage of memories taking him back to a time before the X-Files, before he ever met this woman who sat across from him. A series of frantic images flashed through his mind's eye like an advertisement for a movie, ending abruptly with a prolonged, slow-motion zoom-in shot of a wedding band being slipped onto his finger. What a lifetime ago that was....

Then the sound of Scully taking a somewhat labored breath brought him back to the present and reminded him that he should answer her question.

"No."

"No? It took you that long to say no? Mulder, the woman said that if things had been different, she'd still be your wife." She could not have foreseen how merely repeating the phrase to him would be so distasteful. The words bore the stigma of an unsubstantiated accusation, as though

she were telling him that she had caught him in a lie when in fact she had no knowledge whatsoever. Not to mention she had no real basis for believing anything that Diana Fowley ever told her. Still...

"What did she mean by that?" Her voice trailed off in a wavering whisper, barely audible over the low crackling of the fire. She felt her last remaining ounce of control drain away, worn down by months of agonizing self-doubt and conjecture. Sensing the unmistakable sting of tears, she dug her fingernails deep into her ankles to force her nerves to focus on something else.

"Maybe she meant that we were thinking about getting married."

He sounded unrecognizable in a peculiar way. There was a hollow, lifeless tone in his voice that she wasn't familiar with and didn't know how to interpret. She looked up to search his eyes but found nothing there other than the reflected image of the flames from the fireplace.

She was therefore all the more surprised when he continued without prodding.

"We had talked about getting married in the fall of 1989. Instead, she disappeared for six months, without a trace, without a word. As you might guess, things were never the same after that."

* * * * *

Atlantic City, NJ
April 1989

"You were amazing, Fox. Cool as a cucumber. I'm surprised you've never done this before."

"And I probably never will again. Who would have thought that a simple local child molester case would turn into this complicated, international money laundering pornography ring?"

He took one final lingering glance back at the gaggle of arresting officers in black FBI jackets in front of the casino and retreated down the street, away from the hotel entrance.

"Well, what's important is that you nailed the bastards."

"Yeah, well, it's not quite over yet. I think I'm going to need a few hours with a therapist before I can deal with this case going to trial..."

"Thank God we haven't been on this case full-time, all the time, over the past eight months. You've been so consumed, it's frightening. Are you sure you're all right?"

Her concern was so genuine and real that he had to force himself to shake off his preoccupation in order to allay her worries.

"I'll recover. I always do. Like you say, the intermittent involvement was a lifesaver... And by the way, you said I nailed them. I think we nailed them. You and me, 'Mr. and Mrs. Kensington'."

"You know, that's been the most enjoyable part of this gig, Fox. I think I can get used to it."

The brief flash of uncertainty in his eyes was quickly replaced by a trademark flirtatious leer.

"Are you making a pass at me, Agent Fowley?"

"Not if I go by the book. We're still on duty, even though we're on duty as a married couple and can get away with a lot. But as of tonight — in fact, as of twenty-three minutes from now — we're officially done with this case. And it's Friday night and I don't think we have to rush back to DC just yet, do we?"

"No, we don't," he replied softly.

"Then what say I go get us a different room in another hotel and let Mr. and Mrs. Kensington unwind like they deserve to after a job well done?"

"That sounds serious."

"It is serious." She seemed almost insulted that he might have thought differently.

"I mean, really, Diana — that sounds serious. We've been pushing the rules, but what you're proposing —"

"We're not partners, Fox. Come Monday, we're back to our regular routine and whatever we are to one another is not an issue for the Bureau."

"That's not what I'm getting at. I don't really care what the Bureau thinks. Just that we've been working a dangerous case, together twenty-four hours a day for days on end, on and off over the course of many months.... All I'm saying is — if we start anything now, I'd like it not just to be a case of us blowing off steam."

"What are you implying — that I'd use you and throw you away?"

He didn't answer with words, but it was clear that was what he meant.

"I wasn't just making idle chit-chat the other night, Fox. And I wouldn't have told you how I felt if I'd had any suspicions that the feelings weren't returned. I think I've been in love with you since the first week we were on this assignment."

"And what does that really mean?"

"It means that someday, I want us to spend the rest of our lives together. I don't have any doubts about how I feel. If you have doubts, that's all right because I'm prepared to work hard to change your mind —"

"I don't have doubts..." His voice was unusually low against the noise of the street, but she did hear and smiled warmly in return.

"Then why are we standing on the sidewalk talking when we can be doing something much more interesting?"

She reached between them and clasped his hand, bringing it up in front of them. She indicated the wedding ring that he still wore on his finger.

"Maybe by the end of the year, you'll consider wearing one of these for real."

"With what we've uncovered in those files back at the Bureau, I'm sure stranger things have happened."

"I mean it, Fox."

"I know you do. But let's see what happens this weekend first."

* * * * *

J. Edgar Hoover Building,
Washington DC
March 1990

Fox Mulder nudged open the door with his knee, managing only a quick glance at the woman standing in the middle of the room before making a beeline for his desk. Every nerve ending in his body felt the crackling jolt that passed through him, exactly as he knew would happen. He had just stood outside his own office door for two minutes before entering, trying to think up some way of avoiding that painful eventuality. Ultimately, nothing came to mind and the box that he carried in his arms just got heavier and heavier.

He set the crate of files down on top of his desk and closed his eyes briefly before turning around to face her.

"I was told that you were here waiting for me. So how've you been, Diana? Or should I say, where've you been?"

"Are you rushing off somewhere or do you have some time?"

Good God, the mere sound of her voice felt like a crushing blow to his chest. How in the world was he going to survive this conversation as unprepared as he was?

"You should have called first. But then again, I guess you've already set a huge precedent for not doing so. I have a meeting upstairs at two thirty. Whatever you have to say will have to be said quickly." He turned away from her to retreat behind his desk, but she reached out and latched onto his arm, stopping him temporarily. He couldn't help but notice what was on her left hand ring finger.

"Are you on an undercover mission again, Agent Fowley?" He felt his heart take a pathetic leap at the possibility that there may in fact have been a good explanation for her disappearance after all.

"In a way. An undercover mission in real life, you might say."

"So you were on leave from the Bureau?"

"Yes."

"It was nothing FBI-related that kept you away?"

"No."

The air between them grew distinctly chilly, despite the fact that her hand was still warm on his arm. He extricated himself and sat down, motioning towards the chair in front of his desk. Diana sat down, but appeared to be engrossed in weighing her choices before attempting another statement.

He was, however, in no mood to be patient.

"The clock's ticking, Diana."

"First of all, I want to say I'm sorry. Whatever you're feeling, you have every right to be feeling it."

"Thank you. But I don't need you to tell me that. I was a psych major, remember?" He regretted the sarcasm almost immediately, knowing that throughout all of the past several months, he had been determined to remain as cool as possible in this inevitable moment of truth.

"I've always known you to be fair and reasonable, Fox." Her voice, even and steady as usual, revealed much less than her expression. "Might you be able to give me the benefit of the doubt for just the time that it takes me to tell my story?"

On the one hand, it would be so much easier if he could hold onto some semblance of anger, but of course, she was right. As much as he didn't think any explanation would suffice, there was also a not-so-small part of him that cried out for something to soothe the wound that she had inflicted on him six months ago when she disappeared into thin air.

"Sorry. Go ahead."

"Several years ago, when I was first recruited to the Bureau, I made some contacts that appeared to be highly placed. It soon became clear to me that while they may be highly placed, they weren't exactly 'mainstream FBI'. In a very short time, however, I had already gotten involved to a degree that — to them, anyway — made it impossible for me to get out."

"What are you talking about?"

"I can't be any more explicit than that, I'm sorry. But it's basically why I had to leave like I did. My life was in danger because I wasn't following specific orders that I didn't even realize were orders. Have you ever agreed to do something, just to turn around and find yourself in the position of thinking it the most despicable thing that you could ever do?"

The resulting pause grew lengthy, indicating to him that she was waiting for an answer. Surely it had to be a rhetorical question? After another beat, he shrugged slightly and quietly replied in the negative.

"Well, I hope you never have to face that."

"Okay, fine. So you had a moralistic battle to fight. I still don't get where you're going with this."

"Where I'm going with this, is that it wasn't just my life that was being threatened. Apparently, you and I have both been in the wrong place at the wrong time."

He didn't say any actual words, but the sound of his dismissive snort communicated itself clearly enough.

"You think that I figured it would be easy to convince you when I have nothing to show you as proof? Nothing that I can show you as proof? The thing is, I didn't have to come back. The only reason I'm here is to tell you that I still love you like I've loved no one else before in my life. That I will die loving you if that's what it means. But I won't act on it if it'll put you in danger."

"So what are you saying? That I should get myself some protection because I'm being targeted? By whom? For what reason?"

"It's not as simple as that. I've had access to information that I didn't know was classified. This is information that I've been forbidden to discuss with anyone.... Especially you."

"And why would I want to know this information?"

"Again, I can't say, but I think you're meant to know in due time. It's just that I can't be anywhere in the vicinity when you uncover it. Fox — I know from the look on your face that you think I'm full of it, but I've been told these facts in no uncertain terms by people you just don't argue with. I've seen the results of their 'work'."

"Come on, Diana, doesn't this sound crazy to you?"

"Of course it does. And I would have just as much trouble believing me as you are if the tables were turned, but sounding crazy doesn't mean it's not true."

"So why can't you try harder at giving me a better explanation?"

"If I were making it up, I would, Fox. That's the whole point."

"Okay, so this is unbelievable because it's the truth.... What's the bottom line, then? You came back to tell me that you're gonna be gone for good?"

"Not for good, for now. I have no choice in the matter."

"We always have choices, Diana."

"Well then, Fox, all of my current choices are worse than you thinking that I'm a conniving bitch of a liar who's played you for a fool."

Had she chosen an emotional approach, it probably would have worked to her disadvantage. Making her statement with strength and conviction — despite the fact that she had to know that he didn't exactly believe her story — increased her credibility in a way. At the very least, his belligerence level eased somewhat.

"Where've you been — or is that classified too?"

"In Europe. And I will be back there as of next week." Her steely control faltered momentarily, forcing her to look away before continuing. "I've heard it said that even after you've sold your soul, if you work hard enough at it, you might be able to buy it back."

He didn't know what to say anymore. Perhaps it was the hard-won truth uttered by someone regretting past decisions or perhaps it was simply just a melodramatic put-on. He knew that she was capable of both. As to what could possibly motivate her to do either, however, was still as big a mystery to him now as it was before he stepped into the room.

"Am I going to see you before you leave?"

"I was hoping to... if you're not out and out rejecting me."

"That wouldn't be fair or reasonable. The thing is, I have to prepare for this meeting and —"

She got up, uncertain as to how to end their conversation when it had barely even begun, but knowing it was pointless to stay if he wasn't ready to talk. "I'll leave you to your work."

"Diana?"

"Yes?"

He gestured towards the ring on her finger. "Is that a prop?"

"No. But if you think that this story has been hard to believe so far, you may not want to ask about that part of it now."

* * * * *

"She'd gotten married? To whom?"

"Let's just say that she was right about me not wanting any details."

"You never asked her?"

"No. We met at my place for a couple of hours the next day to say our goodbyes. By then, it wasn't even bitter, just odd. But that was it. Exit Diana Fowley from my life until the day I saw her in that debriefing room with you and the others.... And as I recall, she was 'unmarried' by then. I think over the years, I had come to see her little disappearance as less a betrayal than as something that she had little choice in."

He paused and considered for a moment how painfully and pleasantly nostalgic that day had been, being so abruptly reunited with her when he truly hadn't thought about her in years.

"Scully, part of the reason I've never been too eager to talk about Diana is because I never really knew what to make of her after she left me. She apparently had a secret life that I knew nothing about. But even when it looked bad, I could never picture her deliberately working against me. I can't explain that feeling, it was just there. Even when I tried to be objective like you wanted me to be and see her for what she was, there was still some part of me who refused to lose faith in her. At the same time — and you may not believe this — I didn't doubt for a second that she had one foot stuck in something really nasty. Just that I could never convince myself that she'd purposely do me harm. In the end...."

"She saved your life."

"Knowing what would happen to her. You know, Scully, we've seen all kinds of people pay the price. Some as a direct consequence of the actions that they take, some just because they were simply in the wrong place. I think it's fair to say that most of them don't see it coming. But Diana knew all along that if she got in too deep playing the other side that she'd pay for it with her life. She did it anyway. So Scully, I'll repeat it again: I'm not in love with her. But something tells me that she deserves to be better remembered."

"What's stopping you from doing that?"

"There's you."

"Excuse me?"

"I've been fighting a 'Diana versus Scully' battle for almost two years now. When she was alive, you didn't trust her. Now that she's dead, it's like you don't trust me. I've done my best to shove aside any memory of her, but somehow it hasn't been enough to remove her 'presence' from your life."

"You think that's what I want? For you to forget her and for her 'presence' to be removed from my life?"

"Like I think I said earlier, Scully, I don't know what you want or feel anymore."

"Mulder, what I want is to know that you're not trying to forget her for the wrong reasons. It's obvious to me that you never got the chance to make a choice, one way or the other. I can reconcile myself with being second prize, but I don't want to find out later that you've always wished for someone like Diana. In all the years I've known you, I've never been anything like her... and I won't ever be."

"And you think I don't know this, or what? Of course you're nothing like Diana. Most of the time — believe it or not — I'm utterly grateful that you're nothing like her."

"Most of the time?"

"Well you do tax me with your rigid ways, but as I recall saying to someone a long time ago, it's mostly a good rigidity." He smiled slightly at the distant memory of both simpler and more complicated times. "Look, Scully, give me a little credit for knowing what I want and knowing what's good for me."

"But why have you avoided every mention of Diana to me, even when it's obvious that..." She let the thought trail off, knowing that she didn't want to highlight her jealous nature yet another time to someone who seemed unfamiliar with the concept.

"That what? That you're curious? I'm not sure I'm under any obligation to satisfy that curiosity if you can never bring yourself to ask."

It was harshly put, but essentially true. Sometimes old habits were hard to break.

"I've never thought that anything I could tell you about Diana would make you feel better or change your mind about her. So where's the good in dredging up old memories that I'm not sure I even want to relive?" A slight frown creased his forehead as he considered what he had just said and where their conversation was taking them. "No matter how spooky you think I am, some things aren't always 'obvious' to me. I mean, you've obviously been unhappy with how things are between us, but damned if I know why..."

"This is why. Don't you see that? If you dream about spending your life with her and you've got this 'almost marital' history and she was such an important part of your work and in the end, she gave her life to save yours.... Well, don't you think that's a hard act to follow?"

"I don't know, Scully, I didn't take it to be any sort of competition."

They fell silent as she pondered how to tackle the final obstacle in her way. She had one more potentially insignificant but nagging thing that had to be addressed.

"Mulder, a couple of months ago, you got a package from Wisconsin. I was the one who signed for it — you knew this, my signature was on the courier slip. I couldn't help but see the name on the return address."

Fowley, of course.

"It came from Diana's family." He knew that she wanted to ask the next obvious question and decided to save her the trouble this time. "Something that she had specified in her will that I was to have six months after the fact. Basically a collection of letters, addressed to herself at her parents' home during the years when she was in Europe. They were apparently meant for me."

"Have you read them?"

"No.... I didn't even really open the box. The enclosed letter from her estate lawyer just explained the contents on behalf of the family."

"Why didn't you open it?"

"What would be the point?"

"The point?" Scully was more than mildly surprised at his question. Was it always true that physicians and their ilk couldn't heal themselves? "The point being, Mulder, that you've related this story to me about a woman who — while she may have been led into making some wrong decisions at one time — loved you and I believe you loved her back. You say that she deserves to be better remembered and yet you refuse to open the door to every good memory that you may have had with her. Please don't do that. Not for me. Above all, please don't use me as an excuse to justify it. It'll all just backfire someday and that's the last thing I want to have happen."

It was clear that she had struck a nerve. Mulder gathered himself up off the floor and walked away to seek refuge beside her front window. How many times had she stood in that exact same spot,

staring out at the passing world while trying to decipher life's often obscure lessons? Spurred by an unexpected boost of confidence, she scrambled to her feet and followed.

As she moved closer, she was overcome by an irresistible need to touch him. There hadn't been much touching of any kind lately, and it suddenly occurred to her that they had both been avoiding it. Raising her hand hesitantly, she let it hover above his left shoulder blade for a spell before bringing it down to rest against his back. It was nearly imperceptible, but she did feel a reaction from him.

"I'm so sorry, Mulder, if my insecurities made you to think it was the right thing to do, but it's not.... To quote your own words, it's not fair or reasonable. Not to Diana, but most importantly, not to you."

After an extended silence, he finally spoke. "Sometimes we can't control what's fair or reasonable."

His voice had taken on that distracted, faraway tone again. She began to suspect that it was the result of some self-preservation thing on his part with regards to the whole subject of Diana Fowley.

"When I was in the hospital, I was scared out of my wits like I'd never been before in my life. And it wasn't so much the fact that I could have died. I'm not sure that ever bothered me... not as long as I thought that it might provide some sort of evidence of 'whatever'. It was the thought of what other crazy things would happen to me before I died. You can't know how unsettling it was to 'hear' what people were thinking. Every time someone passed by or entered the room, I'd catch the top layer of their thoughts... you know, that 'talking to ourselves' thing that we all do in our heads? I heard it all. And the rest of it sounded like the noise from one big room of people talking all at once that I could never shut out. I thought I'd go mad."

Scully smoothed her hand over his back towards his right arm, continuing along its length until she encountered his hand. His fingers played absently with hers before grasping them firmly.

"Circumstances being what they were, I never did have much of a chance to talk to Diana after she came back to the Bureau. Like I said before, I had my suspicions about what she was doing, but I really didn't want to get close enough to have them be proven right. During my stay in the hospital, however, I couldn't help but find out things. And what I found out surprised me."

"What was that?"

"Mainly that she loved me. For real. But we weren't in the same place anymore. I couldn't return the feelings. But it made me remember that I did love her at one time. I guess it also made me wonder what might have been... the life that we had made plans for but never lived."

Although she hated herself for the reaction, just hearing Mulder admit to "wondering" was disheartening, despite what he just said about not loving Diana anymore, and despite her own assessment that perhaps he should wonder about her. Once upon a time, Scully's feelings were only that Diana was more Mulder's type. In recent months, it had begun to gnaw at her that Agent Fowley's belief system likely meant that she was also a more capable and compatible working partner for Fox Mulder than Dana Scully could ever be. The reality was that she had been assigned to the X-Files to provide scientific credibility to his work. However, in all these years, she had never really found Mulder to be tragically clueless about the importance of a rigorous scientific approach. And — as he had reminded her at critical junctures in their working relationship — it wasn't as if he was often wrong, anyway. It made her consider how true her statement from two years ago might have been after all. Maybe she did hold him back. With no more life-changing battles to wager, maybe — regardless of what conclusion they would come to this evening about their personal relationship — her time with the X-Files should soon come to an end.

Talk about self-revelations....

"I think she felt she owed a debt of some kind to Mr. Spender. Wound up working alongside him because it was preferable to something much worse. I wasn't adept enough at the mind-reading to do any sort of probing; all I ever managed to gather was what was already 'out there'... the stuff that's waiting to be said but not yet verbalized."

He paused, as though deciding whether to continue to the brink or pull back and play it safe. In the meantime, her fingers slipped away from his hand, symbolic of a lifeline that she couldn't hold onto no matter how hard she tried.

"It was the same with you. I knew what you wanted to say, but couldn't.... Do you love me anymore, Scully, or is that basically over?"

Something cold and ominous pierced her very soul. Once again, the fact that there was no apparent emotion in his voice made the question seem infinitely worse, especially since his back was turned to her and she couldn't see his face.

"Oh God, Mulder, how can you say that...?"

"Because I don't know. And I need to know."

"How can you —"

He turned around to face her and what she saw stopped her in mid-sentence. When had he acquired this amazing newfound talent — the ability to remain so unreasonably controlled in what she could only describe as a gut-wrenching moment?

"The thing is, Scully, even though you thought I was dying, I never heard you say it. I could tell the words were there in your mind, but something held you back. Maybe they were good reasons, but I couldn't tell what they were."

He appeared as cool and unmoved as she had ever seen him. They could just as easily have been sitting across the desk from one other at the office discussing a case, the way he just spoke. Maybe her worst fears were being realized; maybe he had simply given up. As much as that possibility haunted her on a regular basis these days, the potential reality of it staring her in the face right this second made her stomach lurch.

"Mulder, I can't explain what was going through my mind at that time. I don't know. All I know is that I love you so much and so deeply that I have trouble convincing myself that it's even real. It terrifies me and I don't doubt that's why you question me. I don't handle fear well and I don't handle uncertainty well. Not only that, you and I both know that I've made some strange choices in the past. Every time I think about how you fit in with that pattern, it occurs to me that you don't. And that scares me even more. I don't know what it means for the future and I end up being convinced that you'll wake up one day and realize that I'm totally wrong for you."

There was a painfully long pause before he responded.

"And who is right for me, Scully? You think Diana's right for me? You think I'm still pining for her even though she's gone?"

"Will you do me a favor?"

The question seemed to catch him off guard. He shrugged, a puzzled look on his face. "What?"

"Go home and open that box. Read what she wanted you to know and say goodbye to her. Until you do, I don't think you can be sure of how you really feel."

"Why does it have to keep coming back to this?"

"Because it's why we're here, Mulder. I need to clear the air about Diana. You've apparently chosen to ignore her, but I can't. Day after day, I wonder, I assume, and... and it slowly kills me inside. Don't you see? All it does is turn me into this person who can't —"

She stopped, no longer able to match his detachment. She was surprised by how calm she felt even as the tears threatened to spill over. But what was even more surprising was the corresponding change she observed in her partner, obvious even through her blurred vision. The controlled facade suddenly shattered, allowing the empathic side of Fox Mulder to resurface. The look on his face, however, made her want to cry just as much for him as for her.

Mulder never did react well to seeing her this way, but it was all the more distressing when he perceived himself to be the cause of it. He had disregarded her suffering for too long and it was

finally taking its toll on him. Actually, many things were starting to take their toll on him. And the longer he gazed into those watery blue eyes pretending not to care, the harder it was to deny and the harder it was to keep up the fake emotional distance. It wasn't something he was naturally good at, that much was certain.

Out of nowhere, he heard himself whispering, "She didn't deserve to die like that, Scully..."

"I know, Mulder —"

"— not for me..."

It was added under his breath as an afterthought, but she heard it clearly, along with the anguished tone that he tried to disguise. She should have guessed that it was more a guilt thing than a love thing. Small wonder he hadn't wanted to open up any memories of the past. If he valued their time together at all, it would hurt all that much more that she had sacrificed herself to save him. According to Fox Mulder's book of life, people just didn't do that on his behalf.

"She loved you. It wasn't even a choice."

He seemed unconvinced, prompting her to pin him with a look and a question. "Did you consider for a second not going to Antarctica to search for me?"

Without any thought or hesitation, he shook his head.

"Then I think we both understand what Diana did. Maybe we should accept it and let it go at that."

Before either of them could become completely overwhelmed, Scully closed the distance between them and drew him into her arms. There was an immediate connection in their embrace that caused her heart to swell. Was this what was meant by the saying that "it hurts so good"? It took a while longer, but Mulder eventually allowed his body to relax against hers. The release was accompanied by an intense shudder that shook the both of them from head to toe.

"I shouldn't have to tell you this, but you can't just decide to remove her from your past." She thought back to something that her mother had told her years ago — in response to some long-forgotten teenage angst — and realized that it was good advice no matter how old the recipient. "We're the sum total of all of our memories. If we arbitrarily cast any of them aside, even for what we think are noble reasons, we become less than what we're meant to be. Not to mention that it just isn't healthy."

He took a deep breath — enough to bring himself under control — but remained silent. She had the distinct impression that any emotional outbursts would be saved for a more private time. In an ironic way, she understood totally. In fact, she had a much clearer understanding about this than she could have ever thought possible one short month ago. This first step of acknowledgment was only the bare beginning. Scully had no doubt that the complete adventure could wind up being a bittersweet journey for him, even more so than what she herself had experienced a couple of weeks ago on that fateful weekend. All in all, it was just another demonstration of how life's hard lessons weren't necessarily doled out in the most convenient and timely fashion.

"Scully...?"

"Hmm?"

She lifted her head from his chest to look up at him and was pleasantly surprised by the near-instant touch of his lips on hers. It was a kiss not unduly chaste like the one he had initiated on New Year's Eve; nor was it mind-numbingly passionate and out of control like the ones they had shared a few months ago at his mother's house. It was just pleasurably sweet and soulfully satisfying, she thought, as she tilted her head back against the support of his hand and parted her lips in response to his familiar, gentle prodding. As usual, the simple act of being kissed by him delivered an exhilarating rush of warmth throughout her body and set fire to her extremities. It left her feeling emotionally vulnerable and sexually liberated at the same time. It was a battle that she could never tell which side would win. Dana Scully had no idea what part of her would prevail if pushed to the limit by this man.

Before she could think further on it or wonder whether their activity might escalate into something more serious, Mulder pulled away from her suddenly, as though an alarm had gone off in his head.

"I think I should go."

The disappointed expression on Scully's face was immensely gratifying, all things considered. So was the tone in her voice when she asked, "You're not staying?"

He reached down and took hold of her right hand, placing it against his chest.

"I have things to do... as you well know."

"I never meant that you should go home right this minute to do that —"

"No use procrastinating any longer, right?"

"I think you have to do whatever feels right for you, Mulder."

"I'd like to stay, Scully, but I shouldn't. If I do, things might happen and even though that might be a good thing for us, tonight wouldn't be the best time. My mind's not clear..."

He was being honest. While a substantial part of him wanted to lose himself in a night of hot blooded, violent lovemaking, he knew that the last thing either of them needed was to have second thoughts at some point in the future over who might have been most prominent in his mind: Diana or Scully. It just wasn't the right time.

All the same, as he peered into those misty blue eyes, he couldn't help imagining what the right time might eventually feel like. For a few months now, he had been stricken with the thought that such an event might never take place. That their stairway encounter at his mother's house would end up being the humiliating carnal "high point" of their doomed relationship. Speaking so softly that it sounded like he was making a promise to himself, he whispered, "Someday, though, Scully. Someday soon."

He took a closer look at the hand that he held clasped to his heart and noticed that she was wearing a ring that he couldn't recall ever seeing before. Scully didn't normally wear much jewelry. While one part of him absently considered its possible significance, another part was reminded of something from a long time ago, something that had initially occurred to him this afternoon while he was having a drink with Byers. Things seemed to be coming around full circle at last.

"What is it?"

"Nothing." He smiled reassuringly at her. It was a smile not exceptionally spectacular in her memory of famous Mulder grins, but it was full of genuine feeling like no other that she had seen in a long, long time. He added softly, "Just remembering something else that I have to do."

"Something good?"

"Yeah... you might say that."

He smiled again. This time, there was a nostalgic hint of bashfulness in him as he impulsively brought her hand up to his lips and kissed her fingertips. Not a new or life-changing gesture, but she saw it as a sign that they were once again headed down the right track. And while Dana Scully knew better than to assume that it meant no more dark tunnels ahead, she took it as a strong indication that there might eventually be a bright new day at the end of them.

* * * * *

The clatter of keys landing against the table shattered the quiet stillness of the late evening. Fox Mulder stood and stared at them for several beats before he shrugged himself out of his jacket and slung it across the back of a chair. He glanced down at his watch for the second time since entering the apartment, even though he knew precisely what time it was and exactly how many hours he had at his disposal before daybreak. Throughout the drive back from Scully's place, he had been weighing the pros and cons of fulfilling his promise to her, tonight.

He felt totally drained already, which might be a good thing. On the other hand, he really didn't feel up to enduring yet another emotional battering that would undoubtedly keep him up all night. He had avoided this chore for good reason. His feelings for Diana Fowley had always puzzled him. Despite professional admiration and personal appreciation of obvious assets, he wasn't sure if he had ever given himself fully to her. Even though some of the happiest times in his life had been spent in her company, it occurred to him that he had consistently held back something. Was it just his famous spooky intuition all along or had he not been fair to Diana at any point in their relationship? Maybe that was what he needed to know. Was it love, guilt, or something else entirely that he needed to establish closure for?

He wandered into his bedroom and snapped on the bedside lamp, pausing for a final moment to make a decision. He opened up the closet door and reached into the far corner to retrieve a box. It was nondescript, just a box. In fact, it still looked pretty much like it did when he received it two months ago. He carried it to his bed and peeled back the top flaps. Under the first layer of bubble wrap was a cassette tape and a small collection of letters bound with a rubber band. The cassette was unmarked but with no other instructions to be found, he surmised that he should play it.

Walking over to the sound system, he popped in the tape, pushed play, and returned to his bed. Sitting cross-legged with the box in front of him, he fingered the bubble wrap absently and waited. When he finally heard the haunting strains of the Moody Blues' signature tune, he smiled inwardly at Diana's choice. Appropriate in more ways than one. Mr. and Mrs. Kensington had had quite an experience on white satin sheets in Atlantic City.

Mulder sighed and rubbed his hands over his face. Scully was correct in her assessment, of course. His time spent with Diana was an important part of who he was and there was no point in trying to bury that fact right along with her. Maybe this was the step that would finally move life forward for him and Scully. Maybe, in some strange way, it was what Diana would have wanted him to do.

Outside, the night continued to fall.

Inside, the music played on.

And under the dim light of a solitary lamp, Fox Mulder closed his eyes and braced himself for a soul searching journey into his past.

End

Water's Edge



Overcoming the final boundaries of passion...

NOTE:

The first scene here is a direct continuation of the Prologue scene from Truths Untold.

Jasper, Alberta
September 2000

The sound of the splash still echoing in the distance, a soft voice and a gentle touch came to him from behind.

"What was that, Mulder?"

He spun around quickly, dazed with the feeling that he had just briefly lost some time, and inexplicably guilty about the fact that she had probably been witness to it. Old habits die hard. Track two, side A, of Mulder & Scully's Greatest Hits collection...

"What was what?" He swept aside some twigs and leaves from the seat next to him and extended his arm in a welcoming gesture.

She rolled her eyes at him, maneuvering around the tree to join him on the colorfully painted wooden bench, one of many scattered along the shore surrounding the lake. Dressed in a white sleeveless tunic top over some matching walking shorts, she looked like a totally different person than the one that he usually encountered on a day to day basis. So much softer and relaxed. So much more so than he had ever imagined her capable of being, in all honesty. Why on earth hadn't he thought of taking her on a vacation sooner?

"You just threw something into the water," she whispered conspiratorially into his ear, edging close to him in the most "personal space invading" way she knew how. And she knew how very well, considering she had learned from a master over the years.

Leaning away from her slightly so he could look into her eyes, he replied dryly, "Aren't you up a little early for having stayed up so late, Scully?"

"Okay, so you don't want to tell me. Fine."

"No, it's just that I'm feeling a little ridiculous 'cause I don't actually recall doing it. I mean, I meant to do it, but..." At her puzzled and almost concerned look, he shrugged it off with a sheepish smile. "This fresh mountain air must be intoxicating, that's all. It was — a ritual I promised to perform."

"Promised who?"

"Myself. And someone else who once cared about me."

He looked off into the distance to where the object in question had pierced the surface of the water. Tell-tale concentric ripples were still radiating outwards from the area, growing larger and more undefined until they faded into the depths of the lake. She followed his gaze for several seconds before looking at his face, reading it perfectly. After all these months, it was still obvious whenever he thought about her.

"Diana?"

It struck him how, for the first time that he could figure, the name didn't stick in her throat in some way. Ever since they shared a somewhat heated "full disclosure" conversation a few months ago, Dana Scully had finally come to terms with Diana Fowley, laying her unfortunate rival to rest. In the meantime, the process had also allowed him to grieve properly. He finally came to some satisfactory understanding that Diana had been put into the position of not having many choices, to the point where she ultimately lost control over what her life had become. Strangely enough, it had been Scully who had convinced him that it was perfectly acceptable to have happy memories of their time together all those years ago. We are the sum total of all of our memories. If we arbitrarily cast any of them aside, even for what we think are noble reasons, we become less than what we're meant to be. Impromptu Dana Scully wisdom. Funny how things worked out.

"Yeah. When I finally caught up with her after all those months, I tried to give back the wedding band that she had left me with, but she wouldn't hear of it. I didn't tell you this part — and I know it sounds pretty pathetic — but I wore that ring the whole time she was gone."

Instinctively, she reached up to her throat and touched her necklace. "So there's precedent..."

"Well, no. Maybe, I don't know. When I wore this," he leaned over to slide his fingers underneath hers, tilting up the cross so that it reflected in the sunlight, "it was with the hope that it would act as some sort of beacon, to lead me back to you. On the other hand, it never entered my mind that wearing the ring would help me find Diana. It wasn't even like I was trying to find her. It was just that I wasn't quite ready to let go yet, to face a certain element of truth. I was a lot younger back then, Scully. Principled, but in a different way. Anyway, she told me to keep it so that I could perform some sort of ritual with it."

"What do you mean — or, what did she mean by that? What kind of ritual?"

"She told me — and these are her words, not mine — that when I finally find the woman who can love me the way I deserve to be loved, I should do something with it. You know, to mark the occasion."

"Like throwing it into a lake?"

"Like throwing it into a lake."

He looked into her eyes momentarily and then shifted his attention to the water lapping close by, marveling at the identical liquid blueness that he saw in both.

"Interesting concept. Seems an uncharacteristically magnanimous gesture for a woman in that situation, though."

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, when she said it, it was with more than just a broad hint that it might eventually be her."

"And what? You didn't believe it could ever happen?"

"Not at the time. I told you that I didn't take her little disappearance as a betrayal, but it still affected me. It was something that couldn't be erased no matter how many times she said that she loved me. Diana was good at saying the words, you know; I heard them all the time. I just knew that whatever she had been involved in that had kept her away for six months — regardless of whether it had been for my own good, for my own protection, whatever — I just wasn't going to get over it that easily."

"And yet..."

"And yet, when I saw her a couple of years ago for the first time in almost a decade, why did I react the way I did?"

She dropped her head slightly, wondering if she would always be so transparent.

"I dunno. Maybe I just wanted to hurt some more."

In the brief spell of silence that followed, Scully thought back to that strange time in their lives, a little over two years ago, in the months after her cancer had gone into remission. Somehow it made perfect sense that Mulder gravitated towards Diana when he saw her again. It must have been a strange combination of wanting self-punishment and basic, fundamental escape. Who better to do that with than an old flame?

"Did you sleep with her?"

"I assume you mean within the past couple of years?"

She nodded, brushing off a leaf that had fallen into her lap, trying not to appear too solemn should the answer not be what she wanted to hear. He seemed to be taking his time in answering her, in any case.

"No.... Does that surprise you?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, it does."

"I'm hurt." He was only joking, but he had to admit to being slightly disturbed by her implied assumption. "Why would you think I'd sleep with her?"

She had her reasons, but Scully knew that there were certain things that would never be shared, no matter how close two people were.

"Well, it wasn't like you and I were involved at the time."

"Scully, you and I have always been involved. From the moment we met. It would be a lie to try to deny that."

"So are you saying that you haven't slept with anyone in the entire time that we've known each other?"

"No, I'm not saying that."

The look on his face was an odd one indeed. She couldn't tell whether it was an attempt at a false bravado that dared her to ask further, or whether it was a plea not to do so. No matter, since she surely did not want to know any details. Just another one of those things that needn't be shared.

"Anyway... getting back to Diana, she threw herself at you enough times, and was obvious enough about it."

"Not to sound egotistical, Scully, but you've seen various other women throw themselves at me. I haven't slept with any of them either. Besides, you didn't exactly ask if I was tempted."

He punctuated his last word by flicking his fingers playfully at the buttons of her shirt. She swatted his hand away and decided to play along this time.

"Were you?"

"Were you tempted with Doctor Dan?"

"Do you recall the part about him being a cardiac patient?"

"That's got nothing to do with whether or not you were tempted, Scully."

"In that case, I'd prefer not to answer that." She was smiling as she said it.

"Oh? I'm the only one who gets to do the soul-baring thing this morning?"

"Indulge me, Mulder. I promise it'll be remembered and well paid for before the day is out."

"Oooh, well then... ask away, by all means."

He gave her such an exquisitely sweet smile that it made her heart swell. It almost made her want to swallow the question that she simply had to ask, now that the opportunity presented itself.

"Since you offered, I do have something else I'd like to clear up. Something that's been eating at me for almost a year now..."

"What is it?"

"When I was in New Mexico last October and I called you to see how you were doing — just before you were admitted to the hospital — Diana answered your phone. I'm positive it was her."

"Yeah, it might have been. I mean, it must have been. Yes. What about it?"

"I've never been able to figure out why you called her, how you thought she could possibly help you —"

"I never called her."

"Then why was she at your apartment?"

"I'm a little fuzzy about that entire time, but not so fuzzy that I don't remember how it started. I collapsed in the stairwell at the university and the next thing I knew, she was leaning over my face. She took me home."

"She said at the hospital the next day that you'd called for her."

"Well, Scully, obviously someone called for her. Highly unlikely that she was just passing by. All I'm saying is that it wasn't me."

Scully looked out to where Mulder's little "ritual" had entered the water and could no longer see any ripples to give away what had happened. Gone. That easily.

Unable to tear her eyes away from the water even though she felt Mulder's intense gaze on her, she asked quietly, "Is there any part of you that wishes that things could have turned out differently between you two?"

There was no hesitation this time, his response came so quickly as to be rehearsed.

"Specifically, yes; generally, no."

"That's very diplomatic."

She seemed very introspective, and suddenly Mulder wasn't quite sure what part of this conversation was mere satisfaction of morbid curiosity and what part might be something more. He decided that starting from this day forward, he didn't want to be guessing about those sorts of things any more.

"Tell me what you're thinking, Scully."

"I'm thinking about 'finding a woman who loves you the way you deserve to be loved'. Good words."

"I sense a 'but' waiting to be said."

"Well, the 'but' would be that... you surely deserve more than what I've put you through."

"We're not going there anymore, Scully. Right? Whatever our self-perceived shortcomings, we said that we're just gonna move forward and leave all that baggage behind us." Her expression was still tinged with uncertainty, although he could tell that she was trying to rid herself of all doubts. "Hey, I made that a condition of this trip. You weren't supposed to come along if you didn't agree. No regrets. The misunderstandings we had between us have been resolved. Resolved and buried, just like that ring I threw in there."

"If only 'resolved and buried' could mean 'simple and easy'."

"You know better than that. No matter what path we choose, simple and easy is not in the cards for us."

"I know."

"Hey, don't look so down. We're on holidays. Look at that sky — could you have asked for a better welcome on your first day?"

"After the welcome I got last night, I'd be quite greedy to expect better."

He grinned at her, suddenly feeling extremely light, as though he could float on air. He felt energized. Must have been that little bit of Scully magic last night. He stood up and looked out over the water one final time, saying a personal farewell to a path not taken. Then he turned and reached a hand down to her, pulling her to her feet.

"So Scully, how do you propose we kill these hours before we welcome your second night here?"

* * * * *

Washington, D.C.
Approximately Two Weeks Ago

Dana Scully stopped in her tracks upon seeing her partner sitting at the familiar bench. She had expected to find him here, and yet she was surprised all the same. Surprised because they so rarely came here anymore. But expected because he was by himself. She had always imagined that it was a familiar haunt for him, somewhere he would go to for some peace and quiet. As she continued to watch him from a distance, memories of covert meetings intermingled with incomprehensible feelings of separation and anxiety came flooding back like it had all been yesterday. But she didn't need reality to remind her that it had been many yesterdays ago. Six years' worth, in fact. Long before either one of them had been forced to make any truly important decisions. Long before life — in essence — became complicated.

She had left him an hour before lunch, off to run a quick errand. They had been cleaning out the basement office, organizing files for an internal audit and evaluation that Skinner had told them would happen sometime within the next six weeks or so. Cases were light, as they oddly tended to be in the late summer. Catching up on paperwork and ensuring some semblance of organization was an annual ritual that they usually undertook at this time of the year. Nothing overly exciting or exerting. So she was surprised when she returned to find him nowhere in sight. No note, no message. His jacket was hanging on the coat rack and his cellphone — as she soon discovered — was in its pocket. When two o'clock rolled around and he still hadn't returned, she started out on the long walk to find him. Across the mall and many steps beyond, she finally arrived at her present location.

She saw him lean forward, resting his chin in a steeple formed by his fingers, his elbows supported by his knees. The muscles in her stomach clenched involuntarily at the sight. The reaction took her by surprise. In itself, the scene she observed would not have been disturbing to any passerby. A man was simply sitting on a bench by the river, probably deep in thought. All in all, nothing too much out of the ordinary. So why did Scully see the picture as one of profound loss?

She continued to watch from a distance, approaching only when she finally saw him sit up straight again.

"Is this seat taken?"

Mulder looked up, shading his eyes with his hand as he tried to focus on the figure against the bright afternoon sun. No mistaking that form. And no mistaking that line, either, the one that brought with it so many memories from days gone by. Memories of secret messages and after-dark meetings. Back when the chase was still thrilling and new. When life was simplistic and focused. Exactly how long ago was it? Fox Mulder suddenly felt very old.

He had also gone too long without answering. Scully seemed a bit unnerved by his silence and started to apologize for her intrusion.

"I'm sorry. I — I didn't realize that you might want to be alone..."

"No, Scully — have a seat. I just zoned out for a second; seeing you standing there took me back. Didn't expect you, that's all. And since when did that question need an actual reply anyway?"

"Oh, you mean, it was just our secret code for clandestine meetings?"

"Yeah, kinda like a password to get us into our exclusive club. Only paranoiacs and enigmatic doctors need apply. Although after all these years, I think I'm a little less paranoid and you're a little less enigmatic — at least to me."

Clandestine meetings. Exclusive clubs. Everything seemed to have a double meaning these days.

"Life used to be so thrilling, huh, Scully?"

"Used to be? What are you saying, Mulder — that your life is dull all of a sudden?"

"Not dull, no. Never dull."

"But not thrilling?"

"Not especially... and I'm not just talking work, Scully."

Well, there it was in a nutshell. Life outside of work had never been thrilling, so what was he getting at?

"Mulder, to you, work has always been your life and vice versa. Now I know that you've reached the end of a lot of thrilling chases, but look at what it's brought you. Rumor is that the X-Files might be set to become a full fledged division that'll be given full recognition at the Bureau. And I know you're not given to valuing that sort of thing, but you must know what all this means in the big picture. A lot of changes are going to be happening, changes that you and I have worked towards for so long. I mean, Mulder, you might soon have everything you've ever hoped for."

There was a significant and protracted moment of silence before he turned away from her and said, "I won't have you."

She was so surprised that all she could do was return the silence. He, on the other hand, was expecting at least some sort of attempt at appeasing him, such as, "what do you mean by that?"

"So it's true?" He stared out across the river, avoiding the questioning gaze that he felt from her.

"No, of course not. What have you heard?"

"That you've accepted a forensics research assignment at Quantico as part of a small team working under the supervision of a Doctor or Agent James Russell."

She breathed a small sigh of relief. That.

"Well, if you know that much, Mulder, then you should also know that it's a temporary assignment that doesn't even officially remove me from active field duty."

"I heard fourteen months, Scully. That's about as temporary as the year twenty-oh-one."

"It's not full time."

"Fine. It doesn't really matter anyway. Except for the fact that you made this decision on your own — without even bringing it to my attention. When were you going to tell me? Were you just going to leave? Didn't you even want to give me time to get a new partner?"

The way he emphasized the last word made her flinch inwardly. This was totally unexpected. That she didn't let him know from the beginning had nagged at her all along, but she had not anticipated having to answer to this barrage of emotion here on the banks of the Potomac.

"What we've heard is that the X-Files division is getting actual resources, Mulder. You're going to have your pick of junior agents. My position on this research team is going to leave me with two or three days every week to pursue my regular work. I thought that it was an arrangement that wouldn't require you to take on a full-time partner."

"Did you ever stop to think about whether I wanted to do this anymore?"

Talk about unexpected.

"What are you saying, Mulder? That you're done with the X-Files?"

"Scully, so much has happened over the past year. I think my head is still spinning from all of it. I've felt things over the past twelve months that I've never felt before. It's been crazy. I've been crazy. I've lost so much and yet I feel I should be thankful for so much more. And throughout everything, I keep turning to you as that pillar of stability in my life, that constant reminder of where my own reality begins and ends. But somewhere along the way, I lost track of the fact that we still have our own agendas. We're still each our own person. And ultimately, we have our own roads to follow. I didn't realize that until this morning."

"What happened this morning?"

"I got a call from the University. They're interested in having me teach a course in paranormal sciences of all things."

"Are you interested?"

"Maybe, but that's not the point."

"What is the point?"

"The point is that maybe we've gone as far as we can, doing what we've been doing. Together. Regardless of what the Bureau has in store for the X-Files, maybe it is time for us to go our separate ways. Professionally speaking. Scully, we can't go on hiding what's happened for much longer. If I recall, it was never our intention. And I don't know about you, but it doesn't feel right to be involved in this illicit — albeit well-behaved — affair. I know we've agreed not to conduct any bedroom romps for the time being, but we've already crossed that line and at some point, continuing to deny ourselves is just stupid."

"What does all of this mean in terms of —"

"This project you've signed on for? I guess what I'm trying to say is that, much as I don't like it, I think I now realize that it's inevitable. You've got other places to go and so do I. So I've been sitting here trying to gain clarity, you might say."

"But..." She stopped and glanced at her watch, smiling slightly when she returned her gaze to his face. "Clarity is not quickly or easily gained?"

"Something like that." He offered a crooked, self-deprecating grin in return, squinting against the sunlight. "You look like you have something to say, Scully. What is it? You didn't just traipse out here to find my sorry ass, did you?"

"Well, I couldn't get ahold of you by phone." Mulder looked to both sides of himself, suddenly aware that he was just in his shirtsleeves. No jacket next to him; he had been sitting out here in total cellphone deprivation.

"I got my appointment confirmed. This Sunday."

Scully's annual medical. Another agonizing check into the state of the cancer. Another tension-filled two weeks of not just hoping that everything was stable, but of praying that nothing new had surfaced. At that particular thought, Mulder felt his muscles tighten up as he revisited an unpleasant memory from a few months ago. Scully's little "outing" with the Cancerman. The incident had dangerously sidetracked the two of them for nearly a week. He just hadn't known how to deal with the unexpected anger that he felt at her misguided adventure. And he was scared to death that something had been done to her without her knowledge. He had almost insisted that she get checked out right then and there, but for the sake of rebuilding some unity over what eventually turned out to be the beginning of a rather rough period for them, he had left it alone.

Scully knew exactly that sort of thoughts had entered his head just by his changed expression.

"I was wondering if you'd come with me..."

The look on his face softened immediately as he reached over and took one of her hands from her lap. He was still somewhat amazed that she had asked, despite the fact that little by little, she had been more open about her vulnerability lately.

"Of course I will."

They sat in contented silence for several minutes, before Scully withdrew her hand and got up, walking towards the edge of the river bank.

"How long have you known about this project, Mulder?" She kept her back to him while she talked.

"About a week or so. Your Dr. Russell called my number by mistake; wanted to leave a message with me that the project had been approved. I told him to call back and put it in your voicemail."

"I was wondering why you've been sort of distant lately..."

"Sorry. It's my unfortunate male ego, Scully. I thought you were running away from me. Like I said, a bit of clarity helps. You'd think I would have realized a long time ago that neither one of us wants to be doing this until we're fifty. We have to let go some time."

"So it looks like you might have a real decision to make too."

"Well, this position is for January. I have some time on my side. But I'd still like to see what comes out of this department evaluation thing. Although, no matter how nicely they put it, it's still an audit and those are never pleasant. Maybe my decision will be made for me."

"Would that surprise you?"

"After all the decisions that I haven't made in this lifetime? Not one bit. But who knows — maybe this time, I'll even agree with it."

She turned around to lean against the steel railing, meeting his eyes briefly before looking off into the distance. Mulder took the opportunity to study her from head to toe, considering just how much she had changed since the last time she stood in that exact same spot in front of him.

"I used to come here every now and then, after work, when we were shut down that first time. There was this rock — over there, I think; it's totally covered by that overgrown shrub now — where I'd sit and watch this bench. I'd wait to see if you'd show up."

"Spying on me, Scully?"

"No, but I was concerned about you for a long time. And you weren't altogether forthcoming, if I remember correctly. It was all I could do, since I didn't exactly feel comfortable enough to just call you up and say, 'hey, I'm in the neighborhood, can I drop by?'"

"So did you ever catch me here?"

"Honestly? Once. But I didn't know how to approach you, how to explain why I was even here. So I just left."

He got up from the bench and walked over to her, leaning forward against the railing, facing in the opposite direction.

"Interesting times, huh? Talk about paranoid. Funny thing is, I don't think that I'd have the same commitment to it all if the opportunity were to arise again. I don't think that I can care that much anymore. About the job." He leaned back to look at her, a bemused expression on his face, as though he had surprised even himself by admitting such a thing out loud. "What does that mean?"

"I think it means you're getting old, Mulder." She smiled at his look and reached up to ruffle his hair affectionately. "But seriously, after so many years of chasing the same stick, it's perfectly understandable."

"Are you comparing me to a dog, Scully?"

"All I'm saying is that — outside of what might be happening with the X-Files now, finally — you haven't been rewarded all that well for the time that you've invested. And at some point, the

commitment wanes, especially if you've found some of the answers that you've been looking for. I mean, it's not like you're here for the money —"

He laughed. "God, no."

"Or the hours —" She elbowed him in the ribs for emphasis.

"Ow. Another huge benefit. Don't mention respect or I'll really have to cry."

"Mom once told me that as we get older, our priorities sometimes change so much and so quickly that it's astounding when we finally realize it. I guess until that moment we're busy running around looking for the latest and greatest 'key to everything'. Or, I suppose — if our names were Smith and Jones and not Mulder and Scully — we're chasing after the next best minivan or motorboat. We're all the same; it's just a matter of degree. Chasing our tails, not seeing what's really important."

"So you are comparing me to a dog."

"You and me both, Mulder. And maybe the whole flippin' world too."

"You know what, Scully? I think I did manage to gain some clarity here this afternoon. Your mom's right. It is astounding. It's astounding to know that I'm no longer willing to put off the rest of my life for the remainder of this job. Or for any other job for that matter. We only get so many chances and God knows you and I have pushed the limits. So it's not just the dilemma of letting the Bureau know that we are doing what they think we're doing anyway and then trying to live with the aftermath... it's — it's so much bigger than that."

"So as usual, Mulder, where does that leave us?"

"Let's take that vacation, Scully. Let's take your trip to the mountains and see those blue-green lakes before I really get old and my parts shrivel up. I know we have to be on our best behavior for the next little while because of this audit and what it can mean, but... " He turned sideways and leaned in close to her, whispering suggestively into her ear, "In the meantime, let's go somewhere far away where we can relax by day and screw each other's brains out by night. Or the other way around, it really doesn't matter to me. Let's just set aside all these monumental decisions for later."

* * * * *

J. Edgar Hoover Building
Washington, D.C.

Mulder walked up to Skinner's desk as authoritatively as he could manage under the circumstances. The older man's stern expression greeted him as usual, almost warning him to be speedy with his request and not waste his precious time.

"Assistant Director Skinner, I'd like to request clearance for some vacation days for me and Agent Scully."

The stern expression transformed into one of confusion. "Excuse me? Did you say vacation days?"

"Yes sir."

"What am I not understanding here, Agent Mulder — why do you need clearance from me? Don't you normally just go to HR to book holiday time?"

"Normally yes, but this is short notice and I did say that it was for the both of us."

"At the same time?" Skinner's eyebrows shot up briefly for a moment, but he recovered quickly. What the hell. After all, the unofficial office pool had long ago turned into "when" instead of "if". Still, this seemed like an abnormally bold move. They had certainly taken time off simultaneously in the past, but without exception, it was only when both were recuperating in some manner.

"Yes sir."

"And HR would want — what?"

"Details on how the unit will be covered off, and essentially more paperwork than I care to have."

"Is there anything more that I should be aware of, Agent Mulder?"

Not anything other than what you already suspect, or know, Mulder thought. He shook his head, however, hoping that he could count on this man to give him enough trust to leave this alone, or at least leave it off the record.

"You're not experiencing any type of crisis? Agent Scully's healthy?"

"No reason to think otherwise. She's getting her annual checkup this weekend. And we're not in any difficulty that merits any departmental interest."

"Well, I guess there is the concern about your present caseload, and you would know better than me what the status is. When are you wanting this time off and how long is it for?"

"In the next two weeks or so, for no more than a week. We're currently in a homebound paper-pushing phase anyway, getting ready for this evaluation coming up. Nothing new has been started and I'm expecting that anything open will be addressed before we leave."

"So all you need from me is to inform HR that you two are cleared to be off-duty for a week?"

"Something like that."

"All right. I'll get on it as soon as possible and let you know."

"Thank you, sir." He turned to leave.

"Fox..."

Mulder stopped in his tracks. He could count on two fingers the number of times Skinner had called him by his first name.

"Yes sir?"

"I take it that you understand that it's up to you to ensure that personal matters stay personal."

They had managed to read one other perfectly.

"Yes, sir. Always."

* * * * *

Parkway Cemetery
Boston, MA

The bundle of flowers fell onto the soft grassy earth in a gentle tumble, landing against the left corner of the headstone that identified a Teena Mulder. Only a few steps away lay her ex-husband, the same man who had arranged for their burial plots many years ago despite their having been separated at the time. He didn't get them adjacent to one another because of their personal situation, but it had been his intention that their children would be able to visit them at one place, after they had passed on. Give them that in death, at least, he had told her.

Odds were, however, that they hadn't been intending on occupying those spots so soon.

Fox Mulder knelt down on one knee in front of the marker, bowing his head briefly.

"Hi Mom."

Approximately six months had passed since his world had been shaken up yet again. Six months since he had lost his mother to her own hand, with her taking whatever knowledge she had had of his sister to her grave. Many rough nights and hours of therapy invested later, Mulder finally found himself able to face coming here for the first time since the funeral.

"I want you to know that I'm fine. Really fine. Gone the entire circle. Been mad at myself and at you and at the world in general. I've spent the usual hours trying to analyze and rationalize what happened and why. Of course, I was determined to prove it. Prove that this was all somehow linked to my work or Dad's work... that Cancerman had done you in for good. I guess it's just hard

for me to take things at face value. The simplest answer has never been the real answer to anything in my life. I understand it's a learned response... this need to suspect that things aren't what they seem. Which isn't to say that I totally understand why you took this route. I don't. But I've come to accept it. Accept that some things are just not meant for me to understand. And that's okay."

His closed his eyes and turned his face skyward, feeling the sun's rays burning through the low cloud. It was one of those days where sunglasses were needed to cut the glare, even though it didn't look particularly sunny outside.

"I was going to come up on Mother's Day. Never made it, obviously. But I thought about you. I took a walk through a garden greenhouse and it brought me back to all those times when I'd come up to help you put in bedding plants for the summer. The house has been sold, of course, but I went up to the cabin and put in a couple of pine seedlings in the back. One for you and one for Sam... just like I did for Dad a few years ago. They'll all outlast me eventually — grow up big and strong, just the way they're supposed to."

He paused and reached out tentatively to touch the headstone, feeling a shiver go up his spine when his fingers came into contact with the cool surface.

"I'm heading off on a vacation with Scully, Mom. Taking some advice, I guess. I never realized that I can be so thick sometimes, but.... You knew about her, didn't you? It's taken me months to put the pieces together but at some point it occurred to me that you must have known. Certain things that you said to me last Christmas — which seemed strange at the time — weren't really all that strange after all. I think was I thrown by the traditional 'mother-son' tone of it all. That's not what we've ever really been, not since I left home anyway. All that stuff about realizing what's important in life, not wasting time.... You wanted to know that I wouldn't be forever driven by work. That I wouldn't wind up old and alone with no one to love. It didn't click until much later, but... I realize that you wanted to make sure that it might be safe for you to go."

He took the bundle of flowers and placed them upright against the front of the headstone, plucking out a dead leaf that was dangling from the cellophane package.

"It's been a wild ride over the past several months. Things have been happening... sorta fast. It's all relative, I guess. Scully and I are nothing if not methodically thorough. That weekend I was up in Quonochontaug, she came up to see me. It turned out to be... interesting and long-overdue. But what it all means is that we now have some important decisions to make when we come back."

Mulder sat down on the ground and reached over to the flower bundle once more, pulling out the rose he had added to the package. Blood red, more than half open. Gracefully long stemmed, with an abundance of leaves and thorns all the way from top to bottom, he had pricked himself just pulling it out from the container at the flower shop. As he proceeded to pull off its leaves and petals to scatter them on top of the grave, he felt himself inexorably drawn back to that late June weekend at the family summer house...

The weatherman had been promising hot weather for the coast the afternoon he drove out to Rhode Island. It was one of those instances when he had merely hopped into the car and set off with no notice. By chance, Scully had called him the next morning. After explaining where he was and what he was doing there, he invited her up to spend the weekend with him. The offer had been made more on impulse than anything else. Surprisingly, she accepted. Neither of them, however, could possibly have had any inkling of just how much things would change by the time the weekend was over.

She arrived late Saturday afternoon, just as he had finished putting in the first of his pine seedlings into the ground. He took a break to walk down to the edge of the water with her, filling her in on some old family stories of summers spent long ago.

"I'm glad you have good memories of this place, Mulder."

"Hmm. I guess you don't, right?"

"Well, you might say it's still a little creepy for me, but that can change."

"The holes in the wall have been filled in, Scully."

"It's sort of disturbing how you can say that so —"

"So what?"

"So casually."

"I don't mean it casually that I almost killed you, if you that's what you think."

"No — no, Mulder, that's not what I'm getting at. That whole experience was just quite frightening... seeing how far you'd go."

"That was then. I haven't been like that lately, have I?"

She smiled, not needing to answer that one. He gave her an appreciative onceover and grinned back.

"You look nice, Scully. Very summer-like. You should wear dresses more often."

"Doesn't quite fit the wardrobe requirements at the Bureau. At least this one doesn't."

"Why, just because your shoulders are exposed? You can easily slap one of your jackets on top of it. You can probably run better in this than in some of your tighter skirts." He reached down to pick up the edge of the full skirt, extending it outwards for emphasis. As he enjoyed the resulting backlit view of her legs through the gauzy material, it occurred to him that it wasn't often that Scully wore something so... accessible. "Stay here. Enjoy the scenery. I'll be right back after I plant that other tree."

He returned to his spot just a short walk up the bank and had almost finished digging out a second hole when he heard her approach.

"It's starting to rain, Mulder."

"Good, we need it. It'll be nice to cool down the temperature. The heat was stifling last night, made it hard to sleep."

"Aren't you going inside?"

"Actually, I'm just about finished here. I don't want to have to come out and deal with it later if it gets all muddy after the rain. You can go on in if you want; it's open."

"No, I'll wait for you."

She watched as he continued to pull dirt out of the ground.

"Can you give me a hand, Scully?"

He supposed in hindsight that he should have been more specific and asked her to hand him the seedling. As it turned out, his words seemed to strike Scully as meaning "give me a hand with digging this hole". When she bent towards him, hands reaching towards the dirt, he was suddenly reminded of an unpleasant memory that stopped him in mid-breath.

"No!" He was surprised by the sharpness in his voice. "Not that, you'll get your hands dirty."

She straightened back up and looked down at him, connecting with his eyes and seeing something other than what she had expected. The significance of the moment had not escaped her. As soon as he uttered his request, she had heard echoes of a similar plea from him several years ago, in a totally different situation, a totally different place. Help me, Scully.

She thought there'd be some awkward emotional response of some sort. Instead she simply found an open expression of need in his eyes, the kind that manifests out of too many years of persistent suffering, of waiting for physical relief to dull the senses. She had seen this look once before, several months ago when he was at his mother's house, packing up her belongings. Extremes of emotion were just so difficult to classify. Given the right circumstances, love, hate, anger, and grief, along with lust, desire, and sexual yearning can all be fused together into one big ball of

emotion with indistinct and blurred boundaries. She knew what drove him that night. It wouldn't surprise her one bit if some of the same was at work again right here, right now.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to bark at you. I just wanted you to drop the tree in here... " He turned his attention back to the hole in front of him.

Scully picked up the seedling from the cardboard tray near her feet and knelt down beside him. He pulled on the plastic pot and removed it, exposing the root ball in a clump of soil before she placed it carefully in the center of the indentation that he had dug. In no time at all, he was patting down the dirt around it, finishing up his task quickly. Meanwhile, the drops of rain had turned into a substantial drizzle.

They stood up together, with Mulder stripping off his gloves and tossing them aside. Even though she had sensed that something was coming, what happened next was still a surprise.

He reached out to grab her hand, pulling her closer to where he stood. She looked up at him questioningly, not saying a word, allowing him to hold her eyes in an intense, hypnotic stare. Mulder wanted to make clear his desire to her, but he also wanted to convey the fact that he had full control over his faculties. He knew that she might wonder whether this was merely a repeat of the incident at his mother's house. She continued in her silence, however, saying not a word in protest nor in rationalization. The next thing he knew, the rest of the world faded out as his parted lips captured her mouth in a slow, deep kiss.

Despite having crossed this particular line almost a year ago, they still didn't do this very often. And Mulder knew exactly why. All of the blood and heat in his body drained and pooled into one central region the split second after touching her lips. The effect was embarrassingly immediate. But during those rare occasions when they had allowed themselves the pleasure, he had come to recognize the distinct signs of Scully's own little problem with the activity. The way she would squeeze her legs together, trying not to squirm too obviously. The way she would make involuntary, barely audible noises that she would then try unsuccessfully to suppress. Despite feeling himself slipping into a foggy haze, he wondered abstractly if she would be disciplined enough to hold back screams of passion. He also wondered if this would be the day that he might finally find out....

Mulder carefully placed the remains of the rose — now just a tiny closed bud atop a bare stem — on top of the grave marker.

"Talk to you soon, Mom."

* * * * *

Jasper, Alberta

For more years than he cared to count, Fox Mulder had been a runner. He understood and grudgingly accepted the negative psychological implications, but for the most part, he ran because he enjoyed it. He liked the feeling of the wind against his body and the cleansing that it gave him, particularly when he ran in the rain. He liked the idea of being able to travel far on just the power afforded by his own two legs. He liked listening to the rhythmic pounding of his footsteps on the ground. He liked the undeniable proof of progress, the measurable reality of getting from point A to point B. He liked the simplicity and freedom of the activity. It was something that he could do no matter where he was, dependent on no one and nothing.

So ever since his arrival yesterday afternoon, he had been doing a lot of running. Taking advantage of the fact that Scully would be joining him a day late, he set out to explore the grounds and surrounding area. The trails here were absolutely stunning. Exquisitely groomed, lined with tall evergreens, teeming with animal life yet refreshingly lacking the human variety. The weather had been hot during the daylight hours, but the evenings were fresh and cool in that uncompromising northern way. And the air — well, it was totally unlike anything that he had ever breathed in his life, fragrant with the unmistakable scent of the great autumn outdoors. The springiness of the ground beneath his feet was another luxury entirely — it wasn't often that he had the opportunity to run on anything other than hard, knee-jarring concrete.

Every now and then, however, he would find himself running faster and faster. It would then develop into a full-blown sprint with which he would eventually wear himself out. Each time, it was brought about by the same set of thoughts: the reason for Scully's delayed arrival. She had been called back for a second briefing with her doctor. Definitely not normal. The only thing that seemed somewhat reassuring was that she had been told the repeat visit wasn't prompted by the cancer. But that was as much as they were prepared to tell her before they had the final results.

* * * * *

The click of a key in the door and then the sound of a familiar voice came calling.

"Hey Scully — how was your trip? Our cabin boy said that he just dropped off your luggage..."

"It was a nice ride. A little long, though. But it was a beautiful sun going down on the horizon." She looked around at their immediate surroundings and then settled on his eager-to-please face with a knowing smile. "This place is amazing, Mulder."

"Isn't it? I had to stop on the highway coming in to let a bunch of mountain sheep or goats or whatever cross the road."

"Big-horned sheep. The bus driver pointed them out to us."

"Just wait til you see the color of the lake here in the daylight."

"It looked pretty impressive even when I got in. I had a quick chance to look around when I checked in. I really like the 'rustic trappings of luxury' theme they have going here; it's quite unusual. They obviously cater to a high class of clientele."

"Yeah, I was talking to a room service guy yesterday who said that Marilyn Monroe stayed here while filming a movie years and years ago. He couldn't remember which movie. Mind you, he was so young, I was surprised he knew who she was at all."

"You're not still agonizing over the age thing, are you? You're not old, Mulder."

How could he possibly think such thoughts, anyway, looking as good as he did right this minute? He'd obviously been out running; his tank top was damp down the front of his chest. His lower half was encased in a pair of loose-fitting fleece shorts. It was a nice look for him, showing off his lanky, toned limbs. As she watched him walk over to the bed, she wondered if it was common for a woman to admire the way a man's legs went on and on and on...

Mulder sprawled himself on the bed behind her suitcase as she turned her attention back to moving neatly arranged piles of clothing into a nearby dresser. He threw a brief guilty glance over at the couch where his own suitcase sat, open and spilling over with his selections of the day.

"Okay, so tell me the good news, Scully."

"Well..." He didn't know what to make of the odd expression on her face. It was a puzzled yet curious look regarding something that she obviously didn't know how to categorize or explain. That couldn't be good.

"It is good news, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't be here so soon if anything was wrong."

"So why did they call you in again?"

"To let me know the results of some tests that they had to double-check."

"What sort of tests?"

"Well, that's the thing. These tests had nothing to do with — you know. They're standard tests that every woman gets every year. But apparently, they show my hormone levels going off the chart." She stopped and watched for a reaction. But he didn't seem to know what to make of the news any more than she did when she first heard. "You know that I've been on hormone replacement therapy for a few years now, due to my situation. It's the oddest thing, but the only interpretation of these results is that... I'm producing this stuff on my own again."

He frowned. "How is that possible?"

"Well, technically speaking, it's not."

"But — ?"

"But given my history, I don't think any of us can say what's possible or not. After all, we still suspect this chip in my neck is staving off terminal cancer."

For the first time since the chip had been reinstalled, Mulder considered that it might actually have other supposed powers. Was there any chance that holding off the cancer was simply a fortunate side effect of an eventual outcome far more sinister? The very thought was too frightening to consider.

"Is there any health risk?"

"An excess of anything is hardly ever good, but it's everyone's consensus that this happened quite recently and gradually, at that. I've been told to hold off on my HRT treatments for now and see what happens. They took some additional samples and told me to come back in another month, but there's no big emergency. Everything else is as it should be."

"They're sure?" He sat up, tucking one leg under himself.

"Mulder, you ask that every time. And the answer's always the same. They're as sure as they can be. As sure as any of us can be." She reached over and slapped his knee. "Hey, I'm here finally; I vote we start our vacation. And I know it's late, but I'm starving. What do I have to do to get some food around here?"

"I have a suggestion..."

* * * * *

Scully awoke to a magnificent thunder and lightning show. She sat up and looked out the patio doors, engrossed in the interplay of shadow and light amid the trees surrounding the lake. They had left the main door open just a crack, to allow for air circulation, with the result that the noise from outside seemed quite loud. With the sound of the wind blowing through the trees and the rain pounding against the outside of the cabins, it was surprising how the figure lying next to her managed to remain asleep. In her limited experience, she had always known Mulder to be a light sleeper, but there were definitely occasions when he would pass out like a rock. She usually took it as a good sign, that he had nothing pressing on his mind to keep him awake.

She eased herself out of the bed and wrapped one of the hotel-issue white terry robes around herself. Massively one-size-fits-all, it extended all the way down to the floor on her. She shuffled quietly to the patio doors and heaved on the inner panel to close it. That accomplished, she stood back a few feet to observe, instinctively heeding warnings remembered from childhood about not standing too close to windows during thunderstorms. As she stole a quick look back at the bed, she was suddenly overcome by a vivid case of *deja vu*. Of what seemed like a strange amalgamation of two distinctly different memories.

The last time she and Mulder had been together during a thunderstorm was back in June, at his family's summer house in Rhode Island. She had arrived shortly before the sky darkened and opened up. But the day was memorable for another event, an event that she would forever associate with thunder and lightning. Their version of fireworks. That day, shortly after her arrival, she had found herself necking with her partner like a love-starved teenager while the rain fell and drenched them from head to toe....

* * * * *

Quonochontaug, RI
June 2000

Fox Mulder had a sudden coherent thought. Whoever said it, whatever song it came from, was just so wrong: a kiss is not just a kiss.

Having effectively shut out the world around them, lips locked in primal need, it took a resounding crack of thunder for them to realize that they were caught in a sudden downpour. They broke contact and paused for a second to look at each other in wry amusement before running towards the house. In the short time that it took them to reach the back porch, they were thoroughly drenched. His t-shirt clung to his skin, molded to the contours of his muscles. Her dress, several minutes ago fit for an Easter morning at church, now hung wetly from her body.

It was obviously a significant turn-on for the both of them.

After pausing sufficiently long enough to admire Scully's new look, Mulder pushed open the french doors and motioned her inside. She stopped at the threshold to pull off her sandals, entering in her bare feet. He followed closely behind, kicking off his shoes as he stepped through.

"Are you cold?"

"It's warm in here, but — I suppose, in a way..."

He stepped into the kitchen and began opening and closing cupboards, searching for something. He finally came up with an aluminum kettle and proceeded to fill it with water. Switching on a stove burner, he turned back to look at her once more, enjoying the sight of her trying to peel the upper portion of her dress away from her body discreetly.

"It's the damp clothing that's making you cold. I'll boil us up some water for tea."

"Good idea. Do you have —"

"Here." He tossed her a dish towel and watched as she turned away from him before using it, walking over to the doors that they had just passed through. Undoing a couple of buttons from the front of her dress, she reached underneath to run the towel quickly over her chest and shoulders. Interesting, Mulder thought, recalling that her dress had buttons running all the way down the front.

A few seconds later, he approached her from behind, startling her when he put his hands around her waist.

"A little bit jumpy, Scully?"

"Summer storms always do that to me. I'm fascinated by them, their unpredictability, the electricity they send through the air..."

"Are you sure it's not something else?"

"Why, what do you think it is?"

She turned her head to see him grinning broadly at her.

"Well, maybe I'm only speaking for myself, but I'd say that being sexually charged might make you jumpy." He spoke directly into her ear, his quiet, low tone enticing her heart to pound triple-time. He came around beside her and looked out at the pelting rain.

"I don't suppose you've brought in your change of clothes yet, have you?"

"No." She didn't want to go any further on that one.

"Guess you're gonna have to stay wet for a little while longer."

Ordinarily she supposed she would have asked him for a spare shirt or something, but he was obviously baiting her.

"I'm fine, Mulder. Some tea in me and I'll be good as new."

The look on his face said that he didn't believe her.

"Well, I can't say the same, so —" He yanked at his shirt and removed it in one quick motion. "Excuse me a moment while I change."

Scully took the opportunity to go into the kitchen and distract herself with finding some teabags. She knew that he had done that purposely, the little strip-tease thing. Historically, Mulder had never been one to be too bashful about revealing his body to her. On the road, if she happened to be in his room for whatever reason, he would think nothing of changing clothes right in front of her. And this was prior to their having established their current status. She supposed that it could have been a flirting thing all along, or just a little jab at her strip-tease during their first case in Oregon. She flushed at the mere thought. How totally naive could she have been?

In recent months, however, he had been anything but forward in that sense. Obviously, it was a result of unspoken acknowledgments that they were "close" to consummating their relationship. Knowing that anything overt might trigger the hormones once and for all, they had been to the point of going overboard in the opposite direction, virtually waiting for the right moment to display itself in bright neon lights. Peculiar concept, Scully thought, this idea of the "right moment". While they seemed to know instinctively what the wrong moments were, she no longer had any confidence that she would ever know what the right one was, short of the bright neon lights. Just two months ago she thought she had the right moment, but the feeling obviously hadn't been mutual. Probably a good thing, all in all. It was the tail end of a period in which they had been dangerously off balance in a personal sense; she just hadn't wanted to admit it at the time.

Was this the right moment?

Would it be a case of their bodies telling them when the right moment would be? Because it really felt as though hers was screaming out, in want of some relief. It was very odd, because until Mulder kissed her, it hadn't occurred to her at all that this sort of thing might happen. Did he have any inkling when he invited her up to join him?

As she opened a cupboard to look for something to put their tea into, she realized that she was gently tapping her fingers against her mouth. It was as though she could still feel phantom lips on hers. The mere thought of it churned up unspeakable sensations from deep within her gut. Her last memory of such intensity took her back to that weekend at his mother's house, when they had come this close to doing it all.

She heard a door close at the end of the hall and then the sound of water running.

Did he think this was the right moment? Did he just leave her with notice that he was amenable to this being the right moment? Scully had to stifle a groan at the way her mind was circling this issue like an indecisive hawk circling already dead prey. It was there for the taking. It was a known fact that it would eventually be taken. What the hell was so hard about it? As Mulder had said to her several months ago, "It's as easy as breathing."

Except that where Mulder was concerned, sometimes Scully felt like she was still learning how to breathe.

* * * * *

"Finished with your tea, Scully?"

She looked down into the empty mug that she was still cradling with both hands and nodded. "Yes, thanks."

He took their mugs away and went into the kitchen. There was a long pause before she heard him call out, "Got any plans for weathering the storm?"

"What are you suggesting, Mulder?"

"I'm asking you."

He was still speaking from the kitchen, so she got up from the couch and followed his voice.

"Somehow I get the feeling that you already have something in mind..."

As she rounded the corner, she was startled by a flash of lightning that reflected off his white shirt. Seeing him advancing towards her, she stepped back and ended up trapping herself against the

wall. Looking into his eyes, she saw that there was no hiding the fact that he definitely had something in mind.

A low rumbling of thunder seemed to confirm that thought.

"Nothing better to do when it's storming outside than to make out, Scully." His voice had taken on a low, seductively velvet tone.

Without waiting for a response, he bent towards her and kissed her forehead chastely, then worked his way down the side of her face to her lips. As soon as he established contact, she took the lead and circled the inside of his mouth languidly with her tongue, wondering absently if she had ever been so deeply aroused just by kissing someone. Even as she considered the thought, a rush of moisture escaped from her body. It was basically the same thing that happened every time she kissed him. Considering that it had already happened while they were outside, "wet" was no longer a strong enough word for how she was feeling.

Tentatively, he began to unbutton the top of her dress with one hand as he moved from her lips down to her bare throat. Although his voice came out muffled and raspy against her neck, she could still hear his words when he spoke. "Scully — we're not at your place — or mine..."

"No —" She managed to gasp in return, threading her fingers through his hair as he worked his way around her neck. "And we're not on the road somewhere..."

Mulder slowly peeled back one side of her dress, exposing her bra. He kissed the top of one breast reverently, as though acknowledging the significance of the moment. He knelt down on one knee as he continued unbuttoning, all the while occupied with trailing kisses over her body. With his other hand, he reached down to the bottom hem of her dress, slowly gathering up the material.

"But there aren't any mountains and the color of the water is questionable..." He could feel her flesh quivering beneath his lips. "And this definitely isn't a fancy hotel or resort..."

Suddenly his hand was underneath her dress...

"It doesn't mat — Oh God, Mulder —"

... and between her legs. Nothing separating him from her hot center other than a thin pair of embarrassingly soaked panties. Oh God, indeed.

"It — doesn't matter." She managed to repeat, trying to sound unaffected by the presence of his hand, but at the same time unable to stop herself from grinding against it. Thinking back to all her previous experiences, she realized that such behavior would have appalled her, and more than likely would have shocked her former lovers to some extent. But she didn't get the feeling that either party was the least bit offended right now. Not at all. Scully closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall, allowing her imagination to take over her sensibilities. One of her hands was still entwined in his hair, but the other started to move very deliberately over her own body.

His fingers quickly growing slick against her underwear, Mulder looked up and tried unsuccessfully to suppress a moan at this very uncommon sight of Dana Scully. He stood up and reached underneath and behind the bodice of her dress to unfasten her bra. As the undergarment in question fell loosely away from her body, just barely covering what he had long yearned to caress, hold, and kiss, he thought that he had to make one final attempt while he was still capable.

"Are you sure, Scully?"

She reached down and cupped her hand over the front of his jeans in response. One gentle squeeze later and Mulder was left with the sudden fear that he might explode from touch alone. It was time to dribble that mental basketball.

"I'm surer than I've ever been in my life, Mulder."

In short order, her dress was dropped to the floor, just as she managed to pull his t-shirt over his head. She backed up and stared at his bare chest, taking the time to admire its form and shape in

a way that she never done before. Meanwhile, she stood in front of him, oblivious to the fact that she was wearing nothing but panties, with her bra still hanging loosely from her shoulders.

A flash of lightning lit up the room, highlighting her body against the dark wall.

While each remained engaged in his or her own visual stimulation, Mulder unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans, relieving the pressure on his throbbing groin. His right hand lingered briefly as old habits took over, but he managed to remind himself that he was about to experience something much better and much less solitary. Their eyes meeting in quiet agreement, he drew closer, hands slowly slipping underneath her bra, almost afraid to remove it completely. He choked back unreasonable tears at the mere thought of touching her intimately for the first time. He leaned down towards her mouth again, flicking his tongue teasingly over her lips. As the fingers on both hands encountered the hard peaks of her nipples, Scully moaned in mid-kiss and grabbed him by the waist, slamming his body against hers with surprising strength. She so badly wanted to feel his heat against her skin that all other thoughts fled her. Sensing her urgency, Mulder released one hand from her breasts and slowly dipped down to her abdomen and beyond the elastic waistband of her underwear. His flesh to her flesh, finally, he could feel her wetness — God, she was absolutely flowing — and the early contractions caused by her arousal.

The desire to relieve the ache between her legs was unbearable. As adept as his fingers appeared to be — and even so, he was still only toying with her — they weren't going to be enough for much longer. Responding to an urge that she hadn't felt to such a degree before in her life, she reached down and grabbed hold of his wrist, pushing his hand down further. She wanted him inside, one way or the other. After several more long and agonizing seconds of teasing, he finally obliged with two fingers, causing her to sputter a common epithet that he had probably only heard from her once before.

Then he felt a sharp pain.

She was barely aware of the fact that he had flinched and pulled away briefly. Until she tasted blood, she had no idea that she had bitten him in her moment of passion.

"Oh Christ, Mulder — I'm sorry..."

He broke away for air and managed a smile. "S'okay. My lips can handle a little bite. Just don't do that when we get a little more personal, if you know what I mean."

He purposefully slowed the pace and removed his hand, much to Scully's dismay. Her legs buckled just slightly in reaction, but she regained her balance and inhaled sharply as he slid down to his knees in front of her. He noticed that she was shaking in anticipation and took a moment to give thanks to all the forces in the world that this was finally happening. No turning back now; not unless all the players in every world and alien conspiracy possible were to break down the door in the next few minutes. No, correction — not even that improbability would stop them this time. They'd simply have to take a seat and be the audience for the show of a lifetime.

He looped a couple of fingers around the elastic of her panties hesitantly, then stopped and looked up at her. He peered deep into her eyes, seeing eight years' of hidden passion finally laid bare. Once again feeling ridiculously emotional, he whispered hoarsely, "May I?"

Unable to find her voice, she could only nod in reply.

With both hands, he tugged gently at the sides of her underpants, gradually slipping them down to her knees and then to her ankles. At the sight of her so vulnerable and so open to him, he swallowed painfully, his throat suddenly going dry. Before he could even think another thought, her bra came tumbling down around his shoulders, having been dismissed by its owner.

He had seen her like this on two occasions previously, although at neither time were they in anywhere near the same mindset. And the view had definitely not been from his current vantage point. The only assessment he could make was that she was so beautiful that it hurt just to look at her. He reached out and placed one hand flat against her abdomen, purposely avoiding a more intimate touch. Mulder looked up to see her with her head leaned back, eyes closed. She couldn't

be more seductive even if she tried. His hand gravitated towards the fly of his boxers in response as he moved in close to plant a kiss on her navel.

For Dana Scully, it was simply excruciating. The touch of those lips on her sensitive skin, his hand so near and yet so far from where she wanted it to be. And when she opened her eyes and looked down, she could see that he was clearly feeding his own arousal. He seemed to be on a mission to kiss every square inch of her stomach, but he never ventured quite as low as she would have liked.

As though hearing her wishes, Mulder stopped to lock eyes with her. His hand pressed flat against her navel once more, he slowly edged downwards until his thumb encountered an unmistakable patch of moist heat. He could see the immediate effect on her as he slid forward and dipped into her wetness. The expression on her face was one that he had previously seen only in his dreams. Finding the spot he was searching for, he gradually applied a little more pressure and a little more rhythm to his touch until her legs began to quake.

Without warning, Scully yanked him up by the shoulders into a standing position again. Despite the fact that it had been her choice to stop him, she was unable to hold back a whimper at the loss of his touch. She slid her hand from his shoulder down his arm, towards the front of his pants. Maintaining eye contact, she tried to signal what she wanted without speaking any words. She felt movement between them as his mouth hungrily met hers once more. Her hand grappled with his as he attempted to free himself from his underwear and jeans. She broke off the kiss and sucked in a sharp intake of air just as they both succeeded at the same time.

And then, literally, he was in her hands.

As a doctor, Scully had seen enough of the average male organ not to be fascinated by them to any great extent. That she had seen the one attached to Mulder on occasion was also nothing new, considering how often she'd been required to attend to him — or at least be present during such instances — for medical purposes over the years. Seeing it in this state, however — large, erect, and quivering as a result of his desire for her — was not something she was familiar with, and she had to admit, she was almost wanting to do a complete and close-up examination. There'd be time for that later, she thought, settling instead for the opportunity to stroke him gently, understanding full well that anything hard or fast would simply shorten the duration of their ultimate goal. Unable to achieve any sort of clinical detachment, she was surprised by how much her hands shook as she began to pleasure him.

Her touch was hesitant and tentative, but the mere sight of her hands on him made him want to surge forward. He had long since lost control of the basketball that he was supposed to be dribbling.

"Mulder...?"

"Yeah?" Good God, he sounded like a teenager whose voice hadn't changed yet.

"It's not fair that you still have your pants on. Can you oblige my simple expectation that you'd be completely naked the first time we make love?"

He managed to chuckle at her comment, "Anything for you, Scully." With what appeared to her to be alarming speed, he jettisoned his remaining clothes across the floor. With a hint of self-consciousness — unusual for him — and an abundance of boyish charm, he held out his arms for her to check him out. "Everything you ever expected?"

She smiled as she embraced him closely, wanting to feel as much of his skin against hers as possible. "Or hoped for," she whispered. "You're gorgeous, Mulder. I'm sure you've been told."

He nuzzled against her neck as they began to explore one another again slowly, each still trying to delay the final act for as long as possible.

"Really, Scully? I haven't been able to put words together to let you know how beautiful you —" His statement melted away into a gratified moan as he felt her hands return to him, pumping so slowly that he thought he would die of total heart-stopping ecstasy.

Then the action halted abruptly and she released her hold on him. He heard her make a noise like she was about to speak, but she seemed to change her mind immediately after. The sound of rain on the roof punctuated their silence for several seconds until Mulder cleared his throat and ventured to say something.

"What?"

When she didn't respond within a reasonable time, he pulled back and looked her in the eyes. "What is it?"

Her cheeks were red, not with sexual heat, but with what seemed like embarrassment.

"Hey, Scully, given what you were just holding in your hand, now's not the time to be bashful." He kissed her shoulder and murmured gently, "What would you like? What can I do for you?"

"No, it's not that.... I'm just wondering — if we can, if you don't mind — do this without a condom?" At the tail end of her question, her voice fell to barely a whisper.

Her reaction to the request — she appeared to be near tears as a result of some unknown emotion — stunned him temporarily. He held her close for several seconds before answering softly, "I never expected this would happen when I came out here. So short of me running out to the nearest drugstore right now, I don't have one, Scully."

Several moments passed before Mulder brought his hands up to her face, forcing her to look at him.

"May I ask why?"

He could see dampness in the corners of her eyes, just barely there, nothing in danger of spilling over. Several dark reminders of the reason why she didn't need any protection flashed through his mind in a matter of seconds. But as much as that reality was a lifelong wound that would never heal, Mulder also knew that it had nothing to do with why she made the request. Innately, he felt the same way, although he would never have brought himself to ask. After so many years of getting to this point, the thought of yet another barrier between them seemed terribly disheartening.

"I need this to be just you and me. I want to be able to feel you."

Mulder smiled tenderly at her, his gaze penetrating deep into her eyes, his hand gently brushing aside an errant strand of hair from her face.

"Well, I think I should tell you... just feeling your body against me right now is making me crazy."

She had to agree. It wouldn't be much longer now. A whole series of "firsts" had already fallen by the wayside over the past several minutes.

"Scully — remember when I told you I have that fantasy of doing it in the storage room at work?"

"Uh huh..."

"Well, we're almost in the right position, right here. It would be something like this, with you up against the file boxes — the wall will do in this case —" He lifted her off the floor, amazed that she felt light as a feather, "Up a bit like this... standing with one leg up on a chair —" He set her back down and dragged over a chair from the kitchen table, placing it next to her. "Here..." He watched as she put her hands on his shoulders for balance and then, hesitating for just a moment, did as he described. The sight of her was better than any video he had ever seen. And if things worked out right, this memory would be all the video he would ever need for the rest of his life.

"God, Scully, you are so beautiful..."

She leaned forward and murmured into his ear, "Now, Mulder."

He held her wordlessly for a moment before taking a step back to consider the mechanics involved. Without actually approaching her, he instantly knew that all fantasies aside, the difference in height was going to pose a bit of a challenge, unless he was confident of carrying her the entire time. Just

as he was thinking that he'd have to bail out on the whole idea altogether, he caught sight of a pile of old phone books out of the corner of his eye. Scully had to smile as he hurried over and then came back with four volumes that he stacked on the floor by her feet.

"Where are your heels when you need them, huh?" He joked as she assumed her position.

One final shared look of consent between them and Mulder was inside. In Heaven. Or in Hell. To be honest, it was really too much instant exhilaration and sweet agony fulfilled to be either.

For several long seconds, he didn't dare move. Despite having done his thing in the bathroom not a half hour ago, he was afraid he would come too soon if he were to move. He was also suddenly reminded of how small a person she was and how easy it would be for him to forget that fact. Feeling her inner muscles tensing and releasing around him, however, was enough to convince him that she was ready for more. Holding his breath, he pulled almost all the way out and then slid back in to complete his first stroke, feeling the pleasure center in his brain expand to the point of explosion. He didn't even want to think about how long it had been since he'd felt this sensation, of being encircled and held by something other than his hand. He'd even forgotten that it felt so much better this way.

Another stroke completed and he whispered into her ear, "I love you, Scully."

A third and harder stroke now. "Oh God, Mulder — I — I love you too."

With one hand on his shoulder and the other around his waist, she pulled him forward with each thrust to let him know just how much force she could take. He stood with one hand on the wall behind her, holding her raised leg tight against his hip with his other hand. It wasn't a position that Scully could foresee having an orgasm with — although she wasn't about to make any judgments about what she might or might not have with Mulder at the helm — but she also couldn't remember the last time sex felt this good or was this fulfilling.

"Uhh —" He groaned as he completed a fourth stroke. "What do you say, Scully, hard and fast and damned if it's over in five seconds or do you want it slow like this?"

She realized that it wasn't as if they hadn't had any foreplay. For a first time, they had already lasted longer than she would have expected.

"What would you be doing in this fantasy of yours?"

Her breathy voice gave him the inspiration to make the next one a good one indeed. Number five — so long and slow it could have qualified for performance art — caused both parties to moan in unison.

"Hard and fast definitely — I'd be drillin' you into those boxes until you begged for mercy —" He paused and grunted as he attempted an even slower sixth stroke, but found himself unable to hold back and instead followed up hard, slamming her against the wall. "Jesus — sorry about that... the problem is, in my fantasy — I'm not — liable to explode in about two seconds."

"Then — Oh! — do it... " A seventh and eighth stroke, one quickly after the other.

"What — about you?"

"What about me... — Jesus, Mulder —" Number nine would have been painfully deep had she not felt so totally expanded. She put both arms around his neck and arched her back to give him easier access.

"I want you to get off too, Scully —"

He pulled out all the way out for the tenth one, then slanted his mouth over hers to seek entry simultaneously. She gasped into his mouth as she felt the hard and swift restoration of his heat.

"It doesn't matter —"

"Yes it does..."

"It's not going to happen this way, Mulder. Please —" She caught his face in her hands and made him look directly into her eyes. He responded with several short, quick strokes in a row, and this time she could feel him arching upwards as he was obviously getting closer and closer to his personal oblivion. "This one's for you. I'll take the next one, I promise."

"You feel so good... I don't want this to end."

Impulsively, he picked her up. "Put your legs around me." She gladly did as she was told, and as she rubbed up against him, her pleasure increased ten-fold. Mulder noticed her reaction and held still, letting her control the movements for awhile. Unfortunately, at this stage of the game, his legs could only hold the both of them for so long. He turned and sat down on the chair, carefully maintaining their connection and taking advantage of the fact that her chest was now conveniently in his face.

Sweet Jesus, the man's mouth could do wonders, Scully thought, grabbing onto the back of the chair as she suddenly felt that distinctive and nerve-tingling desire to push. She had serviced herself enough over the years to recognize what it was. Surprised by the turn of events, she leaned back and caught his eye. He looked back at her, recognizing the unmistakable signs of an imminent climax on her face. He had done good.

Because this one had to be for the both of them.

Over the next several seconds — which seemed to last like minutes — the virtual explosions of a thousand universes set loose millions of stars spiraling in their heads. And when peace finally settled over their newly christened world, each had learned something about the other. Dana Scully was very pleased to confirm that her partner was a considerate, attentive, and knowledgeable lover; no less and yet so much more than what she had expected. And Fox Mulder got his wish to hear just how vocal and unrestrained his partner could be when she finally let go.

"Hmm, Scully. Are you still alive?"

"Alive and tingling. So, Mulder, tell me — how did you know to do that?"

"Do what?"

"You know what I mean."

Their eyes met in silent understanding. Hers said, thank you; you're welcome, came his unvoiced reply.

"Let's just say that I was duly informed, a long, long time ago, by a woman who isn't afraid to speak her mind."

She regarded him inquisitively but didn't ask.

"I don't know what you've been assuming about me, Scully, but I haven't been around the block that many times. You can probably guess who I'm talking about."

"You know what? I don't want to know. I'm just happy you remembered."

"You're happy?"

"Yes. Aren't you?"

He flexed a certain muscle in response, causing her to jump slightly but not enough to lose him. "Can't you tell?" He grinned wickedly and wrapped his arms around her waist to hold her down.

"All I can tell, Mulder —" the change in tone seemed to indicate that Special Agent Dana Scully was making a reappearance, "— is that we are probably making a major mess on this chair. I don't suppose you have any tissues within easy reach?"

"Nada. We're going to have to make a run for the shower and deal with these consequences later."

"The chair could be ruined."

"If you ask me, Scully, it was worth it. It's not like it's some family heirloom. And even if it was, I don't exactly have anyone to answer to about it."

They fell silent, suddenly realizing that it was very quiet around them. Scully looked past his head and out the kitchen window.

"The rain's stopped."

"Doesn't mean we have to..."

* * * * *

Jasper, Alberta

A flash of lightning lit up the entire room momentarily, followed three seconds later by a loud resounding boom. Startled by the direct overhead sound, Scully had to stifle a scream when she suddenly felt hands on her shoulders.

"Sorry, Scully."

"Trying to give me a heart attack, Mulder??"

"I thought you heard me get out of the bed."

"Well, there's a bit more noise going on around here than just you getting out of bed, okay?"

"Okay, okay, I said I was sorry." He encircled her torso with his arms, holding her tight against his chest and stomach. "Does this seem somewhat *deja vu* to you?"

"Yes, but in a different way than you're thinking." She seemed distracted as she said the words, almost as though she were suddenly far away.

"What do you mean?"

Did she really want to tell him? Although now that she had brought it up, it would be kind of difficult to backpedal and decide not to tell him.

"Remember that weekend when you went to England to chase those ridiculous crop circles —"

It wasn't a weekend that he looked back on fondly, for a variety of reasons. He decided not to go the serious route.

"You mean the weekend you were overcome by that killer case of PMS?"

He could see her embarrassed smile reflecting in the glass of the patio door in front of them. He swore that he could see her face turn red also, but surely, that had to be an imagined afterthought...

"Okay, Mulder, you promised to forgive and forget on that one."

"No-o, I think I only forgave on that one. I don't recall saying anything about forgetting. And in any case, how could I possibly forget —"

"All right, so I was a little bitchy —"

"A little? You were the Holy Goddess of All Bitches —"

"Okay! The point — Mulder — that I'm trying to make here, is that... Jesus, you've made me forget what the hell point I was trying to make."

Another flash lit up the room.

"Such language, Scully. I believe it had something to do with —" He paused for the imminent thunder. "Deja vu regarding this show from Mother Nature."

"That's right. Although now I don't think you deserve to know what I was going to say..."

"Was there a thunderstorm that night?"

"Yes. Remember how hot and humid it got during the afternoon and into the evening, even though it was only April?"

"Vaguely. I don't remember hearing a storm, though."

"I don't doubt it. You were sleeping quite soundly."

Her statement hung in the air for a prolonged while as he suddenly experienced a trademark spooky moment. Of knowing precisely what it was that she was about to say to him.

"Your implication about the *deja vu* thing... Were you expecting us to — do it — that night?"

Dana Scully stiffened in his arms before pulling herself away from him. She turned around in stunned silence.

"How — you knew?"

"No."

She gave him a confused look that didn't escape him, even in the dark. He walked around her to lean against the fireplace, not quite facing her directly.

"It just came to me," he said sheepishly.

It just came to him? Somehow this wasn't how she had anticipated "telling" him.

"What happened, Scully? It wasn't like you started something and I didn't even wake up, was it?" God, he hoped that hadn't been the case.

"I was awakened by the sound of the storm blowing through. I noticed that you'd left me a t-shirt so I changed and got into bed. You moved a bit, but I don't think you really woke up at all."

"I really don't remember that. I may have been aware that you'd spent some part of the night in bed, but you were gone by the morning, so I never..." He trailed off, trying to sift out some semblance of a concrete memory from that night. Jet lag must have hit him rather hard, because he really couldn't recall anything specific after leaving her on his couch with a blanket and a spare shirt. For once, the thought of having sex truly might have been the furthest thing from his mind when his head hit the pillow that night.

She still hadn't elaborated on what may have been on her mind, however.

"You didn't hear me when I left, did you?"

"No." He appeared slightly embarrassed at the admission.

"I told myself that, if you were to wake up — either when I first got into bed or when I was changing to leave — that I'd make a... move... of some kind." Now it was her turn to appear embarrassed. She was now wondering what had possessed her to bring this up in the first place. "I mean, Mulder, you'd always been harping on me to take control. I was even going to go for it earlier, but —"

"You fell asleep." He couldn't help but frown as a definitive memory made itself known to him finally. "Scully, why would you choose that night of all nights?"

"With the benefit of hindsight, I wouldn't have. Hearing you now, I'm glad I didn't go any further with it. At the time, I guess I thought I was turning over a new leaf. Finally accepting where my life had taken me."

"And that was a signal for you and I to get down and dirty for the first time?" He seemed honestly puzzled by her rationale.

"Well, obviously, we weren't on the same wavelength, so it never would have happened anyway."

"I'm just trying to understand what your motivations might have been, that's all."

"Motivations?"

"Yeah, like why that night, after you'd spent the previous two days going down some strangely bizarre and gruesome memory lane. Reliving what life could have been with you and the good doctor. I just don't see how you and I fit into that scenario."

"I needed to feel wanted that night, Mulder. But not by someone from my past who could only see me as I was then, an entirely different person, someone that I don't even know how to be anymore."

She sighed, remembering quite clearly how much she had wanted to tell Daniel that she could never go back to being the person that he knew ten years ago. She wanted to tell him how time had succeeded in healing the wounds on her side, even though she hadn't really known it until she saw him in person again. How the sadness that she felt was a reaction to feeling so little for him after all this time. How it made her realize that her heart was totally with someone else, someone who had just traveled across the ocean to seek out patterns in hayfields. If only she had had the guts to tell him that.

She looked up at Mulder and continued, "I needed to know that I wasn't going to be afraid forever, that I could actually take control of my life."

Just as she had been counting the seconds between lightning flashes and thunder claps, she counted off several seconds before Mulder spoke.

"You don't think you have control over your life, Scully?"

Unexpected tears welled up in her eyes upon hearing the tightness in his voice.

"Not as much as I'd like. But that's me. I let it happen that way and then I complain about it. Not extremely proactive."

"Is that the reason why you accepted the research assignment?"

"Partly. Mostly. Look Mulder, you and I have become so used to working with one another that we've melded into this MulderScully super-entity, this beast that's not quite true to either one of us sometimes."

"So in chasing all these monsters over the years, you think we've finally become one ourselves?"

"In a very metaphorical sense, of course. You said it yourself two weeks ago — we have our own roads to follow. I can only start controlling my life if it's truly my life. Professionally speaking."

Lightning and thunder hit almost in unison, causing Scully to jump back from the patio door. Mulder stepped over to her and caught her in his arms again, kissing her forehead lightly.

"How did a conversation about making love turn into this serious discussion about work?"

"As long as we have this work, that could be how it is."

"Well, that's not allowed while we're here. We have a few weeks yet to make up our minds about work. But for now, we have many years to catch up on in terms of other things."

"Other things?"

"Other things."

He led her back to the bed, just as the room lit up once more from a bright jagged streak traveling across the sky.

* * * * *

The Healing Waters: Epilogue

Fox Mulder's Apartment
Alexandria, VA
One Month Later

Dana Scully stood in the doorway and watched in silence as her partner stuffed the last of his necessities into a knapsack. Hours and counting and soon he would be on a plane and back into the

woods of Bellefleur, Oregon. Back to what had always been his lifelong pursuit. She checked her watch, noticing with dismay how quickly the hour was passing. What an evening it had been, the encounter with that rat bastard Krycek and that smug Covarrubias woman, with the final determination that Mulder would be the one to go back in and — and do what? Haul out a freakin' UFO? As the minutes ticked on, with her nerves standing on end, all Scully could hope was that by tomorrow morning she wouldn't be thinking that this had been a preposterous idea.

"I better get out of here before Skinner arrives."

"Why? Like you're ever afraid of confronting him."

"I just don't feel up to it right now. I might insist on coming along. Old habits die hard."

"Ah. Track two, side A of 'Mulder and Scully's Greatest Hits'. I have that album."

In spite of everything, Scully allowed herself a chuckle at his comment. "Really? What's track one?"

"I'll tell you when I get back. It'll give you time to think about it."

The smile disappeared from her face as reality settled over her once more.

"Scully, you know this is for the best, don't you?"

"Yes. I do know that."

"Thanks for letting me make that decision. It means a lot to me."

"Well... you accepted my suggestion of going with Skinner."

"I won't have as much fun with him. Too bad we don't have time to 'seal the deal', huh?"

Now he was being playful, and Scully wished that she could feel the same way. She gave him a much weaker smile this time and walked away, preparing to make her exit. At the last second, she turned around and approached him again.

"Mulder?"

"Yeah?"

She had a sudden thought and lifted her hands to the back of her neck to unclasp her chain. She motioned to him, and he bent down so she could reach around him. He then turned back towards her, fingering the tiny gold cross that was now around his neck.

"Your beacon," she whispered. He nodded wordlessly in response. "Stay safe."

"I will."

She turned to go but turned back again once more.

"Another thing —"

"I won't be gone long, Scully."

The teasing flicker in his eyes and the smile on his lips took her away from everything that seemed wrong for a moment. For a brief second, she believed him. But she wasn't quite succeeding at tamping down on the foreboding feelings that she had been having ever since the late afternoon. The late afternoon when she got her first glimpse of that disturbing mix of individuals in their office, the same group who ultimately played a major role in determining Mulder's fate for this day.

Perhaps this time, he would come out of these woods with concrete evidence that what he had been pursuing all his life was worth the sacrifices made. Perhaps, all things considered, this might just be his last chance. It was such an unusual situation — they had never been intentionally separated for purely personal reasons before — that Scully nurtured a fervent hope for him to find what he was still unquestionably looking for, once and for all. Dear God, she'd even believe it this time. Believe it all. Without question, without argument. After all these years of steadfast denial, of playing a role that she felt strangely obligated to fulfill, she had finally reached the point of wanting to believe.

A sudden sharp prickling across the bridge of her nose made her wince, just as she felt a corresponding tightening in her throat.

In the hallway outside Skinner's office not two hours ago, she had told him that she wouldn't let him go alone. And he had acquiesced to her wishes without a word of protest. But Scully had also decided then and there that he wasn't going to leave without hearing certain words from her.

"What is it...?"

She inhaled an unsteady breath, holding back inexplicable tears that she knew would fall later.

"I love you."

Coming from her, those words had the power to heal all wounds past, present and future. That Mulder felt his heart leap made him realize just how much he had needed to hear them from her. How much more often, in fact, he needed to hear them than she was able to say them. Mere knowledge was never any substitute. He swallowed down the lump in his throat and opened up his arms to her for a final embrace.

"I know." He remembered laughing out loud when he heard that line being spoken by a sci-fi rogue hero in a movie theater almost twenty years ago. But this was real, and this particular declaration — finally made freely, without being prompted by him in any sense — deserved something in return. "I love you too."

They clung to one another tightly for a moment, before she leaned back to look up into his face. "Is this the beginning of the end, Mulder?"

"I think it's all starting to fall into place and make sense, don't you? I'm reminded of something that you said to me, a couple of years ago, when we came back from Antarctica. You asked me, 'what happens after'? You said that you needed to know that there would be an end somewhere down the road. As fate would have it, our end looks suspiciously like our beginning. To Oregon and back. Maybe we have to end this part of our lives in order to start something new. And I'm sorry, Scully, but... I know that I had said it was up to you to decide if what we're sacrificing isn't worth it, but like I've done before, I'm drawing the line for you. I'm drawing the line for the both of us."

As Scully rested her head against his shoulder, her mind wandered to a memory barely a month old. Walking along the shores of a blue-green lake, caught between the breathlessly giddy exhilaration of finally taking that bold step forward as lovers and the sadly melancholic realization that nothing would or ever could be the same again. Especially in light of what they knew had to happen, the decisions that had to be made. That day, walking along the water's edge — a boundary so symbolic of the ease with which some lines can be drawn and re-drawn again — she had suspected that the end had already arrived.

End

All Our Yesterdays



What a man thinks when time stands still...

Location Unknown
October 2000

I'm floating. Or at least, it feels like I'm floating. I think I'm actually sleeping, but it's kinda hard to tell. If I am, I'm having one of those weird "I know I'm sleeping and dreaming" moments. And able to stay asleep, that's the thing. There's a term for that, but I don't remember what it is. They say you can learn how to do it — controlling what you dream about while staying asleep. Wouldn't that be interesting? What would you most want to dream about, Scully, if you could control your dreams?

Scully?

Oh, yeah, I'm asleep. She's not here. Why am I sleeping like this during the day? I think I went for a run early this morning. Did about three times my normal distance and then came back home to collapse on the couch. But I'm not on my couch now... What time is it? What day is it? Why am I not at work?

Jesus, where am I?

* * * * *

June 1998

The normally bustling cafe was quiet at this hour of the evening. Scully watched as staff members swept behind the counter and wiped down the benches in the booths. They were the only two patrons in the shop, nursing a couple of large cups of industrial strength coffee that had been made fresh just for them. Black. Not the way that either one of them generally preferred their poison but she noticed that he hadn't bothered to add anything to his cup. She quickly decided that black was probably most appropriate for the mood of the moment.

Mulder hadn't said much of anything since they left the Hoover Building. Even when she took over the driver's seat of his car, he didn't utter a word of protest. He also didn't express any preference when she asked him where he wanted to go. She finally decided that somewhere neutral for now was probably best, to allow them time to recover from the shock of the past few hours. She knew one thing: she couldn't imagine leaving him alone for the night just yet, if at all.

Even as she watched the staff perform their cleaning chores, Scully couldn't get the vision of the burnt office out of her mind. It was out there like some sort of virtual reality overlay, some holographic image that hung in front of everything she looked at. As she turned her attention across the table, she noticed that Mulder had dropped his head back against the headrest of their booth, his eyes closed. She knew that he was seeing it all over again, in full living color.

"Mulder?"

He opened his eyes and gradually focused them on her, lifting his head up slowly in the process.

"Yeah?" His voice — that voice that occasionally sent shivers up and down her spine — sounded miles away and stripped of feeling.

Now that she had his attention, though, she didn't know what to say. There was nothing to say, at least nothing that would make the moment any easier to cope with or make their immediate outlook any brighter.

He saw her difficulty and reacted accordingly, sitting up straight and forcing down a mouthful of coffee. Look alive, he thought to himself wearily. He observed her steady scrutiny and pitied her for having to put up with him.

"It's okay, Scully. I'm all right. I'm not about to go postal, if that's what you're thinking."

He swallowed down another gulp of his coffee, his face reacting this time to the unfamiliar bitterness.

"I wasn't thinking that."

"No? I was, for a bit. This just seems like so much crap to me. I'm so sick and tired of being played that I surely must be stupid to keep coming back for more. I'm just doing everything they expect me to do. A big dumb puppet on somebody's string —" He paused abruptly to take a deep heaving breath, as though suddenly tormented by an especially vivid memory of what had happened. It caused him to squeeze his eyes shut momentarily as he tried to regain control over his battered emotional state. But no matter how hard he tried, it was just difficult to ignore the debilitating physical pain that he felt at the mere thought of what had just been done to his years of hard work and essential blood, sweat and tears.

He rubbed his hands over his face and then looked over at Scully as though he had just remembered that she was still in his presence.

"Hell, Scully, what are we doing here? I want to go home.... You need to go home. It's been a long tiring day, and we don't know what tomorrow'll bring..."

He seemed almost to be rambling, which was definitely not a behavior on his part that she had ever been privy to, even through everything that they had encountered over the years. She was more concerned than ever for his well-being.

"Do you want me to stay with you tonight?"

She saw his eyes refocus on her face again after he turned his gaze from the coffee shop door. Several beats passed before he answered.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"I don't think I can say why not." There was a sharp edge to his voice, a distinct change from his tone just seconds before. His expression had darkened, not with further pain and grief as she would have expected, but with annoyance and what seemed like repressed anger.

"Mulder —"

"Look, Scully, don't mother me, all right? I've had a blow, I'll get over it. I promise I won't shoot myself."

His hostility wasn't surprising, all in all, even without considering what had just happened. He had been difficult to reach all day, despite the fact that she had extended more than her usual amount of effort in trying. The events of the past few days had made her feel very vulnerable, and in her case, it really had nothing to do with the possibility of an impending move by the Bureau to close down the X-Files. As much as she hated to admit it, her nerves had been standing on end for a totally unrelated personal — and quite unprofessional, she thought — reason. To be totally truthful, being reassigned wouldn't be any big deal to her. She would move on to another assignment

without much difficulty. How such a move might affect Mulder and their partnership, however, was more her concern.

He observed her as she sat back in silence. Probably wondering about the unnecessarily harsh tone of his words. Damn it all. He quickly fell into a self-loathing moment, angry at himself for being angry with her. For not the first time in his life, he was angry with her for caring enough to want to mother him but seemingly not enough to give in to loving him. The thing was, he didn't need or want any mothering right now. What he really needed was a good roll in the sack, especially after having been assaulted with confusing memories and emotions this week with the unexpected reappearance of Diana Fowley.

Still, he didn't have to be a jerk about it.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

The response came swiftly. Too swiftly, in fact, for his current state of mind.

"Don't be so goddamn understanding, Scully. Tell me when I'm being an asshole."

In spite of himself, it almost made him cringe to see that infamous look of defiance. The look that told him to keep his distance and respect her space. More often than not, he was totally capable of ignoring it, but on occasion, it would stop him in his tracks as he paused to wonder whether they would be doomed to perform this sad little ritual for the rest of their equally sad lives.

In any case, her eyes managed to express what her voice wouldn't. You're always being an asshole. At least, that was how he saw it.

The trouble was, at that precise moment, neither one of them was capable of understanding how closely matched their individual frustrations were. They were so deeply consumed by their own selfish pain that they were on completely different wavelengths, not hearing the agonized cries for attention from their respective halves. Instead, they continued to stare at one another with masochistic fascination until each could no longer bear to see the unmitigated sorrow in the other's eyes, and was forced to turn away.

* * * * *

December 1992

"Don't let that stop you, though. If you want to go, by all means do so."

Fox Mulder smiled at the earnest expression on his partner's face. She was making a valiant effort at masking a concern that she so obviously felt. On his part, it was touching and oddly embarrassing that she cared.

"You could go to show them how normal you really are." As soon as the words came out, she wished that she hadn't said them in that particular way. They had the potential to be misconstrued. However, one look into his eyes revealed to her that he had understood her meaning totally.

"As opposed to their assumptions about how freaky I really am...? Actually, Scully, sometimes this "spooky" reputation has its benefits. It lets me get away with not paying attention to certain social graces like FBI Christmas parties."

"So who actually shows up to these things? Am I going to know anyone there if I go?"

"Oh, I'm sure there'll be familiar faces. Bring a date, have fun with it."

She lapsed into a brief moment of thoughtfulness, as though trying to decide who to bring. Out of the blue, he felt an inexplicable desire to be on that list, to be under consideration for a night out with Dana Scully. He had a sudden curiosity to know what type of men she preferred.

"So how goes the dating life these days? Haven't heard any calls for you from potential suitors in awhile."

"Don't you think that's a bit too personal of a question to ask?" She said it with a barest hint of a smile, ensuring that Mulder would pick up her rejoinder and run with it.

"It's only too personal if you choose not to answer it, Scully. And then I'll know not to ask it again, because I'm smart that way. On a serious note, I don't think that it's been particularly easy for you to be labeled 'Mrs. Spooky', so it might be a good idea for you to put in an appearance at the festivities. To keep in touch with the normal folks."

He appeared to be very earnest in not wanting her to be sullied by his supposed reputation. From Scully's point of view, the realization was as uplifting as it was sad.

"But the final word is that you're not going?"

"No, but I appreciate your concern. And anyway, I do generally get people coming down here to exchange holiday greetings, Scully, so it's not like I'm a total pariah. My door's open to them."

As she turned towards the said open door to make her way back upstairs, she could suddenly imagine the most common type who would come down here. Tall, buxom and packing mistletoe. She stopped just as she stepped out into the hallway, remembering something.

"To answer your question, Mulder — I haven't met anyone recently who's sufficiently interesting for me to date."

With that she turned on her heel and walked away, leaving him with a bemused expression on his face.

Three days later, it was her turn to sport the bemused expression when she noticed the tall, lanky form of her partner threading through the masses to approach her standing beside the punch bowl.

"What are you doing here?"

"Well, I thought about it and it's our first Christmas together as partners. I didn't want anyone to think that I didn't feel lucky and appreciative of the fact that you've lasted this long with me."

He stepped in close to her, forcing her to take a step backwards just so she could look up into his face before making her comment.

"Mulder — may I remind you that you don't care what others think?"

"Well, I do if it might affect what they think about you."

Scully opened her mouth to say something, but decided against it at the last second. She merely smiled at him in return and handed over the glass of punch that she had just poured for herself.

"Thank you."

After filling another glass for herself, Scully led the way to a small table away from the center of the action. Once seated, Mulder seemed totally capable of relaxing in the moment, stretching his legs out as he leaned back fully.

"So Scully, I would guess that you're a totally Christmas-y person. Am I right?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, even though you live by yourself, I'll bet you put up decorations, a tree... the whole shebang."

"Yes, I do. I suppose you don't?"

"Nah. I don't prefer to be reminded. Christmas is just a time when I think too much about what my life should be or could be, even though I'm all right with it the other three hundred and sixty-some odd days of the year. I'm not saying I enter into a great depression over the holidays; I just prefer not to treat it differently."

She wondered just what sort of Christmases he might have had after his sister was taken so many years ago.

"Do you go home for Christmas then?"

"No, not too often. My folks aren't really big on Christmas either. They usually celebrate with friends in a low key way."

"What about this year? Are you staying in town by yourself?"

Something about how she asked the question put Mulder on his guard, making him decide instantly to employ a little white lie.

"No, as a matter of fact, I'm heading up to see my mother this year."

"Oh? Where does your mother live?"

"Connecticut. Far enough away that I don't see her as much as I should and close enough that I don't have too many excuses not to go. So what are the plans for the grand Scully family Christmas?"

"My younger brother is playing host this year. We take turns. He's got kids so it's fun that way. Christmas is really more for children, after all."

"Hmm... I s'pose."

"Do you see any children in your future, Mulder?"

"As in being a father to them?"

"Yeah."

"I don't feel grown-up enough to have kids. Seriously, it's not something I've ever really thought about. I think I have too much baggage to be any good at it."

"Well, I don't think one ever really knows if one is 'good' at it until it happens. For me, it's just a scary thought, the idea of bringing kids into the world."

"Does that mean that motherhood is not in your future?"

"I've never had a real yearning, so I suppose it's a take it or leave it type of thing. I've always thought that I wouldn't have made this particular career choice if having a family was important to me."

Mulder straightened up and leaned forward against the table, sensing that the perfect opportunity had just arisen for him to ask a question that he had been wanting to ask for weeks.

"Speaking of your career, Scully, are you up for more of this or are you just waiting to bail at the next available opportunity?"

She waited several seconds before answering, as though needing to choose the precise words.

"I'm not going to bail."

The way she said it intimated that she had given it some thought in the past, but that the urge was no longer there.

"Why?"

"Why? You're asking me why I'm not leaving?"

"Yeah. You should know me by now, Scully; I never ask the easy questions. What keeps you here?"

"I'm assuming you don't mean 'here' as in here at the Bureau."

"No, I mean 'here' as in here in the thankless X-Files division."

"First of all, I was assigned to this position, and it's not in my nature not to fulfill my obligations in that sense. But beyond that, I think it would be foolish of me to abandon a working relationship that has been quite ... rewarding." She paused and shifted in her seat, wondering just how much she was going to allow herself to say. "You make the work interesting, Mulder. You and I both know that I don't have the same passion for the subject matter, but I appreciate everything you do

to enable my contributions to make a difference. It's not something that everyone in your position would have done for an outsider. So what I'm saying is that I value that sense of a true partnership. It wouldn't be easy to find elsewhere."

"That's... very gratifying, Scully. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Then hesitantly, she added, "Has this worked for you?"

"This'?"

"You and I working together."

"You know how it pisses you off every time I take off on my own and don't tell you where I'm going? Well, the fact that I'm overcome with guilt for days afterwards must say something. Your friendship and support mean a lot to me, Scully. It's probably more than I deserve, Christmas or otherwise."

"Speaking of Christmas, be sure to take a look in your top left desk drawer before you go home tonight. I left you... a little something."

His interest was piqued. "Really?"

"Yeah, it's not much... just something to keep you sustained on your drive up to Connecticut."

"Don't tell me you baked me cookies, Scully."

She didn't know whether to be amused or disheartened by the thought that he obviously did not attach any domestic talents such as baking to her repertoire.

"Okay, I won't tell —"

She stopped in mid-breath, seeing him reach across the table. When the action concluded with him giving her a friendly tap on her forearm, his touch seemed to resonate through her entire body in a way that she had never felt before.

"Well, you certainly have me at a disadvantage here since I don't have a gift for you. Could I interest you in a moment underneath some mistletoe? It'd give the party-goers something to talk about."

It was Fox Mulder at his flirtatious best, Scully thought idly. Best to respond in kind, and quickly.

"Maybe we can leave that for next year, Mulder."

It was definitely more interesting when she participated in "the game". He leaned forward, both elbows planted on the table, hands clasped together with his chin resting against his thumbs.

"Is that a promise?"

This time, she did not reply with words. But Mulder thought that the enigmatic smile on her face rivaled the one da Vinci painted on the Mona Lisa.

* * * * *

Spring 1999

The outfield was littered with white balls for as far as the eye could see. Poorboy had long since left after lining his pockets with the rest of Mulder's cash. It was really past time to turn out the lights and head on home. Except that it felt so comfortable to be huddled together on the batters' bench, staving off the night chill while staring into the black sky above them.

With her attention still directed overhead, Scully asked lightly, "So what happened today, Mulder, after you left me high and dry at the office?"

"Did I do that?"

"Yes you did. And not for the first time, I might add."

"Don't you just hate it when that happens?"

She turned her head down and looked over at him, guessing perfectly what expression she would see on his face. Scully took in his playful eyes and teasing grin and wondered how she could ever feel anything other than devotion to this strangely compelling man.

"Well... at least you're always very attentive and wanting to make good when you come back afterwards. That's a good thing, I guess."

"Well, if you think this is good, just think of how great it could be if only we...."

The look on his face remained playful and teasing, but there was also something else that she couldn't immediately identify.

"If only we, what?"

"Well, maybe that's a present for my birthday. Maybe."

He had managed to do it again, although this time he wasn't so sure if he didn't succeed at making himself blush just as much. It was an odd feeling sometimes. Dealing with the reality of their newly awakened relationship — although now officially out in the open between them — was nerve-racking at times. Casual innuendo occasionally backfired, leaving him wondering when relief might finally come in the way of actual consummation.

"Anyway, about today..." He decided to change the subject before it got too hot to handle. "I met the strangest man who told me this fascinating story about love and baseball and aliens and it made me think of you."

"Oh? Which part of that made you think of me?"

"All of it."

"And it made you want to show me how to whack a few dozen baseballs into oblivion?"

"I assure you that what I was so very skillfully guiding you through was not 'whacking'. Love of the game, Scully; you have to have a love of the game."

"Baseball?"

"Yes, baseball."

"How do aliens fit in to this?"

"Well, in the story I was told, apparently the best ball players throughout history have been aliens."

"And you believe this?"

"No, of course not. But it was a wonderful story with a very deep meaning."

"I must say, Mulder, you usually do a better job of story-telling. I'm totally lost. What deep meaning are you talking about?"

"Well, you haven't asked me the final question yet."

"I don't follow. What question?"

"Well, you asked me about the baseball part of it, and about the aliens. Were you paying attention enough to remember the third component?"

"I thought 'love of the game' covered that. Okay, Mulder, tell me how love fits into this story."

"He convinced me that love can change a man."

"Love of baseball, or love in general?"

"I think he meant love in general. That ability to give up control so that you can feel strong emotions for something... or someone."

"And that can change a person?"

"A man."

"What about a woman?" She managed to sound mildly indignant, the feminist in her rising to the surface.

"Women don't need to change. They're perfect as they are."

In the half-shadow, his absolutely serious expression fooled her for a second or two before tell-tale signs of a barely suppressed grin became apparent. Almost in unison, they broke into peals of unrestrained laughter that echoed across the field.

In the companionable silence that followed, she turned to him and took his hand in both of hers, rubbing it gently. Her eyes were still sparkling with amusement from the impromptu outburst they had both just enjoyed.

"Mulder?"

"Yeah, Scully?"

"Don't ever change."

* * * * *

Location Unknown
October 2000

"I can take a message to her."

"To whom?"

"You know. To your partner."

"How can you do that?"

"No need for you to know how, what's important is that I can."

"And why would you do this?"

"Because I want to help you."

"If you really wanted to help me, you'd get me the hell out of these goddamn binds."

"I can't do that."

"Oh, but you can get a message to my partner who must be millions of miles away from here?"

"We're not millions of miles away, but that's beside the point. What you need to understand right now is that we all have choices to make in life. I'm offering you one right now. Do with it what you will."

After a long pause, he knew that he couldn't say no to this deal, no matter how it might play out.

"What kind of message?"

"Anything you want to say. She'll hear it as though it came straight from you."

"How —"

"You have to stop wasting time asking how. Our window of opportunity is not exactly limitless."

"I need to know how she is —"

"You cannot ask her anything. She will not have the ability to respond to your message. It must be a one-way communication."

This time, he refrained from asking why. Instead, he made another request.

"Can you take something to her?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well, I don't seem to own any clothes right now, but I remember wearing some at some point. I also had a necklace..."

"I have access to your belongings."

"Can you arrange for her to get that necklace?"

"Would it be of great meaning to you if I could?"

"Yes. Definitely."

"I think I can manage that."

He felt a relief that very nearly brought tears to his eyes. His voice was suddenly raspy as he whispered, "Thank you."

"Anytime you're ready... you don't need to speak out loud. I'll let you know when your time's up."

"You say she'll hear my words?"

"Yes. It won't be immediate and she won't be able to recall when exactly she heard them, but at some point, she will be convinced that what you say is a real memory to her."

He took a deep breath and considered for a second. Then he nodded at his unlikely benefactor, who subsequently closed his eyes and waited for his words. Before long, he sensed a tenuous link being formed, an unmistakable presence in his mind. It was distinct but strangely enough, not specifically invasive.

Fox Mulder closed his own eyes and began to "speak".

"Hey Scully... I want you to know that I'm all right. I'm alive... I don't know how much time I have to say what I want to say, but if I ever needed you to go by the book, it's now. Please don't take any stupid chances looking for me. I mean it. In fact, I'd rather you don't look for me at all. It's not safe. I haven't figured out what's happening yet, but I need you to know that I am coming back. If you can keep that faith — and I know you have faith — I'll find you. I promise you that..."

* * * * *

I'm losing myself. I don't know how else to describe it. I feel my mind sinking into some deep darkness that has pressed itself against my entire body. I no longer feel like I'm floating. It's more like I'm under water now. I can still breathe, but everything else is closing in on me. I feel like I'm slowly losing consciousness, but it's more than that and less than that at the same time. It's as though knowledge, memories, and awareness itself are slowly being stripped away from me. Painlessly. I'm regressing towards a blank slate. To a basic embryonic existence. With each moment that passes, I know and feel less than I did a second ago, and yet I can't really know what it is that I've lost, or how much. Soon I suspect I'll have difficulty forming a clear thought. This should be alarming to me, but it isn't. What does this mean?

I need help. That's it, I need help. I'll call for help. I remember enough to know that this is something that's almost normal for me. I get into these situations and I always manage to get saved. I just need to call someone.

I'm sleeping now. My brain is telling me that I'm very tired. I have no other thought than that of sleeping. As I slip away, the last sensation I feel is of water as it caresses my body and soothes away the last of my fear.

I'm gonna be all right...

End

The Sum of My Tomorrows



Is our present defined by our future?

Location Unknown
Present Day

He gasped for air, having difficulty finding his voice. And when he finally spoke, he couldn't tell whether he actually uttered the words or whether he simply thought them. Ultimately, it didn't matter. He was heard and he could hear.

"Why am I here?"

"Because you wanted to be. You wanted to see for yourself. To prove what you've always believed."

"I don't remember that... why can't I remember that?"

"Your mind is not your own right now."

"What do you mean?"

"We have work to carry out and your presence has interfered with that work. You're feeling the effects of the testing."

"I'm being tested on?"

"Yes. I can't totally stop them from doing it, but I have been able to protect you from some of the tests. It's why you have trouble remembering."

"You've been protecting me? Why?"

"Your fight is my fight. Those are my orders."

"From whom?"

The broad-faced man had no reply.

* * * * *

Floating in water. Again. I haven't felt like this in a long time. Or, perhaps I should clarify, in what feels like a long time; I have no idea really. But I've regained a sensation that seems to imply that I have a body with limbs and nerve endings, even though I still can't distinguish them clearly. I feel like I have weight and substance again. It's reassuring.

Then on the other hand, I have to admit that I probably don't know what's real or unreal. I can't trust what's past, present, or future, actual living memory, or mere dreams of wishfulness. I think I'm living purely within my subconscious right now, in a coma of some sort. I have no idea how long I've been like this or whether anyone is affected by my situation. I suppose, like most people, I must have family but I don't know who they are.

I don't know who I am.

I'm in a state of not remembering specifics but yet I know things. For instance, I'm sure this condition is amnesia of some sort. I can even spell "amnesia". I seem to have retained basic skills and knowledge about the world but I can't pinpoint what makes me, me. I'm familiar with societal conventions but I don't know what it is that I do to contribute to society, what my work is, and how I fit in.

This lack of knowledge about myself should be disturbing, but I'm neither alarmed nor surprised. It's as though some forgotten part my brain knew that this would happen and was prepared for the situation.

* * * * *

Quonochontaug, RI
August 2021

"You didn't have to get dressed up just for me, Mulder."

He hadn't heard that voice from such a close distance in a long time. Fox Mulder shut the door of his car and turned around just in time to catch a smartly dressed woman — still attractive after all these years — in a half hug.

"Hey, Scully. I didn't expect you so soon."

"Am I early? I thought we said two —"

"Is it two already?" He started to glance down at his watch but then turned his attention back to his former partner and best friend. His soulmate for all eternity? What a strange thought to have all of a sudden, considering that they hadn't laid eyes on one another in three years. Some things just didn't change. Ever. "What am I saying... it's great to see you again. You look wonderful."

He embraced her fully, eyes closing in fond remembrance of years — too many of them, in simple fact — gone by. He felt comforted by the fact that the strength of her hold on him, both emotionally and physically, was still as strong as ever.

She broke away first and flashed him a toothy grin, revealing gentle laugh lines on her face.

"So what's with the fancy threads? Not that I'm complaining, because I can see that you still fill out a suit better than any man I've ever known."

He felt distinctly flattered and flustered at the same time. Smiling at her in return, he kept one arm around her shoulders while he guided her up the walk to the house.

"I just came back from a retirement luncheon for one of my ex-colleagues. A professor from American."

"Retirement?"

"Yeah, it's alarming. I figure it won't be long before the funerals start happening with regularity..."

"Well, that's rather morbid, Mulder."

"Sorry. I'm sure we have a ton of good stuff to talk about. I didn't get around to asking you yesterday — how was the family reunion?"

"It wasn't really a reunion, but it was interesting. It was good for everyone to be together for a change. And of course, Charlie was quite proud."

"It's not everyday that one's offspring earns a Ph.D., so I suppose he's entitled." He reached out to unlock the front door, letting it swing open. Pausing as he stepped over the threshold, he waved towards the patio table and chairs off to the side. "It's nice on the verandah. Why don't we grab some drinks and sit out here?"

"Fine."

"Come on in. Let me get rid of my tie and jacket. There's freshly made iced tea and lemonade in the refrigerator..."

He disappeared down the hall, pulling off his tie as he walked. Scully stood and looked around in awe at how much the simple old summer house had changed.

"The place looks wonderful, Mulder. Totally different from the last time I saw it."

"When was that?"

"A lot of years ago. Whenever it was that we found your father's files."

"Well, since this is the only place I keep now, I thought I'd do some renovations to make it more like a real home."

He had reappeared minus his jacket, sleeves rolled up, his white shirt sufficiently unbuttoned to reveal a generous glimpse of his chest. He was obviously still in great shape.

"Do you think you'll ever live here full time again? On this side of the ocean, I mean."

"I hope to. I want to. Soon. It's home, and like Dorothy said, there's no place like home."

He pulled open the door of his refrigerator and took out two jugs of liquid. He held them up one at a time, putting back the lemonade when Scully nodded at the other.

"How are you liking life overseas these days?"

"I think I'm finally getting used to it, after all these years. But it's nice to come back for the summer. Especially here."

As she accepted a tall glass of iced tea from him, Scully looked at him curiously, trying to figure out if there was some additional meaning to what he had just said. She couldn't tell.

"I've missed you, Scully. It hasn't been the same since your mom left. You just don't come out this way anymore, do you?"

"I know that you're as much a reason to come out here as Mom used to be..."

"But?"

"Well, you're just hardly ever in the country anymore, Mulder... It's hard to plan around your occasional appearances. Why don't you ever come out to the west coast?"

"Your brother would sniff me out and have me killed in five seconds, that's why. With most of your family out there now, I can't imagine how welcome I'd feel."

"They wouldn't all have to know. California's a big state."

"I know. But it's also the place where you started a new life. There's no sense of 'us' out there."

"That wasn't a decision I made on my own, Mulder."

"I know."

* * * * *

"What could we have done to make us a success, Scully?"

She could swear that she heard a twinge of wistfulness in his voice, but his expression was openly good-natured and not at all ponderous. She decided to keep it light.

"We are a success, Mulder. After all this time, you're still the greatest friend I've ever had, have, or ever will have. We've made the best of what we were given. That's all anyone can ever ask for in this life."

In this life. Mulder looked out across the street, thinking absently about how the area had filled in over the past twenty years. So much change and yet so little at the same time. He turned his gaze back to her face and offered a melancholy smile that tugged at her heart unexpectedly.

"That's a bit sad, isn't it? I mean, to think that we don't have the right to expect more?"

"I didn't mean it that way," she replied quickly. "I'm just saying that with our life agendas and the way everything had to be... this was the best that we could manage."

"Back then, did you ever picture us married and living a quiet normal life somewhere?"

"Three times." Well, that was a lie. Maybe it was only three times that she wanted to tell him about. "The first, appropriately enough, was that night after you flippantly asked me to marry you."

"When was that?"

"Oh, and he doesn't even remember —" She feigned mock despair as she put one hand up to her forehead.

"No, no, refresh my memory, I'm sure it'll come to me."

"I took the weekend off to go up to Maine? And I got cornered into that weird x-file-ish thing with the 'possessed' doll —"

"Oh, the Chucky case —" There was no mistaking the mocking tone in his voice now, even though it was intended in a joking fashion.

"There was no 'Chucky' case, Mulder. But during one of our stranger conversations that weekend, after I had spouted off a long list of potential 'out there' possibilities, you —"

"Now I remember. In fact, I think I remember your response, too. It wasn't exactly encouraging."

"Mulder, you were joking I presume?"

"Yeah, but, you know, I think a lot of my jokes had some basis in actual desire... anyway, back to your thoughts."

"When I finally had a moment to myself that night at the hotel, I kept hearing you say those words over and over again. It was eerie. Not so much the idea of being married to you, but the idea of our lives ever being normal enough for us to consider such a possibility."

Mulder leaned forward, elbows on the table, hands clasped together in front of his chin.

"So when were the other times?"

"That year we were taken off the X-Files after that incident in Dallas. The first time when we were driving towards Area 51 in the darkness of night and I was having one of those 'I wish I had a normal life' moments. The second was when we were in California on that undercover case several months later."

Nothing about the intensity of Mulder's gaze had changed over the years. It still had the power to make her feel exposed and naked and unable to hide anything from him. It still had the power to make her look away to avoid revealing too much, to avoid seeing too much.

She swallowed and reached for her glass of iced tea to quench the sudden dryness in her throat. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Did you ever think about us that way?"

"I tried not to. Don't get me wrong... for a long time, I imagined us being together in some fashion. But whenever I considered the image of a normal married life, it just didn't seem to work for me. I was just never sure that I could belong in such a picture."

They sat in silence for several moments, as each considered how different their lives would have been over the past twenty years had they made another choice. The obvious, but ultimately impossible, choice.

"Nothing going on in your love life, Mulder?" She felt an unwelcome clenching in her soul even as she asked the question.

Surprisingly, he smiled genuinely at her before responding.

"Nah. I wouldn't be good for anyone anyway. As single-minded as I am, I mean."

"I guess some things never change."

"No, they don't, do they?"

"So how is Samantha these days?"

"Always progressing. She gets better everyday, I think." Now there was a look that Scully had never before seen on Mulder's face, in the close to thirty years that she'd known him. It was an expression that hinted at having seen angels.

Strangely enough, it made her ache.

A wait of nearly fifty years and counting was too much to ask of any man, and yet Mulder was still able to rejoice in the small victories. Samantha might never know or understand his true identity, but the look on his face just told her that he already felt rewarded.

"It's so hard to wrap my head around the fact that sometimes, she's really got no better than the mind of a teenager in terms of real life experience. And a scared teenager, at that. On the run one week, on an examination table being poked and prodded the next. There's a part of me that wonders what can be gained by having her remember any of that stuff, but, on the other hand... if she can't get back to that point, she won't ever know who I am."

"Do you still have sessions with her?"

"I have regular meetings with her, but never in an office setting. We go for walks. The thing is, I don't want any of this to seem dishonest to her when the time comes. I'm not going to play at being her therapist and then say to her one day, 'Oh, and by the way, I'm your brother.'"

"So who does she think you are?"

"I'm just a friend she calls 'William'."

* * * * *

"I can't believe that it's been almost ten years now since she came out of it. And not too much worse for wear other than the memory problem. But I guess we all know that some sort of memory loss is to be expected."

Scully knew well enough that her three months had remained a mystery to her all these years. From what she understood, Mulder's personal experience had turned out no different.

"What if it never returns?"

"I'm fine with that. If she never remembers anything about the first fourteen years of her life, I'll probably be thankful. Even if it means that I remain 'lost' to her. I wish you could see her, Scully. You'd be proud. She's taken to the whole care-giving thing like it's second nature to her."

"That's wonderful. The whole concept is wonderful. No better care can be offered to those poor souls than by someone who's been through it. Have they managed to identify everyone at the facility yet?"

"No." Mulder frowned, clearly disturbed by the idea that someone out there was still missing a daughter or a son, a sister or a brother, and not knowing whether he or she was alive. Just as he had for so many years, perhaps having been fed just as many lies. "We still don't know who the keeper of all this information is, how we came to be notified. The parties on both sides have gone to so much trouble to hide everything that it's almost impossible to match someone who's secretly 'looking' with someone who's lying there without an identity."

"And the old guard is dying..."

"Exactly. The syndicate took a huge hit that they never recovered from when that hangar went up in flames back in ninety-nine. We've always known that there were other people scattered around the globe who are in on this, but I believe that the core of the operation has always been here in the States. This is where most of the information is. And unfortunately, where most of it's been lost."

"Approximately how old are these people who haven't been identified?"

"The youngest of them are likely just under thirty."

"Surely it's possible to investigate missing persons reports..."

"You forget how convoluted this might have been. Take the case of my sister. My father knew all along what had happened to her. Someone in every family always knows; I'm convinced of that. So there's only so much that gets done before someone says, let it be. Stop looking. Sign off on the search. Unlike my father, who had access to information to know that Samantha had been 'rescued', some of these other children's families probably knew nothing."

"How are most of them doing?"

"We haven't lost any in the past year, but we haven't had anyone wake up in awhile now either. Some of these test subjects seem to be alive in just the barest sense, but there's no reason to think that they won't eventually come out of it. It's just that there's nothing to tell us what's normal or expected or average. Look how long Sam was out for..."

* * * * *

Location Unknown

Present Day

I'm being given something again. An injection of some sort. A fluid that I can actually feel coursing through my veins, spreading something cool. The rest of me feels hot, burning, on fire.

At times I've felt like Sargon from Star Trek. You know, the disembodied brain in a globe light fixture? Well, actually, I have no idea what kind of "receptacle" I might be in, if any. But that's what my recent existence has felt like. I believe that I must exist in order to be having these thoughts, but I can't seem to connect with the physical world in any way. I can't touch anything, say anything.

I don't know why I know things like Sargon from Star Trek when I don't know my name or my phone number or address.

On my better days — although I have no concept of what a "day" is — I see faces but I can't tell if I'm seeing them with my eyes or if they're just in my head. It's aggravating because I know I recognize them; I feel a rush from deep within me when I see them, as though they should cause me great emotional stress. One face in particular: broad, almost misshapen, at once frightfully monstrous and gently calming. I know instinctively that he can squash me like an annoying insect but I don't have any reason to believe that he wants to harm me in any way.

There are other faces also. Less and more familiar ones. Hovering hopefully, these faces appear less often but seem to reach out to me in some way. I can sense an attempt at communication, a direct communication beyond spoken words. I'm reminded of a similar time in my life when I had that capability, but I can't quite pin down why I had it or when it was. It's just more of that same "familiar unfamiliarity".

* * * * *

Washington, DC

April, 2004

"Fox Mulder? I'm Louise Branson —"

"Excuse me?" His initial look of confirmation was replaced by one of confusion as he stood up from his table and extended his hand, hesitating at the unfamiliar name.

"Oh, I'm sorry — I used Jolene Hilliard in my correspondence, didn't I? Actually, it's Jolene Louise Branson Hilliard, to be exact. All part of a long story that I hope you'll want to hear."

She was tall, with dark blonde hair and brown eyes. Likely his own age or maybe slightly older, but not by much. Her words had tumbled out quickly, even though she appeared to be trying to hold back her enthusiasm. Mulder smiled reassuringly at her and pulled out the chair opposite to him, motioning for her to sit down.

"Well, Ms. Hilliard or Ms. Branson. In either of your incarnations, I don't believe I know you, do I?"

"We've never met but I think we might share a history of sorts."

"In what sense?"

"I have a sister, just like you have a sister, who disappeared as a child. Without any explanation, any clues."

"You mentioned that. But that in itself —"

"I know. That in itself doesn't say a whole lot for why I'd make this overture to you. Unfortunately, the world isn't a nice place and kids go missing all the time for no reason. But Mr. Mulder, I'm talking about a situation that's different from the normal, and I think you know what I mean."

The pause grew long, prompting Mulder to say something in return.

"I'm not sure what you're getting at. My sister is dead." God, it still tore an emotional strip off him to say it out loud, despite his belief.

"After all this time, I can understand why you'd think that." Her voice was gentle and full of understanding for something that she had obviously lived through herself. "I was sure that my sister Sarah was dead too, until a few weeks ago. But I've since found out things. And I think that it's possible that she may still be alive. Just like your sister may still be alive. Do you have any proof about what you think happened to her?"

He swallowed painfully, realizing once again that what he had seen and experienced a few years ago simply hadn't been enough to close the doors on the mystery of Samantha. He had tried to make the explanation suffice — merely because he thought that the passage of time alone was to his disadvantage — but the lack of physical evidence had largely left the issue unresolved in the back of his mind.

"No. No body. Paperwork that went to a certain point and stopped, but nothing that can be taken as absolutely concrete. But when you get right down to it, what other explanation can there be?"

"Abnormal, other-worldly explanations."

She had the presence of mind to offer an embarrassed smile alongside her outrageous comment. Mulder suddenly felt as though he were speaking to a younger version of himself.

"And how do you justify believing in those?" Goodness. Who did he just sound like?

"I've learned things about you, too, Mr. Mulder. You've traditionally bought into these so-called... unusual explanations with more than an open mind. Let me tell you honestly that, until I uncovered this stuff, I wasn't someone who would have had much patience with you, I don't think. But so much of what I've found out explains my own life that I can't help but be convinced, if only to take some time to learn the truth. But I hardly know where to start..."

"The beginning's always good. How about starting at the beginning?"

"What beginning? The beginning of how a global consortium came to be, or my own beginning?"

Mulder paused for a long moment at hearing her say the words "global consortium".

"How about telling me what your connection is to this... consortium?"

"My father was Laurence Thomas Hilliard."

She looked at him expectantly, anticipating something. Recognition perhaps? Mulder shook his head.

"That's the third time you've referred to that last name. I'm sorry, should it mean something to me?"

The disappointment on her face was clear as she spoke.

"I don't know. I had hoped that you might know him. What I have — the evidence — seems to indicate that he knew both you and your father."

"If we're talking about the same organization, I don't think its members were highly motivated to give out their real names and phone numbers to people. Maybe I did know him, but not by that name. Probably not by any name for that matter." Mulder thought back to what he still didn't know about the real identity of the cigarette-smoking bastard.

"My father was highly connected. Both in terms of this group and in terms of his normal everyday life. He had access to British nobility. It easily extended beyond the power of the Royal Family —"

"Your father was British?"

"Yes. God, why didn't I think of this sooner..." She brought up an oversized purse from the floor beside her and rummaged through it, extracting a wallet.

"What?"

"I have a picture of him."

She removed the photo from its sleeve and passed it across the table. Even before he held it in his hand, Mulder had a feeling. The face in the photograph was younger than he could recall on the occasion of meeting him, but there was no doubt about who it was.

"I knew this man."

"I thought you might."

"I never knew his name, but..." He suddenly remembered the outcome of his one and only meeting with the British gentleman in question. "Jesus."

"What is it?"

He looked up from studying the photo and stared blankly at his companion.

"You've been talking about him in the past tense —"

"He's deceased."

"If you don't mind my asking, how did he die?"

He knew, and it would have been hard to fake, but did anyone ever truly know what was real with these people?

"They killed him. While he was here in America. Several years ago. Then they packaged up what was left of his body and sent him back to London. Part of 'my beginning', Mr. Mulder, is that until he was killed, I didn't even know he was my father. I knew him as my uncle."

"You... don't have an accent."

"No, I was brought up here. In a small town in Pennsylvania. My mother and I came over to live with relatives for our own protection."

Mulder looked down at the photograph that he held in his hand once again.

"I was there."

"Where?"

"In DC in the summer of 1998. Your father got into a limousine on a deserted back street and it blew up right in front of me. Technically speaking, he saved my life even though he wasn't exactly pleasant about it. He also gave me the means to save my partner's life."

Dana Scully would have died had it not been for the assistance of Mr. Hilliard.

"From what I understand, my father was a reluctant participant in the whole project during his final years. All he wanted was for the antidote to be effective so that we could protect ourselves against the threat. Maybe make the first move. He always thought that we had the power to make the first move. I mean, this really gets into an area that I don't know how much I can believe in, but I do believe that there is a threat of some kind that is considerable enough for these men to have devoted so much of their lives to fighting it, sacrificing so much in the process. But as to actual alien invasions... what do you really believe, Mr. Mulder?"

"I don't know what to say because I have no undeniable proof. Anything that I've uncovered in the past has been in my fingers one minute and gone the next. Always one step behind, except when they deem it necessary to give me small wins to keep me invested. But I've seen things. I've been places. And I have the feeling that I've probably forgotten more than I know."

"Is the alien threat real?"

"As to whether it'll come down to a take-over-the-world kind of real, I don't know. In any other smaller context, I would have to say yes. As to how alien, I don't know that either."

"But you've always believed that your sister was taken for the project?"

"Yes. But a few years ago, I encountered evidence — paperwork — that suggested that she'd managed to get away."

"Get away to what?"

"Nowhere safe, I don't think. The trail ended. I believe she died."

"What if they got to her again?"

"I don't think so, for the fact that there was an eyewitness who said that she was being pursued by the men from the project when she turned up missing. And apparently they were surprised that she was missing."

"You don't think that they could have caught up with her again?"

He thought of starlight and winced inwardly.

"I have no idea, really. All I'm saying is that every bit of hard evidence that I had seemed to point to the fact that she really disappeared after that."

"But that makes sense in terms of what I've uncovered. Think about it, Mr. Mulder." Her eyes flashed with increasing excitement at what she was about to share. "Some backlash from within. The testing is not as innocuous as they originally thought. Some subjects do not merely experience lost time. Some actually live and breathe the horror as it happens and it slowly destroys their minds. Rather than being prepared for some future where they'll be immune to this threat, they're just going to wind up being sacrificed to the cause as involuntary guinea pigs. Their families couldn't possibly have been okay with that."

"So what are you saying?"

"I don't know what price was paid by the people who got involved in this, but I'm assuming that someone from every family knew the real facts. That these weren't just random abductions. These test subjects were chosen. By both sides."

"I've always thought so too."

"But it doesn't appear to be an agreement that you can easily break. The thing is, as it started to go bad, someone at some point must have decided that they had to rescue certain test subjects before they died from their exposure."

"So they abducted them from the abductors?"

What a concept, Mulder thought to himself.

"That's right. And it makes perfect sense. Taken to relative safety but unable to be taken to any traditional place of healing. It had to be kept highly secret. These children weren't returned to their families. In most cases, their families probably weren't even aware that they had been removed. And the awful reality may have been that some of these children were not in any condition to be reclaimed."

"So where were they taken?"

"That's the extent of my information. I don't know. But I've made an informed guess."

"Which is?"

"You attended Oxford, right? How did that come to be?"

"It was my father's suggestion... "

"Did you ever ask why?"

"He — he said it was a dream of his to go there. I took to the idea and since I was a good student... are you insinuating my father and his people somehow made it possible for me to get accepted at Oxford?"

"No, no, not at all. That would hardly be keeping a low profile, which I'm sure your father and my father had to do at all times to avert suspicion. I'm sure you got in on your own merits; that's not my point. But your being in England may have been convenient for your father to give him access —"

"He did visit regularly. More so than I would have expected."

"Would he have had reasons to go over there otherwise?"

"Not that I knew."

"Well, maybe he did. Maybe it's because he had two children to visit."

Fox Mulder felt a sudden need for something to drink.

* * * * *

Dana Scully had had an inkling that this lunch meeting was probably going to be one that she would never forget. After hearing her former partner's synopsis, she was all the more certain.

"How did she get to know so much in just a few weeks, Mulder? That makes no sense. You're saying that she has knowledge beyond what we know and it took us years, after dozens of dead ends and —"

"I wondered the same thing myself. So I asked her."

"And?"

"I had misinterpreted how long she's been digging."

"How long has she been digging?"

"Ever since her father died."

"But that's still not that long — what, five, maybe six years?"

"Maybe it depends on where you dig. She took a leave of absence from her job and spent six months in London shortly after his death. Finding out just how connected and important he really was. Meeting her half-brother and his family. Apparently she found some paperwork on her own, but the bulk of it was mysteriously delivered to her while she was there. An enclosed note indicated that since both her parents were now deceased — her mother died ten years ago — she was entitled to the information. So what am I thinking?"

Scully blinked at the oddly placed question. "I don't know. What are you thinking?"

"Did I get anything delivered to me after Mom died? I don't think so, right?"

"Are you assuming you should have gotten something? Just because this woman did? 'One' is hardly a pattern, Mulder."

He stared at her, almost through her, as though something about what she had just said triggered a distant memory.

"No, if I remember correctly, one is the loneliest number."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. Just something from a long time ago. I think." His eyes refocused on her face. With a sinking heart, she knew what was coming. She was no stranger to that look of determination. "I have to go to England."

"No you don't. Don't do this to yourself again."

"What am I doing?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"I have a gut instinct about this one, Scully. I haven't felt that way in years; I can't ignore it. I just know this is something I have to do. I'm not saying it'll lead me to Samantha, but I have a feeling that it'll tell me what really happened to her."

It didn't take a medical degree for Scully to know that Mulder was referring to the mysterious starlight theory that he had accepted for a brief time several years ago. She understood that he had finally chosen to believe for all intents and purposes that Samantha was dead, but the how and the why of it was something that had continued to plague him.

Dana Scully was suddenly filled with a sense of deep loss, a spooky little feeling of her own that Mulder was right — that this was what had to be. There would be no changing it. And the end result of all this might just be something that she had never anticipated in a million years.

He was leaving her.

The realization shocked her into a self-preservation mode. It wasn't the current topic at hand, but she had to ask. She had to know for sure.

"And what does this mean for us, Mulder? For you and me? Some things... some things just haven't been the same since you came back."

He stared down into his coffee cup for a long moment before looking up and meeting her eyes. She heard him sigh before he spoke.

"Losing track of six months of my life in addition to all that other time wasn't my plan, Scully. I know you don't really believe that I could possibly miss something that I don't remember having, but every time I see your face... I know. I do know. Despite that — or maybe because of that — I don't want anything between us to be forced. I don't want it to be an obligation, and I don't want anything to happen for the wrong reasons —" He broke off, seeing unexpected tears spill over, sliding down her face. "Scully —"

"I'm sorry —"

"Why are you apologizing?"

"Because I don't normally do this..." Although it didn't seem as though he remembered that either. She wiped the tears away quickly with her fingertips, surprised by her sudden outburst.

"I need you to help me, Scully."

"No, Mulder, not any more. Not if this woman has given you reason and cause to further your chase across the ocean. How far is that going to take you and for how long? It can't be this way... I can't start this all over again."

"What do you mean?"

"It's always been your life goal to 'understand why'. Up to a certain point, it's just not mine."

"So what are you saying?"

"That I can't go with you."

"I don't want you to go with me. It's not safe. You — you have other responsibilities."

She looked at him sharply. It used to be so easy to read him, to know what he knew in an instant. Nowadays, she couldn't tell whether he knew things that he wasn't wanting to share.

"So do you."

"I have a responsibility to find my sister."

Did she ever doubt that everything about Mulder would always come back to Samantha? Could she blame him?

No.

"What is it you want me to do?"

"Come up to Rhode Island with me this weekend. I have a feeling what I'm looking for is there. Help me find it."

"What — why?"

"You know how when Mom had her stroke that I searched the place and found that weapon hidden inside the lamp? Well, I've never ever searched any further for anything else. It occurred to me when I was speaking with Louise that I've looked through both of my parents' places up and down after they died, but never the summer house. If Dad had information that was highly confidential, he may have kept it somewhere away from him where he thought no one would think of looking."

His eyes made one last plea to her, enticing her to acquiesce.

"My last class on Friday is at two," she finally offered.

"Good, same here. I'll pick you up at your place around four."

* * * * *

"So can you make arrangements for us to go over in the next two weeks? Whatever wait time is needed to get reasonable airfare, I guess... I don't have a Bureau expense account to bill this to anymore, y'know."

Dana Scully tried not to listen in on the conversation, but being that the house was absolutely silent except for the sound of Mulder's voice, it was a difficult task to accomplish. He was on the phone to Louise Branson, confirming plans to fly to England.

Fox Mulder had scored once again in another of his intuitive deductions. In a crawl space underneath the subfloor of the summer house, they had discovered two boxes of files that had been kept up to date until the year of Bill Mulder's murder. Everything that they had managed to read over the past six hours had more or less verified what had been discussed at Mulder's meeting with Ms. Branson. The answer to Samantha's whereabouts seemed to lie overseas, no question about it. And even though Mulder had promised not to get his hopes up, all indications were that as recently as the early 1990's, she was still alive.

Bill Mulder had seemingly known all along what had happened to Samantha. But just as Laurence Hilliard had tried to tell Mulder during their brief meeting, everything he did was with the intention of protecting her against the alien threat. That he ended up paying a high price for his involvement was well known. The secrets that he kept from his wife along with the increasing guilt that he felt about the project itself eventually cost him his marriage and family life. Scully could only wonder at what he might have felt when Samantha was rescued from the project and put into seclusion in a secret facility somewhere in England, to recover from the effects of the tests.

What must a parent go through when a child is taken away like that — even for good reasons? Was there ever a point of getting over the trauma, of accepting that the sacrifice was worth it for the sake of protecting the child? Of being able to live with the decision?

Scully found herself unable to put down one of the correspondences that they had uncovered, reading and re-reading it until her eyes watered from both grief and the desire for sleep. They hadn't stopped for much of anything at all over the past twelve hours since their arrival. Mulder's bowl of soup was still half uneaten on the coffee table next to them. As usual, he had been a man possessed, driven by the need to finish the task at hand. Once they found the boxes, he had to read every scrap of paper that was in them, even though it was well past two in the morning when they unearthed the first box. For Scully, however, the decision to stay up with him was really a no-brainer.

She started at the sudden presence of a hand on her shoulder.

"Sorry, Scully. Didn't mean to scare you, but maybe it's time for you to get some sleep."

"What about you?"

"I think I'm too wired."

"And of course, the two pots of coffee had nothing to do with that."

A wry smile was his reply.

"Come on, I'll help you make up your room."

She followed him down the hall, feeling weary, resigned, and acutely nostalgic. She remembered walking down this hall during a different time, several years ago. But it was a memory among many from the time period that Mulder seemed to have lost, and there was no question that being here again was difficult to deal with under those circumstances.

They worked in relative silence to make up the bed with fresh sheets and blankets. Their movements seemed oddly coordinated even without benefit of instruction or words.

"There you go. If that's not warm enough, there's another blanket in the top drawer of that dresser."

"I'll be fine."

He looked at her strangely at hearing those familiar words from so long ago. She stared bravely back at him, her mouth curling into an unconvincing smile.

"Thanks for coming up with me, Scully."

"You're welcome." She hoped fervently that he would just turn and leave. She was losing the ability to hold herself together by the second and couldn't trust herself to say another two words to him.

On Mulder's part, while her obvious discomfort wasn't lost on him, he really didn't know what to do or say to make it better.

"Get some sleep." His voice came across to her as soft and gentle and just a little bit sad.

"You too."

He closed the door behind him, leaving her standing in the middle of the room. She looked around, noting that daylight shone brightly behind the worn curtains that covered the window above her bed. It was close to nine-thirty in the morning, a ridiculous time to contemplate going to sleep, despite how her body ached for rest. Absently, she went through the motions of changing into her pajamas. She slid in between the sheets and — almost against her will — closed her eyes to embrace a disturbing darkness that seemed to devour her very soul.

In her next waking memory, she was crying like a baby, anguished sobs echoing through the room. Spurred on by some unspeakable grief, hot tears ran down her face like rain, both uncontrolled and uncontrollable, soaking her pillow in the process. She wasn't even aware of the fact that she wasn't alone until she clutched at her belly to appease her inner pain and instead latched onto a pair of

strong arms that were holding her gently. It was only then that she heard him whispering into her ear, trying to soothe her with his words. It was only then that she felt the familiar curve of his body pressed warmly against her back.

But it only served to make her cry harder.

As he held her in his arms, Fox Mulder suddenly felt the onerous weight of too many long-suffering years. Something had to give. Clearly, wounds that had been sustained during their involvement with the X-Files had never truly healed, despite their mutual decision to leave everything behind and start new lives. Ironically, their new lives were no less unsettled, at least in an emotional sense. He knew that Scully was unhappy in her new situation, and unhappier still over their tepid relationship. In all honesty, they really had no relationship these days. The glue that once held it together — their work — was no longer there and other things beyond the realm of their wildest expectations had slowly driven a wedge between them. However, in some classic, twisted fashion, it appeared as though their initial inability to come together was mirrored now in their current inability to break apart.

Was it his fault? Probably. Fox Mulder generally accepted most things regarding Dana Scully's unhappiness as his fault. Realistically speaking, how could he not? But he also knew well enough that if he were able to change anything about their current state of affairs, he would have done so already. Unfortunately, this time, making changes was beyond his power. As he had found occasion to repeat several times in the past, this relationship had never been in his control and it still wasn't.

"Please, Scully... tell me what's wrong."

He continued to hold her, waiting for her body to stop shaking, for her tears to subside. It must have taken a full five minutes for her to become coherent again. For her to draw a breath long and deep enough to sustain what she had to say.

"I'm moving to California, Mulder. I'm taking that job in San Diego."

After what seemed like an endless delay where time slowed to the point of standing still, she heard his soft reply.

"That's probably a good idea."

She was glad that neither of them could see the other's face. She thought that hers must have just crumpled with inconsolable grief.

"That's not exactly what I wanted to hear."

"Were you expecting me to talk you out of it?"

"I don't know, Mulder. I don't know anything anymore."

"Yes you do. You know that you're not happy here. You're not happy with me. I think we both know that, Scully. And I think you know that you have to do this for yourself."

Her words stumbled along a series of shuddering breaths as she lost the battle against the new torrent of tears that overflowed onto her pillow.

"Are you giving up on us?"

The sound of unmistakable heartbreak in her voice caused a lump to rise in his throat. He swallowed down hard before trusting himself to respond. When he spoke, however, his words and tone were amazingly clear and strong.

"No. I will never do that."

* * * * *

Location Unknown
Present Day

I hear screams sometimes. They frighten me. The thing is, sometimes I think the screams are coming from me. I remember and then I forget. It's a standard pattern. I seem to remember someone telling me at one time that tests were being done. And yet what sort of tests might these be? Am I sick? Am I dying? Is someone or something trying to save me?

If I'm being tested on, I sure don't remember anything after the fact. Something tells me that this is a good thing. In the back of my mind, I seem to have a vague remembrance of "testing" being an important and significant issue in my life. Not affecting me directly, but affecting those close to me. But again, I have no idea who.

I seem to have protectors. During the few instances in which I actually feel pain or discomfort of some sort, it appears that someone has given me something to make it go away. Although, maybe that's all part of the testing too. But maybe not. I get the feeling of this happening in secret. I get a sense of being told that I shouldn't worry, that this will be over soon. That I will be returned to my life shortly.

But will I remember the life that I return to, is the question?

* * * * *

Washington DC
June 2014

The moving van turned the corner and disappeared from sight, taking the last of Margaret Scully's belongings to its western destination. Mulder stood and stared down the empty street for a few moments before turning around to see his former partner doing the same — although she was turned more towards him than the street — with a lonesome expression on her face.

"Hey, stranger." It was his favorite nickname for her these days, a moniker that — quite frankly — bothered her in a nagging, annoying kind of way. "Penny for your thoughts?"

The immediate look on her face was almost alarming.

"Don't worry, Scully. I haven't been able to read minds in a long time, remember?" Not wanting to force her into having to craft some sort of explanation, Mulder continued without a beat, "Sorry I didn't get to say goodbye to your mom."

"If I'd been here, I would have told you, but —"

"It would have been uncomfortable, huh?"

"I don't know. Mom's more okay about it than everyone else in the family, but I didn't want her bringing up questions to you that you really had no answers for. You know that I've never liked the fact that you wanted to take the blame for what happened to us."

"We agreed it was easier that way, Scully."

"Well, I shouldn't have agreed. It wasn't honest."

"Maybe someday we can change that. For now, it's still easier this way." He turned to her and put his hand on her arm gently, pulling her back towards the walk leading up to her mother's house. "So what do you want to do with the rest of the evening?"

"Can we sit in the backyard for awhile? I can't quite let go of the place yet and I'd like to spend a final hour or two under my favorite tree."

As they made their way around the house, Scully felt a familiar sensation at the small of her back. Mulder's hand. Back to where it felt at home, apparently.

They made their way to a log bench that sat under the shade of a huge weeping willow.

"You know, I've been trying to think and it's not coming clear to me — when's the last time we actually talked for any length of time?"

"Too long, Mulder. And it's probably my fault —"

"Ah —" He held up his hand, stopping her in mid-sentence. "Before we start, let's get the usuals out of the way. Same rules as always? No questions about personal love lives?"

It occurred to Mulder that she was definitely no longer the naive girl he had first met so many years ago. Of course, she wasn't, but he had never paid much attention to the fact that they had aged over the past decade or so. Right this moment, though, she looked like she had really lived every one of her fifty years.

"No... I mean, no, that's silly. I want to know. I want to know if you're happy and in love and if I'm keeping you from someone important tonight."

"Well, I'm mostly happy, but I'm not in love anywhere and no, you're the only important person to me tonight."

He smiled and cocked his head to one side, awaiting a similar revelation from her. Her eyes were downcast when she spoke.

"Okay. I'm sorta blue right now, because I thought I was in love but I wasn't and... I think I misled him without really knowing it...."

She looked up at him and smiled unexpectedly.

"Short version is, I'm not getting picked up at the airport when I return."

They shared a hearty laugh, and Dana Scully was once again surprised by how much more upbeat she already felt in this man's presence.

Mulder turned sideways to straddle the log, facing her. He then leaned forward and tapped his index finger lightly on her knee.

"So, Scully, how do we go about making you 'unblue'?"

She turned and matched his position, surprising him by taking his hands.

"Tell me about Samantha. Tell me everything, even what you've already shared with me in bits and pieces over the last five years. I want to hear all the details and I want to hear you tell it."

Five years ago, Mulder had called her with news that he had received an anonymous mailing from London. Inside the plain brown envelope was a list of names, some crossed off; his name was the first among those that remained. The only other item within was a sheet of letterhead from a mental institution called Spring Hills Psychiatric Center. It wasn't long after that Samantha, along with Sarah Hilliard and dozens of other test subject survivors, were found sequestered within the walls of that secured facility. The news wasn't necessarily good beyond that, however. Mulder learned that many of the patients were in a deep catatonic or similarly vegetative state. Some had been that way since their "rescue" from the testing program. Until two years ago, Samantha had been among them.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

* * * * *

"I think the hardest part of all this has been thinking back to what Dad must have gone through. I mean, it's beyond me to think of why and how he could have done any of it, but given that he did... No wonder it destroyed whatever he and Mom had. Even after Sam was safe in England, he couldn't tell her. What was there to tell? Samantha's alive but a total vegetable? And you know, I always wondered why he came over to visit me so often while I was at Oxford."

"Well, if I remember correctly, when we discovered those files of his, it was always his intention to let you know. He just never had the chance."

"I know."

"Did you ever find out the significance of that list of names that you received?"

"Far as I can tell — and you know I still have sources who'll help me out — the names that were crossed out were people who must have been really fearful for their lives. They're either dead or they simply no longer exist. Their trail just ends. Louise said that I was likely the first person on the list who could be located easily. We've contacted most of the remaining ones; all of them were matched with someone at Spring Hills. Siblings. So many people with stories just like mine."

Scully could imagine the scene that must have taken place as long lost brothers and sisters were finally found. Childhood and innocence lost, but so much more left in life to share. A little voice inside her head reminded her that it was never too late.

"Stories with happy endings," she heard herself murmuring softly.

"Those are the only kind to have."

"You never told me the circumstances of Samantha coming awake — what brought it on?"

"Nobody knows. And no one dared hope in the first little while that she would stay that way, because apparently she'd been in and out like that several times over the past thirty-some years. Some of us have our suspicions that the cloning program may have had something to do with it. Some kind of twin effect or something... shared experiences and feelings. But, hey, two years later and there's been no relapse."

"And you said she's being educated?"

"As soon as they pass inspection by the specialists, so to speak, they're tutored. Whoever our mysterious benefactor is, I give him all the credit in the world because the facility runs like nothing I've ever seen. They've managed to remain highly classified and hidden right out there in the open. The resources they have are outstanding."

"So where does all this leave you, Mulder?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, unless I don't know you at all, I'm sure you've thought about relocating to England?"

"It's in the works. All kinds of factors to consider before I hop a plane permanently. For one thing, it's not like I'm independently wealthy. I need to get myself some sort of employment."

"At the center?"

"You do know me."

"Well that one was obvious, Mulder."

After meeting his eyes for several seconds, she dropped her gaze down to her right foot, watching absently as she dug the toe of her sneaker into the dirt.

"What's the matter, Scully? You gonna miss me?"

It was a standard and even predictable Mulder quip, but it managed to elicit an unexpectedly passionate response.

"I've always missed you, Mulder. Since the day they took you from me, I've missed you. This project, this goddamn alien invasion crap hangs over my head every single day and reminds me of why I have to settle for just missing you."

She leapt up from her seat, years of pent-up annoyance, anger and hurt suddenly bubbling up from deep within her gut. This probably wasn't the place or the time for it, but Christ, it wasn't like they had many chances to speak face to face these days.

"I'm sorry, Scully."

"It's not your fault." She sighed, turning back to him. "You mentioned the clones, Mulder, the hybrids. These Samantha look-alikes who have hounded you over the years... where are they?"

"No one really knows. Or no one will say. Anything that I've discovered before tells me that they're systematically destroyed as soon as their purpose has been fulfilled. Because they're just not stable."

"God... that's what they're still using these people for?"

"It's quite dirty on both sides. From what Louise has managed to find out, no one's winning the war right now."

"How's she doing?"

"She says that if she hadn't found Sarah, all of this would have taken years off her life. Some of the stuff we uncover is not pretty, as you well know. But she's using her connections well. She's managed to recruit her half-brother to the cause."

"But how is — how is 'our' side finding out any inside information these days?"

"There's a double agent at work in every project, Scully. You know that. I get messages."

"What sort of messages?"

"Telegrams, essentially."

After a long pause, no further details seemed forthcoming, and Scully knew why.

"This isn't something I should know, is it?"

"It'd probably be safer if you didn't."

"The risk is still real?"

Mulder nodded, a weary look passing over his face briefly. "Very real."

* * * * *

Dulles Airport was a strangely nostalgic place for them. How many times had they come and gone through here during their FBI partnership days? Mulder watched as Scully checked in her bag, then joined her for the stroll to her departure gate. As they proceeded in silence, he realized that he had to ask the question that he had been holding back from asking all weekend long.

"So how's life in sunny California really, Scully?"

She slowed her pace and looked at him before answering.

"Good."

"Really?"

"Well, I've been there for ten years now, Mulder. If I didn't like it —"

"You might still stay."

"But Mom's out there now —"

"I know, your entire family's more or less together."

She stopped and turned to face him.

"What are you really saying, Mulder?"

"Do you ever think about coming back?"

A look of renewal slowly washed over her face, lighting it up in a way that Mulder hadn't seen in years. Clearly, she appreciated being asked.

"All the time. But I think you know what we're both waiting for. As you once said, we're dealing with decisions that were made a long time ago. We're just along for the ride."

"I know. I just had to ask." He peered deep into her eyes for long moment, catching her before she had a chance to put up any of her usual defences. He ended up being the one to experience a

momentary weakness, however. Half turning away from her, he took a deep breath before adding, "I'm still fighting the fight, Scully."

"I know you are. And when it's finally over..."

The public address system announcing the boarding of her flight drowned out the remainder of her sentence.

* * * * *

Location Unknown
Present Day

I feel like I've been watching a series of vignettes about a life that I should know.

My life.

I am Fox Mulder.

I have a very important friend and quite possibly former lover named Scully. I don't really understand why we're not together, given the strange force of our feelings for one another. Perhaps that's something I will know or remember when I get back to living my life. At some point, I am reunited with a sister that I haven't seen since childhood. But the thing is, I don't know whether this has already happened or not, because I honestly don't know at what point in my life I am right now.

In any case, what I've either foreseen for the future or remembered from the past has made me wonder.

Are we the sum of all our yesterdays or the sum of all our tomorrows? Do our past actions dictate where we will end up — like so many people believe — or is everything totally out of our hands? Might we in fact be pre-destined to wind up at one specific place at the end of our journey on this earth, no matter how many detours we take, no matter how many mistakes we make? Is it possible that the person that we are meant to be actually shapes who we are as we move toward our life goals?

I want to believe that I am the sum of my tomorrows. I want to believe that however many forks in the road I encounter, however many bad turns I take, and however many times I screw up, I will wind up at the right place.

The place where fate has always intended me to be.

* * * * *

Quonochontaug, RI
August 2021

The sun was getting low in the sky. They had been sitting out on the verandah for hours and hours, and it had seemingly flown by like mere minutes.

"Is it safe, finally, Mulder?"

For several years, the infamous Marathon Man phrase had been the standard subject line for many an email message between them.

"I think so. I'll never fully understand the real extent of the threat, but it was obviously as much from within as from without. The syndicate was never just there to fight supposed alien intruders and save the world. It also served its own special interests by conducting its own tests. I don't think it was ever just about finding an antidote. But the warped result of it all is that we may have saved our own skins."

"Have you received any more messages?"

"Not a one since last February. It's been a year and a half and all's quiet."

Mulder pulled out his wallet and removed a carefully creased piece of paper from one of the plastic sleeves. He unfolded it and slid it across the table towards her.

Scully glanced at it briefly, then looked up and met his gaze, taking the time to look at him like she had been afraid to do for so many years. For the first time in a long time, she dared to lose herself in his hazel eyes, free to see the scars from battles fought. For the first time in a long time, she convinced herself to sweep aside her own pain.

She picked up the note and stared down at the terse message, her eyes misting over inexplicably.

PROJECT RESULTS UNACCEPTABLE. UPPER HAND HAS BEEN LOST. PLANS SCRAPPED. SEEKING ALTERNATIVES ELSEWHERE.

"The war's over, Scully. It's time for everyone to come home."

They were safe. They were all safe.

End