

The **X** Files

Hummer

by RC

Hanover Cavern

25 miles outside Las Cruces, New Mexico

Friday, May 12, 1995

1:25 p.m. MDT

Tom "Mac" MacCarthy stood on the carbonate platform of rock, coiling the extra lengths of rope he had brought with him, as he waited for his friends to descend from the ledge above. The bright beam of light from the Mag-Lite lamp on his helmet jumped around the cavernous room as his head bobbed and weaved to avoid the slightly whipping ropes. He laid his eyes on the one closest to landing.

"Nice view from down here," he said, shining his lamp on Lynda's rear.

Lynda Simpson held onto her brake line, dangling a good twenty feet above the cave floor. "One more smart remark and I'll drop on you."

Bowing, with his arms outstretched, Mac mock-pleaded forgiveness. "I did not mean to offend thee, Your Holiness. It would be my pleasure if you would drop on me."

"Shut up, Mac. You're getting on my nerves," Dave Schneider yelled from up top.

Saluting Nazi-style, Mac did his best Sergeant Schultz impersonation. "*Ja wold, Commandante.* I know noootherggg."

"Shut up, Mac!" Lynda and Dave bellowed.

Mac shimmed out of his gear and helmet and started prowling around the nicks and crannies of their underworld playground like a little school kid out on a field trip. The caves were a favorite hang-out spot for the more adventurous entrepreneurs of weekend warrior sports. The Outdoors Club at New Mexico State University didn't think it was appropriate for the numbers of people they got for their monthly trips, and wouldn't fund one last expedition before graduation. It was virgin territory, as far as Mac was concerned. Many people did not know about the place.

Lynda dropped down, and with expert hands was untangled from her rope and gear in under a minute. She took a few minutes to check out the scenery, always amazed at the beauty of the calcitic columns.

"I told you this would be better than those stupid activities the Senior Week Committee had planned," Mac told her.

He jumped off his ledge. He was holding a length of cord between his hands, and used it as sort of a miniature jump rope. Legs curled up toward his chest, he jumped through the loop of his arms and rope and nailed a ten point landing next to Lynda. He held the cord out like a sword.

"My name is Inigo Mantoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die."

"My name is Lynda Simpson. You are annoying. Prepare to run."

Lynda lunged after Mac, sending him sprawling into Dave as he hit the ground. Dave shoved back, taking a swipe at Mac's head. Missing, he settled for a potshot with his leather gloves, hitting Mac squarely in the small of the back.

Still running around the cave like a rabbit on a sugar rush, Mac started spouting off at the mouth again, barely taking a breath between words.

"Hey, do you guys remember that show, *War of the Worlds*?"

"What? The George Pal movie?" Dave asked, stepping out of his gear.

Mac shook his head. "Nah. That TV show. The Blackwood Project? The loony astrophysicist and the Indian guy and the hacker in the wheelchair and the chick microbiologist?"

Lynda chucked her helmet at him. "Chick is not a word."

"Okay, female microbiologist. Anyway, didn't the Advocacy live in the caves around here?"

"That's Nevada, numb-nuts," Lynda pointed out. "*Quantum Leap* had their base of operations in New Mexico. And here I thought you were the wellspring of useless TV trivia."

Mac drop kicked the helmet toward the rest of their gear. "Whatever. What do you think the likelihood is that we could find alien life living down in these caves? Or some kind of mutant? They did do all that nuclear testing down here, and who knows what the government is hiding? They didn't tell those uranium miners about the health hazards, and now they're popping up with lung cancer and all sorts of stuff. And what about those prisoners that were shot up with irradiated blood? That committee is supposed to close down soon. Think we'll ever really know the extent of the government's mischief? What if they're keeping the remains of the ship that crashed in Roswell down here somewhere?"

"Turn your brain off, Mac. You're having another stupid attack," Dave said, setting down on one of the ledges, drawing circles in the dust with the toe of his boot.

"Stupid is as stupid does, sir."

"Come here, Forrest, I'll give you something to Gump about," Lynda warned. She had whipped out a handkerchief and was wiping her brow with it. She wadded it into a ball and nailed him on the forehead. He fell backward in a dramatic heap.

"How the hell did you pass your English comps with all that garbage running through that twisted little brain of yours?" she demanded, retrieving her kerchief and stuffing it into her back pocket.

Mac shrugged his shoulders. "I memorized all the books. 'Whether tis nobler in the mind , '"

"Cut the crap, Shakespeare." Dave grabbed his pack and started rummaging through it for the sandwiches he'd packed. "Must be nice to have a full ride to NYU."

"That's if he graduates," Lynda chided. "There is that little matter of a humanities' requirement that he neglected to fulfill."

"Humanities schmanities," Mac puffed. "They changed the rules on me midway through fifth semester. Three years ago, English 302 took care of the humanities requirement."

"Not anymore, Mac-pie." Dave stuffed half a sandwich in his mouth. He swept his free hand through the air. "Don't sweat it. McNulty'll make sure you graduate. Magna cum laude and all."

Mac rolled to his knees, face contorted in concentration. "Hey guys, shut up a minute ... Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Dave asked. He listened, heard nothing. "Check those ridalin levels there, Spaz. You're hearing things."

"No, I hear it, too." Lynda stood up, walked toward where she thought the noise was coming from. "Sort of like a hum."

"Really low frequency," Mac added. He joined Lynda near one of the many branching conduits that led to other subsidiary caves.

Dave walked over to where they stood. "Nope. Don't hear it."

"I'm sure it's coming from in here," Lynda said, walking inside the tunnel.

"Hey, guys, not without the flashlights," Dave insisted. He ran back and picked up their helmets. "There's no telling how deep some of the drop offs are in here."

Mac led the way, bouncing his arm as if leading a parade. "Off we go, into the wild, blue yonder ,"

The tunnel emptied into a natural underground stream. Mac plowed through the small trickle of water, splashing the backs of his legs and anyone close enough to be in his wake. Dave and Lynda kept to the edges, moss- and slime-covered as they were.

"It's getting louder," Mac announced, picking up the pace. "I think we're getting close."

Dave shook his head. "I still don't hear anything."

"I do. Keep going." Lynda pushed him forward.

The stream tunnel opened up into another cavernous room, the water cascading into a plunge pool about twenty feet below. The water was mysteriously lit from below, casting a strange green glow. There were no outside light sources, no air tunnels to the surface.

Mac made as if he would take a swan dive off the ledge. "Any takers?"

Dave grabbed Mac's belt loops. "Don't even think it. We climb down. Over there." He pointed toward a series of jutting ledges about fifteen feet to the right.

"Whoa, what's that?" Mac exclaimed, pointing his head gear toward the other side of the cavern.

The lamp light reflected off something metallic, roughly spherical in shape in that it looked like a very large soccer ball with too little air in it. Hexagonal panels fit together loosely around the central cylindrical core. Six thin hinged metal legs jutted out of the main body near its base, nestled within cracks in the bedrock. Otherwise, the body appeared to be suspended in mid-air.

"What do you think it is?" Lynda asked, bringing up the rear as they carefully climbed down the talus pile of fallen cavity rock.

"It sort of looks like a lunar pod." Dave jumped to the floor of the cavern, rolling to his knees to avoid injury. "Like that picture Eddie's got on his wall, the Apollo moon landing."

Mac started to dance around like a lunatic again. "I knew the Apollo moon landings were fake! Ha, what did I tell you. The government set it all up and hid the evidence down here. Wait till Mikey hears about this!"

"Shut up, Mac!" Lynda and Dave shouted.

"This is not part of some conspiracy, toadie," Lynda continued. "It's just some hunk of junk."

Dave shook his head as he approached the alleged hunk of junk. "I don't think so." Holding his hands in front of him, he circled the construction, making an invisible wall out of necessity. "This thing is giving off heat. A lotta heat."

"Hey, Dave, check out this pool!" Mac leaned over the edge, nose mere inches from the pool's surface. "What do you make of this stuff? It's glowing." He had a strand of some algae in his hands for Dave to inspect.

"The algae's all over the walls," Lynda observed. "Think this is the stuff your dad was talking about?"

Mac shrugged his shoulders, and tipped nearer to the water's edge, staring into the depths.

Grabbing his belt loops, Dave pulled Mac away from the edge. "Do you have some sort of death wish?"

"It's just salt water, see?" Mac splashed his friend liberally, gaining a viscous growl in response.

"That's it." Dave grabbed Mac's shirt collar and waistband and hefted the scrawny fellow into the plunge pool. The splash echoed loudly in the cavernous room.

"You sonuvabitch. You threw me in!" Mac stood in the pool; the water level came to mid-thigh.

"Hey, guys, if you're finished being childish, this thing is getting hotter," Lynda said, backing away from the pod.

Mac waded out of the water and stopped mid-tread, watched in amazement as the water glowed greener. "This is too weird."

"The heat's coming off in waves," Lynda told them as they joined her near the pod. "What's going on, Dave?"

"Why are you asking me?" Dave asked.

"Because you're the science major," Mac said, stepping closer. His hand stayed before his eyes to shield them from the heat.

"Biology, guys. I could tell you all about the physiology of that glowing algae, not why some dilapidated piece of shit machine is going berserk. Is something humming?"

Mac lightly pounded his fist on Dave's shoulder. "He can be taught!"

"This is what you guys were hearing in the cave?" Dave shook his head, as if knocking cobwebs from his fuzzy brain.

A furnace blast of heat drove the trio from the pod's perimeter. Mac stumbled back into the pool and immediately yelped, smoke emanating from his shins. "Shit! Ow ," He jumped out of the water.

"What the hell just happened?" Lynda knelt down and examined the burns on Mac's shins.

"I don't know , Ow, cut that out!"

Lynda's hand hovered over his mottled and blistered leg. "These are second degree burns, Mac. The water did this?"

He didn't get a chance to answer. Bright flashes filled the room. Mac covered his eyes, wincing at the bright light. He clamped his hands over his head, an ear-drum piercing whine emanating from the machine.

Lynda turned away from the bright flashes. She could not hear anything, not even her own voice screaming, "What the hell is going on?"

Dave pushed the others toward the tunnel entrance. "Get out of here, now!"

The whine increased, deafening and pounding. Before they reached the tunnel, all three were down on their knees, heads held tightly against their legs. One by one they fell into the plunge pool.

C **Crime Scene, Highway 10 Rest Stop**

Las Cruces, New Mexico

Monday, May 15, 1995

9:03 a.m. MDT

Agent Fox Mulder flipped through the case file and grimaced. This was not what he wanted to see first thing on a Monday morning, even though his stomach told him it was nearly lunch time. The thought of lunch nearly turned his stomach. He stopped near the chalk outlines of three bodies on the asphalt parking lot.

At least the weather was dry. Washington D.C. had been deluged by rain for nearly a week, and he wanted away from wet, dreary weather.

Yellow police tape still sectioned off the parking lot from curious onlookers. The rest stop had been closed down for months due to a cut back in state spending on highway maintenance. The local sheriff's department did not expect many visitors to the crime scene.

Agent Dana Scully walked up behind him, engrossed in the police report. "It says here that they were reported missing by friends Friday night," she told him, thumbing through the pages. "They didn't show up for a keg party at the decedents' house."

"I don't know what they were chugging, but it sure wasn't beer." Mulder handed her the photos of the crime scene.

Scully studied one picture after another. The victims' skin, what was left of it, was mottled and flaky. Severe burns marked the appendages and torso. The black and white photos left nothing to the imagination. Close-ups of some of the larger burns showed massive tissue degeneration and necrosis. Very little blood.

Mulder matched photos with victims' names and started to read off their bios. "Lynda Simpson, age 22, speech pathology major, president of the Outdoors club, SPACE activist, and coordinator of a local chapter of Big Brother, Big Sister. Thomas MacCarthy, age 21, English major, quite the thespian. He's had a lead in the last three productions of the Drama club. Captain of the Brainstormers team. David Schneider, age 22, biology major, basketball player, vice president of the Outdoors club. All attended New Mexico State University College over in Las Cruces. They were supposed to go through ceremonies yesterday afternoon."

"These look like acid burns. Who found the bodies?"

"Mr. and Mrs. John Blythe of Midland, Texas. Las Cruces field office has them for questioning."

Scully closed the file folder, tucked it under her arm. "Why were we called in?"

"I'm glad you asked that, Scully." Mulder walked over toward their rental car, a red Pontiac sedan.

Scully did not follow. "Don't tell me. You have an X-File on this."

The tell-tale red and white folder appeared in Mulder's hands. He laid out its contents on the hood of the car. Scully reluctantly joined him.

"Forty years ago, a man in West Texas was found dead near a closed down gas station. Second and third degree burns over ninety percent of his body. Two years later, a woman in Arizona was found dead in the backyard of her split level ranch house, burns over 75 percent of her body. Investigators found no evidence of fire or acid scarring near the crime scenes."

"They may have been killed elsewhere and dumped afterward. I don't see a connection."

"Did you notice those kids' clothes?"

"Yeah," she replied, quizzical. "That was odd. They were hardly damaged."

Mulder tapped his finger on one of the photographs. "The same thing happened in Arizona and West Texas. But that's not the best part. You're gonna love this. What do you think was the cause of death?"

"I would assume the burns have something to do with it," Scully answered. The smart-aleck smirk on his face told her she had guessed wrong. "Tell me, oh insightful one, how did these people die?"

"Drowning. Fluids in the lungs were like nothing the coroners had ever seen. And the nearest body of water with comparable saline content was over 100 miles away for the latest victims. The same is true for Arizona and West Texas."

Scully slapped her copy of the police report against his chest and walked over to the passenger car door. "Where are the bodies now? I assume you want me to do the autopsies."

Mulder smiled, gathered up the file on the hood of the car. "You read me like a book."

Scully opened the car door. "Comic book, maybe."

Mulder stepped back, as if hit with an arrow through the heart.

"Get in the car, Mulder," Scully said, slipping on her sunglasses and a seat belt.

Mulder jumped in the car, shoved both the X-File and the police report between the seat cushions. He put the car in gear as he fastened the seat belt, and peeled out of the rest stop and onto the main highway with a dust cloud rivaling a monster truck.

He rolled up the windows and turned on the air conditioner. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

Scully waited for him to spill everything he knew about the case, as he always did, in that all-so-endearing, neurotic tone of voice. He was in a particularly weird mood this morning, had even been hyper on the plane ride. He usually slept or listened quietly to headphones.

"Okay, Mulder, tell me how you got wind of this case? The bodies were found less than twenty-four hours ago."

Mulder reached for the ever-present bag of shelled sunflower seeds on the dash. "Picked it off the wire last night."

"Don't you ever sleep?"

"Who has time to sleep? You miss too much when you sleep."

Scully rolled her hands forward in circles. "The case, Mulder?"

A seed snapped loudly between his teeth. "Came in through the Las Cruces field office. The investigative officer called for some info on the kids, and Danny over in Research, found something on one of the kids he thought I might be interested in."

"Which one?" Scully asked, picking up the case file to find the photos.

"Thomas MacCarthy. He's on file with a bunch of other Hummers with the center of UFO Activities and ,"

Scully held up her hand. "Wait a minute. Hummers?"

Mulder cracked another sunflower seed between his teeth and started chewing. "Hummers claim that they can hear this low-frequency hum that no one else seems to hear. There's this one guy out here in New Mexico who has claimed he has made a recording of this hum." Scully looked at him skeptically. "They're documented cases."

"What do these Hummers have to do with UFOs?"

"Someone made a claim that aliens were responsible for the low humming noise, as a means of taking over our minds. But, as I was saying before you so rudely interrupted me, some of these people are also on file with the defense department. Someone claims that the ELF project is causing the low frequency that they're hearing."

"The ELF project? You mean how the military contacts submarines in the Arctic?"

"Among other things," Mulder replied, a gleam in his eye.

"So what's your interest in the case? Aliens or conspiracy?"

"Neither. I wanted out of the rain."

FBI Field Office

Las Cruces, New Mexico

10:14 a.m. MDT

Mulder had discarded his suit jacket long ago, leaving it behind in the back seat of the rental. His shirt sleeves were rolled past his elbows, tie loosened at the neck. Dress code be damned. Scully sat at the end of the table, with a pad of paper and pen. A tiny tape recorder was sitting in front of, the record button depressed.

Leaning with elbows on his knees, he faced John Blythe and his spouse, Katherine. They were retirement age, wearing matching floral prints and khakis. Katherine, still looking a bit spooked, held onto her husband's proffered hand with an iron grip.

"Mr. and Mrs. Blythe, I just want to ask you a few questions."

John patted his wife's hand gently. "We've already talked with the police, yesterday morning."

Mulder nodded his head. "Yes, I know, I read the transcripts. I just want to clear up a few details."

John looked at his wife; she slowly looked away. He pleaded, "This has been very hard on my wife. Our youngest is only a few years older than those poor people."

"I completely understand, but it would help us a lot if you could answer our questions."

John nodded, squeezed his wife's hand. "All right, Agent Mulder. Ask away."

"Why did you stop at that particular rest stop? There was a road sign that said it was closed."

"I had been driving for nearly four hours. I wanted to get out and stretch the legs a bit. We're on our way to the Grand Canyon, we have reservations. That's where we spent our honeymoon."

Mulder smiled. The mention of the Grand Canyon seemed to calm Katherine. He turned back to his questions. "So, you didn't see anything suspicious? No other cars? No other people?"

John shook his head. "The road was deserted. It was only about ten in the morning."

"How did you come across the bodies?"

"Well, like I said, I wanted to stretch my legs. We parked at the other end of the parking lot, near the pavilion. I saw the kids as I drove by, but I thought they were just camping there or something."

"What made you think that?"

"They were covered with a blanket."

Mulder looked to Scully. The mention of a blanket was news to her as well. There was no blanket in any of the crime scene photos. She scribbled something down in her notebook.

"When did you realize they were dead?"

John swallowed. "There was a coyote sitting on the ridge. My wife and I slipped back in the car, just so we could watch him, maybe snap a few pictures. I pulled out the camera, and we waited."

It, ah, came over to one of the bodies, and started sniffing around. He tore at the blanket. That's when I noticed , them. We drove out of there and looked for a telephone."

"Did you see any footprints, tire tracks in the area?"

Shaking his head, he squeezed his wife's hand again. "No, sir."

"Did you take any pictures of the coyote?"

"Ah, yeah." He elbowed his wife to get her purse. She shuffled through her purse and pulled out a hand-held automatic Canon camera. "Right here." John gave the camera to Mulder.

Mulder examined the camera. He turned it on; the picture count read 23. "Can I borrow your film? We'll get it processed for you, free of charge, as long as we can have copies of the coyote pictures. You may have picked up something that forensics didn't." He gave the camera back to John.

"Sure," John said. "We were near the end of the roll." He rewound the film, pulled it out of the camera and gave it to Mulder.

Mulder read the canister, memorized it, then tossed it to Scully. She caught it one-handed, and placed it in an evidence bag.

"We'll see if we can get you on your way to the Grand Canyon by this afternoon. And I'll call to make sure your reservations are still confirmed," Mulder offered. He stood and shook John's hand.

"Thank you very much, Agent Mulder."

"No, thank you."

Mulder led them out of the little office, and handed them off to one of the locals. Then he stepped back into the room, and closed the door. He turned his chair around, and sat in it backward, resting his forearms on the back.

"So what do you think?" he asked her.

"The Grand Canyon is lovely this time of year," she quipped, closing her notebook.

Mulder puffed, and grabbed the recorder. "Do you remember anything about a blanket in the police reports?"

"No. That doesn't mean it wasn't there. Maybe someone was a little sloppy, and didn't list it with the evidence collected."

"Maybe. Listen, I'll get these photos developed, see what happened to that blanket. How long will the autopsies take?"

"Three, maybe four hours," she answered.

Mulder stood, replaced the chair and headed for the door. Holding it open for her, he said as she passed, "Okay, meet me back at the motel around 1:30. We'll grab some lunch and figure our game plan from there."

He closed the door behind him.

Photo Lab

Las Cruces Field Office
Las Cruces, New Mexico
11:34 a.m. MDT

Pulling the ten by twelve sheet of proofs out of the rinse, Mulder shook the sheet free of drips and held it up to the red light bulb hanging above his head. Finding the section that he needed, he placed the sheet on the light table. Flipping the switch, the table lit slowly, first the left side, then the right.

Mulder picked up the magnifying glass and slowly moved it over the five pictures taken by John Blythe at the crime scene. Two were telephoto snaps of a lone coyote sitting on the ridge. Photogenic, but not what he was looking for. The next two were not that much of a help either.

The last was a wide angle shot. The animal was closer to the parking lot this time. Though the focus was clearly on the animal, in the foreground, there was a blurry image, offset from the black pavement of the parking lot.

He picked up the negatives and headed out the door, grabbing the overhead string to shut off the red lamp above him as he walked by. As the door closed behind him, he caught the eye of Agent Jerry Doran across the small cubby hole room.

Mulder held up the proof sheet. "Got it."

"Let's run it through the computer," Jerry said, grabbing his jacket.

And I thought my office was cramped, Mulder thought as he stepped into Jerry Doran's home away from home. He felt an appreciation that only another slob at heart could understand. It was a good thing Scully was not with him; he would never hear the end of it.

Mulder was even more impressed with the screen saver on the idled computer; Playboy bunnies posed in provocative bathing suits, another reason to be glad Scully was not around. He'd been slightly more than embarrassed the last time she'd found his little collection in the desk drawer.

Jerry sat down at the desk, moved the mouse to bring up the desktop. "Let me just pull the image off the net, and we'll set to work."

Mulder grabbed a piece of desk and leaned over Jerry's shoulder. "That one," he indicated, pointing at the bottom image.

"Okay." Jerry clicked on the image. A blown-up version of it showed up on the screen. "Where?"

"Lower left, the white blob on the asphalt."

Jerry maneuvered a window around the blob and it enlarged to screen size. Blurry pixels filled the screen. The agent typed in a few keystrokes, and the picture cleared.

"Not much to work with," Jerry commented. He tried to sharpen the image some more. Details slowly came into focus.

It was a white blanket of some sort. The nature of the material was difficult to determine from the resolution of the photo, but Mulder guessed it was stiff, like tarpaulin, by the way it kinked in the center. A reddish pink corner attracted his attention.

"Can you zoom in on that?" he asked, pointing to the corner.

Another enlargement, another enhancement.

"Looks like a hand to me," Jerry said.

Mulder chewed on his lower lip. "There's a ring on the third finger, see there. None of the victims had on any jewelry when the police catalogued the scene."

"Somebody beat us to the bodies," Jerry said. "There are all sorts of vagrants out there along the highway. It's all state-protected land. Troopers find campers and shanty towns all up and down that stretch of road."

Mulder stood, paced the room. "I'm going to need copies of these images, best detail you can give me. And can you arrange for someone to search the area again? Maybe the person who stole the jewelry and blanket is still around. What's the number for the morgue?"

"555-6835."

Mulder picked up Jerry's extension and started dialing.

Las Cruces Morgue

Las Cruces, New Mexico

11:53 p.m. MDT

A lab techie tapped on the glass pane separating the examine room from the coroner's office. Through the glass, his voice sounded muffled. "Agent Scully, there's an Agent Mulder on the line for you," he said, pointing to the phone in her hand. "Extension's over there on the wall, line 2."

Scully waved a thanks, pulled off the latex gloves and stepped over to the phone on the wall. She tossed the gloves on a nearby table. "Mulder?"

"Yeah, Scully. The photo came through, there was a blanket of some sort at the scene. It also appears that some of the victims were wearing jewelry before the authorities got there."

Scully leaned against the wall. "Someone robbed the bodies between the time the Blythe's found the bodies and the police arrived?"

"Looks that way. I'm headed out to the crime scene with Agent Doran now, maybe dig up a few clues, maybe do a bit of searching. I suspect the person who did it hasn't strayed too far. How's it going over there?"

"I was about to start on the MacCarthy boy when you called."

"What have you found?"

"The tissue cultures won't be ready for another hour or so, but it looks as if your theory panned out." She looked over at the scale where a lung still lay. "I found some sort of saline fluid in Lynda Simpson's lungs and blood. The techs are trying to determine its chemistry now." She paused to lean over and grab the folder with the X-File in it. She flipped to the appropriate page.

"On a hunch, I pulled out the autopsy report on the Texas man for comparison. Guess what I found?"

"Our three victims have ruptured ear drums."

"Yeah, how did you know, never mind."

"Before or after the acid?"

"I don't know that yet. This is taking longer than I thought it would. I still want to see if I can figure out the nature of the acid burns. Forensics is running the clothing for trace evidence. Maybe we can find some of the compound in the fabric."

"Okay. Listen, it's almost noon now. The search is probably going to take me all afternoon. Why don't we meet for dinner instead? At some point I want to run out to the college. If the bodies were dumped at the rest stop, I want to know where they were supposed to be."

"All right. When I'm done here, I'll make a few phone calls, see if I can catch some of their friends before they go home for break."

"Sounds like a plan. See you later, Scully."

There was a click on the other side of the line. She hung up the phone, found the box of latex gloves to grab a fresh pair.

The body was on the metal table. All photos had been taken earlier that morning.

There was another tap at the window pane. It was the same techie that gave her the phone message. "Agent Scully, I'm going to get some lunch. Want anything while I'm out?"

Scully tried to keep from looking at the body of Lynda Simpson, still lying on the other slab, unceremoniously draped with a translucent white sheet. Autopsies always took away her appetite.

"No, I'm fine. Thanks."

"Something to drink?"

"Anything cold with caffeine would be great. Thanks."

"Sure thing."

Scully turned back to MacCarthy, took the drape off his body. Reaching up, she turned on the recorder.

"Subject is male, Caucasian, 66 inches in extremis, weight 145 pounds ..."

State Wildlife Refuge

Highway 10, Las Cruces, New Mexico

3:56 p.m. MDT

After walking over miles and miles of hard-packed soil and the occasional outcrop of weathered sandstone, Mulder was damned glad that he'd decided to change into hiking boots. He was not

looking forward to a close encounter of the painful kind with a sunning rattler. His forearms were a bit pink, since he'd forgotten to roll down his sleeves before venturing out in the sun.

Ahead of him, Jerry Doran walked beside the park ranger, wearing a canvas fishing cap that said, "If this hat's missin', I've gone fishin'." Its wide brim was warped and misshapen, a perfect testament to the man who wore it and his sense of humor. Sunlight glinted off a metallic fishing lure attached to the back of the hat.

The park ranger, Doherty, regaled them with his latest tale of poacher chasing, shifting the weight of a gym bag in his pudgy hands. He was a large man, gut threatening to burst out of his strained shirt and elastic waistband. The back of his neck was sunburned and leathery, the fuzz of hair on his head providing no protection from the sun's rays. He wore his ball cap on the back of his head, the plastic sizer in the back cradled between two large rolls of skin.

"Not that all of 'em are all that bad. Some of them folks are just out here camping overnight, and they pick up and leave early the next morning. I've run a few of the shanties outta here. Them that can't get a job in town usually end up shacking up on state ground, selling jewelry at roadside stands along the highway. But I keep tellin' 'em, they can't hunt the birds. Them's protected, I say."

Jerry clapped the ranger on the back. "You do a good job out here, Bobby."

Doherty pointed beyond a small hill. "If Drago's the guy you're lookin' for, he usually camps on the other side of that hill. He's been busted a coupla times for petty theft. Never knew him to rob the dead, though. He's, ah, kinda," He twirled a finger around his temple. "Post traumatic stress, or somethin' like that. 'Nam did it to him."

Climbing the hill, Doherty took off his cap, waved it in the air. Mulder kept a hand close to his gun.

"Hey, Drago! You here? Got some people here who want to ask you some questions," Doherty hollered.

Standing on the crest of the hill, Mulder saw a small canvas pup tent hidden within an alcove of rocks. A stone fire pit stood a few feet away from the opening of the tent, with an old, battered pot standing under a small spit. A white tarp, similar to what Mulder had seen in the photo, served as sort of a bivouac. A man sat under it, legs crossed under him. The knees of his fatigues were worn through, and from what Mulder could see, the boots were in desperate need of resoling.

In the distance, Mulder saw the coyote from Blythe's pictures.

Drago held a wooden spear, and looked ready to throw it.

Doherty held up his arms, away from his sides, and told Jerry and Mulder to do the same. Mulder did so hesitantly, not wanting his hand to stray far from his gun.

"Drago, these are friends of mine," Doherty said, calmly walking down the hill. "They want to ask you a few questions."

Drago shook his head furiously. "Didn't do nothing!"

"We know you didn't do anything," Jerry assured, smiling wide. "We just want to ask you a few questions. Is that okay?"

Drago thought about it, then nodded. He stood awkwardly, stoop-shouldered. When he walked, there was a definitive limp in his gait. His left foot dragged behind him as if lame.

"Did you see anything happen here yesterday, Drago?" Jerry asked. "The police found three dead kids over near the rest stop."

"Had nothin' to do with that," Drago insisted. "Dead when Roscoe found 'em."

Mulder pointed toward the coyote, who now stood protectively on the ridge. "Is that Roscoe?"

Drago turned his head, smiled at the animal watching over him. "That's him. He protects me. Finds stuff for me."

Touching the white tarp, Mulder inquired, "Did he find this for you?"

"Yup. Yestedy mornin'. Over there." The direction he indicated was toward the rest stop.

"Did you know this was covering three dead kids, Drago?" Jerry questioned.

"Dead when I found them. I did nothin' to them kids."

Jerry took a step closer, but Drago held up his spear. Jerry stepped back. "We're not accusing you of anything. We just want to know if you saw anything. We don't think those kids were killed here. We think someone brought them here, left them in the parking lot. Did you see anything like that?"

Drago shook his head, started to fuss with his left ear. "Nothin'. I saw nothin'. I heard nothin' for days, 'cept that damned hum. It was loud a few days ago."

Mulder perked. "You heard humming?" Drago nodded.

Doherty leaned toward Mulder and whispered, "Drago says he can hear this hum. No one around here says they can hear it. We figure it must be somethin' left over from 'Nam."

Mulder ignored him. "Can you hear the hum now?"

"Always hear it." Drago squinted his eyes, fussed with his ear some more.

Mulder noticed a leather thong around his neck, with a ring hanging from it. "That's a nice piece of jewelry. May I see it?"

Drago stared down at his chest and pulled on the thin leather strip. "Can buy it for five bucks."

"Fair trade." Mulder pulled out his wallet and a five dollar bill.

Drago snatched the bill, stuffed it inside his shirt, and handed Mulder the leather thong. Mulder was careful not to touch the ring itself. It was silver banded, with a heart in the center, topped by a large crown. Silvery hands held the heart. He slipped the makeshift necklace in a plastic bag.

"Do you think we can buy that tarp off you?" Mulder offered. He had no problem buying evidence, under the circumstances.

Drago looked at the tarp, fingered the material. "Trade. I need this. Need other things too."

Doherty asked, "What do ya want, Drago?"

Drago looked at Mulder's boots. "Them."

Mulder glanced at his feet. He was not exactly looking forward to traversing the terrain all the way back to the car in his socks.

"No problem, Drago. But this guy's got bigger feet than you do. How 'bout I get you a pair of your own?"

Drago pulled the tarp off the stakes it was tied to, handed it to Doherty. Doherty opened his gym bag and pulled out a pair of brand new work boots, which did happen to look a lot like the pair Mulder was wearing.

"Here ya go, Drago. And there's some soup in there for ya, too." Doherty stepped back as Drago rummaged through the gym bag. He told Mulder, "I always bring him a little somethin'. And I knew he was looking for boots."

Jerry put the tarp in a large plastic bag, tagged it, and started to walk off toward the car. Doherty was close behind when he turned, noticing that Mulder was not following. "Coming, Agent Mulder?"

"In a moment. I want to have a word with Drago here."

Drago looked up at the mention of his name.

Mulder knelt down, watched as Drago neatly stacked the cans of chicken soup on the ground. "How long have you heard the hum, Drago?"

"Forever."

"What does it sound like?"

As if looking for the words, Drago rolled his hands, tapped his good foot on the ground. "Buzzing. Bees buzzing."

"I don't here it, Drago."

"They say only certain people here it."

"They who?"

Drago pointed up to the sky. "Them."

Mulder looked up. "Aliens?"

"Them," Drago repeated, pointing up.

Doherty put his hand on Mulder's shoulder, indicated that they should leave. Mulder stood reluctantly, brushing his hands off on the seat of his pants.

When they were out of earshot, Doherty said, "The guy's nuts. Took a bullet in the head. Never been the same. Shoots rocks at the sky whenever a plane flies by. I knew him before the war, he went to school with my younger sister."

"Did he hear the hum before 'Nam?" Mulder inquired. Deep Throat came to mind. He had said that he'd had the distinction of being one of three men to kill an alien. It had been during the war, in Cambodia.

Doherty shrugged his shoulders. "Not so as I recall. I come out here evry' so often, bring him clothes and stuff. He tells me about the poachers."

"Does he ever claim the poachers came from outer space?"

Doherty looked at him strangely. Mulder was used to that expression. He got it from everybody, including his partner, when he brought up the extraterrestrial.

"I don't believe in no aliens, son. I don't know what Drago sees when he shoots at them planes, but it sure as hell ain't no alien spacecraft."

"Has he ever had a psychological evaluation? Maybe about the humming he hears?"

Doherty shoved his massive hands in his pants' pockets. "Listen, those people I see on them tabloid shows, the ones who claim to hear this hum , I don't know what they're hearin'. I think it's a bunch of hogwash, people just looking for publicity."

"Maybe. Do you know the names of any of these Hummers?" Mulder asked. "I'd like to ask them a few questions."

"Not off the top of my head, but I can get some names, I suppose. What do you want them for?"

They were nearing the car. Mulder skipped ahead toward Jerry to help him with the tarp. "One of the kids murdered claimed he could hear the hum, too."

E-Z Sleep Motel

Las Cruces, New Mexico

7:23 p.m. MDT

Scully looked up from her laptop computer when she heard the knock at the door. Uncoiling her legs, careful not to snag her sneakers on the bedspread, she got off the bed and peaked through the peephole. Mulder, freshly showered, stood on the other side. She unlocked the door, unhooked the chain, and let him in.

Mulder did not comment on the chain or the dead bolt. He knew she was still uneasy about leaving doors and windows unlocked, every since Duane Barry. Not that he blamed her. He himself had insisted that she get another lock put on her apartment door, even had reinforced windows put in place for her before she'd come home from the hospital.

"Hey, there's this neat Mom and Pop joint up the road. They've got apple pie. I'll even pay," he suggested, waggling his eyebrows a la Groucho Marx. "We could walk, it's not that far."

"I thought you had enough walking for today," she said, grabbing a light gray flannel shirt off the chair and stepping outside. She checked the doorknob to make sure it was locked.

"I'm too wired." He held up a piece of paper above her face, using his superior height to keep it just out of reach. "This was just faxed to me."

Scully dummy-punched him in the side, and his arm dropped.

"Ow," he whined, rubbing his ribs.

"You don't grow up being the shortest in the family without learning a few tricks." She quickly read through it, a little amazed at what was before her. "This is the toxicology report and chemistry on the liquid found in the victims' lungs. How did you get it?"

"Guess they got the rooms mixed up. Ten to one odds that the substance forensics finds on the tarp matches the liquid found in the victims' lungs."

"Mulder, these percentages, massive amounts of potassium chloride were found in their lungs. It looks like they inhaled a salt marsh."

"So maybe they accidentally fell in one and drowned."

Scully picked up her pace. His enthusiasm for a good argument was catching. "Mulder, the salts they mine in these parts are hundreds of feet below the earth's surface. What would three college students be doing in a salt mine?"

"Looking for something to go with their margarita mix?" he quipped.

"Then how did they get down there?"

"You haven't been watching *Earth 2*. Terrians do it all the time." Scully did not look amused. He shrugged. "I don't have all the answers."

Scully stopped, held up her hands. "Wait, I want that in writing."

Mulder heh-hehed, took her arm and steered her toward the diner.

After sopping up the rest of the ketchup on his plate with the last of Scully's french fries, Mulder popped them in his mouth, grinned, then dug into the slice of pie he'd ordered.

"Mulder, slow down, you're going to get a stomach ache," Scully warned. She leaned her back against the wall adjacent to the booth, feet propped up in front of her on the seat and knees drawn. "You're giving me a stomach ache just watching you."

In between bites, he managed to say, "I forgot to eat lunch. Besides, I think Mom and Pop over there will be mighty displeased if they find your plate half-full."

Scully pushed the more than half-eaten burger away from her, not used to all the grease that came with it. Another bite and she thought she might throw up. She yawned, looked at her watch. It read 10:30, still on Washington time. Jet lag, she told herself.

Veering from that subject, Mulder asked, "So, what did you find out about the victims' friends at college?"

"There's a memorial service tomorrow night on campus. I got the names of the other students that lived in their house off campus. One has agreed to talk to us tomorrow morning."

"These friends have any idea where they went to Friday?"

Scully shook her head. "I don't know. I didn't ask."

Mulder nodded, inhaled the rest of the pie, then started in on the rest of Scully's burger. She looked away in comical distaste.

"I've got the name of someone else we should talk to: Harold Weinier," he said before taking a bite from the burger.

"Who's he?"

"A physicist employed by the DOE, noted researcher, and more importantly, a Hummer."

"You're kidding."

"I kid you not. That guy I told you about, Drago? He says he can hear the hum, and that it was really bad a few days ago."

"Mulder, what does this humming have to do with our case?" She took a sip of water, crunched the ice between her teeth.

"Drago implied that aliens are the cause of it. He was in Cambodia in 1968. And there were reported sightings of alien spacecraft hovering over various parts of Cambodia in 1968."

Scully quietly drummed the back of her head against the wall. "Okay, Mulder. We'll talk to Weinier, but not because Drago says that aliens caused the humming. I'm not writing that in my field report."

"Whatever you say, Scully. Strictly professional consultation. Weinier runs a support group of sorts for people who hear the hum. He can give us some insight as to what these people are thinking. You never know, maybe it was the humming that led them to their deaths."

"I think you're reaching a bit there, Mulder."

"Only for my wallet."

New Mexico State University

61 North Street
Las Cruces, New Mexico
Tuesday, May 16, 1995
9:46 a.m. MDT

The inside of the Victorian-styled house looked every bit as worn as the outside. Oak banisters lined the stairwell, hardwood floors looked like they had seen better days, and eggshell white paint on the walls was cracked and peeling. Multicolored beanbag chairs made up most of the furniture. Flags from around the world, including the Federation of Planets, were draped from the ceiling. The fish tank was stocked with beer. Nothing about the inside seemed to go with the times the house had been built to commemorate.

Eight-by-ten photos of college-aged students sat in frames nestled all along the plaster wall leading up the stairwell to the second floor. Some were portraits, others prank photos of parties, everyone gathered around the keg. A particular one caught Mulder's attention: All three victims were in it, arm in arm, a beautiful sunset as the backdrop. They were wearing climbing gear.

Eddie Joyner noticed his interest. "That was taken a year ago. Mac, Dave and Lynda loved to go climbing, hiking. You name it. Practically went every weekend."

"Do you know where they may have gone last Friday?" Scully asked, sitting across from Eddie in the living room.

"They said something about a cave Mac knows , knew. It's close by. Mac grew up around here. I've never been there, but I know where it is."

Mulder turned away from the photos. "Would Mac's parents know about this cave?"

"Sure. Mac's dad taught him how to climb. I could call them for you. They know me."

"Thanks, we'd appreciate it." Mulder pointed out a number of the photos on the wall. A number of them were of Eddie, suspended from ropes next to a giant stalactite. "So, you know a little about spelunking?"

Eddie cracked a smile. "I worked as one of the instructors in the Outdoor Club, along with Mac and Lynda. Dave wasn't too crazy about holes in the ground, though. I don't know how they managed to get him to go."

"How long were you friends, Eddie?" Scully inquired.

Eddie pulled his hand through his short, curly brown hair, rubbed his face in order to hide the fact that a few tears threatened to fall. "Ah, since freshmen year. We all lived in the same dorm. Me, Mac, Dave, Lynda, Tracy and Heather. Everyone called us the Brady Bunch. We, ah, moved here sophomore year." He shrugged his shoulders at the general disarray of the house. "Beats living in the dorms."

"Are the others around?"

"Ah, no. Tracy and Heather went home after graduation. They were too upset. I'm doing my grad work here, so I stayed."

Mulder took a seat next to Scully, extracted a plastic bag from his suit pocket. "Eddie, do you recognize this?" He held out the ring for the young man to see.

Eddie nodded. "Yeah, that's Mac's claddagh. It was a graduation present, high school, from his parents. He wore it everywhere. We had a bet that he would never wear the crown up before graduation."

"Crown up?" Mulder repeated.

Scully filled him in. "It's a traditional Irish wedding band. You wear the crown up if you're taken, crown down if you're not."

Eddie fingered the ring, stared at the heart and hand combination. His hand went to a piece of string he had around his neck. There was a shark's tooth attached to it. "Mac had this necklace, like this one. He had a piece of Connemara marble on it. He said it brought him good luck."

When he offered to hand back the ring, Mulder closed his hand around it. "No, keep it. Give it to his parents." Eddie nodded.

A phone started ringing. Mulder's hand collapsed over his inside breast pocket. "Excuse me." He pulled out the cellular phone and hit the talk button, walked to the other side of the room. "Mulder ... yeah, Jerry, we're just about finished here ... we'll be right there."

"What's going on?" Scully stood.

"There was a four-car pile up about an hour ago. No fatalities, but one of the victims claimed to hear a hum just before the crash," Mulder explained.

"Mac used to say he could hear a hum every once in a while. We all thought he was playing with our heads. He was always quoting some nonsense, playing with conspiracy theories. He could quote *JFK* verbatim, beginning to end."

Mulder shook Eddie's hand. "Thanks for your help. Here's where we're staying. Our cellular numbers are on there, too. Call us anytime, day or night."

"I will. Hey, if you're planning on going down in that cave, I can get you down there. Anything to help figure out why this happened."

"Thanks. We may take you up on that."

Eddie led them to the door.

"Mulder, you haven't said a word since we left the house," Scully commented as she changed lanes. There was very little traffic on the highway. As far as she was concerned, a low traffic day was about all she could handle. She stifled a yawn, shook her head to clear the cobwebs. Tossing and turning all night had not put her in the best of moods.

Mulder chewed on his seeds. "I'm thinking."
"I can see that. Smoke is practically spilling from your ears."

"I checked Thomas MacCarthy's file with the Center for UFO Activities last night. He only heard the hum some of the time. I asked the college to fax me a copy of his medical records. At age six weeks, he contracted bacterial meningitis. It was treated with streptomycin after conventional antibody therapy failed. Streptomycin has been known to cause intermittent ringing in the ears."

Scully looked over at him. He stared out the window, into the sideview mirror. "No extraterrestrial explanations? No extreme possibilities? You were actually looking for a plausible, scientific reason for Tom MacCarthy's ear-ringing? Are you feeling all right? Because something must be wrong with you if you've come over to the other side."

"Momentary mental aberration. It won't happen again, especially with this morning's accident. If anything, it proves that there is some outside source responsible for the humming."

"If you say aliens, I'm going to scream."

"Let me get my earplugs."

Scully slugged him in the thigh. Rubbing the tender area, Mulder sat up a little straighter, and slid farther across the seat.

"It was only a suggestion," he grumbled playfully.

"Think of another. Maybe there is a downed transformer somewhere in the area of the accident. It was rush hour. People are a little crazed during rush hour."

"Yeah, I've seen you on the turnpike."

"Don't make me hurt you, Mulder. You're the one with the speeding tickets."

"Sorry. I apologize. Okay, we'll check out the scene, see if there is any reasonable cause for a four car pile up. Then we look to the realm of extreme possibility."

Scully's brow furrowed, suspicious. "Why are you being so placating?"

"Me?" he asked in wounded surprise. "Placate? I just don't want to get hit again. You've picked up a mean streak, Ms. Scully. What would your mother say?"

"Bill, leave your sister alone."

"Must be nice to be Mom's favorite."

Scully smiled, and turned off the highway.

Route 67 Accident Scene

Outside Las Cruces, New Mexico

10:22 a.m. MDT

Two cars were wrapped around each other's fenders near the shoulder of the road. A tow truck had a third riding on the back, its driver's side folded at midsection. The fourth car, a huge '79 Plymouth Volare, had minor rear bumper damage. Its occupant was seated on the fender of the nearest cop car, receiving first aid for a cut about his left eye.

Three ambulances had responded to the scene. State troopers directed traffic to the other side of the highway near one of the meridians so that the investigative team could reconstruct the physics of the accident.

Scully slowed as she neared one of the troopers, flashed her ID, and was directed to park over on the shoulder, approximately fifty feet behind the scene. Mulder was out of the car before she had turned it off, and hunted down the officer in charge. Scully trotted after him.

The officer in charge met them halfway. "You FBI?"

"Agent Mulder." He offered his ID, then thumbed at the person behind him. "Agent Scully."

"Deputy Mike Vasile." He shook their hands, gruffly and quickly.

"What have you got, Deputy?" Mulder asked, pocketing his ID.

Vasile pointed at the blue Volare station wagon, and led them in its direction. "Our driver over there lost control of his car momentarily and slammed on the brakes. Driver number two in the red Jetta got turned around to avoid hitting the Volare, only to be plowed into by driver number three and passenger in the maroon Golf. Driver number four in the tan sedan slammed into the back of the Golf. Sandwich city."

"Any casualties?" Scully asked, using her hand to block the glare of the sun off the road and broken glass. No one seemed to be in a hurry around the ambulances. Anyone who had been seriously hurt had already been taken to the hospital.

"The Jetta has a broken leg, possible concussion. She's been taken to Memorial Hospital. Volare'll probably need a few stitches to close the cut above his eye. Golf had an airbag, minor concussion, maybe whiplash. Sedan should be okay. They're all still here, if you want to talk to them."

"Any idea how this happened?" Mulder inquired. He took in the scene with a detached sense of curiosity. The power company had a truck across the road. The fire truck dispatched to the

scene was revving its engine to leave, its job done. Another pair of tow trucks had arrived, along with a long flatbed to take care of the damaged cars.

Vasile scratched his head, pulled the brim of his cap down closer to his eyes. He did not look happy at answering endless questions. "As far as my men can tell, the Volare slipped on the roadway, about one hundred feet back. It stopped close to that meridian, then was propelled here by the impact of the other three cars."

"What might have caused the car to slip? These Plymouths are like tanks. I didn't see any water or oil on the road surface."

Mulder knelt down beside the rear tire well. Taking a coin from his pocket, he estimated the depth of the tread on the radials to be about a centimeter. "These tires are fairly new. It's kind of hard to believe that they would just skid out from underneath. The length of the skid marks seems to indicate that the driver wasn't going over 40 mph, at most 50, when the accident occurred."

"The driver claimed he saw a bright flash and heard a humming noise just before the incident," Vasile stated. "The power company sent out a crew to check the transformers along the roadside."

Scully stepped forward before Mulder could suggest that they look in a more heavenly direction for their cause. "Can we speak with the driver, please?"

Vasile shot out his arm in a gesture that said "be my guest."

Mulder followed her, leaned near her ear. "You missed my grand finale."

"What, where you say that Reticulans left behind some inconspicuous alien device in an effort to take over our galaxy, or where the sheriff runs you out of town for inciting a riot because of government conspiracy?"

Scully stopped, leaned a hand against the top of the station wagon. She lowered her voice when it became obvious that a number of police officers were looking their way. "This area is already hotter than a hornet's nest about the radiation tests that went on during the '40s and '50s. The National Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments is supposed to file their report soon, including reparations to the families of all the miners and prisoners and patients that were exposed, which we both know won't amount to anything substantial. They don't need another exposure of the government's dirty little secrets, real or imagined."

She stalked off, but Mulder caught her shoulder before she could get very far. He noticed that her eyes were puffy from lack of sleep. "Didn't get much shut-eye again last night, did you?"

"No," she answered quietly. She looked away from him.

"You know you can always talk to me."

"It's nothing. Jet lag. This is not like Minnesota, Mulder. I'm fine." She smiled, no hint of trepidation. "Really."

"You look a little pale."

"Really, I'm fine."

Mulder took his hand off her shoulder and walked beside her toward the paramedics.

The driver was holding an ice pack to his forehead, sipping water from a paper cup. He looked up at the agents' arrival, and gave the paramedic the empty cup.

"Guess I caused a bit of a mess," he said, removing the ice pack. A nasty gash crossed his forehead from the left eyebrow to his temple, bloody, but not very deep. "Murray Nash, contractor."

Mulder opened his ID for the man and introduced himself and Scully.

"Can I ask you what you were doing before the accident, Mr. Nash?" he requested, replacing his ID. Behind Nash, Scully was reading the accident report the paramedics had recorded.

"Just driving to work. I heard this really strange hum, and the next thing I knew, there was a flash of light and my car was spinning out of control. I don't really know what happened. It was so fast."

"Have you had any alcohol in the past six hours?"

"No, never touch the stuff. Messes with my ulcer."

Mulder looked to Scully, knowing she had checked his Breathalyzer results on the report. She nodded; Nash was telling the truth.

"About what time did the accident occur? In your best estimation?"

Nash leaned against the back wall of the paramedic truck he sat in order to stretch his legs. His jeans were torn at the knee, another injury incurred during the accident. "8:45. I checked my watch just before it happened." Nash pulled the time piece out of his shirt pocket, frowned at the cracked face. "It was my daddy's. It's busted now."

Mulder looked at the time it said. 8:59. "This reads almost nine o'clock." Scully looked at him, incredulous. Time loss. "Are you sure about the time?"

"Oh, yeah. I always set my watch 15 minutes ahead to keep me on time. Not that it always works. My eyes see nine o'clock, but my brain says quarter to."

Handing the watch back to him, Mulder dropped his theory of time loss.

Across the highway, a number of men in blue hard hats returned with a singed piece of metal. They were calling to their supervisor, who was talking with Deputy Valise. Mulder and Scully waited to hear their report.

"Blown transformer, 200 yards in. Power's out in this grid."

Scully turned back to the truck and said, "Guess that blows your Reticular theory out of the water."

Mulder didn't justify the quip with a comment.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Nash," Mulder said, shaking his hand. He walked off toward their rental car, first stopping off to thank Deputy Vasile for his help and to request a copy of the accident report.

Scully caught up with him near the driver's side door. "So, now what? It was a transformer, like I said."

"This time, Scully. There wasn't a power outage reported last Friday, and there are no transformers near the Highway 10 rest stop. Drago heard a loud hum on Friday." He checked his pockets. "Do you have the keys?"

"Drago probably suffers from post traumatic stress. Tittinius is a common phenomenon with psychological disorders of that nature." She tossed him the keys and walked around the back of the car to the passenger side.

"Then why would the hum be any louder on Friday? Why not yesterday, or two weeks from last Thursday? There's a connection there, Scully, and those kids' deaths have something to do with it."

They opened the doors together and got in the car. Mulder turned the key, fastened his seat belt.

"Where are we going?" Scully rolled down her window, put on her sunglasses.

Mulder drove through the meridian to get to the other side of the highway, and headed out of the city. "To see Harold Weinier. I want his take on this."

"Do you think he heard the hum Friday?"

"We'll find out, won't we?"

Home of Dr. Harold Weinier

Deming, New Mexico

1:05 p.m. MDT

Harold Weinier carried a tray topped with a tea pot and three cups into his living room. He was in his early forties. A tuft of brown hair still adorned the top of his head, slowly losing the battle with his retreating hairline. His upper body seemed out of proportion to his legs, as his arms seemed thicker than his calves. Sitting on a low table near his reading chair was a pile of magazines. Back issues of *Science*, *Nature*, *Physics Today* and *Scientific American* were displayed in various forms of disarray; pages folded down, covers displaced, small pieces of paper serving as bookmarks in several of them. Newspapers that probably dated back several weeks were on the other side of the chair. Trinkets populated the mantle and shelf space, as well as volumes upon volumes of text books and journals that seemed to have absolutely no order, except for the person who had placed them there.

Scully and Mulder sat on the low-slung couch and graciously accepted their cups of tea. Weinier pulled over a padded footstool, letting the cat that he displaced crawl over his legs until it found a warm place to nuzzle. Seemingly satisfied with Weinier's lap, the cat nestled down, forelegs draped over Weinier's arm.

Weinier petted the cat affectionately. "Don't mind Maxwell. He has a mind of his own," the physicist explained, worming his arm out from under his furry companion.

"Maxwell, as in Maxwell's equations?" Scully suggested. She kept her hands wrapped tightly around the warm tea cup. Despite the heat outside, the house was extremely cool, the forced air system working to keep the house at about 60 degrees.

"Not many people would catch that," Weinier stated, stroking the cat when it decided to claw at his thigh.

"I have a BS in Physics," Scully admitted. "Quantum mechanics and particle physics."

"A glutton for punishment, I see." Weinier smiled. "To answer your question, though, he was named for Maxwell Smart. *Get Smart* was one of my favorite TV shows. And Fuzzball here always seems completely unaware of the trouble he causes. But, I do have two dogs outside named Photon and Quark, if you were expecting some strangely neurotic physicist thing."

"May I ask what your specialty is?" Mulder took an obligatory sip of tea, then placed the cup down. He was not a big fan of herbal blends, especially not hot ones.

"Nuclear physics. In this part of the country, it's hard to escape the field. I used to teach over at the State University. Currently I work for the Department of Energy. They've called me in to do some work on the Yucca Mountain project, and a few others in this area. Mostly environmental concerns. I'm what you might call a token lecturer. I explain to the masses that what is being done is not dangerous or harmful if the technology is respected. That job has become much harder since the President authorized the Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments to hear testimony from the hundreds of people affected by the quote-unquote 'cult of conspiracy' during the Cold War."

Mulder leaned forward on his knees, cupping his hands together. "Well, we're not here to investigate your part in that, rest assured. As I told you on the phone yesterday, we're more interested in the Hummers."

Weinier nodded. "I hope my credentials will keep you from casting any doubt on me concerning this subject."

"Can you hear the hum now?" Scully asked.

"I always hear it. Some days, it is worse than others. I've learned to tune it out."

"What do you think is the cause for the hum?"

Weinier's cat decided to jump off his owner's lap at that point, and headed for Mulder's shins. Weinier caught Maxwell before he could deposit a load of cat hair on Mulder's pant leg, and gently tossed him into the arm chair.

"Sorry," he apologized, returning his attention to Scully. "What was that you asked?"

"The cause of the hum?"

Weinier stood and walked over to an old roll-top desk. From under mounds of paper, he retrieved a device that looked a lot like a tape recorder and microphone attached to a portable oscilloscope. "I have been able to record the hum using this. After a little filtering with the equipment I have downstairs, you can hear it now, too."

He popped the tape into his stereo and played it. Sure enough, there was a very subtle buzz coming from the speakers.

"Everything has a natural vibration," Weinier continued.

"How so?" Mulder asked.

"The next time you're in a public bathroom, Agent Mulder, try humming at different pitches, different frequencies. After a while, the sound vibrations you create will be in phase with the natural vibrations of the metal stalls, causing an amplification affect. In essence, you will be in tune with the bathroom."

"Sounds very Zen-like."

"Physics and Zen have a lot of things in common."

"So, you believe something is causing a natural vibration somewhere to be amplified?" Mulder suggested. "Of what? The bedrock?"

"Or something in the bedrock."

"Like what?"

"That, I don't know. Or what might be the source of the amplification effect."

"Then, why do only some people hear this hum?" Mulder inquired, pointing to the tape that was still playing in the stereo.

Scully set down her tea cup. "Different people respond differently to different auditory stimuli."

"But these frequencies are within the hearing capabilities of dogs," Mulder reasoned. "I don't hear Photon barking up a storm."

"I have an explanation for that one, Agent Mulder," Weinier offered. "Photon is sixteen years old. His hearing isn't what it used to be. But that doesn't mean he can't smell a peanut butter sandwich at twenty paces." Weinier laughed and turned off the tape. "May I ask why you're so interested?"

Mulder pulled two pictures from his shirt pocket. "These two people have made claims that they can hear the hum. The young man, Thomas MacCarthy, was found dead Sunday morning. The older gentleman, Vincent Drago, is a transient who temporarily resides near the rest stop where MacCarthy and two of his friends were found. The three students are believed to have died sometime Friday afternoon. Mr. Drago says that the hum that he hears was more intense that afternoon."

"If you're going to ask if I heard a louder hum on Friday, I'm afraid I have to say no. I was away last week at a symposium in New York. I had just stepped in the door when you called me yesterday, Agent Mulder."

"Could the hum cause the eardrum to rupture if exposed to an intense-enough dose?"

Weinier was taken aback by the question. "The hum can be annoying, but it certainly hasn't killed anyone, not to my knowledge. The victims' eardrums were ruptured?"

Scully nodded.

"Would you be willing to go accompany us to the murder site?" Mulder requested. "We believe the site where the bodies were found was not the site of the murder. We are tracking down leads on where they might have gone Friday. Friends have said that they went spelunking. I'd like to see if you can detect the hum wherever they were murdered."

"Just tell me when and where. I'll have my gear ready. I haven't been spelunking in a long time."

"You actually think that the hum killed those three students?" Scully asked as they returned to their car. Mulder didn't seem to hear her.

Something else caught his attention. Lying on the hood of the car was a small wire-haired fox terrier, with her belly toward the sun.

"I think we have a stowaway." Mulder stared at the dog, watched as her stubby tail wagged merrily along, oblivious to their approach.

"Makes a cute hood ornament," Scully said, walking to the passenger door. The dog did not move when she opened it.

Weinier stepped out onto his porch, a box of dog biscuits held in his hand. He shook the box once. The dog's head turned in the direction of the familiar noise.

"Quark! Here, Quark." Weinier shook the box again. The dog jumped off the hood and yipped at Weinier's ankles. Weinier picked up the dog and tossed her into the house playfully. "Sorry about that."

Mulder waved goodbye and checked for scratches in the paint. "You were saying?"

"You think the hum killed those students."

"I think it's a possibility, one we can't overlook."

"Why, Mulder? The cause of death was drowning. That's abundantly clear."

Mulder started the car, let it idle until he felt it safe to start the air conditioning without overloading the electrical system. "But what's not clear is how did they get into a pool of potassium chloride? Someone or something had to draw them to the site of the actual murder."

"So where are we going now?"

Mulder eyes were lit with puerile charm. "I want to try out that bathroom trick."

E-Z Sleep Motel

Las Cruces, New Mexico
Wednesday, May 17, 1995
10:26 a.m. MDT

Mulder leaned against the back board of his bed, tennis ball in hand. He balanced it on the back of his hand, rolling it up and down his wrist. He bounced it against the wall that separated his and Scully's room again, as he had for the past half hour.

He had let her sleep in, having sabotaged her alarm clock, even let himself have a few extra hours of down time. Scully needed the rest. He knew she knew it, even if she wouldn't admit it. He considered himself an expert on insomnia, and how it cropped up at the most inconvenient times. Now his partner was part of the insomniacs club, not of her own choosing. After Minnesota, she was a little more open with him about what she was thinking, what was bothering her. But not much. She still bottled a lot of it inside.

For better or worse, Duane Barry had changed their relationship. He knew he was part of the reason why she had been abducted. They'd been close friends before; he trusted her explicitly, and she had said the same of him. When she'd disappeared, all the old feelings of helplessness and anxiety had returned. He'd been twelve years old again, paralyzed by fear, unable to sleep, not willing to give up. Only, Scully had been returned to him.

In many ways, she had taken the place of Samantha in his life. And if she thought he was placating her, being overprotective, so be it. Anything was better than the guilt he'd felt when she'd been taken away.

He bounced the ball off the ceiling a few times, then returned to tossing it against the wall. He continued to do so even when Scully knocked and walked into his room, clad in T-shirt and jeans. Her hair was tied up in a ponytail, still wet from the shower. She watched as he targeted the wall and hit it just above the mirror.

Cocking an eye at him, she carefully ducked under the flying tennis ball in order to get to the table across the room.

"I was wondering what that noise was, because by your own admission, you don't know what a girl is."

"Did I wake you?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

"Good. I didn't think I could sneak into your room to turn the alarm back on."

Scully let her head fall back in mock laughter. She took a seat in the room's only chair and propped her feet up on the end of the bed. Mulder was glad to see that she was in better spirits today. Her gaze fell on two pieces of pink paper sitting on the table.

Printed across the top were the words, "While you were out." In neat, flowing script, two phone messages were written out with day and time of call. One was from Eddie Joyner, the other from Bobby Doherty.

She held up the message from Doherty. "Who's this?"

"Park ranger. He called to tell me that Drago's gone missing. Packed up his tent and coyote and left town. Since I had such a nice rapport with the man, Doherty thought I would like to know."

"What do you think happened?" Scully asked.

"I think he went for higher ground. Three deaths in the area would frighten any vagrant." Mulder threw the tennis ball against the ceiling. "I don't know. I hope he left because he wanted to leave."

"What does Eddie have to say?"

"That he thinks he knows where MacCarthy, Simpson and Schneider went last Friday."

"Where?"

"A place about twenty-five miles from here. Apparently, Dave Schneider was not a fan of deep dark places. This one cave is supposedly lit from the inside by some bioluminescent algae. As a biology major, I guess he couldn't resist."

"I take it you want to check this place out," Scully said, taking her feet off the bed.

Mulder stood and slipped on his sneakers, leaving the laces untied. "First, breakfast. Then, we go exploring." He pulled a piece of paper from his back pocket. "Eddie gave me the directions to this place. I told him to meet us at one o'clock. I also gave Dr. Weinier a call, and gave him

Eddie's number so they can collaborate. Weinier is going to join us as well, maybe take a few measurements while he's down there."

"Looks like you've covered all the bases."

"All we have to do know is figure out who's on first."

Hanover Cavern

Outside Las Cruces, New Mexico

1:03 p.m. MDT

Mulder pulled up next to the blue pick-up, its owner perched on the tailgate, a box sitting in his lap. Dust and dirt curled in eddy currents around his feet as Mulder stepped out of the car. He put a hand up to shade his eyes, using the other to pad his shirt pocket for the sunglasses he suspected he forgot.

Dr. Weinier looked up from the box of gizmos and smiled, eyes hidden behind a pair of mirrored sunglasses. "Beautiful day, isn't it?"

A travelling dust cloud marked the arrival of the last of their group. A jeep that had seen better days came to a screeching halt about ten feet from the red sedan. Eddie grabbed a large duffle from the passenger seat and climbed out, wiping dust and sweat from his eyes and forehead as he walked.

"I brought the extra gear you asked for , Dr. Weinier."

"Thank you, Eddie."

Mulder leaned over the side of the truck bed and peaked under a cardboard box topped with a large blue tinted solar panel. A small hourglass twirled in the center of the laptop's screen. Scopes, meters and gadgets he didn't know littered the back of the pick-up.

"I thought you said you wanted to a take a few measurements," Mulder said, holding up a roll of cables and adapters.

"Just the essentials, Agent Mulder. Don't want to do a haphazard job, do I?"

"You actually intend to use all of this stuff?" Mulder picked up a white rectangular unit, the only piece of equipment he recognized. He turned it on, moved the aerial into position. "We're going underground. You can't use a GPS unit in a cave if you want any sort of accuracy."

"But we can use it to narrow down our scope, if we ever hope to find this place again."

Even behind the sunglasses, Mulder knew Eddie's eyes were wide in awe as the young man stared at the laptop. "Is this the new Powerbook with the pentium chip? What's the operating speed? How much hard disk space? What's the efficiency of the solar panel hook-up?" Eddie spouted questions faster than a rushing geyser.

"All in good time," Weinier stated. "But let's get down to business, shall we?" He pulled the lap top closer; box, solar panel and all.

"I've been here since eleven this morning taking readings with some of my equipment," he continued, patting a small black box near his knee. "This is what I've found."

Weinier double clicked on a graphics icon and retrieved the first of three files depicted in the graphics folder. A two dimensional graph of voltage versus time appeared.

"Anyone care to interpret?"

Standing over Scully's shoulder, Eddie spoke. "There doesn't seem to be a pattern, just sort of sporadic bursts."

Grinning, Weinier shook his head. "Ah, but there is a pattern." He double clicked on the second file. A companion graph, this time frequency versus time, overlapped the lower right corner of the first graph. A definite pattern could be seen.

"It's cycling through a frequency range," Scully noted, tracing the sinusoidal pattern on the computer screen. "Three times in the last hour."

A third graph appeared along the bottom of the screen with a third dimension of amplitude added to the frequency versus time graph. With all the hills and valleys in the graph, Mulder thought it looked more like a nightmarish golf course than an energy distribution.

"The signal is sporadic. Stray voltage is intermittent and off the scale at times." Weinier closed each file, then idled the computer to sleep mode. "I think that whatever it is, it is on its last legs."

"Do you think this signal is caused by some sort of machine?" Scully asked, folding her arms across her chest.

Weinier nodded. "Of what nature, I'm not sure. But nothing else in nature gives off signals like this. It has to be man-made."

"Or something like that," Mulder quipped under his breath. Only Scully heard him, and in response just gave him a patented Scully look-of-scorn. He just smiled and shrugged his shoulders. He turned his attention back to Weinier. "You said we could narrow our search. How?"

Weinier handed him another small box-like piece of equipment with a long antennae. "ELF Magnetometer. As indicated by the energy distribution I just showed you, a majority of the spectrum analysis lies in the 10-50 Hz range. This thing will pick it up."

"Eddie, where are we in relation to the cave your friends were in?" Scully asked, scanning the horizon for any other tunnel entrances.

Eddie turned around slowly, gathering his bearings. Stopping, he pointed to another hill a ways off. "Couple hundred feet to the west. It's easier to get in here, though. That's why I told Agent Mulder to meet here."

Weinier handed Eddie the GPS unit Mulder handled earlier. "Eddie, know how to use this?"

Nodding, Eddie walked towards an open area away from the cars.

Weinier started rummaging through the equipment in his pick-up again. "I would have liked to get a gravimeter out here, but I couldn't get one on short notice. But, we can still map any equipotential surfaces this thing is creating. The voltage spikes may be sporadic, but we can still map them out. The largest bursts of stray voltage will probably be the center of the bullseye."

Handing both him and Scully gray boxes that looked like they were pitched together with bailing wire and bubble gum, Weinier showed them how to operate them. "Battery operated multimeter, with probe attachments that's I've put together. After we find the approximate center of the

frequency bursts, we'll map a square grid, one hundred feet by one hundred feet. Readings every five feet or so, then we'll plot it up on my lap top, hopefully pinpoint the center of the anomaly."

An hour and a half later, Weinier pointed to an area on the laptop screen.

"Somewhere under this spot is the origin of the hum. To the west."

Doing a quick mental calculation, Mulder oriented himself with respect to the map and the terrain surrounding them.

"Where our three victims were spelunking."

Inside Hanover Cavern

25 miles outside Las Cruces, New Mexico

2:44 p.m. MDT

The beam from Scully's Mag-Lite bounced off the floor near Mulder's feet. It was tied to the side of her backpack so that she could keep her hands free when it came time to repel down to the cavern below. She had gone repelling once in her life, and vowed never to do it again. It had not been a pleasant experience, wrought with blisters and a twisted ankle that still bothered her when the weather was just right.

She had fallen behind a few feet when she stopped to tie back her hair once more. Mulder waited for her, shining his flashlight just below her face so that he would not blind her. With a nod of her head, she silently sent a signal that he did not have to wait. He tripped over his feet getting back on track.

Weinier was up ahead, talking animatedly with Eddie Joyner, as only a professor would do. Eddie happily answered his questions, asked a few of his own about opportunities in graduate school and the job market with various degrees. Scully remembered having a similar conversation with an anthropology professor at the University of Maryland. He had tried to steer her away from the physics department early on, similar to what Weinier was trying to do with Eddie right now, only to physics instead of away. She had trusted that professor's opinion more than her own advisor's when it had come to career options.

She caught up with the rest of the group easily. They were near the lip of the cavern entrance. Eddie was planting anchors in the rock, checking the safety harnesses and all the ropes. He tossed everyone a helmet for safety.

"Okay, this is real simple. The floor is only about 90 down. This slope is easier than the one Mac and Lynda would have taken, but I can get us over there once we're on the ground," Eddie announced, tying a rope around the loops of his pack. He sent it over the edge.

Eddie checked and double-checked everyone's harness, the ropes, the anchors. Once he was satisfied they had taken appropriate precautions, he flung his rope over the lip.

"I'll go first. Agent Mulder, you come next, then Agent Scully, and then Dr. Weinier."

Mulder looked over the rim. "I hope there's an easier way to get back up."

"There is, but it's a bit of a hike from here, and you can't get to that entrance by car. It's fastest to get at it through the tunnels, and then hike down the rest of the way."

"Lay on, MacDuff," Mulder said, stepping back from the edge.

Eddie dropped over the side.

Scully took a deep breath, unease setting in. A headache threatened to throb behind her eyes. She paced around in small circles, careful not to tangle her ropes.

"Hey, Scully." Mulder touched her shoulder, startling her. "You okay?"

She rubbed her hands together, fidgety. Mulder grabbed them, steadied her hands. "Phantom blisters," she said with a half-faked smile. "I'm okay."

"You sure? You didn't eat much this morning, and you didn't touch your lunch." Mulder brushed away stray bangs from her forehead, then noticed her earlobe. "Your ear is awfully red."

Instinctively, Scully put a hand to her ear. It was warm to the touch. She tugged at her earlobe. "I must be coming down with something."

"You still want to do this?"

"Yes." Scully stepped forward, looked over the side. Eddie touched ground and was waiting for Mulder to start his descent. "It's your turn, Mulder."

Mulder eased himself over the side, not taking his eyes off Scully until safety reasons forced him to do so. He landed without mishap.

Scully took in another deep breath then dropped over herself. She went slowly, not wanting to twist an ankle again. When she set down, she let out the breath she had been holding. Mulder was instantly at her side, helping her out of the harness. By the time she was free, Weinier was on the ground and shimmying out of his gear.

Eddie packed up the ropes and the harnesses, dividing the load between his and Mulder's packs. Weinier knelt down to unpack his portable recorder, and tested it to make sure it was working. Mulder stood over his shoulder, watched the needle move back and forth as Weinier played with the gain.

"Can you hear the hum now, Dr. Weinier?"

Weinier looked over his shoulder at Mulder's expectant face. "Yes. It's a little louder than usual. When I get back to my lab, I can compare what I pick up today with what I have on file."

"Are you sure that thing's recording?"

"Very sure. Agent Mulder, I know what I'm doing," Weinier assured him.

Scully slipped out of her backpack to get at the camera she had stashed in it. She checked the flash, took a light reading. Pictures would probably be dark, even with the flash. Playing with the f-stop helped a little, but not much.

"Ready, Scully?" Mulder walked up beside her, hefting his backpack over his right shoulder.

"Yeah." She picked up her pack, slung it over her shoulder. She carried the camera around her neck. "Let's go."

Eddie unfolded the rudimentary map that they had drawn while topside and headed for one of several tunnels that he thought would lead them in the right direction. Running his hand along

the walls, he said, "This whole area is underlain by calcium carbonate deposits. Acidic water gets in, dissolves away the rock and leaves this behind."

"What about the salt deposits?" Mulder asked. "How close are we to them?"

"Oh, about three, four hundred feet below us. But there are a few lenses here and there. Wouldn't recommend any for your french fries, though. Sylvite is bitter as hell."

"What did you say your major was, Eddie?"

"Geology."

Mulder snapped his fingers. "That's what I thought you said. What's causing the pinkish red color in the rocks? I thought limestone was gray and dull."

Eddie laughed. "In Washington D.C., it probably is. Here, the coloration is probably due to some trace element stain. Maybe potassium, more than likely it's iron. A lot of these units are Triassic, Jurassic in age. Lots of red beds were deposited then."

A few hundred feet in, the tunnel opened into a larger cave. From where Scully stood, she could see three ropes hanging from above. Three backpacks were piled on the other side. Eddie ran over to one of them, a bright orange pack with ink writing all over it. He stopped, knelt down, felt the coarse fabric.

Slowly, almost choked, he said, "This is Mac's. They were here."

Scully turned on the flash, and removed the lens cap from the camera. Stepping over to where the backpacks were laid, she scoured the area with her eyes for any other clues. It was hard to see in the darkened cave. The lanterns left behind by previous hikers did not provide a lot of illumination. Mulder shined his flashlight all around the room.

"Flashing," Scully announced, taking a round of pictures. She took a few of the ropes as well, to be on the safe side.

"Hey, Scully, take a look at this."

Mulder waved her over toward another tunnel entrance, where he knelt beside something lying in the dirt. With a pencil, he picked up a piece of cloth.

"Looks like a handkerchief," she said, taking a picture after Mulder put it back on the ground. "There are some plastic bags in my pack." She shucked off the straps and handed it to him. Mulder placed the kerchief in a plastic bag, tagged it with a felt tip pen. "Eddie." He held up the bag for him to see. "Recognize this?"

Eddie took the bag, studied its contents. "Lynda."

"Mulder, I see footprints, about four feet from where you are standing." Scully walked around them carefully. "Two sets, maybe three, heading west." She took pictures of the footprints as well, kneeling down to zoom in as much as possible and still get a decent shot.

When she stood, she was overcome by a wave of dizziness, almost nausea. Mulder noticed the halt in her step, and took her elbow to steady her.

"You okay?"

Scully swallowed the bile that burned the back of her throat, closed her eyes. "I stood up too fast."

"Maybe you are coming down with something," Mulder suggested. "Look, we can go on without you, if you want to rest ,"

"I'm fine. When we get back to the car, I'll take some aspirin." She shivered involuntarily and wished she had thought to bring something a little warmer to wear. She nodded toward the tunnel. "Let's go."

Mulder nodded, concern still marring his features. He herded the rest of the team toward the entrance. "Okay, we go in."

Water splashed everywhere as they traversed through the stream. Soaked to the knee, Scully stopped trying to find rocks to step on and joined Eddie and Mulder in the stream itself. Weinier did the same. The waterlogged boots were nothing compared to the sight of glowing plantlife along the stream's bank, though.

"Any spikes, Doctor?" Mulder asked, holding his flashlight on the oscilloscope's screen.

Weinier shook his head. "Not since we've begun."

Eddie turned around, flashlight bobbing on the walls and water. "I think I hear a waterfall ahead. Better watch your step. Things could get a little slippery."

"Mulder, take a look at this."

Scully was kneeling near the bank of the stream. In her hands, she held a strand of glowing seaweed. As Mulder shined his flashlight on it, the glow dissipated, and the strand seemed to shrink in size.

She held up several other strands along the bank. "I noticed these when you were talking with Dr. Weinier. The glow disappeared when your flashlight hit it."

Mulder pulled a plastic sandwich bag from his shirt pocket. "Get a sample. I want to have that tested." She opened up her pocketknife and cut several strands.

As Mulder turned, a flat piece of rock slipped from underneath his boot. When he tried to regain his balance, he overcompensated and twisted awkwardly to avoid falling in the water. A hiss of pain escaped his lips as he grabbed his knee with both hands.

"What is it, Mulder?" Scully stuffed the plastic bag and knife in her back pocket and slipped under his arm to help support his weight. She led him to the side wall and leaned him against it. Without being told, Weinier held his flashlight so that she could see the affected area.

Mulder hobbled in order to keep his balance. "I think I twisted my knee." He tried to move, and grimaced with pain.

"Can you bend it?" Scully tried to ease his leg up, and he moaned softly with the pain. "This is going to swell." She looked around her. There was no place for him to sit. To top that, she didn't have a proper first aid kit to help ease the pain. "Well, I could have you sit here in the water. It's cold enough to keep down the swelling a bit." Mulder groaned. "I can see you're not happy with that option."

"I can walk," he said. "Anything is better than wet boxers."

"Avoiding wet boxers is what got you into this mess."

"It's only a little bit further to the next cavern," Eddie called back, nearing the lip of the waterfall. "We can find a place to put him down."

Mulder stopped his forward motion, looking around him. "Did you hear that?"

Scully turned about, trying to find her bearings. "Something is buzzing."

Looking at the scope of his instrument, Weinier's expression soured. "There is something definitely happening. Long wavelength pulse, coming from over there." He pointed beyond the edge of the waterfall. "Voltage spike, off the scale!"

"Is it getting warmer?" Mulder asked, playing with the collar of his shirt. A draft of warm wind hit his face, blowing his bangs from his eyes.

Mulder started to move again, but Scully clasped her hand around his arm in a fierce grip. She had her back to the waterfall. "No, don't. I don't like this, Mulder."

"Scully?"

Eddie took another step closer to the waterfall. "I think I can see it."

Scully whirled, yelled, "No! Eddie!"

Just as the words left her mouth, she tensed, doubled over in pain. She wrapped her arms around her head to dull the barrage assaulting her ears.

Mulder grabbed her shoulders as she started to sway. "Scully!"

A loud whine erupted from the cavern.

Mulder put his hands to his ears. He waved Eddie away from the edge of the waterfall. "Get out of there!" Pushing Scully ahead of him, they scrambled for the tunnel entrance.

Water sloshed and splashed as they ran away from the waterfall. Bright flashes stabbed through the darkness with each new buzzing pulse, strobing as the frequency increased.

Scully dove for cover when the whine became a sustained high pitched note. She felt Mulder fall down next to her, using his body as a shield. A final bright flash tore through her closed eyelids, scouring the back of her eyes with its searing intensity.

She didn't move for several seconds after that. She wasn't sure if she could move, and was too frightened to try. There was a hand on her shoulder, fingers brushed her cheek.

"C'mon, Scully. Open your eyes."

Scully did so hesitantly, one first, then the other. It took a second for her eyes to focus.

Mulder stood in front of her, a smile of relief on his normally smug face. Water dripped down the left side of his face. His hair on that side was plastered to his head.

"You okay?" he asked. "You wiggled out there for a minute."

Slowly she nodded, then noticed that she was sitting in very cold water. She tried to stand, with Mulder's help. "Where're Eddie and Dr. Weinier?"

"Over here," Eddie answered. "What the hell just happened?"

Mulder did not let go of Scully's arm. She leaned against the wall, sucking in air as if fighting for breath.

Mulder tried to kneel down beside her, tensing as his injured knee protested the sudden movement. He placed a hand on the back of her neck, slowly massaging the knotted muscles he felt. "Scully?"

She had trouble finding her voice. "I don't feel so good."

"Eddie," Mulder called. "Go find Scully's pack. There's a cellular phone in one of the pockets. Call Agent Jerry Doran at the local field office. Tell him where we are. You may have to get outside the caverns to get through. Tell him to bring Search and Rescue.

"The hum is gone."

Weinier plodded through the water as if in a daze. Scully and Mulder looked up. The physicist pressed the heel of his hand to his temple. "I can't hear the hum anymore. None of it."

Scully tried to straighten. Her stomach cramped as she did, her face went pale. Mulder stepped back, apparently afraid of what might happen next. From his expression, Scully figured he'd guessed right. Scully fought the urge to throw up, and lost.

Mulder pulled a soggy, but clean, bandanna from his jeans pocket and gave it to her so she could clean up a bit. He rubbed her back, moving his hand in slow, small circles. "Feel any better?"

"No."

Mulder checked on Weinier, then hobbled towards the waterfall.

"Mulder," Scully warned.

Mulder stepped closer to the edge. "No, I think it's okay."

"How can you be so sure?"

He waved her back. It took him a while to actually get to the edge of the waterfall. Beneath him was a plunge pool, glowing a strange color of green. There was just enough illumination in the room to see a small metallic contraption on the other side of the cavern. If it was the source of the flashes and buzzing, it wasn't doing anything now.

Dislodging a small rock with his toe, the rock tumbled and spilled into the plunge pool. Upon impact with the surface, it started to fizz and boil in the water. Smoky tendrils of hydrogen gas left a trail in the water as the stone slowly made its way to the bottom depths. He watched until he could no longer see it in the illumined pool.

Slowly regaining strength in her legs, Scully stumbled towards Weinier's pack. Pointing to it, she asked, "Do you have the ELF magnetometer with you?"

Weinier nodded and fished it out of his pack. He handed it to her.

"Can this be adapted to act like a voltmeter?" Scully asked, looking over the box carefully. Voltmeters weren't nearly this versatile when she was an undergrad.

"Just change the output signal; bottom button, left side."

Before doing so, she took a frequency reading. "I'm picking up a signal in the 20 HZ range."

"It's not uncommon for bedrock to resonate at low frequencies after an earthquake."

"But we didn't just experience an earthquake, Doctor."

"Mechanical energy, heat energy, light energy, what's the difference, really?"

Scully didn't have the time or the heart to argue. Switching to a voltmeter display, the digital face ran numbers by so quickly it was hard to register a single reading. Another button read 'analog.' Couldn't hurt, she thought to herself as she depressed the button. The racing numbers were replaced by a digital version of a needle and number scale. The digital needle swung back and forth wildly.

Mulder was dangerously close to the edge now.

"Mulder, whatever is over there is still putting out a lot of voltage."

The needle stilled, and fell to zero. "Mulder ,"

He turned from his perch, called her over to his side. "Come see this."

Handing the voltmeter back to Weinier, she slowly walked over, equilibrium so disturbed she thought she might throw up again at any swift motion. She watched as he dropped a stone into the water. It started to dissolve slowly.

"How did you know, Scully? If we were inside here when it happened ," He looked down at the plunge.

"I don't know, Mulder." Her voice sounded thick and choked. She nodded towards the thing across the way. "What do you think it is?"

"Ten to one odds it's bigger than a breadbox."

"It's quiet now. Why did it stop so suddenly?"

"Maybe *they* forgot to use the Coppertop," he replied, pointing up. "Built to last longer."

The object seemed harmless now, like any other piece of machinery that someone had left for scrap. Scully sat on her heels, letting the water run across her hand. A strand of seaweed slipped over and between her fingers. She grabbed for it before it could slip over the edge of the waterfall. More seaweed followed a similar course. She turned around. The algae seemed to be sloughing off the stream's banks, falling into the stream and then the pool below.

"Mulder, the algae ," She retrieved the sample she had stashed in her back pocket. It was now shriveled and dried out.

"It's dying," she continued.

Mulder stared at the plastic bag for a few seconds, then started for the ledge. He stumbled, and landed on his rear end next to her. Another rock slipped into the plunge pool, but there was no effervescence following it to the bottom.

Scully grabbed his wrist. "Where are you going?"

"Down there, to collect samples. When that *thing* over there shut down, it killed the algae with it. That plunge pool was full of acid just a few minutes ago. Now, it's not. There is some sort of symbiotic relationship going on there, and I want to know more about it." He tried to scoot forward.

Shaking her head, Scully pulled him away from the edge. "No, you're not. We have no idea if that thing is going to go berserker on us again. I won't let you take that chance."

"We've got a fifteen minute window," Mulder exclaimed, if that cycle Dr. Weinier monitored is right."

"There's no guarantee that this is going to stick to some cycle. Besides, you need to have that knee looked at."

"I wasn't the one puking my guts out a few minutes ago."

"Yeah, well, you're not going down there, I'm not staying here, so we're going up there."

"That made no sense at all."

"Humor me."

"We're missing a grand opportunity here, Scully," he implored, pointing at the hunk of junk across the way. "That is not man made."

"You don't know that for sure."

"Then what is it doing here in a cavern in the middle of nowhere? Why has Weinier's humming stopped moments after this thing went ballistic? Why is this algae dying off? How did the bodies of three collage students get from here to a rest stop nearly 30 miles away?" His voice carried and echoed through the cavernous room.

"I don't know, Mulder! I don't have all the answers."

"The answers are down there!" he replied hoarsely, not wanting another opportunity to pass him by the way side. "It's dying, and I think it has been dying for a long time. That's what caused the humming. Just like a television that's been knocked around a bit too much."

"And we just happen to stumble on it during its death throes?"

"Why not?"

"Mulder ,"

Ignoring her protests, he grabbed her upper arm a little more forcibly than he intended. She glared at his hand, then at him. Letting go of his iron tight grip, but not of her arm or his intention, he pointed at the remains below once again. "Someone or something wanted to hide that thing from the public's eye. We still don't know how those bodies got to the rest stop. Now, unless you've decided to believe in molecular transport, someone moved those bodies, and that someone will eventually come back to claim their property."

Scully closed her eyes, counted to ten, slowly. "It's not safe to go down there."

"It's dead, Scully."

"You don't know that!"

"We need to gather as much evidence as we can. Right now. Otherwise, it's all going to be taken away from us again."

"Mulder, we *have* evidence. We have the bodies, we have the autopsy reports, we have the tarp covering the bodies, we have the algae, we have the recordings we made today of the hum and the energy emissions."

"If you're afraid, I'll go down myself ,"

Her expression spoke volumes. Mulder almost flinched, but maintained his determined composure under her icy glare.

Scully's voice was low and bitter. "Fear has nothing to do with this. And even if it did, it's given me a modicum of common sense that you seem to lack. Those kids died because we are assuming they were too close to that thing. Evidence is not worth losing your life."

"It's dead, Scully ,"

"Excuse me." Both were so absorbed in their argument, they didn't hear Weinier approach. Weinier knelt down so that they could see the readout screen of the instrument he carried. "Power emissions are starting to pick up again. I suggest we leave."

Mulder slowly got up on one knee, turned around as surely as he could without falling in the water again. One soaking was enough for one day. "Can you hear the hum again, Doctor?"

"No. But these pulses are coming more frequently than they were up top. If that thing hasn't died yet, it's bound to soon. And not quietly, if what we've just witnessed is any indication. X-ray band emissions are also increasing. It is not safe to stay down here much longer."

They all turned when they heard splashing headed their way. Eddie was half carrying, half dragging his pack behind him. Scully's cellular was in his other hand. "Search and Rescue is on their way. They are going to meet us in the cave where Mac came in."

"Thank you, Eddie," Scully replied, slowly standing up. "Let's get out of here, Mulder, while we still can."

Reluctantly, Mulder took her proffered hand and eased himself to an upright position. He leaned heavily on Scully as they started to walk.

"You know, Scully, if you were just a little bit taller, you'd make the perfect crutch."

"Shut up, or I'll throw up on you."

"Promise?"

As they neared the central cavern, the entire area was rocked with a tremendous jolt. Thrown from their feet, all four landed in a heap. The ground continued to roll under them. A blast of dry, hot wind followed them out of the tunnel.

Scully rolled off of Mulder, rested on her back as the room spun around her. Mulder turned over on his stomach, laying his forehead in the crook of his arm.

"I think it's dead, Mulder," Scully said, followed by a tired, silly laugh.

Mulder groaned into the ground. "Glad to hear it. I think you landed on my knee."

"I'll send you a bundt cake."

"Is everyone okay?" Weinier asked.

"I'm just going to lie here till the paramedics arrive," Mulder said. "Wake me when they get here."

"Mulder, you need to elevate that knee," Scully reminded him, also resigned to just lying on her back until the cavalry came.

Mulder shook his head. "Too much thinking involved. Won't happen in this lifetime."

Eddie stood up and dusted himself off. "I'm going to go up top and flag down the Search and Rescue party." Free climbing the rock face, he was up and out of the cave in under fifteen minutes.

Mulder watched him climb, then returned to his rest position. "Makes you wish you were young again, doesn't it, Scully?"

"I never did that when I was young."

Outside Hanover Cavern

Outside Las Cruces, New Mexico

7:49 p.m. MDT

Mulder let the paramedic wrap his knee with a heavy ace bandage without complaint. He had wasted all of his brownie points with the attractive Army medic, ranting and raving when she'd had to slice the leg of a perfectly good pair of jeans to get at his knee.

He sat just inside the ambulance's back door, watching as the Army's decon unit hauled the remains of the object to a truck. Somehow, the decon arrived before Search and Rescue, and Mulder wondered what power-that-be informed them of the contraption. The decon unit had the remains stored in a thick lead box. When he asked about energy emissions, they said it had given off none since they arrived. He didn't believe them.

The Army was packing up to go. It had taken them nearly two hours to get it all out of the caverns, and he wanted to be around when it was retrieved. He asked to see the object, a request that was flatly refused.

They assured him that tests would be conducted to determine its composition, its origins, its function, if possible. The nature of the fluids in the plunge pool, they'd said, was even more obscure. The water itself had an appreciable saline content, but no corrosive agents were found

when they tested it. Certain alkaloids could not be identified; further tests had been ordered. The algae on the sides of the pool contained a strange chemical compound that field tests could not identify.

Mulder threw the ice pack against the plastic walls that held him prisoner.

Scully stirred behind him. She was curled up on the ambulance's gurney, wrapped in several blankets. The hot water bottle she held against her right ear fell to the floor. She had been sleeping for the last hour or so, thanks to a heavy dose of antihistamines and antibiotics. Mulder reached in, picked up the hot water bottle, and placed it against her neck and ear once more.

The decon doctor who had checked them out when they'd first left the cave climbed into the protective plastic bubble surrounding the ambulance. He was still wearing his safe suit with the exception of the plastic oxygen hood.

"We've released your friends. There was no biological contagion. You're free to go."

Mulder nodded towards the shielded container that the "object" was being placed in. "Not until I know where that thing is going. We intend to take it to Washington as evidence."

"I'm sorry, that won't be possible in the near future."

"Why not?"

"Well, for one, your partner is in no condition to fly home. She's got a nice inner-ear infection. Flying right now is not advisable."

Mulder put his hand near Scully's head, stroked her hair protectively. "Three students died here last week, and all of them had ruptured eardrums."

The doctor unzipped his suit and shrugged out of the shoulders. The arms dangled lifelessly at his sides. He picked up the medical sheet and read off the results. "No sign of puncture. Strictly bacterial infection. Probably's had it a few days now, judging from the fluid levels behind her eardrum."

A crate, labeled United States Army Decontamination Unit, was fork lifted into an olive green truck. Mulder hobbled toward the entrance of the plastic bubble tent. "Where are they taking it?"

"To a facility where it can be studied."

"It is evidence in a Federal investigation."

"When we're done with our tests, you can have it back."

Mulder turned around. "When will that be?"

"That information is on a need-to-know basis."

"I need to know."

"No, sir, you do not."

E-Z Sleep Motel

Las Cruces, New Mexico

Friday, May 19, 1995

11:43 a.m. MDT

The receiver hung idly in Mulder's left hand, his right hand was poised over the face plate of the motel phone, ready to dial the next number on today's hit list. He was in an unusually chipper mood, despite the fact that he knew it would go away the minute he started his tirade of phone calls to all of his contacts to try and find the lead lined box with itty bitty pieces that no one could identify or classify. But he forgot about the switchboard operator talking in his ear when the bathroom door opened.

Scully clutched the door frame as she stumbled out of the bathroom. She glared one warning glance at Mulder about snide remarks, then continued to fall towards the bed. Once there, she crawled on hands and knees across the mattress, burrowing her head in the pillows. She fell to her side, and groped for the blankets.

"Uh, Scully?" Mulder put the receiver in its cradle.

"What?" came the muffled response.

"Our flight leaves at five. Do you want me to reschedule it?" It took all of his will power not to roll into a series of bad puns and bathroom jokes. Next antihistamine dose wasn't for another hour, he knew, and she would be out like a light within half an hour after that. Despite her assurances that she was fine, just a little dizzy, he had watched her run for the bathroom three times that morning alone. He had hobbled in himself, only using one crutch instead of two, wanting company. Ranting on the phone was no fun without an audience, even a sick audience. Besides, just because she was spending half the time praying to the porcelain gods, that didn't mean she couldn't spoon feed him her notes on the case.

"Yes." She borrowed farther into the nest of pillows. "Now, tell the room to stop spinning."

"Sorry, against the physical laws of the universe."

"How come we can't make it through a single case without one of us ending up in a hospital?"

Mulder laughed; he had been thinking the same thing himself. "A matter of conjecture. We did not, in fact, end up in a hospital this time."

"What's the difference?"

"About \$2000. Can we get on with our field report before you lose lucidity again?"

"Another crack like that, and I'll throw you out of my room."

"I'd like to see you try." He was about to pick up the phone to change their travel plans when it started ringing. "Mulder."

"Agent Mulder, this is Harold Weinier."

"What can I do you for, Dr. Weinier?"

"I tried to run the recordings we made the other day down in that cave. I don't know, something must have happened, maybe the recorder was faulty, maybe the tape was degaussed with all the radiation that thing was emitting ,"

Mulder slumped in his chair. Axe Exhibit A. "You lost the recording?"

"Only that which I made in the caves. I still have all of the data I recorded above ground, including the energy emissions. I can send you a copy via modem if you like."

"Thanks for calling, Dr. Weinier," Mulder replied. "We appreciate all the help you gave us."

"You're more than welcome, Agent Mulder. I only wish it had turned out better in the end."

"So do I." He hung up the phone with a hint of frustration. Don't want to waste it on just this, he thought to himself. I have to save it for the brickwalls I'm going to hit this afternoon.

There was a knock at the door. Mulder stood to unlatch the door as he heard something that resembled 'Grand Central Station' and 'use the crutches' come from the lump under the covers. In deference to his partner, he stepped outside the motel door into the midmorning sunshine.

"Jerry," Mulder said, momentarily letting go of the crutches to shake the man's hand. "What brings you here?"

Jerry Doran grabbed for the floppy fishing hat on his head, wiped his brow of sweat with the brim. "I saved as much of the evidence from the case I could find before the decon unit came in. The tarp is in the back of my car; we never listed it in the initial crime scene reports. No one knows it exists."

"Did your guys get anything on the algae we picked up?"

Bobbing his head in a maybe-maybe not fashion, Doran replied, "I had a friend at the college look into it, completely hush hush. He's never seen anything like it. I gave him your card, he'll be contacting you soon. I know how much discretion means to you. Out here, in the heart of nuclear testing, I've had a lot of cases taken away from me by the powers that be, especially concerning investigations of the radiation tests of the 1950's."

"Thanks, Jerry."

"The families of those three kids have asked that the bodies be released so that they can have a proper burial."

"I'll get Scully to sign off the reports."

Doran nodded, then started for his car. Before he got ten feet, he turned and walked back. "Oh, yeah, I forgot. Drago's back. Checked himself into the VA hospital in White Sands on Wednesday. Doherty talked with him yesterday; said he was more coherent than he'd ever seen him before. Almost as if he was never shot in the head."

Eyebrows raised, Mulder leaned forward. "What did he say?"

"Drago doesn't remember the last ten years. He woke up Wednesday afternoon, had no idea where he was, what he had been doing. Hitched a ride into White Sands, went straight to the VA hospital. He remembers being there ten years ago for an infection in his leg, and that's about it."

"What about the hum? Does he remember the hum?"

"You'd have to ask him yourself, Mulder. I can arrange a car so you can talk to him."

Mulder abandoned his crutches near the side of the door, debated whether or not to go back to his own room to fetch a few things. "I've got to talk to Scully first. Meet me back here in say, half an hour?"

"Yeah, sure. What do you want to talk to Drago for?"

"Just a hunch."

Excerpt from Field Log: Agent D. Scully

May 24, 1995

"... trace amounts of fluids found on the victims' clothes are believed to have originated from the plunge pool described by Agent Mulder, though this conclusion cannot be substantiated due to lack of samples of said fluid from the plunge pool. The fluids taken from the clothes and the victims' lungs contain compounds that are so far unidentifiable. Tests done on scraps of algae taken from the scene also contain these compounds, though their origins are unknown.

"A chemical solvent that burns the skin but leaves clothing virtually undamaged has not been identified. The nature of the acid burns on all victims, including the cases cited by Agent Mulder, is still elusive.

"Agent Mulder's interview of one Lieutenant Vincent Joseph Drago in connection with the low frequency hum heard by a select few in the area around Las Cruces, New Mexico yielded few tenable results. Lt. Drago recalls none of the ten years since his disappearance from the White Sands VA Hospital in 1984. Lt. Drago has agreed to undergo hypnosis therapy to recover memories from the past ten years, though this agent believes that useful information will not be forthcoming.

"Energy emission recordings taken the afternoon of May 17, 1995, have been documented. If they are indeed the result of the breakdown of the device described by both Agent Mulder and myself, there is nothing to compare these readings to in order to devise a reasonable explanation for their existence. Attempts to attain information from the United States Army Decontamination Unit concerning the object removed from Hanover Cavern have been ignored to this date. Any requests for said information are waylaid with a memo saying no object was recovered from the caverns of New Mexico ..."

**GPS , Global Positioning Satellite System; ELF ,
Extra Low Frequency**