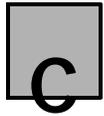


by Deb Walsh



Chilmark, Massachusetts
on Martha's Vineyard
April, 1972

The streetlight on Vine Street reflected against the frost formed on the outside of the bedroom window, sparkling like mini-rainbows and magic prisms. Two children slept in beds across from each other, comforters pulled up tight to their chins. The boy, twelve-years-old, rolled over in his sleep, muttering, his dark thatch of hair tumbled in his closed eyes. His sister, eight-years-old, twisted her thick dark brown braid around her fingers in her sleep, pulling strands free and tangling them around her fingers. Her teddy bear, Mr. Rufus, was clutched tightly against her chest as she shifted in the small bed.

She shook her head slightly, a tiny furrow appearing between her dark brows. A soft moan sighed through her lips as she rolled over. A slow trickle of blood seeped from her ear, staining the starched white pillowcase. An identical line of blood leaked from both nostrils, and she snuffled uncomfortably.

A soft white light came from somewhere near the window, accompanied by a whisper of sound. The girl opened her eyes groggily, murmuring, "Who is it? Mommy?" She propped herself up on one elbow, and rubbed at her eyes with a fist. She called out softly to her brother, but heard only his even breathing in reply. The light, diffused and distant, seemed to be coming closer, and she called out to her brother again, louder this time. He opened his eyes, but didn't roll over, didn't get up to check on his sister. She sat up in bed, wiping her hand against the wetness on her upper lip, and stared at the dark blood, made darker in the strange light. The light grew brighter, brighter still, until she was squinting against the brilliance, and suddenly the room seemed filled with some ... presence. The little girl's voice grew louder, more panicked, as the presence seemed to advance on her. Again and again, she called her brother's name.

The light enveloped the room, and a soft voice spoke in the boy's mind. "Do not be afraid. No harm will come to her. One day, she will be returned."

Eyes open, but unable to see his sister, young Fox Mulder listened to his sister's calls for help, unable to move.



BI Headquarters
Washington, D.C.
April 22, 1994

"Hey, c'mon, Scully, I'll buy you a beer," Fox Mulder offered as he and his partner, Dr. Dana Scully, closed down the office for the weekend.

Scully shook her head, wincing a little. "Sorry. I'd love to. But I'm having dinner with my mother." She shrugged into her coat, and Mulder stopped to help her.

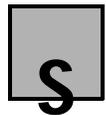
"Still tough, huh?" he asked sympathetically. She nodded. Scully's father had died of a heart attack shortly after Christmas, and while the pain had dulled a little, it was still there, always present. Especially when she and her mother were together.

"I'd say it gets better, but ... well, you and your mom are strong people." He squeezed her shoulder reassuringly.

Scully smiled at him, buttoned her coat, and started out the door. He slung his over his forearm and was turning out the lights when the phone suddenly rang. They looked at each other, tensing. He nodded for her to go on; she shook her head and came back into the office, gesturing for him to answer the phone. Shrugging, he went back to the phone on his desk and picked up the receiver.

"Mulder."

The voice at the other end of the line was silent for a long moment, then it said, "They found her." Then the connection was severed, and Mulder was listening to a dial tone, stunned.



Scully could see Mulder's hand shaking as he put down the receiver, and the light reflecting from the corridor overheads revealed a face gone suddenly ashen. Trembling, her partner dropped into the chair by his desk, staring unseeing into the distance.

"Mulder?" she asked, her voice betraying her concern. "Mulder. Who was that?" No answer. Putting her briefcase down, she walked over to Mulder, shaking his shoulder. "Mulder! Who was on the phone?"

Slowly, as though waking from a long and drugged sleep, Fox Mulder turned to look at Dana. His eyes were unfocused, his mouth slack. He looked like he was in shock.

"Mulder?" she asked again, dropping into a kneebend and quickly checking his vitals. "Mulder, look at me. What is it?"

"My ... my sister," he answered at last, his voice hollow and whispery.

"Your sister," she repeated, frowning. "What about your sister?" Scully knew that Mulder's sister, Samantha, had disappeared 22 years earlier, taken from the room she had shared with Mulder. He had been 12 and she had been eight; despite an exhaustive search, no trace of the girl had ever been found. Scully knew that Mulder had felt responsible, an older brother committed to protecting a younger sister, and he still felt that sense of responsibility, that sense of failure. It was a trauma from which he'd never fully recovered, and hypnotic regression therapy had led him to believe that she had been abducted by aliens. Not long ago, that nightmare had been brought back into sharper focus, first by a similar disappearance in the Midwest, one of their earliest cases together, and then by the rantings of a young faith healer in the South.

Gradually, Mulder's eyes focused, and he turned to look directly into Scully's. "They found her," he told her, shaking his head.

It was Scully's turn to shake her head. "Who? Who found her, Mulder? Who was that on the phone?"

He raised his hand to his mouth, absently pinching his lower lip between thumb and forefinger. "Uh ... um," he shook his head, as if to clear it. "Sounded like Owen Collings. Sheriff when I was a kid. I told him if anything ever came up, call me here." He reached out his hand to her, grasping her wrist. "Scully, I've got to go home."

"Your apartment."

"Martha's Vineyard. Chilmark. My home town." He shook his head again, struggling to rise. "I've gotta go."

"Not alone, you're not. You're in no state to drive."

"You've got dinner with your mother —"

"She'll understand. We can take my car —"

"Fly. It's 10 hours to Boston in good weather. We can get there faster by air if we take the shuttle."

"Mulder, there won't be a ferry to the Vineyard by the time we get there."

"So we get a coupla rooms on the Cape and catch the first ferry over in the morning," he suggested. The action of formulating a plan seemed to be bringing Mulder out of the shock the call had caused. Scully considered his proposal a moment, then nodded.

"Okay. Um, just let me get some things together and I'll meet you at your house —"

"No. I'll take you to your apartment, and then we'll go to my house. And I'll even let you buy me dinner — so long as it isn't McDonald's."

He smiled wanly at that and nodded. "Okay." She nodded and turned away to collect her briefcase. "Scully?" She turned back, expectant. "Thanks."

She smiled a tight smile and nodded. "Let's go."

"M

om, I know," Dana Scully said into the phone in Mulder's apartment. "I know. But we can get together for dinner next week." She listened to her mother's response impatiently. "No, there's nothing going on that you should know about," she answered, dropping her voice to a near whisper. While her mother made another protest over the phone, Scully glanced over at Mulder, who was stuffing papers into his suitcase. He shrugged, grinning a lop-sided grin, then went back to his packing. "No," she replied, her voice returning to normal pitch. "It's a family emergency." Another silence from Scully. "He's my partner, Mom." Another pause. "Yes, that's right, he's my friend, too. Look, I'll call you from Martha's Vineyard." She started tapping her high-heeled foot in exasperation. "No, I don't think the President's there right now. Look, Mom — I've got to go. We still need to pick up my things before we get on

the road." Another interruption. "Yes, I'll be careful. I'll call you, okay? Don't worry." One last wait for her mother's response, and she answered, "I love you, too. Bye."

Mulder closed his suitcase and stood up, favoring her with one of his strange smiles. His color had improved, and he seemed more like his old self again. Scully was relieved. He still looked a little shell-shocked, but she wouldn't have to expend too much energy worrying about him. At least until they got to Massachusetts.

"Okay, pardner, let's hit the trail," he quipped.



Mulder was in the dining room, setting out plates for their Chinese take-out while Scully went through the file cabinet next to her computer, pulling out the copies of the files on Mulder's sister and his regression therapy. She was sure that he had stashed away documents from his apartment on the subject, too, but she had additional field notes that might be useful. She grabbed her laptop and a box of disks and brought them over to her suitcase along with the files.

"C'mon, Scully, your dinner's getting cold," Mulder called out.

"I'll be right there," she answered, closing the suitcase. Had she forgotten anything? Her holster and gun were lying next to the suitcase, and her FBI ID was in her pocket. She had clothes for the weekend, waterproof boots on her feet, and she was wearing comfortable travelling clothes. The computer and battery, along with disks and her micro-cassette recorder and extra tapes were packed away with the files. Yes. She had everything. "Coming!"

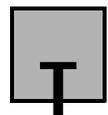


While they ate, they'd worked out the route from Boston to Wood's Hole where they would board the ferry to Martha's Vineyard. They caught the Washington-Boston shuttle at 8:00 and enjoyed an uneventful flight; Scully was pleased to see that Mulder's ability to nap had so far been unaffected. In Boston, they picked up a rental car, advice on the best Earth Day celebrations planned for the following day in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and drove south to Cape Cod.

In addition to Earth Day festivities, the clerk at the car rental pickup had also recommended an inn in Falmouth, right next to Wood's Hole. Mulder and Scully had argued briefly over how the accommodations would be paid for, and Mulder had won the argument by reminding her that this was a personal expedition on his behalf, not likely to be subsidized by the Bureau. With that detail settled, they followed the car rental clerk's directions, and checked in at the Admiralty Inn, taking the inn's last available room. Scully examined the list of amenities while Mulder paid for their rooms – a townhouse suite, in fact – for one night. "Mmm. Jacuzzi," she commented, smiling.

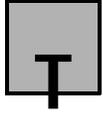
"And free HBO. All the comforts of home, Scully," he grinned, taking two keys from the desk clerk.

"And then some," Scully agreed, picking up her overnight bag.



The townhouse suite proved to be a two-level suite, with a bedroom on the second floor and a pull-out bed on the first floor. The bathroom was enormous,

sporting a massive bathtub that doubled as a jacuzzi. Mulder claimed the pull-out bed and free HBO while Scully claimed the jacuzzi. When Scully came out of the bathroom, pleasantly shrivelled from a long soak in the whirlpool, Mulder was asleep, files still grasped in his hand. She looked at him a long moment, debating over taking the files away and pulling up the covers on her partner. Then, deciding that would probably wake him, she shook her head and climbed the stairs to the second-floor bedroom.



They got up early and ate the breakfast offered by the Inn, then packed up their meager belongings and hit the road toward Wood's Hole, where they waited for the ferry to take them across to Martha's Vineyard. Finally, just before noon on Saturday, they were driving on the island, headed toward Chilmark.

"Most of the tourist places are just opening up this time of year," Mulder was saying as he negotiated the road.

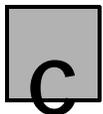
"Great. Does that mean we have to commute back to Falmouth at night?" Scully asked hopefully, remembering the Inn's jacuzzi.

Mulder shook his head. "No. Even if there are no openings in *any* of the inns on the island, we could always stay at my old place."

"So. Where *are* we staying?"

"We'll find out when we get there."

Scully shot Mulder a dirty look, but he just kept on driving.



**Chilmark, Massachusetts
on Martha's Vineyard
April 23, 1994**

Chilmark was a small town, typical of a tourist's idea of New England. Set back from the coast of the island, it was somewhat shielded from the raw winds that still whipped in off the ocean, despite the onset of spring.

They pulled up in front of a coffee shop on Chilmark's main street, and Mulder got out, going up to the meter and giving it a knock on its "head." "No fee on Saturdays," he told her and went into the cafe. Scully shook her head, resettled her purse over her shoulder, and followed.

Inside the coffee shop, they were greeted by the delicious smell of fresh-brewed coffee and home-baked pies. Breakfast at the Admiralty that morning was quickly forgotten; the smell of those pies made Scully instantly ravenous. Mulder led the way to an empty table, took off his overcoat, and sat down. Scully had barely joined him when a waitress came over bearing a heaven-sent pot of coffee.

"As I live and breathe!" the woman exclaimed brightly. "Fox Mulder! Haven't seen you around here since you went off to college." The woman had bleached hair tortured into tight ringlets gathered on the top of her head and eyes outlined in heavy make-up; rouge several shades too dark for her complexion highlighted cheekbones that weren't there.

Pancake make-up nestled in wrinkles the woman obviously preferred to ignore. She poured Mulder's coffee and scrutinized Scully with obvious interest. "Mrs. Mulder?" she asked archly.

Mulder chuckled, masking his wince over the woman's use of his unwanted first name. "Connie, this is Doctor Dana Scully, my partner. Scully, this is Connie Wilkins, proprietor of 'The Coffee Mug'."

Connie finished pouring Scully's coffee and put down the pot. She turned a brilliant smile on her and offered her a be-ringed hand. "Pleased to meet you," she told her, and Scully believed it was true; as soon as Mulder had established that she wasn't his significant other, the woman's attitude brightened immediately. She wasn't at all surprised at Connie's next statement.

"Good timing you coming back home, Fox. Amy's back in town – her divorce is final next month." With a possessive pat on Mulder's shoulder, Connie took up the coffee pot and went over to another set of customers in the shop.

Mulder was trying not to laugh as he studied the menu. Scully had to hold her hand over her mouth to avoid embarrassing them both.

"Amy?" she asked, a giggle escaping.

Mulder nodded, lips pressed tightly together to contain a chuckle. "Last I heard, Amy was on her fourth. Guess Connie's shopping around for Mr. Fifth."

"You still keep in touch with people around here?" Scully asked, shaking out her napkin; she was pleased to note that it was freshly-laundered linen, not paper. She rearranged her silver – genuine silver, it appeared, not stainless – and looked at the menu. Her mouth immediately started watering.

"I get a letter once a year from Owen," he agreed. "You know, the annual 'What I've Been Up To' Christmas message." He shrugged. "I send him a card, sometimes a note."

She glanced around her at the worn but clean linoleum tile, the carefully polished Formica countertop, the pressed linen tablecloths. The massive bay window looked out onto the street, lined with trees laden with fresh buds. "Nice place," she commented neutrally.

"Yeah, I guess," Mulder agreed without enthusiasm.

Connie returned at that point with two salads, placing one in front of each of them. Scully noted with amusement that Mulder's was twice the size of hers, and the croutons looked like they had been cut by hand. "Special today is chicken pot pie. You used to love that as a kid, Fox."

The tremor at the corner of Mulder's mouth was barely controlled as he nodded. Connie turned to Scully expectantly. "Oh. Sounds good to me. If Mulder liked it as a kid, that's a good enough advertisement for me." Connie nodded with satisfaction and stalked off again. Scully watched her retreat, and then let out a whoosh of air.

"I hate chicken pot pie, to tell you the truth. It was the only thing Amy knew how to cook in Home Ec."

"Well, just save room for desert – those pies look fabulous."

"No diet this weekend, Scully?"

She couldn't contain her mirth any further, and grinned at him. "Well, I always loved pie as a kid. Hold the chicken."

Mulder chuckled at that. Then his attention shifted to a point over her shoulder. She twisted around to see what he was looking at, and caught sight of a stocky, elderly man making his way up the sidewalk toward the coffee shop. A few moments later, the door opened, setting off the bell, and the man came into the shop, glancing around him. Scully looked at Mulder; he was sitting up straight, tense as a high-wire.

"Mulder," the old man greeted, walking over and extending a weathered hand to Mulder.

"Owen," Mulder greeted, and gestured for the man to join them.

"I see Connie's back in the match-making business. She spring that chicken pot pie on you again?" Owen asked as he pulled up a chair and settled his bulk.

Mulder nodded glumly.

"Cheer up. Amy went to cooking school a few years back. It's pretty good these days. And who's the pretty lady?" he asked bluntly, turning to Scully.

"Dana Scully. My partner."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Collings," Scully said, shaking his hand.

"Call me Owen. You got up here pretty fast, Mulder."

Connie returned with the coffee pot, a mug and a place setting for Owen, set down the utensils and filled Owen's mug, then returned to the counter. After she'd gone, Mulder replied, "That was a pretty mysterious call you made last night."

Collings nodded. "Well, I didn't have much time. No sense in going into the details over the phone – you'd've had to come up anyway as you're the only next of kin."

"She's dead, then. You found her body?" Dana inquired gently, her eyes on Mulder.

Owen shook his head. "Nope. Not dead. No body. But you gotta see this to believe it."



dgartown, Massachusetts
on Martha's Vineyard
April 23, 1994

They had Connie Wilkins wrap up their lunches, bought a thermos of coffee, and Scully had a slice of pie packed up to go, and were soon on the road again with Owen Collings. They were on their way to Edgartown, 25 miles away, and the local hospital.

"Two nights ago, somebody saw lights on up at your old house. Well, light – there ain't no electricity on in the place this time of year 'cept for the boiler. Don't start renting it out until Memorial Day, usually. Brad Olsen – he's the sheriff nowadays – he cruised by and took a look. That's when they found her."

"I rent the place out to tourists in the summer," Mulder explained briefly. "Owen looks after it for me." Then to Owen, "Why do they think it's Sammie?"

"*They* don't. But I saw her. You ain't gonna believe your eyes, Mulder. Ain't aged at all. Looks just the same as she did when she disappeared 22 years ago."

That ashen look had returned to Mulder's face, and it was all Scully could do to keep herself from demanding the right to drive.



Sheriff Brad Olsen was waiting for them at the hospital. Owen had called him from The Coffee Mug and he'd gone out to meet them. The hospital was tiny by city standards, a white clapboard house with one room set aside as an examination room, another as a reception area, a third as an emergency room, and a fourth as a lab. Two other rooms were designated for in-patient care, but this time of year, they were usually empty. Where summer tourists seemed a sickly lot, the locals were made of sterner stuff. The remainder of the building was allocated to living quarters for the physician in charge. During the week, the hospital staff consisted of a full-time nurse, a receptionist, a lab technician, and the main physician and an assistant; on weekends, the staff rotated on an on-call basis.

Mulder pulled up in a parking place and turned off the ignition, then sat there for a long moment, breathing deeply.

"Are you okay, Mulder?" Scully asked, concerned.

He nodded curtly. "Let's go."

Olsen met them in the reception area, shaking hands with Mulder and eyeing Scully with interest. She studied him in return: he was shorter and huskier than Mulder, with thinning blond hair and a sheriff's uniform that stretched a little snugly over an expanding waist line; Scully guessed that he had been a high school athlete now tending toward fat instead of muscle.

"What do you think, Brad?" Mulder asked quietly.

Olsen broke off his scrutiny of Scully and shrugged. "I would never have noticed the resemblance until Owen showed me the old file." To Scully he explained, "Owen's still deputized and helps me out when I'm short-handed. Nobody knows the old records like he does," he added with a nod toward Owen.

Scully nodded, then asked, "Do you believe that the girl you found is Samantha Mulder?"

Olsen let out a whistle. "Now, I don't know about that. She's been missing for 22 years. This girl can't be more'n eight. I know you believe in them UFOs," he said the acronym as a word, "but I sure don't, Fox. But there's no denying the resemblance."

"Can I see her?"

Olsen inclined his head in the affirmative, and gestured toward the in-patient room down the hall. "Fran says it's okay, so long as you keep it short."

As they walked down the hall, Mulder whispered to Scully, "Don't let that country bumpkin act fool you – Brad's a graduate of Harvard."

"Mmm," was Scully's reply.

Arriving at the indicated door, Mulder straightened his sweater, smoothed back his hair, and knocked. A small voice on the other side of the door replied, "Come in?"

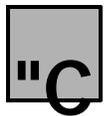
With a glance at Scully, Mulder opened the door.

The child in the bed looked up, hugging a worn and mangy-looking teddy bear. She was about eight years old, with smooth skin the texture of cream, a heart-shaped face, and long dark hair and bangs. She looked up at the man in the doorway, her dark eyes solemn.

Mulder gasped, taking a step back. "Sammie. And Mr. Rufus."

"She was holding the bear when we found her. Don't know where she got it –" Olsen began.

"He's mine!" the little girl exclaimed. "Mr. Rufus is mine! Somebody hid him on me, and I found him." She looked down at the stuffed animal and smoothed its moth-eaten fur. "I'll take care of you now, Mr. Rufus." Then she looked directly at Mulder. "Where's my brother?" she demanded.



'mon, Mulder, take a deep breath," Scully was saying, patting his back. They'd gone back out to the waiting room when Mulder had nearly fainted, and the doctor, a blonde, tanned woman about Mulder's age, had rushed into the girl's room to calm the hysterics Mulder's performance had inspired.

"Jesus!" Mulder breathed, coughing. He sat back in the plastic seat with a thump.

"You okay now, Fox?" Brad Olsen asked. He seemed almost pleased by Mulder's weakness; he also consistently called Mulder by his first name, a name Mulder assiduously avoided. Scully filed the observation away, to be investigated later. Collings, on the other hand, was visibly concerned, and hovered worriedly.

Mulder shrugged off Scully's hands, trying to orient himself.

"Hell of a shock," Collings observed. "Kinda hit me the same way when I saw her."

The doctor joined them in the waiting room. "She's calmer now. She'll sleep for a little while. I've set up the monitoring equipment again, just to keep an eye on her. And how are you doing, Mulder?"

Did Mulder know everyone on this island? Scully shook her head. It was a small island, and Mulder probably had more than his share of notoriety.

"Fran," Mulder greeted, wiping his hand across his brow.

"So, it is her?" Fran asked, her tone argumentative.

"I don't know. You tell me," Mulder challenged, looking the woman square in the eye.

She smiled faintly and consulted the chart she carried. "Eight-year old Caucasian female, in reasonably good health —"

"Reasonably?" Scully repeated.

The doctor nodded. "Mmm. We sent blood and tissue samples to the mainland for DNA profiling, hair samples to the police in Wood's Hole, but we did find some oddities in the blood tests we ran here — her white cell count's a little high, there's a reduction in the lymphocytes population —"

"Effects of prolonged weightlessness," Scully echoed from a long-ago conversation with Mulder.

When the doctor looked at her curiously, she extended a hand to her, introducing herself. "I'm Special Agent Dana Scully, Mulder's partner. I'm also a medical doctor — I did my residency at Johns Hopkins."

"Fran Kulik. Did mine at Mass General. You're right about the symptoms matching those of prolonged weightlessness," Fran agreed with a nod. Then she turned her attention back to Mulder. "You don't really believe that it's really Sammie, do you? Seriously, Mulder?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. When do you expect the DNA profile back?"

"Next week some time."

"Can you get it rushed?"

She considered this a moment. "Well, I sent it to Mass Gen — I've still got plenty of friends on staff there ... I could pull a few strings and probably have it done this weekend. It'll cost you, though," she added with a grin. When Mulder didn't rise to the bait, she set the chart down and looked carefully at him. "Look, you don't too great — this has been quite a shock. Why don't you get some rest and come back later —"

"Do you think she'd respond to hypnosis?" Mulder interrupted her.

Fran didn't seem surprised or perturbed at Mulder's apparent rudeness, and nodded equably. "Well, sure, I don't see any reason why not, but —"

"Can you do it? I'd like to regress her. See what she remembers."

Kulik nodded thoughtfully. "Her memory does seem a bit sketchy. Doesn't seem to remember much before Brad found her in your old house. I can't do hypnosis, but Ben Williams can."

"Memory loss can be a symptom of UFO abductions," Mulder said quietly.

"Any distinguishing marks?" Scully asked, glancing at Mulder. He looked at her, but didn't pursue his thought.

"Um ... some odd scar tissue around the left ear," the attending physician replied, pointing to her own face, her fingers wagging vaguely at her own ear. "Her color's improving — she was very pale when she was brought in. Haggard-looking, really. Her lips were pretty badly cracked — they're about healed now. Malnourished, although not chronically. Her appetite's improving. I'd say the prognosis is pretty damned good."

"Has she asked for her parents at all?" Scully asked.

Fran shook her head. "I asked her if she wanted her parents, and she said they'd be mad at her for being gone so long. When I asked for their names and phone number, she said she couldn't remember."

Scully glanced at Mulder, who shrugged. "Why did she go into that house in particular?" Scully inquired.

Brad took the opportunity to answer. "She told me that's where she was left off."

"By?"

"The Cloud Men'."



ow, I won't take no for an answer, Mulder," Owen Collings was telling him. "Helen'll be happy to see you, and we've got two rooms free now the kids are all grown up."

Mulder didn't answer, and instead stared out the window at the greening trees whizzing by as they drove back toward Chilmark. Finally, Dana replied for them both, "We'd really appreciate it, Owen. Just let me know where to turn off."

A little while later, they arrived at the drive to the Collings home. Scully turned up the gravel driveway, wincing at every rut and stone the car hit on its way to the house. Finally, she pulled up in front of a sprawling stone house, a great mound of split wood piled up on the flagstoned porch. "Mulder, we're here," Scully told him softly, and he roused himself to get out of the car and help unload the luggage. Owen refused to allow Scully to carry anything, so she was left carting only her briefcase and their cold lunch from The Coffee

Mug while the men carried the bags into the house.

Helen Collings was a cheerful woman in her mid-sixties, her hair a mixture of gray and dark brown. She seemed genuinely pleased to see them both, and shoed them away into the parlor while she fixed coffee. She liberated Scully's bag of food with, "Chicken pot pie? The dog loves it," and went back to the kitchen.

Scully shook her head, chuckling, as she followed Mulder into the parlor. It was a beautiful old room, with honey-colored hardwood floors, antique-looking braided rag rugs, and comfortable looking furniture. Mulder was looking out the window.

"What are you thinking, Mulder?" she asked him.

He didn't move, but he answered, "Be careful what you wish for. It might come true."

"Chinese proverb."

"Maybe a guide for living."

"Do you think she's your sister?"

"Maybe." He sighed, turning around to look at her with weary eyes. "We won't know until we get the DNA profile back."

Scully shook her head. "We won't know even then. We have nothing to compare it against."

Mulder nodded and was silent for a long time, turning back toward the window and watching the shadows lengthening across the ground. Suddenly he asked, "Could you develop a DNA profile from a lock of hair?"

Considering this for a moment, Scully nodded. "No. At least I don't think so. Not enough actual tissue to study. Why?"

"Then what?"

"Ah, blood, tissue samples, pulpy tooth matter ... none of it does us much good without a similar sample from your sister —"

Mulder was silent for a long moment, considering. When he did speak, his voice was shaky, and he swallowed repeatedly. "What about ... a blood stain? Blood dried on fabric?"

Scully considered this and nodded. "The blood stain could be used to create an aqueous solution which could be studied, sure. It's a method used frequently in forensic analysis. But you can't have something like that from your sister —"

"We've got something to compare it against," he replied flatly. The deadened quality of his voice was shocking, and Scully reached for the arm of the sofa and lowered herself onto

the edge. He turned and looked at her. "Didn't your mother save your curls from your first haircut? Mine did."

"Every mother saves hair from that first haircut. It's in the manual," she joked, but not even a flicker of a smile answered her. "But I told you, hair won't do it," she added, shaking her head.

"But a blood-stained pillowcase would."

"A blood-stained pillowcase?" She frowned, staring at him. "Why – where is it?"

"In a safe deposit box in Edgartown. With the rest of Sammie's things. I put it there when I was 15."

"Why?"

He frowned, glanced out the window for a second, and moved into the room to sit down. "I never told you what happened to my parents."

She shook her head, watching him expectantly. He was on the edge, she could see, but she also knew that she had to let him work through this in his own way. She sat back on the sofa, waiting patiently for him to continue.

"I told you that after Sammie disappeared, it tore my family apart." She nodded. "What I didn't tell you is that it drove my mother mad. Every day, she seemed to get worse. She built a virtual shrine to Sammie. Nothing that had belonged to her could be moved. She wouldn't even launder the sheets on Sammie's bed, not even the pillowcase with blood on it – probably from a nosebleed or something, kids that age always get them. Possibly a nosebleed caused by proximity to aliens, I don't know. At first I agreed. I wanted her back just as much as my mother did. But as I grew older, her mood swings got wilder and wilder. And when I was fifteen, my father thought maybe if he got rid of all of Sammie's stuff ... maybe that would help. I begged him not to burn it all – finally he let me put it in a safe deposit box. I guess I missed Mr. Rufus."

"Mr. Rufus."

"The teddy bear. She always slept with him. When they took her ... he was left on the bed, tangled in the sheets. He must have been in the closet or up in the attic all these years."

"Until she found him. So the pillowcase, the one on her bed the night she disappeared – is in the safe deposit box?"

"Along with hair from her first haircut, her first tooth and her baby booties." He snorted softly. "Funny how a life can be reduced to just a few belongings, don't you think, Scully?" he asked, looking at her.

She lowered her eyes and nodded. Tears threatened, her own pain and loss too recent to ignore. When Mulder offered her his hand, she took it and squeezed hard.



ou're sure you want to do this?" Scully asked Mulder as they reentered the hospital.

"No. But it's got to be done." He expelled a breath and marched up the steps to the hospital doors.

Fran Kulik was working at the reception desk, going over a file. She glanced up at the two FBI agents and sketched a greeting. Reading for a few more minutes, she finally closed the file and put it in the file cabinet.

"Ben'll be here soon. She's had her dinner and she's doing pretty well. I've got the monitoring equipment set up, and everything's looking pretty good. I think the best course of action is to let Ben talk to her alone; when she's under, then you can come in and ask your questions."

Mulder nodded tautly. "Did you get through to your friend at Mass General?"

"Yeah. He said he can pull it off – he'll fax the initial results, and have the whole package sent over by ferry on Monday. Without a baseline to compare it to, however –"

"What kind of contacts do you have at the local BayBank?" Mulder interrupted her.

"Well, Joe Franken's the manager – you remember him from high school –"

"Good. Can I use your phone?"

She paused, then nodded. "Local call?"

"Joe. Got his number?"

"Let me get my book. Geeze, Mulder, you haven't changed, have you? Still a pain in the ass."

She left the reception area to look for her address book in her office. While she was gone, Scully commented, "And here I thought that was a rep you earned at the Bureau."

"Nah. It's a natural talent, goes way back."

"Yeah. I'll bet."

"Okay, here it is – 555-2732," Fran announced as she came back into the lobby with her address book in hand. She glanced at her watch. "He should be home by now. You want me to talk to him?"

Mulder shook his head and dialled the phone. While he spoke to his old classmate, Kulik led Scully away to her office talk to her privately.

"He looks a little better. But this is really rough on him."

"I know."

"Sammie's disappearance really tore apart his family. It's a wonder he didn't end up in juvie hall – "

"He told me about his mother. Where is she now?"

"Bourneville Hospital in Brockton. She's been chronic care now for over 10 years. She didn't recognize anybody before that, couldn't take care of herself. Y'know, his dad would've done anything to get him out of that house – if Mulder hadn't won the scholarship to Oxford, his father was prepared to sell the house if necessary to get him somewhere a long way from here. And as soon as Mulder got settled in England, his father committed his mother. He died shortly after Mulder got back." She shook her head in remembrance of the pain of the Mulder family.

Scully felt like she was prying into Mulder's secrets, but she knew he would never tell her these things – not that they were too personal, but that he would never put himself in the role of victim. But he had been, as much as his missing sister. And now ... if this wasn't Samantha Mulder, then someone was playing a mindgame of epic proportions with Mulder's head.

Mulder poked his head in. "Sorry to intrude, ladies, but Ben's here. And Joe said he'd let me into my box tomorrow after lunch. Oh, and Scully – don't believe a word she says. Kulik's always had it in for me, ever since I beat her in the fifth grade science fair."

Kulik chuckled at the memory, riposting with, "My project was pure science. Yours was pure pyrotechnics."

"Hey, how was I to know Mr. Kravitz was a volcano buff?"



r. Ben Williams was a psychiatrist who lived year-round on the Vineyard, but maintained a fashionable practice in Boston. Unlike so many people Scully had met so far, he had not gone to high school with Mulder, but like so many locals, had followed Mulder's career with interest.

"So, is this a big case, Agent Mulder?" he asked eagerly. He was a pudgy, older man, with a fringe of grizzled hair around his head, and a shiny dome on top. He was a friendly-looking man, the kind of man who could put patients at ease immediately.

"Skip the 'Agent' part and just call me 'Mulder'. And sorry, Ben. It's on file at the Bureau, but nobody but me would consider it a big case."

"An 'X-File'?" Williams guessed, his eyes shining.

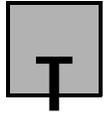
Both Scully and Mulder did a double-take. "How do you know about the 'X-Files'?" they demanded in unison.

"Hey, I read the UFO journals. You'd be surprised how many of my patients have had traumatic experiences involving unexplained phenomena. I'm also a paid-up member of

NICAP – you're one of their heroes. And you, Agent Scully – the great skeptic."

Mulder slapped the heel of his hand against his forehead as Scully chuckled. The world was becoming just too small a place these days. "Great."

"So, what's the drill?" Williams asked, rubbing his hands together with glee.



he softly droning voice of Ben Williams was all they could hear outside the door of the in-patient room. Mulder paced nervously, clenching and unclenching his hands as he marked off ten paces up, ten paces down the corridor. Fran Kulik was in her office, answering patient questions over the phone. Scully sat in the scarred plastic visitor's seat, trying to read the local evening paper and not pay attention to Mulder's incessant marching.

Finally, a soft beep sounded, and Mulder's hand shot to the device at his belt. They'd agreed that the little intercoms were the least obtrusive way for Ben to signal that he was ready for Mulder. Mulder looked over at Scully, his face pale, his mouth set in a tight line. She nodded and stood up. With a shaky thumbs up, Mulder led the way into the room.

The girl lay back on her pillows, her pale face framed by an aureole of dark hair fanned out on the pillow. The teddy bear, Mr. Rufus, was loosely held in the crook of one arm. Her eyes were closed, her breathing steady. Not turning around, Williams motioned for them to enter. Silently, Mulder sat in the chair next to Williams. Scully went around to the other side of the bed, near the monitoring equipment, and watched the telltales relating to heart rate and blood pressure. She turned back to Mulder and Williams, inclining her head to indicate it was okay to start the questions.

Swallowing hard, Mulder leaned forward, fighting down the urge to reach for the small hand laid on the comforter. Instead, he asked softly, "Are you comfortable?"

The little girl nodded silently.

"Where do you live?"

"2790 Vine Street in Chilmark, Massa ... Massachoosits."

Mulder drew a sharp breath. Then he asked, "What is your name?"

"Samantha T. Mulder."

"What does the 'T' stand for, Samantha?"

"Theresa. Like the Little Flower."

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"A brother."

"And what's his name, Samantha?"

"Fox. I call him 'Foxy Loxy'."

Mulder's hand was visibly trembling. He lifted his eyes to stare at Scully, his expression a mute plea for help. Her eyes widened, her lips parting slightly. Then she frowned toward the child. Mulder returned his attention to the girl in the bed.

"How old are you, Samantha?" he asked softly.

"I'm eight and one-quarter."

"One-quarter?"

"That's what my brother told me. One-quarter of a year since my birthday."

Mulder nodded dully. "When is the last time you saw your brother?"

Silence.

"Samantha? What was your brother doing the last time you saw him?"

Silence again.

Williams patted Mulder on the arm, gesturing to him to try again. Mulder nodded, and tried a new tack. "Samantha, you are perfectly safe. No one will harm you. You're here with us and we're going to look after you. No one can get you. I want you to remember the last time you saw your brother. Think of it as a dream, something that happened to someone else. Can you do that, Samantha?"

A nod, small but definite.

"Good. Now. Where are your parents, Samantha?" Mulder asked, glancing toward Scully and the monitoring equipment. Scully nodded back; the indicators remained steady.

"In their room, sleeping. I think I can hear Daddy snoring."

Mulder smiled faintly at that. His father had suffered from a deviated septum, and his snoring had been epic in volume. "Now, you can see your brother, right?" Another nod, more vigorous this time. "Where are you?"

"I'm in my bed. In our room."

"Very good. And where is your brother?"

"He's in his bed."

Mulder paused, taking a deep breath. "Is there anyone else in the room?"

"Yes."

"Who else is in the room, Samantha?"

"The Cloud Man."

"Who is the Cloud Man?"

"I'm not supposed to tell."

Mulder exchanged glances with Scully and Williams. Williams shrugged and nodded toward the girl. "Keep going," he mouthed silently.

Closing his eyes for a moment, Mulder expelled a breath. Then he resumed. "What is the Cloud Man doing in your room, Samantha?"

"He's come to take me away to the clouds."

"Are you afraid of the Cloud Man?"

Silence.

"Does the Cloud Man do something to frighten you?"

"Yes."

"What does the Cloud Man do, Samantha?"

"He ..." She clutched at the comforter, her hand balling up into a fist while in the other she hugged Mr. Rufus closer. "He ..."

"You're safe now, remember? The Cloud Man can't hurt you. What does the Cloud Man look like, Samantha? Can you describe him for me?"

"He's ... light. Bright. Like an angel. Like my guardian angel."

"Is that who he is, your guardian angel?"

"No." A whimper.

"What does the Cloud Man do?"

"He ... Fox! Fox! Fox!" she screamed, bolting up in bed, clutching Mr. Rufus to her chest. Again and again she screamed the name, legs and arms flailing in panic. Finally, Williams leapt up and grabbed her by the shoulders, whispering soothingly to her as he eased her back onto the bed. He cocked his head toward the door, indicating Scully and Mulder should leave. With a glance back at the gradually calming girl, they left the room.



ran Kulik was waiting for them in the corridor. "Is she all right?"

"Ben's getting her calmed down," Scully assured her, steering Mulder toward the

coffee pot. He was still shaking, his face so pale, she could trace the blue of his veins in his forehead.

"Hot sweet tea," Kulik agreed, guessing Scully's intent and drawing hot water into a mug and dumping a tea bag and a couple of teaspoons of sugar into it. She stirred it quickly and shoved the mug into Mulder's trembling hands.

Mulder only spilled a few drops bringing the mug to his lips, and took a sip of the hot liquid. "Hot," he complained.

"That's the idea, idiot," Fran chided. "Look, sit down in my office — the couch is more comfortable than these buckets." With Scully on one side and Kulik on the other, he allowed himself to be led to Kulik's office.

By then, Ben was coming out of the room and closing the door gently behind him. "Good idea," he approved, looking at the steaming mug of tea. "Mind if I do ...?" Fran nodded, and he scurried off to make himself some tea. A few moments later, he rejoined the others, sipping thoughtfully while they waited for Mulder to gather his thoughts.

"It could be her," he said at length.

"Could. But you're not convinced," Ben amplified.

Mulder shook his head. "There was nothing in her answers that was specific enough —"

"Your nickname —" Scully suggested.

"What would you do with a name like 'Fox'?" Mulder countered with a glimmer of his usual humor. "Especially if you're only eight years old? And why do you think I asked my parents to call me 'Mulder'?"

With a faint smile, Scully nodded agreement. "And Theresa's a common name, a good guess for the initial 'T'. Was that your sister's middle name?"

Mulder nodded. "But everything she said, it all comes from public record. My statement at the time. Standard UFO literature. I ... I just don't have enough to go on," he added sadly, shaking his head.

Scully considered this in silence, as the others did. Finally, she offered, "It's been a long day. And you've been through a considerable trauma, Mulder. I suggest we all get some sleep. Tomorrow we'll get that pillowcase and prepare it to send back to Boston. Okay?" At Fran's quizzical expression, Scully quickly explained about the pillowcase, and she could tell from the thoughtful frown on the resident doctor's face that she found it a curious thing for a mother to save, but in keeping with Mrs. Mulder's monomania.

"Scully's right. Sleep will do you some good. Now get out of here so I can do the same!" Fran ordered.

Murmurs of assent from all three of them met the suggestion, and they all got up to

disperse.

"I'll call you if anything changes," Fran promised, seeing them all to the door. "And button up that coat, Mulder – you've had a hell of a shock, you don't want to compound it."

"Yes, mother," Mulder agreed with a smile, and duly buttoned his overcoat and wound his muffler around his neck. "Satisfied?"

"Get a hat. You know you lose 80% of your body heat through your head. Now get some sleep."

Williams, Scully and Mulder all left the hospital, and Fran turned to bolt the door after them.

"Keep me posted, okay?" Williams asked as he climbed into his car.

"Sure. Thanks again, Ben," Mulder called as he started to open the driver's side door. Scully tapped him on the shoulder and shook her head, pointing meaningfully at the passenger's side. Shrugging, he trudged around the car and let himself in on that side while Scully slipped in behind the wheel.

"This thing isn't paid for yet, Mulder. I'm not taking anymore chances with it tonight, even if it *is* on *your* credit card."

Leaning back in his seat, he closed his eyes and raised an arm, pointing. "Home, James."

Scully simply gave him a wry smile and put the car in gear.



Scully had learned long ago that humor – often strange, sometimes smelling of the gallows – was Mulder's way of coping with the world. As defense mechanisms went, it was a pretty harmless one, and it kept their working relationship from ever getting boring or repetitive. But except for a few attempts at humor back at the hospital, Mulder had been silent, brooding. Scully had to admit that she hadn't a clue how she might deal with a similar situation; in fact, her bizarre "visions" following her father's death had left her badly rattled, doubting her own sanity. Mulder seemed to be handling the entire affair pretty well, all things considered, but that didn't prevent her from worrying about the long-term effects.

What also concerned her was the possibility that the little girl in the local hospital might actually be Mulder's sister. If they managed to prove that she was ... Scully would have to reorient her entire view of the world, natural and unnatural. And she was too much of a professional to fail to attest to the accuracy of the claim if the DNA profiles matched. Validation from a respected FBI agent – and an accredited physician, at that – would fuel a furor such as the Bureau hadn't seen since J. Edgar's days.

But what frightened her most was the possibility that this was *not* Samantha Mulder. If she wasn't – and even Mulder wasn't convinced that she was – then who was she? Where had she developed this belief that she was? Where had she gotten even the scanty details she had recounted under hypnosis? And just who was behind it?

Scully shook her head. And she called Mulder "paranoid." She was beginning to see conspiracies in every shadow.

Mulder had gone directly to the room the Collingses had given him, claiming a very real fatigue. Scully had gone to her own room and changed for bed, and now she sat up in the lovely old bed, staring at the blank screen of her laptop. No field notes tonight. Her impressions were far too jumbled, her conclusions far from reliable. Tomorrow was soon enough to try to start making sense of it all. With that thought, she switched off the computer, closed the case and placed it on the nightstand, and turned off the bedside lamp. Within minutes, she was fast asleep.

Down the hall, Fox Mulder stared at his reflection in the mirror, looking for signs of the little boy who had heard but not seen his sister's abduction 22 years earlier. Ever since that day, he'd hoped for her return, believed that today, today would be the day, only to go to sleep that night disappointed. But today ... was today the day of her return? Was that child, that child who looked just like Sammie, his long-lost sister? The superficial evidence indicated that she might be. Then why couldn't he believe what he'd hoped for so long?

Making a face to himself in the mirror, he turned away, pulling off his sweater. He was open to extreme possibility. But he was too rational to believe without proof. Wouldn't the guys at the Bureau be amazed to learn *that*? Shaking his head, he slipped under the covers and turned out the light, but sleep eluded him for a long time. Finally, he slid into a light doze, then a deeper sleep, his dreams full of light-filled rooms and his sister's voice.

Fran Kulik called the Collings house early Sunday morning, certain that Owen and Helen would be up at the crack of dawn. Helen answered the phone, and listened carefully as Fran outlined her concerns. Nodding, Helen agreed. When she put the phone down, she answered Owen's questioning eyes.

"That was Fran. She said to let Mulder and Dana sleep in. Mulder had a rough night last night, and she thinks he might have had trouble sleeping."

Owen considered this as he chewed his toast. "Heard 'em come in last night. Then I heard Mulder wandering around Bill's old room. She's probably right — that boy always did feel things too deep."

Helen sat down and took a sip of coffee. "That whole family did. This is a terrible business, Owen," she added, reaching for his hand.

He closed his own large, calloused hand over her smaller, smoother one. "That it is, Helen. That it is."

It was nearly 11 when Scully got out of the bathroom, her hair turbaned in a towel and a scruffy old bathrobe tied at her waist. Mulder was just opening the door to his room, peering out bleary-eyed and disheveled.

"What time is it?" he croaked.

"Almost 11. You've got time for a shower before lunch." She looked at him closely. "You look like hell, Mulder."

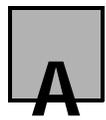
"Thanks. I feel like hell. Is that coffee I smell?"

Scully had to smile. First things first: caffeine. "Downstairs. Helen and Owen ate hours ago, but they had orders to let us sleep in."

"Fran?"

"Mmm-mm. Go get your fix, Mulder – you're useless until you've had some coffee."

"Well, at least I'm not useless all of the time – you should let Blevins know," he called over his shoulder as he stumbled toward the stairway. Scully shook her head, grinning. Then she remembered her field notes – their Section Chief, Blevins, *would* know.



As Mulder swallowed the last bite of his lunch, he announced to Helen, "You've got to let me take you out to dinner while I'm here, Helen. You pick the place. You're too good to us."

"Oh, come on, Mulder. You're family. You were best man at Bill's wedding. I'd've been insulted if you'd stayed anywhere else," she replied, getting up to clear the lunch dishes away.

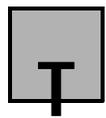
"Let me," Scully offered, picking up plates and silverware.

"No, that's fine," Helen told her, shooing her away. "It's Owen's turn to wash up. Keeps him in line," she added with a twinkle.

Owen pushed away from the table with a grunt. "That's what you think," he complained, but he gathered up the dishes and cutlery and disappeared into the kitchen with Helen.

"You have nice friends, Mulder," Scully told him.

He looked at her for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah. I do." Then he glanced down at his watch. "You ready?"



The Edgartown BayBank office was closed on Sundays, except for the ATM attached to the lobby, but Joe Franken had already opened the doors and was waiting inside for them. He greeted Mulder with genuine pleasure, and politely introduced himself to Scully. Then he presented Mulder with an official-looking form to sign.

"You still have your key, or do I need to go find a copy?" Franken asked.

Mulder dangled his keys in front of Franken, smiling. "I never leave home without it." Then he signed the form and pushed it back to Franken.

"Okay. Let's go."

The safe deposit vault was guarded by an old steel gate, then a combination lock on the door of the vault itself. The bank had a comfortable, old-fashioned look to it; obviously the rage of renovation and modernization rampant in big-business banks had not yet reached here to Edgartown. Finally, Franken led them into the vault, and took out Mulder's safe deposit box. It was a large box, and took up a significant portion of the top of the table in the vault. "You want us to wait outside?"

Mulder shook his head, fitting his key into the lock. He paused before opening the box, steadying himself with a deeply-drawn breath. Then, he lifted the lid.

Inside the box were, as he'd told Scully, baby booties, a small envelope containing a lump the size of a small tooth, a baby doll, hair ribbons, and all manner of impedimenta of a young girl. Mulder extracted a Zip-Loc baggie, holding it up. A lock of dark hair, slightly waved, was held within. He started to shove it into his pocket, then looked at Scully. He handed her the baggie in silence, then reached into the box again, shifting the contents to pick up the edges of a pillowcase that had once been white. He flicked his wrist and shook it out, holding it up. Amidst the folds pressed into it by almost 20 years, there were two small brown marks and a larger smear of the same color. Blood stains.

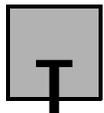
He handed it to Scully, and then simply looked at the contents of the box for a long time, his expression melancholy. Then he sighed, and closed the box, locking it, and handed it back to Franken.

"That's it? Just a lock of hair and a pillowcase?" Franken asked, amazed.

"The blood stain on the case should be enough to do a DNA profile to test against this girl's," Scully explained. While the lock of hair couldn't be used for DNA profiling, it could be used to compare against the girl's. And, she suspected, there was more than a bit of sentimentality involved in taking the hair out of the safety deposit box.

"Wow. Modern technology," Franken breathed, shaking his head as he returned the box to the vault. Then he led them out again, locking up behind him. At the door to the bank, he shook Mulder's hand again, nodding to Scully. "Let me know what happens, okay, Mulder?"

"Sure, Joe. And thanks."



Her next stop was the hospital, where Fran was already at work. Already this morning she'd had to deal with a broken leg and an ulcer attack, but right now she was enjoying a quiet interlude. At Scully and Mulder's entrance, she looked up and smiled wearily.

"Get enough rest last night?" she asked.

"Mmm. Especially after you told Helen and Owen to let us sleep in."

"Damn that Helen – can't keep a secret," she complained, grinning.

"Actually, it was Owen," Mulder pointed out, returning the smile.

She motioned them into her office and closed the door. As they sat down, she informed them that her part-time nurse was looking after the girl. "Did you get the pillowcase?" she asked.

Scully nodded, and brought out the linen, handing it to Fran. "Good. I'll prep it to send to Mass General on the ferry tomorrow." She fingered the fabric, studying the stains. "Hopefully this will be enough to pull a sample." Then she put the pillowcase down on her desk and rummaged for a large envelope. "I thought you might like to see these — they just came back from the lab," she explained, handing a large manilla envelope to Scully.

As Scully opened the envelope, she asked, "What are they?"

"Photographs we took of her when she was brought in. There's some detail on the scar tissue you might want to examine."

"Anything from Mass General?" Mulder asked as he peered over Scully's shoulder.

"Don't get pushy, Mulder. My friend is pulling out all the stops to get the stuff here by tomorrow."

"Hmm," Scully murmured, studying the photographs. She handed one to Mulder while she looked closely at another. "Mulder — look at this scar —"

Behind the left ear, a small triangular scar marred the smooth surface of the young skin.

"Click. Another piece falls into place," Mulder said acidly.

"You've seen that kind of scar before," Kulik stated.

Mulder nodded. "It's consistent with the abduction theory — there've been several cases of this type of scar being found on victims who claimed they were abducted. And at least one on a man who didn't know he had been," he added with a glance at Scully. She frowned in response, remembering poor Max Fennig, the epileptic man from NICAP who'd died mysteriously in Townsend, Wisconsin.

"Now this looks interesting," Scully commented, tracing her finger along the next photograph. "Fran, look at this," she told her, handing her the photo.

"What am I looking for?" Fran asked, puzzled.

"Look at the hairline along the temple and around the ear."

Fran took the photo over to her desk and turned on the lamp, holding the photo up. "Tiny scars ... like ..."

"Like plastic surgery. Very good plastic surgery, I might add."

"Are you suggesting that that child was altered to look like Sammie?" Fran demanded, incredulous.

"I'm offering it as a possibility. Mulder?"

"Some abduction cases have exhibited faint scarring around the face and hands. Presumably the result of some sort of medical procedure, tests maybe. It could go either way," he shrugged.

Mulder looked at another photograph for a long time, his face unreadable. The photo was a full-face view of the girl. He lifted his hand and touched his fingers to the image. Then he looked up at Fran. "Do you think she's in any condition to leave the hospital – for a short time?"

"Why? What have you got in mind?" Kulik asked, her eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"I'd like to take her out to my old house, walk around with her – see if that jars anything loose."

"Return to familiar surroundings?" She considered this for a moment, then nodded. "We can ask her. Karen can go with you, just in case. If you keep the visit short, and make sure she stays bundled up, she should be okay. She's sleeping now, but later ... sure."

"Good."



Mulder spent the time waiting for "Samantha" to awaken by making phone calls on his cellular from Kulik's examination room while Scully took the opportunity to catch up on some of Fran's medical journals. He was sitting on the examination table, his shoeless feet crossed at the ankles.

"Yeah, Roscoe, I know it's Sunday," Mulder was saying. "Your day of rest. I know."

"Don't you ever rest, Mulder?" Roscoe Breskin, his partner in the operation mounted over the Scully kidnapping a few months earlier, asked. Officially, the perpetrator in the case has been a felon named Lula Phillips, who had held both Scully and Agent Jack Willis hostage. Mulder's command of the operation had gone a long way to reestablish his credentials with many of his colleagues at the Washington Bureau, most especially Breskin.

"No, I never rest, except when the Skins are in town. You know that. Okay, it'll cost me – how much?" Mulder listened to Roscoe Breskin's price and whistled. "I hope you're worth it, Roscoe," he told his fellow agent at the other end of the connection. "Yeah, yeah, that's what they all say."

"Okay, Mulder. You've got my attention. What do you want?"

"I want a trace run – no, not a phone trace," he amended at the strangling noises coming through the phone. "I want a computer trace. I need to know who's accessed a file."

"An 'X-File'?" Roscoe asked, chuckling.

"As a matter of fact, yes. I know how you feel about them, Roscoe, but this one's personal."

"Your sister?" Breskin guessed, his tone turning serious.

"Yeah. My sister." Quickly, Mulder outlined what had occurred so far, ending with, "Something doesn't smell right about this." At the snort Roscoe greeted that statement with, Mulder added, "I know – none of the X-Files smell right to you. But this girl ... she looks like my sister, she even sounds like her ... but her story – it's too pat."

"You think someone's accessed the file and is using the information to set you up? C'mon, Mulder, that's conspiracy shit."

"Which would you rather believe, Roscoe – that my sister's been returned by aliens, or somebody's been hacking into Bureau files?"

Roscoe whistled in response to Mulder's challenge, and Mulder held the phone away from his ear, rubbing at the ear absently. "You've got a point. What's the file number?"

"6 007. There are some tapes that go with it, too."

"What's the time frame?"

Mulder considered this for a moment. He'd opened the file more than three years ago. Official attention had been directed at him about a year later. "Two years. Twenty-five months, really. Since Scully's been working with me."

"You don't suspect her?"

"Not on your life. But that's about when Blevins started sitting up and taking notice."

"You think this could be internal?"

"You know McGrath," Mulder reminded him, thinking of the Section Chief in charge of the Office of Professional Responsibility who'd tried to crucify him not too long ago with a disciplinary hearing that almost ended in his being thrown out of the Bureau on criminal charges.

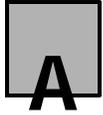
"Hmm," Roscoe agreed thoughtfully. "Okay. You've got it. Where can I reach you?"

Mulder gave his cellular number, along with Owen Collings' phone number. "Thanks, Roscoe," he said.

"You get those tickets, and we're square. If not ... I'll take it out of your hide in unpaid overtime."

"Deal." Mulder said goodbye and closed the connection. The next number he dialled was his home number, and he punched in the sequence to retrieve his messages. Not surprisingly, the calls were few, but one in particular caught his attention. Two clicks, then dial tone. His government source. Shit. He couldn't call him from here, he'd never answer the phone. And he might just know something about this; the timing was just too coincidental otherwise. Making a mental note to get in touch with the man as soon as he

got back to D.C., he hung up and laid back on the examination table to take a nap.



soft tap on the door brought Mulder to immediate wakefulness. He sat up straight, banging his head into the examination lamp, and rubbing his head painfully, called out, "Who is it?"

Fran poked her head inside. "She's up. And she's willing. Are you really up for this, Mulder?"

He nodded, pulling his shoes back on. His cellular phone was still sitting on the examination table as he left.



ulder led "Samantha" out to the car, with the part-time nurse, Karen Jenkins, bringing up the rear. Scully had agreed to stay back at the hospital in an effort not to overwhelm the girl.

At loose ends, Scully started to straighten up the reception area, piling magazines into neat stacks.

"If you want to be really helpful, you can help me strip her bed," Fran offered with a smile.

"I thought I put all this behind me when I joined the Bureau," Scully commented.

"Once a doctor, always a doctor," Fran reminded her. "Coming?"

Scully was surprised to note that the infamous Mr. Rufus had been left behind, casually dropped on the floor. She picked up the bear and set him in the visitor's chair, smoothing down his tufted fur. Then she walked over to the bed and lifted one of the pillows to strip off the pillowcase. As she pulled off the case, she started to dust off a few strands of hair, then stopped, pulling the hairs off and twisting them in her fingers. She stood there, staring thoughtfully at the hairstrands in her hand.

"Something wrong?" Fran asked, straightening from where she was pulling the sheets away from the bed.

Scully started to say something, then shut her mouth with a snap. She tilted her head slightly, staring more closely at the hair. She patted her pocket, where the baggie containing Samantha Mulder's lock of hair rested. Finally, she looked up. "Do you have a microscope?"

"Silly question. This *is* a hospital, small as it is. Why?"

She extracted the baggie and held up both the strands of hair from the pillow and the lock of Sammie's hair. "I meant to do a comparison earlier." She frowned at the hand holding the strands. "Something doesn't feel right."

"Sensitive fingers. You oughta be a doctor."

Scully grinned in reply.

"C'mon."



Mulder guided the car into the driveway, turned off the ignition, and pulled a flashlight out of his pocket. "Ready?" he asked.

The girl in Karen's lap nodded solemnly, looking up at Mulder with huge eyes. Mulder smiled at her and opened his door.

At the front door, he unlocked the lock and let them into the house. The house was silent, chilled, and musty, having been closed up since the end of the summer season. Except for when Brad Olsen had found the girl wandering here. Once inside, Mulder crouched down in front of the girl and asked softly, "Do you remember where you were when got here?"

She nodded silently, her eyes large and curiously mature.

"Can you show me?"

She nodded again. "Now?"

"Now."



While Scully examined samples of the girl's hair alongside samples of Mulder's sister's hair under the microscope, the phone rang, and Fran left her in the lab to answer it in her office.

"All right, Fran, April Fool's was weeks ago – what's the deal?" demanded a surly masculine voice on the other end of the line.

"Marc. What the hell are you talking about?" Fran asked, settling into her chair and lifting her feet onto her desk. The man on the phone was Marc Kammenstein, her friend at Massachusetts General Hospital doing the DNA profile tests.

"I'm talkin' about the sample you sent me – what's it from, an orangutan?"

"Look, I know there are some oddities in the blood, but –"

"Oddities! C'mon, Fran, come clean –"

Fran slid her feet off the desk and leaned forward in her chair, frowning. "Wait. I sent you a blood sample taken from an eight-year-old girl who was found wandering around the site of an alleged UFO abduction 22 years ago. The girl looks exactly like the girl who disappeared – exactly the way she looked 22 years ago. I admit it's weird, but I ran preliminary tests on a similar sample here, and all I found was increased lymphocytes and decreased white cells. What did you find?"

Marc was silent for a long time, long enough for Fran to prompt, "Marc, are you there?"

"Yeah, Fran. I'm here. I'm gonna fax the results to you and you can tell me if what you tested is human. *Homo sapiens*, I mean."

"Marc, you're scaring me ..."

"I'm scaring myself. Look at the results and call me back. I'm sending it through now," he added, and she could hear the line to her own fax ringing in the reception area, stereoed with the sound of electronic connection from the opposite end. "And Fran?"

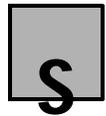
"Yeah?" she asked, watching the fax extrude from the fax machine through the open door connecting her office to the reception area.

"You have any kind of weapon – a gun, mace, anything out there?"

"I've got myself a pair of FBI agents, actually. Why?"

"Because if what I think I see in this test is true, you've got one hell of a potential problem on your hands. You make sure you keep those agents close while you're working with that ... girl? And call me back."

"Sure, Marc. Bye," she added, her attention focussing on the document dropping into her receive tray. She hung up the phone and walked out to the fax machine, picking up the papers and scanning them quickly. Then she grew impatient for the remaining pages to transmit, because the picture the data painted was a frightening one.



Scully snapped off the light on the microscope in disgust. She bagged the samples and labelled them and, stuffing them in her pocket, left the lab to find Fran. She nearly collided with the doctor as Fran rushed through the door to the lab.

"The girl's hair is artificially colored – dyed," Scully told her, just as Fran blurted, "This kid's got 56 chromosomes."

"What?" they demanded in unison. Fran shook her head and shoved the fax printout at Scully. "Read this," she ordered.

Scully read through the report quickly, her eyes widening with alarm. "Extra chromosomes at 4, 5, 12, 16 and 22 ... oh, my God," she breathed in horror.

"You recognize this chromosomal pattern?" Fran said in disbelief. "What is it?"

Scully's mouth worked soundlessly for a moment, then she shook her head. "I've got to make a phone call first. I've got to confirm this –"

"So call already," Fran agreed, making shooing motions with her hands.

"You call Brad – have him go out to Mulder's house," she ordered as she punched the numbers into her cellular phone. "And call Mulder on his cellular," she added, reeling off the number. Fran ran back to her office to make the calls. Scully held the phone against her ear with her shoulder as she grabbed her purse and pulled out her gun and arm holster.

Scully was buckling the holster on when she said, "I'd like to speak to the warden, please. Yes, I know it's Sunday, but this is an emergency. I'm Special Agent Dana Scully of the

Washington Bureau." She continued with her security clearance, and the special clearance she and Mulder had received in order to visit the Whiting Institute for the Criminally Insane last year. The man at the end of the line made respectful noises, and then put her on hold. She pulled her weapon out of the holster and checked the rounds while she was waiting. Satisfied that all was in order, she slid the weapon back into its berth, and reached for her coat.

"Agent Scully," greeted a husky, male voice on the other end. "I am Warden Thompson. What can I do to assist the Bureau?"

"Warden Thompson, there are three inmates in your facility, products of the Litchfield Experiments – Eve 6, Eve 9 and Eve 10."

"Ah. There *were*. Eve 6 is still here, but Eve 9 and Eve 10 were broken out of the facility several months ago." He paused, and Scully felt the floor go out from under her. She maneuvered herself to a chair and sat down. The Warden's voice dropped to a confidential tone. "Quite honestly, Agent Scully, it's a disgrace. The previous warden and the security staff were reprimanded and replaced. In fact, several of them face criminal prosecution. I only took over about a week ago. You see, there was a cover-up. Two guards were killed, and another critically wounded – she may never walk again. The escape was not reported, and was only discovered during a snap inspection. As you know," he added, and she knew he was consulting the file on the capture of the two psychotic, genetically-engineered eight-year-olds from the way he spoke, "these 'girls' are extremely dangerous. You and Agent ... ah, Mulder, are among the few to survive contact with them from the outside world."

"So they're free. Well, Warden, I think they may be on Martha's Vineyard. And at least one of them may be with Agent Mulder right now."

Thompson was silent. When at last he spoke again, there was steel in his voice, a voice confident in its authority. "I'll contact the appropriate authorities, Agent Scully. There'll be a squad at the ferry dock on the mainland. And I think air support to Martha's Vineyard would not be too extreme a response, don't you think?"

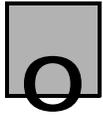
"You're right, sir, I don't. We've called the local law enforcement officials, and I think I'd better join them. Tina and Cindy have every reason to wish Mulder harm."

"I agree, Agent Scully. Good luck."

Scully severed the connection and stuffed the cellular phone into the pocket of her coat. Fran was shrugging her own coat on as she came out of her office. "No answer on Mulder's phone – he's probably in the house and didn't bring it in with him. But Brad's on his way. I had to call around to find him, but he's calling up back-up from Edgartown and a couple of other towns here on the island." She paused to drop something into her medical bag, then snapped it shut, looking at Scully expectantly. "You ready?"

"I can't take you with me –"

"You can't get there without me – it's my car."



When Owen had turned the electricity off once the summer season had ended, although the boiler was on a separate circuit to ensure some heat had kept the pipes from freezing and bursting during the long winter. As a result, Mulder played his flashlight on the stairs to light the way, despite the fact that outside, it was mid-afternoon. Karen Jenkins trailed behind Mulder and the girl, glancing nervously over her shoulder. In the lead, "Samantha" trudged up the stairs silently. All three had kept their coats on, and their breaths created little puffs of fog as they breathed.

The house was silent, save for the subtle squeaks and groans typical of old buildings, and the soft footfalls on the carpeted stairs. At the head of the stairs, the girl stopped, staring into space. Mulder stepped up behind her, with Karen still standing a few steps down.

"What is it?" Mulder asked softly.

The girl raised an arm and pointed. Following the direction of her finger, Mulder looked up, seeing the door to the bedroom he'd shared with his sister as a boy. Suppressing an involuntary shudder, he put a hand on the girl's shoulder.

"It that where you were when the policeman found you?"

The girl shook her head. Then she answered, "Downstairs. Where the candles are."

Ah. That explained the "lights" that Owen had seen. "What's in there?"

"That's where the men from the clouds left me."

Men from the clouds. Not "cloud men." The phrase caused a shiver to wriggle up Mulder's spine. Taking his hand away from the girl's shoulder, he shifted the flashlight to that hand, and slid his right hand into his coat, feeling for his gun. Closing his hand around the butt of the weapon, he said, "Why don't we go look at the room?"

The girl hung back, shaking her head. Reluctantly, Mulder let go of his grip on his gun, and placed his hand on her shoulder again. "You're not alone, now. We won't let anything hurt you."

"Promise?" she asked, looking up at him with wide, trusting eyes.

"Promise," he replied with a smile. "Cross my heart and hope to die," he added, crossing his heart with the hand holding the flashlight. Light danced in quick arcs across the walls and ceiling, and he chuckled softly, returning the flash to a steady level. The girl favored him with a giggle, and Karen grinned. "Okay?"

"Okay."

Mulder walked up to the door and turned the knob, his eyes closing from old practice; with a start he reminded himself that if she were truly Sammie, he needn't worry about that old ritual of closing his eyes as he went into the room, hoping she'd be there in bed when he opened them.

The door opened silently; Owen had kept the hinges well-oiled over the years. Mulder shone the flashlight into the room as the girl came up behind him, placing her hands on the door jamb and peering inside. "See? Nobody there."

She looked up at him again and smiled. He stepped into the room, followed by the girl. And just as Karen was about to follow, the door slammed shut in her face.



ran slammed down on the accelerator and her Explorer roared out of the hospital parking lot. As she whirled the steering wheel to bring the vehicle onto the road, Scully was picking up the microphone to the radio.

"Brad Olsen, this is Dana Scully and Fran Kulik," she called out on the waveband Fran had indicated.

"Dana. This is Brad. Over."

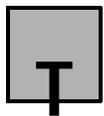
"Brad! We've learned more about the girl – she's not Mulder's sister. She's an escapee from a maximum security institution for the criminally insane. She almost certainly has accomplices in the area. They are to be considered extremely dangerous. Over."

"What? A little girl –"

"That little girl is responsible for the deaths of at least two people, and she and her ... sister ... attempted to kill both Mulder and myself several months ago. We're responsible for their capture and incarceration. Over."

"Right. Edgartown PD are on their way. I'll relay the news. Out."

Scully replaced the microphone in its cradle and balled her hands into fists, willing the Explorer to move faster.



he dark-haired woman stepped from behind the door, the revolver in her hand trained steadily on Mulder's chest. He looked at her, and smiled faintly, nodding. He glanced back at the young girl, the girl with his sister's face, with her back pressed against the door. Outside, he could hear Karen banging on the door, calling his name.

"Let me guess. Eve 8?"

The woman smiled, a harsh, narrow-eyed smile. "That's what they called me at Litchfield. None of us had *real* names – we were just pieces of the genetic puzzle to them. A puzzle they've been trying to figure out for over thirty years. But you know all that – you talked with Eve 6."

"Your sister."

"Mmm." She motioned with the gun toward the small bed shoved against the wall. "Have a seat. The reunion's not over quite yet."

The closet opened slowly, and a young girl with shoulder-length brown hair, big eyes and protruding ears stepped out, smiling a predatory smile.

"Tina?" Mulder guessed.

"Cindy, actually," the woman known as Eve 8 said. "That's Tina there," she added, indicating the girl by the door.

"Hello, Agent Mulder," Tina said, her voice changing from the echo of Samantha to her own voice.

"Hi, Tina. So the hypnotic regression was all a fake. I take it you can't be hypnotized?"

It was Eve 8 who answered. "Really, Agent Mulder – we're far too intelligent for that."

Mulder favored her with a sour smile and turned back toward Tina. "So how did you know what my sister sounded like? There aren't any recordings of her."

Tina smiled enigmatically. Then she said chillingly, in unison with Cindy Reardon, "We just knew."



Brad Olsen's black and white spun into the Mulder driveway next to Scully's car, kicking up gravel and dust. Checking the safety on his firearm, he turned off the ignition, and picked up the microphone on his police radio. He checked in quickly with the dispatcher, informing him of his position and his intention to go into the house. Then he unclipped his safety belt, and got out of the car, crouching low and keeping Scully's car between him and the house.

In the road, he could hear another vehicle pulling to the side of the road just a few feet away from the driveway. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Fran Kulik's Explorer come to a jarring stop, and Fran and Scully got out, both dropping low to the ground to keep out of direct line of fire from the house. They hurried up to meet him.

"Anything?" Scully asked, holding her gun at the ready.

Olsen shook his head. "Just got here. No sign of anyone outside."

Scully expelled a slow breath. "Right. We're looking for two girls, both eight, the phony Samantha and her ... sister. And probably a woman in her mid-forties, 5'8", 135 pounds, dark hair. All three are unusually strong. They are extremely dangerous." She paused. "Are we going to wait for backup?"

Brad looked over his shoulder at the road. Another black and white was coming up the road, parking a little ways up from the house. "Looks like they're here. I'll brief them. Fran – go back to the car," Brad added, shaking his head with exasperation as he got up to go over to the other police officers.

Fran shook her head violently. "Sorry. I'm in this for the long haul. Besides," she added, grinning and extracting something from her medical bag, "I've got my own weapon." She

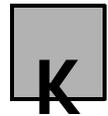
held up two syringes filled with clear liquid. "Fast-acting sedative. I wield a mean needle, and you know it, Brad."

Scully had to chuckle at that. To each his or her own.

Brad wasn't gone long, and returned to the two women crouching by the car. "They'll watch the outside of the house, keep an eye on the road. We'll be going in."

"You know the layout —"

"I'll take the back. Here," he added, fishing keys out of his pocket. "I keep a set to be able to check on the place this time of year — that's the front door key," he pointed out, removing the key and handing it to Scully. "Let's go."



Karen Jenkins stood outside the closed door, pounding it with her fists. She could hear the murmur of voices — adult and child — on the other side of the door, but she couldn't make out words. Like many older houses, the Mulder house was built with solid materials. Finally, she stopped hitting the door and stood there staring at it a moment. "What am I doing?" she asked herself. She shook her head and turned to go back down the stairs, to see if the phone had been turned on yet. If not, she'd go out to the street and flag someone down. Battering her hands to pulp didn't seem to be doing any good, and she couldn't afford to damage those hands.

She was halfway down the stairs when she heard the click of a key in the front door. She glanced frantically left and right, then scurried down the last few stairs and threw herself into the living room to the right of the stairs. The door opened, and a nasty-looking gun slipped through the opening, held in the hand the other FBI agent, Scully. She slid into the house silently, followed by Fran Kulik. Karen relaxed and came out of hiding. Scully's gun whipped up, then immediately dropped when Scully recognized her. Karen hurried over to them and quickly told them what she'd seen on the second floor.

"There's definitely someone else in there with them — it sounded like a woman. I couldn't make out any words."

"Thanks, Karen," Scully told her, patting her on the arm. "Go out and get into Fran's truck, okay? Brad's coming in the back — we'll take care of this."

Brad slipped around the corner at that moment, nodding. Karen didn't waste any time getting out of the house; the number of guns was increasing, and so was her fear level.

Scully nodded at the stairs, and Brad indicated agreement. He took the lead, with Scully and Kulik edging up behind him.



"The girls prefer their own method," Eve 8 was explaining. "But I doubt very seriously we could convince you to drink a glass of foxglove, isn't that right, Agent Mulder?"

Mulder snorted agreement.

"So, I'm afraid it's the direct approach for you," she commented, raising the gun up to point

directly at his heart.

"Just a minute – why?" he demanded, and the upward arc of the revolver in Eve 8's hand halted.

"Why what?"

"Why all this – the masquerade, the timing ..." he looked at the girl who looked like his sister, "the plastic surgery – everything?"

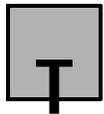
Eve 8 seemed genuinely surprised by the question. "Why, punishment, of course." At the look of incomprehension on Mulder's face, she shook her head. "You don't understand, do you?" her voice was incredulous. "We are superior to you ... genetic accidents. The 'plastic surgery' as you call it – a genetic compound we developed as a team, moldable, pliable – and reversible. Beyond anything your best scientists have developed – or will develop for at least a generation or more. We're so far in advance of your kind. We don't belong in institutions, we can't be judged by your rules. They simply don't apply," she added with total conviction.

"So you ... declare war on us ... *genetic accidents*?" he demanded.

"Starting with you," the girl once known as Cindy Reardon said simply. "You put us away."

"And you have to be punished for that," added Tina. The sight of some ... thing ... that looked like his sister sent a jolt of pain through him.

"I think you've delayed us long enough, Agent Mulder. Your friends are making their way up the stairs – oh, yes, I can hear them through this lovely old solid door, even when you can't. Agent Scully can wait. But you ... your time has come. Now." Calmly, she pulled the trigger while the girls looked on, smiling.



he gunshot tore through the hush in the stairway, and Scully would swear later that she felt the thud of a body falling to the floor through her feet. Then a crash, the sound of glass breaking, and sudden silence.

"Shit!" Brad swore, rushing at the door and leaping into a flying kick. The door shuddered and held. "Damn. I've always wanted to do that –"

"Don't you have a key?" Fran demanded, then Scully pointed her gun and shot pointblank at the locking mechanism. With a nod to Olsen to cover her, she stood against the lefthand door jamb and turned the knob, throwing open the door. Then she pivoted rapidly into the room, holding her gun steadily out ahead of her.

A stiff breeze blew in through the remains of the window, flapping the shredded curtains. From outside, they could hear the sound of a car being started up then accelerating rapidly out onto the road, and the voices of men shouting; moments later, another car roared out onto the road.

Scully's attention was immediately riveted on the still form of Mulder lying on the floor,

blood seeping freely from a wound in his left shoulder, only inches from his heart.

He opened his eyes and smiled weakly. "Don't let them get away, Scully," he whispered.

"Brad – see if you can catch them! Fran!" Olsen was already racing down the stairs, taking them two at a time.

"Way ahead of you, Dana," Fran told her, dropping down to examine Mulder, her bag dropped at her side. To Mulder, she said, "Well, I always wanted to get you into bed, Mulder, but this isn't exactly what I had in mind."

Mulder chuckled softly, turning his head slightly to look at Scully. "Dance lessons came in handy ... did a little twist ..."

Scully smiled faintly. Trust Mulder to make a joke out of the move that surely had saved his life. "Hang on, Mulder. We'll get them," she told him, brushing his hair back from his forehead.

"The Eves ..."

"I know. Help's on the way."

Brad Olsen was on the radio to the Steamship Authority office in Vineyard Haven, outlining the problem. He'd received a radio call from the men he'd left on duty outside the house, and they'd called in the license number of the car, and the approximate direction they'd taken. He'd already passed the information to his peers in Edgartown and other towns on the island, sending out an all-points-bulletin. He'd also called for an ambulance for Mulder.

In the meantime, the net was closing.

Mulder's injury was not a inconsequential one, but with care, he'd recover full use of the arm. Fran patched him up as well as she could for the moment, and she and Scully helped him down the stairs to the car. The ambulance was just pulling up to the house when they came through the door. Fran got into the ambulance with Mulder, while Scully hung back reluctantly to talk with Brad.

"Steamship Authority promises they'll check all passengers. We got their license number, and I passed on their descriptions. They said there's a chopper coming across from the mainland, too."

So, Thompson was as good as his word. She hoped it would be enough.

Eve 8 pulled the car over to the side of the road and stopped. Leaving the safety brake off, she told the girls to get out, and then pushed the car toward the verge. Slowly, the car slid off the roadway and into the brush. She smiled with satisfaction, then nodded to the girls. Ahead lay the Manuel Correllus State Forest. Nodding to her companions, she pushed off, accelerating rapidly to a run; the girls loped alongside her easily, and they covered ground quickly.

Before long, they arrived at a small cove along the northern coast of Martha's Vineyard. Slipping and sliding in the sand, they made their way to a tarp-covered boat. Ripping the tarp away, she revealed a small boat with an outboard motor. The girls climbed in and she shoved the boat off the sand into the water, then leapt in. Within moments, the motor was running, and they were in the Vineyard Sound headed toward Naushon Island and eventually the mainland. Happy faces turned away from the wind to smile at her.

"W

hat do you mean, nothing?" Scully demanded.

"We found the car in the woods near the state forest. They must have gotten away on foot —"

"And how'd they get off the island?"

"This *is* an island, Agent Scully — there're a hundred places they could have hidden a boat —"

Scully threw her arms up in disgust. "Keep me informed," she added sourly and went back into Mulder's room.

M

ulder looked up wanly, his face pale against the pillow. An IV drip led into his arm, and his shoulder was thickly padded with bandages. The look on Scully's face told him that the capture had failed. He closed his eyes and sighed.

"Mulder, I'm sorry. They ditched the car and apparently got off the island by boat."

"It's probably how they got on the island," he agreed, opening his eyes and looking at her.

She licked her lips and frowned. "I'm going to contact the Boston and Providence Bureaus. See what they can do."

"They won't be able to do anything. We had our chance. They got away." He considered for a moment, then added, "They despise us, Scully. Not just you and me. All of us. They call us 'genetic accidents.' They've just declared war on *homo sapiens*."

"So what are they? *Homo superior*?"

He nodded. "At least they think so. She had every intention of killing me — exterminating a lesser lifeform. If I hadn't moved a little just as she pulled the trigger ..."

"Score one for accidents, Mulder," Scully pointed out. "The war's not over."

R

oscoe Breskin called later in the afternoon — the same day, Mulder was shocked to realize — with news of access made to Mulder's files. Mulder listened to Breskin's report in silence, nodding.

"You want me to send a squad out there?" Breskin asked.

Mulder thought about it, and finally told Breskin, "No. I can guarantee they've moved on already."

"You okay, buddy?"

Mulder had to smile. He had two pints of someone else's blood in him, and he was hooked up to a tube. Thank God Fran hadn't insisted on catherizing him! "Yeah. I'll be fine. I'm not going to be able to get out in time to be in work tomorrow, and Scully's coordinating the mop-up here. Could you ...?"

"You got it. You know you'll never get reimbursement on this, pal. You didn't put the right paperwork through."

Chuckling, he replied, "That's okay. It started out as personal business anyway." Saying goodbye to his friend and colleague, Mulder turned off the cellular phone and laid his head back on the pillow. Started personal. Got personal. *Was* personal.



BI HEADQUARTERS
WASHINGTON, D.C.
APRIL 27, 1994

Mulder entered the squad room and stopped by Roscoe Breskin's office. His arm was in a sling, and he was still stiff, but he'd managed to convince Fran Kulik to let him return to Washington. Once there, he'd insisted on returning to work. Scully had returned the day after the Eves had escaped. Roscoe was glad to see him.

"Hey, Mulder! How you feelin'?" the tall, balding agent asked, standing up and coming around his desk. He extended his hand to Mulder, who looked at it a moment before putting down his briefcase and the shopping bag he carried, and grasping it in a handshake.

"Okay, Roscoe," Mulder told him, nodding. "I wanted to stop by and thank you for your help."

Roscoe waved the thanks away. "Hey, you'll do the same for me sometime – I'll make sure of it!" He flashed a grin, then frowned in puzzlement. "Remember what I told you about not getting reimbursed on this one? Well, I was wrong. Word came down that you and Scully are supposed to enter all your expenses for reimbursement. Seems you would have been called out on it anyway, you just jumped the gun – as usual. How do you do it, Mulder?"

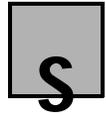
"Just lucky, I guess, Roscoe," Mulder replied, equally puzzled. "You know who the order came down from?"

Breskin shook his head. "It came through Blevins' office. But where it started ..." he shook his head again. His face grew somber and he laid a hand on Mulder's good right arm. "Scully gave me some more background, Mulder. I'm really sorry it didn't turn out ... the way you wanted it to."

Mulder nodded quickly. "Yeah. It was a long shot. Sort of like a ... space shot," he added with a faint smile.

Roscoe grinned in reply. "You let me know if ... well, if I can help. And don't forget those tickets! Okay?"

"Okay."



scully was already in the office, typing up her notes. She looked up when Mulder came in, and smiled. "I didn't think Fran would be able to keep you still for very long. How's the arm?"

"Okay." He looked at her, obviously uncomfortable. "Scully ..."

"We got orders to put our expenses in after all. Apparently Warden Thompson spoke to Blevins, and Brad put in an official request for FBI assistance," she said quickly.

"Yeah, Roscoe told me. Look —"

"Mulder. I'm sorry it wasn't Sammie. I wanted to believe it, too," she added gently.

Mulder smiled at that. "Opening yourself to extreme possibility?" he asked.

She pursed her lips, then smiled. "Wishful thinking, maybe. Are you going to be okay?"

He came over to her desk and put the shopping bag down on it. "Yeah, sure. Why shouldn't I be?"

She shook her head. "Because ... this started 22 years to the day since Sammie disappeared. Because ... well, I don't think I'd be okay. You sure you should be back at work already?"

He looked at her a long moment before replying. Then he nodded. "How else are we going to catch up with them? And besides — I love this job." His expression softened, and he added, "I need to work, Scully. Just like you did."

She considered this, remembering how she had told him the same thing following her father's death, then nodded. "What's in the bag?"

"Ah. Well," he said, reaching into the bag, "I had some visitors while I was in Fran's care. You remember Amy?"

"Ms. Chicken Pot Pie," she replied with a chuckle.

Mulder lifted out foil-wrapped parcel and put it on the table.

"Oooh, yum," Scully said, eyeing it with arched eyebrows.

"And ..." he pulled out another foil-wrapped object and placed it in front of her. "Cranberry

creme pie. A New England specialty. Gift from Helen."

"Oh, that sounds great. Are we dining in today, Mulder?" she asked with a twinkle.

"Dessert, anyway."

She chuckled and turned back to her computer. "Field notes?" he asked, a slight edge to his voice.

"Field notes." She glanced at him, then back to the screen, and read off, "'Despite the deeply personal nature of the case, Agent Mulder was the first to raise suspicions about the identity of the girl.'"

"You did some fine work up there, too, Scully."

"As did Roscoe, as did Marc Kammenstein at Mass General, as did Fran. As did Brad Olsen. A team effort. That's quite a group of friends you have, Mulder."

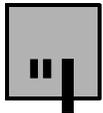
"Yeah. Sometimes it's worth going home again." He looked back at the notes displayed on the computer screen. "Which file are you going to put that in?"

Scully glanced at the screen, pursing her lips. "Both."

"Yeah. We didn't manage to close an X-File, just reopen two old ones."

"That's better than opening a new one ... isn't it?"

The expression Mulder gave Scully told her he wasn't too sure. It would take time to get over this one.



heard what happened," the older man said, seating himself next to Mulder in the bleachers around the ballfield. "This is the first opportunity I've had to get in touch."

"I know. I just got back last night. But you called while I was in New England. About them, wasn't it?" He fished a sunflower seed from his pocket, cracked the shell, and popped the seed into his mouth.

The man Mulder thought of as "Deep Throat" nodded. "Your partner learned most of it from Warden Thompson."

"But not all?"

"Not all," Deep Throat agreed. He tilted his head back, drawing a deep breath.

"Apparently our friend, Eve 8, has been doing some work for one of your sister agencies. Genetic experiments. Government funded."

"And you knew about it?"

"I knew about the research, not who the scientist was. Brilliant stuff, frightening stuff. And last week, she disappeared without a trace. All the research disappeared, too. A technician, her assistant on the project, was killed. And a rather effective and far-reaching virus was placed in the mainframe. Trashed five years of work, brought the project to a complete halt, back to square one."

"Let me guess ... a genetic compound for regenerating tissue."

Deep Throat nodded thoughtfully.

"It makes it possible for them to change their appearance at will. They could be anywhere. They could be anyone."

"Yes."

Mulder tossed a sunflower shell toward the ballfield, his expression sour. "They're out there. Waiting." He stood slowly, painfully.

"Yes."

Without a word, Mulder walked away.