

TEZCUCO

Rating: NC-17

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Disclaimer: They're not mine. They're 1013's, but they should be David's.

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Distribution: Ask me.

Time Span/Setting: Part Three of a series that began shortly before Patient X/TRATB, with part two (Music City Blues) beginning shortly after. Previous series entries are "The Garden District Murders" and "Music City Blues".

Thanks To: All my pals on the various email lists, especially those Kalifornia women.

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Summary: Mulder is having nightmares of an old enemy he believes to be dead. A woman he believed to be a vampire. Is she dead? Will Mulder survive finding the answers he needs?

Author's note: Tezcuco is a real plantation in Louisiana, but I have taken the liberty of re-locating it. I know nothing of the actual house or the surrounding geography, I simply like the name Tezcuco, which means "Resting Place". I found it to be apropos for the vampire character of this story. I hope the owners would not take offense at my borrowing the name.

Chapter 1

Scully's Apartment

June 15, 1998, 3:15 a.m.

He lay on his back, naked, as fingers trailed down, down, down.....

His back arched as the fingers of one of the hands found their target, slipping through the hair around his painfully hard cock to grasp its base. Another hand found his balls and rolled them in their sack, and still another twirled around his nipples, then down to caress the muscles of his abdomen.....

The hands left him as he opened his eyes, confused, disappointed. He gazed wildly around the room, aroused and desperate, seeking out who had been touching him. The room was dark, full of cobwebs and shadowed corners. In one of the corners, something moved and eyes glowed red in the darkness.

"Please....." he whispered, not sure what he was begging for--completion or escape.

Escape? He tried to bring his arms down from where they rested on the pillow above his head and found that they were bound.

"N-no! No, this can't be....." he gasped as he realized that he was tied to a small, child-sized bed like the one in.....

He pulled and his hands came free easily. There was a deep chuckle, strangely androgynous, from the corner behind him. He jumped up from the bed and whirled to face his captor.

There was no one.

"W-who are you? What do you want?" he yelled into the darkness.

No answer but for a wet finger to trail down his spine to the crack of his ass, a hand cupping one of the rounded cheeks.

Again, he spun around to face his tormentor.

Again, there was no one there.

Then he saw a door in one of the walls. He ran to it, twisting and pulling on the knob.

Locked.

Another chuckle, this time from right behind him, breath warm on his bare shoulder. Sheer terror prevented him from turning this time. Instead he flung himself against the door, pounding with his fists and screaming to be let out.

Something, someone, pressed into him from behind, crushing him against the door. His penis ground painfully against the wood as he struggled to free himself.

With warm breath on his neck and strange hands on his hips, he slowly ceased struggling. A scratchy wet tongue slid over the pulse in his neck as it pounded beneath his flesh and he whimpered in shame as his cock hardened once again.

"No....." he whispered, as a tear slipped from one eye and ran down his face. He pressed his forehead against the door and gathered the courage to face his captor.

He pushed hard against the door and the weight on his back fell away. He turned and saw that he was alone.

He turned back to the door and twisted the handle. It opened easily.

Rushing out of his prison and into an eerily familiar room, he could hear music and laughter in the distance.

"Mulder! Thank God, I've been searching everywhere for you."

He turned his head and saw Scully hurrying into the room. Embarrassed, he went to cover himself, but found he was dressed in blue jeans and a navy polo shirt, a strand of green, purple and gold beads around his neck.

"Scully, I.....what.....?" he babbled, confused.

"Fox....." she said as she grabbed the beads and pulled his head down toward her waiting lips. She devoured his lips, sucking and biting.

He gasped as she drew blood and began licking it. His mind reeled. It was just like.....

She pushed him down onto the sofa and straddled his chest. Pulling aside the collar of his shirt, she growled and began licking his neck.

He began to struggle. It was too much like....like.....

"Scully, let me up, please." She didn't seem to hear him. "Scully! Please!" A shriek tore from his mouth as her teeth scraped his neck and he pushed her up away from his throat.

"I will possess you entirely, Fox, do you hear me? Entirely."

Her laugh as he continued to struggle beneath her sounded like....it....his body went cold with terror. As he watched, her face shifted. He began to scream.....

A scream startled her from a sound sleep. Scully turned over to find

Mulder struggling in tangled sheets, crying and moaning.

"Mulder," she said, gently shaking his shoulder as she tried to wake him. It broke her heart to hear him scream like he was being tortured. He probably *was* being tortured.

"Noooo....not you, not you....." he cried, in anguish.

"Mulder, please wake up. It's a dream, Mulder, just a dream." She brushed the sweaty hair from his forehead as his eyes slowly opened.

When he saw Scully, he quickly scooted away from her, landing on the floor with a loud thud.

"Mulder, it's me, Scully," she said, her heart in her throat at the terror on his face. She felt as if it were being ripped from its moorings when he backed away from the bed, pulling the sheet with him to huddle against the wall. He looked at her with large, glassy eyes, still partially asleep.

She did the one thing that seemed to work in the past. She turned on the light.

He blinked at her sleepily and she could see him come fully awake.

"You okay now?" she asked gently.

He took a deep shuddering breath and slowly blew it out between his lips. Then she noticed it.

"Mulder, your lip....."

His hand flew to his mouth and his fingers came away bloody. She could hear him swallow from her spot on the bed.

She started to get out of bed to help him but he threw his hand out to ward her off. The last thread that was holding her heart in place ripped and it shattered when it hit the floor.

He's afraid of me. Even with the lights on this time.

He gazed at her warily as he got up and, grabbing a pair of boxers, went into the bathroom, shutting and locking the door behind him.

She got out of bed and, pulling on her own boxers and a tee shirt, went over to the door. Leaning her head against it, she placed the palms of both hands flat against the surface, aching to touch him, help him.

"I love you, Mulder," she whispered. Then she shuffled tiredly into the living room and turned on the television.

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JustadreamJustadreamJustadream.....

It seemed so real.....

Then he looked at his cut lower lip and wondered.

He heard the television click on in the living room, and his heart thudded painfully in his chest. He always felt horribly torn after one of these "episodes." Afraid of her, yet wanting her. Sure that he wanted to stay here with her, yet needing to escape.

He took a deep breath and opened the door. He shuffled into the living room and up to the couch.

"I'm sorry," he said, not quite able to meet her eyes.

She sighed heavily. "Mulder, you have nothing to be sorry for. I understand what you're going through." She paused for a moment. "I just want to help you, but I don't know how," she finished sadly.

"You do, Scully. You do help me. I couldn't have gotten through any of this without you."

"Mulder, they're getting worse. Surely you realize that."

He nodded wordlessly, fearfully. He laid down on the couch, his head in her lap. She began to run her fingers through his hair and massage his scalp, soothing him, completing the ritual. He wouldn't sleep again tonight. He always tried to get Scully to go back to bed, but she wouldn't leave him alone. She seemed to sense exactly what he needed from her. A connection on *his* terms.

"Mulder?"

"Yeah, Scully?"

"I...I think you need to go to the doctor a little more frequently...Wait!" she said, when he started to object. "Hear me out."

"All right."

"The nightmares are getting worse. You were bleeding this time when you woke up. I turned the lights on - and you still weren't sure it was me, were you?" she asked, already knowing the answer. "I'm frightened for you, Mulder. You can't go on like this."

"I can move out, if you want me to, Scully. I know this is hard on you."

"Mulder...you almost sound like you *want* to move out."

"I...I don't really."

"You aren't very convincing," she replied sadly. "I want you here with me, in my bed--in my life. But you know I won't try to force anything on you."

"I love you, Scully. I want to stay," he whispered, tears welling in his eyes. "But..."

"Am I in your dream, Mulder?"

He nodded.

"Am I hurting you?"

"Yes," he whispered. "But it's not really you."

"Is it Clarice?" she asked quietly, gently.

"I don't know," he replied, mournfully. "It could be. I...I don't want to talk about this."

He started shivering and she pulled the afghan from the back of the couch over him. He did love her, so much. Maybe she was right. He had only gone to his shrink three times in the month since they had come back from Tennessee. In the last two weeks, these new nightmares had started. They weren't like the others. These seemed very, *very* real.

"Mulder, you really do need to talk about it. You aren't sleeping nearly enough and...and I worry that this is going to drive you away from me." She sighed. "It breaks my heart when you're afraid of me, Mulder. I want to wrap my arms around you and hold you--but I'm afraid that I'll be pushing you."

"Scully--"

"I think that I need to maybe join a support group or something."

"A twelve-step program for significant others of people who've been attacked by vampires?" he asked with a small smile.

She slugged him lightly in the arm.

"There's no such thing, Mulder," she replied, falling into her comfortable role.

"*You* burned the body, Scully."

"The things I do for you," she said softly, with a slight smile playing about her lips, her fingers still carding through his hair.

"And I love you for each and every one of them," he replied, sincerely, looking up into her eyes.

She leaned over and kissed him gently, on the side of his mouth so she didn't hurt his cut lip. His fingers slipped into her hair, holding her in place.

"I *do* love you. Never doubt that." With that he got up, surprising her, and lifted her into his arms.

"Mulder!" she gasped.

"Shhhh....change in plans."

He carried her into the bedroom, deposited her gently on the bed, then crawled between her legs. He was hard as a rock instantly as he lay in the vee of her legs, kissing her gently on the mouth, pressing her into the mattress with the weight of his body. She moaned quietly when he thrust against her boxer shorts. He could feel the heat of her through the two thin layers of cotton and it spurred him on, his arousal quickly becoming unbearable, his cut lip forgotten. He pulled the shorts off her, and his own quickly followed.

He settled back between her legs, the length of his hard cock grinding against her clitoris as he kissed her hard, both hands tangled in her hair. She was panting wildly when his tongue left her mouth and trailed down to her breasts, circling her nipples lightly. She began thrusting her hips up to meet his, murmuring nonsensical pleas interspersed with his name and God's.

"Love you..." he whispered as he pushed slowly into her, "I love you, Scully." He looked into her eyes as he filled her, watching her gasp and then smile with pleasure. She bit her lower lip as she thrust her hips and he lost all measure of control.

He spent the rest of the morning making love to her with a passionate abandon that he hadn't felt since the nightmares had started.

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Scully stood in the doorway of her bedroom, staring wistfully.

Mulder was sprawled on his back on the bed, sound asleep and completely naked. Her eyes flicked over his bed head, down to the broad shoulders and the muscled abdomen. As was usual, her eyes paused longer on his groin. She couldn't believe she had waited so long to put something that *impressive* to great use. She still felt a delicious throbbing between her legs thinking about their early morning activities. Before last night, he hadn't had the strength for anything other than slow and easy lovemaking because of what had happened in Tennessee. Since the nightmares began, he had cut back on even that.

Last night, everything was different. It had always been great. The man really knew how to make her scream. He could use nothing but his index finger and turn her into an incoherent mass of jelly. But last night?

Incredible. Intense. Hard and fast. She felt hot just remembering it. Maybe he was getting better, regardless of the nightmares.

"Interested in anything you see?"

She jumped at the sound of his voice and swore inwardly when she felt a blush rising in her cheeks. She looked down at her neatly pressed suit and then back up at him.

"Where are you going?" he asked quietly, watching her.

She moved over to sit on the edge of the bed and intertwined her fingers with his. She desperately wanted to stay here with him, but.....

"Don't you remember? I have to go to that conference in Florida for the week."

"Ugh. I was hoping if I ignored it, you wouldn't go," he replied with a frown.

She didn't care for the look on his face. He seemed vaguely upset.

"Will you be okay?" she asked gently.

"I'm a big boy, Scully, I'll be fine," he replied, less than convincingly. She looked at him for a minute, debating.

"Will you make an extra appointment with your doctor? Maybe the nightmares will go away if you talk them out."

"I don't think they will--but I'll give it a try."

She was surprised--and confused--by that response.

"Mulder? What do you mean you don't think they will? Is there something you aren't telling me?"

He looked at her curiously. "I-I don't really know what I meant. What could I not be telling you?"

She smiled ruefully. "I don't know, Mulder. I just thought your response was odd."

"I'm an odd guy, Scully," he said with a smile.

"Well, thank God for that. Do you want me to cancel? I can--"

"No, Scully, really. I'll be fine. They're just nightmares. They can't hurt me."

Yes, they can, if you don't sleep and forget to eat because of them, she thought. But she knew it was pointless to argue.

"I'm sure you have a plane to catch, Scully. And just think of it. You'll get four decent nights' sleep in a row."

She sighed. She didn't think she would sleep well at all. She had gotten used to a gangly bed hog very, very quickly. She would miss him terribly.

"Please take care of yourself, Mulder. Don't forget to eat. I asked the Lone Gunmen to keep an eye on you and report to me daily," she claimed, only partially joking. "I'll call you every night...and don't be afraid to call *me* if you need me. None of this strong, macho man crap," she said, mock lecturing him.

"You know....it turns me on when you boss me around like that...." he said, in his sleep-roughened voice. He made a grab for her, but she stood up quickly.

"I have a plane to catch and you have your first day back at work," she said sternly, but with a slight smile playing about her lips as she took in the

forlorn look on her partner's face. She grabbed him by the chin and kissed him on his delicious, talented mouth.

She was in such a hurry that she didn't notice his eyes glaze over and his body go rigid.

"Bye. I'll call you tonight," she said, grabbing her bag and heading for the bedroom door.

"B-bye....." he stuttered slightly and raised his hand in a half-hearted wave.

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Mulder was done in the shower before his heart rate returned to normal.

He stood in front of the mirror staring at himself, dazed, hands gripping the sink tightly.

What the fuck is going on here? What the hell happened back there?

It was Scully. It *was* her. It was.

I'm going crazy.

His heart started to speed up again. He shook himself, picked up his razor...and then put it back down when he realized how badly his hands were shaking. He settled for combing his hair.

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Headquarters of the Lone Gunmen
Same Day; 4:10 p.m.

tap, tap-tap-tap, tap

Langley paused to push his blond hair out of his eyes. It had been bugging the crap out of him all day and he was seriously considering a cut.

He shivered. Not that seriously.

Before he could resume typing, an alarm sounded on the computer next to him. Getting up to check on what it was, his eyes widened behind his horn-rimmed glasses.

"Frohike! Byers! Get over here!" he yelled to the other Gunmen, working in another room on a large server. He sat down and started tapping keys on the computer in order to turn the alarm off. He pulled up the full description screen just as Frohike and Byers appeared to look over his shoulders.

"Oh, shit," was Frohike's soft exclamation at what he saw.

"This can't be," replied Byers, in his soft, even tones.

"Fraid it is, dude. We never removed the alerts we placed after Mulder and Scully got back from New Orleans," said Langley.

"She's dead, Langley. Scully had her cremated."

"I better call Mulder."

TEZCUCO
Chapter 2

Headquarters of the Lone Gunmen
June 15, 1998; 5:30 p.m.

"Okay, guys. It was my first day back at work. I'm here at 5:30. If I find out that this is a plot between you and Scully to keep my hours down, I'm gonna--"

"Hold up, Mulder. We have something we really think you need to see. Um...you might wanna sit down....." Frohike fidgeted, uncomfortable in the extreme.

Mulder stared at Frohike. Then he glanced to Byers and Langley, the latter of the two not looking him in the eye. Frohike watched as his friend appeared to deflate onto the couch, the color draining from his face, hands trembling.

"Mulder? Are you okay?" he asked, mystified.

"Fine. I'm fine," he replied, softly. "What do you have?"

Frohike took a deep breath. "We had a hit on the alert we placed on the police departments in the Southeast." He mentally prepared himself for an onslaught.

"The alert?" asked Mulder quietly.

Frohike looked at his friend and tried to read the expression on his face. Mulder looked impassive and laid back, but his hands betrayed him. They were trembling, as if he knew what was coming. "The alert we inserted in the systems of police stations throughout the Southeast after.....after you were attacked by Clarice in New Orleans." Frohike watched him, but Mulder's eyes widened only slightly. Nothing else betrayed the extreme tension that Frohike could feel in him.

"Clarice is dead. Scully made sure of it. There must be a mistake," said Mulder, his calm, rational voice steady, not betraying anything of his internal conflict.

"Mulder, I checked and re-checked. I called the police department in question, after hacking their files, and they confirmed it," intoned Langley. "They had a young man, age 29, found exsanguinated in the alley behind a gay nightclub. There were signs of sexual activity." Langley fumbled for something else to say. All of the Gunmen were well aware of how tortured their friend was by this particular case.

Frohike looked closely at Mulder and didn't like what he saw. There were dark circles under his eyes, and he seemed to be holding himself very stiffly. Scully was right to be worried. Their friend was on the edge, but hiding it well. As Frohike watched, a huge yawn overcame Mulder and his eyes drooped even more. His eyes flickered, yet he remained silent.

"Mulder? Don't you have anything to say?" asked Byers quietly, also watching Mulder closely.

"Where did this happen?" Mulder asked.

"Uh....New Orleans," said Frohike, not taking his eyes off Mulder. He saw the flinch that followed the revelation, and it disturbed him even more.

"Coincidence. A copy cat. It's New Orleans--they probably have vampire wannabes crawling through the streets daily," replied Mulder, in a tone that would have convinced anyone other than his best friends. "Scully saw Clarice cremated. It can't be anything other than coincidence."

The Gunmen were quiet for a moment, watching their friend. Finally, Frohike made a decision based on his love for his friend and his promise to the red-headed half of the FBI's best pair.

"Mulder, why don't you stay here tonight? We're getting pizza," he said calmly, brooking no argument.

"That isn't necessary. I'm going back to Scully's, she'll be calling me there."

"Mulder--"

"I'm okay, Frohike. Really. If I can't sleep, I'll come back."

"We promised Scully--" Frohike said, firmly.

"I'm *fine*, Frohike. Really."

"Mulder--"

"I gotta run, boys. Thanks for the info." Mulder jumped up and dashed out the door before the Gunmen could argue with him further.

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Mulder opened his eyes in darkness. He sat up quickly, not recognizing his surroundings. A chilling breeze blew through the windowless room, causing gooseflesh to break out on his bare skin. He pulled the sheets closer around his nakedness and marveled at the contrast between the incongruous blue silk and the room itself. It was a dingy room, walls glittering and stained where moisture was seeping through and had been for years, leaving its mark on the crumbling brick. The ever-present cobwebs danced in the mysterious breeze. The bed was a four-poster mahogany monstrosity, with gargoyles and other creatures carved into the posts.

Stark fear coiled in his stomach as he dimly recognized this place, yet had no idea where he was....or who was with him. Something smelled his fear as it grew, and laughed so only Mulder could hear. That laugh, neither male nor female, was wholly terrifying. The silk whispered across his skin as he slid out of the bed. Naked or not, he had to get out of that bed before--

The hand between his shoulder blades was startling in its coldness. He wanted to flee but his legs wouldn't move. He was paralyzed. Another hand landed on his hip, then slid forward, caressing down, down to the front of his thigh and he wanted.....

No. The paralysis broke and he rushed to the suddenly apparent door, throwing himself against it, pounding with his fists.

"Scully!" His own voice echoed back to him with his scream, and mocking laughter filled the air.

"You want Scully, Fox? Then Scully you shall have....." whispered the voice.

Mulder whirled around to face his captor and found Scully, just as promised. She was dressed in a long, black velvet cloak, pulled around her to completely cover her as she flowed towards him. The clasp at her throat glittered in silver and diamonds. He was mesmerized by the shape of that clasp...a wolf's head detailed into the silver, with diamonds for eyes.

"Mulder....." she said as she reached a hand to his face. Her satin glove was cool on his hot cheek. She stepped closer and he relished the feel of the velvet on his bare skin. She bent her head and began flicking her tongue across one nipple. Mulder whimpered as his cock began to harden. She chuckled at his weakness and reached down to wrap her hand around his shaft. He gasped and thrust himself into her hand. Her hand still wrapped around him, she began backing towards the bed, pulling him with her. They reached the edge of the huge structure and she released him. She gazed at him with a barely disguised hunger and something else.....something else was in her eyes.

"Get into bed, Mulder, and lie on your back," she commanded.

The shaking started in his knees and he began to back away from her. Something....what was it? What is this? He started shaking his head slowly.

"No."

"No? Mulder, you belong to me. You are mine now," she said, her voice becoming strangely guttural.

"No, no, I'm not." Fear was back in his stomach, making it lurch and flip. He cursed the tremor that he heard in his voice.

She smiled at him benevolently. "I will possess you, body and soul. It's only a matter of time." She chuckled again, her voice deepening. "And then, Mulder? Then I will fuck you to within an inch of your life."

With the word "life," her voice was that of his captor, androgynous and terrifying. His terror grew as Scully began to shift, growing taller, hair becoming longer, and.....

He began to scream.

He sat bolt upright in Scully's bed, wild-eyed and panting. He flew out of the bed so quickly that he hit the wall hard, bruising his shoulder. The impact was enough to wake him sufficiently and he took several deep breaths trying to slow his racing heart.

Different dream, equally bad. But just a dream. Nightmare. Perfectly understandable, considering.

The details skittered away into the night and left him with a feeling of foreboding so strong that there was only one thing he could do.

He started throwing clothes into an overnight bag, and ten minutes later he was out the door, locking it behind him.

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Headquarters of the Lone Gunmen
June 16, 1998, 3:30 a.m.

"Hey Frohike, wanna play scrabble?" asked Mulder as he stumbled in the door to the lair of the Lone Gunmen. When he got a good look at his friend, Mulder realized the man had been sleeping, albeit in a flak jacket. "I--I'm sorry. I...."

"Get in here, Mulder. Let's play scrabble. I'll kick your ass."

Mulder sighed in response. He looked at his friend and saw understanding, compassion.

"I can't go to sleep."

"I understand, Mulder. Let's play--and perhaps you can give me some info on the delightful Agent Scully."

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F.B.I. Headquarters
J. Edgar Hoover Building
June 16, 1998; 9:15 a.m.

"Mulder."

"It's me."

"Hey, Scully. How's the sunshine state?"

"Hot. Hot and wet."

"Ohhh, *Scully*," he moaned, as he collapsed into his chair. "You know what I like...."

"Yes, yes, I do, Mulder," she replied such that Mulder could hear the smile on her face. "How are you doing? Seen the doctor again?"

Mulder rubbed his forehead tiredly and stifled a yawn. "Yeah, actually, I have an appointment for this afternoon."

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the phone.

"Scully?"

"Yeah, I heard you."

Mulder could hear an odd tone in her voice. "You sound surprised."

"I...I guess I am, Mulder. Are you really okay? It isn't like you to give in and go to the doctor so easily. Are they still getting worse?"

"Uh, no, Scully. I just want them to stop. I...." he trailed off as his hands started to tremble again. He clenched his fists tightly and tried to calm himself.

What in the hell is wrong with me?

"Mulder?"

"Uh-huh."

"Mulder, I'm coming home--"

"No! No, you don't have to, really, I'm okay, I stayed with the Gunmen last night and everything was fine, really," he said in one long, breathless rush.

Silence.

"Scully, I'm okay," he whispered, his heart rate slowing back to normal. He heard her sigh in resignation.

"You're sure?" she asked softly.

"Yeah. Listen, I gotta run. Call me tonight?"

"Sure...."

"Okay. Bye, Scully." He ended the phone call and laid his head on his desk, his fists clenched tightly and lying in his lap.

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The Hilton
Tampa, Florida

Scully stood staring at the phone receiver in her hand, mouth hanging open slightly.

As the shock of Mulder's abrupt disconnection wore off, small tendrils of fear started unfurling in her stomach. She pulled out her phone card and made another call.

"Lone Gunmen."

"Byers, it's Agent Scully."

"Hello, Agent Scully, what can we do for you?"

"It's about Mulder. I want to know how he's doing."

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone. "Have you called

him?" Byers finally asked.

"Yes, but I wanted *your* opinion on his condition," she replied. She heard a click as another extension picked up.

"That kinda puts us in an awkward position, don't you think, Agent Scully?" asked Langley. Scully sighed. At least they were loyal. She could hardly blame them for being less than forthcoming after what had happened to Mulder in Nashville.

Because of me, she thought with a pang of guilt.

"Langley, Byers, I'm just very worried about him," she pleaded. "He sounds exhausted and stranger than usual."

"Stranger than *usual*--" Langley started, with a slightly hostile tone. Byers cut him off.

"He really seems okay, for the most part, Agent Scully. He looks tired, but he seemed his normal self to me."

"Thanks, Byers, Langley, I appreciate it." She hung up the phone and chewed her lower lip absently.

Is it me? Am I the problem here? He was *fine* up until two weeks ago. What could have happened.....

She jumped when someone began speaking over the PA in the conference hall. She squelched her worries for the moment and headed back in for the next session.

Apartment 42, 2630 Hegal Place
Alexandria, Virginia
Same day, 9:05 p.m.

Mulder trudged through the door and into a very musty apartment. He had been back to get clothing and feed his fish, but he hadn't spent a night here since before his ill-fated trip to Nashville.

Maybe I can sleep here without the damn nightmares, he thought. He went into his bedroom and stripped down to his boxers. He drifted aimlessly, sleepily about his apartment, checking things out, before he realized that his message light was blinking. He stood there staring at it as a premonitory chill raced up his spine. When his hand reached out to press the button, it was trembling slightly.

"Mulder, where are you? I tried the office, my place, the Lone Gunmen, and your cell--which seems to be turned off. Please Mulder, I'm worried. What's going on? Call me at the hotel. Bye."

There was a mixture of emotions evident in Scully's voice that made him sorry he had turned off his cell phone. He wasn't sure why he'd done it, only that he'd had an overwhelming desire to be left alone at the time. He still did, but he called her anyway.

"Mulder?" she asked breathlessly, in place of hello.

"Yeah, Scully, it's me."

"Where have you been? I've been worried sick."

"Working. Seeing the shrink."

"Mulder, it's only your second day back--"

"I'm *fine*. I'm a grown man, Scully, I can determine how much I should or shouldn't work," he said, more harshly than he intended.

Silence.

"Ah, Scully, I'm sorry. It's just.....you're hovering, Scully, and I'm so tired....." he sighed in resignation, waiting for the explosion.

"Mulder," she said, softly, "are you avoiding me?"

That took him completely by surprise. "What--why would you say that?"

"Let's see. You weren't answering the phone at the office, your cell phone was turned off, and you weren't at my place."

"I just didn't feel like talking after my appointment, I guess."

She sighed. "Well, how did it go?"

"Scully, can we *not* talk about this now, please?"

"Mulder--" she began, in her stern, no-nonsense tone.

"Please, Scully..." he whispered, his hands clenching and un-clenching.

"Okay, I'm sorry. I'm pushing," she said, gently. "It's just that I care so much about you--"

"I know. I know you do, but it's okay. I'll be okay. Really."

"Why don't you try to get some sleep? I know you're having nightmares, but you have to get some rest--"

"I will," he said, abruptly. He realized he was taking it out on her and softened his tone. "Scully, I'm sorry--I'm just so damn tired. The doctor's appointment--it took a lot out of me."

"I understand Mulder, I do. So where are you anyway?"

"Home," he said, biting back a growl.

She sighed again. She was doing that a lot lately and Mulder wondered if she would ever *not* be frustrated with him for something. He felt a twinge of resentment at what was starting to seem like an interrogation.

"Okay, Mulder, I'll let you go so you can get some rest. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Okay. Bye, Scully."

"Goodnight, Mulder."

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click

Scully listened to Mulder hang up the phone on his end and then gently replaced the receiver on her phone. She sat on the bed staring at the phone, alone and lonely in a sterile hotel room several hundred miles from where she desperately wanted to be.

But am I wanted there? He's having nightmares that include me and I don't have a clue as to how to handle the situation.

She thought back to the time in New Orleans, right after Clarice assaulted Mulder the first time. The psychologist had said to follow Mulder's lead, that he would have to dictate how much help he wanted and how much he wanted to share with her.

That only makes sense, I suppose. And that's why he's getting angry with me. I don't know when to stop pushing him.

She thought back over their conversation. He had said the word "hovering." He had begged her to drop the subject of his therapy. He had turned off his cell phone.

Oh, crap. I've got to back off or I'm going to drive him away. I'll call him in the morning, because I said I would, but then I'll let him make the moves. Let him initiate the contact.

A pang of loneliness hit her that was stunning in its intensity. She missed him badly. Despite the fact that they had only recently intensified their relationship and he had been struggling to get over everything that had happened to him in the past months, she had rapidly adjusted to him being in her apartment and then, in her bed. After three short weeks of sharing that bed, she couldn't sleep soundly without him.

She curled up on the hotel bed and closed her eyes. She drifted back three weeks to their first time.....

They had come back from Tennessee once Mulder had been released from the hospital. She had been loath to let him go home on his own after the traumas he'd sustained. She told herself that she wanted to keep an eye on him, just for a little while. They had gotten on well, he began to bounce back. Emotionally and physically. He had stayed in her spare room....for about a week.

One night, after he woke up screaming from a nightmare, comfort had turned to something else. She had pulled away, afraid to push. Afraid that in the dark of the night, he would mistake her for Clarice if she was too aggressive. No matter how far back she pulled, he followed. Caressing and nuzzling turned to kissing and tasting. Slowly, tenderly, he seduced her. He had owned her mind, her soul, for years. That night he owned all of her and she didn't regret a moment.

She hadn't dreamt that they would sleep together so soon after everything that had happened. He had made love to her that night and every night that week. Then the new nightmares.

Her eyes popped open and she sat up, worried all over again. Looking at the clock, she saw it was late. She resolved to call Karen Kosseff first thing in the morning and get her opinion on what she should do to help him through this phase...and on what could have caused it. Post traumatic stress kept ringing through her head, but she had to be sure. She decided that if she had a few sessions with Karen it would be beneficial for both Mulder and herself.

It sure can't hurt, Dana.

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He opened his eyes in New Orleans.

There was no question in his mind of his location or that he was dreaming. It was the reality of the dream that terrified him. He was sprawling on a chaise lounge, pillows embroidered in intricate patterns behind his head and back. He raised his arm and saw that he was wearing a snow white shirt with a frilly, old-fashioned cuff. If he knew more about vintage clothing, he could have placed an age on the garment, but he didn't. Because of this lack of knowledge, he couldn't put a name to his pants. Breeches? Tight, black and velvet. His shirt was open to the waist and his chest was dotted with sweat from the oppressive heat and humidity that was quintessential New Orleans.

He gazed around the room, loath to move and seeming to lack the energy to do so. He would guess that the furnishings, couches, and low tables, were late eighteenth century, but he couldn't be sure. It was ornate and heavy, but looked new. Paintings in gilded frames adorned the walls and small, painted portraits rested in silver frames on the mantle above the fireplace in the wall behind him. Directly in front of him were a series of

open windows in a long wall. These windows served as doors, with their floor to near-ceiling construction. Beyond the windows, he could see the ornate wrought iron railing that framed the overgrown and blooming balcony. Small trees and pots with flowering plants covered the balcony, their branches and leaves swaying in a slight breeze.

The colors of the sky and the dimness of the room, combined with the heaviness of the air, told him that it was late afternoon to early evening. Dusk.

He heard the door open behind him and his heart started to pound. He tried to get up to face his captor but found himself paralyzed. He closed his eyes tightly, willing himself to wake up and now.

There was a faint tinkling sound as it approached and he cringed, sweat plastering his hair to his forehead.

"My heavens, darling! What's wrong?" asked a sweet, very feminine, voice.

His eyes popped open and he stared up in surprise at the speaker. A very beautiful, very familiar blond stood in front of him wearing what must be the goth compliment to his own outfit. A black pleated, transparent skirt (broomstick, supplied a deep recess of his brain) with a frilly, matching blouse. A black bra and panties, completing the ensemble, were visible beneath the sheer fabric. She was barefoot but the tinkling sound came from an ankle bracelet strung with tiny bells. His awestruck eyes traveled back up to her face, flawless as he remembered, her lips painted a shocking shade of red. Her blouse was cut low, revealing translucent skin and full, rounded breasts. She carried a riding crop in one hand.

He started to hyperventilate.

"Say something, Fox. Are you alright?"

"D-dream. You're dead." He swallowed convulsively and he shook his head in denial.

"You dreamed I was dead?" she questioned, a curious looking on her face. "I can assure you I'm not."

"C-clarice....."

"Ah...you are dreaming of someone named Clarice and it is she who is dead. I should wake you up and remind you of me, your *true* love....." She lowered her head to his and kissed him gently on the mouth. Her kiss became more aggressive and she opened her mouth against his, trying to gain entrance. His mind screamed distantly in protest, but his body was disobeying all commands. His mouth opened under her assault and her tongue invaded, lashing against his.

She broke the kiss, trailing her mouth along his jawline to take his earlobe between her teeth, biting and sucking on it. As her tongue flicked into his ear, she began pulling his shirt out of his pants. He groaned despite himself. She spread his shirt open, baring his chest, and sighed her appreciation. Her fingers stroked across the sweat-soaked skin, twirling around and tweaking his nipples, trailing down across his abdomen.

Still, Mulder couldn't break his paralysis and get up from the couch. In spite of his fear and the apparent paralysis, he found himself arching up to meet her fingers where they skimmed over his flesh as he groaned again. She bent her head and took one nipple in her mouth, licking and biting. At the same time, one of her hands found the bulge in his pants and cupped his balls before moving up to stroke his painfully hard and constricted cock. His hips bucked off the couch and his mind was torn in two. One half was screaming to be let go, the other, alien part of his brain was controlling his body and begging her to finish what she had started. An unnatural erotic haze descended, pushing all protest and fear to the dim recesses of his mind.

"Please...." he whispered, voice roughened by desire.

She moved both of her hands to his shirt, to slide it off. He sat up very slightly so that she could remove it easier, but when the shirt reached his elbows she pinned him back on the couch, effectively immobilizing his arms. He flashed instantly to another couch, another time, in this very city. With this same blond. The fear and terror he had felt then now reclaimed him.

"No!" he shouted as he began to struggle. She effortlessly straddled his hips, smiling broadly at him, her incisors sharp and glittering.

"What's the matter, darling?" she asked innocently. "We were having such fun a moment ago."

"No....you...you drugged me.....you are....." he gasped, losing the ability to breathe.

"I have no need for drugs, Fox." She bent forward and kissed him hard on the mouth, her fingers stroking his neck and drifting over his collarbones, one hand clutching him by the hair.

"Let me go....." he croaked breathlessly, after she finally broke the kiss. He weakly tried to buck her off but he wasn't strong enough. She just rode him, as she had before. It was all too familiar and he began to panic, his thrashing becoming wilder.

All traces of amusement left her face and she began to look angry. It chilled Mulder to the bone to look up into that face. He couldn't stop his struggling as his flight instincts kicked into full gear.

"This is getting tiresome, Fox," she said with a deceptive calm. "I *will* break you and you *will* do as I say." With that she picked up her riding crop and delivered a stinging lash across his chest.

He screamed in shock.....

....and woke up on the floor next to his couch, his heart racing and the scream still on his lips.

Too long....too real....what is happening to me....when will this end?

He sat up, intending to get back on the couch, and gasped at the searing pain in his chest. Filled with a sudden dread, he got up and stumbled to his bathroom, flicking on the light.

There, in the harsh light of the bathroom, he looked down as saw a red welt rising in a diagonal line across his chest.

TEZCUCO
Chapter 3

Apartment 42, Hegal Place
Alexandria, Virginia
June 16, 1998; 11:32 p.m.

Mulder stared in horror at his chest, the red mark becoming more and more pronounced and not a little painful. He was trembling all over, starting to hyperventilate.

Panic attack.

He turned and staggered back out to living room. Wrapping himself in an afghan, he collapsed onto his couch, willed himself to breathe normally and recited what he could remember from various X-Files about dreams that came with actual physical manifestations.

The mind works in powerful and mysterious ways.

People injure themselves while sleepwalking all the time.

The case involving the man who killed his wife while sleepwalking. He fixed his pool pump, too.

Lucy Householder exhibited physical manifestations of injuries that happened to someone else.

Mulder couldn't think of any other instances where something like this had happened, but he began to get his breathing under control. He turned on the television and cranked up the volume.

It was just a dream. Clarice is dead. Completely dead. Scully burned her.

Didn't she?

It was just like before. Just like before.

I was powerless.

She's dead. *Dead*.

When his eyes began to feel heavy, he sat up, elbows on his knees and rocking slightly.

Don't go to sleep. Don't.

Something is happening to me. Something real.

This is stupid. I was attacked by a woman who controlled me, drugged me. I only hallucinated that she was Scully. These dreams are symptoms of a larger problem. That I'm not over it. Post traumatic stress. Any first year psychology resident would say that.

But you know that vampires exist. You know that people like Robert Modell exist.

You know the dreams could be real. And you know there may only be one way to stop them.

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Apartment 42, Hegal Place
Alexandria, Virginia
June 17, 1998; 6:15 a.m.

Mulder slowly paced in front of his television, feet dragging slightly on the carpet, still in his shorts and wrapped in the afghan. He was so tired that he could barely keep his eyes open. Hence the pacing. He jumped in surprise when someone knocked on his door.

Looking out the peephole, he saw an odd trio of men glancing around nervously. He opened the door and stepped back to let them in.

"What're you guys doin' here?" he asked sleepily.

"You look like shit," was Langley's response.

"Yeah, man, are you not sleeping again?" asked Frohike.

"What're you guys doin' here?" Mulder asked again, waking up slightly.

"I'll make coffee," said Byers. "You look like you could use it."

"Fer real," commented Langley.

"Will somebody *please* tell me what's going on here!?" Mulder was starting to get pissed off.

"Easy, buddy," said Frohike. "Why don't you sit down before you fall

down."

Mulder clutched his afghan tighter around himself and collapsed onto the couch. He looked blearily up at Frohike and asked again. "Why are you here, Frohike?"

"We've got some.....news, Mulder. There was another murder in New Orleans, same M.O., only with signs of physical abuse."

Mulder's heart started pounding and he came fully awake. "What.....what kind of physical abuse?" he croaked, his throat suddenly dry.

"Looks like the dude was beaten with some sort of narrow rod or stick," replied Langley.

"Or a riding crop," whispered Mulder.

"What's that, Mulder?" asked Frohike.

"N-nothing, nothing," he said, shaking his head.

Byers walked back into the room with a cup of coffee and handed it to Mulder. "So, did you tell him?"

"They told me." Mulder took a sip of the coffee and was silent for a moment trying to decide what to do.

"What're you gonna do, Mulder?" asked Frohike.

"I guess.....I don't know....." he drifted, staring into his coffee cup.

He looked up in time to see the Gunmen exchange worried glances. "Guys, I'm just really tired. I have to go to work."

"Man, why don't you take the day off and try to get some rest?" asked Frohike.

"That's the *last* thing I need to do," replied Mulder, as he got up and headed into his bedroom to dress.

=====
A.D. Skinner's Office
FBI Headquarters
Same day, 8:15 a.m.

Mulder had been in the office a very short period of time when Skinner had called him, asking him to come upstairs. He hesitated for a moment outside Skinner's door, composing himself, before knocking.

"Sir?"

"Agent Mulder, come in and sit down, please."

Mulder sat and then watched in mild astonishment as Skinner fidgeted nervously with various items on his desk. Mulder's heart started to thump loudly in his chest.

"Sir - is something wrong? Is Scully.....?"

"No, Mulder. As far as I know, Scully's fine." Skinner's lips twisted as he stared at Mulder. "You, on the other hand, don't appear to be *fine* at all."

Mulder sighed. "Is that why you called me in here, sir? Because I'm just tired-"

"No, Mulder, that isn't why I called you in here. But your appearance certainly affects what I was going to say."

Skinner took a deep breath and Mulder suddenly knew what was going on. He gripped the arms of the chair, whitening the knuckles of his hands.

"Mulder, I got a call from the New Orleans P.D. They have requested your assistance in solving a case."

Skinner hesitated and Mulder kept quiet, afraid that if he spoke up his voice would tremble. He took a few breaths to steady himself and regain his mask of calm professionalism.

"It appears that they have a serial killer exhibiting the same M.O. as...the one that you and Scully were down there helping with." Skinner looked Mulder hard in the eye. "The lieutenant you worked with last time requested you and Scully specifically - but now, looking at you, I think it may be too soon."

Mulder's mind raced, filled with reasons why he should go and reasons why he desperately didn't want to be anywhere near New Orleans. Then he felt the skin on his chest twinge painfully.

He couldn't go on like this.

"S-sir...I think I should go. No one else could solve this case quickly. And I think you know that." Mulder gulped nervously, "Sir."

"You're in no condition to go down there, Mulder, especially with Scully in Florida until Friday. I won't send one of my agents into a physically *and* emotionally dangerous situation when it's obvious he isn't up to it."

"I could go down there and just work from the station. I can look at the crime scene photos and any physical evidence without leaving the building. I'm sure that since the lieutenant requested my presence they must be desperate, sir, and he could accompany me if I needed to interview witnesses."

"Mulder --" Skinner began, in an exasperated tone.

"Sir...I think I need to do this," Mulder said, quietly. As he said the words, he realized that this could end it, one way or another. He *had* to end it, as much as the situation terrified him. A thin sheen of sweat began forming on his forehead.

He watched Skinner watch him, assessing, thinking.

"Sir, I've been cleared for field duty."

"Right now, I'm wondering who made that brilliant decision," snorted Skinner. Mulder actually had to smile a little at that comment. "You go on one condition. Scully meets you there."

Mulder had begun shaking his head before the A.D. had even finished speaking. "Sir, this is a continuing education seminar. It was pretty important to her that she attend this one."

"Then you don't go until Friday or I assign you a temporary partner."

Mulder was shocked into silence. A bead of sweat trickled from his temple down the side of his face. His mind started racing again, weighing his options.

Scully or a stranger? Someone who is haunting my dreams or someone who will simply ridicule me?

Disturbed that he even had to consider it, Mulder made up his mind.

"Sir," Mulder began calmly, "they need me immediately, but I don't need the distraction of a new, albeit temporary, partner. I have to get down there before someone else gets killed. Besides that, I'm a field agent on active status. *You* made that decision, *yourself*. Now, it's only two days until Friday. If Scully can't come right away, at least the lieutenant is familiar with me and my theories." Mulder was insistent but he was struggling to maintain his normal, calm facade while his insides were twisted in a knot.

"It is *my* responsibility to make sure my agents don't go out and get themselves killed. Mulder, without your partner....." Skinner began, equally insistent. He took a deep breath before changing his approach, softly. "Have you looked in the mirror? You look like hell. You're obviously exhausted and you can't deny that this case has serious personal overtones." He softened his tone even more. "I was *there* in Nashville, Mulder. I saw how you were after that case."

"Clarice is *dead*...and I won't be alone down there. If I don't go, someone else will be killed."

"You're setting yourself up for feeling like a failure if someone else is killed while you're there. You don't need that."

"And how do you think I'll feel if I don't even try?" queried Mulder calmly.

Skinner sighed and sat down heavily in his chair. Mulder watched him pull off his glasses and throw them on the desk. He knew then that Skinner was giving in.

"All right. Here are the ground rules. You do not go out in the field without Scully or the lieutenant in New Orleans. Otherwise, this is a desk assignment. Scully joins you as soon as she possibly can." Skinner held up a hand for silence when Mulder started to protest. "As *soon* as she *possibly* can, Agent Mulder. If it is critical that she stay in Florida until Friday, then she stays. I will speak with her to find out. I will also be informing the lieutenant of the ground rules..."

"Sir--"

"Mulder, this is not negotiable. It is my duty to inform him that you are recovering from an injury incurred on another case and that you are not up to full power." Skinner paused, considering. "You've been through a lot recently. I take my responsibilities to my agents very seriously and this goes against my better judgment. Please don't make me regret this," he finished softly, yet firmly.

Mulder's mouth hung open for a split second before he clamped it shut. "Thank you, sir."

"That will be all, Agent Mulder."

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X-Files Office
FBI Headquarters
Same day, 9:25 a.m.

Mulder had just finished pacing his third circuit around his office when the phone rang.

"Mulder."

"Hi, it's me."

"Hey, Scully."

"What's up, Mulder? You called me?"

Mulder had been running possible outcomes for this conversation in his head for the last twenty minutes. He didn't know why, he knew what it would be. He took a deep breath.

"Scully, there have been two murders in New Orleans that fit Clarice's M.O."

"Mulder..." she began, with a warning in her tone.

"They requested us, Scully, and I told Skinner that I would go and you

could meet me there on Friday. He should be calling you shortly."

"Mulder! No...."

"Young men are *dying*, Scully. They need all the help they can get and we did *such* a great job last time we were there...." he said in a mildly sarcastic tone.

"Skinner approved you going down there? Getting involved in this sort of case? After what's happened recently? Is he insane?"

Mulder could hear the outrage in her clipped sentences and knew she was building up a good head of steam. He tried to forestall it.

"Well...there were some conditions."

"And they are?" she asked angrily.

"I don't go into the field as an agent...unless accompanied by the lieutenant."

"And?" she prodded.

He sighed heavily. "Skinner's going to call you and see if it is critical that you finish your seminar."

"You don't seriously expect me to sit on my ass here while you are running around New Orleans, do you?"

"Scully..."

"No *way*, Mulder. Absolutely not. Don't you dare go down there without me."

Now Mulder was starting to get pissed off. "That's an awfully big command from someone who doesn't like to be ordered around herself. I'm an FBI agent, Scully, and an adult to boot."

"Mulder..." she began angrily. Then he heard her breathing for a minute before she spoke again. "Mulder," she said again, in a much softer tone of voice, "you haven't been sleeping. You've been through hell. I...I just don't want anything to happen to you. I'm sorry if I've been hovering and bossy, but that's the reason why."

Mulder's anger deflated instantly. "I'm sorry I yelled at you."

"It's okay. I shouldn't have yelled at you, either. You're tired, and this case has to scare you a little bit, doesn't it?"

He grimaced and rubbed a hand over his chest. "You have no idea."

"I'll catch the next available flight to New Orleans..."she began.

"But what about your class...you needed this..."

"I'm only 3 CEU's short," she interrupted him gently, "and I have a year to obtain them. Now, you call an airline and I'll do the same. Then call me back with your info. Shall we stay at the same hotel?"

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The Ramada Inn, Room 407
St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 17, 1998; 4:15 p.m.

Mulder walked into the spacious bedroom and tossed his suitcase on the nearest bed. Then he crossed to the air conditioner and cranked it up, before throwing himself face down across the other bed.

New Orleans, again.

It was odd, but after what had happened here, he still got a little thrill from being in this town. There were bad memories. But there were good ones, too. He had shown Scully *his* New Orleans. He had kissed her for the first time on a dance floor in a rocking Cajun restaurant. He heard the clatter of the street car out on the avenue and he smiled slightly. Yes, there were some good memories.

What is it about this town? You get off the plane in June and the air is so heavy that you can barely walk, let alone breathe. But then you smell the magnolias, hear the clatter of a street car, and see the crumbling moss-covered crypts in the old cemeteries, and a thrill races up your spine.

I must be exhausted. I'm delirious.

Pleasant thoughts continued to tumble around in Mulder's head, the fear and anxiety pushed to the back of his mind.

A smooth hand caressed his cheek, soothingly, comfortably.

"So, here you are," whispered the voice.

"Where's here?"

"Why, with me, of course." A chuckle. "You are much more beautiful up close, my dear Fox."

"B-beautiful?"

"Indeed. Lovely, even."

"Who.....who are you?"

"We will be together, soon.....and you will know everything. I will make you very happy....."

The voice left him and Mulder drifted deeper into sleep.

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Mulder came awake slowly, feeling groggy and confused. The light in the room was diffused through the chintz curtains, throwing the room into shadow. He looked away from the window and saw Scully standing next to the bed.

"Hi, Mulder," she said, softly.

"Scully...." he groaned, exhausted.

"Shhhhh, Mulder, just relax, rest," she interrupted him, and knelt next to his legs where they were sprawled on the bed.

"S-scully.....I'm glad you're here. Something weird is happening....."

She cut him off with a deep, hungry kiss, her tongue exploring his mouth. Her fingers trailed from his jaw, down his neck to pluck at the buttons on his shirt, sliding them through the holes one at a time until she reached his waist. She pulled the shirt out of his pants slowly, moving her lips to his exposed chest. Her tongue flicked lazy trails across him, purposely avoiding his nipples and making him moan with want. She nipped his abdomen before darting her tongue into his belly button.

"Scully.....please....." his breath was harsh in his throat, his cock stiffening within its confining material. He tried to roll her onto her back, but she stopped him with a hand against his chest.

"Let me take care of you, Mulder," she panted, as she pushed him back

and climbed on him, straddling his waist.

"Love you, Scully," he whispered. One of her hands threaded through his hair, holding him in place as she kissed him again.

As she kissed him, Mulder thrust lazily with his hips, fully aroused but only half aware. He felt strangely disconnected, wanting but drowsy. He began to feel everything slow around him, as if he were swimming through molasses. Scully took his hand and kissed it, then sucked his index finger into her warm, wet mouth. He moaned softly, hips thrusting again. She pinned that hand over his head, as she repeated the action with the other.

Mulder blinked and his wrists were tied to the headboard. His heart began to race.

His shirt was gone, and Scully was working on the button on his pants. She looked him in the eye as the button popped through the hole. He was panting heavily, pulling on the ties that bound him to the headboard.

"Scully.....why.....untie me...."

"Mulder, this will be fun, I promise....." she said before lowering his zipper and plundering his mouth yet again.

"Scully....." he began, after tearing his mouth away from hers. He started to panic, erection wilting slightly from fear. A cold sweat broke out over his body, causing him to shiver.

"Shhhh.....we'll stop if you want," she said, as she reached into his trousers and grasped his cock, stroking him back to hardness.

"Untie me.....untie me, Scully, please." He thrust against her hand, all the while his heart hammering in fear.

"Don't you trust me, Fox?"

The alarm bells in Mulder's head got louder and more insistent. He couldn't catch his breath, white spots appearing before his eyes. He shook his head violently from side to side, trying to clear it, beads of sweat flying from his soaked hair.

She backed off of him slightly, then pulled his pants and boxers down and off in one smooth move. She sat back and stared at him as he squirmed under her gaze, bathed in sweat and shivering in the cool, conditioned air.

Something's wrong here. Something isn't right.

"Scully.....let me go...." he pleaded.

She ran a cool hand down the center of his chest, through the damp hair, over the abdomen, past his cock and grasped his balls, rolling them gently. Her eyes glittered, feral, in the twilight of the room, her tongue flicking out over her bottom lip.

With a strangled cry, he twisted his hips away from her, trying to get away. Tied to the headboard and trapped on the bed, his heart raced. She grabbed one of his ankles and pinned it to the bed with an iron grip.

"Mulder.....do I have to punish you?"

"Get off me.....get away.....please....." he gasped, unable to breathe, his breath catching in his throat. His vision swam, making him disoriented. He shook his head again, trying to clear it. He heard a sharp crack, screamed at the fire burning his chest.....

.....and woke up lying on the floor between two beds, the scream still lodged in his throat, his heart still racing. He realized that he was naked and couldn't remember how he had gotten that way.

Oh god. Oh god. Scully. Not Scully. Just a dream. A dream.

Mulder got up quickly, pulled underwear and khaki shorts out of his bag and yanked them on. Next he grabbed a tee shirt and pulled it over his burning chest without looking down. He ran into the bathroom, splashed cold water on his face, and combed his hair.

Mindless tasks to re-direct his thoughts from the dream. And what the dream might mean.

Was it a dream?

He squelched that thought quickly and ran back into the bedroom.

He was in his shoes and out the door less than five minutes after he had awakened.

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Igor's Tavern
St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 17, 1998; 7:15 p.m.

Dusk on St. Charles Avenue. The Garden District. Where the hotel was located, on the corner of Jackson and St. Charles, was actually the fringe of the Garden District. This was the reason they had chosen the hotel the first time around.

Mulder walked quickly out the door of the hotel and into the fading sunlight. The humid air was thick, heavy, and rich with the smells of New Orleans. His stomach growled as he caught a whiff of something spicy cooking at the restaurant across Jackson Avenue from the hotel. Next to the restaurant was an old neighborhood dive bar, its windows open onto the sidewalk, the outdoor tables vacant in the heat. He could hear the music playing from where he stood as people walked in and out the door, carrying beer in plastic cups. The last time he had been in New Orleans, he and Scully had had fun in that bar....and then a murder had been committed in the courtyard behind it.

A streetcar clanged to a stop, picking up passengers headed uptown, as he walked across Jackson Avenue and headed toward the bar.

The bar was crowded with happy hour customers playing pool and the gaming machines, or just sitting at the bar talking. Mulder slid onto an empty stool at the bar and the bar maid appeared instantly in front of him, a big smile on her face.

"Hey, dawlin', what'll ya have?" she asked, batting her eyelashes at him and cracking her gum.

Mulder gave her a faint smile. "Turbo Dog?"

"Go cup?"

"Uhhh..." he thought for a minute, translating. "No, I'll be staying here for a while."

"B'right back."

She sashayed away to get his beer and Mulder just shook his head slightly, mildly amused.

Mulder was on his second beer when he felt it. His skin crawled as all the hair on the back of his neck stood up.

Someone is watching me.

He didn't move, other than to take a sip of his beer. The room had an area with tables right near the windows, next to the door. The bar itself began just inside the door and ran along the side wall of the building. Past the

end of the bar was an area that held pool tables, a foos ball table, and washing machines. Another pool table was located directly over this area on a balcony that overlooked the main bar.

He catalogued the bar and sharpened his awareness of who was around him. His peripheral vision was good, but he was sitting near the far end of the bar from the door which meant the large portion of the bar by the pool tables was behind him. It limited his view of the balcony as well.

Mulder turned his head toward the nearest end of the bar and motioned for the bar maid. While his head was turned he studied the people playing pool, while not looking directly at them.

Something flickered at the edge of his vision and he turned his head sharply towards movement, and then let out a deep breath.

A man and a woman were making out. He saw a flicker of light again and realized that it was only her bracelet catching the light and grabbing his attention. He smiled ruefully, the feeling of being watched dissipating slightly.

Two beers and I am totally paranoid.

The thought of the dreams flitted through his head and he realized that there was a good possibility that he *wasn't* being paranoid. Something strange was happening and no matter how much he ran from it, it wasn't going away. If anything, it was worse. He didn't normally run from things and he wasn't going to start now. The barmaid spoke to him, snapping him out of his own personal pep talk.

"Honey? Did you want something?" she asked, tapping her long nails on the bar.

Mulder looked at those nails and shivered.

Geez, I need food. I'm getting paranoid *and* drunk.

"Cheeseburger and fries, please."

"Mulder, that crap is going to clog your arteries."

His head whipped around to the other side so fast that Scully burst out laughing.

"I didn't mean to startle you, Mulder," she said with a smile.

He stared at her, mouth open and heart pounding, for a moment before relaxing slightly.

"Scully..." he breathed, relieved to see her.

"Were you expecting someone else?" she asked teasingly.

"You never know....." his voice trailed off as he continued to stare at her.

"How many beers have you had, Mulder?" she asked as she slid onto the vacant seat next to him.

"Two."

"Then what's wrong? You are staring at me like you haven't seen me in eons."

"How did you find me here?" he asked, diverting her smoothly.

"I'm an FBI agent, Mulder. You really liked this place the last time we were here and so, instead of freaking out when you weren't in your room, I made a wild guess. And I was right." She hesitated for a moment, studying her hands. "I was worried when you weren't in the room."

Mulder felt his muscles unknot as the tension drained out of him at her

words. He reached over and cupped her face with his hands. When she looked up at him he leaned over and kissed her softly on the lips.

"I'm sorry," he said as he broke the kiss, "I just had to get out of the room. I....it's *New Orleans*, Scully," he finished, a small tight smile on his face. As good an excuse as any for his hasty departure from his room. Scully smiled back at him, oblivious.

For now. Probably not for much longer. I have to tell her.....

"I'm glad to see that your love of this town wasn't affected by what you went through last time we were here," she said gently.

"It wasn't the town I had the problem with."

"Are you sure you're all right? You seemed a bit...tense when I first came in. More nightmares?"

He sighed. So much for oblivious. "Yeah."

"Are they worse?"

"Scully, would you understand if I told you that I'm just not up to dissecting them right now?" he asked, a bit desperately. He didn't want to share them with her at the moment. The implications weren't pleasant no matter which way they were looked at and he just wanted a little time to sort them out for himself. As it was, he could only remember bits and pieces of the whole.

She moved her chair closer to his and laid her hand on his where it rested on the bar. "Okay," she said softly, "but we're going to have to deal with it sooner or later."

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close for a kiss. As his lips touched hers, the sensation of being watched came back full force and he jerked away from her.

"Mulder?"

He shivered, almost able to feel the caress of a hand on his bare back as the eyes burned holes into him. A disembodied voice called his name in his head. He shook his head violently, clearing it, then looked around the bar.

"What is it?" Scully asked again, a worried frown forming on her face.

As quickly as it came, the sensation was gone. His eyes flitted around the bar, seeing no one who aroused his suspicions. He felt a hard jab on his arm and turned to find Scully staring at him, anger mixed with fear in her eyes.

"What's going on?" she asked for the third time, as she touched her hand to his forehead, presumably checking for a fever.

"I....I just had the strangest....I thought someone was watching us," he replied, his own eyes clouded with fear as he looked at her. He swallowed thickly, as another shiver wracked him.

"Mulder....you need food and sleep, in that order. You're wrung out, I can see it in your face. You'll feel better...." Her tone was comforting, soothing.

"I hope it's that simple, Scully," he replied. The memory of the dreams and that itching feeling of eyes on his back made him doubtful.

The bar maid chose that moment to place the cheeseburger and fries in front of him. To his surprise, he was starving.

Ravenous.

Maybe she was right. But still he doubted it. Nothing was ever that simple.

TEZCUCO
Chapter 4

Igor's Tavern
St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 17, 1998; 9:25 p.m.

Mulder was lit and he liked it. He felt boneless, relaxed. Scully was sitting close to him and she was *normal*.

The real Scully. Not the dream Scully.

They had eaten food that was bad for them and had too many of the locally brewed beers. Now pleasantly full and tipsy, Mulder felt more normal than he had in some time. The food and the beer were also having another effect. He yawned, suddenly overcome with sleepiness.

The desire to sleep made the tendrils of fear unfurl in his stomach again, then tie it in a hard knot, as he remembered what sleep brought him nowadays.

Not rest. Something else. Something terrifying.

Alcohol often has the effect of loosening inhibitions, instilling false courage. It was having that effect now.

"Mulder, I think it's time we got you into bed."

"Nope."

"Whattaya mean, nope? Are you worried about the dreams?" she asked carefully, slightly tipsy herself.

"Yep. No telling what you'll do to me this time."

She sobered instantly, right before his eyes, and he mentally kicked himself. As she stared at him, he could see the gears turning in her brain as she puzzled out the best way to respond to his cryptic comment. She turned away from him and stared into her glass, running her finger through the condensation beading on its side.

"Scully? I'm--I'm sorry. I didn't mean that the way it sounded....."

She turned back towards him. "Is it me? Am I causing this somehow?" she asked him tightly, seeming to struggle with the words.

At her question, he could feel himself mentally backing away from the topic. He wasn't ready to explore it. Not now. And yet, he wanted to reassure her.

Reassure her? You make it sound like you have an idea of what's going on, Mulder.

Maybe I do.

He shook his head, mutely, and Scully interpreted that as an answer to her question. He didn't know that it was.

"Maybe we should talk...." she began.

"Maybe tomorrow, Scully," he forestalled her, delaying the inevitable.

"Mulder...." she began, in protest. She stopped when he glared at her. Her shoulders drooped slightly and a quiet sigh escaped her lips. "I got the room adjoining yours, since we're officially on a case. I-I didn't quite know--well, this is our first case since we...."

He gave her a slight smile which felt, and probably looked, like a grimace.

"It's okay, Scully."

He was ashamed to feel relieved.

The Ramada Inn, Room 407
St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 17, 1998; 10:05 p.m.

"So tired.....beer made me so sleepy....."

"That's good, Mulder. You need to sleep," she said gently. "Regardless of the nightmares, you have to go to sleep or you won't get through this. You'll collapse and end up in the hospital." She debated briefly offering him a sleeping pill before she remembered the beer drinking.

"I don't wanna go to sleep....." he replied, slumping down onto the bed.

Scully went to the connecting door between their rooms and unlocked his side so both doors were open. When she turned back to him, she saw his eyes drooping in exhaustion. He looked like he was barely awake. She moved across the room and knelt in front of him, her hands moving to his shirt to help him get it off before he completely drifted off. When she tugged on the shirt to pull it from his pants, his eyes flew open and he grabbed her wrists, hard. She winced at the pain in her wrists, but then she looked into his eyes and wanted to cry.

"No! No...." he said, releasing her and jumping up from the bed to move away from her. He looked back to her from across the room and his eyes were wide and bright.

Oh, my God. He's afraid of me. Terrified.

She watched as he began to pace in front of the window, moving like a caged animal. Her chest constricted; she didn't think she could catch her breath.

He's exhausted and he's been drinking. Once he gets some rest he'll be fine.

Won't he?

Almost as quickly as he had jumped up and away from her, Mulder seemed to realize what he was doing. She watched him stop, shake his head, and then gaze at her with a such look of sadness that it broke her heart. She took a chance.

"Do you.....do you want me to stay...."

"No! I'm sorry....no....." he replied quickly, looking down at his feet as he stood, jamming the toes of one foot rhythmically into the carpet.

The threat of tears made her throat close briefly before she pushed her pain down deep inside. He needed her to understand--to be understanding and supportive. She asked herself for the hundredth time what she had done to earn a starring role in this latest round of nightmares. She rubbed her forehead, trying to push the self pity to the same place that held the pain. She was an FBI agent on a case. She needed her rational, scientific mind calm and focused so they could solve this case.

Then we will deal with this problem.

She was startled out of her reverie when she found Mulder pulling her into a quick hug. It was very brief, but it gave her a small measure of comfort. She brushed her hand against his cheek and gave him a tiny, tired smile before turning to head into her room. She turned back when she got to the door.

"Goodnight, Mulder."

He looked at her, a small, baleful smile on his own face.

"Let's hope so, Scully. Goodnight."

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He watched as Scully left the room and made no move to close either of the connecting doors.

She left the door open.

She could come in at any time.

She isn't the woman in the dream, asshole.

She could see the marks, though.

She'll never believe your theory.

I have a theory?

You always have a theory, you're just denying it this time. And *she'll* think you're crazier than *ever*.

I'm usually right, though. Whether I want to be or not.

Focus on solving this case. According to the theory, that should stop the nightmares.

If it doesn't kill me first.

You need a place to start.

I *need* to stop talking to myself and go to sleep. That is how I will get a place to start.

Mulder, you *are* one fucked up, crazy dude. And you're drunk, too.

Oh, really? Am I?

Mulder walked into the large vanity area connected to the bathroom, turned on the bright fluorescent light and then tugged his shirt off over his head. He stared into the mirror for a long moment, before stripping off the rest of his clothes and heading into the shower.

He had to adjust the water temperature several times to reach the one least painful to the two red welts that crossed his chest.

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Mulder was lulled into a near trance-like state by the rhythmic pounding of his sneakers on the sidewalk. When his foot caught on the concrete where it had been pushed up by massive tree roots, he had to struggle to keep from going down. Arms flailing, he regained his balance and stopped running.

He realized that he was panting harder than he should be and resolved to walk back to the hotel. As he bent over, hands on his thighs and sweat dripping from his face, he cursed the injuries that had stripped from him his peak physical conditioning.

He straightened up and began walking in small circles, willing his breathing to slow to normal. When he noticed his surroundings he slowed to a stop, brow furrowed in confusion.

He was on a narrow, tree-lined street in a well-kept but non-affluent section of town. In the darkness, lights sparkled behind leaded glass windows as people moved about inside their homes, doing whatever it was that normal people did on a warm summer evening. He looked around at the cross street he had just passed and looked for a street sign.

Maple Street.

The name nagged at him, sounding familiar. He didn't recognize any of the houses, but still the area seemed like one of which he had a passing knowledge. He heard a streetcar in the distance and realized that he must have turned off St. Charles by accident, consumed by his runner's high. He began walking towards the sound, thinking to walk the streetcar tracks back towards the hotel.

Mulder had walked a few steps when something caused him to pause, uncertain, hairs prickling on the back of his neck. He looked to his right and saw a female form standing, motionless, at the window of the nearest house. At least it looked like a woman. He couldn't make out a face, the dimness of the room in which she was standing making her a mere shadow.

Without realizing how he got there, Mulder found himself on the front porch of the house, his hand raised to knock. He shook his head, trying to clear it of the perpetual fog that was causing him to drift. Before he could do anything else, the door swung open noiselessly. Again, without making a conscious decision to do so, Mulder moved through the open door and into the house.

When he saw the room he was in, Mulder recoiled in horror. He turned rapidly to get out of the house and found the door had closed behind him. There was no door knob. His chest tightened painfully, his breathing harsh in his ears, as he began clawing at the door jamb, trying to pry it open.

"Fox. Stop," said a soft, yet commanding, feminine voice.

He stilled immediately, a distant part of his mind howling in protest.

"Come in and sit down."

He turned and began walking toward the voice. Two steps into the room and he paused, his mind warring for control of his body.

"I just want to talk to you, Fox. Nothing more," she said, gently.

He took another step, his head shaking, his jaw clenched tightly as he fought against obeying the voice. "I don't....believe you."

She chuckled softly, not unkindly. "It doesn't appear as though you have a choice," she replied, as he took another step into the room. "Relax, Fox, you're only going to hurt yourself if you continue to fight so hard."

He continued his slow progress into the candle-lit room and towards the couch. The same couch on which Clarice had tortured him a few months ago.

Once he was standing next to the couch, he gave up the fight and collapsed bonelessly on to it, panting, sweat rolling down his face and soaking his tee shirt.

He lay there for an indeterminate amount of time, feeling a lethargic haze settle completely over him. His eyes slipped shut and his breathing slowed to normal as a distant part of his mind chastised him for giving in so easily.

He heard that faint tinkling sound and then felt the cushions sag as someone sat down next to him. He opened his eyes and, through a mental fog, he saw her.

Clarice.

"You're dead," he said to her, calmly. "You're dead and I'm dreaming this."

"How can you be so sure?" she asked with a smile.

"You're wearing the same outfit as the last time I saw you. I don't know any women who would be caught dead wearing the same outfit twice in such a short period of time. Pardon the expression," he replied, a sardonic mask firmly in place. He was actually warming to this idea and it was alleviating some of the fears. "So...I'm dreaming you."

"Well, Fox, you are partly right. You *are* dreaming....sort of," she said, enigmatically. "But I'm not dead."

"Yes, you are. Scully burned your body. Had you cremated."

"So she told you."

"Scully doesn't lie to me," he replied, anger starting to burn and mesh with the fear in the pit of his stomach.

"Are you sure about that? Are you sure she wasn't just saying things to make you feel better?"

"She doesn't do that...she has *never* done that," he said, angry, yet confident.

"How do you explain this, then?" she asked coyly.

"A dream....I told you...."

"Ah, yes. A dream. Have you ever had dreams like this before, Fox? This real?" she asked, a cool hand landing on his sweaty thigh. He jumped slightly at the contact. "So real you can *feel* things? So real you wake up with evidence on your body?" She pressed a finger into his covered chest at the exact spot of one of the lash marks.

Mulder began to feel little twinges of doubt eating away at the edges of his certainty, replacing it with new fears. It was a struggle to think clearly, the haze over his mind thickening and obscuring his reasoning. Clouding his judgment.

"How do you explain this, Fox? Hmmm?" she asked, a hungry smile blooming on her face. "If Scully didn't lie to you, then how am I able to do these things?"

Her hand slid up his thigh to the hem of his running shorts. His breathing quickened and he realized that he couldn't move. He had lost control of his body to the fog in his mind, its weight and heft making it nearly tangible, nearly.....

"You....something.....this....different....." he panted as his eyes roved over her, the struggle to reason and think excruciating. "You.....never.....t-this.....s-s-strong....." He stared at her and saw her shimmer, flicker, and then become seemingly enraged.

She shoved her hand into the leg of his shorts and grabbed at his balls, protected only by thin cotton. His back arched reflexively and violently, as a muted scream was forced through a clenched jaw. Arms limp at his side and thought processes gone, his body responded naturally and he could do nothing more as she fondled him.

"No...." he whispered.

"Who are *you* to question *me*?" she asked, her voice deepening in rage as she crawled onto his lap, facing him but not releasing him. "I *am* Clarice....that's all you *know*."

She stared deeply, penetratingly, into Mulder's eyes, before crushing her mouth to his in a brutal kiss. Her tongue forced its way into his mouth as her free hand slid into his hair. Her other hand moved from his balls to his cock, giving it a quick hard pull before releasing him. She broke the kiss, but Mulder had no time for relief as she yanked his head violently to the side, exposing his neck and sinking her teeth into the tender flesh.

And once again, he screamed.....

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The Ramada Inn
St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 18, 1998; 1:35 a.m.

Scully woke rather abruptly and wondered for a moment where she was.

New Orleans.

Mulder.

She listened intently for any sound, anything to explain why she was suddenly wide awake. The room was quiet in the darkness, the only sounds were coming from the street outside. And then there was a faint rustling sound from Mulder's room.

A whispered, "No..." in a husky voice got her out of bed and moving towards his room. She stopped short near his door and wondered if she should actually go to him. He hadn't wanted her anywhere near him earlier. She certainly didn't want to make it worse.

She sank down on the end of the low dresser near the entrance to his room. Her head leaning against the wall, she squeezed her eyes shut and willed the tears away. More rustling and a whimper pulled her back to her feet. She had taken one step toward the door when a raw, hoarse scream made her blood freeze and her feet break into a run.

Scully ran up to the bed, turned on the light above it, and froze.

Blood.

There was blood in glittering little pools on the starched bottom sheet near his neck and on his pillow. It was soaking into his tee shirt at his throat. It covered the skin of his neck from Adam's apple to ear lobe. He wasn't moving.

Oh God nopleaseno.....

Breathe....deep breath....

She reached with trembling fingers and laid them against the blood soaked skin of his neck, feeling for a pulse.

And Mulder sighed, his eye lashes fluttering against his cheeks.

Scully dropped to the bed, weak with relief. It was short-lived, for then she realized that she had made a critical error. She had assumed he was dreaming. Then she had seen the blood and was afraid he was dead. She cursed her lack of detachment as she glanced quickly around the room. Seeing his gun on the dresser, she grabbed it and began cautiously searching the room.

No one in the vanity.

No one in the bathroom.

The door was deadbolted and chained on the inside.

Mulder groaned, and she hurried back to his side.

Sitting on the edge of the bed facing him, she laid a hand on his forehead. He was warm and sweating profusely, the sweat mingling with the blood, making his shirt stick to his chest. Even his hair was wet where she ran her

fingers across his scalp on the side of his head, looking for a wound. Her fingers came away sticky with salt water, not blood. He turned his head away from her and groaned again. That's when she saw the blood welling from two marks on his neck.

Two marks on his neck.

A chill raced up her spine. She ignored it as best she could.

"Mulder," she said softly, trying to wake him. She squeezed his shoulder gently.

"Mulder," she said again, louder this time. He stirred, eye lids fluttering against the overhead light.

"S-scully? What....." He looked down at himself and, seeing the blood, recoiled from it.

"Wait, Mulder...are you all right? How do you feel?" she asked quietly, reaching out to gently, carefully take his hand, hoping a physical connection would calm him. Before she could touch him, he pulled away, recoiling from her touch as fast as his eyes recoiled from the sight of the blood in the bed. For an instant she saw accusation as well as fear in his eyes.

"I didn't....." she huffed, terribly hurt. "I think you scratched yourself in your sleep," she choked out. "Are you in any pain?"

"I....I'm okay...I think," he replied roughly, sitting up. She saw his eyes widen as he remembered. "Dream. I was.....dreaming....of Clarice."

"She can't hurt you, Mulder."

"I know it was her," he said in a dull monotone.

"She's dead, Mulder."

"So you say, Scully..." he said, eyes somewhat glazed.

She gasped, suddenly angered by the implications of his comment. "I told you I had her cremated!" When he visibly jumped from her outraged tone she was immediately sorry. Then, before her very eyes, something changed. He shivered lightly and put a hand to his forehead, rubbing it slightly. When he looked at her again, his eyes were more awake and alive.

"I know, Scully...I know you had her cremated," he said softly, before reaching over and running the tips of his fingers over her hand where it lay on the bed. Then it was her turn to shiver.

"Let's get you cleaned up and check out that wound you have on your neck."

His hand flew to his throat and his eyes widened. "My n-neck?" he asked, staring first at her and then down at the blood on the bed.

"It's not as bad as it looks although I must admit that when I first saw you I...well, never mind. We need to get you cleaned up and back to sleep."

She got up and started towards the bathroom, expecting him to follow. When he didn't move she looked back at him and found his hand still at his throat and all the color gone from his face as he looked at the bloodstained sheets.

"Mulder? I'm sure you just scratched yourself in your sleep. Come on-" she stopped when he looked up at her. There was a barely disguised terror in his face and he began to tremble violently. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"I'm...I'm not...sure..." he swallowed hard. She sat down on the end of the bed again and reached for his hand. He took it and squeezed, which reassured her immensely. "I...something...Clarice..." he shook his head violently and her heart began to pound yet again. "Not...her..." he

muttered, "Not...but...but how...?"

"Mulder--stop," she said in a firm tone that belied her rapidly growing fear. Something dreadful was happening here and she wasn't at all sure what it was. This was more than post-nightmare Mulder.

Or less.

She immediately hated herself for questioning his stability.

"Tell me what's going on, please," she requested with a firm yet gentle tone.

"All--all I can remember of my dream is that it's Clarice--but--it can't be. You had her body cremated." He looked her in the eyes and she could see he believed that. "But it is her...it is...." His voice trailed off and he bit his bottom lip, a look of concentration replacing the fear as if he was trying to remember something.

"Mulder..." she began, very gently, as if to a child, "it was a *dream*. A product of the terror that woman put you through."

"What about the blood? The...bite..."

"I never said it was a bite. Like I said before, you most likely just scratched yourself when you were having your nightmare."

He had begun shaking his head before she finished. "It isn't just a dream....It...it just isn't."

"What are you saying, Mulder? That someone was in the room? That's impossible. The doors were locked from the inside."

He just stared at her.

Scully sighed deeply, squeezing his hand again before giving it a gentle tug. "Come on--let's get you cleaned up."

She nearly missed the look of disappointment that flashed across his face, and when she did see it she sighed again, this time in resignation.

She led him into the vanity and motioned for him to sit on the low counter. She reached for a washcloth and then, turning on the taps for the sink, held it under warm water. Wringing it out, she turned toward Mulder and found him hunched over tiredly, elbows on knees and his head in his hands.

"Take off your shirt, Mulder."

He ground his fists into his eyes and yawned before taking the hem of his tee shirt in his hands and lifting it off over his head.

The wash cloth fell from Scully's fingers as she felt her bones turn to liquid and her heart stutter in her chest.

"My God. Mulder, what have you done?"

TEZCUCO
Chapter 5

The Ramada Inn, Room 407
St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 18, 1998; 1:50 a.m.

"My god. Mulder, what have you done?"

Mulder's head jerked toward Scully and he saw she was ghostly pale. His stomach twisted as he realized where she was looking. His chest. Focusing on his hands where they lay in his lap, he took a deep, shaky breath.

And found he didn't know what to say.

"Mulder, what the hell is going on here?"

Mulder flinched as her tone shifted from fear to anger bordering on hysteria. He took another deep breath, trying to control his emotions, and looked up at her.

"It--it happened in my--dreams," he said, quietly, yet firmly.

That's it. Keep it simple and to the point, Mulder.

In front of his very eyes, her face shifted from anger to incredulity and he felt disappointment begin to bloom in his heart. As she crossed her arms over her chest, the feeling grew exponentially. His head dropped and he closed his eyes tightly, willing her to go easy on him. He felt weak, battered, and close to tears.

How much more can I take? How much more?

It was a shock when he felt her cool hand close over his and squeeze. He looked up and she was now looking at him with tears in her eyes. She stroked the hair back off his forehead gently, then rested her hand against his cheek all the while staring him in the eyes. She was trying.

"Tell me what you mean, please?" she asked softly.

"Clarice...she had a whip...I wouldn't cooperate...." he said, feeling a bit vague on the specifics, the memories cloudy.

"In your dream."

"Yes. But they're real, Scully. They are dreams that are *somehow* real...like...like Clarice is in my head..." he trailed off.

She sighed heavily and turned away from him. When she turned back, her arms were crossed in front of her again. Mulder recognized the stance well--and he was beginning to resent it.

"Mulder, there are any number of explanations as to how you got those marks on your chest, not the least of which is hurting yourself while sleep walking."

"You think I *whipped* myself while sleep walking?" he asked, now incredulous. "How exactly does one do that, Scully?"

He watched her shuffle, uncomfortable with the direction the conversation was taking.

"Is it possible--is there any chance that there was someone....."

Mulder gasped, outraged, and jumped down off the vanity. "You would rather believe that I let someone do this to me--while I'm sleeping with you, no less--than believe me when I say something strange is going on?"

Scully waited a fraction of a second too long, in Mulder's mind, before replying.

"Of course not, Mulder. I just thought that maybe...maybe someone had actually broken in while you were sleeping..."

He simply stared at her, unable to decide between anger, despair, or just plain exhaustion.

"I'm sorry. I...I'm just trying to find the simplest explanation for what is happening to you," she said quietly, a look of regret on her face.

Regret for what? For not believing or believing the worst?

He sighed and leaned back against the vanity, looking down at his feet.

"John Lee Roche. Robert Patrick Modell. Two instances of people getting into my head," he said, as he raised his head to look at her again.

"Mulder, those two cases--we never proved that Roche was in your head. And Modell is something different all together. You also seem to be forgetting that Clarice is *dead*."

"So, your explanation is what?" he asked, jaw clenched so hard his eyes filled.

"You're having nightmares...and somehow, during them, you're injuring yourself."

"And this just happens to coincide with recent murders in New Orleans that fit Clarice's MO," he stated, his calm voice masking an anger that was beginning to churn in his stomach.

"The murders remind you of Clarice, so you started having these nightmares," she replied, equally calm.

"I started having the nightmares *before* I knew about the murders."

"Are you sure? Are you sure you didn't read about a murder down here and it sparked your memory?"

"Dammit, Scully, the murders just began a few days ago! My dreams started two weeks ago...and they didn't start out violent or..." he trailed off, his gaze becoming distant as he tried to remember something. His eyes widened slightly as he made a small connection in his mind.

"What? What are you thinking?"

He snapped back into the present and looked at her warily. "I'll--I'll tell you later. When I have something *concrete*," he replied, a touch of anger still in his voice. He bent over and picked up the washcloth. Turning toward the mirror and sink, he ran it under warm water and began cleaning off his neck, all the while feeling slightly childish but unable to *not* feel hurt as well.

"Mulder--" Scully began, angrily.

"It could be nothing, Scully, and I'm too tired to argue with you any more. It's the middle of the goddamn night."

He watched her in the mirror as she softened, giving in. For the time being, anyway.

"Sit down...let me do that," she requested, gently taking the wash cloth from his hand.

He turned and sat down on the counter, shoulders slumped so she could reach him better. She placed one hand on his left shoulder to steady herself as she leaned forward and began gently wiping the blood from the right side of his neck. With each brush of the cloth against his skin, Mulder felt the anger and resentment flowing out of him to be replaced with exhaustion. Just as his eyes were slipping shut, Scully made a curious sound in the back of her throat and spoke.

"Strange."

"What?" Mulder asked, looking at her searchingly.

"The wound--it isn't what I thought it would be."

"W-what do you mean?"

"There are two jagged marks that are shaped like they could have been puncture wounds--but they aren't as deep or large as I would have thought, based on the amount of blood on your sheets." She was staring at his neck with a morbid fascination. She pulled back a moment later and looked him

in the eye, questioningly.

He shrugged, clueless. "You have any ideas?"

"You aren't taking anything that would be considered an anti-coagulant...well, you aren't taking anything at all. Are you?"

He shook his head, frowning, vaguely irritated by the question. She chose to ignore the frown and continued.

"I think that maybe we should get your blood tested for clotting properties. There has to be a medical reason why you would bleed so profusely from such small, shallow wounds."

Then, suddenly, Mulder actually could think of a reason. A non-medical reason. One that he was not at all eager to share with her right at this moment. Arguing vampire myth with his rational, scientific partner at two in the morning was not his current idea of a good time.

"Mulder?"

He jumped, startled out of his reverie, to find Scully staring at him again. "Yeah?"

"You okay? You still with me?"

"Yeah. Sure, Scully." He nodded slightly, then yawned.

She smiled softly at him, surprising him. Her hand left his shoulder and stroked through his hair gently, before moving to his hand to tug him off the counter.

"Come on, back to bed with you."

She led him back into the bedroom to the bed that hadn't been slept in. Pulling back the comforter, he collapsed on to the sheets. Scully pulled the comforter back over him and then sat next to his hip facing him.

"Do you want me to put something on those?" she asked, pointing to the red marks on his chest.

"Nah. They don't hurt too much anymore." He yawned again and his eyelids started drooping.

"Mulder.....I....." she looked at her hands, apparently flustered.

"What?" he asked, softly, eyes at half mast.

She paused, then sighed. "Nothing. We'll talk in the morning, okay?"

"Okay. Goodnight, Scully."

She looked at him carefully, still looking like she had something to say, then she nodded slightly and got up from the bed. "Goodnight, Mulder."

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As Scully lay down in her bed, in her room, the tears she had been holding back began to fall.

She was, quite simply, terrified. She wasn't sure what scared her more: her partner's apparent ability to get injured while sleeping in a bed in a locked hotel room, all the while claiming a physical manifestation of a dream; or her lover's increasing fear, anger and resentment, all of which were being directed at her.

The latter was, in no small part, her fault. He could read her like a book, even half asleep. He was half asleep when he saw the accusation in her

face and heard it in her voice. Scully the woman, the lover, had momentarily thought that Mulder.....*Mulder*.....had been unfaithful, and kinky to boot. Scully the partner knew that to be ridiculous.

Then, she had fallen into her pattern of knee-jerk denial of his theories when it was clear that he was in no shape to argue. He was exhausted and worn down. Vulnerable. Not only that, but something very strange *was* happening. She couldn't make herself believe that *Clarice* was doing this, though. Clarice was dead. Very dead. Ash, even. No, there was a logical explanation for what was happening. She would find it. *She* had to find it.

Both Scully the partner *and* Scully the lover knew that Mulder was in no condition to be involved in this case. She also knew that to try to prevent his involvement at this point would be akin to cutting him loose. That was to be avoided at all costs. There had to be a way to solve this, yet protect Mulder.

She could guess what he was thinking, from what little he had said. The dreams and the murders were connected. Solve the murders, stop the dreams. Or solve the dreams, stop the murders.

She shuddered, and pulled the covers up to her chin. Her tears dried as she wracked her brain to find a solution to this predicament. One that would keep Mulder safe.

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Mulder was in the warm, dark, soft place of deep sleep.

"You poor darling." A whispered voice.

"W-what?"

"I'm sorry you're being so tortured."

"This....this is y-your fault...."

"Well, I think your Scully has a rather large hand in your current predicament, my dear, sweet boy," the disembodied voice said, gently.

"No...."

"Shhhhh....." whispered the voice. "You must sleep, darling. Rest, or she will stop you from playing the game....."

A warm breeze soothed Mulder's agitation, and he slipped into a deeper state of sleep.

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The Ramada Inn, Room 407
St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 18, 1998; 7:55 a.m.

Mulder opened his eyes to see sunlight trying to creep into the room through the gaps in the heavy curtains. He rolled over and was surprised to see how late it was. He had slept late and slept well, once he had gotten that nightmare out of the way.

He slid out of bed and walked over to the windows. Throwing the curtains wide, he saw that it was very sunny outside, not a cloud in the sky.

"Good morning."

Mulder spun around so fast he almost fell over. Scully stood in the doorway to her room watching him.

"I didn't mean to startle you, Mulder. I just saw your room light up and I thought I'd see how you were," she said.

"I actually feel pretty damn good, Scully," he said, surprised to find that it was true. He walked past her to go into the vanity.

"Really," she said, unconvinced. She followed him into the vanity and watched him as he filled a glass with water.

"Really. It's a good thing, too, because I have a long list of things that I need to look into while you're doing your autopsies this morning."

"They've already been autopsied, I'm sure," Scully replied, a frown turning down the corners of her mouth as he gulped down the water and refilled the glass.

"But I need *you* to look at them, Scully," he replied, firmly.

She sighed, resigned. "What exactly is on your list of things to do?"

He walked into the bathroom and shut the door. "I'm going to get McIntyre to take me to the crime scenes, interview potential witnesses," he yelled through the closed door.

Her predictable objection was drowned out by the flushing of the toilet.

Now when I open this door, she'll be standing there with her arms crossed over her chest. She will then tell me that Skinner said that this was to be a desk assignment.

He opened the door and grinned at her.

"What's so funny, Mulder? You know perfectly well that Skinner wanted you to stay out of the field on this case."

He laughed outright and pulled Scully into a tight hug. "Scully, you are the one constant in my life and I thank you for that."

"Despite the fact that you're obviously feeling much better, Skinner did say....."

"He wanted me behind a desk *until* you got here. You're here," he said, smugly, throwing his arms wide. He grabbed his shaving kit and went back into the bathroom, closing the door firmly behind him.

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Scully stood staring at Mulder's bathroom door for a moment, perplexed and more than a little irritated. Then she turned and shuffled back to her own room to get dressed.

As she went through her morning ritual, she tried to figure out the best way to handle this situation.

He's obviously feeling better, he'll be fine out in the field. It's better than having him stand over me while I look at the bodies, right?

Or is it an act? He's extremely good at carrying on as if nothing is wrong.

There *is* something very strange going on here. Those marks on his chest, and the one on his neck. And the cut lip of a few nights ago. But there has to be a simple explanation for it. The cut on his lip and neck could have been self-inflicted, easily, but the lash marks? How?

I'll have to watch him tonight, see what happens. Maybe the boys could set me up with a camera, like they do in the hospital for studies of sleeping patterns.

She sighed, believing that he'd never go for that. But she had to try to convince him before he got badly hurt.

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New Orleans Police Department
5th Precinct
Same day; 9:30 a.m.

"Agent Mulder, good to see you again."

"Lieutenant." Mulder shook hands with the older, silver haired cop before sitting down in the chair facing his desk.

"Where's your partner? Scully, isn't it?" McIntyre asked, peering over Mulder's shoulder into the bull pen.

"She's at the morgue taking a look at the bodies. I was rather anxious for her to get right on it," replied Mulder, wryly. Understatement of the year, he thought to himself.

"Ah, I see. I'm very anxious to hear what she thinks. She did the autopsies on the victims from the previous....uh, killer...so she should be able to tell if it's the same...."

"Clarice *is* dead, Lieutenant," Mulder said quickly.

"I realize that." Lieutenant McIntyre frowned slightly and gave Mulder a penetrating stare. "Mulder...I heard what happened in Nashville and I understand you're having some problems..."

"Nightmares. Nothing more," he replied, holding himself very still.

"Regardless. You've been through quite the ordeal and I understand you haven't entirely recovered."

"What *exactly* are you trying to say?" Mulder asked, frustrated.

"I'm trying to say, 'take it easy'. We're on the same side here." McIntyre paused briefly. "Skinner told me--"

"The ground rules," finished Mulder with a sigh. He was starting to wonder if he could function like this. The hovering and the restrictions were enough to make him crazy. If he had to, he would get around them.

He felt like a captive. A prisoner. He wondered if that feeling would ever go away.

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The City Morgue
Same Day, Same Time

Scully walked rapidly into the typically cool and quiet section of the hospital that housed the morgue. As was usual in most hospitals, it was located in the basement and there was a sparse staff in attendance. She walked up to the main desk and the two men standing behind it. One had a name tag that identified him as a pathologist.

"Special Agent Dana Scully. I'm here to look at the bodies of the two young men who were murdered. The exsanguinations?" As Scully said that word, a shiver crawled up her spine. She flashed back briefly to the very early morning hours, Mulder lying in his own blood on his bed.

The resident pathologist just stared at her, a perplexed look on his face. He seemed rather young and he was definitely not the same pathologist she had worked with previously.

"There must be some mistake," he said carefully.

"What do you *mean*, there must be some mistake?" asked Scully testily. "Look, I know you don't know me, but I assure you that I'm a fully qualified pathologist and I need to see those bodies."

"The bodies aren't here." The young pathologist swallowed nervously.

"Not here? What do you mean *not here*! Well, where the hell are they, then?"

"Well....uh....the order came in to cremate them, so I did. I-I can show you the paperwork...."

"These are murder victims, they don't get cremated this fast. What about their families? What about evidence....this is an ongoing investigation! Who the hell ordered this?" Scully was outraged and frustrated as hell. She grabbed the proffered paperwork out of the pathologist's hand and scanned it. It looked legitimate and was signed by one Lieutenant Joseph McIntyre, N.O.P.D.

"I'll be taking this up with the Lieutenant," she said as she stuffed the papers in her briefcase. "Where are the autopsy files for each of the victims?" she asked, steaming.

"Uh....probably in Doctor LaTour's office. He isn't in today." The young man shuffled nervously on his feet, probably desperate for her to just leave him in peace.

"Can't *you* get them for me?" she asked through clenched teeth, trying not to berate him so harshly and simultaneously wondering why the senior pathologist wasn't in when he knew she would be coming.

"Uh....I can look....." he began, then scurried down the hall toward the offices at her glare.

Ten minutes later Scully was standing in the same place, tapping her foot on the linoleum and wondering how this hospital continued to function. The junior pathologist hurried back down the hall toward her, hands empty, and her stomach churned.

"Where are the files?" she asked.

"I t-think he must have taken them with him....they weren't in his office, as far as I could tell."

Scully just stared at him for a moment, contemplating.

"He would have sent copies to the investigating officer, wouldn't he?" she asked, resigned.

"Probably. Provided that he had completed the report to his satisfaction, anyway," he replied.

"What are the odds...." Scully muttered to herself. She thought for a moment. "I want his home phone number and I want you to call me at the cell phone number printed on this card," she handed him a business card, "in the event that you speak to him before I do. Please tell him that I am extremely anxious to see those files."

The pathologist scribbled a number on a sheet of paper and handed it to her. She took it and looked closer at his name tag. "Thank you, Doctor

Kinsey," she said, before she turned and stalked out the way she came.

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Esplanade Street
Same Day, 10:10 a.m.

The second crime scene was closer, so they stopped there first.

McIntyre had parked along the grassy median dividing Esplanade Avenue. The crime scene was in an alley between two houses just across the southbound lane of the avenue.

Mulder got out of the car and stood next to it, looking across the street with crime scene photos in hand.

McIntyre came around the front of the car to stand next to him. "The body was found in the alley next to the house, there," he said, pointing.

Mulder looked to his left at the intersection of Decatur and Esplanade. Check Point Charlie's, a dive bar on the scale of Igor's, was on the far side of Esplanade from where he stood and to his back. A block past that, on Decatur and Frenchmen, was the townhouse he had been going to in order to question a suspect when Clarice had first taken him, unawares.

He gauged the distance and wondered.

A bar.

A young man...although not so young as before.

Exsanguination.

Clarice was dead.

Who knew her M.O.?

Other cops?

A previous victim?

A previous, not-quite-dead victim?

Mulder began walking away from the crime scene and toward Check Point Charlie's.

"Mulder, what....?" sputtered McIntyre as he hurried to keep up.

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Mulder strode past Check Point Charlie's, noting to himself that he would need to come back at some point, and rounded the corner onto Decatur. McIntyre huffed and puffed along behind him, trying to keep up with Mulder's rapid pace.

Mulder slowed to a stop in front of the peach-colored townhouse on the corner of Decatur and Frenchmen and looked up at the second floor balcony. It was wide and beautifully decorated with plants and small trees. The windows were like doors.

He felt as if he were in a daze as he slowly approached the front door. He grasped the handle and slowly turned the knob. The door opened with a protesting creak.

"Mulder, what the fuck are you doing?!? You ever hear of knocking? We

don't have a goddamn warrant!"

Mulder barely registered him as he walked into the house. His head was pounding, his heart felt as though it might explode right out of his chest. There was a sick, knowing feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Mulder, goddamn it!" whispered McIntyre from the doorway, exasperated. "Get your ass back out here!"

Not hearing a word McIntyre said, Mulder went straight to the staircase in front of him and began climbing the stairs, knees quaking in an unnamable terror. Beads of sweat popped out on his forehead, his breathing rapid.

When he reached the top, he turned shakily toward the front of the house. There was a partly open door in front of him and he moved slowly toward it, fear growing with each step.

He stopped just short of entering the room and took a deep breath, trying to pull himself together. After another moments hesitation, he pushed the door open and stepped into the room.

Paintings on the walls.

Small, painted portraits on the mantle.

A chaise lounge with embroidered pillows.

A riding crop crunching under foot.

A tiny, silver ankle bracelet, its little bells glittering in a ray of sunshine where it struck the floor.

TEZCUCO
Chapter 6

2223 Frenchmen Street
June 18, 1998; 10:20 a.m.

Mulder stood, rooted to the spot just inside the door, and stared. White spots and dreamscapes flashed before his eyes, and he swayed slightly on his feet. The little ankle bracelet lying on the floor seemed to mock him as it twinkled in the sunlight. He blinked slowly, and shook his head as he heard McIntyre grumbling and swearing his way up the staircase and into the room.

"Mulder, I'm gonna....."

"He was attacked here.....but he got away," Mulder said, in a soft, trance-like voice.

"Ho-lee shit! You think this is the crime scene? And we just entered without probable cause? Goddamn it!"

"Couldn't prosecute anyway....." Mulder mumbled quietly, before walking, a bit unsteadily, over to the mantel. He stood studying the small paintings intently, barely registering McIntyre's voice as he called in what they had found. His finger lightly traced the gilt frame of the portrait of a familiar-looking blond. He turned slowly from the paintings and looked at the chaise. And the riding crop. His chest twinged painfully in recognition.

He moved towards the chaise to have a closer look and saw the blood. It was just barely visible, mottling the otherwise perfect embroidery on the pillows.

"All right. Yeah, un-fucking-believable. Make it quick."

Mulder looked up at McIntyre when he heard the cell phone snapped shut. McIntyre glared at him, and Mulder simply gestured to the pillows.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I have a forensic team on the way," McIntyre grumbled, shaking his head.

Mulder turned away from the chaise and slowly walked toward the balcony, memories of a dream flashing through his mind.

Breeches. Tight, black and velvet.

A snow white shirt with a frilly, old-fashioned cuff.

We were having such fun a moment ago...

I have no need for drugs, Fox...

I *will* break you and you *will* do as I say...

The marks on his chest tingled painfully, re-living the dream with him. He shivered as gooseflesh crawled quietly over across his skin. Standing on the threshold to the balcony, he could feel the prickling under his skin, his hair straining to stand on end.

It's happening again. Someone is watching me.

He opened the window and stepped out onto the wooden flooring of the balcony.

The sensation of being watched was so powerful that it was nearly physical. His skin crawled where the eyes swept over him, caressing. He flinched as they licked over his cheeks and down across his chest. His knees almost buckled as the feeling swept over his hips and around his thighs.

He grabbed the balcony railing tightly with both hands and searched the street and the surrounding buildings, his stomach roiling from the invasion. It was a rather quiet section of town and late enough in the day that most people were at work. A block past Esplanade, Decatur intersected with Frenchmen Street at a sharp angle. The townhouse stood on this corner and the balcony extended the whole length of the townhouse, from the Decatur side rounding the corner onto Frenchmen. In front of him Frenchmen continued on to intersect with Esplanade, creating a triangle bordered by the three streets. He saw no one out of the ordinary, no one paying him any attention. The sensation persisted.

His cell phone rang, breaking the spell so suddenly that his knees wobbled like jelly. He reached into his pocket and shakily pulled out the phone to answer it, his eyes still sweeping the streets and the buildings across the way.

"Mulder," he answered, voice hoarse.

"Mulder, it's me. What's wrong?"

"N-nothing. Nothing. We found a crime scene."

"You what? Where are you?"

"Decatur, off Esplanade. That house that we were to meet in front of when Clarice--when she...." his throat closed before he could finish the thought. He cleared it, painfully, as he leaned against the building wall, looking back towards Esplanade.

"I know what you're talking about," Scully said quietly into his ear. "I'm on my way."

Just then Mulder saw a movement out of the corner of his eye.

"Mulder?"

He turned towards the movement and saw a figure in a long cloak step out of a small cafe on Frenchmen, just past where it intersected with Decatur.

"Shit." He ran back into the house, past McIntyre and down the stairs.

"Mulder!" yelled Scully and McIntyre, in stereo.

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Mulder burst out the door of the townhouse at a dead run, nearly knocking down two uniformed cops as they made their way into the building.

"Hey, you! Stop! Police!"

Mulder heard them but ignored them, hoping that McIntyre was right behind him to smooth things over. He ran across Decatur, then up the sidewalk along Frenchmen. The figure in the cloak had turned left at the next intersection, out of sight.

He reached the intersection and slowed, staying on the opposite side of the street from where the figure had turned. A quick glance up the street revealed more houses, these more rundown as the neighborhood quickly deteriorated away from the French Quarter. There wasn't a soul in sight. He crossed Frenchman and started up the new street at a slow jog.

To Mulder, it seemed unnaturally quiet. There still wasn't anyone in sight. He slowed to a stop, breathing hard and trying to listen for any sound that would give away the location of his suspect.

A sudden skittering of gravel behind him caused him to whirl around, hand on his gun.

"Jesus Christ, you run fast! What the fuck is going on, Mulder?" McIntyre was panting, out of shape from too many years behind a desk.

Mulder sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I saw someone in a long black cloak leave a cafe on Frenchmen and head up this way."

"And?"

"It's 90 degrees outside and we're looking for a vampire...or at least a vampire wannabe. It only makes sense that they would dress like one."

"Then it also makes sense that they would only come out at night, right?" McIntyre asked, somewhat sarcastically.

Mulder thought for a moment. "Not necessarily. Clarice never worried about it. And maybe that's the reason for the cloak. Protection."

"You're really grasping at straws, Mulder. This is New Orleans. We have those vampire, witch and voodoo tours that run nightly out of Jean LaFitte's not more than six blocks from here. They all dress like that, and half of them are weirder than shit. Besides, Clarice never dressed like your everyday, average, stereotypical vampire. Whatever the fuck that means."

Mulder nodded slightly, letting it go, not eager to share his feelings of being watched. He turned away from McIntyre and surveyed the houses around him one more time. There was no feeling of being watched now.

Suddenly he just felt hot, tired, and a little discouraged. He took off his suit coat, slung it over his arm and headed back the way he had come, McIntyre falling into step beside him.

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When they got back to the townhouse, Mulder wasn't at all surprised to see Scully walking rapidly toward him up the sidewalk, her face making him think of a small storm cloud.

"Where'd you go, Mulder? The officers upstairs said you ran out of here so fast you nearly ran them down. That is, after you hung up on me." She seemed more angry than usual, Mulder thought to himself. McIntyre quickly excused himself and headed back into the house.

"Sorry. I saw someone who I thought was a possible suspect, so I went after him."

"Mulder--" she began, angrily.

"Scully--" he interrupted, a warning in his tone. This was not the time or the place for an argument. She was going to have to wait and beat him up later.

Beat me up? Is that what we're coming to?

His shoulders slumped in defeat, and he sighed. "Have you seen the crime scene?" he asked, steering them back to safer ground.

"Yes, while I was waiting for you I checked it out. It looks like the victim was lying on the chaise when things got out of control. He got away from his attacker and made it as far as the alley on Esplanade before the attacker caught up."

Mulder was nodding. "Yep, that was my conclusion as well. That actually answered a few questions that I had."

"Such as?"

He hesitated. "Such as the beating. How it could have taken place in that alley with no one seeing."

She stared at him, eyes searching his face. "And?" she asked softly.

He sighed again. "That room was in one of my dreams, Scully. I was the one on the chaise."

Her eyes widened and she began shaking her head. "Mulder--"

"I saw the riding crop. She hit me with it, you've seen the marks. She was wearing the same ankle bracelet that was lying on the floor upstairs."

"Mulder, that's impossible--"

"Did you look at the paintings? Did you?"

"Not really."

"There was one of a woman who looked like Clarice on the mantel," he said quickly.

"But still--"

"I will bet you dinner that the victim was wearing black velvet pants and a white shirt."

"Mulder, you said you didn't remember a lot about the dreams. It's entirely possible that you're filling the blanks in with crime scene detail, not the other way around," she said gently. "As for what the victim was wearing, haven't you already seen the file?"

She was talking softly and gently, as if to a delusional child. That just made Mulder more intent on proving her wrong.

"I haven't seen anything about the victims. And how did I know to look in that house, huh, Scully? How did I know? Lucky guess?" he asked, angrily.

"You can't deny that you have a history with this house, Mulder."

He sighed and ran a hand roughly through his hair. "So this is all just coincidence, is that it?"

"Why would all of this be happening? Do you honestly think that Clarice has come back from the dead to torment you? And if it isn't Clarice, then

who?" She laid her hand on his arm and squeezed gently. "I think that you are overwhelmed and still traumatized. We probably shouldn't have come here. Not so soon after everything that happened."

"We have to solve this or more people will die. And I won't stop having the damn nightmares."

Scully's chin dropped to her chest in defeat. After a moment, she looked back up at him, a grim half smile on her face.

"What next, Mulder?"

"We need to question the people in the cafe and in Checkpoint Charlie's. Then I need to study the file on the recent murders and the old one on Clarice."

Scully opened her mouth as if to object, but Mulder continued.

"But first we need to go to the house where you found me with Clarice."

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En Route to Maple Street

"Mulder, why are we going to that house? Why are you doing this to yourself?" Scully was becoming more worried by the minute.

"That crime scene sparked some memories for me. It was in my dream. One of my other dreams happened in that house where Clarice took me."

"So you think that we'll find another crime scene at that house because of your dream," Scully said, finishing his train of thought for him. She sighed, hating this case more and more with each passing revelation. Her skin crawled with some unnameable feeling. Fear or dread?

What do I do if he's right? What does this mean?

Then she remembered something that had slipped her mind in her mad rush to get to him and the subsequent questioning of potential witnesses.

"Mulder, something odd happened at the morgue." He looked over at her, questioningly. "When I got there, the head pathologist wasn't there, and the bodies had been cremated."

"What? This is an active murder investigation!"

"That's what *I* said, but the younger pathologist on duty showed me the paperwork. McIntyre's signature was on the forms releasing the bodies."

Mulder was silent for a moment, his forehead creased in concentration. "That doesn't make sense. He was anxious for you to see the bodies and look over the paperwork. He told me so himself."

"So does McIntyre have copies of the pathologists' reports?" she asked, her instincts telling her that something more was going on here.

"Not that I'm aware of. All he has is what his people got at the crime scene." He paused. "You think someone sabotaged the case?"

"I think we need to talk to McIntyre. His signature on release forms? Combine that with the cremation of both bodies and the conspicuous absence of the lead pathologist *and* his report?"

"Too much. Where does this pathologist live?" Mulder asked with a frown.

"I can find out," Scully replied grimly, pulling out her cell phone.

"Once you find out, call McIntyre and ask him about his signature and then have him send some uniforms to the pathologist's house."

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2209 Maple Street
Same day, 3:15 p.m.

Mulder pulled the car up in front of the house that Scully pointed out. His own recollections of the exterior of the house were almost non-existent. He hadn't been conscious when he had been taken in, and by the time he had been taken out it was with a gunshot wound. He certainly didn't seem to recognize it now.

"Mulder, tell me what you remember from this dream before we go in there," Scully asked carefully.

He stared at the house, unblinking. "I was jogging," he began in a soft monotone, "I was wearing nylon jogging shorts. I never wear those...." he broke off, confused and surprised at his recollection.

"What else?" Scully asked quietly, unnerved by his dreamy tone.

"Somehow--I was in the house. I couldn't get back out." His throat bobbed as he swallowed convulsively, a light sweat breaking out across his forehead despite the air conditioning in the car. Scully laid her hand gently on his arm in growing concern.

"You don't--" she began.

"They were red...the shorts. She bit me, here." He touched his fingers to the small bandage on his neck. "We were on the couch--like before." He finally looked away from the house and directly at Scully. "That's all I remember," he said and looked at his hands lying in his lap.

Scully could tell that he wasn't telling her everything but she wasn't going to push. His recitation of what he could remember frightened her. It was as if he were in a trance.

"You remembered this because of seeing the other crime scene?"

He shrugged. "It kinda came back to me."

Scully unlocked her car door and released her seat belt. "Well, let's go in," she said, dread creeping into her voice. She opened the door and stepped out. Mulder sat there for a moment longer before following her lead.

Scully strode quickly and confidently up the walk, but her insides were twisting in apprehension. She pulled out her I.D. as she reached the door and knocked. She could feel the tension in Mulder as he stood behind her.

No one answered so she knocked again, harder. Mulder walked to one of the windows and peered in, using his hands to shield the glare.

"Probable cause, Scully," he said softly, pulling his gun.

She hurried to the window and looked in. "Fuck."

"Such language," said Mulder with a shaky, nervous smile.

They walked back to the door and Scully turned the knob. It twisted easily under her hand and she pushed the door open.

She swung into the room, gun out in front of her. "Federal Agents! We're armed!" She entered a little farther and Mulder followed, covering her.

The house was just as she remembered it, with the exception of slightly different furniture. It was a small shotgun, each room opening into the next all the way to the back of the house. It certainly made searching it easier, since there were no rooms opening off on either side.

She moved towards the couch and glanced back at Mulder. He stood just inside the door, his eyes flicking to her, the couch and to the next room, his

gun out in front of him in both hands. The only sign of his discomfort with the situation was the trickle of sweat down the side of his face. He met her eyes and motioned with his head toward the back of the house. She nodded as she reached forward to lay her fingers on the still throat of the man on the couch, confirming that he was dead.

Scully turned and followed as Mulder moved to the side of the archway that led to the bedroom. He swung around the corner and she took the counterpoint position, covering him. They moved through the house in this manner, silently checking, but knowing that the perpetrator was long gone.

They walked back to the living room and Scully pulled out her cell to call McIntyre. As she told him what they had found, she watched Mulder carefully. He simply stood in front of the corpse with his head bowed and eyes closed, as if in prayer. She thought it more likely that he was trying to pull himself together.

She clicked her phone closed. "They're on their way, Mulder."

His head jerked up and he looked at her with big soulful eyes. "Now what do you think, Scully?" he asked her in a rough voice.

She flinched at the direct question. "I--I don't know what to think," she replied softly. She looked at the dead man on the couch and her stomach knotted in fear. Dark brown hair, thin red nylon shorts, sweat-stained tee shirt.....sitting on the couch with a wound in his neck, yet very little blood.

Mulder gave a strangled, choked bark that could have passed for a laugh if he hadn't looked so miserable. He brushed past her on his way out the front door. "I'm waiting outside--I need some air."

Scully blinked back the tears that threatened at his words.

I've let him down. Why do I do this? Why can't I learn? The last time I reacted this way to one of his theories he nearly got killed. I have to let go of my fear and think about this.

He's led us to two crime scenes because of what he remembers from dreams.

The crime scene detail seems to match, right down to the location of the wounds.

It's tearing him apart. It's tearing *us* apart.

He *is* somehow connected to this. There's too much to be coincidence now.

Someone wants to take him away from me again.

That was it right there. She was terrified that he would be right because of what it meant. That someone was after him again and she wouldn't be able to protect him.

Her thoughts began to swirl around her, chaotic and confused. She shook her head, trying to clear it and regain her professional detachment. She had to figure out the best way to handle this.

I will do whatever it takes to keep him safe. He's *mine*.

"Mine," she whispered under her breath, as if sending out a message to the perpetrator.

Scully walked over to the corpse and began looking for trace evidence. She sucked in a gasp when she noticed the scratch on the dead man's inner thigh, near the hem of his shorts. Clarice's assault on Mulder flashed through her head, briefly, before she squashed it. She didn't want to think about how that scratch may have gotten there.

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Mulder sat down on the steps of the front porch and rested his head in his hands, his elbows on his knees. His head was pounding and he was trying desperately not to scream out in frustration, anger and fear.

How can she not believe me now? Why won't she just consider it?

Fear. He was terrified. Someone was speaking to him, controlling his dreams, and he could do nothing to stop it. Nothing other than find the person responsible.

Powerless. That was a sensation he was becoming all too familiar with, and he resented it. Hated it. First Clarice, and now this...person...thing...entity. Scully. Skinner. Everyone was trying to control him. Everyone.

One person strips away your defenses, your power and then everyone else in your life tries to do the same thing in the guise of "helping" or "protecting" you.

I'm suffocating.

And I'm as alone in my beliefs as ever.

Think about it, Mulder. They don't mean to do it, that's just how it feels. They aren't Clarice, purposely taking away your control and using you. They do care, they just don't believe.

He sighed deeply and rubbed his eyes. It was only three in the afternoon and he was exhausted.

"Well, hello there, young man."

Mulder's head shot up in surprise to see a wizened old woman standing right in front of him. She chuckled.

"I didn't mean to startle you, dearie," she said kindly.

"That's okay, ma'am. What can I do for you?" he asked, as he heard Scully come out onto the porch behind him.

"I was just wondering if you and your wife had gotten all moved in."

"No, ma'am, we aren't moving in," he replied carefully.

"Really? I saw you jogging by here the other night and then go into the house."

Mulder's mouth dropped open in surprise. He quickly snapped it shut. "Are you sure it was me and not just someone who looked like me?"

"Honey, I may be old, but my eyesight isn't failing me at *all*," she replied with a proud smile. "You looked like such a nice young man and I was hoping that someone like yourself would move into that old place."

"You mean no one lives here?" asked Scully from right behind Mulder.

"Oh, no. There was a problem in that house some months back and it's been empty ever since."

"Could someone have moved in without you noticing?" Mulder asked.

"Oh, my, no. I never go anywheres much. Too old. I just work in my garden, there," the old woman replied, pointing to the house directly across the street. "I was rather surprised to see the two of you...I hadn't seen any movers or anything, after all."

"Ma'am, we're--"

"So what happened here a few months back?" Mulder asked at the same

time as Scully began to identify them.

"Well, I've heard stories, but I was in the hospital with pneumonia so I wasn't here. Let me tell you, though--that young woman that lived in this house? I knew she was wicked right from the start," she said, confidently. She leaned forward slightly and whispered conspiratorially to Mulder, "I have a kind of *sight*, if you know what I mean."

Mulder couldn't help but smile at the woman. "Yes, I know what you mean."

The old woman straightened slightly and studied him. "Why, you *do* know, don't you, son? And a police officer, too. How 'bout that."

Mulder's eyes widened and he heard Scully snort softly behind him. He smiled again. "You're good, ma'am."

The old woman chuckled again. "Son, it's just empathy with your fellow man. You open your eyes and really look...you be surprised by what you see. The two of you dressed so nice, hanging around a vacant house. Your face when I explained my sight. You aren't laughing at me, young man, you're a believer. But, oh, so sad, those eyes!" She reached over and patted Mulder on the hand. "It may get worse, dearie, but it'll get better." She winked at him, gave Scully a little wave, and turned to head back across the street, her gait slow but sure.

Mulder stared after her, thinking about what she had said. Scully sat down next to him and slipped her hand into one of his.

"I think your eyes are already really open, Mulder," she said softly.

He looked at her searchingly. "Why, Scully, I think that's one of the nicest things you've ever said to me," he said with a little smile.

"I know I seem to argue just for the sake of arguing sometimes--but I do agree that something very strange is going on here."

"As much as it drives me crazy, Scully, your arguing with me actually helps clarify my thinking. So, it can't be bad, right?" he asked her, treading lightly, trying to smooth things over.

"I suppose not," she whispered back to him with a look in her eyes akin to love.

"It really is amazing what you can see when you open your eyes," he said with a smile.

"I'll have to give it a try," she said, wryly. He snorted out a surprised and delighted laugh and nudged her with his shoulder.

He turned toward her to speak and noticed that she was, once again, very serious. He hesitated and her hand tightened in his.

"Mulder--" she paused, not looking at him but at their intertwined hands.

"What is it, Scully?" he asked, unable to read her. He watched her take a deep breath.

"I want you to take yourself off this case."

TEZCUCO
Chapter 7

2209 Maple Street
June 18, 1998; 3:15 p.m.

"I want you to take yourself off this case," she said, her heart in her throat. Mulder dropped her hand and blinked at her.

"What? What did you just say?" he asked in a deceptively calm tone.

"Please, hear me out. This is getting too dangerous, too close to you," she said, hating the pleading tone that crept into her voice.

He stood abruptly, walked three steps away and whirled back to face her, hands on hips. "What is it you don't trust, *Scully*? My ability to watch your back or my sanity?" he growled.

"That's not--I didn't mean--dammit, Mulder! I trust you!" She jumped to her feet and faced him, her hands on *her* hips. "You know I trust you. But you have identified two murder scenes that seem to be right out of your dreams. These dreams are about someone who assaulted and tortured you. Something extremely bizarre is going on here and I don't know what it is or how to explain it. But the one thing I do know is that you are right at the center of it." She paused for a breath and tried to soften her posture into a less confrontational one. "You're vulnerable, Mulder. I won't lose you to this again."

He stared at her with angry, glassy eyes, and her insides ached from wanting to touch him, hold him. She held her ground and waited.

"So. Let me get this straight. You now believe that my dreams are directly connected to--this," he waved his hand around in the air, gesturing back towards the house. The rest of his body looked painfully stiff with the tension that radiated out of him.

"I--," she sighed and closed her eyes, then rubbed her forehead with her fingers. "Yes--somehow."

"And you expect me to just--walk away," he asked in a low voice, still staring at her, his gaze penetrating.

She thought for a moment, remembering other times she had drawn lines in the sand. And what had resulted. "If your theory is right, you are a target. You are *the* target, Mulder. Not only that, but you haven't been sleeping and this case is tearing you up inside."

"Taking myself off the case won't change anything. For that matter, it could get worse. And I slept fine last night."

"After that nightmare, you mean. I can solve this case with McIntyre--" she began.

"Why don't you just admit that you think that I'm cracking up, that I would put you in danger by staying on this case!" he said angrily.

"No! I think you would put yourself in danger," she blurted, voice raised and angry now as well. "And I'll do whatever I have to do to prevent that."

"That last yank on the leash was a bit too sharp for me, Agent Scully," he growled quietly as he leaned toward her, making her heart pound harder. "You gonna call Skinner? Is that it? Reel me in? Make me behave like a good little dog?"

"That's not fair!" she gasped, her mind whirling. "I'm only trying to--"

"Protect me? Or control me?" he asked, backing away from her.

"Mulder--" She then looked in his glittering eyes, noted his rapid breathing and the physical distance between them. His arms were crossed tightly and protectively in front of himself.

Oh, no.

She thought desperately, trying to regroup and keep him from retreating further.

"I--I'm scared. Do you understand that, Mulder?" she asked, in a desperate attempt to make him understand. She watched as his eyes widened, incredulous. "Someone or something is after you. At least, that's how it seems, and I don't want to lose you," she whispered, walking slowly

toward him. The tightness in her chest loosened slightly when he didn't back away.

"Do you understand how *I'm* feeling, Scully? Do you?" he asked, a desperate edge to his voice. "It's like--" he broke off abruptly as McIntyre's car screeched up to the curb and the lieutenant hopped out.

"Well, this is getting real fucking weird--you okay, Mulder? You don't look so good."

"I'm fine," Mulder said tightly. "I'm going back to the hotel to look at the files."

Scully watched in stunned disbelief as he walked to their car, opened the passenger door, and pulled out the case files. He slammed the car door and was three strides up the sidewalk before she could process what he was doing.

Scully jogged after him as three more police cars pulled up in front of them.

"Mulder, wait!" She reached him and grabbed his arm. When he jerked away from her, she swallowed thickly, willing the tears away. "If you're going to go, at least take the car. Please."

"I need the exercise," was all he said before turning and heading quickly back toward St. Charles Avenue.

She stood there for a moment watching him walk away, and wondered if she'd ever see him again. The fear was burning a hole in her stomach.

"Would you care to explain to me what the hell just happened?"

McIntyre. She took a deep breath and turned to face the detective. She found she didn't know where to start.

"We--argued," she admitted, reluctantly.

"No kidding?" asked a sarcastic McIntyre. "Why don't you start by explaining how Mulder manages to find these crime scenes. The man has been here less than 24 hours and he's already found two that were previously unknown."

"Well--he's been having nightmares."

"Nightmares? Of the crime scenes?" McIntyre's shift from sarcastic to incredulous was swift.

"Hear me out. He saw this house in one of his dreams. He saw the last townhouse, the ankle bracelet--" As she spoke the words, her heart fluttered in her chest.

"This fucking town. I mean, it's New Orleans and all, but we really don't have this sort of thing happen on a regular basis, ya know?" McIntyre voice dripped in sarcasm.

"Lieutenant--" Scully began angrily.

"I'm not saying you're crazy, Agent Scully. Really, I'm not. But don't you think that there's another explanation--"

"Like what? Don't you think I've wracked my brain?! Do you think I want to believe that something totally bizarre and unexplainable is going on?" she asked, voice raised in anger.

"Maybe you don't want to believe that Mulder is having a breakdown? That he's too close to the case and he's just flipping out?"

Scully sucked in an outraged breath at the same time that her heart sank at the possible truth in his words. Regardless, she needed McIntyre to help her on this case, she couldn't alienate him.

"Come on, Scully, you gotta have more than an ankle bracelet in a dream," McIntyre continued softly, when she didn't respond.

After a moment's consideration, she continued, her heart pounding as she added it up.

"Mulder's been having prophetic dreams. He says that he feels someone is controlling them. He knew there was someone in this house just as he knew that the townhouse on Frenchmen was connected to that other murder," she paused, exhaling shakily.

"And?" prompted McIntyre.

"He has--whip marks--on his chest. The ankle bracelet he says Clarice was wearing in his dream was found on the floor of the townhouse," she said haltingly. When she spelled it out for the lieutenant the evidence did stack up, despite her skepticism.

"Anything else?" asked McIntyre, eyes wide.

"Did the first victim have a badly cut lip, Lieutenant? Mulder had one in DC the same night the first murder occurred. The victim we found today has a bite mark that is *identical* to one Mulder has on his neck. And--and the clothes Mulder says he was wearing in this last dream match the clothing the victim is wearing."

McIntyre sighed. Then he stared at her for a moment. Finally, he nodded slightly in resignation. "Okay.....let's say that Mulder is connected to this somehow. I'm not saying I buy this completely, but I'll grant you that something fucking weird is going on. I mean, Mulder is a good profiler and all, but *nobody* is that brilliant. What do you suggest we do?"

"My number one priority is to protect Mulder--which is why I need your help on this. I need to watch Mulder's back, which will make it difficult follow our normal investigative procedures. I need you on our side. I need your help investigating."

"This goes way beyond your typical murder case. If...and I mean *if*...you and Mulder are right, it seems that it would be extremely difficult to catch this suspect. I mean, what the hell else can this person do if they are capable of controlling Mulder's dreams?"

Scully just looked at him, eyes widening. "I--I have to go to the hotel...I'll be back."

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Mulder picked his way carefully along the wildly tilted sidewalk on St. Charles Avenue. The avenue, like much of New Orleans, was lined by massive trees whose roots had done significant damage.

With each step he took, the bustle of the traffic, combined with the sunny warmth of the day, began to ease his depression and instill a sense of freedom. He felt as though he were moving under his own power for the first time in days. No one was controlling him or hovering over him.

The last thing he had expected when he had taken this case was the feeling of being smothered by his own partner, his lover. He had been doing so well, recovering physically and emotionally. But the claustrophobic feeling that made his skin crawl and his throat lock up was intense. Scully and Skinner trying to protect him, Scully trying to get him off the case; her hovering over him; the dreams.....they all combined to make him feel as if he were no longer in control of his own life. He may as well be tied to that bed in the well house, for all the power he felt he had at the moment.

He shivered. Good old Jim Bob was definitely dead. His was one body accounted for that he wouldn't have to consider. That only left several hundred possible suspects.

"Slight exaggeration, Mulder. There are a very limited number of people

who could be the murderer," he whispered to himself.

He stopped walking suddenly. He was alone, he had gotten a bit of sleep and the whirlwind of the arrival in New Orleans and the case had momentarily slowed. His mind, which had felt shrouded in a thick fog for days, began to clear a bit.

"Oh, shit! Of all the simple....."

He began to jog down the sidewalk towards the hotel, taking care not to trip.

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Ramada Inn, Room 407
St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 18, 1998; 4:25 p.m.

"Mulder?!"

When there was no reply, she closed the hotel room door and walked slowly into the room. It only took her a moment to realize that he hadn't been there yet. Her heart pounding, she sat down on the edge of his bed and began to wait.

He should be here, I should have passed him on the street.

But he knows these streets better than you do, he could have taken a different way.

What can a vampire do?

Pluck him right off the street in broad daylight?

If so, why hasn't she/he/it done it yet?

She shivered, then quickly crossed the room to turn off the air conditioner. She looked out the window into the dusky evening of the Garden District, scanning the streets for a familiar, lanky form. When she didn't see one, she fingered the ever-present cell phone in her pocket.

He's mad at you already, what difference could it make to call him now?

You could make it ten times worse, that's what.

But if he's been taken, I'll need all the time I can get to find him.

Fifteen minutes. Give him fifteen minutes.

She sat back down on the bed and began gnawing on a perfectly manicured nail, nerves stretched to the limit.

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Ramada Inn
St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans
Same day, 5 minutes earlier

Mulder slowed as he approached the hotel.

"Alone in my room? Not a great idea."

"You say something, sir?" asked the valet standing nearby.

"Just talking to myself. New bad habit," Mulder smiled with a touch of self-mockery.

"It's the heat sir, just the heat," replied the valet with a chuckle.

"So, you're saying that a tall, cold drink will stop it?"

"Certainly couldn't hurt," said the valet, still smiling.

"Igor's it is, then," said Mulder. "Nice and public," he added in a whisper. He took off towards Jackson Avenue with a new lightness in his step.

He was going to solve the case. Or at least make a damn good start of it.

Ten minutes later, Mulder had the original and current case files spread out on a table in front of the windows, a picture of Clarice staring back at him. His jacket was off and slung over the back of the chair and his tie hung loosely around his neck, both serving to make him a bit out of place in the dark dive bar. A huge glass of iced tea was rapidly making a condensation ring on the wood of the table.

On the top sheet of legal pad, he had made two columns. At the top of one column was Clarice's name, followed by a list:

- 1) caused mild hallucinations
- 2) victims are young, easily manipulated
- 3) some evidence of weak mind control
- 4) unable to control older men without use of drugs

Motivation: personal, sexual gratification/control, power

He tapped the pen against the paper, thinking of other distinctive traits. When nothing came to him, he started on the second column, headed with the word UNSUB.

- 1) dream manipulation (featuring Scully and Clarice in positions of power)
- 2) real, physical manifestation of dream injuries/torture
- 3) dreams mimic actual events/physical surroundings
- 4) higher level of physical torture
- 5) possible physical morphing ability
- 6) slightly older, male victims

Motivation: Unknown?

He wracked his brain to remember more detail from the dreams, but it wasn't coming to him. Looking at the two columns, one thing was immediately apparent to Mulder. He pulled out the old file on Clarice and began scanning the pages.

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Scully alternated between pacing and rubbing her cell phone as if it were the genie's lamp or a good luck charm.

His fifteen minutes are up.

He'll be extremely angry.

That's a chance I'm willing to take. I have to take.

She sat down on the bed near the window and hit speed dial number one. Just as she was about to hit send, there was a noise in the hall. It was like the sound of a glass falling on the carpet and was followed quickly by a very slight, warm breeze, like someone moved in the room, disturbing the

air, making it shift.

She dropped the phone and pulled her gun. Her skin was prickling, crawling, like someone was in the room with her. Watching.

"Mulder?"

No answer.

She moved slowly towards the door that enclosed the vanity, and the bathroom beyond, her gun out in front of her. As she passed the open door to her room, she pushed it shut and locked it.

She stood in front of the open door to the vanity. It was very dark, only getting enough light from the main room to create more shadows.

"I'm a Federal Agent! Whoever is in there, I want you to come out now with your hands up," she said firmly.

A moment, still nothing. She started slowly towards the door. When she was close enough, she reached around the wall and flicked the light switch.

Mulder's bag, a pair of blue jeans pulled halfway out. A pair of boxer briefs on the floor. His toiletry kit on the long counter. No one.

She moved through the vanity toward the bathroom, gun still firmly gripped in both hands and held stiffly out in front of her, her heart pounding.

The light switch for the bathroom was on the wall next to the door, in the vanity area. She flicked it on and could immediately see there was no one in the bathroom.

A nervous smile trembled on her lips and she wondered if maybe she was going insane.

She had just lowered her gun when the shower curtain hanging open in the tub moved. She didn't have time to react before the warm breeze washed through her hair from behind and kissed her face lightly. Her eyelids drooped and she yawned. The gun slipped from her fingers, unnoticed, and she stumbled back into the bedroom.

When she reached the bed, she crawled in, pulling Mulder's pillow to her face and inhaling his scent. She smiled as she drifted off to sleep.

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Igor's
St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 18, 1998; 6:35 p.m.

"That's all you have? No, okay. Yeah, I understand. Thanks for your help, Detective Stanton." Mulder snapped his phone shut and laid it on the table.

Detective Harry Stanton had worked with Alex DuMont in San Francisco on a serial murder case that had born a striking resemblance to the case he and Scully had originally worked here in New Orleans a few months ago. Just a month or two before the murders started in New Orleans, Alex had been brutally attacked and raped by the murderer, but had survived. She had subsequently moved to New Orleans and resumed working as a cop.

Mulder and Scully had argued over what had happened next. Scully's position was that Alex had developed a second, dominant, personality, Clarice, because of the brutality of the attack and rape. That personality had been taking revenge on men, prior to developing an obsession for Mulder.

Mulder had believed, and more so now than ever, that Clarice had been a fledgling vampire. She had claimed to be attacked by a male vampire in San Francisco. Surviving such an attack, depending on exactly what transpired, could turn a person into a vampire. She had the desire to control and seduce men, in addition to a growing taste for blood.

They had agreed that Clarice's status as a vampire, or not, hadn't been the important factor. She'd been killed and her body cremated, so there was no way of proving she had been a vampire. Or not. She had been very violent and destructive while alive, regardless of her status as a human, and Mulder needed to move past it. Her obsession with him had nearly cost him his life and her sexual assault continued to torment him in a thousand little ways.

Now the question was coming back to haunt him. But he thought he knew the answer, in a way. He had been - unfortunately - right in his assessment of Clarice. She was a vampire. There was another vampire working New Orleans now. Since the crimes involved him, in a way, there was only one question. Was this vampire made by Clarice? Or one who made her? The answer was obvious.

He looked at his lists and notes, disappointed that this hadn't occurred to him sooner.

"Oh, give yourself a break, Fox."

Mulder started and reached for his gun.

"That won't be necessary, my boy," said the figure suddenly standing over him.

Mulder placed his hand back on the table and looked at it as if it were a traitor for its involuntary action. His heart began to pound and his mouth went dry with terror as he looked up at his tormentor. All the way up. Six foot four inches tall, broad shoulders, dark wavy hair that nearly reached his shoulders. Black pants encased narrow hips and black silk shirt covered a chest more broad and strong than Mulder's own. Handsome face with sharp, chiseled features. But his eyes were gray, lifeless and cold. Reptilian.

"Who are you?" Mulder asked steadily.

"You know who I am. I must say, you are a strong one. Very clever, too," said the man as he lowered himself into a chair opposite Mulder.

Mulder just stared at him, terrified yet intrigued. He couldn't move even if he had wanted.

"Nothing to say, Fox?" he paused. "Okay, I'll talk for a moment. You shouldn't be so hard on yourself, darling. You've only been here for a little more than a day, for heaven's sake. Pardon the expression," he laughed.

Mulder's skin crawled in recognition. The dreams.

"You figured out what was going on much too quickly for me. At least, the who of it anyway. Or should I say *what*?" Another brief laugh, but tinged with something other than humor.

"What do you want with me? Why are you seeking me out?" Mulder asked, amazingly calm now that he had a face for the enemy.

"I think you know some of what I want. As to the rest, well, that's part of the game." He reached forward and ran a long, frigid finger over the back of Mulder's hand, a sly smile playing about his lips.

"I'm not interested in playing. Or in anything else," Mulder said coldly, trying to pull his hand away.

This time his companion laughed out loud. "Maybe you don't have a choice in the matter! Oh, you are so brave!" he exclaimed as he leaned

toward Mulder, grinning in delight.

Mulder's eyes were drawn to the man's teeth, glittering in the dimness of the bar. He shivered. He felt anything but brave at the moment. He wanted to run, fast and far.

"Ahhhh...but that is why you are so very desirable, Fox! You won't run, even if you could. I can feel your fear. I can taste it. I want it. And still you hunt. Few humans will work through their deepest fears and show such bravery."

"You read my mind," said Mulder softly, amazed that his voice was steady.

"In a way."

"Do you ever give a straight answer?" Mulder asked, squashing the rising fear which twisted in his stomach.

"Maybe. That depends on the question," the vampire added, smiling again.

"Why are you here, then?" asked Mulder.

"Hmmm....why am I here, why am I here. Good question." His broad chest heaved in a silent chuckle at his own game.

Mulder snorted. "Are you going to answer on not?"

"Insolent brat. I think I like this trait, too, the strength and this control you have over your worst fears and terror. Yet so vulnerable and open-minded. Delightful."

"Answer the damn question!" Mulder snarled, angry now at being played with.

In a flash, the man sitting opposite had Mulder's jaw pinched between freezing cold fingers, squeezing. Mulder's mouth opened slightly in a gasp. No one in the entire bar seemed to notice what was going on and he wondered if that was this man's doing as well. He was in serious trouble. So much for staying in a public place.

"This game is played by my rules, Agent Mulder. Why am I here? That's part of the game. I decided it was time to move to the next level."

"Is it revenge for Clarice?" croaked Mulder, around the pain in his jaw. His breathing was harsh and rapid, he was beginning to see stars.

Another laugh. "You just don't give up, do you?"

The man released his hold on Mulder, and Mulder leaned back in his chair, rubbing his jaw. His heart was beating so fast and hard he thought he might pass out. He saw the man's eyes flick to the pulse in his neck and he began to hyperventilate.

"Calm down," his companion said firmly.

Amazingly, Mulder did calm slightly. The level of control this man could exert over him was terrifying. He wondered why the man, the *thing*, didn't just kill him and get it over with.

"That would be no fun at all, Fox. Besides, what makes you think I want to kill you? Hmm? Be a good boy, and you could live for a very, very long time. So to speak."

A chuckle followed those words and Mulder could feel his testicles crawl up into his body.

"You've been reading too much Anne Rice. I won't be like you. I'll die first," he said, his voice harsh from the rage he felt building.

"Oh, speaking of melodramatic! Did I say that you would be like me?" he asked with another chuckle.

Mulder's head began to spin. Riddle upon riddle upon riddle and he was in no condition to be clever.

"Oh, you *are* clever, Fox. You can find me, if you try. And you can figure out what I want. Once I get what I want, you *and* your partner can get out of this alive. Don't disappoint me. I hate to be disappointed."

Mulder's chest tightened at the oblique reference to Scully. "You go anywhere near Scully and I will drive a stake through your heart," he growled.

"Aren't you going to try that anyway, darling?" the vampire asked with a serene smile.

"So you want me, is that it?" asked Mulder, now on the verge of hysteria. "You take me and Scully stays alive?"

"Silly boy. If it were that simple you'd be in my bed already. No, I have a purpose. A goal, you might say. You'll just have to wait for it. Or figure it out. Before I lose patience." With that, the vampire got up and walked toward the door, turning back to Mulder just before leaving. "Oh, Fox? Say hello to Dana for me?" He smiled and was gone.

Mulder went cold, the blood draining from his face, his heart hammering in his chest. He scrambled to put the file back together, his hands trembling.

Scully. Got to get to Scully.

His flight from the bar was fast.

And careless. As he jogged past the entrance to the alley leading to the courtyard behind Igor's, a hand reached out and pulled him easily off his feet and into a strong embrace. In the blink of an eye, Mulder found himself at the far end of the long, darkening alley wrapped tightly in the vampire's arms, his back firmly pressed against the other man's chest. He opened his mouth to cry out, but nothing happened.

This time, the chuckle he heard was in his ear. All the hairs on his neck bristled as his skin crawled.

"See how easy it is, Fox?" he whispered in Mulder's ear, before flicking his tongue out and licking the whorls.

Mulder tried to struggle, but his upper body was effectively immobilized. He tried kicking out with his feet, only to be lifted and pinned against the wall. His mind flashed back to Clarice and Jim and he began to panic.

"Calm, Fox. I'm not going to hurt you. Much," the voice whispered.

Mulder laid his forehead against the brick of the alley wall and struggled to breathe normally. His thoughts were chaotic, tumbling one over the other. No matter how he tried, he couldn't regain control. He continued to pant, his heart racing.

"I'm not going to force you, Fox, I swear. I want you to come to me of your own free will."

For some reason he couldn't fathom, Mulder believed him and began to calm slightly.

"It won't happen, you sonofabitch. Let me go," he demanded, his voice strong, covering his fear.

"Are you sure, Fox? I can tell if you're lying, you know," the vampire whispered seductively. "I can see what goes on in that head of yours. Perhaps this will help."

Mulder felt the arms around him change, as did the body pressing him tightly into the wall.

"Mulder," a new yet familiar voice whispered, "don't you want me? Can you resist me?"

"Cheater," Mulder spat out, hoarsely. "You aren't Scully."

"How can you be so sure? Don't I look like Scully?" asked the calm, measured voice of his partner.

The arms fell away from Mulder and he turned. Scully was standing in front of him in a filmy, flowing garment, her hair tumbled about her face like she'd just gotten out of bed. His bed. His head began to swim. "You're not her. Y--you're him. Or am I dreaming again? How much of this is real?" He pressed both hands to his head and squeezed.

"Scully" reached out and ran both hands down his chest and he shivered. When she licked her lips, he stepped away from her and bumped into the wall behind him. She pursued, pouting slightly as if his retreat hurt her.

She pressed herself into his side and, both hands in his hair, pulled his lips down to hers. Her breasts rubbed against him, he could feel the taut nipples through the two thin layers of clothing that kept their skin from touching. Still he resisted, but the lips that caressed his and the tongue that demanded entrance to his mouth felt like Scully's. A groan as her tongue flicked against his and one of her small, strong hands went to front of his pants and caressed him through the cloth of his suit pants. She reached farther and found his balls, rolling them in her hand. He began to harden, groaning in misery, the truth of the situation still niggling at the back of his brain.

"Stop, s-stop," he groaned, pulling her hand away. "This isn't real, you're not her. I won't...."

"You want me...."

"I want Scully," Mulder replied. Despite knowing on some intellectual level that it wasn't her, his arousal was becoming painful. She looked like Scully, kissed like her, even smelled like her. He shook his head violently and almost fell down, he was so dizzy and confused.

She just smiled and pulled him down for another kiss. A sharp pinch and the taste of blood filled his mouth. He gasped into the mouth that changed and grew under his and he pulled away. A cold, masculine chuckle filled the air around him as a strong chest and arms pinned him against the wall once again. A large hand reached down and skimmed over the erection tenting his pants.

"Hmmm.....you only want Scully?"

"You..you cheated, you bastard!" he yelled as he renewed his struggles.

"Who ever said I would play fair?" the vampire asked with a smile. "Now I need a goodbye kiss and I will be off." He pushed Mulder's head to the side as if he were a rag doll and sank his teeth into the still tender area of Mulder's neck where the previous bite had been.

Mulder groaned, his eyes rolling back into his head, and collapsed into the larger man's arms.

TEZCUCO
Chapter 8

Ramada Inn, Room 407
St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 18, 1998; 8:55 p.m.

Scully woke suddenly, right in the middle of an erotic dream about Mulder. Before they got to the "good" part. She groaned, still extremely sleepy.

As she lay there, something began to niggle at her brain. She was forgetting something.

Suddenly it hit her, and she sat up in the darkness.

Darkness? She fumbled for the lamp switch and turned it, blinking as the light filled the room.

"Oh, my God, what have I done?" she asked herself as she looked first at her watch and then out the window at the dark sky. She leapt out of Mulder's bed and felt around for her gun. She only found the cell phone.

Standing still and taking a deep breath, she thought hard about what had happened, how she had gotten into his bed. Then she ran into the vanity and saw her gun lying on the floor near the bathroom door. After picking it up and putting it in her holster, she hit number one on the speed dial and held her breath.

Nothing but the recording.

For the first time in a very long time, Dana Scully panicked. Her partner wasn't answering his phone and she had somehow fallen asleep on the job.

What if he's dead? Oh, my god, how did this happen? I won't survive this. I fell asleep? How did this happen? What do I do?
Godgodgodgodgodpleaseplease.....

She jumped at the knock on the door. And then ran top speed to answer it.

"Mulder?" she asked as she opened the door. Her heart sank and it took all of her will power not to cry when she realized that a very angry McIntyre was standing in the hall.

"Where the hell have you been? I've been calling. We've worked the crime scene, got the body to the morgue. Found out the goddam pathologist is deader'n a doornail. And where the fuck is Mulder?"

At that last angry question, the tears did spill over, and Scully turned away, mortified.

"Scully?" Taken aback, he used a much more conciliatory tone. "Talk to me, what's going on?"

She took a deep, calming breath. "I came back here to look for him, and--and I was waiting. I-I fell asleep," she said weakly, her breath hitching. "Oh, my god, we have to go find him. You've got to help me find him!"

"You fell asleep?" asked McIntyre, first incredulous and then suspicious. "Scully, I want you to take another deep breath, and tell me what happened, step by step. Maybe it's important."

She did as he asked and thought for a moment. "I-I heard a noise in the hall. Then, it seemed - it seemed like there was someone in the room. Like -- like when someone walks behind you and disturbs the air. I pulled my gun." She closed her eyes and thought for another moment. "Then I closed the door to the adjoining room so nobody could sneak up on me. Then I checked the vanity room and the bathroom, but there was no one there."

"What is the next thing you remember?"

"I--the shower curtain moved. But it was pushed open, there was no one hiding there. There was a warm breeze, like the heater had come on. Then I was so tired I couldn't stand up," she said finally.

McIntyre blew out a breath and appeared to be considering something. "Did you eat or drink anything?"

"No," she replied, wishing she had such an excuse as drugs. Something McIntyre had said finally penetrated her brain, and she looked up at

him."You said the pathologist is dead?"

"Yep, same MO. Interesting thing is, his wife was with him in bed. She woke up and he was dead. She slept right through it. No autopsy files in the house."

Scully rubbed her forehead. "I'll never forgive myself for this. If anything has happened..."

"Cut the crap, Scully. Let's get crackin' on this. Now."

She nodded gratefully and followed him out the door.

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Same Day, 5 Minutes later

"Do you remember seeing my partner, sir?" she asked the bellhop.

"Your partner?"

"Yes, he's six feet tall, dark hair, good-looking. He was wearing an expensive suit, dark gray, white shirt?" She held her breath and prayed. Her heart sank when he shook his head.

"Hey, Scully!" McIntyre shouted across the lobby to her, and she jogged over to the valet stand. "Sam here says he saw Mulder around 4:30 or so. Says he was coming toward the hotel, but then decided to go to Igor's. Said something about a cold drink and talking to himself."

"Let's go," she said and, thanking the valet, took off out the door.

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Igor's
St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
Same Day, 9:15 p.m.

Scully's heart was thumping hard in her chest, but having a direction to look had actually calmed her down somewhat. Despite that, she let McIntyre with his distinctive New Orleans drawl and fatherly appearance question the barmaid while she gazed around the room.

"So you think he left about two hours ago? Did you notice anything suspicious? Anyone talking to him?"

"No. I didn't see anybody. He seemed rather upset at one point. Dashed out of here really fast, left his coat even," the barmaid shook her head. "Stiffed me on the tip, too. Why is it always the good-looking ones?"

Scully frowned at her and McIntyre just sighed. "Did you happen to see which way he went?"

"Nope, I was busy."

"Where's his coat?" Scully asked in a demanding tone that caused McIntyre to give her a warning look. The barmaid handed it to her from behind the bar with a glare.

"Were any of the customers here now, here when Agent Mulder was here?" asked McIntyre, trying to maintain calm and order.

The barmaid looked at him like he was insane. "You're kidding."

"Could you please answer the question? I have to find my partner NOW." Scully's hands were balled into fists, ready to rip the woman's head off.

"Hell, I don't know, honey! I don't keep track," the barmaid snarled, and McIntyre held his hands up in a placating gesture.

Scully clenched her jaws together and stormed away before she did the woman bodily harm. She walked over to where Mulder had been sitting and gazed out the window. She had never been paralyzed by guilt and self-recrimination before, but it was rapidly becoming the case this time. If it weren't for McIntyre she'd be floundering. It was frightening being this close to the edge, she didn't know how Mulder did it so well without losing it. She held his coat up to her face and breathed deeply.

Is this what he went through when I was gone?

I'm not strong enough. I can't take it.

Where are you, Mulder?

Again she found herself scanning the streets for a familiar figure. Again she was disappointed. She tried to think like Mulder. Where would he go? Without the file, or even a clear indication of what he had been looking at, she had no way of telling. He would have called her if he'd found something, full of the excitement of the chase and forgetting any harsh words spoken between them.

McIntyre said he called, and she'd never heard the phone.

The despair pushed down on her again, trying to suffocate her. It was getting harder by the minute to hold on to her precious control. She almost felt the fissures form on her tough exterior. She was cracking, crumbling to dust.

I've got to get out of here.

She walked toward the door, gesturing to McIntyre as she went. She stepped out into the humid evening air and took a deep breath. Counted to five and released. Once more she scanned the streets, looking. Praying.

She patted his jacket down, looking for something that would give her a clue. Nothing.

Then she scanned the ground in front of the bar, looking for anything that may tell her where her partner might be.

Then she saw it lying near the entrance to the narrow alley between the restaurant and the bar.

A photograph.

Her heart pounding and a white noise drowning out all other sound, she walked slowly over to the photo. Blond hair, blue eyes and porcelain skin stared back up at her.

Clarice.

She snatched it off the ground and looked to her right, into the alley.

And saw the entire contents of the file scattered over the ground just past the entrance. She dropped Mulder's coat as she pulled her gun. There was a muffled curse from McIntyre as he came out of the bar and saw her.

She started into the alley, glancing quickly behind to make sure McIntyre was following. He handed her a small penlight to cut the darkness.

She was twenty feet away before she saw him, sprawled on his back, motionless, right where the alley opened to the courtyard. A small sound escaped her, but McIntyre grabbed her shoulder before she could run to him.

"Easy, Scully," he whispered. "I know you want to help him but there's a lot of area we can't see back there. Could be a trap."

She nodded reluctantly. "I go left and ahead, you go right." She took a shaky breath and nodded again before moving forward.

They moved the last several feet forward to where Mulder was lying. Standing right over him, Scully swung to the left where the courtyard wall was only three feet away. Seeing no one, she swung her gun straight ahead as McIntyre went right, then crept along the back wall of Igor's. Scully stepped over Mulder's still form and crouched, keeping her gun out toward the courtyard, covering McIntyre. Still scanning the courtyard for attackers, she reached down and laid her hand protectively on Mulder's chest.

"All clear, Scully," yelled McIntyre, pulling out his cell phone to call it in.

She re-holstered her gun and bent over Mulder's still form. She flicked the flashlight onto his face and chest and gasped.

Blood. It was running down his chin from a new gash in his lower lip. The collar of his partially un-buttoned shirt was soaked with it, his tie hanging loose around his very pale neck. She turned his head gently toward her so she could check the pulse in his neck.

"Oh, my God," she whispered. There was no mistaking the bite wound this time.

"Holy fuck!" breathed McIntyre, from where he stood looking over her shoulder.

Her fingers trembled as she reached for the blood-slicked skin over his carotid artery. His skin was too cool to the touch, and so pale. A faint pulse beat quietly under her fingertips, and she let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. She turned her head and put her ear next to his mouth.

"He has a pulse and he's breathing," she told McIntyre, her voice catching slightly.

McIntyre squeezed her shoulder. "I'm gonna go to the front of the building and watch for the ambulance, okay?"

She nodded gratefully, choking back the tears that threatened. As he walked away, Scully ran her hands over Mulder's chest, arms and legs, looking for any other injuries. Then she took off her suit jacket and spread it over Mulder's chest, before pulling his head into her lap. One arm cradling his head and the other across his chest, she bent and kissed him on the forehead.

"I'm sorry, Mulder. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me," she whispered to him, her voice breaking as she unconsciously rocked him.

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Mercy Hospital, Room 809
New Orleans, Louisiana
Same Day, 11:35 p.m.

Scully walked past the two cops stationed outside the door and into Mulder's room. She stopped when she saw him, his face nearly as white as the sheets on the bed. His lower lip hadn't been cut badly enough for stitches, but both were bruised, giving his face the only color it had. Those and the absurdly long eyelashes that curled against his cheek bones. She choked down another sob.

Controlling her emotions was getting more and more difficult. She was barely holding it together at this point, and the loss of control was making her angry. Her mind and soul were in a whirl, one minute ready to sob in despair and shame, the next minute furious that she was so weak. She went from sweet relief at having Mulder alive and in her care, to anger that he

had walked away from her, knowing the potential danger.

The anger shocked her. He didn't deserve it, really. She had fallen asleep on the job. She had failed him. She could have cost him his life. Again. Two silent tears rolled down her cheeks.

It won't happen again. It won't. Ever.

"Scully?"

She jumped, then dashed the tears away angrily before turning to find McIntyre looking at her quizzically.

"Yes?"

"Cut it out, Scully," he said gently.

"I don't know what you mean."

"I walk in here and you are standing five feet from the bed, making tight little fists with your hands. Now who exactly are you mad at? Mulder or yourself?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said firmly.

"Ookay. Just listen when I say this...Mulder is a grown man, an FBI agent. You can't protect him every minute of every day, and he'd resent you if you tried. Also, not too long ago you tried to convince me that someone was controlling Mulder's dreams--don't you think that your little sleeping spell is somehow connected to that?"

"I *can* protect him and I will protect him. I'll do whatever it takes," she replied with a scowl. Her mind grasped wildly at his theory that her sleeping spell was induced, but her skeptical nature pushed it away as ludicrous. "As for my sleeping on the job....it won't happen again, regardless of the cause."

She turned to stare at Mulder again, stepping closer to the bed. "They won't hurt him again. They won't take him away from me," she whispered.

She heard McIntyre sigh in resignation and she didn't care. He just didn't understand. She'd failed.

"How's he doing anyway?"

"He's lost a lot of blood and he's dehydrated, but other than that he's fine. He should even be awake by now," she replied, growing more worried than ever. "Wake up, Mulder. Tell me what happened," she murmured, finally moving close to the bed and taking his hand.

"Listen, Scully, I'm gonna go grab some shut-eye and then I'm going to come back and relieve you so you can do the same."

She nodded, not taking her eyes from Mulder's face. She heard McIntyre sigh again, before shuffling out of the room.

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2 Hours Later

She sat at his bedside holding his hand, her eyes never leaving his face. Her mind, however, was turned inward, searching. With each minute that passed her self recriminations grew, her feeling that she had failed him in the most basic of ways festering.

If there was one thing she hated, it was a feeling that she was not in control of the situation or her emotions. Her calm, cool facade was cracked, nearly ready to fall in pieces around her feet. She wanted to

blame her relationship with Mulder for her loss of control. She was in love with him, after all, and the thought of losing him hurt deep inside. Actual, physical pain that was unbearable. But she knew that a physical relationship with Mulder didn't increase her fear of losing him. That was there years ago. She was just going to have to deal with it better, because there was no way she was giving him up. No way at all. The only way she could deal with it, control it, was to do a better job of protecting him. There has to be a way.

Although she was looking at his face, she wasn't focused on it so she failed to notice his eyes open.

There was no mistaking, however, his jerking his hand away from her and low moan that came from his parted lips. He tried to skitter away, but the hospital bed was narrow and he only got as far as the railing.

"Mulder, it's okay. It's me," she said sadly, wondering if he was angry or just afraid.

He lay there studying her, his eyes glittering through his slitted lids, not saying a word.

"Mulder? Are you alright?" Scully's guilt faded a bit as she began to get worried. "Say something, please," she asked firmly.

As she gazed at him, her concern growing, he blew out a breath he seemed to have been holding. His eyes opened a bit wider and he relaxed a bit into the bed.

"Scully?" he asked, a note of uncertainty in his voice.

"Yes, Mulder?" she asked gently, as she lowered the bed rail and sat facing him on the edge of the bed. His hand flew to the bandage on his neck and he stared at her, wary and uncertain.

"Is it you? God, how will I know if it's you? He can read my mind....."

She watched him glance quickly around the room, before staring at her again. Her stomach twisted itself into a knot of apprehension.

"It *is* me, Mulder. Tell me--tell me why you would question that now? Were you dreaming?" she asked calmly, yet secretly petrified of the answers.

"I wasn't dreaming. He--he can do things," he replied, never taking his eyes off her face.

His unwavering stare and the look of suspicion on his face was unnerving her. "Who, Mulder? Who are you talking about?"

"I don't...know his name. The vampire," he whispered, his eyes suddenly glassy with unshed tears.

Despite the way she ached at the tears in his eyes and despite the bite marks she had seen and the strange things surrounding this case, Scully felt her mouth drop open in an automatic protest. She shook her head and then looked down at her hands, away from his sad yet prying eyes.

"Mulder...." she began.

"It's you," he sighed in relief.

"What? I don't...." she looked up, confused.

He smiled slightly, blinking back the tears, and eased himself back towards the center of the bed. He touched his fingers to the back of her hand where it lay in her lap.

"Even when you believe me, like you do now, you can't help but try to deny the word 'vampire'. No one operates just like you, Scully."

She snorted softly, the ache and the fear easing slightly at his words. That left room for the guilt to creep back in when she looked at his pale face and bandaged neck.

"I believe you?" she asked softly.

"Yep, I can tell," he replied, equally soft.

"Are we okay now, Mulder?"

"I need to tell you what happened so you can understand why--why we may not be okay."

Her heart felt liked he'd plunged a knife into the center of it. "I--I know. It's my fault, Mulder, I'm so sorry." She found she couldn't look at him any longer and focused on her hands twisting in her lap. His much larger hand slipped into view and stilled her.

"Scully, what are you talking about? None of this is your fault."

"It is--it is my fault. I fell asleep when I should have been looking for you." She gulped and closed her eyes, remembering the paralyzing fear upon waking up and realizing what she'd done. "You could have died. It would've been my fault."

"Hey," he said, lifting his fingers to her chin and tilting her head up so he could look her in the eye. "First of all, I'm pretty sure I wasn't supposed to die. I'm also certain this is not your fault. I want you to tell me exactly what happened."

"You should be resting...."

"Tell me, Scully," he said again, gently.

Scully sighed. "When you left me at the crime scene, McIntyre and I were talking. He asked that if this person could control your dreams what else could they do. That's when I realized how much danger you were really in." She looked at him and he nodded, encouraging her. "So I went back to the hotel to find you. You weren't there yet and I didn't want to call right away because--because of the argument we'd just had." Another mistake I won't make again, she added silently to herself.

"Then what happened?" he prodded.

She told him about thinking someone was in the room, then the overwhelming urge to sleep and how she woke up hours later. She left out the terror and other feelings that had been rocketing through her since.

"Scully," he said gently, "it's so obvious. You just can't believe what I *know* to be true. Our vampire friend needed you out of commission for awhile, so he put you to sleep."

"If that's true and if he is a vampire, then why didn't he just kill me? Why simply put me to sleep?" She wanted to believe him, but it didn't make sense. She saw a shiver run through his body as he pulled his hand away from her to wrap his arms around himself.

"I--I don't know."

"Tell me what happened, Mulder," she asked gently.

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One hour later

Telling Scully his story had brought all the feelings, especially the terror, rushing back to him. He was shaking slightly as he described the strong pull he felt as his blood left his body. How the world went gray around the edges before going completely black. Faint stirrings of arousal shamed

him as he remembered the feel of Scully's' body pressed tightly against him and that last erotic rush before darkness fell.

"But no one else saw him?" Scully asked.

He jumped, his reverie thankfully broken. "No. Don't you see? He could create the illusion that I was alone. He seemed to change into you. Then you fall asleep knowing I'm in trouble? It's all connected Scully. You just don't fall asleep on the job. Hell, I have to tell you three times to take a nap on stakeout before you'll do it."

"He won't get away with it again. I'm ready for him this time."

He looked at her and could tell she was still feeling guilty. He really hoped it was that simple.

They were both silent for a few moments, mulling over everything that had been said.

"So that's why you jump when I come near you?" she asked doubtfully.

Mulder nodded, wishing he could stop it. But the memories were so raw. He was so unsure of what was real and what was illusion. Every time he looked at her lips or touched her hand, he waited for it to shift under his fingertips. He shivered again.

"I'm sorry, Scully, but..." he paused when he saw her face. He had never seen her so angry. "Scully?" he asked, uncertainly.

"That bastard," she said softly, menacingly. "He's using me to get to you. Well, I am sick and tired of being used so people can hurt you."

"I don't think it's quite as simple as that," he replied carefully.

"Mulder, he supposedly put me to sleep so he could get to you. He *bit* you. Who knows what he'll try next."

He thought for a moment, going over and over his conversation with the vampire. It just didn't add up. By all rights, he should be dead right now.

"He's playing a game, Scully, and I don't know the rules or the object. But it involves more than just 'getting' me." He shivered again. "I mean, come on. He *had* me, if that's all he wanted."

"Then what do you think he wants?" she asked. "And how on earth do we stop him?"

"We learn more about vampires."

Chapter 9

Central City Public Library
2020 Jackson Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 19, 1998; 4:05 p.m.

"Scully, look at this," Mulder said, pointing to the computer screen in front of him listing at least six different kinds of vampires. She put down the book she was looking through and came around the table to look over his shoulder. "I'm betting on the "Classical" vampire..."

"Mulder," Scully asked with a sigh, "how is this going to help? You should still be in the hospital where it's safe, and let McIntyre do this...research."

"You don't get it, Scully. I'm not safe anywhere. As much as you want to, you can't protect me from him. And I feel fine." He kept his voice gentle, so as not to offend, but she was driving him mad with her hovering and her skepticism. She was never more than three feet away from him, yet she

was resisting every move he made. It seemed they were wrestling for control of his body and mind.

He watched her mouth tighten and her face flush in anger, tiny frown lines becoming pronounced in her pink skin.

"So instead of trying to be safe, you're going to make yourself more of a target, is that it?"

"You are neither my mother nor my keeper. You are my partner. Emphasis on the word 'partner'. You watch my back, I watch yours. That doesn't entail locking me in a room to keep me safe." His voice was a whisper which belied the anger that was beginning to build to a boiling point.

"I have to do something! I can't stand by and watch while he plucks you off the street."

"So you'll be *like* him and control my every move?!"

"That's not what I'm doing...."

"Leave me alone, Scully, please," he begged her, holding up a hand, palm out. Before it's too late, he added silently, his heart breaking. It was too much, he couldn't take her like this. She couldn't see how close it was to his nightmares and the other, real, threat.

"We--we'll do it your way, for now. But I'm not leaving you," she said with a firm resolve.

Mulder just sighed and turned back to the computer, trying to concentrate. He shook his head slightly, trying to stop the thoughts and feelings that just tumbled randomly through his head.

Focus, dammit.

He focused on the web page in front of him: *The bite. Vampire myth says that the bite is the way a mate or partner is made, when in actuality it can signify any number of things: friendly playfulness, erotic lust, defense or attack. When a vampire bites an ordinary person, it causes no long-term supernatural affects to the one who is bitten, rather, it causes a pleasure or release for the one who bites.*

Mulder shuddered. "That makes me feel better. Sort of."

"What?" asked Scully, softly, so as to avoid the wrath of the librarian.

"I'm not going to become a vampire."

"Oh. Really," she said, mildly sarcastic. "Why does this only 'sort of' make you feel better?"

"Because my vampire buddy gets more out of biting me than I do."

"You mean...."

"Yep."

"Shhhh!!" The librarian was apparently unimpressed with the badge he had flashed on the way into the library. Mulder sheepishly went back to work.

One click and Mulder was back to the web page categorizing vampires. He barely registered Scully taking her book back to the stacks as he clicked through gothic images of vampire web pages. The dark colors and blood-red print made his eyes ache as he wondered about their veracity.

He rubbed his forehead, feeling the beginnings of a headache encroaching on his thoughts. Blinking slowly, he refocused: *The Classical Vampires, also known as Classics, are what most people visualize when they think of a Vampire. Classical say that they have been "Brought Across," meaning

brought across the threshold of death; or have been "turned," meaning transformed by infection from a living human into a not living Vampire. (However, the term "dead" in this instance is not exactly the same in meaning as real death or as in "dead and buried" or Undead). Real vampires are alive and are living beings.*

"Hmmm...alive and living. I wonder...."

Mulder scrolled down the page and continued reading. *An actual Classical needs to feed immediately, i.e., to ingest fresh, living blood to restore health, vigor, etc. Young ones - newly infected ones - usually have a hard time dealing with the rush of new emotions, strength and mental capabilities. Most do desperately try to maintain their humanity, and it is always a struggle.*

"Clarice," he said softly, to himself. He scrolled further. *Almost all true Vampires or Vampiroids have the same or quite similar problems, including sensitivity, in varying degrees, to light and sun; even indoor lighting and the lights in night clubs. Some blister very badly, some deeply burn, some pass out, some suffer heat stroke. Most have Day-Glare Blindness, similar to snow blindness or night blindness. Most CAN go out into the day, but really would rather not. All feel ill and weak during the day and better and stronger as darkness descends.*

"Oh, that makes me feel a bit better." The sarcastic whisper was met with a raised eyebrow from Scully. He ignored it and kept reading. *Real Vampires, such as Classicals, and many Inheritors feel protective toward human friends, mates and feeding sources---known as "Sources," "Donors" or "Victims." Most Vampires do not kill their Sources, but do become very territorial about them. They feel possessive, as if they have pure and simple ownership.*

That's our guy, Mulder thought to himself, shuddering. The Classical Vampire. His eyes drifted to the bottom of the web page and came to rest on an "email the webmaster" icon. He shrugged.

"What the hell? Why not?" he whispered.

"What's that, Mulder?"

"Nothing," he replied, taking a bit of mean satisfaction in denying her. Anything for an ounce of control. He composed a short note to the webmaster as Scully came around the table to peer over his shoulder. He huffed out a breath in exasperation as he added a postscript indicating his need for a quick reply.

"Do you think that'll work?" she asked.

"Can't see how it would hurt. The page originates from New Orleans, the author claims to be a vampire herself, maybe she knows others. Maybe it's a community where they all know of each other....like doctors or scientists or....."

"I get the picture, Mulder."

Mulder caught the librarian's lethal glare and looked up at Scully.
"Dinner?"

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Mother's Restaurant
401 Poydras Street
New Orleans, Louisiana
Same day, 5:15 p.m.

"I don't know, Mulder, it just feels like I should be doing something more," she said, her anxiety over his safety and her irritation at his cavalier attitude banishing any desire for food. She picked at her Poor Boy Sandwich.

"What more can we do?" he asked, his own irritation evident once again. "Interview witnesses? We know what he looks like, some of the time anyway. We know the who, what and why of this case, Scully. We just need to hunt him down."

"That's exactly what he wants. He wants you to find him. You said it yourself, he wanted you to come to him 'of your own free will.' It's a blatant trap, Mulder." She pleaded for him to listen to reason, convinced that they shouldn't be playing this game.

She'd never been more certain that he was walking directly into a trap and it scared the hell out of her. She wanted to protect him and was determined not to fail again. She was even beginning to think that perhaps him hating her was preferable, if it meant that she could call Skinner and get Mulder yanked off this case so fast his head would spin. Her stomach twisted in fear and guilt. Could she do it, though? The cost would be tremendous. She remembered how she had felt when she realized that Mulder was missing and that she had fallen asleep. What he had looked like when she had finally found him. She realized he was speaking to her and looked back up at him.

"That's only part of it, Scully. He has a larger plan, not just getting me. He had me, remember?" he asked, matter-of-factly.

It was like a knife in the gut. "Dammit, yes! Yes, I remember he had you," she hissed, her guilt making her venomous. She watched his eyes widen in surprise and only slightly regretted her outburst. "I don't want that to happen again! That's why I'm so against this."

"Why can't you accept that you may not be able to prevent it?" he asked, his own voice becoming harsh. "Look at what he's been able to do, Scully. Look. At. It. Jesus, he *looked* like you! Or at least he did to me."

Scully saw heads turn in the restaurant but found she didn't care. She was more angry than she'd been in a long time. This meant too much to her. He meant too much to her and she couldn't believe he didn't see that she only wanted what was best for him.

"I know what he's done! But there has to be a way to prevent it from happening again." She took a deep breath. "And I think I know where to start." She pulled out her cell phone and hit speed dial number three.

"Who are you calling?" Mulder asked, his voice dangerously low.

Scully closed her eyes briefly before answering. "Skinner. I'm going to ask him to arrange a safe house."

"Like hell you are," Mulder growled. He grabbed the phone from her and pushed the end button.

"I have to call him. It's my responsibility as your partner," she said, her calm voice belying her gut-wrenching fear.

"Is this the way it's going to be, Scully? Every time you think you know what's best for me, you turn me in if I don't toe your line?" he asked, jaw clenched so tight she was afraid his teeth would crack.

"That's not fair!" she hissed. "You are his target and therefore too close to this case. It would be irresponsible of me if I didn't inform Skinner..."

"Skinner knew I was somehow connected to this case when he sent me down here. *Skinner* realized that I could solve this case, regardless of that little fact. Maybe *Skinner* is the only one who thinks I'm a competent FBI agent who knows how to handle this situation."

Mulder glared at her, his voice never raised above a normal speaking tone. Scully realized that she risked destroying her relationship with him, and yet everything in her resisted his continued involvement in this case.

"I do realize you're a competent agent, Mulder, I do," she said carefully, tamping down on her anger. "I just want to prevent him from hurting you

again."

"You can't. If it's what he wants, no locked door or armed guard will keep him out," he said, an air of despair and fear in his voice. "The only way to win this game is to play it out."

"That's ridiculous!! He'll kill you!" she exclaimed, angry at his willingness to give up or give in, whichever it was.

He sighed and lowered his eyes to the table. He then set her cell phone on the table and slid it toward her. "Go ahead, call him. Call Skinner." When he looked up at her she was shocked at the pinched, hurt look on his face and the tears in his eyes. He pressed his lips together tightly, as if to hold them back. "I'll be in the library." With that he got up and strode out the door.

Scully's mind whirled, trying to figure him out. What had just happened?

She was trying to protect him. She had almost lost him and she didn't want it to happen again. Was that so wrong? Why did he look as if she had beaten him into submission?

Perhaps because she had? In her zeal to protect him had she robbed him of something important? In her desire to not fail again, had she caused serious damage?

She thought through their conversations of the past few days. The words he used. His comparison of her and the vampire. A comparison that hurt, badly. She realized that, as painful as it was bound to be, they needed to have a very serious discussion. One that didn't end in vicious words and hurt feelings.

For once in her life, she had to understand him completely, or lose him. Permanently.

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Mulder's slow, shuffling gait led him back into the cool interior of the library. He sank slowly into the chair in front of the computer terminal he had been using a while ago. A few mindless keystrokes and clicks and he was on a different vampire-oriented web page. Unfortunately, he couldn't seem to read from the blurriness in his eyes. He rubbed them viciously and his fingers came away wet. He shook his head, trying to clear it, and took a few deep breaths to rid himself of the chest pains that had overwhelmed him.

Focus. Focus. Read.

Emotionally and physically, vampires are unpredictable, moody, temperamental and overwhelming. The most distinguishing characteristic of real vampires, as opposed to ordinary people who share those qualities, is the vampire's intensity. Vampires are extremely intense people. When others talk about them (usually to complain about them), vampires are often described by such terms as needy, attention-seeking, prone to grandstanding, manipulative, exhausting and draining, with a tendency to monopolize conversations. They also have huge egos and get very jealous when one encroaches on their "turf." A vampire's emotions are deep, fervent, and powerful, and they usually display great psychic ability and have uncontrolled magickal and psychic experiences. Vampires are also empaths, and while they may remain unconscious of their natures, they are frequently "psychic sponges" who simply absorb vibrations from everywhere, with the expected emotional instability resulting.

"Yep. I'll buy that. It certainly sounds familiar," Mulder whispered to himself, becoming engrossed in his topic once again.

He had just sent an email to another web master when he felt a familiar pair of blue eyes studying him. He looked up to the right and she smiled gently, apologetically, down at him.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "We need to talk. Really talk, Mulder."

He gazed at her suspiciously. "Are you the real Scully?" he asked, half seriously.

She sighed, fondly this time. "Do you remember what you said on the Tooms case, Mulder?"

He looked at her, quizzically.

"Sometimes the need to mess with their heads outweighs the millstone of humiliation," she whispered with a smile.

"You remember that?" he asked, a warm feeling blooming in his chest.

"I remember everything you've ever said to me," she replied, taking his hand, running her thumb over the smooth, brown skin on its back. "Come on, let's go somewhere else. Somewhere we won't get yelled at." She yanked on his hand, and he came out of his chair with a little smile.

Audubon Park
St. Charles Avenue
Same day, 6:25 p.m.

Mulder and Scully entered the park through the gate across the street from Tulane University. Despite the bustle of St. Charles Avenue, the park seemed quiet and peaceful. Magnolias and willow trees dripping in Spanish moss surrounded a duck- and goose-filled pond, the sunlight glinting on the surface of the water. The humidity was oppressive, even at this time of day.

Mulder took a deep breath and blew it out slowly through his lips, and Scully could feel the tension leave his arm through the hand she held. He had taken off his coat and tie at her urging, the heat of the day overwhelming. She glanced at his handsome face as they strolled and saw that beads of sweat still dotted his brow. A laugh huffed out of his mouth, and she looked away from his face to see two college-age women jogging toward them.

"Oh, to be young and insane again," he said wryly.

"Insane is right, nobody should be jogging at this time of day, in this heat." Scully looked back as the women went by and saw two men, also in jogging gear, walking not far behind her and Mulder.

"Always the doctor, eh, Scully?"

"Well, yeah, I guess so, Mulder," she replied. She felt hope blossom in her chest when his fingers tightened around hers.

"So...we're going to talk?" he asked carefully.

"Yeah, let's find a cool place to sit first." She led him over to the shade of a huge magnolia tree on the opposite side of the path from the pond. She sank carefully to the grass, trying not to stain her pants, and held her hand out to him. He sat down next to her, turned slightly sideways so he could see her face.

"So..." he began, awkwardly.

~~It hurt her to see him so uneasy. Because of her. It was confusing as well.~~
One minute he was fine, holding her hand and talking. The next he was pulling away, uncomfortable.

"Mulder, I'm so sorry if I've driven you to distraction lately." She paused, considering her words. It had never been easy for her to bare her soul. "I-- when I fell asleep--"

"Oh, Scully, that wasn't your fault," Mulder said gently. "He--"

"Mulder, wait. I'm trying to explain where I'm coming from. Perhaps then

you can understand. I need you to understand. But even more, I need to understand what you're going through so I don't continue to push you away." She took a deep breath. "I don't want to lose you. I don't ever want that, especially not by my own actions."

A tear rolled down her cheek, and she dashed it away with her hand. She was startled when his warm fingers brushed the skin of her cheek before landing under her chin to tilt her head up.

"Talk to me, Scully," he said softly, his voice nearly a purr, and her heart hammered in her chest as fear warred with desire. He was so beautiful, she realized once again, his skin glistening with sweat and his hair sticking slightly to his high forehead. His lower lip was slightly swollen from the cut it was sporting, but it added a seductive vulnerability to an already seductive face. He leaned toward her, one hand on the ground supporting him. With the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up she could see the fine golden hairs and the cords of muscle under the sleek skin of his arms. Her eyes traveled up his arms to the dark chest hair showing in the vee created by his partially unbuttoned shirt. He had slight circles under his eyes from a lack of sleep, but she had never wanted him more than she did at that moment.

"I had forgotten," she said softly.

"Forgotten what?" Mulder asked, when she didn't continue.

"How much I love you. How much I want you." A small sob escaped her. She stopped him when he tried to embrace her. "I have to get this out, Mulder. When I fell asleep on the job, something in me snapped."

She took another deep, cleansing breath. "I've always prided myself on doing a good job, being a good partner to you--" she made a noise of frustration when she realized that this was not sounding quite right. "It doesn't matter what caused it, really, because when I found you lying in that alley...it felt like--it felt like I had killed you myself. I had failed you as a partner. Someone got to you *again* and tried to take you away from me. I didn't do anything to prevent it. I couldn't do anything to prevent it. I had lost control of the situation, and not for the first time. So--I tried to control you. I was desperate not to fail again, so I tried to control you." She paused again and took a deep breath. "I miss you, and I love you and I was willing to do anything to protect you. And I think--I *think* that is what's pushing you away from me." Her sigh was ragged, clogged with tears. "I'm so sorry for that, Mulder. And I'm sorry that I've been hovering over you for weeks, trying to protect and care for you, and yesterday's incident only made it worse. I haven't been listening to you very well."

"Oh, Scully," he whispered. "I--"

"Wait, I'm almost done, but not quite. I--I didn't call Skinner. But I did do something else that might make you angry."

"What?" he asked, still whispering.

"I have two plainclothes cops following us...just in case."

Mulder started laughing.

"You're laughing at me? I expected a lot of responses, but not laughter," Scully said, a bit resentfully.

"I'm sorry," Mulder huffed out, smiling. He cupped her face with one hand, his thumb caressing her cheek. "It's just so 'Scully'...this big, wonderful confession, yet you don't give up. I love you, even if you do drive me crazy sometimes," he said with a big smile.

"Will you tell me, Mulder? Tell me what you started to tell me the other day when McIntyre interrupted us?" She stretched her legs out in front of her and patted her lap, hoping against hope. She breathed a sigh of relief when he laid his head there and closed his eyes.

"It all goes back to Clarice, actually," he said, in his soft monotone. "She held me captive and made me see things. You aren't the only one with control issues, Scully. I didn't have them before, I don't think, but I do now. It was never really taken from me so thoroughly before." He shivered slightly, even in the heat, and she combed her fingers gently through his hair, massaging his scalp.

"It wasn't so bad, after we got back from New Orleans. Until we had that big fight and I went to Nashville. My worst nightmare--" his voice shook slightly, and he cleared his throat. "My worst nightmare was waking up tied down again. I couldn't move, much, and I hurt. All I could think about was getting away before.....before she came for me. And I did."

He opened his eyes and looked up at her. "She got to me again, though. Clarice and this new vampire....and to a lesser extent, Jim...had the power to completely rob me of any control. Over my body, and even my mind at times." His eyes filled with tears. "I wasn't my own person. I was an object to own, possess, manipulate...use."

"I'm so sorry, Mulder," Scully whispered, her heart aching. She had known all this, yet she had let her own fears and guilt rule her actions. She swore to herself to think more carefully before acting in the future, until they got through this.

"Maybe it wasn't really true, but it *felt* like you were doing the same thing. You, and to a lesser extent Skinner, were trying to control my every move and hovering over me. I just react to that feeling....that sense of powerlessness. It makes it hard to breathe, makes my chest hurt....like claustrophobia. I just need things involving my life to be on my terms for awhile. A bit of space, from time to time." He paused, looking thoughtful.

"And yesterday. He made it seem like it was you kissing me, Scully. It was so convincing," he said softly. "No one in the bar noticed he was there except me, and then he changed into you. Or perhaps it was an hallucination--whatever, now I'm just not sure what's real and what isn't."

He looked up at her and she saw the plea for understanding in his gaze.

"So--what do we do now?" Scully asked gently, stroking her hand through his hair.

He stared into her tear-filled eyes. "Kiss me?" he asked softly. "For real this time?"

She gave him a watery smile and bent her head to his. She pressed her lips softly to his, so as to not further injure him. When she felt his tongue flicking against them, she sighed in pleasure before opening her mouth to him. He took her hand and laid it on his chest, leading her, showing her it was okay. As he deepened the kiss, she felt all the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

The tall figure deep in the shade of the weeping willow tree was unhappy. Very unhappy. The game wasn't going according to plan.

"Not according to plan at all," he growled softly. Then he smiled, teeth glittering even in the deep shade of the tree. His cold eyes narrowed. "This too shall pass. I'll see to that." He chuckled darkly.

The young redhead across the pond lifted her head from the gorgeous man in her lap and stared across the pond, seeming to look right at him in his place in the dark camouflage of the willow tree.

The vampire snarled.

"Mulder...."

"Yeah, Scully, what?" he whispered to her, trying to pull her into another

kiss.

She felt the arousal pooling in her groin at the husky tone. At the same time, her skin wouldn't stop prickling. They were being watched.

"Mulder, do you feel that?"

"Yeah, I feel it," he purred, his hand slipping into her hair and pulling her down to his swollen lips. She couldn't resist, and she groaned into his open mouth, dismissing her suspicions at the sweep of his tongue.

When his fingers deftly flicked open the first button on her blouse like a seasoned professional, she pulled back slightly.

"We're in public, Mulder," she said, panting slightly. She smiled when he groaned in disappointment.

"And the cops are watching," he replied, scowling.

"Are we okay now?" she asked hesitantly.

"Oh, Scully, I just don't know. We're much more okay than we were a few hours ago. Beyond that...."

"I understand," she said, fingers carding through his silky brown hair. "You're dealing with a lot on little sleep. This has been traumatic. But we're going to get through it."

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Ramada Inn, Room 405
St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 19, 1998; 10:05 p.m.

She wandered into her bathroom, uncertain of what she was supposed to do. Adrift. They had made progress, hadn't they? Couldn't she go to him?

He was so troubled. So frightened. As was she.

She wanted desperately to go to him, to hold him. Love him. But would it be too much, too soon?

Shouldn't I at least reassure him that I'm thinking of him?

Why haven't we discussed this? It's driving me crazy.

Am I only thinking of myself?

She stared into the mirror. Her reflection was disappointing. Tired and drawn. As she watched, tears sprang to her reflection's eyes and she felt the accompanying pain.

I miss him.

She shook herself, dissipating the black cloud threatening to suffocate her.

I can't. He has to make the first move. That's what he wants.

Doesn't he?

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Ramada Inn, Room 407

St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 19, 1998; 11:55 p.m.

Mulder came awake slowly, disoriented and mildly aroused without knowing the cause. He was wearing only gray boxer-briefs, the sheets of the bed pooled around his calves.

When the air moved over his bed, patches of wet skin on his chest cooled and chilled him. Blinking repeatedly, he looked up to see Scully standing over him in pale blue silk and tousled hair. She licked her lips.

"Scully?" he asked, confused as to what she was doing in his room. They had parted ways earlier with a new understanding between them, yet both badly needing sleep and space. He looked past her to the doors connecting their rooms. Both were standing wide open, light from one of her lamps spilling into the room.

"Mulder...I just wanted to see how you were," she said, softly, sinking down to sit, facing him, on the mattress next to his hip. She ran a finger from his collar bone, through a damp patch of skin and around one of his nipples.

He shivered and his breathing quickened. "Scully," he moaned, his voice hoarse and deep. "It's been--awhile." She ran her finger down to the waistband of his shorts and smiled at him. Her hand lingering there as she bent and kissed him hard on the mouth, her tongue stabbing against his lips, seeking entrance. He opened his mouth with a groan, his cock partially erect and aching for her hand to continue its descent. Instead, she caressed the skin of his abdomen and, not breaking the kiss, ran her hand up to his shoulder, kneading it.

He broke the kiss, reluctantly. "Don't you think we both need some sleep, Scully?" he asked carefully, gauging her reaction. As much as he wanted to believe that nothing was wrong with this scenario, his paranoid brain wouldn't allow it. This seemed too--familiar, yet not.

"I want you, Mulder, now. This afternoon I could hardly keep my hands off you and now, I can't sleep in the next room knowing you're here...." her words trailed off as she bent to kiss him again, one hand running up the inside of his arm to twine her fingers with his, the other caressing the skin of his belly.

Little alarm bells were pinging madly in the back of Mulder's mind, yet he was having a difficult time resisting her soft lips and stroking fingers. He gasped when her hand finally descended into his boxers to grasp him firmly, stroking her thumb over the tip of his engorged penis.

"Scully," he croaked, "wait a second." He was desperately fighting to control his arousal and think clearly for a moment. Just one moment to figure out if this was real.

His answer became clear when Scully didn't back away, and instead climbed on top of him, her hot center trapping his cock against his abdomen. He thrust almost involuntarily, groaning. She rocked back and forth on his shaft while pinning his arms above his head. When she lowered her mouth to his again, he turned his head away and tried to throw her off. She clung to him tightly with her knees pressed to his ribs and he cried out in frustration. He pulled his hands free from hers and tried to push her away, his misplaced sense of chivalry not allowing him to become too violent.

"You're not Scully! Get off me!" Then a frightening thought struck him and he screamed at the top of his lungs. "Scully!! Scully!" He struggled harder, preparing to forcibly pick the woman off his chest and fling her across the room, chivalry be damned. When he grabbed her waist, she instantly balled her hand into a fist, pulled back and then hit him as hard as she could in the eye. His head swam, and while he shook it, trying to rid it of stars, she grabbed his wrist and handcuffed him to the bedpost using cuffs she had presumably stashed just out of sight while he was sleeping.

"You're under arrest," she said coolly. Then she giggled slightly when he continued to struggle, his arm stretched out over his head, the cuff cutting sharply into his flesh, drawing blood. His skin crawled and he was shaking with terror. His fear for the real Scully made him nearly hysterical.

"God damn you, you sonofabitch! Let me go! If you've hurt Scully, I'll--"

"Shut up, Mulder," said the woman on top of him, before she tried to kiss him again. He used his free hand to slap her away before shoving at her again, succeeding in pushing her to the mattress beside him, near his feet. When she moved to straddle him again, he pulled both knees to his chest, then kicked out with both feet. His feet connected with her stomach and she went flying over the end of the bed and landed on the floor against the entertainment center with a thump.

Mulder didn't waste any time. He twisted around and got to his knees facing the headboard. His heart was pounding so loud and his breathing so harsh that he couldn't hear what the vampire was doing, and in his panic all he could think of was getting free and finding Scully. A hysterical laugh bubbled in his throat when he saw that he had been handcuffed to the long part of the bedpost that rose above the head board. All he had to do was stand up and raise his arm above his head to slip the cuff off the end of the post. Once he did that, he jumped off the bed, knees wobbling when his feet hit the floor, and ran into Scully's room, slamming the connecting door shut behind him.

The room was empty.

He tried to catch his breath and calm down, but it wasn't working. In the back of his mind, he recognized a full-blown panic attack and concentrated on deepening his breathing.

Think, Mulder, think. You can find her, you've done it before.

He walked rapidly to the vanity and then into the bathroom. Silence, except for his still-racing heart pounding in his ears. His knees wobbled again and he sank down onto the toilet to try to figure this out. He rested his head in his hands, his eye throbbing where she had punched him.

"Oh, no, that--that can't be," he whispered in response to one logical conclusion his mind supplied him with the moment he got his fear under control.

He got up and walked back to the connecting door. Standing there, staring at it, he tried to gather up the courage to open the door.

When he reached out to twist the knob, someone on the other side knocked, making him jump and his heart begin to race again.

"Mulder?"

Scully? Or not?

She knocked again. "M-mulder?"

The quiver in her voice was his undoing. He reached a shaking hand out to the door knob and turned it. He pulled the door open to see "Scully" standing on the other side, her face a mask of apparent confusion.

He didn't know what to believe anymore.

She stepped toward him into the room and he stepped quickly back, away from her, his breathing quickening as his adrenaline kicked back into gear.

"Mulder, what--" she began as she started toward him again.

He started at the sound of her voice and moved quickly around her into his own room, not thinking, just moving. The psychologist in the back of his mind was screaming about classic fight or flight responses, telling him to slow down, not to do anything stupid. The psychologist went unheard.

He saw the key to the cuffs lying on the floor and grabbed it, unlocking the cuffs so they clattered to the carpet. In seconds he was dressed in blue jeans and a tee shirt, shoving his bare feet into sneakers. He started toward the door to the hall, an automaton.

"Don't leave," she begged from the doorway between the rooms.

He stopped at the door. He slowly turned toward her and saw "she" was crying. There was a sharp pain in his chest at the sight and the realization that he just couldn't be sure. He was afraid he could never be sure again.

They were both silent for a moment. Tears streamed down her face, and all he could do was shake by the door, his every instinct telling him to run.

"Do you--" his throat clogged and he cleared it. "Do you have a tattoo?" he asked in a whisper.

She hesitated for a moment, then turned her back to him and lifted her pajama top.

The top half of the ouroboros peeked out at him above the waistband of the pajama bottoms, and the white noise in his head overwhelmed him as he sagged against the door. His mind was whirling, trying to wrap itself around the events of the past hour.

She turned back and started toward him. He threw out a hand to ward her off.

"No. No." His voice was ragged with suppressed emotions to which he couldn't put a name.

"Mulder, p-please," she whispered, taking another step toward him, and he was out the door like a shot.

TEZCUCO
Chapter 10

Ramada Inn, Room 407
St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 20, 1998; 12:10 a.m.

Scully woke up when she hit the floor, banging her head on the entertainment center. There was pain in her stomach and she was seeing a constellation of stars. And she had no idea what was going on.

She hadn't meant to fall asleep. She blinked rapidly and realized she was on the floor of Mulder's room. She looked up and saw him in the dim light coming from her room, standing on the bed with his back to her, wearing only a pair of cotton boxers. Then he jumped down and ran from the room, the door slamming. Her vision swam and she shook her head trying to clear it.

What the hell is going on? She had been in her own bed, reading, trying to stay awake despite Mulder's assurance that she should sleep. That *he* wanted Mulder to come to him. Maybe the bastard wouldn't take Mulder, but maybe she could prevent more dream-tortured sleep. Instead, she had fallen asleep and done some dreaming of her own.

She tried to stand and found she was still dizzy from hitting her head. She sat on the end of Mulder's bed and tried to figure out how she had gotten here. And why he had left. Her stomach twinged painfully and she rubbed it.

"Oh, my god," she whispered, in realization.

It had been a typically bizarre dream. She had been arresting a suspect and he had been fighting her. She had decked him, then handcuffed him, feeling proud that he hadn't gotten the best of her, despite her size. She racked her brain, trying to remember more of the dream. She knew Mulder had been

there, she remembered feeling desire and love.

She nearly groaned aloud remembering Mulder's actions of a moment ago, his run from the room. What had happened? How much of her dream was real? She had to find out and make it right.

She walked over to the connecting door, turning on a light as she went. She pushed on the cool wood of the door, trying to get it to open. Since he had shut it tight, she wouldn't be able to open it from this side. Like the door on his side, there was only a handle facing into the room. That way, both doors had to be opened by the room occupants in order to pass from one room to the other. It was a safeguard that Scully now desperately wished they had used before going to sleep.

She rested her head against the wood for a moment, hands trembling, afraid to find out what she might have done in her sleep. She gathered up her strength and knocked.

"Mulder?"

Nothing. Silence from the room on the other side of the door. Her mouth went dry and her stomach twisted into a knot.

"M-mulder?" she called again, fear closing her throat tight, making it hard to speak.

Just when she thought she might start screaming, the door creaked open. Then she thought she might start screaming anyway.

Mulder stood in her well-lit room, only a few feet away, yet it could have been miles. It hurt her to see the bruise forming around his left eye, and the tinge of blood on his lower lip, but it was the look in his eyes that devastated her. It was as if he didn't know her and was terrified of her.

She took a step toward him, hoping to help relieve his pain. When he backed quickly away, his hand out to keep her away, she saw the handcuffs dangling from one wrist and wanted to die a quick and painful death.

Please, Mulder, please. Please let me back in, she thought desperately. I didn't mean it, it wasn't me, I didn't mean it, it wasn't me.....

"Mulder, what--" she began, hesitantly taking another step.

A very foolish step, she realized, when he dodged her and ran into his own room.

You can't approach him, Scully. Something horrible happened and it involves you. You can't drive him away.

It was too late, she realized, when she turned and went to the doorway to see him pulling on his jeans and tee shirt. The handcuffs glittered on the floor, mocking her, as he slipped his feet into some shoes.

The pain in her heart was tremendous, and she put a hand to her chest to try to hold it in. She couldn't hold in the sob that escaped when he started toward the door, and the tears cascaded down her cheeks.

"Don't leave," she begged him, crying hot, desperate tears. Please don't go, please don't go, please.....

He turned and looked at her, seeming to take her measure. She could see him shaking, either from the adrenaline or from fear. She held her breath.

"Do you--" he began in a rough voice. He cleared his throat. "Do you have a tattoo?"

The whispered question made her head swim. A tattoo? He knows....

Oh, God.

She turned slowly and, hoping against hope, lifted her pajama top to expose her tattoo. She heard a sharp exhalation and the door creak as he leaned against it. She turned and started toward him, relieved.

Mistake.

His hand flew out, warding her off again. "No. No."

She couldn't bear it. "Mulder, please--" she whispered, taking another step.

Then he was gone, the door slamming behind him. She went after him, yanking it open and running out into the hall. She saw a flash of color, and the door to the stairwell at the end of the hall slowly closed behind him.

She stalked the few feet to the snoring plainclothes cop sitting in the chair next to her door. Grabbing him by the shoulders, she shook him hard. He came awake quickly and went for his gun before he realized it was her.

"My partner just took off down the stairwell. Try to catch up and follow him," she ordered, wiping the tears off her face and trying to pull herself together. "Don't accost him, just keep an eye on him and let me know where he is. I'm going to get dressed." She blushed slightly when she realized the cop, Hernandez, was staring at her like she was insane. "Go!" she yelled at him, and he took off at top speed toward the stairs.

She went back to Mulder's door and realized it had closed after her. She was locked out. She choked back another sob of frustration and then resigned herself to going to the lobby for another key.

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Mulder ran, no particular destination in mind.

Up St. Charles Avenue, into the heart of the Garden District, running top speed. After five blocks he had to stop, the past couple of months having sapped him of his usual stamina. Instead, he slowly walked across the westbound lanes of St. Charles to the median strip. Stepping over the first set of street car tracks, he turned and continued walking westward.

His mind was a blank slate. Shut down, regrouping, resting. The clanging clatter of a streetcar behind him caused him to instinctively move away from the outbound track.

After a few moments, he began to register his surroundings again. The heavy, humid evening air had a summertime fragrance to it. Cut grass and magnolias. Traffic was light, streetcars infrequent at this time of night. And, as always in the Garden District, a strange quiet. Solitude. The mansions on both sides of the avenue seemed to watch over him, lights lit behind glittering leaded glass doors.

He reached the intersection of Sixth Street and St. Charles and gazed up at the tower of the church on the corner. Lights on either side of the main doors blazed, the limestone brick reflecting the light, illuminating the church in a dull glow. He strolled across the outbound lanes of St. Charles Avenue and climbed the steps. Hesitating only for a moment, he yanked on the door.

It swung open easily. He stepped into the entryway, his mind aimlessly searching for the name of that section of the church. Nave? Vestry? As the door slid closed behind him with a soft thump, he left the entry and entered the main sanctuary. The lights were very dim, except for the light on the cross which hung over the altar. He made his way carefully up the center aisle and slid into a pew towards the front.

It was then that his mind reluctantly began to sift through what had happened in his hotel room, trying to distance himself from it so he could maybe figure it out.

That was really Scully back there, not the vampire. He could accept that, now, in the cool air of the church. The tattoo confirmed it for him. He didn't think that the vampire would have known about that, since Mulder himself didn't really dwell on it. For obvious reasons.

He rubbed his eyes, wincing at the pain in the blackened one. This was an utterly confusing situation to be in. Scully wasn't to blame for what she had done and he wished he hadn't run from her. But he really hadn't been sure until he got away, scott-free. He hadn't exactly been clear-headed.

"Can I help you, son?" asked a quiet voice, making Mulder jump.

He turned and saw an old priest dressed in a black shirt and pants, collar included, standing next to him in the aisle.

"I don't think so, Father. I just needed a quiet place to think. Is that okay?"

"Of course, that's part of what the church is for." The priest motioned him to slide over, which he did, and the man sat next to him. "Who gave you the shiner?"

"Would you believe, my partner?" Mulder asked with a wry smile.

"He musta been pissed off."

Mulder laughed in surprise. "*She* was sleepwalking, I think."

"Ahhhh...partner?"

"We're FBI agents..." Mulder hesitated.

"...and maybe lovers?" asked the priest, with a knowing look.

"Yeah. Lovers," Mulder replied softly.

"Had you fought?"

"Oh, we fight all the time, but that's not a bad thing, really. It's never been physical--the fighting, that is. We're going through something really complicated right now, and--and--" Mulder voice trailed off and he grimaced, not knowing how or even if he wanted to continue.

"Maybe it would help if you told me what was going on."

"I don't think so, Father. It's very--bizarre."

"It could help to talk it out with someone."

"You probably won't believe me," Mulder replied, ruefully.

"How about if I promise not to judge you and just listen?" asked the priest gently.

"Father, thank you--but no. I just--I think--"

"You need space to sort some things out," said the priest, a knowing look on his face.

"Yeah," Mulder replied softly, apologetically.

The priest got up and moved into the aisle. "If you need anything, my residence is connected to the church through a door behind the altar. Just come on back."

"Thanks, Father."

The priest took two steps toward the altar before turning back to Mulder.

"Son, remember, forgiveness is the key. For you and your partner. Forgive yourselves and forgive each other." With that he gave Mulder a

knowing look, nodded in satisfaction that his message had been received, and continued the trek to his house.

"Forgiveness. There's nothing to forgive, is there? The vampire..." Mulder whispered to himself. "Forgive each other and forgive yourself....." he squinted in the darkness of the church.

A niggling suspicion began to take shape in the back of Mulder's mind.

"Forgiveness...I made it worse by running," he whispered to himself, puzzling something out. He rubbed his forehead, trying to dislodge the headache that was pounding with renewed strength.

There was something--something that he wasn't quite seeing. The purpose of the game was nagging at him. He was looking at it the wrong way.

"A church, Fox? That's so--pedestrian," the patrician voice whispered right in his ear.

Mulder started violently and slid quickly away from the cool breath on his cheek. His heart was hammering in his chest as he turned slowly to see the vampire sitting where the priest had been moments ago, a smirk plastered across his handsome face. His icy eyes glittered in the near darkness.

"Pedestrian?" Mulder asked once he found his voice. He was trembling so much that he was amazed he could speak.

"You didn't come in here thinking it was a haven, did you? Crosses, holy water and all that? I expected more from you, Fox," the vampire said, haughty and aristocratic. He was still smiling, teasing Mulder, taunting him.

"I came in here for peace and quiet. Now get the hell away from me," Mulder replied, false bravado firmly intact. He was almost proud.

"Don't you mean you came in here to get away from Dana?" asked the vampire, ignoring Mulder's demand.

The anger boiled up in Mulder, causing him to momentarily forget his fear.

"What were you hoping to accomplish by manipulating Scully? Do you really believe that by making me doubt her I will run to you? Are you really that egotistical? Oh, of course you are. You're the great vampire, isn't that right? You're all about ego," Mulder said with disdain. "Or are you just stupid?"

The vampire snarled and Mulder realized, heart pounding, that he had just fucked up. The vampire slid toward him on the bench and Mulder froze, his mouth going dry. He then tried to back away, but the vampire's arm flashed out, his hand grabbing a fistful of Mulder's tee shirt and yanking him forward so they were nose to nose. Mulder's hands went to the vampire's wrist trying to pry him off, his fingers trembling so much that they were nearly useless. His legs thrashed as he tried to back pedal away from the other man.

As quickly as the vampire had become enraged, he cooled, his hand still fisted tightly in Mulder's shirt. He chuckled slightly at Mulder's ineffectual struggle and sniffed Mulder's hair, breathing deep. Mulder saw the change in his eyes and went still, feeling his balls attempt to crawl up into his body in terror.

"Ahhhh....I can see why she loves you so. I can *smell* it. I've tasted it." The vampire sighed. "She doesn't deserve you, Fox. She doesn't deserve you at all."

"Leave her out of this!" Mulder screamed, his struggle resuming, his terror building at the implied threat to Scully. "Leave her alone! Stop playing with her and--"

Again Mulder went still. "That's it. Scully. That's the object of the game. You bast--!"

The vampire slammed Mulder's head into the back of the pew in front of him, silencing him and causing him to go slack in the vampire's arms. "Well. So much for free will," he said with a sigh. Mulder looked at him through slitted lids, only partly conscious. "Can you hear me, Fox?"

A slight grunt in the affirmative was all Mulder could manage. His vision was black around the edges and blurry everywhere else, his head pounding so hard now that he wished the vampire would just finish him off.

"I'm sorry, Fox, but I can't. I need you. Not only that, but I want you. And the rules of the game have just been changed."

Mulder felt the terror so deep in his soul that he didn't know if he'd ever be rid of it. He managed to bring one hand up in a feeble attempt to push the vampire away.

Again the vampire chuckled. An instant later Mulder felt the sharp pain of a bite in his neck and the erotic rush of blood leaving his body. He groaned, a stirring of arousal in his groin filling him with shame. His visible world changed from black to white and the prickly sensation that precedes unconsciousness began to tingle in Mulder's face.

The vampire made a sound that Mulder took for pleasure and then he felt the vampire's tongue caress the skin around the bite. Mulder desperately wished for oblivion.

The withdrawal of the teeth was painful and he missed the rushing pull. Suddenly he was upside down, a caressing hand on his ass, the vampire's shoulder biting into his abdomen as he was carried to the aisle, his arms dangling uselessly.

And then the world went completely black.

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Ramada Inn, Room 407
St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 20, 1998; 1:15 a.m.

She paced.

Hernandez had called a few minutes ago to say that he had followed Mulder to a church a few blocks away and he was waiting outside. McIntyre was on his way to the hotel so they could decide the next course of action. She prayed none would be needed, that Mulder would come back on his own, but she had little faith. She desperately wanted to go to him, but feared that would be the last straw.

"My god, what have I done? He'll never trust me again. I assaulted him, hit him. After everything with Clarice, how could I do that? How in the hell could I do that, even in my sleep?"

She muttered and paced, hyperactive, nerves stretched to the limit. When a knock sounded on the door, she nearly jumped out of her skin.

She opened the door to see a very bedraggled McIntyre standing in the hall.

"He back yet?"

"No. And I won't be surprised if he doesn't come," she said grimly, resuming her pacing, choking back the emotions that had been boiling close to the surface since they had taken this case.

"Scully, why don't you sit down?" he asked carefully.

"Sit down? Sit down while my partner is god knows where?" She was almost hyperventilating, as if McIntyre had flicked a switch by being kind to her. She didn't feel she deserved it. She didn't know how much more she could take.

"This--this isn't your fault, Scully."

"Not my fault? Do realize what I did to him? Do you? He can't possibly trust me! I don't trust me!!" She was ranting, but she couldn't seem to control herself. If she stopped moving she would start screaming.

This is new, Dana. Attack your partner, rant and rave, climb the walls. Next you'll be running through the Quarter naked. What's a little screaming?

"You're hysterical, Scully, and somehow I get the feeling that this is a new experience for you. You have to get a grip or we'll never get to him and solve this case."

"Get a grip?"

"STOP THAT, GODDAMN IT!!" McIntyre bellowed, causing Scully to stop mid-pace and stare at him. "You're repeating everything I say. You are out of control. You were used, Scully. *I* believe that. You should give it a try and cut yourself some slack."

She felt the tears start to clog her throat and it pissed her off. She had been closer to tears more in the last few days than she had been in years. Desperately wanting to believe McIntyre, she still couldn't get past the fact that she'd handcuffed Mulder to the bed and slugged him. The one person he trusted and she'd hurt him. She sank down on the end of the bed, the tears finally reaching her eyes.

"Do you realize, McIntyre, what I did to my partner of five years tonight?" she whispered. McIntyre just looked at her, seemingly content to let her have her say. "I abused him. I handcuffed him, I hit him. Even if my dreams were manipulated by that bastard vampire, he may never again be certain of me. And I can't blame him for that. *I'm* not certain of me. How can I go to sleep at night and not worry that I'll beat the crap out of him?"

"You find the 'bastard vampire' and put him down," McIntyre replied calmly.

She stared at him in shock. "You really believe that he's a vampire and that he caused all of this?"

"You mean you don't? Come on! Face it. Mulder believes it, I bet, and once he has a bit of space and time to think he'll be fine. He won't blame you, Scully."

"What do we do now?"

McIntyre sighed. "Well, how about I go and talk to him, see what he's thinking?"

Scully's heart ached at the thought of someone else filling her usual role. But it seemed like the best solution.

"Okay. Let's go."

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St. ===== Church
===== St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 20, 1998, 1:45 a.m.

When they pulled up in front of the church, Scully could see Hernandez sitting on the front steps, his head in his hands.

"Oh, no," she whispered, in counterpoint to the expletive McIntyre uttered when he saw the officer. They both got out of the car and walked over to him. McIntyre shook his shoulder, and Hernandez awoke with a jerk.

"Wha--"

Scully ran into the church, her heart heavy, McIntyre muttering and lumbering along behind her.

In the sanctuary she jogged up the center aisle, checking the floor between the pews on both sides, looking for Mulder. When she got to the front of the church she turned and went to look down one side aisle, McIntyre covering the other. Hernandez stood in the doorway at the back of the church, rubbing his eyes.

"Mulder!?" she yelled.

Silence.

She walked slowly back to the center of the church and sank down onto the steps leading to the altar. She felt the tears overflow, running hot down her cheeks. She couldn't hold them back any longer. She didn't want to, didn't care.

She'd lost Mulder. Again.

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Tezcuco Plantation
Lafitte, Louisiana
Same Day, 2:30 a.m.

The tires of the black Rolls Royce crunched over the gravel of the circular driveway in front of the old plantation house. Brandon smiled as Marianna skipped lightly down the front steps of the verandah, seemingly eager to meet the car. She was a beautiful wraith, in flowing, filmy white garments, bare feet and long, wavy blond hair.

Not exactly what you would expect, for a vampire.

Brandon had never had a tolerance for the goth youth who filled the streets of the French Quarter in the wee hours of the morning. Insolent brats whose need to pierce their bodies was only surpassed by their need for blood.

They weren't even *real* vampires. Simply pale imitators of the real thing.

Marianna was knocking impatiently on the heavily tinted window to his left. The moment the car door opened, she was all over him with excited questions.

"Well, well? What happened? Tell me! I've been waiting and waiting just like you asked."

Brandon sighed. "Plans have changed a bit." He went to the trunk of the car, Marianna close on his heels, opened it up and then stepped back slightly. Marianna gasped and turned to him, delighted surprise painted across her delicate features.

"Brandon, what--ophf!" she grunted as she was slammed into Brandon's chest by the figure that came lurching awkwardly out of the trunk.

Brandon made a grab for Mulder as he began to run, but was thrown off balance by Marianna almost knocking him down. As the two of them

regained their balance, Brandon steadying her, she brushed herself off and looked around him.

"Aren't you going to go after him?" she asked, with a smile.

"He won't get far."

"Brandon, he's heading for the bayou..."

"Darling child, he has a bad concussion and he's been relieved of some blood. He won't get far," he replied with a smirk.

"But if he gets as far as the bayou, the alligators...." she drifted off, fidgeting, as Brandon scowled at her.

She was right, of course. He needed to go after the runaway Mulder immediately. With a stirring in his groin and a sudden thirst on his tongue, he realized that this was a chance to have some fun in a way he hadn't in a long, long time. It was an old way, a cliché. It thrilled him. He laughed suddenly and loud, causing Marianna to take a step back.

"Get me a horse, darling."

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Mulder ran, heart pounding and head throbbing, through the moon-lit oak and cypress trees dripping in spanish moss.

When he heard the vampire laugh he nearly fell down. Instead, he pushed it a little harder, heading for the corner of the huge house.

After what seemed an eternity, he passed the corner and headed towards the old buildings just visible through the trees.

Suddenly he was on the ground, a sharp pain in his abdomen. The terror blinded him and he struggled to get to his feet again. When he couldn't get his foot free, he realized he had tripped on an old barbed wire fence and had gotten tangled. His tee shirt was ripped down one side and dotted with blood. Blood also welled in some scratches on his sock-less ankle just above his tennis shoe. He took a few gasping breaths, trying to calm down and think. He could feel the energy draining out of him like his blood had earlier. He was soaked in sweat and now his ankle was throbbing in tempo with his head. He wouldn't make it much farther; he had to have a plan.

Deja vu, big time. In the woods, being chased by a vampire. Great, just great, he thought.

Bite mark. Check.

Concussion. Check.

He sat up and leaned forward, his head swimming. Disentangling his foot, he got slowly, carefully to his feet and continued toward the small, dark buildings.

Outbuildings, he realized. He was on a plantation, one that appeared to be mostly deserted, if the darkness around him was anything by which to gauge. He moved quickly past the first building, with its rotting roof and missing door, and headed toward the small log building beyond. Abandoned slave house, he thought, with an old white picket fence around it, paint peeled and mostly flaked off.

Picket fence.

He stopped abruptly and grabbed at the white pickets, testing their solidity. He kept testing them until he found one that was sturdy and pried it off the rotting cross ties, making his fingers ache and bleed from the splinters. He rubbed his thumb across the dull point of the picket and wished for his gun. He had a feeling it would be more effective. He started forward again, praying he could stay upright long enough to find a place to hide and wait.

He ran over to the door of the cabin and opened it, hoping. His stomach lurched at the smell of rotting flesh and the skittering of little rat feet. Staggering away from the cabin, he controlled the urge to vomit.

He turned in a wobbly circle, trying to decide where to go. He could barely make out the mansion past the dark trees in the direction from which he'd come. Behind the mansion were a couple of other buildings. One was lit and he could see it was better maintained than the outbuildings next to which he was standing. He turned away and faced more trees, endless trees, with water pooled between the more distant trunks. There was little underbrush and the branches of the trees were high in the air. Nowhere to hide.

A wave of despair crashed over him, making it hard to breathe, as he realized he had no idea where he was. A deserted plantation somewhere in southern Louisiana was the best he could come up with. He wondered why the vampire hadn't caught him yet.

He was so tired. Every part of him ached, especially his heart. The desire to curl into a ball and wait for death to come for him overwhelmed him, bringing tears to his eyes.

But he couldn't. If he died, Scully was sure to lose the game.

TEZCUCO
Chapter 11

St. ***Church
St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 20, 1998, 2:30 a.m.

Scully snapped her cell phone shut and laid it on the carpet of the step she was sitting on. She rubbed her eyes, which were itchy from crying. At least she hadn't cried in front of Skinner.

Skinner was flying down in the morning to help find Mulder. Again.

That's twice in two months. Twice he's had to bail me out when things got out of control. Twice he's had to help me find Mulder. Through no fault of Mulder's. Mulder's better off without me.

"Skinner's going to want my resignation," she whispered, realizing for the first time that it was better for everyone if she gave it to him.

"Hey, Scully, this is Father O'Halloran," said McIntyre as he came towards her from a door hidden behind the organ.

She stood up and shook the Father's hand. "Special Agent Scully, Father."

"You must be the partner, eh?" asked the Father.

Scully's eyes widened. "You spoke to my...Agent Mulder?"

"Surely. Has something happened to him?" asked the aging priest.

Her heart began to beat a bit faster. "He seems to have disappeared. We think he was kidnapped. Can you tell me what the two of you spoke about? Did he give you any idea--" she stopped abruptly, not sure of her question or how to ask it.

"Well, he seemed very troubled--are you his partner? The one who gave him the shiner?" the priest asked.

A sharp pain tore through Scully at the question, and her eyes slipped closed as she tried to catch her breath. Then she felt the priest's hand clasp her own.

"Agent Scully--I didn't mean to upset you. You should know, he seemed

to think you were sleepwalking. He wasn't angry with you."

"He told you that?" she asked breathlessly.

"Not in so many words, but I could tell that he wasn't angry. Just--contemplative, I guess, is a good word."

"Did he tell you anything else that might help us find him?"

"I don't think so. We didn't really talk that long, although I offered. He just wanted a bit of space, I think."

"Father, I don't mean to push, but you really need to think about this. I have to find him. What else did he say?" she asked insistently.

The priest thought for a moment. "Really, all he said was that his partner had given him the shiner and I said something about the partner being angry. He said no. He said that you fought but that it wasn't a bad thing, usually. That you were--very close," he said, giving Scully a gentle smile before continuing. "I told him that the key to any relationship is forgiveness."

"And that's it?" she asked, disheartened.

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"Scully," said McIntyre, interrupting before she could keep questioning the father, "I don't think there's anything more we can do tonight." He held up a hand to forestall her objections. "My men lifted a few prints off where the Father says Mulder was sitting, but I doubt they will do any good. It's the middle of the night, so there was no one to see anything. Hell, with this guy there could have been a dozen witnesses and they *still* wouldn't have seen anything. There's nothing more to do, right now."

"You're wrong. There is one thing I can do. I need my laptop."

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Tezcuco Plantation
Lafitte, Louisiana
Same Day, Same Time

From his place behind the slave quarters, Mulder could see activity in the lit building behind the main plantation house. He couldn't risk going back that way, and going farther away from the main house meant going into what he suspected was a bayou. He couldn't see that far in the darkness, but he could see moonlight hitting pools of water. It was as if the bayou was encroaching on the plantation, bit by bit. He suspected it was, the Mississippi River area being a dynamic environment, constantly changing despite man's resistance.

He turned back toward the front of the main house and the sprawling lawn dotted with oak trees. The oak intermingled with cypress and thickened once past the end of the house to where he was standing. His eyes followed the driveway away from the front of the house. All he could see were an open, overgrown lawn and abandoned fields. There had to be a road out there somewhere at the end of the drive.

It was his only choice. He gripped "his" picket tightly in his hand and began slowly stumbling his way through the trees along the edge of the water, parallel to the drive. His head still pounding and ankle aching, he tried to formulate a plan. He knew it was only a matter of time before the vampire found him. He was surprised that he hadn't already.

Or maybe he knows exactly where you are and he's playing with you, Mulder.

He tried to make his mind a blank slate, unreadable. He focused his eyes on the ground in front of him and thought of nothing other than making his legs work.

One more step, one more step, one more step....

Several minutes passed in this manner, in a blank haze, before Mulder saw something orange fluttering near the ground just to his left. He found it hard to focus on the object, his strength slowly draining away. When he realized what it was, a small snort of laughter escaped his lips, making him dizzy.

A stake.

An actual wooden *stake* with some orange flagging tied to it. He crouched down and touched it to make sure it was real and saw some letters and numbers printed on it in black marker. A surveyor's marker placed right at the water's edge, perhaps to survey the bayou's current extent.

He didn't care what it was there for, he needed to borrow it. He wrapped both hands around it and pulled. It didn't budge, and he nearly passed out from the effort.

He rested for a moment and tried again, his vision going white around the edges. Suddenly the stake came loose and he flew backwards, landing on his back, water rapidly closing over his face. He sat up quickly, sputtering and coughing, waist deep in the murky swamp.

As he sat there looking at the prize clenched in his fist, he wondered how he'd ever have the strength to use it. He wasn't even sure he could regain his footing.

A gurgling noise somewhere behind him in the bayou pushed him to his feet and out of the water. He staggered slowly to the edge of the woods and, leaning against a tree trunk, gazed out over the moonlit lawn. He could see the shadowy forms of the trunks and sprawling limbs of oak trees standing in a line a short distance away. Like sentinels at attention.

The driveway. He had a picture in his mind of the typical southern plantation with massive oaks lining the drive, covering it like a canopy.

He looked back toward the house and, seeing no movement or sign of life, he started towards the oaks.

He had an idea. An idea that might kill him, but he wouldn't go alone.

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After too long a delay for Brandon's comfort, he was ready to go.

When he had purchased the plantation many, many decades ago, he had kept the stable stocked, although much of the grounds had gone to seed. A skeleton crew kept the house and stable running, Marianna ruling over them during his long absences.

He ran a long hand over the horse's chestnut-colored neck, loving the feel of the velvety coat. He adjusted the rope looped over the saddle horn and guided the horse out of the barn. He loved riding, and he had practically been raised on a horse's back.

He loved the hunt even more. He couldn't prevent the smile that crept onto his face and he felt positively wicked.

"You *are* wicked and evil, Brandon. I can't believe you've wasted all this time."

Brandon's smile was replaced by a grimace as he glared down at Marianna standing by the stable door.

"Your desire for the Fox overrules your good sense, my dear," he replied

with a growl. He felt a strong measure of satisfaction when she shrank slightly and began to fidget.

"Just--please find him quickly, Brandon. He won't last with the bayou creatures."

"Just make sure his room is ready. He'll be with us for a while, I suspect."

With that, Brandon walked his horse slowly towards the crumbling outbuildings and slave quarters, sniffing the air like a hound as he went, his ears listening carefully for any sound.

A few moments later he pulled the animal to an abrupt halt near the front of one crumbling shack.

Blood. Fresh blood, the scent hanging faintly in the air.

He's hurt himself, but not badly, Brandon thought with a slight twinge of worry.

He listened carefully, with his ears and his mind, but there wasn't a sound that didn't fit in with the creature noises of the bayou.

Brandon grimaced and followed the scent of blood along the waters edge.

He was rather surprised when, after a few minutes' walk, the scent he was trailing veered off across the front lawn towards the driveway.

He followed, all senses on alert.

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Mulder woke with a start when he heard the snort of a large animal.

A horse, he thought dimly. He was amazed to realize that he'd fallen asleep. In a tree.

He had searched for just the right massive oak, one whose trunk split into two thick, ascending branches not too far off the ground. Then he had proceeded to drag his pain-filled body up, and up, and up. He was now lying on his stomach on a branch nearly as wide as he was, and about ten feet off the ground.

As he clenched his stake tightly in his fist, he realized that only his head was still pounding. The rest of him was numb. Dead. He looked toward the ground below his perch and calculated. A sudden rush of vertigo and the stamp of a horse's hoof about 50 yards away caused him to clamp his eyes shut, hold on, and pray. He cleared his mind of anything that might give him away too soon.

The horse came closer, almost silently. Mulder had to open his eyes, to keep a look out.

Just out of Mulder's sight because of the leaves and branches, the horse came to a stop. His heart was pounding so hard he was certain it would give away his location. Perfect.

The creak of leather reached his ears and he was petrified.

Scully, if this kills me, I'm sorry.

"Fox?" came the deceptively soft call in that hated voice. "I know you're here, dear boy, you may as well come out."

Mulder held his breath.

"Fox, you're hurt. I can fix that, you know. Why do you think your bite wounds healed so quickly?" The vampire's voice got louder as he moved

under the tree toward Mulder.

An instant later he stepped into view almost under Mulder's perch. Two steps later, he was directly beneath the branch. Leaning back, the vampire looked up and right into Mulder's eyes, the parody of a grin crossing his lips.

Gripping the stake, Mulder pushed himself off the tree branch.

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Ramada Inn, Room 405
St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 20, 1998, 3:00 a.m.

Scully hung up the phone, confident that the Lone Gunmen would find the information she needed.

She just hoped they would find it in time.

"That's a good idea, Scully, but we checked this out before and all the crime scenes were owned by different people."

"His access is too good, though. There has to be a common thread between the houses, at least. If we can find a name, or a company, then we can see what else that company owns in this area."

"And then, presumably, we find Mulder. It's a good idea, Scully."

She couldn't bring herself to acknowledge his compliment, or even feel confident. Any agent would have done this much. The activity was the only thing holding her together at this point, the only thing preventing her from dwelling on what had happened.

Flickers of panic had shot through her, and continued to do so, as bits and pieces of her actions came back to her. It was as if whatever hypnotic barrier that prevented her from realizing or remembering what she was doing was slowly crumbling away, leaving her in horror. She wondered if it was intentional. She wished desperately that she had approached him about their sleeping arrangements. He could have at least fought her off sooner. She pinched the bridge of her nose. Dwelling on it would make her lose it all together.

She tried to shake off the nervous breakdown she felt sure was coming by booting up her computer and going on line under Mulder's account. She scanned his email messages, hoping that his earlier idea had been fruitful.

There was a message from an Angelique. Scully snorted softly.

"What're you doin'?" asked McIntyre as he looked over her shoulder.

"Mulder sent out emails to some vampire web page owners, asking if they could help him track down a particular vampire."

"And?"

"This woman, *Angelique*, says she would very much like to meet Mulder and that she's certain she can help him."

"And you disagree?"

"My extremely limited experience with people who claim to be vampires, and with women who want Mulder, has told me that neither are to be trusted." Not even me, she added silently.

"But she could still know something, Scully."

"I know, so..."

"So, we'll go meet her in the morning, after you've gotten some sleep."

"First of all, we don't know that she'll come out in the morning, and secondly--I can't sleep. Not while Mulder is out there somewhere, all alone except for--" she couldn't complete the sentence. She shuddered in revulsion and fear.

"You're going to have to try. You won't be any good to the man otherwise," McIntyre said gently.

She snorted again, but didn't voice her thoughts.

"I mean it, Scully. I know you're keeping occupied in order to avoid thinking about it, but come on. You have to think about it. The guy takes Mulder, now, after previously claiming that isn't the point of the game? What has changed?"

Scully's eyes widened. "Mulder figured it out."

"He must have. But why take him just because he figured out the game? It's kinda hard to play it that way, isn't it?"

"Maybe he wasn't supposed to figure it out," Scully replied.

"Maybe. And maybe this guy is just one weird fuck. Do you see why we need sleep now? We need to figure this out."

"You go on home, McIntyre. I'll see you in the morning," she said, firmly.

McIntyre just sighed, and Scully wondered if it drove Mulder nuts when she did that to him.

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Tezcuco Plantation
Lafitte, Louisiana
Same Day, 3:30 a.m.

Mulder felt as though he were falling in slow motion, the vampire's despised face coming slowly closer, growing larger, the grin fading as he saw the stake in Mulder's fist. But it wasn't slow motion and surprise froze the vampire just long enough for Mulder to strike in the only way he could.

Mulder himself wasn't ready for the pain, instant and blinding, as he used his entire body weight as if it were a hammer to the blunt end of the stake. He was only dimly aware of the harsh scream right in his ear as the point of his weapon was driven into his enemy's chest. All that really registered was the white hot pain in his own chest and the audible crack as something broke.

His body bounced off the end of the stake and he rolled away from the vampire, his arm across his chest and trying not to scream as the waves of pain continued to wash through him. He felt his heart jump in his chest and he feared it would stop completely from the shock. Part of him wished it would.

The other part was screaming silently, desperately, for Scully to come and take away the pain.

TEZCUCO
Chapter 12

Ramada Inn, Room 405
St. Charles Avenue

New Orleans, Louisiana
June 20, 1998, 6:00 a.m.

She couldn't stop running her hands over his smooth skin.

His arms, covered with a soft downy hair, the muscled shoulders, the rippled abdomen. A kiss to his lips, her hand slipped into his shorts and he groaned into her mouth. She stroked him and his breathing became harsh, warm puffs in her hair.

A soft, "Scully, wait a second," went unheard as her tongue met his beard-roughened jaw. She climbed up to straddle his hips, the hard length of his cock grinding against her damp panties. She rocked against him, wanting him inside her, yet unwilling to let go of his hands pinned above his head or remove the feel of him from between her legs for even a moment.

"You're not Scully! Get off me!"

Scully woke with a gasp, sitting straight up in bed, her face wet with tears.

"Oh, god. Oh, my god," she whispered to herself, voice hitching and choked. "It was me, it was."

She slid off the bed and resumed the pacing that exhaustion had forced her to give up only two short hours ago. She couldn't stop the tears from flowing, it was all she could do to hold in the sobs. Part of her wondered why she bothered, there was no one to see.

Then the small part of her that retained some sanity spoke up and reminded her that someone had to find Mulder. That it had to be her, after what she had done, was highly ironic.

Suddenly she heard a pinging sound from the direction of her laptop where it sat on the small table in front of the window.

Email.

She walked slowly over to the computer and stood in front of it, afraid to look. She walked around the table to the window, pulling back the curtains and looked out over the Garden District.

A bright, sunny morning, early commuters driving up St. Charles Avenue towards the business district. People walking hurriedly towards unknown destinations. A normal morning in New Orleans.

She stifled a sudden urge to scream at them for acting calm when everything was far from normal. There were vampires roaming their streets after dark, taking away beautiful men, doing god knows what....she shut those thoughts quickly away and walked purposefully back to her computer.

A click or two later she was reading a message from Angelique which told her that she was available this morning to talk to "Fox."

"Well, you're going to get Fox's partner. Whether you like it or not."

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Tezcuco Plantation
Lafitte, Louisiana
June 20, 1998, 8:30 p.m.

His dreams were fractured.

A fall to the earth. The snap of a bone breaking. The sharp pain of a bite in his neck and a fade to darkness.

The memories drifted away in a haze of pain as he slowly worked his way

back to consciousness.

His first realization was of the strength in the two small hands massaging his shoulders.

"Scully?" he asked hopefully, his voice a dry croak.

"Shhhhh.....relax, you've been badly hurt," a voice whispered to him, as the hands continued to work their magic on his pain-filled body.

He drifted away.

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He regained consciousness again when someone struggled to turn him over to lay on his back. A sharp, searing pain in his chest made him cry out involuntarily and cost him the ability to breathe.

"I'll be as careful as I can, Fox. I'm sorry, but this is your own fault."

It was the voice of a young woman, not Scully, he realized. He tried to wonder at it, though his mind was focused on the agony of his body and his desperate need for air.

"If you hadn't tried that stunt, you wouldn't have broken something. A rib, I suspect, if your breathing is anything to go by. And you wouldn't have made Brandon so angry that he nearly drained you completely dry." The voice paused, laughing slightly. It sounded rueful. "Well, he had to do that, actually."

It was a melodious, sweet voice, sing-songing its way through a rather confusing, and decidedly one-sided, conversation. He tried to move and found that he barely had strength to open his eyes. When he managed that, they widened in shock.

"Oh. You're awake!"

"You-you're practically a c-child," he said in a rough, breathless voice. He couldn't believe his eyes. A young blond, dressed all in white, kneeled next to him on a huge, four-poster bed. The room was dressed in flickering shadows, the only light coming from two candles on a bedside table.

"I am most certainly *not* a child," she replied, haughtily. "I'll have you know that I was nearly 22 when I became a vampire and that was at least twenty years ago."

Mulder just stared, not sure if he was hallucinating again, or dreaming. This was surreal and he was terribly confused. He didn't know where to start with his questions. Then again, he wasn't sure he wanted to find out where he was, or what was going on.

He blinked, groggily, and gazed more closely at his surroundings. His heart began to pound, as he realized that this was a scene closely resembling one of his dreams.

Four walls, one door, no windows.

Darkness, mildew.

Gargoyles carved into mahogany bedposts.

Blue satin sheets.

He was naked. A huge black and blue bruise decorated the left side of his chest from just below his collar bone to below his nipple. He tried to move his left arm, but he was so weak it was difficult. When the arm did move, another searing pain shot through his chest, making him groan. He suspected that a rib or two was broken, and that he had some serious

muscle damage.

With his right hand, he pulled the sheets higher on his chest and looked warily, suspiciously, at his blond companion.

She gazed placidly back at him and shrugged.

"I'm sorry, Fox, but you smelled awful. You must have fallen in the bayou. Besides, I had to see if I could fix you."

"Fix me?" he croaked, his mind racing around in confused circles.

"I'm too young to do much good, but I thought I'd try. Although, I may have earned Brandon's wrath when he finds out. He wants you to hurt for what you did to him," she said, solemnly. "But I couldn't bear to see you in such pain. You kept moaning." She grimaced, as if the thought filled her pain of her own.

"W-what I did to *him*?" rasped Mulder, incredulous. Then he felt the despair begin to creep over him, a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. The vampire was still alive.

She sighed. "You must not try that again. If I hadn't shown up when I did he would have drained you."

"So...he's...still alive then," he asked, hoping to be wrong.

"Yes. Although he needs to rest up for quite some time, thanks to you. I'm afraid you're going to pay for what you did." She sighed again and shook her head sadly. She ran her fingers through his hair, pushing it back off his forehead. "I don't want him to hurt you anymore, Fox. You must be good."

He cringed away from her fingers but found he couldn't go far. The effort was exhausting. And potentially revealing, he realized, as he clutched the sheet higher on his chest.

Mulder tried to shake off his despair and began to turn her words over in his mind. He couldn't give up, not yet. He had to do something before Scully became any more involved than she was already. He had to win this game before she found him. If she found him. Thoughts of what would or could happen terrified him and he pushed them away before they became distracting. Instead, he struggled to think of a plan, a way to gain information he needed. Even thinking was difficult in his condition.

"Brandon? That's his name?" he asked, carefully.

"Brandon Ellory Van Ormand, the Third," she replied casually, tucking the sheets carefully around Mulder, before laying a hand to his forehead.

He shivered at the touch of her cool hands on his hot skin, goosebumps rising all over his body.

"You're feverish."

She poured him a glass of water from a pitcher on the bedside table. Slipping her hand behind his neck, she helped him sit up slightly to take a drink. It was hard to breathe, like there was a band around his chest. The weakness in his body frightened him even more, he could barely move without her help.

You're probably a few quarts short, Mulder, he thought to himself. He shivered again, his skin crawling with revulsion, and other feelings he wasn't anxious to explore at the moment. If ever.

As she gently laid him back on the bed, he studied her more carefully.

She had delicate, elfin features and large blue eyes. Her white-blond hair hung almost to her waist and had a luxurious wave to it. While she was tiny, he could see that he had been mistaken in thinking her a child. Her face and manner spoke to her age and a soul older than she appeared,

despite still retaining a bit of naivete. She also had the body of a woman, one she seemed eager to flaunt with her wispy, flowing, nearly transparent garments. Her skin was like white porcelain, very pale and cold-looking, with smooth curves and softly rounded edges, her nipples the only visible blemish. It invited a touch, to see if she really existed, that she wasn't just a ghost, or a figment of his imagination.

"What's your name?" he asked, quickly breaking off this train of thought.

"Marianna. I keep the house for Brandon. He's the one who brought me across." she said, matter of factly. "He's been like a father to me."

Mulder snorted in disbelief, then tried to hide the dizziness that rushed through his head. Marianna put a hand to her own forehead and closed her eyes.

"Oh, my. Don't do that again, if you can help it," she said gently, opening her eyes again and gazing fondly down at him.

"I'll try to keep...that...in mind," Mulder said, panting slightly, a tinge of sarcasm coloring his words.

Marianna laughed gaily, allowing Mulder to see her elongated eye teeth. His stomach flipped over and he found himself trying to inch away from her, again.

"Oh, Fox, don't be afraid of me," she begged him. "I'm only going to take care of you, I'm not going to hurt you."

"You're here. You're with *him*. You can't help but hurt me."

She pouted at him, tears welling in her eyes. Mulder suddenly got the feeling that he'd kicked a small puppy. And he couldn't afford to alienate her.

"I'm-I'm sorry," he said, carefully. "Will you tell me what happened?"

She sniffed delicately, and he suddenly realized that he'd been expertly manipulated.

"When you fell...or jumped...from that tree, you drove that stake into Brandon, barely missing his heart. He pulled the stake out, but he lost a lot of blood and was terribly injured. When I rode up he was enraged, drinking from you. You were so pale, I thought I was too late," she trailed off, sad and introspective.

Mulder's mind was whirling. Terribly injured? She thought she was too late?

"So, you stopped him from killing me? Why?"

"I like you, Fox, and I'm lonely out here. Brandon promised you to me, he can't break his promise now."

"What - how - I don't understand." He was baffled.

"I know all about you, Fox, from Clarice. We were like sisters."

It was becoming a bit clearer to Mulder. The remaining puzzle pieces falling into place.

"So-the whole reason I'm here is--for you?" he asked, not believing it for a minute. She did like to talk, though, so as long as he continued asking questions...

"Well, that's not the *whole* reason," she replied sweetly. So sweetly that his skin crawled.

"What are the other reasons?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"Scully shouldn't have burned Clarice. She really shouldn't have. She

killed one of Brandon's children, his lover."

She said that so seriously and with such an air of injured innocence, that Mulder didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Marianna," he began gently, "Scully was protecting me. Clarice was hurting me, making me do things I didn't want to do."

"She shouldn't have burned her. She took from Brandon, now Brandon will take from her."

"Don't you see? Clarice was trying to take something that didn't belong to her. She was in the wrong and Scully was protecting *me*. Clarice started this, she was crazy, not handling being brought across." As he finished Marianna was shaking her head violently.

"That's not true, it's not."

Something clicked inside Mulder. This was about revenge, possession and family. He used all his strength to reach out to Marianna and grasp her hand.

"I belong to *Scully*," he said, trying to speak in a language that this young woman would understand, "just like you and Clarice belong to Brandon."

"Scully forfeited her rights to you by burning Clarice. She has to pay. You belong to me now. And Scully will lose *everything*," she concluded, teeth bared slightly, hatred shining in her eyes. A light flush dotted her white cheeks, the anger making her look more alive.

Mulder shuddered slightly, trying to find his way around her twisted logic. She just wouldn't see. Perhaps she couldn't, perhaps Brandon had brainwashed her to the point that there was no reasoning with her. He had to take a different tack, keeping Scully out of it.

"Marianna, Brandon has been playing with me for weeks. He's said - things - that make me think he had no intention of letting me go or giving me away." He gasped, out of breath again and tiring quickly. "He wants revenge on me, too."

"You've done nothing wrong," she said, uncertainly.

"I shot Clarice in the *head*," he said, watching her eyes widen, "and Brandon's revenge on me will *not* consist of letting me live the happy plantation life here with you."

Marianna's head was shaking in disagreement, but she still seemed uncertain. "Clarice could have recovered if Scully hadn't burned her. Burning is the worst thing, she has to pay for doing that. And Brandon wouldn't lie to me, Fox."

Mulder sighed, feeling the despair creep back over him. He had to get out of here before Scully showed up. There was no reasoning with Marianna on the subject. But maybe he could make her doubt Brandon.

Suddenly a huge yawn over came him and made his breathing difficult again. He blinked slowly, starting to fade, exhausted. His chest muscles throbbed rhythmically, in time with his head. He struggled to stay awake, terrified of falling asleep with a vampire in his bed and another roaming the house.

"Oh, poor thing. All this talking is tiring you out. Let me try to work on your bruise again."

"No! That's okay, you don't have --" his words trailed away in fear as Marianna lowered her mouth toward the huge bruise on his chest.

She laid her lips against his skin and raised the fingers of one hand to caress his chest.

Warmth pooled under her mouth and fingers, spreading deep into his chest. He felt his eyes grow heavier and his breathing deepen, allowing a bit more of welcome air into his lungs. Her tongue flicked out against his skin, almost causing a spark, and he couldn't stop the gasp that escaped his mouth. The warmth spread south, arousing him slightly, making his feet shift restlessly under the satin sheets. The throbbing in his shoulder lessened slightly and he groaned.

"Marianna!! What in the hell do you think you're doing?" Brandon's voice boomed from the doorway.

Mulder's heart jumped into his throat and he squeezed his eyes shut.

And then he prayed to a God he hoped was listening.

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Ramada Inn, Room 405
St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
Same Day, Same Time

"A dead fuckin' end." McIntyre followed Scully into her room, grumbling the whole way.

"We can't give up," she replied.

"Of course not, but a day spent walking around the French Quarter talkin' to freaks is not my idea of *the* way to spend a day."

Scully snorted, miserable and disappointed. She would have to agree with him on that one. It had been, at turns, a highly disturbing and singularly un-fruitful day. Her only luck had been Skinner's delayed arrival.

As if the thought summoned the man himself, there was a knock on her door. When she didn't move to answer it immediately, McIntyre shrugged and went to the door himself. She used the moment to compose herself, rebuilding the tough shell that she had patched earlier in the day while wandering the streets.

"Assistant Director Skinner, I presume," drawled McIntyre, in his slightly sarcastic southern drawl that would be amusing in any other situation.

"Lieutenant McIntyre, *I* presume," said Skinner in his no-nonsense, FBI A.D. voice. Scully cringed inwardly, keeping her back to the door. She felt her head droop, her chin coming to rest on her chest against her will. Skinner's voice brought back everything that had happened, everything that she had somehow managed to subsume during the day.

How badly she had failed. Again.

She could hear the two men shake hands. She could feel two sets of eyes on her back, and still she couldn't turn around.

"Agent Scully--"

"Sir, I'm--I'm sorry that you had to come down here," she said, hesitantly, still not able to face him.

"Scully, turn around."

She took a deep breath and turned to face her superior. What she saw unnerved her.

He pitied her, she could see it in his face. Her hard won composure started to crack. She scrambled quickly to keep it from falling apart.

"Sir, we've been working steadily all day. We've not found any solid leads, but I believe we are on the right track as far as investigating. We

just need to get a break. I've--" She stopped when Skinner held up his hand.

"Slow down, take it easy. Tell me what you've been doing, tell me where I can help."

She tried to calm down. "We started by emailing web pages that were run by self-proclaimed vampires. It was Mulder's idea, actually--" her voice caught and she slammed the emotion deep down inside. "Anyway, we emailed them and have only gotten one response, so far. A woman named Angelique. We met with her and she knew of a so-called vampire that was new in the area, as far as she knew. But, she didn't know his name. She referred us to some others, who referred us to others--"

"Which lead to us investigating some *very* interesting places throughout the French Quarter," finished McIntyre sourly.

"Go on," prompted Skinner.

"I also contacted some friends of Mulder's who - well, they're multi-talented, let's leave it at that. They are trying to find a link between the crime scenes, one that will allow us to find where Mulder might be held captive."

"So they are searching for ownership or rental records?"

"Yeah, a common thread," McIntyre picked up the conversation. "My guys tried that the last time Mulder and Scully were down here, but didn't find a link. We're thinkin' that maybe this guy rented or bought these places since then in order to use them to torture Mulder."

"And?" asked Skinner.

"No luck so far," Scully said. "It seems that both the Frenchmen town house and the Maple Street house were recently bought by two different corporations. The guys think that these are a front for something, or someone, else. They're still working on it."

"You mentioned a game in your phone call. Any more thoughts on that?"

She sighed. McIntyre looked up and away from her. They had disagreed on this earlier.

"I think this man is insane, seeking revenge on Mulder for Clarice."

"You don't think he's a vampire?" asked Skinner, carefully.

"I--do," she said, reluctantly. Then she hurried to convince Skinner. "There's really no other explanation for some of the things he is able to do. I mean, what is a vampire, really, but a person who drinks blood?"

"That's too simple a description for what he's been able to do, Scully," interjected McIntyre.

"I *realize* that--" Scully replied heatedly.

"Hold it, hold it," Skinner interrupted. "I get the feeling there's a dispute between the two of you."

"I think that Scully may be the target of this guy's revenge."

Skinner's eyes widened in disbelief. "How do you figure?" he asked, and Scully turned away and walked to the window to stare out at the night.

"What is the most important thing in the world to Scully? Mulder, followed closely by her job."

"I'm not getting you." Skinner sounded as confused as Scully was heartsick.

"Everything this guy has done has threatened what is important to Scully."

He has used her, or her image, to terrorize Mulder, which serves to drive a wedge between them."

"What makes you think he isn't just trying to drive Mulder insane?"

"This guy tells Mulder that he could take him any time he wants, but that isn't the object of the game. Yet, last night he suddenly decides to take Mulder? Why? Why didn't he take him the first time he met him? Why end the "game" suddenly if Mulder is the target? Has the game ended, or have the rules just changed?"

"So you think Mulder figured it out? That Scully was the target? Then the vampire took Mulder to further torture Scully? It sounds a little thin. Why Scully and *not* Mulder? Mulder shot Clarice in the head." Skinner sounded dubious.

"Man, if there's one thing you pick up quite a bit of in New Orleans, it's vampire lore. In the vampire's wacked out mind, he probably doesn't believe that Clarice was dead from a gunshot wound to the head."

"But then Scully had her cremated," Skinner concluded.

Scully heard him walk over to stand beside her at the window. Her eyes slipped shut, her hands balling into tight fists.

"Scully, this sounds like it could have potential. Do you have another theory, or a reason why you reject this one?" he asked gently.

She couldn't speak, couldn't look at him. If she did, she would fall apart. She was hanging by a thread.

"Scully-" he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. She gasped and jerked away from him.

"Don't! Just don't."

"Okay," he said, as if she were deranged. Perhaps she was.

She turned back towards the window, staring out with unseeing eyes.

"I just--I just can't bear the thought of him going through all of this *again* because of something I did. I can't--" she whispered in a tight, choked voice.

"You did what you had to do, what you thought was right for Mulder. I'm sure he would agree, and thank you."

But I've done nothing right since then, was a thought she couldn't voice without screaming. So she kept her silence and tried to pull herself together.

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Tezcuco Plantation
Lafitte, Louisiana
June 20, 1998, 9:05 p.m.

"Brandon, calm down," Marianna said, her voice trembling slightly. Her fear terrified Mulder even further, but he couldn't hide for another moment.

He opened his eyes and saw Brandon in the doorway, a mass of bandages on his chest, under his shirt. He looked pale and drawn. He looked--old.

Interesting.

"Welcome to the party...Brandon, is it?" he asked, trying for bravado despite his gasping for air.

"Marianna, I asked you what you were doing."

"I was trying--to make him feel better," Marianna replied. Mulder felt almost proud when she straightened her spine and stared Brandon in the eye.

"Trying to make him feel better--after what he tried to do?"

When Marianna glanced down at her hands, Mulder interrupted.

"What *I* tried to do? Are you insane?" Mulder asked, pushing his luck.

Brandon snarled and strode over to the bed. Mulder shrank back into the pillows, not strong enough to run. Not that he had anywhere to go, naked and locked in a room with two vampires.

As Brandon sat on the edge of the bed, on Mulder's right, opposite from Marianna, his face cleared and he began to smile. He reached out with his uninjured right arm and touched Mulder's calf through the satin sheet. He wrapped his fingers around Mulder's ankle and Mulder began to shake in terror. Then Brandon slowly trailed his hand up over Mulder's knee and squeezed his thigh.

"You're awfully cocky for someone in your - situation, dear boy."

A gasp from his left told Mulder that his insane idea might be working. He didn't look away from Brandon.

"Well, *Brandon*, you're the one who's been torturing me. You told me yourself that I wouldn't give up and would try to drive a stake through your heart. Are you really surprised? Or were you stupid enough to think I would just knuckle under and do everything your way when you changed the rules?"

Brandon backhanded Mulder across the cheek so hard that he drew blood, and Mulder saw stars, his consciousness fading slightly. He couldn't see Marianna, but he could hear her, as Brandon's hand closed around his throat.

"Brandon, no, stop!"

"I'm not going to kill him, I need him," Brandon said harshly, his voice guttural.

The bed sank next to Mulder as Brandon lay his full weight on the mattress, leaning toward Mulder. He grabbed Mulder's arms and pulled him forward, compressing his chest even more. Mulder gasped, wanting to scream but breathless, as the pressure on his lungs increased, and Brandon chuckled in his ear, before sinking his teeth into Mulder's still tender neck.

The colors swirled behind his eyes as the stars whirled and then faded to black. The pain faded to a tiny pin point and it became all about sensation.

The hot mouth on his neck

The tingling rush of blood leaving his body.

Fingertips skimming over the gooseflesh on his arms.

Satin rippling and skimming across his groin.

A crushing embrace, then the heavy weight of a body lying across his own, pressing him further into the mattress.

And, just before he lost consciousness, the warm wetness of tears falling on his outstretched hand.

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Ramada Inn, Room 405
St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana
Same Day, 10:25 p.m.

She sat in the chair, unmoving, looking out over the now dark Garden District. Looking out, but not seeing anything other than his face. His face the way she had last seen it.

Scared. Uncertain. Hurt.

He just kept staring at her, with the question written across his features.

How could you?

The pinging of her email startled her out of her trance. She stared at the blinking mail icon on the screen, a sudden premonition prickling her skin.

She clicked on the icon.

Agent Scully,

I have something you are looking for. You should come, he is ill. Come alone, no escorts. HE will know if you break this rule and Fox Mulder will suffer the consequences. Come to the address below at 2 am. Be discreet.

Marianna

Her heart racing, she ran into the vanity. Tearing her suit off, she began haphazardly pawing through her suitcase looking for dark clothing. Pulling on a pair of black jeans and a dark colored tee shirt, she raced back into the main room to get her gun.

The minute her fingers touched the cool metal, she slowed down, beginning to think. Carefully.

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Tezcuco Plantation
Lafitte, Louisiana
Same day; Same time

Brandon chuckled quietly to himself as he sat in front of Marianna's computer.

He was feeling much better after his last "meal," thankfully, but he wished he could see the look on Scully's face when she read that email.

The game continued.

All the pieces were in place.

TEZCUCO
Chapter 13

Tezcuco Plantation
Lafitte, Louisiana
June 21, 1998, 12:05 a.m.

She hid in the shadows, as always.

She was a shadow, a non-entity, a child of darkness. A vampire.

She wondered how one could also be an idiot for twenty years.

An idiot? Or just happy - until the moment that she was slapped in the face with what she was missing. And with reality.

Fox Mulder. The man she had observed from the shadows while her sister hunted him. A man of quiet strength, integrity. A man who made her yearn for more than her quiet country life.

A man devoted, he made her long for a similar devotion to be bestowed on her.

Dana Scully didn't deserve such a man.

As she watched him from her shadowed corner, she anguished for him. He was as good as dead, never to be hers. She had seen his future with her own two eyes, as Brandon had drunk from him, filled with a lust she had never witnessed in him.

One that he had never shown her. Or Clarice.

She had never felt more alone. Once a condition that she craved, her solitude filled her with despair. She didn't know the solution, how to end it. Although she had a few ideas.

Candlelight shone on Fox Mulder's skin, skin that was nearly translucent and covered in a sheen of sweat. His face was stubbled with a light beard, and dark circles hung around his closed eyes. He looked like a pale angel, the blue satin riding low on his hips, his shifting feet pulling it ever lower. One hand, the fingers splayed, rested on his abdomen. His other was fisted in the sheets next to his hip. Pain.

He was suffering now, from the sickness of a source. Blood loss, repeated bites, exhaustion, fever and the pain of a broken bone and torn muscle. Soon, she feared, he would suffer far worse. For when Dana showed up, the game would end. One way or another.

As she watched, his eyes cracked open. He licked his lips as his head tossed lightly on the pillows, scanning the room. They rested on the pitcher of water on the night stand. He tried to roll his body to the side, forgetting, for a moment, his chest. When he cried out in pain, she relented and went to him.

He gasped in surprise when she emerged from a darkened corner of the room. She lowered herself to the edge of the bed and shushed him gently, pouring a glass of water.

He stared at her with huge, dark eyes, seemingly afraid yet desperate for a drink.

She slipped her hand behind his head, the sweat-soaked hair and too-warm skin shocking even her. She helped him sit up, and he drank greedily from the glass she held to his lips.

He coughed, sputtering when the water ran quicker than he could swallow. He sank back into the pillows and stared up at her, panting, his expression unreadable.

"You see now?" he whispered, his voice as weak as his body and his gaze knowing.

She shouldn't have been surprised that he saw right through her. She couldn't look at him any longer, her gaze dropping to her lap, her hands buried in the filmy, translucent gauze of her dress.

"You have to help me get out of here, Marianna," he pleaded. "You *know* what's going to happen when Scully shows up, don't you?"

"I-I have an idea...."

"Please. Please, Marianna."

"Do you know why I've spent twenty years of my life out here on this plantation, Fox?" He shook his head mutely, his gaze impatient, desperate. "I liked it out here, and I was never a killer. I had sources, occasional lovers, but I prefer the bayou, woods and the horses to the city streets. Brandon came and went, Clarice and others of our ilk were only a phone call away when I wanted companionship...I seemed to have everything as I wanted it."

"Now, Clarice is gone and Brandon is a liar." As she said the words, she saw Fox edge away from her again. She carefully re-schooled her features and ran her hand through the damp hair, trying to soothe him. "Brandon wants you, Dana wants you, I want you...you're very popular, aren't you?" she asked, softly.

"You can leave here, Marianna. You don't have to stay--" he stopped mid-thought and his eyes widened. "He--he can hear us, read my thoughts..."

"No, no, Fox. He's been badly hurt, all his energy is going to repairing the damage. He's only an intermittent mind reader at his best, he just makes you think that it's more powerful than it is. Manipulation, be it physical or emotional, is his specialty."

He grabbed at her arm weakly. "Help me get out of here, then move on. Get away from him. You're not like him, Marianna, you don't have to be like him."

She sighed. "I am like him. I'm a vampire, Fox. We're evil creatures. Especially Brandon. I've been fooling myself, thinking that I wasn't bad just because I keep to myself. But I was willing to keep you here with me, despite your unwillingness."

"You said you weren't a killer."

"I'm not, normally, but I don't know if I could continue to say that outside this plantation. Do you know what it takes for me to sit here and not drink from you or make love to you?" Her hand went to his face almost against her will and she wanted to cry and scream at the same time when he flinched. She caressed the warm, damp skin of his cheek anyway, then bent over him and pressed her lips to his, kissing him gently. She pulled back slightly and his breathing was rushed, panicky. She skimmed her nose against his in an Eskimo kiss.

"I'm not normally a rapist, either, Fox," she whispered to him, her eyes locked on his and his breath warm on her lips. "I want you to love me, but I know you belong to someone else." She felt the tears clog her throat then. "I should have realized...."

"Marianna--" he began, then faltered when he saw what she pulled from the folds of her gown.

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Exact Location Unknown
Lafitte, Louisiana
Same Day, Same Time

Her hands hurt from the white-knuckled grip she had on the steering wheel.

Lost somewhere in Lafitte, she was desperate to get to the plantation well ahead of her 2 a.m. appointment with the devil. She was also racing the clock on another front.

Scully had taken a risk. She wasn't sure which was the more foolhardy move: the quick flight from the hotel, leaving McIntyre and Skinner in the dark, or the strategically placed note she had left Skinner so that he would find it at the right time.

A Mulder tactic. The thought made her smile, and her eyes filled with at the

same time.

If they got there too soon....if they got there too late...had she thought this out?

No, Scully, you had no time.

She had grabbed her gun, Mulder's, and extra clips. Writing down the instructions to the Tezcucio Plantation on a note pad, then pocketing the page, she had forwarded the email to Mulder's Bureau account. Then she had written Mulder's password on a clean sheet of paper and left it lying next to the computer. By the time Skinner found the note and figured it out, she hoped that she would be at the plantation.

She wanted reinforcements, but for once in her life she was almost convinced that the vampire would know if she didn't show up alone. Her real hope was that she could sneak in, find Mulder and get him out before the vampire realized she was there. She was not confident, but she had to try.

She was torn up inside, wanting to do the right thing, wanting to rescue Mulder, wanting to storm the plantation with every cop and agent she could get her hands on.

Mulder.

Sitting behind the wheel of the car, driving, she had too much time to think about him. Was he all right, was he being tortured, was he really dead?

No. Not dead. He can't be dead.

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Mulder's heart raced at the sight of the silver dagger in her hand. It glittered in the candlelight, and he stared at it, transfixed, beyond fear.

That's one way to end the game before it gets going, Mulder. Too bad Brandon would probably play without you.

"What are you doing with the knife?" he asked quietly.

"It's so hard, Fox. It was never this hard before. I want...I want...." she drifted and the knife lowered slowly to rest coolly against the damp skin of his chest.

Mulder went completely still as she lightly traced a line down the center of his chest with the tip of the blade. She seemed despondent, dazed, her eyes glowing in the dimness of the room. She almost floated from her sitting position on the edge of the bed, to a kneeling one at his hip. The knife caught on the sheet, pulling the blue satin lower, exposing him, causing him to shiver, his skin prickling with gooseflesh. His heart nearly stopped and he ceased breathing, his whole being focused on that knife as it rested on his upper thigh, before she brought it back up to the center of his chest, over his heart. Her tongue flicked out and she licked her lips, then pressed slightly on the knife.

Mulder gasped, his heart now pounding again in terror as he felt the wet warmth of blood as it ran in a rivulet towards his belly button.

Marianna sighed her appreciation and Mulder saw her eyes go nearly black as she looked at the bloody stream. She bent over him and licked delicately at his abdomen.

"Marianna, this isn't you," he whispered, short of breath, deja vu smacking him between the eyes. She didn't seem to register him. "Marianna, stop, you're out of control."

"You're right," she said, gazing up at him, her lips hovering above his belly,

her voice husky with desire and blood lust, "it's not me. It's never been me, but it is nearly overwhelming. So hard to resist...the desire for you, for revenge, for blood. I could kill you now and have my revenge on Brandon and Scully simply by denying them. First I could make love to you, drink from you..."

"But you won't," he said quietly, firmly.

"No, I won't. I can barely live with myself as it is. And I really can't blame Dana for protecting you," she whispered, her eyes filling with tears. "Perhaps I won't have to..." she drifted off, as she sat up, gazing at the knife in her hands. It glittered in the candlelight as she turned it over and over, staring, transfixed, her eyes distant.

As frightened as he was, Mulder believed her when she said she wouldn't hurt him. But he didn't want her to hurt herself either. He tried to divert her. "Will you help me escape?"

She blinked back the tears and pushed her blond hair back from her face in what Mulder recognized as a nervous habit. "I don't know that I can, Fox. He'll catch us before we can get very far. Then Brandon will kill us both, unless I kill him first. Then I would be hunted to the ends of the earth. Other vampires tend to look poorly on someone who has killed one of their own."

Conflicting emotions crashed through Mulder at her simple statements. Emotions that disturbed him on several levels. His mind whirled, confused. Briefly, momentarily, he wanted her to kill Brandon, and he was horrified. At war with that was the need to protect this girl, shelter her. He especially hadn't considered that leaving here would not be the end. The despair that had been present for so long now welled up, choking him. He quickly shut everything down and tried to focus on one goal - getting out of here before Scully arrived.

"We can make it, we've got to try," he begged her, breathless. "You can just leave Brandon, you're not like him. You're not, Marianna, you prove it every day."

She slid off the bed and wandered aimlessly about the room, the dagger still clenched in her fist.

Mulder struggled to sit up, to slide to the edge of the bed. The weakness in his body was like nothing he had ever experienced. He could move his arms with concentration, but his legs felt like highly sensitized dead weight. He pulled the sheet up around his waist and it was as if he could feel every hair on his legs as the satin shifted against them. Lightning bolts of pain lanced through his chest when he used his left hand to try and stanch the flow of blood from the cut on his chest. He gritted his teeth, not able to stop the moan that escaped.

Suddenly, there were two cool hands on his chest, pushing him back down. "You'll never make it out of here, Fox, and I don't think I can help you."

"Marianna--"

"He's still my father, Fox. I hate him right now, but I don't know if I can betray him. I'm not strong enough--"

"You are strong, Marianna," he interrupted, desperate for her to believe. She shook her head, blond hair cascading in waves over her shoulders, making her look like a child. Suddenly, in that moment, he understood her better than he had before. The isolation, the position of having no one but that one person to rely on, the fear of that person being cut out of your life. Either intentionally or against your will.

"I-I need some time alone...to think...." she said softly, walking away from him towards the door.

"No! Marianna, wait!" He nearly screamed in frustration as she left the room, the door closing quietly behind her, the sound of a key turning softly in the lock. He struggled to sit up again, propping himself on his good arm

and resting for a moment.

That's when he saw the dagger.

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Tezcuco Plantation
Lafitte, Louisiana
Same day, 12:35 a.m.

She accidentally drove past the plantation and didn't realize it until there was bayou on both sides of the road. Once she got the car turned around, she drove very slowly, lights off, to the end of the oak-lined drive and parked out of sight from the plantation house at the far end of the drive.

She shut every conflicting thought and painful emotion out of her head and heart and concentrated on one single thing.

Finding Mulder.

She jumped when her cell phone rang suddenly. She pulled it out of her bag and looked at it. It had to be Skinner.

She pressed send. "Scully."

"Where the hell are you, Agent Scully?"

She sighed, grateful not to be alone any longer, yet afraid. "Did you get my note?"

"You mean the password to Mulder's email account? Yes, I got it. We're about halfway to Lafitte. Now where the hell are you?"

"I'm at the plantation. I'm going in," she said firmly.

"Scully, wait for us, we'll be there in half an hour."

"No, I'm not waiting. I'm going to find him and try to get him out."

"You'll just get the both of you killed. Wait for us. The parish only has a sheriff and one deputy, but five of us will be better than you by yourself. They can be there in a few minutes."

"Tell them to hold, sir! Mulder is a hostage. I can get in there and find him, but this man will kill him if he senses anyone other than myself on the property."

"Scully--"

"Sir, call them off. At least until you get here. I need a chance to find him before you get here."

"Agent, you are out of control, you aren't thinking this through. You--"

The phone beeped when Scully turned it off.

She slipped quietly out of the car, grateful for her dark clothes and the moonlight. It was so bright she wouldn't need a flashlight. It threw shadows everywhere that would give her some cover. She could see the house in the distance, few lights shining in the windows, but the moonlight on the white-painted wood made it almost glow in the dark. She shivered in apprehension.

She began to walk up the drive, keeping to the shadows of the oaks, one gun in her hand and another tucked in the waistband of her jeans at her back. Fear coiled and knotted at the base of her spine. She had never been afraid of the dark, yet this was unlike any darkness she had ever experienced. It was almost alive. It was definitely menacing. There was a preternatural

silence, as if all the creatures were in hiding from the evil that pervaded the very air. A twig snapped under her foot and she cursed silently, going still and listening.

Nothing. She picked up the pace, watching her step.

After ten minutes of walking at a fast pace, she was amazed at the length of the driveway and the size of the plantation. In a few minutes more, she was hidden behind a tree at the edge of the large gravel circle at the front of the house. An old, dilapidated fountain stood in the middle of the circle, and a shiny black Rolls Royce was parked in front of the door. She studied the house, wondering how to approach it.

There was one light in a ground floor window at the farthest corner of the house from where she stood. As she watched, a shadow moved behind the thin curtains and her heart began to pound.

There was no way that was where he had Mulder. It just wouldn't be so accessible. That had to be a study or a den. And the shadow was that of the vampire, Scully was certain. She started creeping through the shadows in the opposite direction from the lit window and toward the corner of the house.

She had just reached the corner of the house and had pressed her back up against the wood when a light went on in a window directly above her head, causing her to freeze as her breath caught in her throat.

She stood paralyzed for a moment, but heard nothing.

She continued to creep toward the edge of the house, then peered around the corner of it before moving in that direction.

Moments later she was at the back wall, peering around at what appeared to be a stable. There were a few outside lights on, but no sign of life. She craned her head back and up to look at the windows on the second floor of the house and saw no lights.

About 50 yards away from her spot at the corner of the house, there were a small verandah and a door leading into the house. She crept forward, careful of her footing.

The stairs leading to the verandah and the back door were, like the rest of the plantation house, made of wood. Wood that had been subjected to decades, if not centuries, of weather. She eyed the first step, afraid of the noise that wood could make when she placed her weight on it.

But she had no choice. She made it up two of the three steps before there was a creak, which sounded like a boom to her mind, in the stillness. She froze, heart pounding so loud she was sure HE could hear.

Silence.

You have no choice, Dana. Keep going.

Five footsteps later and she was at the door, the knob cool under her shaking hand. She took a deep breath and cleared her mind, pulling her Special Agent Dana Scully persona tightly around herself like a shield. It was a welcome persona that she felt like she'd been missing for days.

Calm. Cool. Tough.

She turned the knob, and the door opened easily. She wasn't sure if the vampire was just confident that no one would dare bother him, or if he knew she was there and wanted her to come in.

She stepped forward and found herself in a large, dark kitchen. Fortunately for her, this plantation house was in the style where large archways led from one room to the next, with no doors to block her view. It made searching the ground floor quick, although she kept a good distance from the end of the house where she had seen the light in the window.

The rooms were sparsely but elegantly furnished in antiques that seemed right for the period of this house. She couldn't tell the actual condition of the house and its contents, since her only light was that of the moon as it shone in through the sheer curtains over the windows. And she really didn't care.

It was a perfunctory search, one that was meaningless, as she was sure that Mulder was on the second floor. She could feel it in her bones. She imagined she could smell him, his scent, feel him like a vibration in her soul.

She found a back staircase off the kitchen and crept up it, eager now to see him again, but still mindful of her step.

When she got to the top of the stairs, she was at the end of a small, narrow hallway. She followed the hallway and found the main hall running the length of the house, rooms on either side. Twenty feet to her right was another, much larger, staircase leading down and toward the front of the house. She figured, based on its location and her trek through the ground floor, that it led down to the vestibule and the front door.

She hesitated for a moment, then went left, away from the stairway. She tried the first door on her right, the knob again twisting easily under her hand. She didn't need to open it to know it was the wrong room.

There was another door across the hall from that one. She stepped lightly across the hall and tried the door. Locked. She heard a faint noise from within.....a moan?

Mulder. She just knew.

She gazed farther down the dark hall and saw two doors on each side of the hallway, a window in the wall at the far end. She glanced back the way she had come and saw no one.

She pulled a small lock picking device that she had stolen from Mulder out from her pocket and began to work on the door.

Seconds later she heard a slight click as the lock gave way. Her heart began to pound faster, harder.

If I'm wrong.....

She pushed the thought away and opened the door a crack. She could see a wall, a high dresser and a flickering light hitting the wall, the light scent of candles reaching her nose.

A slight rustling sound met her ears and she pushed the door open wider. When her eyes fell on the bed she couldn't stop the gasp of pain that escaped her lips. She slipped quickly inside the room and closed the door quietly behind her, leaning against it, heartsick.

A long, slim, yet muscled body lay on blue satin, sweat shimmering in the candle light. Tears sprang to Scully's eyes as she saw the circles under his eyes, his skin so pale that she wondered that he was alive. There was a cut on his cheek, blood crusting in the five o'clock shadow, and a bruise...there was a huge one on his chest making her own twinge in sympathy pains. There was a cut on his chest as well, a line of dried blood running down the center.

His eyes were closed and his breathing shallow. She could see his chest hitching from across the room.

When his nakedness registered, a rage grew in her heart like none she had experienced before.

When he whimpered in pain she was across the room in seconds, one hand in his hair, fingertips of the other skimming his body trying frantically to assess the damage.

Hot. So hot. A fresh wound in the bruising on his neck. The panting, a

broken rib.

His eyes were suddenly open wide, glittering from fever. Another choked cry and he was trying to back away from her, uncertain and afraid.

She followed, unthinking. "Mulder. Mulder, it's me. Shhhhh..." she soothed, trying to touch him.

Suddenly, there was the sharp point of a knife at her throat. The hand holding it, Mulder's, was shaking in fear and apparent exhaustion. She backed up a few inches. Carefully. Remembering.

"Mulder, it's really me. Scully. We've got to get you out of here."

"H-how do I know?"

She carefully considered her answer. "Remember before you left the hotel? That tattoo. The Ouroboros."

He lowered the knife, his eyes filled with tears. "You have to leave. Now. Quickly."

"Not without you," she said, shocked. "Never without you."

"You have to....."

"What's he done to you?!" she asked in a harsh whisper, terrified of the answer. "We have to leave. Now."

"You won't make it out of here...with me and...you can't stay. You have to leave."

"No, never...."

"Listen to me!" he said, his voice raspy and breathless. "You have to trust me...."

"I've always trusted you."

He was silent only for a moment, looking at her, and she could see that he realized that. "This one time, Scully," he struggled for breath, "you need to do the exact opposite...of what your mind..." he coughed, giving her the chance to jump in.

"Mulder--"

"-and heart are telling you," he continued as if she hadn't spoken. "You have to leave me here."

"Why? How can you expect me to do this?" she said, getting angry with him.

"You are the object of the game, Scully. He wants...." he took a gasping breath, "He wants s-something from you. Revenge. The worst possible thing he could do to you. I'm not sure what...but I have an idea."

"I don't care. I won't let him hurt you anymore."

"You don't understand," he said, his voice quiet and pain-filled.

"Skinner is on his way....."

"Then you have to go outside and wait for him. The vampire...the vampire will not let you out of this house *with* me. He may already know you're here."

"Mulder..."

"Listen! Listen to me." He grabbed her hand. "You have to have faith in me...just this one time, Scully, just this one time," he begged in a whisper, gasping for air. She felt the hot tears fall and she tried to hold them in.

"We can't get out of here together. But at least one of us will live. If you stay, we're both dead. Or worse."

She shook her head in denial. She couldn't believe what he was asking her to do, he had to be insane.

"If you leave, he can't use me against you. Or you against me. Scully, don't believe a single word he says. It's all riddles. If you run into him, take any opportunity to get away. Please, Scully, do this. Trust me. Please."

She was quiet for a moment, tears falling, deliberating, trying to be realistic. "I've always had faith in you," she whispered, as she slid the gun in her hand under the pillow behind his head.

"So, you'll go?"

"I don't want to leave you..."

"I'm not completely alone, Scully. I may have help. And you can't carry me out of here. Please, Scully, I can't take any more..." he trailed off and his eyes widened in pain and shock.

"Mulder?" she asked, worried when he stopped speaking. Then her heart froze in horror when she felt the gun in her waistband yanked out and heard the deep chuckle behind her.

"Agent Scully," said the deep, yet laughing, voice, "you're early."

TEZCUCO
Chapter 14

Tezcuco Plantation
Lafitte, Louisiana
June 21, 1998, 1:10 a.m.

"Mulder?" she asked, her expression confused and worried.

He couldn't breathe, momentarily frozen in horror.

Brandon.

Standing just behind her, grinning at him over her shoulder.

Scully gasped when she realized, then her eyes slipped shut in dread for a moment, before re-opening them. When Brandon focused on her, Mulder slowly slid the dagger beneath the sheets at his side, wondering just how much he had heard. He then saw that Brandon had a gun in his hand, one he must have pulled from the waistband at Scully's back.

"Agent Scully, you're early," he said, apparently on the verge of laughing in delight.

Still sitting on the edge of the bed, Scully slowly shifted to face Brandon. She braced both hands on the bed, about a foot from either hip, attempting to shield Mulder. He silently thanked her as he shifted the dagger closer to his body and, hopefully, completely out of sight.

"Yes, I wanted to check on my partner. Make sure he was still alive."

"Your *partner*?" Brandon tilted his head and grinned wider. "Surely he means more than that to you?"

She was silent, staring at him, refusing to play. Mulder was proud of her strength and prayed she would have the strength to get away.

Brandon sighed, then waved her gun at her. "This won't do you any good, but I'll hold on to it for awhile. Now, why don't you come with me and we'll have a little talk?"

Still silent, Scully didn't move to follow him.

"Agent Scully, I have your gun. That gives me at least three ways to kill Mulder right now, the game be damned. Now, are you coming?"

Her spine was so rigid that Mulder was afraid it might snap. He slid his hand along the sheets, out of Brandon's sight, and gave her back a weak caress, then a gentle nudge.

Her shoulders slumped slightly at the silent reminder, then she stood and preceded Brandon out of the room, not looking back.

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"This way, Agent Scully," the vampire said, gesturing to the room immediately adjacent to Mulder's.

She stepped into the room ahead of him. He flicked a light switch in the wall and closed the door behind them. The light was rather dim, but she could see they were in a sort of sitting room, complete with fireplace, embroidered chairs and a deep couch. It seemed that the room had been connected, at one time, to the room Mulder was in, but the entry had been closed. She realized in that moment that the windows in this room, and Mulder's, had been skillfully boarded over so that they were visible from the exterior of the house, but not the interior.

"I prefer candlelight to the harsh modern light, you know. So much more-romantic."

She shivered, her skin prickling, her stomach lurched in revulsion. She walked across the room to put distance between them, but was not surprised when he followed. She stopped suddenly, her breath caught in her throat, as she got a closer look at what she had thought was a painting on the wall.

Mulder. A live-action Mulder clearly visible on the bed through a one-way glass into his room. She dimly remembered a mirror on the wall of the room and she was more frightened than ever at what this *thing* had planned. She tried to remain impassive, unaffected, but her hand went to the glass unconsciously.

"Ahhhh....you've discovered my little secret. I like watching him, from time to time, when he doesn't know it." He was standing right behind her, his voice was low, conspiratorial, evil. Her fear slowly turned to a white hot rage, but she controlled it, drew strength from it. "Isn't he beautiful, Dana? May I call you Dana?"

"No, you may not," she said, coldly, not looking away from the glass, her heart breaking deep inside when she saw the tears slide down Mulder's face. As she watched, he tried to get up, holding one arm across his chest, his face contorted in pain.

"He's always trying to get out of bed. So strong, so determined, so clever...but not quite strong enough to get out of that bed."

Scully could hear the smile in his voice and she struggled to maintain her control. The bastard was acting like Mulder was a prize pony, a toy. A bug to be studied under glass, then played with. Still, she said nothing, not willing to take a chance.

"Do you know what he did, Dana? He found himself a stake and launched himself out of a tree at me. Nearly killed me, he did," he whispered in her ear, sounding like a proud father. He ran a cold finger down her cheek and she shivered, still not looking away from Mulder's struggle. "So valiant, so brave. A man worthy of the very best in this world, but unlikely to take it. A crusader, a savior, a hero...and yet, just a man," he said, voice deepening.

The lust in his voice sickened Scully. She realized that no matter what this man said, he would do whatever he could to possess Mulder completely. She would need help to stop him. Mulder was right. Her mind raced,

trying to think of the best way.

Then a woman stepped into her line of vision and she froze.

The vampire chuckled lightly, his breath chilling her ear. "That's Marianna. She and Mulder have become quite the good--friends."

Scully could sense that the truth of the situation was different than what he implied. Still, she said nothing and watched, her heart pounding in fear, as Marianna approached Mulder.

Marianna carried a bowl and a candelabra filled with lit candles. She placed both on the bedside table and gently pushed Mulder back to a prone position. He didn't seem to be afraid of her, just resigned. He spoke to Marianna and Scully realized that she couldn't hear into the room. She was desperate to hear what they were saying.

When Marianna climbed onto the bed, then leaned over him and kissed him, her blond hair falling in a curtain around her head and Mulder's, Scully nearly lost her precious control. As her hands curled into fists and she grit her teeth, the vampire chuckled.

"Partners, eh?"

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"Marianna, what are you doing?" he asked, confused and a little frightened.

She remained bent over him, her hair cascading over her shoulders and onto his chest, tickling him. "They're watching from the other room, we have to be careful."

"What?!?" he asked in a harsh whisper. "Is she alright? He's not hurting her?"

"She's fine, so far. I don't think she's in as much danger as you are, right now." She sat back and reached into the bowl, pulling out a wet cloth.

"What do you mean?" he asked, wincing when she lowered the cold cloth to his forehead.

"I can sense a sort of conflict in Brandon. I think his plan is changing constantly, his priorities shifting." She washed his face off and then started on his chest. He was surprised at how it made him feel cooler, better. Almost stronger. Yet, her words about priorities made his stomach twist.

"Will he let her go?" he asked, desperately afraid for Scully.

"I think it depends on what she says to him, how she handles him."

"Can't you help her? Stop him somehow?"

"I'm helping her right now. It's all I can do for her."

Mulder was confused, distracted by the effects of the cool cloth on his fevered skin. "I-I don't understand. How are you helping her?"

"Making her realize that she is outnumbered, pushing her to get outside to your friends waiting at the end of the drive."

"Friends waiting...Skinner. He's here." His mind raced and he was increasingly frustrated at his inability to do more.

"There are two of them right now, I think. I can feel them out there."

"What about Brandon, does he know they're there?"

"If he doesn't right now, it's only a matter of time. He's getting stronger

by the minute."

"What does that mean for Scully? Marianna, there's got to be something you can do..."

"Brandon is three times the vampire I am, Fox. He's ancient, he's powerful...All I can do is try to protect you for a while longer and hope that Scully plays the game right."

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"Yes, partners," Scully replied, her voice cool and not betraying her pain or fear. Brandon shifted behind her, lowering his face next to hers so he was close to the glass as well, peering into the room. Marianna continued to bathe Mulder.

"She's taking good care of him, as you see. Relieving his fever."

"So you say. He would be better off in a hospital," she said calmly, her heart hammering in her chest as she sensed the true beginning of the game.

"How far would you go to get him to a hospital, Agent Scully?" the vampire whispered in her ear again, making her shiver.

She struggled to suppress all emotion, especially her fear and her love for Mulder. She held onto 'Agent Scully' with the barest of threads.

"I don't know. What did you have in mind?"

"So cool! So strong. Did you know I can feel your heart thundering in your chest?" he asked, his glee apparent in his voice. He was having far too good a time at her expense. And Mulder's.

"What's your point?" she asked, still cool, but barely. She still stared into the other room, focused on Mulder's every breath. The breath, the gentle strokes of the cool cloth on his skin mesmerizing her.

"Marianna could put him in hospital, if I asked her to do such a thing."

"And you would ask her to do that?"

"I might."

Scully focused on the word 'might' and remembered Mulder's warnings. Riddles and half truths were this thing's specialty.

"And that would be the end of your involvement with him?" she asked, thinking that very specific and direct would be the way to go.

"If things went my way, yes."

"And what is 'your way'? What do I have to do?"

"Join me."

Scully blinked, and turned slowly to face him, feeling her whole body go cold.

"What?" she asked, certain that she wasn't understanding him. He towered over her, invading her space.

"You become like me, a vampire. We kill an innocent together...and Mulder is free."

Scully turned back to the window, her mind whirling, searching desperately for a way out, a way to stall, a solution...the trick. There had to be a trick, this made no sense to her.

"You're insane. What do you hope to gain from this, when it's been Mulder all this time? He's been your focus. He's what you've wanted."

"The ultimate revenge, my dear. From upstanding FBI agent, to amoral killer." He chuckled lightly and her skin crawled. "From Mulder's lover.....to mine."

Suddenly it was hard for Scully to breathe. She focused on Mulder, sprawled on the bed before her. He was so sick, so hurt. Tortured by the bastard standing right behind her. The bastard that who *wanted* him.

Don't believe a word he says, Scully. Mulder's words whispered through her head, overlain by the vampire's, making her dizzy and confused.

We'll both be dead, or worse.

The ultimate in revenge.

It's all riddles.

Isn't he beautiful, Dana?

He looked like *you*, Scully.

Kill an innocent and Mulder is free.

Innocent.

Mulder.

Free.

The ultimate revenge.

He'll use you against me.

"My God," she whispered, the realization shocking.

I kill an innocent, and Mulder is free. Mulder's freedom is in death - by my hands. The ultimate revenge. That *would* be the ultimate in revenge...if she allowed it to happen.

"How much do you love him? How badly do you want him free of me?" the vampire asked, mistaking her realization for indecision.

She stared silently through the glass.

I'm not alone, Scully.....

Have faith, Scully.....

Trust me, Scully.....

"How much *do* you love him, Dana?" whispered the vampire once again.

She turned and faced him, suddenly, startling him into stepping back. "What happens if I say no?"

The vampire's slow grin made her sick to her stomach. "It's a - what do you mortals call it nowadays? A 'win - win' situation?" He laughed. "Mulder is *mine*. My lover, my slave, my source - mine. And you walk away, never to see him again."

Scully lifted her chin and glared at him. "You would let me walk away?" she asked, incredulous.

"Dana, you know you won't leave him here. Why do you fight me?"

"You lose the game," she said calmly, her heart breaking and stomach rolling.

This is impossible, I can't leave him. I have to leave him. I can't. I have to.....

"You lose the game," she repeated, louder. His eyes widened in surprise and shock as she brushed past him and headed for the door, not daring to look through the window one last time. She moved quickly, afraid he would stop her, despite what he said.

As she opened the door and stepped into the hallway, the vampire took his parting shot.

"I'll enjoy him enough for the both of us, Dana!" he roared, now angry.

She began to run.

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Mulder and Marianna both jumped at Brandon's voice booming through the walls of the house. Marianna crawled closer to him, her eyes wide and fearful. He just stared up at her for a moment, before taking her hand and squeezing it tight. He'd never been so terrified in his life.

"Do you think she got out?" he asked her, finding it increasingly difficult to breathe, the pain in his chest intensifying. He didn't think it had anything to do with his injuries.

Her eyes drifted closed for a moment, head back. Then she nodded.
"She's out, but..."

The door to the room crashed open and Brandon stood there glaring at the two of them on the bed.

"Get away from him, Marianna," he growled.

Marianna hovered over Mulder, almost draping herself across his body. Mulder used the opportunity to slide one hand under the sheet and around the handle of the dagger lying against his hip.

"You said he would be mine, Brandon."

"I lied," he sneered at her, stepping toward them.

"I'm not giving him up," she sneered back, although Mulder could feel her trembling.

"I choose Marianna," said Mulder, his bravado sounding very false as his voice trembled slightly.

In a flash, Brandon reached out and grabbed Marianna by the throat. In a seemingly effortless move, he plucked her off Mulder and threw her away. She hit the wall with a loud thud. Mulder's heart stopped momentarily before he began to scoot backwards, away from Brandon. Brandon grabbed his ankle and began pulling him back, his hand like a steel vise. An evil grin filled his face, his teeth glittered in the candle light.

"You don't get to choose, slave."

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Scully was crying so hard she almost couldn't see. She stumbled blindly down the front steps of the mansion and slid on the gravel of the drive. She gasped in pained surprise and the tears kept coming. She had just made the biggest mistake of her life. She continued running, on instinct.

What have I done? What have I done?

She fell to her knees in the grass beyond the drive and began heaving, nothing in her stomach to come up, yet she couldn't seem to stop.

When two hands grabbed her by the upper arms, she came up fighting.

"Scully! It's me, Skinner," he said, his voice a harsh whisper in the moonlight. "Where's Mulder?"

She went slack at the question, the horror of what she had just done like a fresh punch in the gut.

With McIntyre on one side and Skinner on the other, they hauled her into the shadows of the oak trees along the drive, not far from their cars. Two parish cops also stood there, waiting.

"Scully," Skinner began again, "what happened?"

"I had to...I had to leave him. He wanted me to leave him," she whispered, tears still streaming down her face, in shock. "My god! How could I listen to him? How could I do that?"

"Where's your gun, Dana?" asked McIntyre.

"The vampire took -" she stopped, suddenly breathless, remembering where the second gun was.

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Mulder kicked out weakly, in a panic, terrified. The adrenaline surged through him. The vampire just laughed and pulled him closer.

When he was in range, Mulder slashed out with the dagger.

Brandon easily dodged his erratic swing and chuckled. "Ahhh...the mouse is armed, making the cat's game more challenging. I love a good challenge."

"Fuck you," growled Mulder, growing angry. He fed off it, and the fear, gathering his strength.

"Is that an invitation? You know, vampire myth says that once you invite a vampire in..." he leered at Mulder, moving closer again.

Again, Mulder slashed out with the dagger. This time Brandon grabbed his wrist and squeezed until Mulder dropped it, panting from the exertion and the tightening band of pain around his chest. In an instant, Brandon had both his wrists pinned to the bed and was kneeling over him, still grinning, his eyes raking over Mulder's body. Brandon licked his lips and lowered his head toward Mulder's. Mulder went cold and began to fight, tossing his head and kicking out with his legs, his damaged ribs adding to his distress and making his struggle ineffectual.

A second later, Brandon was howling as Marianna clawed at his eyes. They both flew backwards off the bed, Brandon trying to throw her off while she clung to his back, hissing and scratching, her teeth slashing at Brandon's neck.

Mulder rolled over and scrabbled under the pillows for the gun that Scully had left. He began to hyperventilate when he couldn't find it. He threw the pillows off the bed, knocking over candles, in his desperate search. The rush of activity caused black spots to dance before his eyes.

When his fingers hit upon the cool metal, he was instantly calm. His hand wrapped around the grip and the world went silent, soundless. He turned back to face the room, everything in slow motion. He leaned against the head board of the bed, both arms out in front of him, pointing the gun at the two figures struggling in the dancing light and shadows.

Brandon slammed himself and Marianna against the wall, finally breaking her grip when she hit her head. She slid to the ground and Brandon turned back to Mulder. An expression of surprise crossed his face when he saw the gun.

"That won't do you much good, Fox," he said softly, as he walked toward the bed. "You may hurt me but you'll never get out of the house. Especially if you succeed in starting a fire."

On one level, Mulder smelled the smoke and could see it begin to cloud the air, but it just didn't register. He was mesmerized, refusing to look away from Brandon.

Brandon took another step closer to the bed, his hand out. "Give me the gun, Fox."

Mulder fired.

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"Scully, you can lead us back into the house. It'll be five against two. We can get to Mulder. You did the right thing," Skinner said, presumably trying to calm her down.

"Shhh!" she said, trying to listen. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" asked McIntyre.

There was nothing but frogs for a moment, then another muffled report came from the house. A gunshot.

"Mulder!" She ran back toward the house.

"Scully, wait!" Skinner yelled, running after her. He caught her at the edge of the driveway, grabbing her arm. "Wait just a moment. Describe the way to the room again. The sheriffs and McIntyre will take the back, you and I can take the front."

She nodded, then froze. "Oh, my God."

"What?"

"I smell smoke."

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Brandon grabbed his shoulder and staggered backwards from the impact of the bullet, before regaining his footing and starting for the bed again.

Mulder's world resumed normal speed at the sound of the gunshot, then suddenly sped up, as Brandon was reaching for him again.

Again, Mulder fired. Again, the bullet struck the vampire, this time in the chest. He collapsed across the foot of the bed, blood spilling across the sheets as smoke continued to fill the room.

Mulder was frozen, uncertain, his gun still pointed at Brandon.

Amazingly, Brandon began crawling towards him on the bed. Mulder fired again, wildly, terrified. He missed, and Brandon had his ankle again, his teeth bared, seeking the healing blood. Mulder shot again and kept shooting until there were no more bullets.

Brandon was bleeding from several wounds, a writhing mass on the bed.

Mulder just stared at him in a shocked trance. A groan from Brandon and the trance was broken, driving Mulder off the bed and onto the floor with a bone-rattling thump and pain-filled coughing. He began to drag himself towards the door, looking for Marianna as he went. He realized he couldn't see her because the smoke was getting thicker.

Fire.

He looked over his shoulder and was horrified to see the wall on the far side of the bed in flames, wall paper curling and burning, the old house like dry kindling. It was spreading rapidly to the ceiling.

"Marianna!" He called for her, coughing, hoping she wasn't dead. Suddenly he saw her, a white wraith at the foot of the bed, a lit candle in her hands. He watched, heart pounding and breathing strained.

She stood there for a moment, then threw the lit candle on the bed. Brandon's shirt caught fire and he reached for her, screaming in rage and pain. She ducked out of his reach and watched for a moment, as he lay burning on the bed.

Mulder blinked, his eyes tearing badly from the smoke and his already punished lungs struggling for air.

Then there was a strong arm around his waist, and the blond waif of a girl was practically dragging him out of the room, his arm slung around her shoulders.

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Scully and Skinner kicked open the front door of the house as McIntyre and the sheriffs ran around to watch the back. They couldn't all risk going into a fire and losing each other in the confusion.

Skinner's hopes sank when he entered and saw the house filled with smoke. He coughed and put his arm across his mouth and nose, trying to block out the smoke and breathe through the material of his shirt. He glanced quickly at Scully and wondered how much longer she would hold together. If they didn't find Mulder, and fast, she would never survive having left him in the house.

He could hear a crackling sound of fire and smoke billowed into the vestibule as Scully started up the main staircase in front of him.

"Scully...."

"Hold it right there! Let go of him and back away," she yelled, going into a shooting stance, then coughing in the smoke. Skinner instantly echoed her stance and then he saw why.

At the top of the stairway was a young woman dressed all in white. She half carried, half dragged a nearly naked Fox Mulder. Skinner was shocked at the younger agents appearance. Bruised and bloody, sooty smudges on his face, it was obvious he was having trouble breathing, coughing, and couldn't walk on his own. He was clutching a blanket that was wrapped around his waist.

The girl was crying, he could see the tear tracks in her soot-streaked face. She gently lowered Mulder to the ground and started to back up, but Mulder reached out and grabbed her hand.

Skinner couldn't hear what he said, but it was obvious he was having no effect. The girl pried his hand off and backed away, still crying.

Scully dashed up the stairs and Skinner followed, eyes watering from the smoke, gun still trained on the girl. He didn't think she was a threat, however, and Mulder obviously didn't think so either. Scully wrapped her arms around Mulder and he clutched her tightly, but his eyes didn't leave the girl.

"Don't, Marianna. You're not like him," Mulder said firmly, choking back a cough. "Skinner, don't let her...."

The girl, Marianna, turned and dashed into the smoke-filled hallway. Skinner ran after her, filled with dread.

She was quick, too quick. She turned into one of the rooms and when he tried to follow her he was met by a wall of flames. He threw his arms up to protect his face, the flames pushing him back towards Mulder and Scully. The smoke was so intense now that he dropped to his knees, coughing, his eyes watering badly.

It was no use. He turned and crawled back to them. He saw them huddled together, the smoke choking them. Scully was trying to drag Mulder down the stairs as she coughed, he was resisting, waiting. When Skinner reached their place at the top of the stairs, Mulder's dirty face turned to him, his eyes searching Skinner's face. Skinner shook his head slightly and Mulder's face screwed up into a mask of pain.

"We have to get out of here, Agents," he said, raising his smoke-roughened voice over the growling sound of fire, "this place is going fast."

They both nodded, silently. Skinner pulled Mulder's arm carefully around his neck and put his arm around the man's waist. Scully did the same from the other side, and together they helped him down the stairs and onto the front lawn.

TEZCUCO
Chapter 15

Tezcuco Plantation
Lafitte, Louisiana
June 21, 1998, 2:15 a.m.

The three of them stumbled out of the burning building and into the darkness, coughing, their eyes watering from the smoke. Scully and Skinner were practically dragging Mulder between them, since he couldn't seem hold himself up. Scully was afraid the house would come crashing down before they were clear. It was burning so fast she felt extraordinarily lucky to have gotten out at all. She quickly shut out any thoughts about Marianna and her contribution.

"How about we put him on the lawn and I go for the car?" Skinner asked her, breathless and choking on smoke, as they reached the first oak along the drive.

"Yeah, but hurry. He's in shock and I don't know the extent of his injuries. I need to get him warmed up."

"Hey, all right!!" came a yell from McIntyre at the corner of the house as Scully and Skinner lowered Mulder to a sitting position on the grass. Scully followed him to the ground, unwilling and unable to let go of him for even a moment.

McIntyre and the two sheriffs came running up to them, plainly visible in the night due to the bright orange light of the fire. "We got in the back door, but the smoke was so thick that we couldn't go in far, safely. Thank God you got Mulder out...goddamn, Mulder, you're a mess!"

McIntyre's voice was shocked and Mulder just gazed at him blearily, his arms wrapped tightly across his chest and abdomen, one hand holding tight to the blanket wrapped around his lower half. Scully wasn't quite sure that Mulder heard or understood at that moment. She also wasn't sure that his eyes were simply watering from the smoke. He looked...desolate, hurt. Sad.

She gave Skinner a warning look that sent him off to get the car, McIntyre and the sheriffs in tow. She turned her attention back to Mulder and found him now lying on his side, curled up on himself. He was staring at the

burning house, blinking away more tears and coughing. Fear gnawed at her as she looked at his face, painted orange and gold in the firelight. His focus on the house worried her, though she couldn't put her finger on why.

"Mulder," she said, softly and very gently, "can I see your chest?"

He blinked at her, then moved his arms to his sides so she could see. She pulled gently on his knees to get him to lie flat on the grass. He grunted in pain or fear and it made her chest hurt. She brushed a hand through his hair, comfortingly, before gently pushing aside the blanket that he had been clutching around himself.

The bruise looked extremely painful, even in the strange light, and she wondered how many ribs were broken. The smoke was exacerbating an already big problem. The coughing, combined with his apparent inability to draw a deep breath because of the pain, blood loss and malnutrition, would make Mulder extremely lucky if he didn't get pneumonia. If he didn't have it already, she thought, seeing the perspiration dotting his skin and the flush in his cheeks.

It could be from the heat of the fire, the flush emphasized by the color of the light, she mused, laying the back of her hand to his forehead. Too warm, although his breathing seemed a bit better.

As if thinking about a problem could make it worse, Mulder had a particularly harsh coughing spell, the coughing and the pain making him want to curl into a ball. Scully was trying to keep him from moving too much, uncertain at the extent of his injuries, when suddenly he was gasping for air.

Can't breathe, can't breathe, can't breathe...suffocating...the thoughts echoed through Mulder's mind and his panic telegraphed clearly to Scully.

"Mulder, calm down," she said firmly. She put a hand on his shoulder and another on his chin, turning his face slightly toward her. "Breathe, Mulder, relax and breathe," she said gently.

He was trying to calm down and he seemed to be getting air, but he was still struggling. It felt like he had knives in his chest. And like he was drowning.

Skinner pulled up in his car, McIntyre in the passenger seat. Both jumped out and hurried over, intent on getting Mulder to a hospital. Scully made a move to wrap Mulder up in the blanket again, so the two men could lift him into the backseat, when he stilled her hand. He was staring at the house again, his face hard to read in the flickering light and the shadows cast by the trees.

"What is it, Mulder? What's wrong?" she asked, her heart suddenly in her throat.

He swung his head to gaze at McIntyre, his face filled with an emotion that Scully decided was a combination of fear and despair. "Any...body?" he rasped, trying to breathe and not cough.

McIntyre knelt down on one knee next to the injured agent. "Nobody came out of the back of the house, if that's what you're asking, Mulder," he said, surprisingly gently for the gruff lieutenant. "It's over. The goddamn game is over. You won, Mulder. You're safe, and so is Scully."

Mulder hiccupped, which made him cough and gasp for air again. He looked bleakly at Scully and she was suddenly certain that this was not over. He looked emotionally shattered, and she was terrified that nothing would ever be the same.

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Mercy Hospital
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 21, 1998, 5:05 a.m.

She paced the bright, white waiting room, surprisingly alert and edgy considering the lack of sleep and the events of the past several hours.

They had bundled Mulder into the car and sped towards the small hospital in Lafitte. His breathing had been so labored and strained that she thought they were going to lose him. And then he had actually stopped breathing.

She dimly remembered screaming at him to breathe before doing it for him, giving him mouth-to-mouth from her kneeling position on the floorboards of the back seat of Skinner's car. By the time they reached the hospital he was breathing again and she was ready to collapse herself.

They gave him oxygen and quickly worked to re-inflate his lung which had collapsed, then had arranged transport to New Orleans.

And here she was. Pacing the waiting room of yet another hospital, terrified that the most important person in her life was going to be lost to her. One way or another.

"Scully, are you all right?"

Skinner. She had forgotten he was even in the room.

"I'm fine." she replied, her back rigid with tension, her nerves stretched to fine wire.

"You will pardon my saying so, but you don't look fine. Perhaps you should lie down."

"Lie down?" she said, with a bitter laugh.

She felt so brittle at that moment that she prayed for Skinner to let it go.

"You will be no good to Mulder if you work yourself into a breakdown."

"No good to..." she snorted derisively, feeling the heat of anger building deep inside. "No good to Mulder. What good have I been to Mulder lately?" She heard her own voice become shrill, but couldn't stop. "I played no small part in getting Mulder to this particular place. Not only do we have that Nashville fiasco to deal with, but on top of that I don't know when to let him be. Always pushing him. Attacking him, and not just verbally any more, but physically. I can't protect him - hell, can't even talk to him. I can't save him. When I do try to help, I nearly kill him with my own ineptitude. I..."

"This has got to be the biggest load of self pitying crap I have ever heard." Skinner's voice was low, but menacing. "Is this really all about you, Scully? Did Clarice and Brandon, hell, even Mulder himself have no say in anything that has happened in the past couple of months? I realize you are extremely tired right now. That's obvious from this very uncharacteristic outburst. But you'd better get some rest and get a grip, because it ain't over yet."

She gaped at him, speechless.

He sighed. "You did the best you could in the given situation. You kept him *alive*. We had to move him, there was no other way. And you know it."

"But..."

"As for the rest, well, he's not a child, Scully."

She clamped her mouth shut, realizing that he had some valid points. Not the least of which was that she was exhausted. She wondered, though, if rest would really ease her mind.

She had been, and still was, guilt ridden over her part in this nightmare. Part of her knew that none of this was her fault, yet...quiet time caused even more reflection, as she thought about what she had done, what she

could have done differently.

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Mercy Hospital
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 21, 1998, 7:35 a.m.

As she remembered her near hysterics in front of her superior, her face burned with shame.

For a while there, she had been officially out of control. She wasn't feeling much more in control now, but at least she was hiding it better. She had gotten a short nap and had awakened when Mulder's doctor had walked into the room.

Mulder officially had pneumonia to add to his long list of ailments to recover from.

Skinner walked up and handed her a cup of coffee. She couldn't look at him. "How's he doing?" he asked, treading lightly.

"As well as can be expected, I guess. He needed a transfusion -" she took a shuddering breath, trying to hold it together. "He's in x-ray right now. They're trying to determine the extent of the damage to his ribs and lungs. He broke two ribs, they think, in addition to serious bruising. The blood loss, malnutrition, pneumonia...all are things he'll recover from."

"That's good news, then, right?" he asked her, gently, perhaps sensing her real fears. Or perhaps trying to prevent another hysterical outburst, she thought, filling again with self-recrimination.

"Yes. Good news."

"Have you spoken to him at all? Asked him what went down in that house?"

"He's mostly out. When he isn't, he-he won't talk. Or-" Another deep breath. "Or he can't talk. I'm not sure which."

"What do you mean, can't?" he asked, still gentle.

"He's shut down. I'm not sure he hears me," she choked on the words, suddenly. Embarrassed, she stared into her coffee cup, blinking rapidly and willing the tears away.

Maybe he doesn't want to hear me.

The thought whispered through her head before she could prevent it.

"You don't think...Brandon didn't..." he gulped so loudly she could hear his throat click. Skinner didn't seem to be able to voice his concerns any more than she could.

Scully couldn't respond to his veiled question. She didn't know how and she couldn't bear the thought right now.

But she was running out of time.

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Mercy Hospital
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 23, 1998, 8:00 a.m.
48 HOURS LATER

He was back in the bed again, the blue satin whispering over his skin, making him want to cry.

He'd gotten away, hadn't he? Hadn't he and Marianna gotten out of the house?

Marianna is dead, a voice spoke softly to him, a warm breath on his cheek. She can't protect you any more.

"Who's there?" Mulder asked, his heart in his throat.

There's no one to save you from me now, Fox.

"You're dead, I saw you burn," Mulder said to the invisible presence, his heart pounding.

I will never die, I'll always be with you. Always.

"No, I won't let you! I won't!" he shouted to the darkness. He tried to get out of bed, but invisible hands lashed his wrists to the headboard over his head. He fought, but it was no use. He was so terrified that he couldn't breathe. Soft ropes snaked around his ankles, then pulled his legs straight out and tied them to the posts at the foot of the bed.

He began to scream.

Scully jumped out of her bedside chair when a hoarse, strangled scream, which was abruptly cut off by harsh coughing, erupted from her previously silent partner.

She didn't move fast enough to prevent him tearing the IV out of his arm, or the oxygen cannula from under his nose.

"Mulder, calm down," she said, softly, trying to soothe him without waking him up.

When that didn't work, she tried to grab his hand. He instantly became more agitated than he had been.

"NO! No!" Mulder cried weakly, still flailing his arms slightly, pushing her away, beginning to wake up.

"Mulder, you're dreaming. It's just a dream." She watched him closely, standing back a bit so that he wouldn't fight her.

"Mulder, come on, wake up," Scully pleaded, her heart breaking when she saw a tear roll down his face. She sighed in relief when his eyes opened seconds later, blinking away the tears.

"Welcome back, Mulder," she said softly. He just stared at her, gasping. "You've been asleep for a while, how are you feeling?"

No answer. She saw his eyes skip around the room, assessing. That he was awake and his breathing seemed slightly easier was a relief. But the silence scared her.

"Mulder? Can you tell me how you feel?" she asked again, willing herself not to touch him.

"Urrrrrrm..." It was almost a moan, low and rough. He cleared his throat, then coughed. "S-scully? Scully. 'M thirsty."

She poured him some water and held the cup out to him. Tentatively, he reached out and took it from her. He was so weak that his hand shook. Instinctively, she moved closer and grabbed his hand to steady it. Startled, he jerked his hand away, spilling the water all over the bedding. She felt her throat close and she was suddenly on the verge of tears.

"I'll get a towel," she said quickly, turning away and blinking rapidly. She walked into the small bathroom and grabbed a hand towel. She sagged against the sink for a moment, trying to regain some of her professional detachment. It wasn't easy, she hadn't been "detached" about Mulder for a long time.

She walked briskly back into the room and almost began sponging the damp spots on the blankets. Mulder watched her, an uncertain look in his eyes. Instead, she held the towel out to him.

After a brief pause, he took it from her, one corner of his mouth quirking up in the ghost of a smile. Then he began coughing again and the moment was gone.

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Mercy Hospital
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 24, 1998, 7:35 p.m.

She combed her fingers through his hair, massaging his scalp. He sighed softly, relishing the feel of her fingers and their light pressure.

Then her lips were soft and warm against his, her tongue flicking out, seeking entry to his mouth. His lips parted on another contented sigh, feeling safe and warm in her bed. The blue satin skimmed down over his hips and the cool air of the room tingled against his exposed flesh.

His eyes opened when he felt her licking his chest. A curtain of red hair met his gaze as her lips closed around his left nipple. She nipped it with her teeth, and his cock began to harden, lengthen, against his lower abdomen, making him want more.

She sucked on his other nipple and laved it with her tongue as one hand smoothed down over his belly. She trailed that hand past his erect penis, barely brushing it with the inside of one finger, and moved down to caress the inside of his thigh, carefully avoiding his balls.

His hips shifted anxiously toward her caressing hand, trying to establish contact with a more needy portion of his body. He strained to get closer to that hand, and to the lips on his chest. She was teasing him, making him desperate.

He **was** desperate. He ached to be inside her, moving above her, thrusting into the warmth that was her body.

His hips came off the bed when a small hand wrapped around his shaft, stroking. He groaned her name softly.

"Yes, Fox, yes."

He started. Fox? He studied her, panting, the desire making him nearly incoherent.

Lush red lips swallowed the tip of his engorged penis, the wet warmth and the flick of a tongue almost making him come right then. Large blue eyes pierced his as she took him deeper. He couldn't restrain a thrust of his hips. It was all he could do to not come.

A flash of gray in her eyes and the scrape of a tooth on his sensitive flesh and his skin prickled in goose bumps.

No. It was Scully. It had to be.

Another involuntary thrust and she released him, crawling up his body with a smile on her face that he would describe as wicked.

And then she bared her teeth.

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Mulder came awake suddenly, with a breathless gasp, in a cold sweat with a raging hard-on.

He groaned, smoothing a hand over the sheets that covered his groin. He shivered, not quite sure what to make of that dream.

Perhaps it was a good sign. He was recovering well enough to almost have a wet dream.

I woke up too soon, he thought with an internal chuckle. Least she coulda done was finish me off.

He swallowed another groan and resisted the urge to slip his hand under the sheets.

Then the clarity, the real feel of that dream and how it ended made his stomach clench in fear. He had too much experience with dreams lately. They usually meant one thing.

Brandon. Manipulation.

But Brandon was dead. He had to be dead. He never could have survived the fire. It was entirely possible that his mind was playing tricks on him.

How would he ever feel sane again?

"Well, you seem to be coming along nicely."

Scully. Her voice had startled him out of his introspection. When he registered what she had said, he looked down quickly and then smiled awkwardly, inwardly relieved.

"Um, yeah. I feel okay."

"How's your breathing?"

"Okay," he replied, nodding slightly, on the verge of lying. He found himself studying her closely, looking for something. He shook himself out of it as she frowned at him, moving closer to the bed. He stifled a cough and held his breath.

As he watched, she began to reach out to him, then stopped herself short, pulling her hand back to her side. He felt like a bastard.

"It's okay, Scully," he rasped, suddenly hoarse.

She gazed at him for a moment, then reached out to tentatively lay her hand on his forehead. "You're sweaty, Mulder. I better get a nurse, your fever may be coming back."

He grabbed her wrist as she turned to leave the room. "No, Scully, it's not a fever."

"How do you know?" she asked, glancing down to her wrist still held firmly in his grip.

"I - It was a dream. I had a dream."

"A dream?" She studied his face and saw something there that caused her to frown at him. "Brandon's dead, Mulder. It was just a dream."

"It was very real." He took a breath that he still had to work for. "Are you really sure that Brandon's dead?"

"Two bodies were found in the house, Mulder. Burned beyond recognition, but one was female and one was male." She hesitated for a moment. "It's only natural that you would be having nightmares, after what you've been through."

"It was like...other dreams I've had recently." He saw the realization on her face and regretted starting this conversation.

"Was I in it?"

His heart sank like a stone. He swallowed thickly, then nodded silently.

"Mulder -" she paused, looking down to focus on his chest. She shook her head, mutely.

"I don't know, Scully. I don't know how to get through this."

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Mercy Hospital
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 25, 1998, 12:05 p.m.

"I need to go."

"You what?" Scully asked, sounding incredulous. She looked at him like he was insane.

"I need...to go. I want out of here." He had hoped she would understand, he was climbing the walls. Little snippets of dreams, more vague than before, were haunting him. But they were similar. And what if....

"Scully, I'm going crazy here. I'm breathing better, not coughing too much...why can't I leave?"

"You've only been here for five days, your breathing is NOT that much better and I've seen you trying not to cough in front of me." She sighed in exasperation. "You broke two ribs, punctured a lung, had a bad case of pneumonia and you...experienced...extreme blood loss."

She couldn't look him in the eye when she spoke, and he found that interesting. But then, he wasn't exactly forthcoming when it came to the events of the last several days, either. He had said almost nothing to her since he'd been awake and alert for the last day and a half, their conversation of the previous evening being cut short when she had yawned so hard that he had sent her home.

His silence was different, though. He had lived a nightmare, he was trying to cope with it and make sense of it. His feelings were a jumbled mess, he couldn't control his reactions. He felt claustrophobic, afraid, trapped...hunted.

He shivered.

"Are you all right, Mulder?" she asked, reaching out to touch his forehead.

He jumped.

She grimaced, hurt, but didn't say anything. And the cycle began again.

He hated this. "I'm okay, Scully, really. I just..." He stumbled to a halt yet again and felt like slamming his head into a wall.

"I'm going to get a thermometer. And you can't leave until the doctor says it's okay. I don't want you having a relapse."

She strode quickly out of the room, a new mission at hand. She had to take his temperature because he had shivered. He sighed and sank back into his pillows.

A prisoner in bed. Again. Different jailer.

A twinge of guilt nipped at him for those thoughts. He wasn't her prisoner. And maybe if he kept telling himself, he would begin to believe it.

Why couldn't he talk to her, he wondered. He'd never had a problem before. But then, he'd never been so...violated before. By a vampire who got

his jollies doing a halfway decent Scully impersonation on more than one occasion.

Maybe if he were *sure* that Brandon was dead. Maybe that would make a difference. Maybe he would be able to stop hurting her.

All he knew was that he had to do *something* to take back control of his life.

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Tezcuco Plantation
Lafitte, Louisiana
June 25, 1998; 8:15 p.m.

He stumbled, coughing, out of the cab and, after paying the driver, began to walk slowly up the long gravel drive. He wondered if the weakness in his limbs was from being ill or from fear. Either way, he hated it.

The massive oaks towered over him, their gnarled branches dripping in spanish moss. The air was heavy and humid, and nearly silent. He thought he could still smell smoke, but he wasn't sure, didn't care. His skin was crawling with dread.

There's no reason to be afraid. No reason. No reason.

The thought echoed around inside his skull, a mantra to keep his feet moving forward.

There were several reasons for this journey. He was taking back his life, banishing the ghosts and vampires to the past. Or he was trying, anyway. He knew that it would take a long time, that it would take work.

He rubbed sweaty palms on the legs of his blue jeans when he saw the sooty, smoky rubble at the end of the drive, and the empty stable gleaming dully in the twilight.

This is all about control. That's what it's always been about. I've been spinning almost out of control for months, ever since I was led to believe that my whole life was a lie. Who to believe, who to trust. What is the truth? How can I know? Then, Clarice. It was like being pushed off a cliff. I had been walking the edge, then my sense of balance was gone.

He wanted it back. All of it.

Belief.

Faith.

Control.

Scully.

That was the hardest part of this whole mess. He was losing her, pushing her away, and he couldn't help himself. He didn't seem able to explain his feelings to her without hurting her. He couldn't stop his reactions to her demands, her touch.

The psychologist in his head clamored for attention at the word "demands". When Scully insists that you stay in bed because you have pneumonia, is that a "demand"? Isn't she just concerned for you? The psychologist questioned him relentlessly. He *knew* the answers to these questions, but he couldn't stop his feelings. Which resulted in negative reactions.

He was obviously good at self-diagnosis, but he was having a great deal of trouble with a cure.

Then there was Brandon. And Marianna.

His heart hurt when he thought of Marianna. One more innocent person

who died trying to save him. Maybe "innocent" wasn't the right word. But she had cared about him. She had tried to do the right thing.

He blinked a sudden wetness from his eyes and realized he was standing at the edge of the smoldering ruin. He wondered just how long he had been standing there, if perhaps he was further gone than he had realized.

A chill ran up his spine, and he felt eyes on his back. The hair on the back of his neck prickled to attention.

They're both dead. Scully said she was sure of it. But how? How can she be sure? What if that was someone else's body? Had they checked the house for other people?

Who's watching me?

Am I insane?

He turned quickly, almost falling down. He didn't see anyone, but that meant nothing, of course.

He listened carefully. There was a stillness in the air that was unusual for what was essentially a wilderness, a bayou. There was hardly a sound. As if on his request, a frog chirped and he smiled, momentarily relieved.

He turned and walked carefully around the ruins, skirting burned timbers and debris. Searching the ruins with his eyes, he wasn't sure what he was looking for or what he expected to see.

I had to see for myself. The devastation, the ruins. But it's not enough. I'm still not sure they're dead, I can't believe it's over.

When he closed his eyes, he could still see the fangs in Brandon's mouth as they neared his throat. He could feel the erotic pull of blood leaving his body, and the smoothness of the satin as it slid across his bare skin. He could see Brandon's face clearly, the lust visible in his eyes. Brandon hadn't accomplished that one, horrible thing, but he may as well have for the effect it was having on Mulder.

Worst of all wasn't the near rape, but the fact that Brandon had used Scully's visage to manipulate him, touch him. Looking at her now gave him chills, made him wonder. What if it really wasn't her? What if *he* wasn't really dead?

He was completely irrational. Or was he?

He loved her so much, but now he was afraid of her, too. If it weren't for the nightmares maybe he would get over that feeling in time.

The nightmares.

He sank to the ground in front of the stables, his back leaning against the wall facing the ruined house. His heart began to pound again as he remembered the feel of rope around his ankles, stretching them out and tying his legs firmly to the foot of the bed. The cool air prickling his naked skin, the cords around his wrists biting into his flesh. His chest hurt, he was hyperventilating again. He couldn't get enough air.

Panic attack. He shook his head, trying to clear it. Still, his blood pounded through his veins and he began to shake.

"Mulder?"

He looked up so quickly, so surprised that he banged his head on the wall and saw stars.

Tezcuco Plantation
Lafitte, Louisiana
June 25, 1998; 8:25 p.m.

She had gotten out of the car and slammed the door hard, hoping to alert him to her presence.

Walking slowly, she had approached him head on and still he didn't seem to see her.

Sprawled against the outside wall of the stable, he was staring at the charred ruins, his mouth agape as he hyperventilated. He was pale, sweaty, with a look of horror on his face that she had never seen before. It terrified her.

He was re-living something. Something she wasn't eager to contemplate.

"Mulder?" she called to him, uncertain. Despite her best intentions, he started, hitting his head on the wall of the stable.

"Ow! Damn," he said softly, rubbing the back of his head. He started coughing.

"I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." She felt a twinge of pain. Constantly wounding, constantly apologizing. She shook herself and dug for the anger that she had felt on finding him gone. He wasn't the only one trying to find himself. "Why did you leave the hospital?"

"I told you I had to get out of there. You didn't listen," he said calmly, if breathlessly, staring at her so hard that it felt like a hole was being burned through her forehead.

"I didn't listen? Mulder, just because you want to leave the hospital doesn't mean that you can or should. You have a lot to recover from, you need to be hospitalized."

"You don't understand, Scully. I've spent enough time trapped in a bed and *I* made the decision to get out." He glared at her. "It was *my* decision."

A light went on inside her head. She got it. She walked over and sat down next to him, not touching him, but close.

"You're your own man. I know that..."

"But I don't know it, Scully. I need to know it." A cough erupted harshly from his mouth and he grabbed his chest. She glanced sideways at him, making sure he was all right.

"Mulder -" she stopped, struggling for something to say. She was out of her depth. The doctor in her warred with the woman that loved him enough to give him what he wanted. If only it wouldn't kill him.

Mulder watched her.

"I know how this must be affecting you..."

"No, you don't, Scully." He said this so solemnly that her heart skipped a beat, then tightened in pain.

"Mulder....he didn't....I mean..." she stuttered to a halt, unable to continue.

"No. Almost. But no. He did -- things."

He spoke the words softly, staring into the burned remains of the house. She felt her eyes cloud with tears at the look of despair and pain on his face. When he leaned forward, coughing again, she gently rubbed his back.

"Your lungs are trying to clear all the fluids. You really should be in the hospital," she said, then paused for a moment before continuing, hesitantly. "Do you want to talk about everything that happened? I don't want to push, Mulder, but if you need me --"

He tore his gaze from the house and stared into her eyes, searching them again.

"I have to stay here until dark."

She was confused, and must have looked it because he elaborated. "If he's not dead, he'll come for me."

"Oh, Mulder --" she said, shaking her head.

"No, Scully, I mean it. I want to know for sure. You say bodies were found, but I keep having these dreams. Kinda like before, you know?" He looked at her, his face going dark with a scowl. "If he somehow got out, I want to know *now*."

She thought for a way to reason with him, get him out of the hot, humid air and into a bed. "Are the dreams *exactly* the same?"

He thought about it for a minute. "Not exactly. They are still very real, but - - fuzzier? Like the Brandon is far away, or hurt."

"Mulder -- has it occurred to you that the dreams are different because Brandon's dead? I mean, you went through a terrible ordeal -- several terrible ordeals over the past few months -- it's only natural that you'd be having nightmares."

He gazed at her for a moment, a slightly hurt look on his face. "I thought of it. I've considered every angle of this, Scully, and what I keep coming back to is the fact that he was a vampire. He has incredible strength. And Clarice survived a pretty long fall."

She sighed in exasperation, not quite willing to admit that he had a point, even though she didn't buy it. She had seen the fire. "Let's say that he's not dead, Mulder." His head jerked back toward her in surprise. She held up a hand. "Hypothetically. Let's say that he got out of the house. What are you going to do if he shows up? Confront him? Tell him to get lost? What? You're in no condition to fight him, Mulder, and if he somehow managed to survive then you would need all your strength if he did find you."

He opened his mouth to argue, but she beat him to it. "You'd be a sitting duck, Mulder. Hell, *I* could take you at this point." Surprisingly, that made him break into a short burst of laughter, before he began coughing so hard that she didn't know if he would be able to stop.

She rubbed his back, willing him to breathe again. "I can't believe you find that funny. I should be insulted, I think," she said, gently teasing him.

"You could always take me, Scully," he said, gasping for air. "It's funny that you never realized it. I can run faster than you, though."

"Well, gee, what a shock. Your legs are just a bit longer than mine."

"And I'm usually highly motivated."

The friendly banter, combined with laughter, made her want to cry. Happy tears of relief. Her Mulder was still in there, battered, but alive.

He sobered quickly, still breathing hard from his coughing spell.

"What is it?"

"It's getting dark," he said quietly, ominously.

A shiver ran up her spine and she cursed, internally. She *knew* Brandon was dead, but Mulder's tone -- his fatalistic need to sit here and wait for something to happen was un-nerving. As was the growing darkness, and the preternatural silence of the bayou. She glanced around, seeing nothing but shadows and trees.

Then, for her own piece of mind, and his, she pulled out her gun. He looked sideways at where it rested on her knee, then up at her face, a slight smile playing about his lips.

"You know --" he began, smile fading and trying to draw a deep breath before continuing, "I emptied that gun. Hit him at least twice, as I recall." Another

pause, then a grimace. "He kept coming for me." He gasped for air to continue talking. "Grabbed me. We were on that bed."

She could sense the pain behind his deceptively casual delivery of those words. She could see it happening in her mind's eye and it made her feel sick inside. She reached over and slipped her hand into his, intertwining their fingers and squeezing gently.

"He -- he and Marianna -- she helped me, Scully." His voice broke slightly and she couldn't tell if it was because he was on the verge of tears or another coughing fit. She didn't look at him or say anything, just continued squeezing his hand, hoping he would continue.

Mulder, for his part, appreciated her silence, and the boundary she erected by not staring at him. He didn't want to talk about it, but he couldn't *not* talk about it, since it was like a video playing in his head on a continuous loop.

He gazed out over the burned ruins and into the trees, the pain in his chest reminding him of his leap from the tree, stake firmly in hand. He then looked to his left at the outbuildings, barely visible but looking haunted. He thought he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye and looked sharply forward again, scanning the front lawn, shivering.

Suddenly there was a cool hand on his forehead, and a gentle voice in his ear. "Breathe, Mulder, take it easy. It's a panic attack, there's nothing there."

"W-what...happened?"

"I think you blanked out there for a minute. You jumped, like you saw something, then you started shaking and hyperventilating." She paused, treading carefully. "We really need to get you back to bed, you have a fever again. Please, Mulder."

He heard the pleading tone in her voice and felt like a bastard. But he couldn't help it. "Just a few more minutes, Scully."

The minutes ticked by as they sat there, backs to the stable wall, and the light faded completely from the sky, the humidity lessening slightly. They were far from any city and the absence of city light he was so accustomed to made the night seem pitch black. He looked up and noticed for the first time that the night was cloudy, adding to the gloom. At least the frogs had started up their chirping. It made the darkness less...lonely.

Scully still held tightly to his hand, her gun resting on her knee. She had pulled her knees up to her chest, curling her body into a smaller target. A protective position. He wondered if she was conscious of her own fears. On some level, she believed it was all possible. He looked at his own, outstretched legs and pondered their differences.

She didn't want to believe it, said she didn't believe it, and yet there she was, practically curled into a ball. But maybe she wasn't frightened of Brandon coming. Maybe she was just frightened for him, his sanity. Maybe she was protecting herself from him. When he fractured into a million pieces, she would be less likely to be hurt. She had made the target smaller.

But what about him? His presence here, his open body language -- what did that mean? Did he want this, on some, subconscious level? Had he been so wounded in the past few months that he now just waited for it to happen? Did he want it? Did he expect it? Did he deserve it?

He shivered and he could feel Scully's gaze on him, her expression one of worry verging on anger.

He was in serious need of a shrink and some space. He wasn't quite sure of who he was anymore.

"Mulder? I don't think he's coming," Scully said, firmly.

He sighed, and the bands tightened around his lungs, making him hold back another coughing fit. "It doesn't appear that he is, Scully."

"I'm glad you agree," she said, starting to get to her feet.

He pulled on her hand. "Wait, Scully."

"Mulder --"

"Just a minute -- I need to tell you something."

She sat back down and he took a deep breath. He couldn't think of a way to say this without hurting her. Then again, maybe it wouldn't hurt her at all.

"What is it, Mulder?" she asked quietly, perhaps sensing what he was getting ready to say.

"I - I love you, Scully."

She raised an eyebrow. "But?" she asked, too smart for her own good.

"But I need - I need..." He started coughing again and got angry with himself. He struggled to his feet and began pacing unsteadily in front of her as she stared up at him in surprise from her seat on the ground.

"I think you better sit before you fall," she said quietly, trying not to boss him around.

"I'm all right. I'm all right." He wondered who he was trying to convince. It was so obviously not true as he staggered on his feet, gasping for air, all while walking a short, straight line on the ground. Yeah, he was just dandy. "I need some time, Scully."

"Time?"

"I need to move back into my own place," he said softly, staring intently at her upturned face. Her mouth opened, then her head dropped quickly, hiding her face behind a curtain of red hair.

He dropped to his knees in front of her and took both her hands in his.

"You're leaving me," she said, not looking up at him. He slid two fingers under her chin and lifted her face. She was trying desperately not to cry.

"I'm not leaving you. As stupid...as *cliched* as this may sound, I have to find *myself* again." He took a deep, rattling breath. "I'm lost, Scully. So - - confused. Clarice and Brandon...and Cancerman before them...they robbed me of something. I have to get it back."

"Tell me. Tell me what it is. Tell me how I can help." She looked at him intently, her wide blue eyes steely and determined, her cheeks wet with tears. He sighed.

"That's just it. You *can't*."

"I can, Mulder! You know I'd do anything to help you."

His chest hurt at the pain in her voice. She didn't understand. He leaned toward her and pressed his lips softly against hers, smoothing her hair back from the side of her face. He pulled back only slightly, his thumb caressing her smooth, tear stained cheek.

"I need to re-gain control of my life - of my body, Scully. I have to learn to trust myself - my instincts - again." He sucked in as much air as his lungs would take, then coughed harshly before continuing. "I just have to live on my own terms for awhile."

She gazed at him sadly, understanding but not liking it at all. "Then Brandon really won. He won the damn game, didn't he?"

"No!" Mulder shouted, upset at what seemed like a lack of faith. "How can you say that?"

"I'm not trying to pressure you to change your mind, Mulder, honestly. And I do

understand why you need to do this. But it comes right down to Brandon accomplishing one of his main objectives, which was to tear us apart."

He just stared at her, not knowing whether to be appalled or hurt.

"He wanted to make it so you didn't trust me, didn't recognize me. He wanted you to leave me so that I would hurt, and that you would hurt. So we wouldn't be happy. That's why he masqueraded as me, that's why he caused that incident in the hotel room. So you would never be sure. He wanted me to become a vampire and kill you...but he knew that you not trusting me would be just as efficient." She just gazed at him, resigned.

He gasped at the revelation. "That's...that's what I thought...I knew he wanted to use you against me. I just...hadn't realized that I was right."

"And you realize that I'm right, now," she said softly, sadly. "He's won. You don't trust me."

"Scully, I trust *you*...."

"But when you see me, are you sure it's *me*?" she asked gently.

He couldn't answer her without hurting her more. A tightness in his chest that wasn't a result of pneumonia made him cough and want to cry.

She choked back a sob and tears started rolling down her face. She brushed them away, angrily. "That bastard..."

"This isn't forever, Scully, it's not," he said, his breathing harsh from the coughing. "You're my partner, my best friend. I'm in love with you...."

She quieted him by laying her fingers against his lips, smiling sadly. He could tell she didn't believe him. "I love you, too."

He grasped her fingers tightly. "Brandon only wins if you lose faith in me. In my ability to get past this."

"I've always had faith in you. It might not have seemed like it at times, especially recently..." She was the one quieted this time, when Mulder kissed her, gently. He pulled back slightly.

"You have faith in me? You don't think I'm irredeemably nuts?"

She smiled slightly. "*Irredeemably* nuts? No."

"Then you'll wait for me. Wait for me, Scully."

She stared into beautiful hazel eyes, pleading with her for patience, and wondered only how long the wait would be.

"I'll wait for you, Mulder."

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The End

Feedback can be sent to:

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Note for chapter 9:

The web pages Mulder quotes from did, at one time, exist. They may still exist, but it has been a long period of time since I wrote this chapter. I no longer have the links to these pages, but I do recall that two webmaster's pages were particularly helpful: NightPoe and Tiamatu. I apologize to these web masters for quoting bits of their text without their permission or knowledge.