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# CATATONIA

By Tim Lebbon

LYNOTT SOUND, MASSACHUSETTS

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“**D**id I wake you?”

“Mulder? Urgh... no, I had to get up to answer the phone. Damn, it's three in the morning, don't you ever sleep?”

“Why?”

“You get tired. Your eyes get heavy. You sleep.”

“Oh, that. Sometimes. But not right now.”

“Why not?”

“I need your help.”

“Really? At three in the morning?”

“It *could* wait 'til tomorrow, I guess.”

“What exactly is 'it'?”

“Lynott Sound. Little town in Massachusetts. Four kids vanished from home two nights ago, and yesterday morning they were all found in the local woods. Catatonic. They were brought home, and they're healthy but completely non-responsive. Sound intriguing?”

“Sounds like a bunch of kids on drugs.”

“No drugs found in their systems, Scully.”

“Mass hypnotism. They love playing around with that stuff. The less susceptible ones ran home because they were scared, leaving their friends out in the woods. Kids are cruel.”

“They all vanished separately, and none of them are close friends. They'd never have been hanging out with each other. Scully, are you really doing this?”

“Doing what? Maybe they're just copy-catting. Happens a lot. One has

a rare form of sleep apnea, the others think it's cool and gets them attention, so they do the same. Classic teenage angst."

"Doing what you always do. Trying to rationalize it away."

"Look, *you're* the one who rang *me* for help!"

"You sound sexy when you're angry."

"I'm not angry, I'm tired."

"Then you sound sexy when you're tired."

"Damn it, why aren't you asleep? And anyway, we don't work together anymore."

"Officially."

"Right. So why do you want me along on this one?"

"Same reason as always. It wouldn't be the same without you."

"And because I'm the voice of reason."

"The reason is what we're looking for. See you midday tomorrow?"

"Lynott Sound, right?"

"A diner called Marshall's, just outside town. I knew you couldn't resist."

"I'm going back to sleep, Mulder."

"Sweet dreams, Scully."



As diner's went, it wasn't the most salubrious Mulder had ever visited. Two trucks stood on blocks at the edge of its graveled car park, wheels gone, windscreens smashed, seats ripped and spewing foam guts. A ditch that ran along the other side of the narrow road smelled like something dead. The building had once been a gas station, and though the pumps were gone, the tattered canopy remained, as did the stench of spilled fuel. It hung in the air as he slammed his car door and walked across the lot, and he felt faintly queasy as the tang of petrol fumes merged with the scent of hot fat and sizzling bacon. Mulder hadn't eaten for almost twenty-four hours, but this place did little to perk his appetite.

Paint peeled from walls, the door stuck in the frame, and the sign across the front—'Marshall's Diner'—had been hand-painted in uneven and dribbled paint. It looked like a place that wanted to be loved but made do with being needed.

But once inside, a huge woman behind the counter smiled and welcomed him with a friendly wave. There didn't seem to be any other

customers. That didn't bode well, but the place seemed well-used and clean, on the surface at least. And Mulder was suddenly, surprisingly hungry.

"Now there's a man who needs a mug of coffee," she said, and she poured without waiting for a reply.

"Is it good?" Mulder asked, taking a stool at the counter. Still pouring, the woman looked up at him through wild eyebrows. She was ruddy-faced and round, the clichéd cheery chef.

"He asks if the coffee's good, Patton!"

"Good? Best coffee in the east." The old man was crouched in a window seat, so small, wizened and hairless that Mulder wondered whether he'd merit a file of his own. The mug on his table was almost as big as him.

"Patton?" Mulder asked. The old man waved a hand around his head, as if shooing away a fly.

"My mother didn't like me, my father never knew me."

"First name or last?"

"Depends on which side I get out of bed."

Mulder smiled, then shook his head when the woman—Marshall, he surmised, though he couldn't guess whether it was her first name or last—offered him cream and sugar. He picked up his hot mug and took a careful sip, and damned if Patton wasn't right. It was the best coffee he'd tasted in ages.

Still sipping, he glanced at the menu chalked clumsily on a wide board on the wall above the counter. It offered typical diner fare in an array of delightfully original, and occasionally worrying, forms. Bacon and pancakes with nut-warmingly sweet syrup, triple-death burgers, meatloaf with Heavenly mash fit for the Lord Himself, a variety of pastries baked with Wonder and Love. Cautious, he caught Marshall's eye where she worked stacking washed plates.

"So is the food as good as the coffee?"

"You judge by appearances, Hon?"

Mulder thought of the stink of gas, the ravaged trucks, and the coffee, and shook his head.

"I'll do you my breakfast special." She smiled and disappeared through a wide doorway into the kitchen beyond.

“First brewed that coffee myself, almost forty years back,” Patton said. “Sourced the beans, measured the grind, stored them in a way only I knew how. Passed down what I knew to my daughter.” He nodded in the direction of the kitchens, smiling warmly. “Now she’s making coffee just as good as I ever did. People ask, strangers and regulars alike, they ask how we do it, what we do, when we grind and mix and pour, how long we let it stand, whether we use special water from a particular creek or well. They ask, but I don’t tell ‘em.” The old man tapped his nose with a twig-like finger. “Cos it’s a secret.”

Mulder sat at a table across the aisle from Patton. He couldn’t help liking the man, and knowing that he was Marshall’s father made the diner seem an even warmer, friendlier place.

“Yeah, well, I won’t ask,” he said, sipping at the divine coffee once more. “I like a good mystery.”

“But mysteries are there to be solved, eh?” Patton asked. He looked Mulder up and down, his wrinkled smile not quite as open as it had been. “By people like you, I mean.”

“People like me?” Mulder asked.

“Cops.”

“I’m not a cop.”

“Feds, then.”

Mulder looked away and drank some more. He’d need a new cup soon, and he wondered whether the second would taste as good as the first. Some mysteries had a way of growing stale.

“I’m not your usual kind of Fed,” he said softly. He didn’t want to alienate this old guy. In small places like Lynott Sound, old characters like Patton might know things that most other people did not. Me might be shriveled and ancient and barely able to move, but Mulder guessed he had his finger on the pulse of the town. It was often people like this that possessed nuggets of information that could make or break a case.

Patton laughed, a brittle sound like a newspaper being crumpled. “You’ll be here for the sleepers, then.”

Mulder nodded.

“Buncha’ kids. Drunk or drugged up, most likely.”

“You really think that?”

“Sure.” But Patton wasn’t looking at Mulder any more. He was staring

at his own hands, clasping the edge of the table before him as if terrified to let go. His knuckles were bony nubs, nails blackened scabs.

“There’s something else,” Mulder said.

“Angels’ songs,” the old man muttered.

“What’s that?”

“Here ya go, hon,” Marshall said, then whispered, “Oh, don’t mind him, mad old coot.” She slid a plate before Mulder, glancing back and forth between him and Patton. She didn’t look quite so welcoming anymore. “You okay, Pop?”

“Can I get another coffee?” Mulder asked. “And one for my partner, too. She’ll take cream, but no sugar.”

“Partner?” the woman asked.

Mulder shrugged. “She’s late.”

Marshall disappeared back behind the counter, and while he dug into the breakfast of pancakes, eggs and crispy bacon, he glanced at Patton every few seconds, noticing how the tension slowly went out of the old man as he relaxed even more into the shiny leather seat. It could have been his age, diffusing the knowledge of what they’d been discussing. But Mulder thought it was a slow easing of anticipation. Patton had been expecting Mulder to ask some more, to delve deeper, and he was terrified at the prospect.

He knew to ease back, for now. Simply knowing that there were depths to plumb was enough.

“You’ll get fat,” a voice said behind him, and Mulder felt a rush of affection. He’d missed Scully. It had been almost two months since they’d seen each other, and although they spoke on the phone—and although she sometimes feigned frustration, he knew that she liked talking with him—nothing could trump meeting face to face.

“I have a fast metabolism,” he said.

“Yeah, still full of bullshit.”

Mulder stood to greet Scully. Her hair was longer, and perhaps she was a little leaner, but other than that she was the Scully he knew. Sharp suit, sharper wit, and a tongue that could cut a man in half from ten paces.

“Thanks for coming,” he said. “It’s good to see you.”

She looked around, smiling briefly at Patton. “You bring me to the nicest places,” she said quietly, so that only Mulder could hear.