

Warren Grove, New Jersey exists on maps but isn't really a town, *per se*—which is perfect because I just exercised a *lot* of creative license and turned it into the kind of town I wanted it to be! Many thanks to all of the Jixsters over the years who have made Jix the community it is as I celebrate my 13th Jixaversary. You all rock! Thank you to Julia for reminding me why I love Jix. And, finally, thank you to Susan, ahem, *GSSusan*, for the day-of edit and being such a great friend. One of these days I'll actually write my Jixaversary offering ahead of time!

The triX-Files

Chapter Two

Warren Grove High School, Warren Grove, NJ
Tuesday, September 12, 2000
7:43 am

Trixie, driving a silver sedan she had signed out from the FBI car pool, arrived at Warren Grove High School with minutes to spare before her arranged meeting time with the other agents. She idled her car in front of the school, her sharp eyes taking in her surroundings. The rundown, two-story building that housed the students of Warren Grove had clearly seen better days. The plain structure, made of brown bricks, hadn't actually fallen into disrepair—yet—but to Trixie's eyes, it looked like an old man who knew his best days were behind him and had given up the fight. Turning away from the sad structure, the young FBI agent noted that woods surrounded the school on two sides. On the third side lay tired playing fields.

Trixie turned her attention to the parking lot in front of the school. Most of the cars were older models, but a shiny silver sedan, not unlike the one she was driving, caught her eye. The sticker of a local car rental agency convinced her that this was the Washington agents' rented vehicle. Trixie put her car in gear and pulled into an empty spot not far from the other silver car. Sure enough, as she slid the gearshift into park, she looked in the mirror and saw Agents Scully and Mulder climb out of the other sedan.

They waited for her to exit her own car and approach before greeting her.

"Good morning, Agent Frayne," Mulder said with a smile. Scully offered the blonde agent a small half-smile, which Trixie returned.

"Good morning, Agents," Trixie greeted them. "Are we ready?"

The pair from FBI headquarters nodded, and the trio headed for the lonely, vacant- looking building. A building that possibly housed a murderer.

As they headed up the front steps, Trixie had the very distinct sensation that they were being watched. She stopped and turned around, her sharp blue eyes scanning the parking lot. The blonde agent saw nothing out of the ordinary, but the hair on the back of her neck was standing on end. She could not shake the feeling that someone, or *something*, was out there watching them.

Mulder and Scully paused at the top of the steps and turned toward her.

"Agent Frayne?" Scully asked. "Is something wrong?"

Trixie finished her scan of the parking lot and turned to face the other agents. "No, nothing's wrong," she fibbed. "Just getting a feel for the place." She continued up the stairs and in through the front doors of the school. She did not miss the thoughtful look that Agent Mulder gave her.

The halls were devoid of life, and Mulder informed Trixie that school had started at 7:40 a.m. so the students were tucked away in their classes learning the wonders of algebra and Shakespeare. As both Trixie and Scully wore sensible pantsuits with flat, rubber-soled shoes, the three did not make any noise as they approached the principal's office near the front entrance. Mulder opened the door and allowed the two women to enter first.

Money in the Warren Grove school district was certainly not spent on decorating, at least not that office. The walls were completely bare of posters or pictures and painted the color of eggshells. A utilitarian clock hung on the wall over the secretary's desk, a plain, wooden affair that was battered and looked as though it had been around since the Eisenhower administration. There were three wooden chairs set along one wall, presumably for those waiting to see the principal. An old-school black phone sat on the secretary's desk, along with a clutter of papers. Two metal file cabinets, scratched and dented with age, sat next to the chairs.

Behind the desk sat a large woman with frizzy hair the color of mud. Her face was lined with wrinkles, and her dull brown eyes glared at the visitors. The nameplate on her desk proclaimed her to be "N. Wornethall, W.G.H.S. Secretary."

"Miss Wornethall?" Scully asked. At the secretary's nod, Scully continued. "I'm Agent Scully with the FBI," she stated as she held out her official badge. Agents Mulder and Frayne also displayed their badges. "These are Agents Frayne and Mulder. We're here to investigate—"

"I know what you're here to investigate," the woman interrupted crankily, her voice thick and rough with years of cigarette smoking. "I may not have a fancy degree or fancy badges like you, but it doesn't take brain surgeon to know the FBI's here to investigate the deaths of them two kids. What do you wanna know?"

The three Agents exchanged glances before Scully continued. "Can you please tell us what you know about Campbell Smith and Kenneth Butler?"

The secretary thought for a moment. "I didn't know them. Which means they weren't regular visitors to see the principal. Know their moms, though. Those are good women. Don't deserve this grief."

"What about Jeffrey Shaw?" Scully pressed on.

The woman snorted, and her brown eyes hardened. "That boy is a no-good troublemaker! He's been nothing but trouble since he stepped foot in this school." Miss Wornethall's voice took on a derisive note. "It's those parents of his. They don't discipline him. He creates havoc in one school, and whatta they do? 'Stead of making him stick it out and face the music, they let him run away. Boy's not gonna learn any lessons that way!"

The three agents again exchanged glances. Trixie was the one who spoke. "Are Jeffrey Shaw's past troubles common knowledge?"

The secretary shook her head, her frizzy hair emphasizing the gesture. "No. The Shaws are pretty secretive about it. Guess you can imagine why. But it's in the boy's file."

"Speaking of files, Miss Wornethall," Scully said, "we'll need the files on Campbell Smith,

Kenneth Butler, Jeffrey Shaw, Jennifer Belarius, Brandon McKenzie, and Ryan Jordan. If it's not too much trouble, we would also appreciate access to a room where we can review the files and interview the involved students."

"Involved students?" Miss Wornethall's gravelly voice rose in incredulity. "You don't think those other students had something to do with them boys' deaths, do you?"

Mulder spoke for the first time. "Those students were involved in daring the boys to enter the woods in the first place. We need to ask them a few questions related to the circumstances surrounding that unfortunate dare."

Mulder's answer seemed to appease the brusque woman. None of the agents missed the irony of a person employed by the Board of Education who spoke as though she didn't have much education herself. The secretary nodded as she slowly rose and ambled over to the battered file cabinets. "On account that Rosa Smith and Olivia Butler deserve to know what happened to their boys, and that killer needs to be caught and shot, I'll help as much as I can," she stated as she clawed through the files, retrieving the appropriate manila folders.

"We appreciate that, Miss Wornethall," Scully said politely.

Miss Wornethall momentarily stopped her search to stare contemptuously at Scully. "I said I'd give you what you wanted, so you don't have to keep brown-nosin'." She went back to her search as all three agents tried to hide their laughter at her cantankerousness. When she had found the six dog-eared folders, she gathered them up and handed them to Mulder.

"The music room's empty on account of the music teacher quit last week, and we ain't found a sub or a replacement yet. All those kids that took that class are now in study hall." She gave directions to the music room, and the three FBI agents thanked her for her time before quickly exiting the office.

As they shut the door behind them, Mulder gave Scully a sly grin. "I think she liked you, Scully."

The red-haired agent rolled her eyes, but the ghost of a smile appeared on her lips. "Let's go, Mulder."

Trixie appreciated the camaraderie the two agents obviously shared, despite their vastly different personalities. They might hold different view points, but they made that work for them. Trixie liked that and sensed that she could trust them. She liked Mulder's wry sense of humor and Scully's scientific detachment. For the first time since she had been assigned this case, the young agent felt that she might actually enjoy working with these two agents.

The three settled into the music room and immediately began reviewing the files the irascible secretary had given them. The room was silent as they studied the students' backgrounds and scribbled hasty but meticulous notes in their notebooks. The trio had listened to a noisy period break in the hall outside before they declared their task done.

"Did anything stand out to you?" Agent Mulder asked when all of the files had been thoroughly read.

Trixie leaned back in her chair, threw her pen on the table, and sighed. "Not a freakin' thing."

"Scully?"

The petite redhead echoed Agent Frayne's sigh and looked at her partner. "I'm sorry, Mulder. I didn't see a thing that raised any red flags. Other than the obvious. Jeffrey Shaw orchestrated this. He's had a history of scaring the bejesus out of his friends, as Agent Frayne said, he's heard the tales of the Jersey Devil, and he decided that playing the Jersey Devil would make a great prank—until it went too far and he escalated from juvenile delinquent to murderous felon."

Trixie looked at the Mulder. "What do you see, Agent Mulder?"

Mulder studied the two women for several moments before speaking. "I tend to agree with Agent Frayne. Nothing stands out. 'Not a freakin' thing'." Trixie looked mutinous at Mulder's inelegant quotation, but she didn't say anything as he continued, "By all accounts, Shaw was remorseful following the incident at his old high school."

"Well, remorseful or not, the experience doesn't seem to have changed him for the better," Trixie pointed out. "According to the secretary, he's still in trouble all the time. And he's still daring people into frightening and potentially dangerous situations. If that's remorse..."

There was a moment of silence before Scully asked, "How do you want to handle the interviews?"

"Let's talk to the Belarius girl first. I think she'll be the most open. We can decide where to go from there," Agent Mulder suggested.

"Fine, but you should be the one to ask Miss Wornethall to summon her from class." Scully wagged her eyebrows at Mulder's questioning look. "What? She likes you, Mulder."

Trixie chuckled at Mulder's pained expression, but she noticed that he didn't argue. While he was gone on his mission, Trixie turned to Scully.

"So, you're a doctor?"

The redhead nodded. "Yes, but not a practicing one."

"That must be interesting. How'd you manage to join the FBI instead of practicing medicine?"

Trixie could have sworn Scully looked bemused for just a fraction of a second, but then the agent looked so much like the no-nonsense woman that Trixie had met that she decided that she had imagined it. "I did my residency in forensic pathology, and I really enjoyed it. I decided to put that type of training to use in the FBI."

"I think that's fascinating," Trixie commented. "I always enjoyed my forensics classes. Forensic pathology must be so interesting."

"I like it," Scully agreed. "And it's proven very useful considering the types of cases that Agent Mulder and I often pursue."

"About that—" Trixie started to say, but the door to the music room swung open and Mulder re-entered.

"Miss Belarius should be joining us in a few minutes. I noticed a vending machine as I walked by the cafeteria. Would either of you like anything?"

Both women declined, and Mulder, looking disappointed at the lost opportunity to visit the vending machines, re-took his seat at the table. It was only a few moments before a pretty,

dark-haired girl hesitantly opened the door and looked inside. She was petite, only about five foot two, and her slender body was encased in highly fashionable clothes. Her hair hung long and loose past her shoulders, giving her an almost ethereal look, next to her pale skin and hauntingly dark eyes.

"H-hi," she said timidly. "Miss Wornethall said I was to report to the music room. I'm Jennifer Belarius."

"Hi, Jennifer," Scully said pleasantly, attempting to put the young girl at ease. "I'm Agent Scully and these are Agents Mulder and Frayne. I'm sure that you can guess why we're here. We understand that you were close to Campbell and Kenny, and we were hoping you could answer a few questions."

Jennifer stood in the doorway, tears filling her large, dark eyes. "I want to help. You're right. I was close to Campbell, and Kenny, too. And I want whoever did this to them to pay!"

The agents exchanged glances following the girl's outburst. Trixie was the first to react.

"We want justice for your friends, too," she said in a soothing voice. "Please, have a seat and tell us what you know."

Jennifer crossed the room, hugging her books tightly to her chest. It did not escape Trixie's notice that her knuckles were white from squeezing the two thick volumes so hard. She regained her composure by the time she crossed the room and sat down in a graceful manner that reminded Trixie of her best friend and sister-in-law, Honey.

"Now, Jennifer," Mulder began the questioning, "we understand that you were present at school last Thursday when Jeffrey Shaw dared Campbell and Kenny to spend the night in the Pine Barrens. Can you tell us how that came about?"

The girl closed her ebony eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, and then opened them. She stared at the three agents with a calm that belied her previous outburst.

"The boys were talking about hunting. Cam mentioned that his family had this old cabin back in the Pine Barrens, and he used to take Cam there when he was a kid. Sometimes they'd just go stay like a camping trip, and other times they would go hunting for the day. Rather, his dad would go hunting, and Cam would tag along." Sadness passed over Jennifer's angular face. "But then Cam's dad died, so he stopped going."

Jennifer paused, and the three agents waited for her to continue.

"Brandon said that Cam was full of it, because everyone knows the Pine Barrens are haunted by the Jersey Devil," Jennifer said.

Mulder, who had been sitting relaxed in his chair up until that point, leaned forward. "*Brandon* mentioned the Jersey Devil?"

Jennifer looked surprised and then apprehensive, as if she had just said something wrong. "Yes, but the Jersey Devil is common knowledge around here..." she trailed off.

"It's okay," Scully said gently. "We're just trying to get to the truth. What happened next?"

Jennifer turned wide dark eyes from Mulder to the redheaded agent. "Well, everyone started

talking about the Jersey Devil. You know, what they'd heard about it and stuff. Urban legends, that kind of thing. The next thing I knew, Jeff was daring Cam to go into the woods and spend the night in the cabin."

Trixie asked, "And how did Cam react to that?"

Jennifer seemed to think for a moment and then answered, "He didn't seem like he wanted to do it, but he looked...I don't know...resigned? As though he *had* to since he'd been challenged?" For a moment, the haunted look left Jennifer's face, and she suddenly seemed like any teenage girl as she snorted and said, "Boys! Just because they're dared!"

The three agents smiled empathetically at her small outburst, and Jennifer blushed and then remembered the seriousness of the situation. She sobered and said, "Even if..."

She didn't complete the thought, but she didn't need to.

Trixie, summoning all of her best friend's tact, tried to reassure this girl who looked so fragile. "They couldn't have known what would happen. And how did Kenny come to be a part of the dare?"

"He's Cam's best friend. He...he volunteered to go with Cam. He didn't want him to have to go alone."

At this, Jennifer began to cry. "I'm sorry," she began.

Scully reached out to gently touch the girl's shoulder. "There's no need to be sorry. It's a tragic thing that happened."

Jennifer nodded as she accepted a tissue from Trixie. "I just...I just don't understand why they had to act so...so *macho*!"

Over Jennifer's bent head, the three agents exchanged a glance. They knew that it was just the way of teenage boys, and seeing how beautiful and ethereal Jennifer was, it wasn't hard to surmise what had happened as the boys egged each other on in front of her.

Mulder was the first to break the silence after Jennifer had somewhat composed herself. "You're sure it was Brandon who brought up the Jersey Devil first?"

Jennifer nodded. "I'm sure."

"Was there anything unusual that happened that day? Or on Friday before Cam and Kenny left to go...camp?" Trixie wanted to know.

Jennifer shook her head. "Nothing that I can think of."

The agents questioned her further, but she didn't provide anything new, and they let her head to her next class. She took Mulder's card and promised to contact them if she thought of anything else.

After she had gone, Trixie asked, "What do you think?"

"I think that she's very traumatized, but she's told us everything that she knows," Scully immediately answered. Mulder agreed.

"I agree that she seemed genuine," Trixie concurred. "Who's next?"

"The boy who mentioned the Jersey Devil first, of course," Mulder responded.

The agents summoned Brandon McKenzie, a thin but muscular boy with a shock of red hair and a face full of freckles. His six-foot-four frame seemed to corroborate the fact that his student file listed him as the center on the varsity basketball team.

When questioned about his interest in the Jersey Devil, he responded, "Interest? I wouldn't say I have an interest. Everyone knows about the myth around here, living so close to the Pine Barrens and all. Heck, we practically live *in* the Pine Barrens. Everyone knows the legend," he repeated. Trixie picked up on a certain defensiveness and nervousness that she found interesting.

"Why did you bring up the Jersey Devil that day?" Mulder pressed, apparently sensing the same thing that Trixie did.

Confusion settled on Brandon's plain features, his light blue eyes bewildered. "Because we were talking about the Pine Barrens? What other reason would there be?"

The agents let Brandon's question hang in the air for the moment. Brandon continued to stare at them, his freckled face exhibiting what appeared to be real confusion.

Seeing that he wasn't going to offer anything else, Mulder continued his questioning. "After you all talked about the Jersey Devil, what happened?"

Brandon thought for a moment. "Jeff, who's not from around here, so maybe he doesn't really know all of the legends about the Devil, didn't seem to think it was a big deal, and he dared Cam to spend the night in the cabin his dad used to take him to."

"And how did Cam react?" Mulder asked.

Brandon snorted. "Like he had to, with Jennifer there! He said he'd do it."

"Did he have a relationship with Jennifer?"

"You mean like boyfriend and girlfriend? No, we all grew up together, except for Jeff, and we've been friends since kindergarten. Cam really liked Jennifer, and he wanted to date her, but he always told me she was out of his league."

"So he agreed to the dare to impress her," Mulder said rather than asked.

Brandon nodded, and even though he didn't look as haunted as Jennifer had, the sorrow that came over his face spoke volumes about the grief that he was carrying about his two friends. "He told me the next day that he was pissed off that he had agreed to Jeff's dare, but now he really didn't feel like he could back out. He didn't want Jennifer think he was a p—pansy." Trixie hid a smile at Brandon's near slip and noticed that Scully and Mulder were doing the same thing.

"Kenny was cool enough to volunteer to go with him, though. He and Cam have been best friends since birth."

Further questioning by the agents didn't reveal any additional information about the dare, the Jersey Devil, or the murders that Jennifer hadn't already told them, and the lanky youth was

finally allowed to retreat to his next class with Mulder's card shoved hastily in his pocket.

Questioning Ryan Jordan—a tall, handsome boy with wavy brown hair and honest brown eyes whose student file listed him as running back on the football team, forward on the basketball team, and captain of the track team—did not yield any new information that Jennifer or Brandon had not already shared. Brandon had mentioned the Devil, Jeff had made the dare, Cam wasn't happy about it but agreed to it, and Kenny had loyally volunteered to go with him. There had been nothing unusual or out of the ordinary other than the dare.

That left Jeff Shaw. The former delinquent who could possibly have stepped up his game to include murder.

Trixie couldn't wait to meet him.

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