

CATATONIA

By Tim Lebbon

LYNOTT SOUND, MASSACHUSETTS

12th OCTOBER, 1994, 3 a.m.

“Did 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-cattin’. 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 diners 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.”