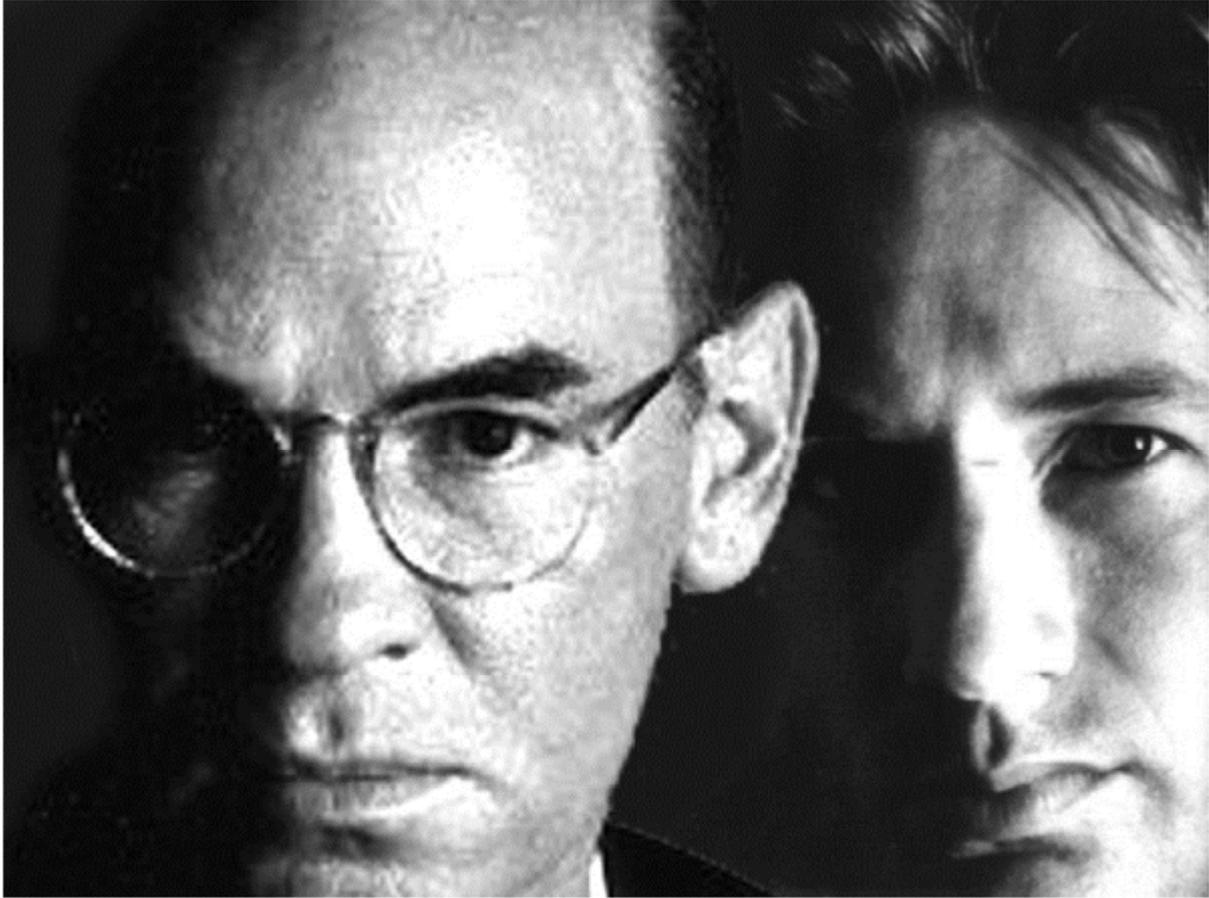


Betrayal by Xanthe



<http://www.xanthe.org/betrayal/>

Story Notes:

Posted: 24th March, 1999.

MAJOR ANGST ALERT. There is virtually nothing light and fluffy about this one and barely a wisecrack in sight.

Many thanks to Sergeeva and Holmes.

Betrayal by Xanthe

Prologue.

8 am, September 15, 2001.

Seal Beach.

He pulled on a pair of gray shorts and a vest, and took his usual morning jog along the seashore. It was the same routine, and he stuck to it, rain or shine. He even jogged in the snow. He was a man comfortable with certainties in a life where the sands had shifted more frequently than he was able to keep up with. He jumped the steps from his small beach house two at a time, and hit the sand with his bare feet, sinking a little way in, loving the grainy feel of it between his toes. He ran down to the sea, longing to feel the cool waves lapping over his ankles as he ran, splashing in and out, his long legs covering the distance in no time. The salty air refreshed and invigorated him. There was a cool breeze, and a promise of rain in the dark overhead sky.

He enjoyed his solitude. During his year in prison, it had been a precious commodity, in short supply, and he had sometimes felt that he would have killed for it. Now, he enjoyed both his freedom, and his loneliness. After a couple of miles, he passed Mrs. Jardine's house. Her dog ran out into the yard and the old lady waved and opened the gate. The dog ran down to the sea, jumping up against him, and he grinned and pulled the black, curly coated retriever into a bear hug, laughing as the dog licked his nose.

"Hey, Ben. C'mon." The dog barked excitedly, and they set off, dog and man, splashing through the water, tiny droplets of rain coating the man's vest and the dog's fur.

He parted company with the dog half an hour later, returning him to Mrs. Jardine's yard, with a last fond pat on the animal's head, and then he returned to the beach, jogging back the remaining distance towards his home, his bare feet wet, and coated with sand. As he neared the house, his footsteps slowed and his heart froze. There, sitting on the steps, was a familiar, heart-breaking figure. He stopped, and stood for a moment, his breath catching in his throat. He had always known, deep in his soul, that it would, one day, come to this.

August 25, 1999.

Hoover Building. Washington DC

"Agent Mulder, this is, at this stage, an informal internal investigation to ascertain whether Assistant Director Skinner should be brought up before the OPR, or even whether there is a criminal case to answer here." The dark-haired man leaned back in his chair, and flicked open a file.

"I'm aware of that, sir." Mulder said steadily, not taking his eyes off the Assistant Director, who was sitting at the end of the long, polished table. Skinner cleared his throat, and gazed

back. Mulder's hazel eyes held no hint of what he intended to do. Skinner's eyes dropped, and he stared instead at his own hands.

"Agent Mulder, I believe that you have recently been working on a case that you hoped would resolve several important issues that you have raised during your tenure on the X Files?"

"Yes, sir. That's correct." Mulder nodded, his eyes still fixed on the Assistant Director's bowed head.

"However, when you came into your office last Thursday, is it true that you found the file on this case missing?"

"Yes, sir. It is."

"Is it also true that the file contained special data that was not held anywhere else?"

"Yes, sir. That is also true." Mulder nodded.

"Who else knew of the existence of that evidence, Agent Mulder?"

"Only Assistant Director Skinner, sir." Mulder stated clearly.

"What do you believe happened to that file, Agent Mulder?"

Mulder didn't hesitate. His steely eyed gaze was unwavering.

"I believe the Assistant Director took it, sir, or someone working for him."

"Why would A.D. Skinner do that?" The agent in charge of Internal Investigations leaned forward eagerly.

"To cover up his involvement in a conspiracy against the American people, sir." Mulder rapped out. Skinner's head snapped up, and the AIC allowed the corner of his mouth to turn up in a smirk.

"A 'conspiracy', Agent Mulder?"

"Yes, sir. Let me explain. For six years, I have struggled to find evidence relating to the activities of a group of faceless men who, I have reason to believe, are experimenting on innocent citizens for their own ends. The information I had recently gleaned was relating to a Mark Anthony Storr. He knew names, faces, and facts, and moreover, he was prepared to testify. He gave me, for the first time ever, the proof that I needed. The day after the file disappeared, Storr also went missing. Without his testimony, my case against the Syndicate, or Consortium, or whatever these faceless men call themselves, is worthless."

"I see. And do you have evidence to support your belief that Assistant Director Skinner was involved in this?"

"Yes, I do." Mulder pulled a file out from under his jacket, and laid it on the table. "Storr was being held in a safe house. A.D. Skinner was the only one who knew where."

"That's hardly conclusive..."

"No, it isn't; however, the documentation releasing Storr from our safe-keeping was signed by the Assistant Director."

"A signature is easily forged..."

"Two hours after Storr walked out of our safe house, this picture was taken of him on a bank security camera." Mulder handed the other man a grainy photograph. "You can see the date and time stamp. It clearly shows Storr, and he isn't alone. I had the image enhanced..."

Mulder pointed to a second photograph, which showed the unmistakable features of the Assistant Director.

"Where did you get these pictures from, Agent Mulder?"

"An old...friend." Mulder's eyes flickered back to meet Skinner's and he noticed a nerve in Skinner's neck twitch, almost imperceptibly.

"Do you know anything about this, A.D. Skinner?" The AIC looked directly at the Assistant Director.

"I do not, at this stage, have any comment to make." Skinner stated numbly.

"Did you authorize Storr to leave the safe house, and arrange for his subsequent removal to another, unknown location?"

Skinner hesitated. "I can't comment," he said finally.

"Are you able to share with us the reasons why you might have removed the witness? The AIC pressed.

"No."

"Do you have any idea as to the whereabouts at this time, of Mark Storr?"

"No. I do not." Skinner shrugged.

"You're a liar!" Mulder slammed his fist down on the table. "You killed him to stop him testifying against your friends in the Consortium, Skinner."

Skinner's jaw clenched, but he said nothing.

"Do you have evidence to support that accusation, Agent Mulder?" The AIC pressed.

"No. They're too damn clever to leave any evidence; however he's a killer. I know that much. He's killed before, he can do it again."

Skinner stiffened, his body language agonized.

"What are you referring to, Agent Mulder?"

Angry hazel eyes met dark, hopeless, brown ones.

"I'm referring, sir..." Mulder paused, as if looking for some sign from the other man that would stop him continuing. He received none. "To a case a little over two years ago, when a police officer called Ray Thomas was killed during the course of an investigation into the death of a postal worker named Jane Brophy. The man who killed Thomas is sitting at this table. He was using my name at the time of the murder. The Assistant Director is that man. I have a file of evidence to support this accusation. "

"Why have you only chosen to speak out now - if this case is two years old?" The AIC demanded.

"The Assistant Director persuaded me that he was not responsible, that he'd been set up. I believed him." Mulder spat bitterly.

"And now you have changed your mind?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why? Why now? Why keep silent for two years?"

"The Assistant Director tried to manipulate me in order to enforce my silence." Mulder spoke softly.

"In what way?"

Mulder's eyes met Skinner's again and the Assistant Director's mouth opened in a wordless 'no'. The blow, when it came, was struck with a soft, but deadly accuracy.

"He seduced me, sir."

The Journal of Walter Skinner

May 20, 1998

I wonder if it would surprise you to learn that I keep a journal? Maybe after tonight's events, nothing would surprise you. I find it easier to express myself in writing than I ever have in

speech. Sharon used to wonder how I, who could write her love letters 20 pages long, could never utter a simple "I love you." I don't have any answers, I just know that I can say what I feel, tapping away at a word processor with an ease that I do not have when talking face to face.

Maybe you mistrust me, but if you thought tonight was just a quick fuck, or maybe some weird form of comfort, then you're greatly mistaken. Tonight was the culmination of so much, of all we've been through for so many years, and of all I've wanted for a very long time. I like to think the same is true for you. Somehow, I can't help feeling you'll read this when I'm dead and gone, and laugh at me. In my defense, I can only say that this journal is not intended to be a chronological account of the wearisome details of my life: "Got up, went to work, came home, drank myself into oblivion, went to bed..." That would sum up too many lonely days and nights, and in essence, say nothing. I get enough bland facts at work.

Of course, if someone were to find this journal - well the contents are fairly explosive, which is another reason for not writing longhand. Plausible deniability is the correct term I believe.

In this private place where I alone visit, I write instead of those emotions that are too fleeting or intense, to consign to memory. I write of sensations and events that I feel compelled to record, to know how they smelled, and tasted, how they felt, and looked, and sounded. For this reason, I sometimes go many months without writing at all. Often there is little enough to say. Tonight though, I think I could write forever. Tonight changed everything. Tonight changed this journal. Until a few years ago, I addressed this journal as an old friend. As time passed, I realized the friend had a name - and that here, I committed to posterity all those things I wished I could share with him: observations, remarks, experiences. Conversations and debates that we never had, and some that we did, only I re-wrote them here so that I could explain what I meant, and why I said what I did. I also tried to put myself in your head and understand where you might be coming from too. Now, I can finally put a name to my nameless friend. Tonight gave me that right, Fox.

You looked lost, not for the first time but never with greater cause. I found Scully with her arms around your unresponsive body, trying to comfort you, without success. How could anyone truly comfort you, as you stood in the smoldering ruins of your life's work? In all honesty, I wondered if you could stay sane in the aftermath of this great tragedy. Scully tried to lead you away, but you refused to budge. Her eyes met mine over your shoulder.

"Leave it to me." I whispered, and she nodded, grateful for help, still reeling from a sense of shock. "Go home, get some sleep. We'll see how we can clear this mess up in the morning." I whispered as she passed me.

"What about him?" She stared at you where you stood, unmoving, unaware.

"I'll get him home. Don't worry." I told her.

"I'm not sure he should be alone..." She began, obviously fearing what you might do.

"Then I'll take him home with me. I'll make sure he sleeps, and you must get some rest too. Don't worry about him, Scully." I cupped her face momentarily in my hand, and she looked

suddenly grateful. I knew that feeling. Taking care of you is a full time job, and it was wearying. She had needs of her own, and nobody to take care of those. She needed time to recuperate - to re-charge her batteries. In that instant, whether she knew it or not, she gave care of you over to me, and I accepted the burden, felt it settle around my shoulders, where, in all honesty, I had always known that it belonged.

I stepped over to you, tapped your shoulder.

"Agent Mulder, we have to leave. The fire department need to take a good look around, see if there are any clues..." You gazed at me mutely, but your feet remained glued to the spot, and you resolutely refused to move. "Agent Mulder?" I raised my voice. "Did you hear me?"

Your eyes didn't even register that I'd spoken. I tried again, but this time fell back on an old marine trick I'd learned during my first command amongst battle-shocked comrades many years ago. "Agent Mulder." I rapped out. "Let's go. That's an order. Now. Move it." Finally, my voice seeped into your consciousness. Your head snapped up, and you looked over in my direction. "Come on." I pulled you around, pushed you away from the ashes, and out through the door.

"Agent Mulder...was this your office? We might have some questions...?" The fire chief stopped us.

"Later." I snapped, pushing you along the corridor, shoving you into the elevator, taking you to the parking garage, into my car.

"Where are we going?" You looked at me, confused.

"Home." I started the engine, and tried not to think about what would happen next. Would you fall apart - you had good reason to - or would you bounce back, as you so often had? You had never seemed to be less yourself than at that moment. I despaired then that you would ever come back to us. I took you back with me, to Crystal City, up to my apartment, opened the door, and pushed you inside.

"You brought me here? Why?" you asked, as I sat you down, poured us both a drink. You made a face upon taking a sip. "Whisky? Ugh."

"Drink it." I said firmly, and your eyes glanced speculatively across my face, suddenly distracted for a moment from your own tragedy. I knew in that instant how to make you forget it completely, and how to give you something else to think about. We are all of us, at some points in our lives, parodies of ourselves. I'm no different. What you wanted from me in that second was someone strong. You needed someone to be the rock you could cling to while the storm raged; someone to take charge, to be in charge, and our working relationship had made me a cardboard cut-out of just such a figure. I am not. I never have been. Nobody lives in one dimension. I do my work as well as I can - I view myself as a professional, and I act according to my own sense of values, whether they are right or wrong. It's all anybody can do. Yet, if what you wanted were certainties, for someone else to take up the threads of your shattered life, and allow you to look away from its remnants for

just a few hours, then this was respite I could provide. I could be in private what I was in the office, if that was what you wanted.

"Agent Mulder." I spoke firmly, harshly. "Come here." I ordered and you came. Unquestioningly, you came, wanting what I could give. You smelled of the ashes of your beloved X files, and you had dark streaks on your cheeks from silently shed tears. I took your face within my hands, stroked my thumbs down those tearstains, wiped them away, and then kissed your lips. You tasted of fire, smoke, and water, of salty tears, and sunflower seeds. You surrendered to me with a shudder of desire. Thankful not to have misread you, I pushed you away, straightened your hair with a smile. "Strip." I said. Your eyes widened, and you gazed at me in surprise, but I didn't miss the flash of excitement that crossed them either. "Do it." I commanded curtly, leaving the room, climbing the stairs to the bathroom, finding condoms, lubricant, staring at myself in the mirror for a second, wondering what the hell I was doing. Taking advantage of a broken man, or providing him with comfort in his hour of need? History is written by the victors. I have no idea how you might interpret my actions at a later date. I just know how it seemed to me. It felt that you wanted me tonight, and that I ought to be whatever you wanted me to be.

I returned downstairs to find you standing, naked, on the rug by the coffee table. You stared at me wordlessly, looking for commands, not wanting the responsibility of action, or even reaction. I moved the coffee table to one side, out of our way, and then beckoned you over, pulling you roughly into my embrace, my lips seeking yours, finding them, bruising them with the intensity of my need. Your need matched my own, and you sagged against me, holding onto my shoulders, your naked body seeming almost frail, too thin, as you hung there in my arms. I twisted your hair in my hand, held you tight, held you up, and you lay your head on my shoulder licking and nuzzling at me as if you would burrow your way inside me. "Look at me." I ordered, and you obeyed, instantly, hazel eyes begging me for help.

"I can't think," you whispered. "Don't let me think. I don't want to think about it. I don't want it to swallow me, to take me into the darkness..." Your voice was a high pitched babble as you begged me for an escape route, and I would have done anything for you in that moment.

"I won't." I pulled your head back, and traced a finger down your throat. "Don't think of anything but me, here, now...wanting you."

The relief in your expression, in every fiber of your body was evident. You submitted to me, went down on your knees, pressing grateful lips against my shirt, your fingers tangling in the buttons, trying to undo them. I slapped them away.

"Don't. Don't do anything unless I tell you." I whispered, and you looked at me wordlessly, drowning in something a million miles away from your shattered life, the gratitude plain and evident on your face. I liked you naked, against my clothed body. I liked the way your cock hardened, showing me that I was doing something right. "Come here." I led you to the couch and laid on it, pulling you down on top of me, my arms big around your body, crushing you to me. I gently bit your shoulder, and watched the reaction as you melted into the momentary discomfort, the fusion of pain and passion, arching your back, craving a roughness that wouldn't give you time to think. I rolled you down under me, your hazel eyes

locked with mine, trusting me, giving up your whole soul to me, needing me to make it all right, and if I couldn't do that, to take you away from the nightmare for just a short while. I sucked each of your long, sensitive fingers, bit my way along your chest, up to your nipples, and took each of them in my mouth, sucking as I held you down, roughly teasing the hard flesh with my teeth until you groaned, bucking up against me. I went down lower to your cock, my hand slick around it as I lathered lube into my open palm, then brought you to climax with only a few quick, hard strokes along the shaft. You came on your own naked belly, with a groan of release then lay there looking up at me, needing more.

"Turn over." I commanded, and you did, your flesh compliant beneath my fingertips as I explored inside. One, two...you weren't a virgin of course. In fact, it's fairly obvious that you're no novice at all. Your hips thrust back on my fingers, and with my other hand, I unzipped my fly, unwrapped a condom, and rolled it onto my cock. I stole a kiss along your back, licked a line down over your butt and you shivered, and pushed up impatiently. You didn't want tender licks and kisses, you wanted me to ride you hard and fast, to make you forget. So I did - the tip of my cock pushed easily inside as I positioned myself on top of you, thrusting deep into your willing body. At my age, I don't have much problem keeping my erection for some time, and you seemed to appreciate this, swallowing more of me inside you, until I was flush against your body, and could smell the smoke and ashes in your hair. You moaned, wanting more, wanting me to thrust hard, deep inside you, so I grabbed your shoulders and used them to lever myself in and out, worrying on some level about your slenderness, combined with the fragility of your mental state, as if scared you'd break. Instead you cried out with something approaching ecstasy as I lost myself within your compliant body, and, when at last I came, you were covered in sweat, your body flushing a pale pink. I was still wearing my suit, my jacket, my tie, socks and shoes. I lay there on top of you for a moment, almost obscuring your body from sight, and then at last you moved beneath me, and I let you up.

"I'll go..." you whispered. "I'm sorry...I shouldn't have..." You stared me in the eye, both of us knowing that tonight I had merely provided what you wanted me to.

"No." I got up, took hold of your arm and pulled you up the stairs, into the bedroom. Then I pushed you under the sheets, took my clothes off, and joined you there. You sank uneasily into my embrace as I fastened my arms around your body, pressed my naked flesh against yours.

"You don't have to," you whispered guiltily. "I'll be all right. I won't kill myself if that's what you're thinking."

"I know that." I kissed the back of your neck. "But you can't leave here. I won't let you just leave." You struggled pointlessly in my embrace for a moment, and then surrendered, leaning into me, snuggling against me, desperate for solidity, for someone to cling to until morning. I knew I would be that. I would be whatever you want me to be, and I would give you whatever you want me to give: strength, comfort, passion. You see I have no choice. I love you.

August 28, 1999.

U.S. Penitentiary, Allenwood.

Mulder walked along the prison corridor, his footsteps clicking angrily on the tiled floor. He had pulled several strings to get this privilege, and he still didn't know why he was here, or what he could possibly hope to expect. They stopped outside a cell, and the prison guard opened the door, whispering to Mulder that he had ten minutes.

"I'll...uh...ignore any sounds if you want to settle the score." The guard grinned. "Just don't kill him," he winked.

"I'll try to restrain myself." Mulder replied stonily.

"I hate dirty cops." The man spat on the floor in the direction of the prisoner who was lying on his bunk, staring at the ceiling. Mulder stepped into the cell, and flinched as the door clanged shut behind him. It was such a final sound, allowing no hope. Skinner had to listen to that sound several times a day. Mulder wondered how that must feel, empathized despite himself, despite believing that the other man deserved it. He glanced up, to find Skinner staring down at him.

"This is, I believe, against the rules, Agent Mulder," Skinner murmured, swinging his legs down over the side of the bunk. "Visiting prisoners in their cells? Alone?"

"What do you care about the rules, Assistant Director?" Mulder hissed, holding his body like a cat, ready to pounce. "Or should that be ex-Assistant Director?"

"It doesn't matter." Skinner shrugged.

"It does to **me**," Mulder said savagely. "I came here for answers, not the stone-walling crap you gave the inquiry. The guard was more than happy to oblige my request to visit you. Did you know how unpopular cops are when they turn dirty? You can expect a rough ride from them while you're in here. I don't suppose the other inmates will take too kindly to having an ex-fed among them either, although I expect you can handle yourself. Maybe you'll find a willing body in here to keep you warm, someone to take my place. Well?" Mulder closed the distance between himself and the other man.

"Nobody could take your place," Skinner said softly, his face flushing. "You know that."

"Oh I expect that's what you say to all your boyfriends." Mulder snapped.

"There was only...you." Skinner murmured.

Mulder stood there, visibly shaking, too close, invading the other man's space.

"I want to know. I **have** to know. There's only us two here, nobody listening, tell me - tell me why?" His voice was low, despairing. Skinner stood there silently. If he wanted to put out a hand to still the other man's shaking body he made no move to do so, nor did he answer the question. "You don't think that I have the **right** to know?" Mulder asked. Skinner said nothing, did nothing, just stood there, his eyes as dark and unfathomable as ever. Mulder found himself drowning in the silence. "I loved you. I trusted you." Mulder said at last, in a strangled tone. Still Skinner made no move, but every muscle in his body was stiff and taut. "One word from you...an explanation, and I could at least have peace of mind." Skinner's eyes never left his face, but they carried no message. "If not an apology, an explanation at least..." Mulder hated the way he was begging, hated the way Skinner's face remained set in granite, unmoving.

"I'm sorry then. If that will do." Skinner shrugged.

"No explanation?" Mulder whispered.

"The facts speak for themselves." Skinner shrugged again, almost dismissively.

"All right. Just one question - maybe you'll answer this. Did you do it?"

"Did I do what? Did I remove Storr from Federal protection? You know better than to expect me to answer that." Skinner shrugged. "In here? The walls have ears, Agent Mulder, and you could be wired."

"I just wanted to hear the truth from your own lips." Mulder angled his head even closer as if he could read the answer in the other man's flesh. "Tell me this then - were you working for the Consortium?"

Skinner held his gaze, did not waver as he gave his reply.

"Yes."

Mulder chewed on his lip, hesitated for one endless moment. "How long?" He asked. Skinner shrugged.

"A long time," he murmured.

"While we were together?" Mulder held his breath.

"Yes. Oh yes."

Mulder exhaled deeply, rocked back on his heels.

"And you stole the file, you did everything possible to prevent bringing them to justice?"

Skinner made no answer. He just stood there.

"Tell me. I'm not wired. Just tell me!" Mulder said, in an agonized tone. Skinner studied him for a moment, his gaze cool and detached.

"Yes." He said at last. Realization mingled with final loss of hope in Mulder's eyes.

"You betrayed me," he stated, flatly.

Skinner didn't hesitate. He nodded. "Yes," he said firmly. "I did."

Skinner saw the blow coming, but he didn't even try to duck it. He doubled over as Mulder's fist plunged into his stomach, then lay gasping for breath on the floor. He made no move to avoid the kick that smashed into his jaw. "You covered up their dirty rotten lies, their filthy rat tracks. You covered for them, and you betrayed me to do it." Mulder leaned over the other man's prone body, pressed his hands on either side of Skinner's head and pushed it back so that he was looking at him.

"Yes..." Skinner ground out, looking up into pain filled eyes, into a trust betrayed, and irrevocably broken, into the face of a man who had given up everything to someone he loved, and had it violated, twisted beyond recognition.

"I...loved...you..." Mulder said, unable to contain the emotions in his body. His hand reached out as if he wanted to console, to remove the imprints of his anger that were vivid in the other man's flesh, but his hand turned into a fist that punched hard against Skinner's cheek. Skinner's head snapped sideways from the force of the blow, but apart from that he didn't move, his dark eyes calm and still, no emotion in them. Mulder shook his head, nodded, the tears falling unchecked down his cheeks. "I loved you," he said again.

"Yes." Skinner made no move to wipe away the other man's tears.

"Don't you have **anything** to say to that?" Mulder asked in despair.

"I could say 'I love you' back. I could say that I still do. I won't though." Skinner shook his head. "I wouldn't do that to you," he whispered softly.

"If I could kill you now, with my bare hands...I think I would." Mulder said, one finger touching the other man's bruised lip.

"If you wanted to - I wouldn't stop you." Skinner smiled gently. "It might, in the end, be easier this way." Mulder's hand slipped down, circled Skinner's neck.

"A little light pressure..." Mulder squeezed gently, and Skinner closed his eyes, surrendering to the embrace, awaiting his death. Mulder stared into that acquiescent face, and remembered nights spent kissing those features, and days spent studying them in love and need. His fingers slackened, and he felt sickened. He got up, knocked on the door to be released, and left without looking back.

Journal of Walter Skinner.

October 13, 1998.

*Domestic Terrorism **really** doesn't suit you, and if I have to listen to one more diatribe about AD Kersh, and all those goddamn fertilizer orders... Just teasing. You look haggard, and fuck knows Kersh is no friend of mine. Shout about him as loudly as you want in private, but just take care. We have too many enemies, and sometimes I don't know how we will ever defeat them.*

Today was your birthday. It's hard for us to be together, with the pressure at the Bureau. Even though I've explained it to you a million times you never seem to understand. That's probably my fault. I get tense, terse, and you of course, look for enemies everywhere.

*I know that precisely **because** you feel safe with me, you worry all the more that I might one day betray you. I won't. I promise. I'd die rather than hurt you, Fox. You have to use your head though - you flail around, accusing everyone in sight of conspiracies, and it creates enemies you don't need. I'm a friend, and I can help you if nobody knows about us. Discretion seems to be an alien concept to you, and I wonder if you really appreciate the consequences of discovery? I don't give a flying fuck about my career, if that's what you think. There's more at stake than my pension and position on the bureaucratic ladder. I don't kid myself that there aren't hundreds of men and women out there who could do my job just as well as I do it, maybe better. I know my office is bugged, and I can't do a damn thing about that. My home is a different matter - I have that checked regularly, but still it won't take much digging on the part of your enemies to turn up this spectacular piece of dirt. No, I am **not** suggesting we cool it, as you seemed to think earlier. You seek out rejection where none exists, look for hidden meanings where there are none. I say, bluntly and without finesse sometimes I admit, more or less what I think. My feelings are a different matter. I don't find those so easy to express. I'm just warning you to be careful.*

It was a relief to take you out of the city, away to the sea. I love the sea, was born and brought up near it. I still miss the unceasing lap of waves against the shore, the sounds of the gulls circling in the sky, the spectacular sunsets over water. You seemed to appreciate all these too, enjoying these rare snatched moments away from the daily ordeal that is now your working life. I loved sharing my childhood with you, and when that brought memories of your own youth - less happy memories than mine - I was content to share those too. There is no part of you that needs to hide from me. I wish I could have said these things to your face, but of course I didn't. I sat next to you on the beach, my arm around your shoulder, and just listened. Was that good enough? I hope so. I hope also, that when I took you to bed, and made love to you as gently as I know how, that you knew why, and that in knowing, guessed what I could not say.

September 4, 1999.

Hoover Building.

"Mulder. I'm sorry. There's been...a development." Scully sounded distressed, and Mulder dragged himself blearily from his silent contemplation of the wall, and back into reality.

"What?" he asked.

"That was Detective Klein on the 'phone. They've found a body."

"Whose body?" Mulder asked. Scully's face made the answer clear.

"Mulder, it's Storr."

"That bastard."

Scully knew he wasn't referring to the dead man. "Mulder, forensics are working on it right now. There might not be any evidence that Skinner was involved in this."

"Oh, he's involved." Mulder got up, and pulled his jacket on. "He killed Storr, Scully, to prevent him from testifying against the entire consortium, and bringing this conspiracy out into the open once and for all."

"Mulder..." Scully followed on behind him, looking unhappy. "I know you don't trust Skinner...I know the evidence against him looks bad, but do you really believe this?"

"Yes." Mulder snapped, his expression savage.

"Why? Mulder..." She placed a hand on his arm. "Mulder - I'm not stupid, I've heard the rumors about you and Skinner. I heard the accusations that you made at the Internal Investigation. That you said he...that he abused his power over you." She couldn't find any other way of putting it. Mulder stopped, every muscle in his body trembling. "Mulder please, can't you talk to me about this?"

"He and I...he...and...I..." Mulder stopped, unable to continue.

"It's all right." Scully wrapped her arms around him, pulled him into a hug. "It's okay. I don't need to know, but if you were...involved...why do you now believe these things of him? I know we've had our run-ins with him over the years, but to suspect him of this..." she trailed off, her eyes searching Mulder's for answers.

"He did it." Mulder said simply.

"How do you know?"

"Because he admitted it." Mulder stated flatly, and his eyes were dark with a despair Scully had never seen in them before. "He was working for them all along."

Journal of Walter Skinner.

January 2, 1999.

*You laughed at me earlier, as I sat here tapping away on this machine, confiding to it those parts of myself I never tell you, and yet... Somehow, through the very act of typing this, I feel as if I **have** told you, shared these secret thoughts and reminiscences with you in a very real sense. I sometimes have trouble sleeping - too many bad dreams - but you know all about those. I creep out here, so as not to disturb you, and sometimes I read, sometimes I write. Tonight, you caught me sitting here, tapping away, and stole a peek over my shoulder, and I felt exposed, and closed the lid, glared at you until you put up your hands in mock surrender.*

"Jesus, Walter, what the fuck is it? Your last will and testament?" You grinned.

"No. My journal." I replied gruffly, snapping the case shut, and placing it under my arm for protection.

"You write a journal? What, like...a diary?" Your grin grew wider. "No wonder you didn't want me to set eyes on it. Am I in it?"

"Duh!" I rolled my eyes at you. "I think you get a tiny mention somewhere."

"Gee, thanks. So, I don't get to see it?"

"No." I know I was gruff, but I'm kind of sensitive about being this open, this transparent, even with you. You have no idea how much I confide to this damn machine, and I don't want you to know. It'd make your head swell up, and you'd be even more insufferable than you already are.

"Well, I guess I'll just have to wait until you go to sleep, and then I'll creep down here, and take a look." You made a face. "Well, you know now insatiably nosy I am. Walter? It's a joke." I don't know what expression I was wearing, but I suppose I must have looked pretty damn shocked and pissed.

"Don't you dare." I stormed off to the kitchen to get a drink, taking the laptop with me - ostentatiously.

*"Hey - it was just a joke. Walter." You pulled me around to face you, fingers lightly caressed my face. "Hey," you whispered, trying to get me to look at you. "I wouldn't pry, big guy. You **know** that."*

"I'm sorry. I over-reacted." I said humbly, trying a gruff apology. It worked.

"Look, if it helps, let me swear - solemnly..." you arranged your features into a blank mask of solemnity, "that I will never, ever, look at your private journal, under no circumstances whatsoever. There. Sacred vow. Hang on, I'll get a knife."

"What for?" I asked in alarm.

"To seal it in blood," you said, and before I knew it you'd sliced down your thumb, and were holding it up to me. "There. Now you." You gave me the knife.

"Mulder, you're getting your rituals all muddled up. This is the blood brothers one."

"Well we can do that one too," you grinned. "Where I come from, we seal solemn oaths in blood, so get carving. Unless you're squeamish...?" With a weary sigh at your sense of the dramatic, I cut my own thumb more circumspectly, and certainly with less enthusiasm (and correspondingly less blood). Then I endured the ridiculous farce of you pressing our thumbs together so the blood mingled while you made some stupid speech about pacts and oaths until I shut you up the only way I know how - with my lips.

February 1, 2000.

The trial was over unexpectedly quickly. The case against Skinner lacked any detailed forensic evidence, but circumstantially there was enough to bring about a conviction. Mulder watched Skinner's face intently as the other man was sentenced to 12 years, but there was no trace of anything - no remorse, or anger, or fear. His face was impassive, and he only once glanced in Mulder's direction, then looked away again, his eyes telling Mulder nothing. Scully placed her hand in Mulder's, and squeezed gently, and he smiled at her, grateful for her concern, but there was nothing she could say or do that would lessen his pain. He got up and left the courtroom, walked outside. It was a bitterly cold day, the way it had been when his mother had died, a year ago today. Too much pain, too many losses. Mulder balled his hands into fists, and tried to laugh against the fates, tried not to think of Skinner in his prison uniform, staring his loss of freedom in the face. We're both prisoners now, he whispered, turning up the collar on his coat, and running down the steps two at a time, ignoring Scully's voice as she called to him.

"Mulder." She caught up with him. "Where are you going?"

"Home." He gave a faint smile. "Back home. To where she's buried."

"Your mother?" Scully put her hand through his arm. "Want me to come?"

"No. Yes." He felt a sudden need not to be alone. "It's the anniversary..."

"Yes. I know." Scully held on tight, and he was grateful for her warmth and compassion.

Mulder took a small bunch of yellow roses, and laid them by the neat headstone. Scully laid some lilies next to them.

"Thank you. You didn't need to..." Mulder murmured.

"I wanted to."

"It's been a long year." Mulder glanced around the stark, cold cemetery, his breath misting the air.

"Yes." Scully said simply. "But she was very ill, Mulder. The stroke was so severe - if she had lived she wouldn't have been able to lead a full life."

"Yes. I know. She'd have hated that. She was always so independent." Mulder smiled softly, kicking a stone off the grave with his toe.

"She died happy." Scully said. "With her children at her bedside."

"Yes." Mulder shrugged.

"Do you ever see...?" Scully began.

"No." He cut her off. "Never," he said tersely, and then he turned on his heel and left. "What the hell kind of emotional cripple am I?" he muttered to himself. "Is it me? Do I drive them all away?"

"Mulder?" Scully caught the tail end of this and pulled him around to face her.

"Well, Scully? What do I have to show for myself? My parents are dead, my little sister flits in and out of my life with an air of fucking dramatic mystery every couple of years, my lover was up to his neck in shit with my goddamn enemies..." His chest heaved, and he groped his way to a nearby bench, breathing too fast. "And now I'm having a fucking panic attack!" He laughed out loud at the final irony. "Thank you, God for leaving me without my dignity either."

Journal of Walter Skinner.

January 28, 1999

I do not believe in destiny. We all make our own choices, whether for good or ill. This quest was not chosen for you, by some labyrinthine twisting of a predetermined plot, neither did circumstance force it upon you. You made your choice, Fox, as I make mine. When your sister left your life all those years ago, you could have turned your back on that experience, and resolved never to question, or wonder why. You could have decided that this would not be the single most important pivotal point in your life. You could have made that decision and you chose not to. By so doing your life path brought you here, irrevocably, to me.

It is 3 am or thereabouts. You are asleep in my bed. You arrived here late, too tired to do more than cry in my arms before giving in to your weariness. I undressed you, laid you under the sheets, soothed your hair, and gazed at you for a long time. Your face, in repose, is innocent and calm - the face of the child you once were, and have not been since you were

12 years old. Sleep gives you back the childhood you were robbed of. As I look down on you, I wonder at your trust in me. You have told me everything, and I...I have kept a secret. It's only one secret, yet such a secret that it could tear our world apart, and blast your safe haven into kingdom come. You will have nobody to turn to, no place to run.

As I watch you sleep, I know that I have in my power the ability to give you what you desire most in the world, and also to break your heart. Unfortunately, in doing the one, I must also do the other. Is that what you would want? I have no way of knowing, and yet I think the urgency of this current crisis pushes me towards a decision that will destroy our love.

I cannot sleep. Instead I return to the lounge, pour myself a whisky, listen to music. Ah yes, my music that you make such fun of. I suppose we all express ourselves differently. You have no problem putting a thousand different conflicting emotions into succinct words, and handing them to me for understanding. I open my mouth, and nothing comes out. I want to tell you, but I am not blessed with your gift. I find in music though, an expression of emotions that I cannot share. It frequently moves me to tears. As usual, I seek out a CD that will express my mood, inform my decision, help me come to terms with the shifting sands of my own emotions. Les Miserables. Do you remember this? I took you to see it, and you slept through the first act, and fidgeted through the second, then faked a call in the interval in order to escape the third. So you never saw Valjean carry the wounded, unconscious Marius for miles through underground sewers, and Marius did not know who had saved him until the very end.

Forgive me, if you can, for I will not lay one more burden of guilt on your doorstep. My good deed, like Valjean, I shall perform in silence. My betrayal will, no doubt, be all too public.

March 12, 2001.

Hoover Building.

"I can't believe it. Are you sure?" Mulder glanced at Scully and she nodded. "It's only been just over a fucking year. He went down for murder for god's sake."

"And now he's been released." Scully shrugged. She handed Mulder a file and he flicked through the details.

"Looks like our friends in the Consortium have been busy pulling strings." Mulder spoke bitterly. "Nobody else would be able to spring him like this."

"Mulder, if they could do that, why didn't they do it a year ago? Why allow him to serve any of his sentence?"

"I don't know." Mulder shook his head. "But I'm going to find out."

"Are you going to see him?" Scully asked.

"See him?" Mulder gave her a cold stare. "Why the hell would I want to do that?"

He returned to his apartment, slamming the door shut behind him, and paused for a moment, half expecting to find **him** here, waiting for him. No, not expecting - hoping. Still, after all this time, hoping for an explanation. Mulder went into his bedroom, opened his closet and rummaged around in the mess of shoes that were piled up there before finally pulling out the laptop. He found the battery, plugged it in, set the computer down on the coffee table and turned it on.

"Come on...come on..." He tapped his fingers against the table, then stared blankly at the files displayed on the screen as he had done so many times before. "Journal entry, 1st September 1996. Journal entry, 14th March 1997. Journal entry January 28th 1999..." There were hundreds of them, listed neatly one after the other. Mulder sat there, staring at them for several long minutes, idly licking his thumb, and remembering the taste of blood. He finally gave up, and turned off the power with a flick of his fingers. "Just because you were a fucking bastard who can't keep faith with anything, doesn't mean I have to be," he growled, snapping the case shut and returning the computer to the closet. "There has to be another way."

The Journal of Walter Skinner.

January 29, 1999.

"I believe you were told to wait for further instructions." The smoking bastard sat there, in his hotel room, puffing away as usual. I hate the smell of cigarette smoke. I hate the smell of him. He smells of deals done in dark corners, and he sticks of corruption. The stale stink of the cigarettes is merely a mask for the true stench of the man.

"That's correct." I moved closer. "But that was before the situation changed. Something has come up. Something urgent."

"Ah, something to do with our young friend." He leaned over, stubbed out his cigarette, smiled.

"Yes. His mother's very ill. She's had another stroke."

"Hmm. I had heard." His mask dropped for just one second and I saw an expression in his eyes that I'd never seen before. Sadness? Regret? I couldn't be sure. "You haven't told him about the "situation", I take it?"

"You mean the fact that I have fucking robots in my blood that can kill me whenever you press a button? No I haven't told him that. I figure it's not something he wants to hear right now."

"How compassionate. As always. But then you are very close to our young friend, aren't you?"

"Cut the crap. You know exactly what the nature is of my relationship with Mulder. That's why you infected me isn't it? To manipulate me? To get to him through me? I came to tell you that it won't work."

"Oh?" He looked surprised.

"No. When I first knew...I thought maybe I'd kill myself to save you the trouble. One thing I knew was that I wouldn't betray him, just to save my own life, if that's what you're thinking."

"It had occurred." The bastard gave that creepy smile, waved a languid hand in the air. "But you're still alive, Mr. Skinner. Walking, talking...breathing." He lit another cigarette, and inhaled deeply as if to illustrate the point.

"Yes. I need a favor." He laughed out loud, almost choking on his own smoke.

"You're in no position to request a favor, Mr. Skinner."

"Oh, I think I am. If you refuse, I'll walk out of here, and take my own life. I won't be any use to you dead."

"And if I agree?"

"Then I'll do whatever you want. I'll be whatever you want. You'll own me. I'll use my position at the Bureau to aid you in any way I can."

"Hmmm." The bastard considered this for a long while. "Very well. We have a deal. What is your favor, Mr. Skinner?"

10:13 PM, March 29, 2001.

Krycek whistled to himself as he collected his mail, and unlocked the door to his apartment, turned on the light, noticed the note lying on the floor. He bent to retrieve it, his eyes widening as he read what was written on it: "Things are Looking Up", looked up himself, too late, as the barrel of Mulder's gun crashed into his jaw and sent him flying. He stared, stunned, at his assailant, as Mulder attached a handcuff to his good arm, and fastened him to the solid wooden leg of his couch, before sitting on said couch, his gun pointed at Krycek's head.

"You're well, I see, Alex," Mulder said pleasantly.

"Yeah. No thanks to you." Krycek ran his plastic hand gingerly over the raised lump on his jaw.

"I'm sorry, but this isn't a social call." Mulder smiled. "I want information."

"I was expecting you earlier," Krycek grunted.

"Earlier?" Mulder looked puzzled.

"Yeah, a year or so earlier." Krycek grinned. "When he was first arrested."

"Did you work with him? Did you report to him?" Mulder asked, curious about his ex lover's double life.

"Did I report to him?" Krycek laughed out loud. "He fucking well reported to me, Mulder. I held his life in my hands. It felt good."

"Why has he been released?" Mulder refused to be goaded. "Who pulled the strings?"

"Guess." Krycek made a face.

"Why now? Why not then?" Mulder asked, confused.

"To teach him a lesson?" Krycek shrugged. "He disobeyed orders by acting on his own initiative. That's pretty much discouraged in the company he was keeping."

"What did he do?"

"That guy you had in that safe house - the one who was going to testify?"

"Storr? Yes. What about him?" Mulder leaned forward eagerly.

"Skinner was told to terminate him. Instead, he tried to hide him. He sprung him from the safe house, took him someplace else. When they found out, they were pretty pissed. I was sent to rectify the situation. Storr took some finding. Skinner had him well hidden."

"You killed him? You killed Storr?"

"Yeah." Krycek shrugged. "Ancient history, Mulder."

"Why didn't Skinner kill him?"

"Conscience?" Krycek suggested. "Skinner never was a killer."

"What about the other man, Officer Thomas - from the Jane Brophy case. Did Skinner kill him?"

"Thomas? No. Jesus, that was years ago, Mulder. Skinner wasn't even working for us then, not officially. That was some sort of one shot deal to help Scully, I think. Skinner didn't kill that guy. I told you, he isn't a killer."

"But he was working for the Consortium?"

"Well, yeah." Krycek shrugged. "He did pretty well for us too, for a while. Did what he was told, stole all the right evidence, covered up the rest. All the same, when the bosses found out about this one, the shit hit the fan. So they decided to teach him a lesson. That's when I was sent to give you that file on him, detailing his work for us, and the photographs of him with Storr on the night he took him out of the safe house."

"They allowed him to go to prison, just to teach him a lesson for not committing murder?" Mulder shook his head.

"Not just for that. They wanted to pile the pressure on you, and they succeeded. Skinner was just a pawn in the game. I guess it worked too, didn't it? Pretty much broke you, and removed your more powerful ally from the Bureau. We don't hear much from you these days, Mulder. What's the matter, is the Behavioral Science Unit too tame for you? Let's not forget dear little Agent Scully, back up to her armpits in stiffs in the Quantico mortuary. It couldn't be that much different to working with you I'll bet."

"She's happy enough." Mulder refused to rise to the bait.

"And you? Are you?" Krycek asked.

Mulder ignored him. "Skinner was sent down as part of a plan to break me?" He asked, trying to get the facts straight in his mind.

"Yeah, and partly to teach him a lesson, and of course somebody had to take the rap for that murder."

"And it's never you, is it?" Mulder whispered bitterly.

"Nope." Krycek grinned. "How about a kiss?" He leered. "For old time's sake."

Mulder answered him with a back-hander across the jaw and then left.

He returned to his apartment, and opened his closet, pulled out the laptop and turned it on.

"I'm sorry, Walter," he whispered, as he stared at the screen. His finger hovered for a moment, and then he highlighted the file dated May 20, 1998, and brought the journal entry up on screen.

Journal of Walter Skinner.

February, 7, 1999.

We buried your mother today. You went to see her before the funeral, and I went with you. She looked smaller than I remembered, much smaller. I hope she was worth it. Watching you kiss her cheek, I knew that she was. I stood beside you at the grave, Scully on your other side, and we both of us watched to see if Samantha would come. She didn't. Of course. Not that it matters now - she showed up when she was supposed to, and your mother died with a smile on her face. Samantha's absence at the funeral was just another ache inside for you by then I suppose.

I did what I do best, stood next to you, silent as ever, and brought you food that you barely touched. I accepted the endless condolences from members of her bridge club on your behalf when you grew too sad and tired to shake one more hand, or smile one more false smile. Scully talked brightly - distracting you with words in a way that made me both marvel at and envy her. I didn't know what to say to you, losing one more person you'd loved. It must have been hard for you. I hope it was a consolation that she had her final wish, and I hope you never know what it cost to make it happen. I don't really doubt that it was worth it. I saw her face when you brought Samantha to see her. And I saw your face too. I do see things. I know you think I don't because I don't want to discuss them endlessly, but I do. She died with a smile on her face, and I know that you were at peace with her loss. For the first time in 25 years, you were free of that mountain of guilt that had been her curse upon you. Freedom. I had never seen you free before. It was worth it for the moment when Samantha showed up at the hospital, and your face was full of wonder. For the moment when your mother took Samantha's hand in her own, and clasped it tight, and then looked at you without reproach for the first time since you were a child.

I still can't forget your face, as you came home a couple of weeks ago, and told me about this last burden she'd placed on your shoulders, as if they weren't bowed enough from bearing so much guilt all these years. I held you as you cried, and later watched you as you slept before leaving you to come to a decision about what to do for the best.

"Walter?" You stumbled into the lounge, and hour or so later, running a hand through your sleep-tousled hair. "What're you doing? Drinking alone? What have I told you about that?" You grinned, and wrapped an arm around my neck, kissed an earlobe, stole a sip of my drink. "Ugh. I don't know how you can consume so much of that stuff. It can't be good for you."

"We all have our vices." I grunted, closing the lid of the laptop.

"Were you working?" You glanced at the computer.

"No. Just...ruminating."

"Ah - the famous journal." You grinned.

"You should get more sleep, Fox. You're worn out."

"I will. I just hate it when you sit out here in the dark on your own with this god-awful music playing. What is it? More depressing crap? Oh, not this." You sighed, picking up the CD. "Les Misérables. They named that right. I've never known such a sour faced bunch of people, wailing such miserable lyrics."

"I think that was the point."

"Well, for god's sake stop listening to it then. It would make anyone depressed. Please. I don't want all my problems to weigh down on you."

"Your problems **are** my problems."

"No. No, she's my mom."

"She's ill. Of course you want to help her. I want...to...I am... I want to be here for you, Fox." I could curse myself for my inability to say what I feel, to make you understand. I sometimes wonder if you really know me at all, and if I'm not just a shadow of your desires, the personification of what you want, not what I am.

"You are." You looked surprised. "But you can't bring Sam back. Nobody can. I just wish she hadn't asked me..." Your eyes filled with tears, and you brushed them away angrily. "Why couldn't she have a sensible last request, huh? Why couldn't it have been something like to smoke one last cigarette, to see the sun's rays sparkling on the sea one last time, to watch the last ever episode of M.A.S.H. again, like normal people. Instead, she wants to see Sam before she dies. As if I had that in my power. As if **anyone** did."

"As if." I shrugged.

"What does she think I've been **doing** these past 25 years?"

"Looking for Samantha."

You snorted. "That quest has been my entire fucking life for 25 years, and she thinks I'm going to find Sam just because SHE asked?"

"She's ill. It was a severe stroke." I pointed out gently. "She may not know what she's asking for."

"She knows. That's just it. She knows." You shook your head. "And you know what? I don't blame her for asking. I can understand. I want it for her too," you whispered. "I want it more than I've ever wanted anything."

"Ah." I smiled. "Well then."

You yawned. "Come back to bed..." Your hand lingered on my shoulder, and I covered it with my own.

"In a few minutes. Go and warm it up for me," I said.

I had my answer.

9.30 AM, September 15, 2001.

Mulder got to his feet as he saw Skinner approach, fighting the wave of anxiety that rose in his stomach, almost making him retch. Skinner looked well, despite his year in prison. He was wearing a pair of gray shorts, and a white vest. His long legs were bare, the muscles in them still rippling, still strong. His torso was still lean and hard, a few less hairs in the fringe around the back of his skull, and a few more of those that were gray. He was barefoot, his toes covered in sand.

"You're a hard person to find," Mulder whispered.

"How long have you been looking?" Skinner asked, climbing the steps to the tiny house, opening the door and holding it for his guest.

"Six months."

"Well, that's not bad then - it means I've managed to hide myself relatively well, but if you managed to find me, they can too. I suppose I'll have to move on again."

"The Consortium?"

"Yes. Who else? Iced tea? Coffee?"

"Tea." Mulder nodded. "You don't work for them any more?"

"Let's just say they don't have the same leverage over me that they once did." Skinner shrugged.

"They could still kill you, if they wanted, though?" Mulder took the mug that Skinner offered him. "I suppose they hope that you might be of use to them again one day?"

Skinner's face was set in stone. He made no reply. "It's all right. I know." Mulder whispered. "I know everything."

"I doubt that." Skinner sat down.

"That's why I came here, and to say I'm sorry. I know it's too late - I'm not asking you to take me back. I don't deserve that."

"You always looked for rejection where there was none." Skinner struggled with the words. "Always wanted to...to...push away before you were pushed out."

"Yes." Mulder bowed his head.

"And I...I don't have the goddamn words." Skinner got up, prowled around the house like an angry dog. "Can never say anything. At work...it was easy. I understood that territory, not when talking about myself, and you and what...what I feel. I once came to you, asked you...told you...wanted you not to resign. I had to rehearse that speech. I wrote it down. I told myself it was work, and, I didn't want to lose a good agent, but I knew it was more than that. I desperately needed to convince you. I'm not very good with speeches from the heart."

"Maybe not, but you can write." Mulder said softly. "That's how I know." Skinner stared at him for a moment, his eyes registering a kind of dull horror. Then he left, abruptly.

Mulder chewed on his lip, thought about it for a moment, and then followed. Skinner was sitting outside on the top step, gazing at the billowing gray clouds scudding across the sea.

"There'll be a storm later," he said. Mulder nodded, sat down beside him, his denim encased thigh touching Skinner's bare leg.

"I didn't do it for a long while, not until six months ago. I took the laptop from your apartment on the night they arrested you, but I never once looked. I didn't do that, Walter."

"Yes. Thank you." Skinner said absently, gazing at the darkening sky.

"No. You don't understand." Mulder rested his head in his hands. "I didn't do it for you. I hated you. I did it because I wanted to prove in some small, useless way, that I was better than you. By not looking, by keeping that ridiculous oath - that was my way of being the better man, of wallowing in self-righteousness, when all along you had done this thing for me, sold yourself to those people for me. You threw yourself to the wolves for me, and the first time someone came along and told me you were dirty, I believed them."

"It was true though." Skinner absently brushed his bare feet, dislodging some of the sand that still clung to them. "I was dirty, and the evidence was all there. Of course you believed it. Why wouldn't you?"

"Because I should have believed in you."

"I didn't ask you to. I thought it would be better if you didn't know what I'd done for you. I didn't want this. I didn't want your guilt. You had enough of that already."

"You said, in your journal, that you were a shadow to me, that I didn't know you properly. I think maybe, that we were both shadows to each other. I would never have wanted you to do what you did for me, what they had you do..."

"Fox I was already dead." Skinner said impatiently. "I have these fucking nanocytes inside me. They can pull the trigger any time they want to. What I did, I did because I knew that. The details don't matter."

"Ah well, the devil, as my mother used to say, is in the detail."

"Damn. You're saying it's my fault? For not...being able to tell you...share... more of...myself with you..." Skinner stopped, then got up, his whole body shaking as if from some giant effort. "Fuck you. I can't...I'm not like **you**, I don't say things easily, and when I do they damn well mean something."

"Whereas I'm the shallow bastard who betrayed you, the first chance I had?"

"I never...I have never...fuck this. I'm going for a walk." Skinner jumped down onto the sand, his whole body quivering with unexpressed emotion. He walked a few steps, and then stopped.

"Well?" He asked. "Are you coming?" Mulder gave a wan smile and got up. "Take your shoes off." Skinner commanded. "Then you can feel the sea on your feet."

"That's a good thing right?" Mulder grinned. He rested his head for a second against Skinner's shoulder. "It's been a while since you gave me any orders," he murmured.

"You never obeyed them then, either." Skinner grunted, glancing at Mulder's shoes, which still resolutely encased his feet.

"Oh. Right." Mulder gave a charming grin, and pulled his sneakers off without untying the laces, ignoring Skinner's expression of disapproval. He threw his socks down on top of them then stared at the other man expectantly. "Tell me that your fingers aren't itching to ball the socks up, and tuck them tidily into one of the sneakers?" He taunted. Skinner gave a little barking laugh. "See, maybe we know each other better than we think," Mulder said. Skinner shrugged, and walked briskly to the sea, allowed the waves to wash up to his ankles. Mulder followed him, over-reacting theatrically to the cold water, clinging, for just a second, to the other man's arm. He was encouraged when he wasn't immediately shaken off, but Skinner made no move to touch him. They began to walk.

"How did you find this place?" Mulder asked. "It's kind of...bleak."

"Yes. I didn't exactly want to be in the center of a tourist attraction. I'm hiding." Skinner reminded him. "Or at least I was. They'll be here soon."

"Why do you...oh. You think they followed me." Mulder deduced.

"What made you start looking for me?"

"I was angry. I couldn't figure out why you had been released from prison so soon. I tracked down Krycek. He told me that you didn't kill Storr. Or Thomas."

"Of course I didn't." Skinner reacted angrily. "But did you ever wonder how you managed to find him? And why he gave you that information so easily?"

"Well I did have a gun aimed at his head." Mulder pointed out. "But...I see what you mean. Sounds like they have a job for you, and they wanted me to find you, to save them the effort?"

"Yes." Skinner picked up the pace. In the distance a dog began to bark. "The fact that they arranged for my release at all suggests they have something they wish me to do."

"Luckily I took some precautions then." Mulder grinned. "Hey, I'm not stupid, Walter, although I guess you might dispute that. I did manage to figure this out on my own. I actually found you 6 weeks ago. I made some very careful plans, and believe me, I came here by a very circuitous route." Skinner turned to look at him, one eyebrow raised. "Via Africa." Mulder added and he was rewarded with another of those snorting laughs.

"Glad to see you still have some sense left in that thick skull." Skinner remarked.

They reached Mrs. Jardine's house and the old lady came to the door and waved.

"I'm going for a walk. Do you want me to take Ben?" Skinner asked.

"Oh would you? Thank you." The old lady said. Skinner smiled and opened the gate. Ben rushed around him excitedly for a moment before settling into a trot at Skinner's heels.

"Hey, you look good with a dog. This is definitely an accessory that suits you." Mulder grinned. "Didn't you ever think of getting one of your own?"

"No." Skinner frowned. "I don't want to get close to anything. I don't want to lose anything again."

"Why? Are you worried about waking up to find it dead in the bed beside you - like that horse in *The Godfather*?" Mulder pressed. "That's a hard path you've chosen there, Walter."

"Mulder, I won't risk it. I'm fine alone." There was a flash of something angry, something sad in his eyes.

Mulder stopped. "I'm sorry. I suppose I never saw the fear before," he said.

"I never let you. My fault. You always wanted me to be strong for you. I was always just a shoulder to cry on, someone to hold you up when you were tired of it all, someone to rescue you. I can understand that."

"We could change the plot. I could rescue you this time." Mulder took his life, and Skinner's face in his hands, moving forward for a gentle kiss. Skinner stood there unmoving, unresisting, yet unresponsive. When it was over, he pulled away, carried on walking.

"Let's hope Mrs. Jardine didn't see that." Mulder grinned. "She'll start wondering about her next door neighbor."

"She's nearly blind." Skinner muttered tersely. "That's why she can't walk Ben any more. I'm happy to take him with me. Anyway, I already told her that I was in prison, so a kiss shouldn't come as a shock to her after that."

"You told her you were in prison?" Mulder didn't know why he was surprised.

"Of course."

"Did you tell her what for?"

Skinner stopped, turned, allowed Mulder to catch up, his expression pained.

"Murder? Yes."

"She's not afraid of you?" Mulder thought he would have been if someone this tall, grim, and imposing with a murder conviction had moved in next door.

"No, but then she's blind." Skinner remarked, his face deadpan. It took Mulder a while to realize he'd made a joke and then he doubled over, laughing.

"Yeah. If she could see you she sure as hell wouldn't sleep easy in her bed at night. But then...I've heard blind people can sense what people are truly like - maybe she sees your gentle soul."

"You're still full of crap, you know that?" Skinner cuffed Mulder playfully. "Some things never change."

"Dogs don't like me, or cats." Mulder commented wistfully. "I don't have a still center. I'm too fidgety and excitable."

"Ah, so that explains those poor fish," Skinner remarked. "Presumably the tank insulates them against all these weird energy vibes you give off." It was Mulder's turn to cuff him then.

They stopped and sat, tiny droplets of rain falling from the gray sky. Mulder picked up some stones, and threw them into the sea. Ben chased them hopefully, and unsuccessfully, into the surf.

"I lost the X Files." Mulder said in the midst of the silence. "It's amazing how quickly your career can go down the tubes once you admit to sleeping with your male boss."

"Hmm. Well, despite who that building was named after, the FBI is hardly a bastion of open minded tolerance." Skinner shrugged. "That was always a really dumb move."

"I wanted to hurt you."

"Yes, well, if it's any consolation, you did."

"You didn't seduce me."

"Maybe I did."

"No. Anyway, I kind of lost interest in the X Files. The fight went out of me after you... I used to have nightmares of you in prison."

"Me?" Skinner turned, surprised. Mulder's hair was blowing in the wind, his hazel eyes were troubled.

"Yes. You belong to wide open spaces, like here." Mulder waved his hand around. "I always used to think of your office as a kind of prison for you too. You were too big, had too much energy. It contained you, restricted you. I used to think you did all that boxing to get the frustrations at being so confined out of your system."

They were silent again, then Mulder asked, because he needed to know.

"What was it like?"

"Prison? Pretty much as you predicted actually. The guards hated my guts, the other inmates viewed me as the enemy. I fought a couple of battles, established a reputation as being too big and ugly to screw around with, and then they left me pretty much alone after that. I didn't exactly make any friends in there, and no, I didn't find anyone to keep me warm at night either."

"Shit." Mulder flinched as he remembered that conversation, and how he had lost control, and lashed out. "I'm sorry for hurting you."

"Me too." Skinner got up, stretched out his muscles. "Come on. It's pissing down."

They walked back to the house together, dropped Ben off on the way.

"You know..." Mulder began. "I've had a lot of knocks in my life, but I'm pretty tough."

"Yeah, you seem to bounce back okay."

"I was unfair to you. You don't always need to be the tough guy, and I don't always need your protection."

Skinner glanced at him with a raised eyebrow as they reached the house.

"I mean it. I wear my emotions on my sleeve, I react strongly to everything. It's just who I am. I look like I'm about to fall apart, but inside I'm pure steel." Mulder grinned. "I must be to have kept going this long. You, on the other hand," he pressed close to Skinner, put his arms on his shoulders, "are exactly the opposite. Everyone thinks you're so hard but inside..."

"I'm harder still." Skinner stated implacably, disengaging himself.

Mulder shook his head, chuckling. "You don't fool me, big guy. Not any more. I've, uh, got something for you. In the car."

"Go get it then. I'll get changed, and fix us some lunch. You hungry?"

"Always." Mulder smiled. He returned a few moments later with the laptop, placed it on the rickety kitchen table, glancing at the other man appreciatively. Skinner was wearing a pair of faded blue jeans that hugged his ass, and an old green shirt. He paused in the middle of making some untidy sandwiches, and glared at the computer.

"You can start writing again." Mulder said. "I bet you stopped."

"There's nothing much to say any more." Skinner shrugged.

"I don't believe that." Mulder took a bite of his sandwich. "I...uh...quit the Bureau." Mulder looked at the other man from under his eyelashes, trying to gauge his reaction.

"Hmm." Skinner grunted.

"And I lied earlier." Mulder bit on his lip. "When I said I wasn't going to ask you take me back. My bags are in the car."

"I know." Skinner shrugged.

"How the hell...?" Mulder asked, outraged.

"Because I know you. We both know each other better than we think. You've been cozying up to me since you got here, anyway."

"This time it can be different." Mulder stated firmly. They stared at each other for a long while.

"Ammunition. This is, presumably, exactly what **they** want." Skinner murmured.

"Yes. Maybe. It doesn't matter so long as it's what we want."

"No." Skinner whispered the word softly. "You don't get to do this again, Mulder. You do not get to walk into my life with your quest, and make me care about you again. You don't get to always call the shots and..." he paused, breathing heavily.

"And what? Don't pull any punches. Say what you feel," Mulder pressed, getting up. "I was always in the dark with you. If I loved a shadow it was because you never let me see the real person underneath. Then you wondered why I believed Krycek when he told me..."

"No. I don't wonder that. I know why you believed him. I never did anything, never said anything, never gave you any explanations..." Skinner shouted. "It was only afterwards that I

realized I wanted you to trust me just because of what I meant to you. I hoped that you always saw in my actions what I could never express in words. I was so busy being a fucking martyr that I never woke up to the fact that I wanted you to love me the way I loved you, and the bottom line is that you didn't. When it really mattered, you couldn't do that for me. Nothing's changed, Mulder." He stopped speaking, ran out of steam, shaking from the effort of the speech.

Mulder nodded, kept nodding, finally pressed his lips against Skinner's cheek.

"You're right," he whispered. "I'll go." He shook his head sadly. "You did deserve better."

"So did you." Skinner turned his back on the other man, busied himself clearing up the half eaten remains of their lunch. When he finally turned around, Mulder was gone.

Skinner sat down, opened the laptop, pulled up some of the entries and read them. As the afternoon faded into early evening, he took a can of beer, and went to sit on the steps, gazing out at the raging sea, the wind churning great swathes of foam on the surface. He sat there for a long while, and then finally got up, and went down to the water's edge. The rain pounded down on his bare head, and hid the tears falling down his cheeks. His shirt was soaked before he even got to the sea.

"We'd better get your stuff from the car before the storm gets any worse." He yelled over the howling gale.

Mulder turned, shivering, his shirt and jeans sticking to his body, up to his knees in the freezing water. Skinner pulled him close, his mouth devouring Mulder's, his large arms encircling Mulder's cold, wet body and pulled him into a warm bear hug. The sound of the storm rose around them, and the sea churned the sand underfoot, but neither one moved, their faces locked together for several long minutes. Finally, Skinner broke the embrace, pulled Mulder by the arm past the house, to Mulder's car, and helped him bring in his bags.

"Not much for a lifetime." Mulder commented, glancing at the small pile of luggage.

"Travel light. It's the best way." Skinner grunted. "You're wet. Come here. You should get warm." He lit a fire in the grate. "Strip," he ordered.

Mulder grinned. "Want to help?"

"You mean you can't manage it by yourself at your age?" Skinner deadpanned back. Then he reached out a big hand, and caught Mulder's shirt, unbuttoned it, his fingers softly touching the other man's damp skin. He ran his hands through Mulder's wet hair, squeezing the worst of the water from it, then unbuttoned Mulder's jeans. Mulder kicked them off, didn't move as Skinner's hands reached into the waistband of his boxers, pushed them down to find his already erect cock.

"You are such a slut," Skinner murmured.

"Only with you." Mulder grinned, eager fingers finding the buttons on Skinner's shirt, smothering the other man's face with kisses as he undid them, and eased the shirt from Skinner's broad shoulders. "I have missed this so much." Mulder buried his head in Skinner's chest, teased a nipple with his tongue. "Your body...so solid...so **you**." He undid Skinner's jeans, slid down onto his knees and found Skinner's cock, which pulsed into life the moment his warm, wet mouth closed around it. Skinner sank his hands into Mulder's damp hair, holding on as Mulder took him whole, deep-throating him until he sighed with pleasure, and bucked hard into Mulder's throat, coming forcefully.

"Quicker than I remember." Mulder remarked, licking some of the other man's come from his lips.

"It's been a while," Skinner confessed.

"Not even with Mr. Hand?" Mulder asked, jokingly.

"I was never in the mood." Skinner shrugged, serious, quiet. "Not for a long while anyway." He pulled Mulder up, kissed his lips gently.

"Lie down." Mulder said, throwing a blanket from the couch onto the floor in front of the fire. Skinner gazed at him uncertainly. "I told you, I can take care of you. Yes?"

Skinner nodded, lying down as ordered. Mulder sat astride him, kissed the other man's naked head, licked behind his ears, down to his collarbone. He held Skinner's arms above his head, and plunged down onto his mouth, kissing him forcefully, and Skinner surrendered everything to the embrace. Mulder licked and nibbled for several long minutes, working over every inch of Skinner's body, re-discovering those areas where Skinner was sensitive, and lavishing them with attention. He spread Skinner's thighs, and positioned the other man's long legs over his shoulders, as he inserted his fingers inside him, rubbing softly. Skinner's dark eyes never left Mulder's hazel ones as Mulder pushed his erect cock into Skinner's waiting body, drew Skinner's firm hips close, and thrust deep inside him.

"Is this okay?" Mulder moved gently inside his lover, and Skinner nodded, his eyes still locked with Mulder's.

"It's good...keep going..." he whispered. Mulder did, but not for long as Skinner's warm, strong body swallowed him, and he came, leaning down over his lover for a long, lingering kiss.

"I love you," Mulder said softly. "I never stopped. I never could."

Skinner gave a small, uncertain smile. "Yes." Was all he said.

Epilogue.

September 16, 2001.

Mulder woke feeling stiff and satisfied. It took him a moment to remember where he was, then he heard the gulls crying in the wind outside, and smiled to himself. He got up and pulled on Skinner's robe, wondered where the other man was. He wandered into the kitchen, and found the note on top of the laptop.

"You can read this whenever you want. It's written for you, anyway. It always was. W."

Mulder smiled, and poured himself some orange juice, sat down, and opened the laptop.

Journal of Walter Skinner.

September 16, 2001.

I've left you sleeping. I didn't want to wake you. I'm feeling stiff, and sore (!) myself. It was a long night, but good. Very good. You tasted of salt, and sea, and sunflower seeds, and **Fox**. My Fox. I've missed you. When I held you last night, I wanted to weep for having you back in my arms where you belong.

You spoke of love. I never doubted your love for me, or mine for you. I suppose, in the end, that you can betray somebody, as we both did, simply because you love them too much, a strange truth, but real nonetheless. I know what you're thinking, that you'll make me say all this out loud one day, force me to speak as eloquently as you do, but trust me, you might find that a hard task. Sharon tried. I don't think I ever said the things she needed to hear until she was on her deathbed, and couldn't hear me. If I can't say the things you want, then I can at least write what I think and feel, and maybe, at the end of the day, that's the best we can manage. I don't know.

One thing I do know is that while I'm out jogging I'll be thinking of you, and for the first time since I moved here, I'll be looking forward to coming home.

Mulder smiled, closed the laptop, and got dressed. Then he wandered out onto the steps of the beach house and sat there, gazed at the sea, and the sand, and waited for his lover to return home.

THE END

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