

Bittersweet by Xanthe



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Story Notes:

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Beautiful pic by Mika.

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It was a freezing day - bright, and sunny, but bitterly cold. Skinner didn't feel the biting wind as he stood at the graveside, staring down at a sight more bleak than the climate - a hard, wooden coffin. Someone was crying, he wasn't sure who, as he stood, his arms by his side, gazing numbly at the casket. He didn't turn to look at the mourners behind him. None of them had as great a right to be here as he did, he was sure of that. He had taken his place at the head of the procession with pride. They couldn't deny him that, the way he'd been denied so much else...

Mulder.

So much unsaid, and now it was too late. It would never be said. So many years of stupid risks, playing a game he didn't understand, fighting the devil in so many guises that he lost track of who, and what, and how, just knew that he did it all for one man, and one emotion that he had never dared give voice to, until now. When it was too late.

Love.

Skinner bowed his head, lost in his thoughts. It could have been different, and yet, with a bitter chuckle, he acknowledged, looking back, that he wasn't sure **how**. In the somehow limpid aftermath of so great a tragedy, it seemed simple, devoid of the great dilemmas and dramas that had once been its core. You should have just told him. Just opened your mouth, and spoken the words. Too late. Now, and forever. Always too late.

Another sob, and he turned, distracted, to find himself looking into Scully's clear blue eyes - only it wasn't she who was crying. Strong as ever, her pale face was frozen into a mask of porcelain white, her red hair impossibly bright in the stark, colorless winter landscape, her breath painting clouds in the bitterly cold air. Of course she wouldn't show her feelings. She was too much the old soldier for that, had seen and suffered too much, and found her only defense in the mask of indifference that she displayed to the outside world. Inside...it was a different matter. He could see that so clearly - more clearly now than ever on this bright day of reckoning. He touched her arm, but she ignored him, her gaze resolutely fixed on the stark reality of the coffin in front of them. She would go home and cry, as she had cried many times since it happened, but she would never give the bastards the satisfaction of knowing how she felt. As always, she would be strong for **him**.

They were throwing earth onto the casket now. A last goodbye to a man who had given his life in a desperate, instinctive act to save a friend. More than a friend... What had been between him and Mulder made them more than friends. Skinner remembered the look on the other man's face as he had lain, dying, in his arms, blood pooling in a warm river around them.

"Don't go...not now." Not now. The words - so nearly there - but in the end the sentiment had been spoken only with eyes, with numb fingers pressed against flesh, and the frantic actions of hands sliding across bloody skin, trying to stem the flow from a body that was already growing cold. "Not now, not now, damnit! Not like this! You can't. I need you! I've always damn well needed you!" But it had been too late.

It was ironic. Looks and acts had always been their words, the way they shared what neither of them could ever speak, and in the moment of death that had not changed. Hazel eyes locked with brown, bloodstained fingers caressed sallow, dying skin, and one had died, throwing himself in the path of the hail of bullets meant for the other. Looks, and acts. In death, as in life.

"Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

Skinner mourned. He mourned a life unfinished, too many questions left unanswered, and, most of all, a love left unclaimed. Whether through fear, or cowardice, or just the pressure of lives too complicated to handle the additional complications of an unconventional love. Too late.

The crowd of mourners began to disperse, and Skinner moved around to the front of the grave, and studied the headstone for a moment. It was stark: A name. A date...and then four simple words that transformed it from cold marble into something warm, and personal.

"Sleep Well, Noble Heart."

Words from the heart. Words that had been chosen with care, and love. Skinner knelt before the headstone. He reached out and touched the gold engraving with his fingers. Noble Heart. He smiled, the words touching his soul. Words. Finally words between them. One last gift, from the living to the dead.

"It's time to go." Scully's voice. Soft, gentle, low. Comforting. He looked up, and smiled at her, watched as she tucked her gloved hand through the black coated arm of her partner, and led him away.

Skinner found he was moving, gliding across the cold landscape, as if he were weightless, and in an instant he was standing in front of them. Now he knew who had been crying. Mulder's eyes were red, his lips chapped where the salt water had dried on them in the bitterly cold breeze.

"*Mulder.*" He put out a hand, pressed it against the other man's chest, over his heart. Mulder stopped, in mid-stride. Scully turned.

"Mulder?" She asked.

"Do you believe in ghosts, Scully?" He managed the smallest grin, anticipating her reply. She raised an eyebrow, a familiar, comforting gesture.

"Mulder." Her tone of voice was chiding, but still so gentle.

"He's here, Scully. I can feel it." Mulder looked straight ahead, and Skinner was suddenly grateful for the other man's enduring willingness to believe. For a moment they locked gazes, and hazel eyes met dark, insubstantial, brown. Mulder took a step forward, reached out, and his fingers caressed the side of Skinner's face.

"Goodbye," Mulder whispered. "Safe journey, my friend."

"*Goodbye.*" Skinner leaned forward, and for one brief moment their lips touched. Mulder stood stock still, then, slowly, raised his hand to his mouth, a look of wonder on his face. Time froze for an eternity, then sound, and movement, and light, flooded back in again.

"Better late than never," Mulder grinned. Skinner smiled back, taking that last image into his heart, to ease him on his way.

Mulder started walking again, and his warm, solid flesh passed through Skinner's light, ethereal body. For a moment, for just one second, they were joined, flesh with spirit. Mulder paused. "With me always," he whispered.

Something was resolved. Skinner felt the moment, his spirit soaring free, unfettered by a sense of being incomplete, and unfinished. He held out his arms towards the bright light that was coming closer, and closer, then he was flying, up into the sky, leaving the cold world far beneath him, until the cemetery, and the two dark-clad people below, were merely dots on a landscape he no longer held any allegiance to.

Mulder stood for a moment, staring dreamily into space.

"Mulder?" Scully broke the spell, and he turned to her.

"It's okay," he smiled softly. "We can go now, Scully. He's at peace."

The End

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