

Personal Time by Xanthe



<http://www.xanthe.org/personal-time/>

Story Notes:

Posted: 23rd December 2001





Winner of the Spooky Award for Outstanding  
Doggett Characterization

PERSONAL TIME BY: XANTHE

(First Place)



Winner of the 2002 Spooky Award  
for Outstanding Doggett Torture!



First Place

Personal Time  
by: Xanthe

DTA

The 2002 Spooky Awards  
Outstanding Doggett Angst  
Second Place

2002 Spooky Awards Winner  
Outstanding Skinner Slash Romance 3rd  
Place  
Personal Time  
by Xanthe  
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Outstanding Doggett Slash  
Honorable  
Mention



This story has won the  
Doggett Torture Anonymous Award  
for Outstanding Doggett Torture

First Place

Personal Time  
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2002 Spooky Awards

*Don't ever do this to me again," Doggett said as he frantically continued rubbing the towel over Skinner's cold flesh. "...Are you listening to me? Huh?" He stopped his frenzied movements and took Skinner's face between his hands. "Whatever is going on inside that thick skull of yours, this is no way to deal with it. We have to find a better way. D'you understand that? I'm not going to let you do this to yourself. Even if you don't give a damn, I do."*

*Skinner's dark, glazed eyes suddenly focussed on Doggett as if those words had penetrated his foggy mind.*

*"I mean it," Doggett said. He pulled Skinner against him, wrapped his arms around the big man's shoulders and held him tight against his body to share his own warmth, all the time running his hands over Skinner's back as he rocked him to and fro, still trying to rub some life back into the listless, shaking man. Skinner's bald head was pressed into his shoulder and the big man seemed to be drawing some kind of comfort from the contact as he slowly came to. "Hold on. Just keep holding on, Walter, because I'm not going to let you fall, I'm not going to let them destroy you...just keeping hanging on in there."*

**1. Part One** by Xanthe

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### Part One by Xanthe

**Author's Notes:**

Pic by **Sergeeva**

Posted: December 23, 2001

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### Author's Notes:

As you know, I'm a Skinner-with-anyone girl. I've written him with Mulder, Scully, Krycek, *Twin Peaks's* Dale Cooper, my original male character, Geri Warner (***Crush***), and even Obi-Wan Kenobi! (***Life-force***) So, I thought I should try my hand at Skinner/Doggett - and this story, ***Personal Time***, grew and grew and grew, so hope you'll give it a try. It's very angsty, with lots of sex (of course!!!), a spanking or two (ditto!) but most of all it's a romance, with lots of emotional connection, because that's what 1013 rarely give us. It's my first ambitious, long story in quite a while, so I hope you enjoy it :-). Because it's a very long story I think it should have very long author's notes to go with it, so there's more below

1.) Doggett: Doggett...hmmm. I know some people have a problem with him, and it's certainly true that while I liked the character well enough onscreen I didn't feel moved to write fanfic about him for a long time. Then I had a dream...and to cut a long story short started to think that \*maybe\*, if I had the time and could be bothered, I might be able to write something about him. Then dot began talking enthusiastically about honest John and how he seemed like a good partner for Walter, and we had a long discussion about Dom/sub relationships and who would be the top Then Sergeeva wrote her wonderful ***Mistress Xanthe and the Good Boys Club*** and I was finally convinced enough to write my own exploration of this pairing. Still, I didn't have much time and wasn't sure I was able to produce anything and then dot started the Skinner/Doggett list and I fished out what I'd started and looked at it again and thought maybe I could work it up into a little something for dot's list and 60,000 or so words later...here it is!

2.) Skinner: Skinner's personality is very different now to how he came across in the early seasons. I tend to think of Season 2's more severe and strict personality as Discipline!Skinner but as the years have passed and he's come under more and more pressure, he's changed and developed and now shows a much softer, even hesitant side. Whatever you may think of Season 8 and 9 Skinner (and I do have some problems with the way they've portrayed him of late, particularly in the way he's treated by the other characters, to say nothing of his fluctuating intelligence level) he's clearly a man at the end of his tether. If 1013 won't explore the emotional and psychological reasons behind their recent characterisation of the man, then I'm just going to have to do it for them, aren't I?

And in as slashy a way as possible! So, here is my first Skinner/Doggett fic. It's heavy on the angstorama and features a loving, consensual Dom/sub relationship between the two men as Doggett tries desperately to haul Skinner back from the brink of self-destruction. This is less about BDSM and more about romance with some Dom/sub dynamics thrown in (a slightly different emphasis than other portrayals of BDSM on my site and I don't really view it as a BDSM story).

### **Dedication:**

This fic is dedicated to all the girls in the Walterzone for being such great friends, and encouraging, supportive and feedbacking readers. Special thanks to Phoebe for the intelligent beta and for knowing all those obscure little details! To dot for starting the **Skinner/Doggett** list and getting me inspired again after a long dry spell, to Sergeeva whose wonderful *Mistress Xanthe and the Good Boys Club* made me resurrect this story, and to Kristen for being so encouraging and supportive :-)



Doggett took the final 8 stairs to the 5th floor two at a time, and sauntered along the corridor to the AD's office, scarcely out of breath after having jogged all the way up from the basement. He was whistling cheerfully to himself, a newspaper tucked under one arm as he burst through the door to Skinner's secretary's office.

"Hi, Kim, is he free? Can I go straight in?" Doggett was halfway towards the door to his superior's office by the time Kim replied.

"Agent Doggett, I'm sorry. Did you have an appointment with him?" She asked, glancing at a burgundy leather diary on her desk. "It isn't in his appointments book – I've cancelled all the ones that were marked."

"Cancelled...?" Doggett paused, his hand on the handle of the door leading to Skinner's office. "No, I don't have an appointment...I just..." He stopped short, puzzled. While he didn't have a formal appointment with the Assistant Director, he had taken to stopping by at lunch-time to see if the big man was free to visit the small Italian restaurant just around the corner from the Hoover Building. More often than not Skinner was free for lunch and they walked to the restaurant together and consumed a tasty meal while reading their respective newspapers, pausing occasionally to read out a particularly interesting – or outrageous – article. Doggett had been delighted to discover that his boss was as much a news junkie as

himself. It gave them a lot to talk about and he had come to enjoy their lunches so he was non-plussed when he pushed open the door to Skinner's office and found it empty. He stood, considering the matter for a moment. It wasn't important – their lunching together had been more of a casual arrangement than a formal one after all, but usually Skinner mentioned when he was going to be in a meeting or out of town, and on those occasions Doggett grabbed a sandwich and ate it at his desk. Somehow it wasn't the same going to the Italian restaurant without Skinner.

"Agent Doggett? Can I leave a message for the Assistant Director?" Kim asked.

"Hell, no, it isn't important. I'll catch up with him tomorrow." Doggett smiled and turned on his heel.

"Agent Doggett?" Her voice stopped him mid-stride again. "I'm afraid the Assistant Director won't be in the office tomorrow. He's..." She hesitated, a catch in her voice. "He's booked some personal time. He'll be away for two weeks."

"Personal time?" Doggett turned back to gaze at her quizzically.

"Yes, Agent." She nodded, closing the diary and replacing it on the side of her desk.

*Personal time.* Doggett pondered that for a moment. He had seen Skinner just last week and the big man hadn't mentioned anything about taking personal time – and something about that phrase was bothering him. He nodded to Kim and walked slowly back to the stairs, chewing it over thoughtfully. Personal time...not vacation...personal time. What the hell did that mean?

Doggett was queuing to pay for his sandwich in the cafeteria when he suddenly realised why the phrase 'personal time' was eating at him so much. 'Personal time' was the euphemism Skinner had given for Scully's disappearance for a couple of days, early in her pregnancy. Doggett had later discovered, purely by chance, that Scully had been in the hospital undergoing tests during those missing days. Was that where Skinner was right now? And if so, then why? Last time Doggett had seen him, his superior had been looking fine. True, Skinner still seemed shaken by the events leading up to the birth of Scully's baby, some of which he refused to talk about - including how Alex Krycek had ended up on the floor of the parking garage with a couple of bullet wounds in his body and a hole in his head, but Doggett hadn't pushed the big man on that subject. He didn't give a rat's ass, literally, if a low-life scum like Alex Krycek never drew breath again, and he had no intention of causing Skinner any problems within the Bureau on that score. Hell, he owed Skinner – big time. The man had been the only one who had had the decency to explain to him what was going on in the whole mess surrounding Mulder's disappearance. It had been Skinner who warned him about his career, and about the conspiracy within the FBI that meant Doggett was doomed to fail in his investigation. Doggett had grown from distrusting the man at the beginning to coming slowly to respect him. On a few occasions he even called on the AD to help him with a case – and found his boss not only made the time for him, but seemed to actively enjoy being able to get out from behind his desk and do some investigating in the field. Watching Skinner work, even when he thought the other man was wrong, Doggett had

come to appreciate just how Walter Skinner had attained the rank of AD at such a young age. He was meticulous, patient, thorough, and utterly professional – all qualities that Doggett admired in a man. Hell, he had grown to not only admire Skinner but to like him and count him as a friend. Now, it seemed, his friend might be in trouble.

Doggett paused in the cafeteria queue, glanced at his plastic-wrapped sandwich with sudden distaste, then turned and jogged swiftly back up to the fifth floor again. He opened Kim's door without knocking and put his head around it.

"Which hospital is he in?" He asked.

She looked up, an expression of surprise on her face. Doggett fought down a wave of impatience. He knew his direct approach sometimes took people by surprise but if he had a question then he asked it – he didn't see the point in wasting time beating around the bush first.

"Agent Doggett?" She raised her hand to her throat, but Doggett had interrogated enough people in his career to know when someone was playing for time.

"Kim, you and I both know he's in the hospital. I just want to know which one. If you're worried that you'll get into trouble for letting on then don't be – I just want to make sure he's okay." He smiled at her and she smiled back, uncertainly.

"He left strict instructions that nobody was to be told. I don't think he even wanted to tell me," she said hesitantly, "but he had to in case of an emergency. I think..." She paused and bit on her lip. "I don't think he wanted Agent Scully to find out. I think he thought she might worry." She gave a little grimace, but whether that was because she thought Agent Scully was unlikely to be remotely worried, or whether it was because she was scared she'd said too much, Doggett wasn't sure.

"Kim, I won't tell Scully. I won't tell anyone. I just want to check that he's okay," Doggett said gently. He liked Kim. She had worked for Skinner for years, and as far as he could tell she had always done her best to be loyal to her boss - and loyalty was a quality that Doggett appreciated in his colleagues. Also, it was pretty clear from the expression on her face whenever Skinner was around, that Kimberly Cook thought her boss was one of the good guys and they had an excellent working relationship. That had been one of the reasons why Doggett had been prepared to trust his boss in the first place – in his experience you could gauge the measure of a man by how he treated those under his command and how they responded in turn, and Skinner's secretary clearly thought the world of her boss. As she worked with him day in, day out, and had done for years, Doggett was inclined to trust her judgement. Kim was clearly doing some weighing up of her own, because she gazed at Doggett for a moment, then nodded and reached for her notepad. She scribbled something on it, tore off the sheet, and handed him the piece of paper. Doggett glanced at it. *Bethesda Naval Hospital*. So, he had been right. Whatever 'personal time' Skinner was taking, it sure as hell wasn't a vacation.

"Thank you, Kim," he said softly.

She gave a hesitant little smile, still clearly unsure whether she had done the right thing. Doggett crumpled the sheet of paper between his fingers, stuffed it in his pocket, and then set off once more back to the stairs, cursing as he went.

Christ, what the hell was it with these people, he thought to himself as he rode down the elevator to the parking garage. Scully was as close-mouthed as a clam – she'd shut him out more times than he could count, no matter how much he tried to prove to her that he was trustworthy. Mulder, once they'd resurrected him from the dead, had proved to be even worse. Doggett trusted Scully's judgement that Fox Mulder was another of the good guys but he didn't like the way the other man had treated him when they'd first met. Hell, what made all these people so paranoid? Skinner at least had treated him with some courtesy and had made an effort to fill him in on what was happening in the X Files department. Maybe Doggett had interpreted that the wrong way, made too much of it, thought that he genuinely had Skinner's trust when it was clear that the man didn't even think enough of him to tell him he was going to be in the hospital for a couple of weeks – not just a day, but a couple of weeks. That had to be serious and it made Doggett angry as hell to find that Skinner hadn't told him what was going on. It brought back all those memories of his early days on the X Files when he felt as if he had been walking around in the dark with just about everyone, including his own partner – especially his own partner - keeping information from him and going behind his back. This was a unique experience for John Doggett. He was used to being pretty much liked wherever he went. Whatever his faults - and he knew that he could be irascible and almost tactlessly blunt on occasion – he wasn't a man who lied, hid behind half-truths, or dissembled for political reasons or career advancement. If he thought or felt a certain way then he said so, however unpopular his opinion. He'd made a few enemies along the way for that very reason, but most of his colleagues appreciated knowing exactly where they stood with him.

Doggett got into his car and sped out of the Hoover building towards the Bethesda Naval Hospital. He was a little surprised by just how angry he was feeling and he jumped a couple of red lights on the journey, which helped ease his frustration a little. He had eaten lunch with the man just three days ago, on Friday, and Skinner hadn't thought to mention that he was going to be in the hospital for the next two weeks? What the hell was that about? Whether Skinner liked it or not, Doggett had no intention of being fobbed off with talk of 'personal time'. As far as he was concerned one of his friends was in trouble, and whether Skinner wanted his help or not, he was damn well going to get it.

Skinner was in a special unit of the military hospital undergoing 'tests'. Nobody would tell Doggett what the tests were for – even when he flashed his ID around aggressively. However they did, finally, after much talking on his part, agree to let him see Skinner. Doggett was coiled up like a spring by this point, utterly puzzled by the cloak and dagger way the staff and, by implication, Skinner, were treating him. He pushed open the door to Skinner's room and barged inside, barely managing to contain all his angry energy...and then stopped short. His anger left him in one go, leaving him almost breathless. Whatever he had been expecting, it wasn't this.

Skinner was sitting in a bed, his skin as pale as the white sheets - in stark relief to the dark, angry veins that were standing out like a network of black lines all over his face.

"Sir? Walter?" Doggett whispered, stunned beyond belief. "Christ, they said you were undergoing tests but...what the hell kind of test is this?"

While Doggett's anger might have dissipated, Skinner's was clearly only just beginning - an expression of outraged shock had appeared on his face the moment he set eyes on his agent.

"What the hell are you doing here, Agent Doggett?" he asked in a furious tone.

"I came to see you," Doggett explained, standing his ground. "When you weren't at the office today...Kim said you took some 'personal time' and you weren't expected back for a couple of weeks. I figured out the rest myself - but I had no idea that you'd be undergoing this, whatever **this** is." He looked at Skinner hopefully, wanting the other man to fill him in on what the hell was going on. He was to be disappointed.

"**This** is none of your business, Agent," Skinner snapped at him. "Kim was right - this is personal time, with the emphasis on **personal**. If I'd have wanted you to know I'd have damn well told you."

Doggett stared at the other man. Skinner was perfectly entitled to his privacy, and if it hadn't been for those livid veins in Skinner's flesh then Doggett might have backed off, but as it was, he found he couldn't.

"Sir...I'm sorry for interfering, but I've never seen anything like this before. It looks to me like you need some help, and I'm sorry if it pisses you off, but I'm here to do exactly that."

"Why the hell do you think I'm here if not seeking help?" Skinner snapped at him. " **Medical** help, Agent. There's nothing else going on here."

"With all due respect, sir, I don't think that's entirely true." Doggett walked over to the bed, wincing as he got closer and saw how sharply pulsing the veins were. He couldn't imagine what it felt like to have them lancing through your skin like that. Skinner's dark eyes were veiled, the anger in them made raw by the pain he was in. "Whatever this is...it's clearly outside the normal realms of medical science. I'd say that almost made it an X File, sir."

"Damn it, Doggett." Skinner's voice was raspy, and his jaw made that sideways movement that Doggett had come to know so well. "You are **not** turning me into some kind of case file. I am fine. These are tests. That's all. It's routine."

He choked on that last word, and reached up to grasp his own throat. Doggett was by his side in seconds, handing him the glass of water that was on the nightstand. He put a hand on Skinner's shoulder as he guided the big man to drink and was shocked by how heated his boss's flesh was beneath the thin, hospital robe.

"Walter...I'm sorry," he murmured. "I don't want to cause any trouble for you. That's not why I'm here. I don't view you as a case - I'm just concerned about you. If you'd prefer it, I'll

leave – and I promise I won't say a word to anyone about what I've seen here. It's just that I view you as a friend, and I like to help my friends if I can."

Skinner finished drinking and Doggett replaced the glass on the nightstand for him.

"If you need me, then just call," Doggett said softly.

Skinner ignored him as he settled back against the pillows, his breathing coming in wheezing gasps. Doggett sighed. He had handled this badly. He had genuinely meant to help, but Skinner, doubtlessly infected by the same paranoia that Mulder, Scully, and the whole X Files department exhibited, clearly didn't know whom he could trust any more. Getting no reply, or even a sign that Skinner had heard him, Doggett turned, and walked resignedly towards the door. He had his fingers on the handle, when Skinner spoke, in a low, hoarse voice.

"Krycek infected me with a kind of poison using sophisticated nano-technology. He implanted nanocytes in my bloodstream and used them to control me, to get me to do what he wanted. He could do this to me - take me to the brink of death at the push of a button if I didn't obey him – and he frequently did before I shot him."

Doggett paused, his back going rigid as he tried to take in this information.

Skinner took a deep, rasping breath and continued. "After I killed him, the first thing I did was search his pockets for the palm pilot he used to control the nanocytes. I brought it here and booked myself in for these tests to see whether we can use the palm pilot to neutralise the nanocytes altogether – maybe even to kill them - or whether we need some other mechanism for that. I'd willingly put myself through anything, however painful these tests are, in order to be free again. Krycek may be gone, but that's small comfort if there's someone else out there who decides they want the services of an Assistant Director at the FBI. I can't live like that any more. I won't."

Doggett turned slowly back to face the other man. Skinner was paler than ever, and his eyes were like two dark, angry jet stones in his pallid face.

"How long...and who else knows?" he asked softly, coming to stand by the bed. Skinner closed his eyes and put his head back.

"Almost two years. And Mulder knows – or at least he thinks he does. He has no idea about the reality. Scully knows some of it, although not all."

"Two years...?" Doggett mused. "Christ, Walter – all this time and you didn't tell anyone? All this time workin' together and you didn't even tell me?" He couldn't keep the tone of reproach out of his voice. "I might have been able to help."

When Skinner opened his eyes again, the anger had gone, to be replaced by a look of utter bleakness.

"No, John, nobody could help," he said in a tired tone. "And I didn't tell you, didn't tell anyone, because I'm ashamed." That comment blindsided Doggett, and he raised a questioning eyebrow.

Skinner sighed. "I've done things..." His voice trailed off and his jaw slid sideways again and locked there. Doggett gazed at him intently. "Well, let's just say that I've done things to stay in the game, to stay in my job, in a place where I could be of some use to Mulder and Scully and the X Files..." Skinner trailed off again, and gazed, sightlessly, out of the window. When he started talking once more there was a tone of intense self-loathing in his voice and he bowed his head so that Doggett couldn't read the raw emotion in his eyes. "I tell myself that's what it is, but in my darker moments I wonder whether I haven't just been trying to save my own hide."

"Bullshit!" The word was out of Doggett's mouth before he could stop it – and he wasn't sure he wanted to anyway. "Walter, I might not have known you as long as Mulder and Scully, but I've known you long enough to figure out what kind of a man you are. You're not the kind of man who runs away from a fight, and if this is what you've been going through for two years then you've sure as hell had a battle on your hands. Even the most hardened warriors become battle weary after that amount of time. You shouldn't doubt yourself."

Skinner gave a wry, hopeless smile at the military jargon and Doggett's heart did a little leap of concern. He so rarely saw Skinner smile and in these circumstances the gesture seemed out of place – and all the more heart wrenching for that.

"So, tell me more about these tests." Doggett drew up the armchair by the bed and sat in it. He leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees.

"There's not much to tell. They're trying out a variety of drugs using different levels of nanocyte activity to see if anything's effective. They're also working on the palm pilot itself. They told me it wouldn't exactly be a walk in the park and it isn't." Skinner grimaced and gazed at his black veined hands. "That's it. There's nothing you or anyone else can do, Agent Doggett. There's no point getting anyone else involved – that's why I didn't say anything." Doggett considered that for a moment. He knew that statement wasn't entirely true – although Skinner might think it was. The truth was a much more complex mix of his superior not wanting anyone to see him weak and vulnerable and an almost pathological need for privacy, combined with a not insignificant desire to make sure that nobody the Assistant Director cared about was hurt any more by their involvement with him and these damn nanocytes – whatever they were. Doggett decided that now was not the best time to treat Skinner to these personality insights though.

"Well, I might not be able to do anything practical, but you've shouldered this particular problem alone for far too long, so from now on, I'm sticking around."

Skinner's eyes betrayed a flicker of surprise – Doggett guessed that his boss wasn't entirely used to people giving him their wholehearted support.

"It's not your problem – it's mine," Skinner growled, seeming almost embarrassed by the offer.

"Well that's where you're wrong," Doggett replied. "Because the way I see it this is an X Files problem." Skinner opened his mouth to protest but Doggett continued talking. "Would you be here if it wasn't for your involvement with the X Files?" He demanded. Skinner gazed at him sharply but finally exhaled loudly and shook his head. "Well then – it's an X Files problem, and I'm in charge of the X Files so that makes it my problem." Doggett gave a grimly pleased with himself smile, challenging his boss to disagree with him. Skinner just shook his head ruefully and managed a faded smile.

"Thanks, John," he muttered, turning his face away slightly. Doggett wasn't sure what had embarrassed his buttoned-up superior more – the unexpected offer of support, or his own overwhelmed reaction to it.

Doggett spent the next few days alternating his time between visiting Skinner in the hospital, and researching whatever he could find about nano-technology. At Skinner's request, he kept what he was working on secret from both Scully and Reyes, both of whom were preoccupied elsewhere anyway, Scully with her baby and Monica with an old case of Mulder's she was fascinated by, so they didn't ask him many questions about what was suddenly taking up all his time. Doggett found himself so intrigued by his research into nano-technology that he often stayed up late into the night, tracking down science articles on the internet. Visiting Skinner took up the rest of his time – the tests were taxing on Skinner physically, and there were numerous side effects to the combination of drugs they were experimenting with – including blurred vision. While the doctors had assured Skinner that this particular side effect would only last a couple of days, it wasn't an easy thing to endure all the same. Skinner wasn't exactly a model patient either, and although he was never less than scrupulously polite to the medical staff, Doggett saw the man's frustrations build as day followed pain filled day. He arrived at the hospital one morning towards the end of the first week just in time to witness Skinner throwing the TV remote control against the wall where it shattered into smithereens.

"Well you certainly showed the remote who's boss," Doggett commented calmly. Skinner jumped, and Doggett guessed that the other man's eyesight had deteriorated to the extent where he hadn't even seen Doggett enter the room. He must have imagined himself to be alone because Doggett was pretty sure that a man as self-controlled as Skinner wouldn't allow anyone to witness that display of temper.

"Fucking CNN," Skinner growled.

"What's wrong with CNN?" Doggett asked, surprised. Listening to the news on the television was Skinner's only way of keeping up with current affairs while his vision was so badly impaired – and as a fellow news junkie Doggett knew how important it was to have a daily dose of CNN.

"It's all just words – I want to hear some analysis," Skinner snapped. "They repeat the same things over and over again until I could..."

"Throw the remote against the wall?" Doggett supplied with a smile. "You're just bored being cooped up here with doctors pushin' needles into your arm every five minutes. Who wouldn't be? Especially now that drug they're using has affected your eyesight, but at least that'll wear off in a day or two and then..."

"Thanks, John," Skinner interrupted sarcastically. "I am aware of the fact that my situation isn't ideal right now. I do know why I'm pissed off."

"Well, if you'd just hear me out," Doggett said, in calm, steely tones, "I was about to offer to read you the articles in all the main papers."

"Oh." Skinner looked a little abashed. He lay back against his pillows with a wry smile. "Sorry, John. I've always been the world's worst patient. I'm trying not to take it out on the staff here because god knows I'm sure they're not enjoying this any more than I am, but..."

"I'm here, and you needed to holler at somebody. I understand." Doggett smiled, seating himself in the armchair. "For what it's worth, I don't think I'd be as polite a patient as you are, Walter. I have a lousy temper and I hate hospitals."

Skinner grunted in heartfelt acknowledgement and Doggett opened the newspaper and began reading out loud. It was a surprisingly enjoyable way to spend the morning, Doggett thought as, after he finished reading, Skinner began dissecting the article and before long they were both involved in a vigorous debate. Doggett found in Skinner a worthy partner for his own news obsession and he thoroughly enjoyed the way Skinner debated so energetically and intelligently. Strangely, considering that he lived in one of the most news-obsessed cities in the world, Doggett had rarely come across anyone with the same passion for discussion and analysis as Skinner. It kept the other man preoccupied as the doctors increased the amount of active nanocytes in his bloodstream, causing the veins all over his body to start pulsing in a way that made Doggett wince. He had no idea how Skinner could stand it, but beyond throwing the odd TV remote at the wall, Skinner never once complained.

It was interesting, Doggett thought as he sat watching while Skinner emptied a glass of water and then leaned back on the pillows waiting for his agent to start reading again – interesting being able to watch Skinner without Skinner knowing he was being watched because of his temporary virtual blindness. Doggett realised that he had never seen his boss in an unguarded moment before, had never witnessed Skinner being anything other than in control, hiding behind the façade he presented to the world. Even when sitting in Kersh's office, taking a reaming out or listening to Doggett take one, Skinner's features were always perfectly arranged, his suit immaculate, his glasses always hiding his eyes – and what he was truly thinking and feeling. Now, though, Doggett knew he was witnessing the man himself. Skinner wasn't wearing his glasses – no point as they couldn't have helped him see while the drug they were experimenting with was obscuring his vision.

Doggett leaned forward and surveyed the other man in more detail. Skinner's brown eyes were curiously vulnerable without his glasses. They shimmered with frustration and pain,

but beneath that, Doggett caught sight of something profoundly wistful, a kind of deep-seated sadness, almost a sense of being lost, that Skinner kept well hidden during the normal course of events. Doggett wondered what that was about – it was hardly something he could ask his boss, but it fascinated him. Skinner's whole personality fascinated him if he was honest. He sensed a man such as himself – someone who worked hard, who tried to obey the rules but would break them if necessary, someone combative, who was prepared to fight in his own corner and fight it dirty and tough if need be, but that was where the similarities ended, because while Doggett was newly arrived on this particular battle scene, Skinner had been on the battlefield for 8 years, and it was obvious that he was close to being shell-shocked. In unguarded moments his hands shook, and his eyes betrayed a weariness that went bone deep. He had fought, and fought, and fought, on so many different fronts, both at the office and closer to home, but the battle had intensified over the past couple of years, and the presence of the nanocytes in his bloodstream effectively meant he was now fighting on his knees, with one hand strapped behind his back. He was, quite simply, exhausted – so much so that Doggett wasn't sure that Skinner even knew how serious his situation was. He just kept on putting one foot in front of the other and didn't know how to take a step back, and look at the broader picture.

"John?" Skinner's softly spoken enquiry startled Doggett out of his introspection. "You still there?"

"Yes. I haven't left. Sorry...I was...miles away." He opened one of the many newspapers and news magazines he had brought with him and began reading again, but part of his mind remained preoccupied. How much more, seriously speaking, could Skinner be expected to take without falling apart? And what could John Doggett do to make sure that never happened?

Doggett was still pondering this question when he arrived home late that evening, after squeezing in a few hours at the office following his visit to the hospital. He took a long, refreshing, hot shower, and rested his head against the tiles as the water pummelled into his skin. He could sense something about Skinner – something he understood, something familiar, something that responded to his own manner, which bounced off him in a way he hadn't felt since...Doggett rested his head against the tiled wall with a sigh. He knew where this was going and couldn't see that it would do him any good. He had worked with Tony Larsen for 3 years in the NYPD. Tony had been his partner in the office and out of it, and Walter Skinner, for all the fact that he was considerably older and wiser than Tony, somehow shared an essence, a trait, a **something** with his old partner that Doggett found extremely attractive. Tony Larsen had been green, impulsive, and prone to running off and getting himself into trouble without a second's hesitation. Superficially, he couldn't have been more different to a man like Skinner who was much older, more experienced, and infinitely more measured in his attitude to both life and work. What they shared...what they shared was a kind of unexpressed need, Doggett decided. Walter Skinner had that same lost look in his eyes that Tony had once had. Only it was a damn sight easier taking a young, green agent under your wing and looking out for him, than doing the same for a big, bad Assistant Director of the FBI who not only happened to be several years your senior, but was also more than capable of taking care of himself...or was he? Doggett ruminated on this for several long minutes. Did Skinner really need what he could offer him, or was he fooling

himself, simply because he found his boss so damn attractive? Doggett sighed, unsure where the truth lay on this particular subject. He never lied to himself - it wasn't in his nature. He was as ruthlessly honest with himself as he was with the people around him, but even so, sometimes it wasn't easy understanding his own motivation.

Doggett slid his hand down his body and found his cock rock hard and waiting for his attention. He wasn't surprised to find that just thinking about Skinner had aroused him. This was an attraction that had been building up slowly for a long time, and he knew it wasn't going to just go away. At first he had viewed Skinner as no more than a good boss, someone who could help him on the X Files. Then they had started their lunches, and before long, he had found himself enjoying the other man's company above that of anyone else. He looked forward to seeing Skinner every day – in fact it was the highlight of his day - and somewhere along the way he had fallen in love without even realizing it. Doggett had been surprised when he had first found himself waking in the night with a hard-on that could only be relieved by thoughts of his boss. Skinner couldn't have been more different physically to Tony Larsen, who had been a wiry, slender man, with a mop of almost white-blond hair and sparkling blue eyes. There was no similarity there at all...but Doggett had never been a man to fall for the obvious and, as he looked back over the previous patterns of his relationships with other men, there was never an obvious 'type' that he went for...although, thinking about it, he was aware that the important ones had all had something in common – that indefinable something that he was struggling to understand right now. Could Skinner ever want from him what Tony had wanted, Doggett wondered. He had a sudden flashing mental image of himself pushing Walter Skinner against a wall, holding the other man's arms against his sides as he claimed a deep, long, satisfying kiss from his boss...and then laughed out loud at his own stupidity. Christ, he made it a rule never to fall for straight men – or men still in the closet – and he wasn't sure which of those Skinner was but he was certainly one or the other. Doggett wasn't interested in anyone who wasn't honest enough to admit his sexual orientation. His experience in the military had taught him that no purpose would be served by broadcasting his homosexuality to the world in general and the FBI in particular, but a man had to be able to admit certain things to **himself**. Skinner had given no indication that he was gay – hell, the man had even been married according to one of Mulder's X Files, not that, as Doggett was all too well aware, that necessarily meant a thing. Doggett winced as he remembered that particular file. No wonder Skinner didn't want to risk becoming a case file again. That particular case file culminated with his wife's death. Perhaps the man's paranoia was understandable when placed in that context. Doggett grimaced; the death of Skinner's wife had been one of the more serious body blows his boss had suffered during this long, seemingly unending battle. How long before one of these body blows proved mortal? Or perhaps an accumulation of all of them? How much longer could Skinner stay on the battlefield when he was already fighting on his last legs?

Doggett turned the shower dial to ice cold with one savage flick of his hand. He didn't want to masturbate in the shower with thoughts of a man he was so close to but couldn't quite have. You either did something about your feelings or you let them go; you didn't keep dredging them up like this and re-examining them. That didn't do anyone any good. Damn but he missed Tony. He missed having someone who liked what he could do for them – hell, what he enjoyed doing. He had once wondered whether his relationship with Tony had been born out of their roles at the office, out of Tony being younger, requiring guidance,

and leaning on his older, more experienced partner for support, but now, with these new feelings about Walter Skinner surfacing, Doggett could see that wasn't the case. What he had been responding to in Tony had nothing to do with age or experience and everything to do with personality. His mind went back to the events of the day, to Skinner throwing that remote against the wall – Doggett utterly sympathised with the emotions behind that outburst, but somehow he had the feeling that it would take a lot more than one broken remote to relieve the feelings Skinner had kept locked up inside for so long.

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The doctors wanted Skinner to rest over the weekend, before resuming the gruelling tests the following week. The tests had been bad enough during the week he had endured them thus far, but the doctors had been honest with the Assistant Director, informing him that what he would undergo would be even worse during his second week. Skinner took the news as he might a lecture from Kersh; his eyes became veiled and guarded, and his jaw performed that sideways lock that Doggett knew betrayed an emotion of some depth.

"If that's the case, then I want to at least get some exercise," Skinner said to his doctor. "My eyesight's nearly back to normal. If I'm not on the drugs for a couple of days then I want to work out in the gym."

The doctor agreed that some exercise wouldn't do him any harm after sitting in a bed for the best part of a week, although she made him promise to take it easy as he wasn't in the best physical shape after the tests. She directed this plea more towards Doggett than Skinner – clearly believing the agent was more likely to ensure that the A.D. didn't push himself too far than the man himself. Doggett nodded, signalling that he understood the meaning behind the look – there was no way Skinner was going to do himself any harm on **his** watch, that was for sure. The doctor seemed reassured and Doggett was duly despatched to Skinner's apartment to pick up some gym clothes for him.

Doggett felt strange letting himself into Skinner's apartment. He hadn't intended to snoop, but inevitably he found himself looking around the place, trying to get some measure of a man he knew himself to be becoming increasingly infatuated with. Skinner's apartment was tastefully decorated – there were paintings on the walls, leather bound copies of first edition books on the shelves, and several examples of beautiful Oriental art and sculpture. Doggett was fascinated, and pondered the Oriental influence as he trotted up the stairs to where he assumed Skinner's bedroom was. There were three doors on the landing – one was a bathroom, and one clearly a spare room. The third opened onto a bright, airy room, decorated in the same tasteful style – obviously Skinner's bedroom. Skinner was clearly a man who liked harmonious surroundings, and his apartment was as neat as his personal attire. While Doggett approved of that on one level, another part of him couldn't help but wonder at a man who kept his life under such a tight degree of control – he knew his own apartment to be a lot more lived in than this one.

Doggett opened the closet door and swiftly located the sweatpants, hanging neatly on their hanger – he would have expected nothing else. He was reminded of the last time he had visited a man's apartment when he wasn't present – Fox Mulder's apartment had been a

damn sight more untidy. Mulder's chaotic approach to life had been reflected in the many layers of his existence that had been left out on display, classic signs of a life interrupted. Clothing and various journals, papers, computer accessories and other paraphernalia had all been spread out around his apartment. Skinner's depths were hidden away in drawers and cupboards – out of sight but still there, tantalisingly beneath the surface, beckoning to Doggett who longed to know more about his elusive superior. He liked the mystery, the challenge that Skinner presented – it intrigued him despite himself.

Unlike that time in Mulder's apartment, Doggett wasn't investigating a case – he was just picking up a few clothes for a friend, and yet the investigative side of his mind refused to switch off and he found himself noticing certain things about the apartment and drawing conclusions about Skinner's personality as a result; the books piled untidily next to Skinner's bed looked out of place in the neat apartment. They suggested a man who, having trouble sleeping, tried reading book after book in the middle of the night only to find that none of them served as enough of a distraction.

There was the bottle of whisky lying beside the bed – unopened. As if the man wanted desperately to let go and drink himself into oblivion, but was stopping himself by sheer willpower alone – as if he knew that one day that resolve might falter and if it did then it wouldn't just be a matter of one or two glasses of whisky, it would be the whole bottle.

There was a pair of broken spectacles on the dresser, perhaps waiting to be mended, but when Doggett moved them he saw a thin layer of dust around them, testament to the fact that they must have been lying there for several months, as lost and abandoned as their owner. Skinner was a busy man, and Doggett figured that he hadn't had time to take them to be mended, but all the same, there seemed to be something wistfully symbolic about them.

Doggett opened the dresser drawer searching for tee shirts and located a pile of them, neatly folded. He drew out a gray one then turned to go - when something caught his eye. The tee shirt had some lettering on it. Frowning, he unfolded it to see what was written on it, and felt as if some great divine hand of fate had just swung into motion. USMC. Four simple letters, but they revealed a connection he had neither expected nor anticipated.

"United States Marine Corps." He had a tee shirt very similar in his own dresser. Doggett sat on the bed, fingering the lettering thoughtfully. Suddenly the Oriental influences in Skinner's apartment made perfect sense – on closer examination he was sure he'd find that the fine artwork he had noticed downstairs was Vietnamese in origin. It wouldn't surprise him in the least if he discovered that his boss was a veteran of that conflict. In fact, it made perfect sense – it also made sense of this connection he'd felt to Skinner ever since he'd met him. Doggett was a man who understood other men – he liked their company both professionally and personally. He knew himself to be the kind of gay man who had the utmost respect for women but found it easier to unwind and relax with other men. With other men he knew where he was – and with a military man he knew **exactly** where he was.

USMC – not just any branch of the military but the US Marine Corps, where he had started out his own military career – and would have stayed too if he hadn't found the ordeal of

living a "don't ask, don't tell" lifestyle too abhorrent. Damn, but every time he thought he could conquer his feelings for Skinner, something like this turned up and knocked him right back into his obsession. Surely this was too much of a coincidence? Doggett wasn't the kind of man who saw fate or conspiracy in a coincidence, but this one spoke to him on a very deep and personal level. He exhaled loudly, folded the tee shirt, put it in the sports bag with the other clothing, and then set off back to the hospital.

"Here." Doggett slung the bag onto the bed, and watched as Skinner eagerly rummaged through the contents. "I didn't know you were in the Corps," Doggett said softly, as Skinner pulled on his sweatpants under his hospital gown and then reached for the gray tee shirt. Skinner glanced at him, and shrugged.

"It isn't a secret," he said in a tone of voice that implied he would prefer not to talk about it all the same. He removed his hospital gown and Doggett had a brief glimpse of a magnificent, toned chest before Skinner pulled the tee shirt over his head.

"Nam?" Doggett asked softly. Skinner paused for one second, his body taut.

"Yeah," he growled at last.

"I was in the Lebanon – part of the peace-keeping force," Doggett said quietly.

Skinner pulled on his socks and sneakers, not even sparing Doggett a glance. "I know. Whole different kind of military experience I'd imagine," Skinner grunted, his back to his agent.

"Yeah. I'd imagine so," Doggett replied. "You knew I was in the Lebanon?" He asked, as Skinner finished tying his shoe-laces and stood up.

"Sure. I make it a rule to always know the agents under my command. I read your file. Several times."

"I didn't know about you – being in the marines, being at 'Nam," Doggett said slowly.

"Does it make a difference?" Skinner straightened, and faced Doggett full on for the first time in the conversation.

"Frankly – yes," Doggett said, and noticed the way Skinner's eyes widened at the reply. Maybe he'd expected a polite demur but that wasn't Doggett's style.

"In what way?" Skinner asked, his dark eyes intense.

"It just makes sense of a few things. You have... a military bearing I guess. I enjoyed the military. I was a career marine."

"And yet you left to join the NYPD." Skinner turned, and walked slowly towards the door. The comment didn't require an answer but the question – why? – hung between them anyway.

"Yes." Doggett followed Skinner out of the room. Two people could play at the elusive game, and he wasn't sure he wanted to give away all his secrets just yet. Skinner didn't press him and they walked down to the gym together.

Skinner's eagerness to work out wasn't matched by his physical fitness. The days of tests had left him run down and in too poor a condition to do anything very energetic, although his eyesight was back to normal at least. After a brief warm-up, Skinner made a beeline for the weights – only to find Doggett blocking his path.

"Uh-uh. Ten minutes slow jogging on the treadmill first. I want you properly warmed up before you try lifting anything."

Skinner held his ground, his dark eyes rebelling at being given an order by someone under his command. Doggett eyeballed him – he had no intention of backing down. Skinner studied him for a moment, as if testing his resolve, and then gave a wry grunt and backed off.

"You remind me of my drill instructor," he muttered, turning away and going to the treadmill. "Mean son of a bitch – used to push us until we were ready to drop and then sent us out on a ten mile run. I could have killed him sometimes. Wanted to most of the time during training – then afterwards, in country, offered up a prayer of thanks to him every single night of my life for getting me fit enough to endure what we faced out there."

Doggett chuckled and got on the treadmill next to Skinner. "Drill instructors the world over are the same – you hate 'em at the time but want to shake their hand after."

"I met him again several years later – couldn't believe this frail, white-haired guy was the same one who had scared me shitless in boot camp," Skinner grimaced. "I thanked him to his face and he laughed, said he was just doing his job. I don't suppose he even remembered me. He must have seen so many of us passing through." Skinner shrugged, even the gentle jogging making him breathless while he was talking.

"What was it like – 'Nam?" Doggett asked softly, curious to share experiences of warfare with someone who knew what it was like, who understood.

"Hot. What was the Lebanon like?" Skinner shot back, neatly avoiding the question.

"Hot." Doggett grinned sideways at his boss and Skinner shot him an uneasy smile back.

"Actually, that's a cliché about 'Nam. It could be hot enough and humid enough to boil your eyeballs, but there were times when it was so cold out in the mountains that I thought my balls would freeze off," Skinner offered, perhaps to offset his earlier facetious remark.

"Were you drafted?" Doggett asked, wanting to know this man running beside him, to really know and connect with him on some level other than as merely agent and AD.

"No. I enlisted on my 18th birthday." Skinner gazed ahead, the broad planes of his face settled into moody lines. "My father thought I was crazy and my mother wept. I think...it

was either the biggest mistake I ever made or the best thing I ever did. To this day I'm still not sure which." He turned his head back to face Doggett again. "How about you?" He asked.

"Like I said, I was a career marine. I joined the military both wanting and expecting action, and I sure as hell got it in the Lebanon. It wasn't a war like 'Nam. I didn't have to see my buddies go home in body bags...but I did see some fighting."

"I don't think you can compare the two," Skinner shrugged. "Any man who sees real action, whether as part of a peace-keeping force or a full-blown war experiences the same emotions whether ten or ten thousand die."

"Yeah." Doggett nodded, remembering the adrenaline rush of battle, the roar of the helicopters and the feeling of his gun in his hands. "You were 18 years old when you fought out there?"

"Yeah." Skinner stumbled slightly, then regained his footing. Doggett reached over and altered the programming on the other man's treadmill, slowing it down. Skinner glowered at him.

"Too much, too soon. Pace yourself," Doggett ordered. Skinner's eyes flashed with rebellion again and Doggett had to suppress a very real urge to take the big man in his arms, push him against the wall, and...He tore himself away from imagining how those sensuous lips would feel pressed against his own. He knew he wanted this man more than he'd ever wanted anyone in his life. He wanted Walter Skinner, body and soul. He wanted to make love to him, to take care of him, to find a way past those walls to the sweetness he was sure was inside and lay Walter Skinner bare to himself, in a way he had been hiding from during all these long, weary years of battle.

"Yessir," Skinner muttered under his breath. Doggett had to breathe very deeply to ensure his cock didn't respond to that particular mode of address. To have a man such as this kneel before him, and address him in such a way...Tony used to do it, with that sweetly submissive look in his beautiful blue eyes but that hadn't been hard for Tony – in fact he'd been the one who suggested it, who admitted to being turned on by it. Skinner was very different...Skinner would fight it, not understanding how much he needed it – how much he needed someone to take control – no, how much he needed to give up the rigid hold he had on his life, and bring himself back to himself. Not to have the control taken – but to surrender it freely, with trust. Doggett thumped the switch on his treadmill and hopped off the side of it. The idea of Walter Skinner ever looking at him with that kind of trust in those lost brown eyes was impossible. It wasn't a good idea to dwell on it.

"How long were you in the Corps?" Skinner asked, as Doggett reached for a towel and took a long, distracting swig of water.

"A few years. You?" Doggett watched those long legs stride on the treadmill, the broad chest heaving with the unexpected exertion after the previous few days in bed.

"Ten months, three weeks and 6 days," Skinner shrugged, the precision of the numbers belying the casual way he was speaking.

"And then?"

"Medical discharge." Skinner shrugged again.

"You were wounded in 'Nam?" Doggett paused, the water bottle held to his lips.

"Yeah. Whole squad went down in an ambush. I thought...I thought I was dead too. Should have been dead...**was** dead." Skinner's breath was coming in hard pants. "Was dead," he murmured again, his eyes faraway, seemingly lost in thought. "When Krycek...when he first infected me with these bloodsuckers, he killed me. I mean, literally – I was declared dead, just as I was in 'Nam all those years ago." He stumbled again and Doggett reached out an arm and helped him off the treadmill. Skinner leaned heavily on him, his breathing erratic, the weight of his body pressing on Doggett's shoulder and arm. Doggett held him easily – he was in pretty good shape himself, and he was as tall as Skinner, even if he didn't have the big man's breadth.

"Well I won't let you kill yourself in here," he commented wryly, sitting Skinner down on a bench. He knelt in front of him and handed him a water bottle. "Okay?" He asked as Skinner finished drinking. Skinner nodded.

"I died myself once," Doggett commented.

Skinner nodded. "I was there. That soul eater case."

"Yes. It was the weirdest thing – I'm not sure what my thoughts are on the existence of souls, but I was still there even when, technically speaking, I was dead. I remember seeing my body lying on the ground."

"I have the same memory," Skinner said softly. "Both times. Back in 'Nam, I was floating in the sky, just watching my body far below, covered in blood and bullet wounds. Second time, a couple of years ago, I was hovering on the ceiling of the hospital room. Both times..." He ducked his head. "Both times someone made me come back."

"Someone?" Doggett rocked back on his haunches. "A person?"

"Yeah. An old woman. She picked me up and carried me back to my body. That's the only way I can describe it." Skinner looked profoundly uncomfortable, as if this wasn't a revelation he really wanted to share. "You?" Skinner asked, unable to meet Doggett's eyes.

"I wish I could say something that interesting happened to me but it didn't," Doggett sighed. "I don't remember anything after that until I woke up good as new in the soul eater's cave. Do you have any idea who the old woman was? Did you recognise her?"

"No, but she sure as hell made it clear on both occasions that my time wasn't up just yet. Maybe she's someone they send to all the people who have to go back." It was said with a wry grunt but Doggett wasn't entirely sure it was meant to be a joke. He got up.

"I probably said too much. I don't usually...uh...I don't usually mention the out of body stuff. It freaks people out too much – hell, it freaks **me** out too much," Skinner said with an apologetic shrug, clearly thinking he'd scared Doggett away with the direction the conversation had gone. Nothing could have been further from the truth – Doggett was even more fascinated.

"No. I'm interested. I know you must shake your head and wonder about a guy like me, basically a disbeliever, working on the X Files after Mulder believed so much of this stuff. I don't take anything on trust but if someone has a real experience, first hand, well that's interesting to me. I'm prepared to accept it a lot more than someone banging on about intuition or some new age crap they read in a book."

"I didn't always like Mulder's methods, or his beliefs, but he was a damn fine agent. The best I've ever known," Skinner told him. He raised his head and looked Doggett in the eye, and there was a sense of such loss there it was almost tangible.

"I know. And I won't let him down," Doggett said softly. "Look, we could try some gentle weights but nothin' too strenuous. I think you're over-estimating what you're capable of right now, Walter."

"You're a kind of an anti-drill instructor," Skinner groused. "He used to push us too hard and you won't let me push myself at all."

"Left to your own devices I think you'd push yourself harder than either of us ever could," Doggett commented quietly. Skinner gave him a look of surprise, clearly taken aback at having been so expertly analysed, and Doggett could have kicked himself for his words. Skinner didn't say anything, he just followed Doggett over to the weight stack, and the rest of the session progressed in silence.

Doggett couldn't shake off a feeling of guilt for the rest of the day. Skinner had, in some respects, laid himself bare during their conversation. He'd offered up the kind of personal information that he wasn't comfortable with, had shared a very important part of himself with his agent in relating his near death experiences, and Doggett was acutely aware that he hadn't been nearly as honest back. He had sidestepped the question of why he had left the marines in order to go into the NYPD. He wished he could share that particular detail of his life with Skinner, but to do so would open up a can of worms he wasn't sure he was ready for.

Doggett pondered the discussion later that evening as he lay on his couch, idly flicking through the television channels for something worth watching. He wondered whether Skinner had shared the details of his out of body experiences with anyone else – especially the second one. The first he could dismiss as a result of his injuries, or maybe even as a hallucination caused by the drugs he would have received in the hospital before he regained

consciousness, but the second out of body experience rendered the first much more solid and real. Doggett wondered how much that would bother Skinner. He seemed uncomfortable with both experiences – and yet he also wanted to talk about them, to make sense of them in some way. Doggett had the very real feeling that this wasn't a subject Skinner had spoken about with anyone else and he felt as if his own response had been somehow unsatisfactory. All he had done was stress that he didn't believe – even though he was prepared to accept Skinner's account at face value he couldn't provide the same kind of validation for the experience as, say, a man like Fox Mulder could. Doggett fought off a wave of jealousy. Fox Mulder had been everywhere before him – the X Files, Scully's partner, and also, unless he was very much mistaken, Skinner's heart. He wasn't entirely sure what kind of love Skinner had felt for Mulder, whether it had been the love of brotherhood and comradeship he had seen so many times in the military or something deeper, but either way, now that Mulder had taken off once more Skinner seemed to have lost his footing. He was hanging out there, buffeted by the cold winds that were gathered around them all, with nobody to turn to for advice, solace or anchorage. Doggett sighed and closed his eyes, trying to switch off from examining the enigma that was Walter Skinner. Tony had been a piece of cake in comparison. All loud ties and flashing smiles – easily reined in, brought back to earth, and taken care of. Skinner was a much harder proposition.

Doggett arrived at the hospital early the next day bearing a bag of bagels – only to find Skinner's hospital room empty. He waited for a few minutes, thinking Skinner was in the bathroom, but when the other man didn't appear he grew concerned. Dumping the bag of bagels on the nightstand, Doggett went in search of the medical staff, but none of them seemed to know where Skinner had gone. Doggett fought down a wave of panic. This was absurd – Christ, this was just what Tony used to do to him all those years ago. Disappear without a word, turn up the worse for wear a few days later full of babbling news about some stake-out or other he'd been on, without a thought for how dangerous it was or the need to take someone to watch your back. Doggett reasoned that it was very unlikely Skinner could have gotten into any trouble in a hospital, but you never knew...no, that was absurd. Skinner wasn't a Tony Larsen or a Fox Mulder. He didn't **do** running off. He **did** do silent self-reproach though – was a master at it in fact, and Doggett suddenly knew exactly where the other man had gone.

He raced down the stairs to the gymnasium and looked in through the window on the door. Skinner was on the treadmill running as if he was in a sprint. Sweat was pouring off his body, his skin was pale and mottled, and his breathing was coming in harsh gasps. He was clearly pushing himself way beyond his body's current capabilities, his gaze fixed and glassy as he stared straight ahead, lost in the punishing rhythms of his own body and completely oblivious to the way his limbs were shaking with exertion. Doggett felt a surge of anger. Damn it – if the man would only let someone **in**, allow someone to help him, instead of repressing it all in this kind of self-punishment!

Doggett slammed through the doors, charged over to the treadmill, banged his hand down on the control panel to stop the swiftly moving ramp, grabbed Skinner's arm and hauled him off the machine sideways.

"What the hell do you think you're playin' at?" He demanded. Skinner's eyes came slowly back into focus, wide with shock.

"I could ask you the same damn question!" he growled out in reply, his breathing coming in harsh, retching pants. He gasped for breath, and then, without warning, keeled over. Doggett still had one hand firmly gripping Skinner's bicep, but it wasn't enough to hold up the weight of the big man as Skinner literally crumpled in front of him.

"Christ, there was no need for this - if you'd just taken it easy and paced yourself like I told you." Doggett managed to get Skinner into a sitting position, but the other man was shaking uncontrollably, his teeth chattering so violently as to be audible. Doggett grabbed a towel, wrapped it around Skinner's shoulders, and then began rubbing hard and furiously. He wondered if he should run for help, but he didn't want to leave Skinner who was clearly in a state of shock after pushing himself too far, too fast.

"How long have you been in here? Huh?" Doggett asked as he rubbed Skinner's clammy flesh with the towel, drying the sweat and warming the other man. "Were you lifting weights without anyone to spot you? Why the hell didn't you wait for me - you knew I'd be here today and I'd have worked out with you." *Then this wouldn't have happened*, Doggett thought to himself. He wasn't really expecting an answer to any of his questions; he was just thinking out loud because Skinner had given him such a scare. The big man's trembling had started to subside, but his body was nerveless, his arms as heavy as lead when Doggett tried to lift them. The pallor of his skin had receded slightly however, and he looked as if he was coming round, his dark eyes full of pain and anger at being so helpless.

"Don't ever do this to me again," Doggett said as he frantically continued rubbing the towel over Skinner's cold flesh. "D'you hear me, Tony? Are you listening to me? Huh?" He stopped his frenzied movements and took Skinner's face between his hands. "Whatever is going on inside that thick skull of yours, this is no way to deal with it. We have to find a better way. D'you understand that? I'm not going to let you do this to yourself. Even if you don't give a damn, I do."

Skinner's dark, glazed eyes suddenly focussed on Doggett as if those words had penetrated his foggy mind.

"I mean it," Doggett said. He pulled Skinner against him, wrapped his arms around the big man's shoulders and held him tight against his body to share his own warmth, all the time running his hands over Skinner's back as he rocked him to and fro, still trying to rub some life back into the listless, shaking man. Skinner's bald head was pressed into his shoulder and the big man seemed to be drawing some kind of comfort from the contact as he slowly came to. "Hold on. Just keep holding on, Walter, because I'm not going to let you fall, I'm not going to let them destroy you...just keeping hanging on in there." Doggett wasn't even sure what he was saying, just that he needed to convey some kind of soothing comfort to Skinner at this moment in time. He stroked Skinner's back for a long time, holding the other man against his own body until finally there was movement under his fingers, and Skinner drew back, shakily.

"It's okay. I'm okay," Skinner murmured softly. "I'm feeling better." His skin did feel warmer. Doggett let go, took a step back, and settled onto his haunches, as he surveyed Skinner intently.

"Can you walk?" He asked. "If not I'll call for a wheelchair."

"In that case I can definitely walk," Skinner growled, as if even the thought of being pushed thorough the hospital corridors in a wheelchair offended him. He took several deep breaths and then held out his hands to be helped to his feet. Doggett hauled him up and Skinner almost fell straight over again. Doggett dragged Skinner's arm over his shoulder and held him upright.

"It's okay. I've got ya," he said, guiding Skinner towards the door.

"Legs feel like jelly," Skinner explained apologetically, as he leaned on Doggett for support.

"Hardly surprising." Doggett glanced at the dial on the treadmill as they passed it and winced. "45 minutes, Walter? You were running like that for that long after the kind of week you've had? What the hell were you thinking?"

Skinner's mouth settled into a straight line. "That's none of your business, John," he snapped.

"That's where you're wrong, Mister," Doggett snapped back. "This is my case file, whether you like it or not."

"I told you before, I'm not a goddamn case!" Skinner growled.

"And I told you that I'm here as a friend but you wouldn't accept that, Walter. You can't have it both ways. I'm here as a friend - or as the SAC on a case file. Either way don't tell me to butt out because I won't – either as an agent on this case or as your friend."

Skinner made no reply, but when Doggett stole a glance at him the big man's eyes were downcast, his expression contrite.

Doggett managed to get Skinner safely to his room and helped him into bed, then sat down in the armchair with an exhausted sigh. There was silence between them for a moment, and then Skinner turned his head, his jaw doing that sideways clench that was so familiar to Doggett.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to worry you. I didn't realise I'd been running that long to be honest. I just...blanked out."

"That's not quite true, Walter," Doggett replied, in his usual blunt style, not wanting Skinner to get away with the half-truth, needing the other man to face up to himself. "You knew I was coming to visit today. Why not just wait for me? Presumably because you wanted to do precisely what you did – drive yourself into the ground. I accept it got out of hand, and you didn't anticipate what would happen – hell, I saw you down there on the treadmill and you

were completely out of it so I also accept that you didn't realise how long you'd been running, but the fact you were there on your own in the first place leads me to believe that you knew exactly what you were doing when you went down there."

Skinner's jaw was now clenched so tight that Doggett thought it might snap.

"Who the hell appointed you as my keeper?" He asked. "Look, I've told you I'm sorry if I worried you, but this was just an accident, that's all. There's no need to make such a big deal out of it."

Doggett made no reply, he just stared at Skinner intently for a long time, until, unable to bear his scrutiny, Skinner dropped his gaze down to his hands, grimacing slightly.

"Sorry," he said again, and this time he sounded as if he meant it.

"Okay then. Just don't pull this kind of stunt again," Doggett said firmly.

Skinner nodded, and rested back on his pillows. "Just some kind of crazy way to convince myself I'm fine I guess," he said with a little shrug.

Doggett saw no reason to join in Skinner's self-delusion – the episode in the gym went a long way beyond that piece of pop psychology. Skinner looked deflated – his skin was still paler than it should be and his eyes held an infinitely weary expression.

"You need some rest," Doggett said softly. He got up, and walked to the door, intending to call the doctor to check that Skinner was okay, but the big man stopped him dead in his tracks with what he said next:

"Who's Tony?"

Doggett froze, his hand reaching for the door handle. After a long pause, he turned.

"Sorry?" His voice didn't sound real to his own ears.

"Tony. You called me Tony back there. Who is he?"

"I don't remember...I didn't realise..." Doggett took a deep breath, and swallowed hard. How many of this man's questions was he going to avoid? He didn't have anything to hide, or anything he was ashamed of. Maybe working in the X Files department turned you into someone who existed in a permanent state of denial, but that wasn't him and he was damned if he was going to turn into that kind of person. Doggett came back to the bed and sat down in the armchair again. "Tony was my partner in the NYPD," he said softly. "He was also my lover."

There was a long silence. Skinner just stared at him. Doggett took a deep breath and started again.

"Yesterday you asked me why I left the Marine Corps and I didn't answer you. The truth is that I left because I was tired of living what, to my mind, amounted to a lie. I didn't like it

then and I don't like it now. I'm a homosexual – and I was a damn good marine. The US, as you know, has a "don't ask, don't tell" rule for gays in the military, but it just got too hard living under that kind of embargo. There was a time when I wasn't as upfront about what I am as I am now – not because I was ashamed of it because I've never been that - but because it was the only way to remain in the military. I've known I'm homosexual since I was a boy. It's just part of me, like the fact I have blue eyes or my name is John Doggett. I've always sought out and enjoyed the company of other men. I'm not remotely like the gay stereotype the media likes to portray and to be honest I'm not usually attracted to that kind of gay man either. In fact, I believe I follow a tradition of homosexual men in the military – a certain kind of gay man has always flourished in that kind of tough, all male environment. I used to..." Doggett paused, but Skinner still wasn't saying anything, so he continued. "This may fall under the heading of too much information but as a kid I used to read Homer's *Iliad*. I loved that story – loved reading about the battles, the heroism...and I found a role model there in Achilles. His relationship with Patroclus was one I always wanted for myself. It was my ideal. Two men fighting next to each other; warriors, friends, and lovers...that was partly why I joined the marines in the first place, but I didn't find what I was looking for there. Instead I found the only way I could stay was to hide what I was, and I was never comfortable with that." He fell silent again, waiting for some response – any response.

Skinner gave a little grunt. "You were married," he said finally, in a very quiet voice.

"Yes I was. Debbie was a soldier too. We met in the military and just clicked. She was a good friend – still is. I still see her occasionally, although...it's harder for us now, after Luke – our son. After he died..." Doggett took another deep breath. This wasn't easy. "Debbie was gay too. We got on so well that people thought we were seeing each other. She was the one who suggested we got married – she was worried that her sexuality might compromise her career. I wasn't particularly interested in covering up my sexuality but when she suggested that we have a child – it woke some yearning inside me I hadn't even realised I had before that. I wanted that child as much as she did and I wanted him to have parents who were married, and who would always be there for him. Debbie and I were never physically intimate – she was in a very loving relationship with a woman outside the military in any case, and I just don't work that way. I provided what was necessary and Debbie did the rest. We were both committed to Luke though – however unconventional our relationship, we loved that boy. It was partly because of him that I left the marines. I wanted him to know who his father was – and I didn't want him to be ashamed of a father who hid something as fundamental as his sexuality. Debbie was out of the military by this point, and, when I was wounded in the line of duty shortly after, I followed her. We both lived in New York for a while, although not together, until...until Luke was murdered. That nearly destroyed us. After that there didn't seem any point in even remaining married, so we got a divorce." Doggett dried up – those were just the bare facts of his life but they didn't really get close to the truth and reality of it. He gazed at Skinner, wondering what the other man's reaction would be - and when it came it surprised him.

"I'm sorry. I've lost people too. I know what that feels like," Skinner said softly. "Sharon and I...she had some miscarriages. Each time it happened it hurt...but it isn't quite the same as what you went through. I can't imagine what losing Luke was like for you."

"I read about Sharon in Mulder's files. I'm sorry for your loss," Doggett said, and Skinner's jaw did that sideways clench again.

"Mulder's damn files," he grunted. "And you wonder why I don't like being written up as a goddamn case file?"

"No, I don't wonder why – I agree with you, it's frustrating and it's a violation of your privacy, but I guess that when you get involved with the X Files your whole life becomes a case file. It goes with the territory. Look, do you have any problems with this?" Doggett asked bluntly, aware they were getting away from the point. "It doesn't affect my work, and I hope it doesn't make you uncomfortable, but if it does, then I'll be honest with you – that's your problem, not mine. I'd hate to lose our friendship over this but I am what I am, Walter, and I won't apologise for..."

"I don't have a problem with it," Skinner interrupted him "I've worked with gay agents before, John. It's not an issue for me. Do you have anyone in your life right now?"

"No," Doggett said firmly. "Not since Tony. How about you? Anyone for you since Sharon died?"

Skinner shook his head. "No," he said softly, gazing at his fingernails intently as if this kind of personal conversation was intensely difficult for him. In fact, if it hadn't been for the fact that he felt guilty about the incident in the gym, Doggett doubted that Skinner would have opened up to him at all. Maybe his own intimacies had led Skinner to feel he had to give something back.

"Well, now we've got that out in the open, perhaps we can watch a game or some news or somethin'," Doggett said cheerily, breaking the mood. He wasn't someone who liked sitting around talking endlessly about his past or his feelings, and he guessed Skinner was much the same. The other man certainly appeared relieved as they turned their attention to the latest report from CNN. Before long they were discussing current affairs as if the past hour hadn't just happened – but Doggett knew something had changed between them forever. Whether for the good or ill he didn't yet know.

The following week was one of the best and worst of Doggett's life. Best because he got to spend almost the entire time with a man he knew himself to be falling very much in love with, worst because it was hard to just stand by and watch that same man in so much pain. Skinner, as usual, didn't complain – he just fell more and more silent to the point where he barely spoke at all. Doggett didn't question that the tests were necessary – he understood what was driving Skinner to want an answer to the problem circulating in his own bloodstream, but all the same, the tests were tiring, complicated, and invasive. Doggett made himself useful reading to Skinner when the big man was too tired or in too much pain to even watch the television. Doggett wasn't sure it helped, but Skinner never asked him to leave, and he seemed soothed to some degree by the sound of Doggett's voice as he trawled through every article he could lay his hands on, trying to find something, anything, that would distract Skinner from the pain in his body. There were times when Doggett knew

that if Alex Krycek wasn't already dead he would have put a bullet through the bastard's skull himself.

"I'm only amazed it took you so long," he told Skinner one evening towards the end of the week. "I'd have put a bullet through his eyes 2 years back if he'd done this to me." Skinner gave a tight, tired smile.

"It's complicated," he murmured. "And I have some old fashioned ideas about bringing people to justice and the proper uses of a Bureau issue sidearm – it took me a long time to accept that Krycek was never going to be dealt with by conventional means. Besides, even if I had killed him when he first infected me, I'd still be here suffering these tests – until I can find a way to neutralise the nanocytes I can never rest easily."

"I guess." Doggett shook his head, the anger rising again. "Just seems to me after all you've been through you deserve a break."

"I haven't lost a son," Skinner shrugged. "I haven't been through anything worse than you."

"I disagree. I'm not saying losing Luke didn't hurt me – it damn near crushed the life out of me – but I haven't had to fight every day of my life the way you have these past few years. You've been under the kind of pressure that makes a man snap in two, Walter."

"You think I'm heading for a nervous breakdown, John?" Skinner asked, the hint of laughter in his voice implying that he was joking. Doggett pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"I think that you don't realise just how close you could be to falling apart, Walter, yes," he said honestly. Skinner's jaw clenched and he turned his face away.

"I'm fine. Next thing you'll be suggesting I see a goddamn shrink."

"No. I don't set much store by shrinks. I think a man can help himself by finding an outlet for his problems though – working through them with a friend, maybe even just admitting them to himself and not bottling them all up inside."

"I deal with things the only way I know how," Skinner growled.

"Maybe that's not good enough any more," Doggett told him. He knew he was pushing the other man, probably further than Skinner was able to go right now, but he wasn't about to be soft on him – too much was at stake.

The tests continued until the Friday of the second week, although they lessened in intensity on the last two days.

"How long before we know what the results are?" Doggett asked the doctor, as Skinner finished dressing to go home. She smiled.

"A week – maybe two. We need to analyse the results of some of the tests we ran. Mr. Skinner will be getting a full report on our findings."

"Okay...but how do you think they went?" Doggett asked. "I mean – do you have any clues to how we go about defeating this thing?"

"We have some avenues of investigation," she replied, sidestepping the question smoothly. Doggett glared at her, remembering all over again just why he hated the medical profession so much. "Take good care of him – he'll need a few days to get back to normal. He's going to be pretty weak for the next 36 hours or so."

"I'll see to it that he rests and takes it easy," Doggett promised.

"One thing before you leave," Skinner said, as the doctor turned to go. "The palm pilot." He held out his hand to her and she smiled.

"Of course. I can understand you wanting to keep that safe," she smiled. "I'll bring it in for you in a moment."

"I was assured you'd also keep the data from the past two weeks under lock and key," he said, and she nodded.

"Of course. We have security procedures in place for you, Mr. Skinner."

Skinner gave a curt nod, but Doggett didn't blame him for being so concerned on that subject. The doctor left the room, and Skinner went to pick up his bag.

"I'll take that." Doggett took it from him.

"You're going to drive me home and insist on buying me groceries as well, aren't you?" Skinner sighed.

"You got it." Doggett gave his most infuriating grin. "I told the doctor I'd see to it that you take it easy and I will." He ignored the look of irritated disgust Skinner gave him – although he picked up on an underlying sense of affection beneath the look and that warmed him. For all his protests, he got the feeling that Skinner genuinely liked having him around.

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"Why don't you go through to the living room and I'll bring us some coffee," Doggett said, dumping Skinner's bag in the hallway of the big man's apartment. By the time he took the coffee in a few minutes later, Skinner was already fast asleep on the couch. Doggett smiled and put the coffee mug down on the table, then pulled the comforter off the back of the couch and covered the sleeping man. There were weary lines etched around the edges of Skinner's eyes but apart from that he looked better than he had in a long time – maybe because now he had hope. After two years at Krycek's beck and call, freedom was at last within his grasp. Doggett turned on the TV to catch up on the day's news, and tuned the volume down low so as not to disturb Skinner. Every now and again he turned his attention from the news to the sleeping man on the couch. Skinner was a damn good-looking man, although that wasn't what had initially attracted Doggett's attention. Now though, he allowed himself to just enjoy the sight of that big body lying stretched out in all its glory, the

shirt slightly open at the neck to reveal a few stray curls of chest hair. Doggett was only human – he couldn't help but enjoy the view.

Skinner woke with a start two hours later.

"That was one hell of a nap," Doggett laughed, amused by the big man's startled expression. "I didn't want to wake you but you must have gotten yourself cramped on the couch. I think you should go to bed. It's nearly 9 anyway."

"9? I don't think I've gone to bed at 9 since I was in the eighth grade," Skinner grouched.

"You will tonight," Doggett told him firmly, getting up and stretching. Skinner shook his head, an amused light in his eyes.

"You never let up do you, drill sergeant?" He said. Doggett laughed.

"No I don't, marine," he replied. "Now get up those stairs."

"Yessir." Skinner mocked a salute and Doggett laughed again.

"What rank were you when you left the marines?" He asked, out of interest.

"Corporal." Skinner got up and swayed slightly. Doggett reached out a hand to steady him.

"Well, I guess I outrank you then because I was a Staff Sergeant," Doggett said with a grin.

"You're trying to pull rank on me now?" Skinner asked, in an amused tone.

"Why not – you pull rank on me every day in the office," Doggett replied.

Skinner grunted a wry laugh and began walking to the stairs. "Just you remember that on Monday morning, agent," he said. "I'll be back in charge then."

Doggett followed Skinner towards the stairs, deciding to keep one step behind in case Skinner's footing failed him again – he certainly wasn't very steady on his feet. They were about halfway up when Skinner paused and hung onto the banister for a second.

"Okay?" Doggett asked anxiously, putting down the bag he was carrying and holding onto Skinner's arm. "Can you make it the rest of the way or do you need some help?"

"I'll be fine." Skinner took a deep breath. "If the ground would just stay still this would be a lot easier. And I'm really not tired. I won't sleep now. I slept it all out – and I have just spent nearly 2 weeks sitting in a hospital bed." He took another step and swayed again. Doggett moved in and held him up.

"You seem to have an almost pathological dislike of going to bed," he commented and then he remembered those piled up books and that bottle of whisky. Maybe he wasn't far wrong about that.

"Hate the fucking insomnia, that's all," Skinner growled, confirming his suspicions. "Hate that feeling of being wide awake when everyone else is fast asleep."

"Is that why you work those absurd hours? The night Krycek died I couldn't believe you were in your office at that time of night – and only a couple of hours after being discharged from the hospital. Hell, if I wasn't here right now to stop you I think you'd go right on over to the Hoover building, wouldn't you?" Doggett waited patiently for Skinner to feel he could continue the journey up the stairs.

"I expect so. Beats sitting around waiting for sleep that doesn't come." Skinner shrugged. His face was very close and he wasn't wearing his glasses. Doggett was suddenly aware of seeing his boss in one of his rare unguarded moments.

"How long you had insomnia?" He asked, tightening his grasp on Skinner's arm. The other man shrugged.

"Since I was 18 years old. It comes and goes," he replied. "Sometimes it's worse than others. Used to wake up screaming about a 10 year old kid loaded with grenades who I shot in 'Nam. Recently it's been other things – Mulder when he was abducted. Scully when she was nearing the end of her pregnancy. They were screaming like that boy, screaming while I shot them, or while faceless people tortured them – and I could never stop it. Never could stop it." He bowed his head, his face betraying that little flicking grimace he made whenever he was upset.

"You can't keep everyone in the world safe, Walter."

"I can't keep anyone safe, John," Skinner replied, his eyes dark.

Doggett gazed at him for a moment, lost in the sense of sadness radiating from the other man. He so much wanted to reach out, and give comfort. Skinner turned back to the stairs, and they were nearly at the top when the big man stumbled against Doggett. The agent threw the bag onto the landing and held Skinner up...held him close, and then Skinner was too close, falling against him and Doggett couldn't help himself. Their lips touched – soft at first, and then, when he wasn't pushed away, Doggett grew bold. He wrapped his arms around Skinner, pulled him closer still, and kissed him full on the mouth. Even as he was doing it a part of his mind was yelling at him to stop, while another part couldn't have stopped if he'd tried. All the time he expected Skinner to shove him off, but instead, much to his surprise, Skinner's hands came to rest on Doggett's jeans-clad backside, and he held on for dear life as the kiss continued. When they finally parted, Doggett had no idea what to expect.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I guess I've wanted to do that for a long time."

"It's all right." Skinner sat down on the stairs with a weak smile. "I didn't exactly stop you."

Doggett gazed at the other man, genuinely stumped. "Walter, what are you telling me?" He asked, the room reeling around him. He had never thought he could actually have Walter Skinner. It had been a dream, a fantasy – was Skinner telling him different now? Skinner lowered his eyes in that downcast way that Doggett found such a turn on. The big man

looked so thoughtful and vulnerable like that – almost shy - his thick eyelashes obscuring the warm brown eyes.

"Just what I said. I'm not..." Skinner gave up, and shrugged, helplessly. Doggett sank down onto the landing, one step above where Skinner was sitting, and took the other man's face in his hands.

"Walter, you gotta tell me something here. Do you want us to take this into the bedroom? Because if you do I should warn you that I don't do one night stands with people I care about. Sure, I'm no angel. I've slept with guys I met in bars – too many times, probably, but this is different. This means something. Now, do you want to take this into the bedroom or not? If the answer's no then I'll forget this ever happened – and I'd be grateful if you did too."

"No." Skinner looked up too quickly, and Doggett caught the look of need in the other man's eyes. "No, I'd like us to..." words failed him again but he nodded his head in the direction of the bedroom.

"Walter." Doggett raised Skinner's face to look into the other man's eyes. "Have you ever been with a man before?" He asked.

"Yes." Skinner nodded, his jaw doing its usual sideways clench. "A long time ago. After 'Nam...I went a little crazy. I needed to prove I was alive I suppose. I experimented with a lot of things – drugs, sex. Hard to believe now I know, but I went through a wild 18 months. I had a male lover during that time. It was a good experience."

"Why did it end?" Doggett asked gently, sensing this wasn't something Skinner had talked about in a long time – if ever.

"He finished it...because I was so mixed-up at the time. Then I met Sharon and she put me back together. I decided to make something of my life. She saved me back then. She was the only one with the patience to take me on back during that crazy time. She pulled me through. I'd never have cheated on her for that reason alone...but I often thought about my lover. He was a good man."

Doggett smiled, and gently caressed the side of Skinner's face with his fingers.

"Is this what you want, Walter?" He asked. "I know it's what I want, but is it what you really need right now? You've been through a lot lately – I don't want to take advantage of you if you're not sure."

Skinner shook his head, and then, hesitantly, brought his hand up to rest on Doggett's chest. He stroked Doggett's nipple softly through the thin fabric of his sweater.

"John, I'm not very good with the words, and it's been a long time since I was with anyone, let alone another man, but it is what I want. I've appreciated you being here for me these past 2 weeks. I'm not sure what I'm feeling, not sure I'm feeling anything at all to be honest...but I want to. Things have been so numb, John." He raised his head again, his eyes

full of yearning but no less lost for all that. Doggett couldn't help himself. He pulled Skinner's head towards him and claimed the other man's mouth with his own, plundered it, worked open the lips and entered his tongue inside, lost himself in the pleasure of the kiss, of feeling Skinner's tongue clashing and dancing against his own as he reciprocated the embrace. They parted, reluctantly, and Doggett stood up.

"You well enough for this, Walter?" He asked, reaching down to help Skinner to his feet.

"I don't think I'm exactly going to be doing any acrobatics," Skinner said with a wan smile, "but...well, you're the drill instructor and I'm betting that you've done this more recently than I have so..." He paused again. "I'm in your hands," he said softly.

Doggett's heart skipped a beat at those words. They were such sweet words of trust and surrender.

"I'll take very good care of you, Walter," he said firmly, as he led the big man into the bedroom.

He helped Skinner to sit on the bed, and then went and closed the drapes. He turned back to find Skinner unbuttoning his shirt.

"No." Doggett strode across the room and put his hand on Skinner's fingers. "I want to do that," he said firmly. "I'm in charge here, Walter. I want you to go with the flow – just let go."

"I'm too beat to do anything else, I think," Skinner commented with a wry smile, allowing Doggett to push him back onto the bed. Doggett sat astride him, and started unbuttoning Skinner's shirt. He went slowly, claiming a kiss between each button, delighting in the soft warmth of Skinner's mouth under his own. He had never thought this could ever happen in a million years and he wanted to get it just right. Skinner was in no shape for anything strenuous, but after the past couple of weeks of pain Doggett wanted to remind the big man what it felt like to experience pleasure. He finished unbuttoning the shirt and smoothed it off Skinner's shoulders, revealing that beautiful, broad chest in all its glory. Doggett lowered his head and took one nipple in his mouth, kissed it gently, then caressed the nub of flesh more firmly with his tongue. Skinner gave a throaty growl, and reached up to wrap his arms around Doggett's body.

"Uh-uh." Doggett drew back and disengaged himself. "I'm in charge here, Walter. I'm the Staff Sergeant remember, Corporal."

Skinner gave him a bemused look, but allowed his weary arms to drop to his sides again.

"I'm the one doing all the work. You're just going to lie back and let me take care of this magnificent body," Doggett purred. He was aware of Skinner's cock hardening through his pants as he spoke. So, his boss liked the idea of giving up control did he? Doggett had never doubted that would be the case. Someone as buttoned up and in charge as Skinner was most of the time had to want a rest from that every now and again. He stroked Skinner's chest softly, toying with one nipple while he bent and sucked its twin. He went slowly,

languorously – this was a feast that he wanted to savour. His mouth trailed over warm, golden flesh, covered in little twists of hair, down towards the groin area, and Skinner pushed up against him as he went lower. Doggett paused again.

"What did I say, Walter? You give it up to me – all of it." Doggett's voice was low, and throaty and he loved the effect his words had on Skinner. The big man gave a moan of arousal and lowered his hips again. Doggett slowly, tantalisingly, undid Skinner's pants and reached inside. He could feel Skinner's hot, eager cock through the other man's briefs. "Now you can lift your hips for me. Let's get rid of these."

Doggett slid Skinner's pants and briefs off his thighs, threw them on the floor and then went back for a look at the treasure he had revealed. Skinner's cock didn't disappoint. Large, broad, cut and pulsing, Doggett looked forward to the day when he could take it in his ass, fast and hard, but that day hadn't arrived yet. Doggett had something a little more sedate in mind for Skinner's first sexual experience with another man in close to 30 years – especially considering the big man's current physical condition. He bent his head and took Skinner's cock in his mouth and Skinner groaned, and thrust up into him. Doggett drew back immediately.

"What did I tell you, Walter?" He asked, with mock severity.

"Feels so good," Skinner muttered.

"Yeah, and it'll keep on feeling that way for as long as you do what you're told. Okay?" Skinner nodded, his eyes dark and trusting in the dim light from the lamp. Doggett smiled. "You're doing good, Corporal," he said. "Real good." He sat astride Skinner once more and began slowly unbuttoning his own shirt. He slid it off his shoulders, never breaking eye contact with Skinner. He didn't usually do the whole seduction routine, but then he was never usually so concerned about pleasing his partner as he was tonight – usually it was just a matter of fast, hard and urgent. Tonight was something different. Skinner looked up at him, a longing look in his eyes.

"Can I touch you?" He asked. Doggett smiled. There had been an unspoken 'sir' at the end of that question and he liked that – it turned him on.

"Go ahead." He nodded, and Skinner reached up questing hands and slid them down Doggett's hard, toned body. Doggett's smile grew even broader as Skinner's fingers lingered on a nipple and then went lower, down the back of his pants and over the crease between his buttocks.

"You like that huh? You want to go there?" Doggett asked. Skinner nodded, and Doggett knelt up and undid his pants. He quickly disposed of them and his boxers. His own cock was a fraction longer than Skinner's although without the other man's breadth – he was also uncut. Skinner reached out and ran his hand over Doggett's shaft, moving the foreskin with his fingers, and Doggett placed a hand over the other man's, stopping him.

"I didn't say you could touch that," he purred. Skinner looked startled.

"Sorry," he whispered. "Can I touch it?" he asked, the 'sir' now almost tangible. Doggett grinned.

"Not yet. First I want to play with you some more." He turned and, raising his backside in the air, ducked his head and took Skinner's cock in his mouth in one smooth motion. Skinner groaned and bucked up against him, but this time Doggett allowed him the movement. He grinned to himself as he worked, guessing that Skinner was enjoying the view. Sure enough a few seconds later he felt hands on his backside, gently stroking, and then parting his buttocks and dipping inside. He hadn't given permission but he liked the sensation too much to quibble about it at this point.

Doggett teased Skinner's cock with his tongue and lips for several long minutes until the other man was groaning under him. Then he turned around, and laid down next to Skinner, their bodies pressed close. Doggett raised himself on one elbow and looked at Skinner's naked body, lying next to him in all its glory.

"You sure are a sight for sore eyes," he murmured, sweeping a hand over Skinner's taut flesh, across his torso, and down his thigh. Much to his surprise, he noticed that Skinner was trembling slightly. "Okay, Walter?" He asked gently. "You cold? Want me to stop?"

"No," Skinner replied through gritted teeth. "Just..." He lowered his head, unable to meet Doggett's eyes. Doggett sighed – this was a habit he was going to have to break, endearing though it was. He lifted Skinner's chin so that the other man was looking at him. "Nervous, I guess," Skinner admitted. "It's been a long time. Are you going to...?" He gestured vaguely with his hand in the general direction of the lower half of his body.

"No," Doggett smiled tenderly, and brushed the side of Skinner's face with the back of his hand. "Not today. Would you like that though? Another day?"

"Maybe. Yes." Skinner shrugged, his eyes downcast again.

"Good. When you're ready – huh? Tonight I have something different in mind. Now just lie there and enjoy this, Walter." Doggett pressed his lips against Skinner's and the other man's parted easily beneath his embrace. As he kissed, Doggett reached a hand down and took Skinner's hard cock in his hands. He squeezed it, and then began pumping more vigorously, all the time kissing Skinner soundly, exploring the other man's mouth with his tongue. Skinner moaned into him as he expertly aroused the other man towards climax, but Doggett sensed something wasn't right – Skinner wasn't letting go. He drew back, and looked Skinner in the eyes.

"Walter, any time you want to come, you just shoot, okay?" He said.

"What about you?" Skinner asked. "I haven't done anything for you." Doggett suppressed a little smile. However surly the big, bad AD Skinner acted in the office, in the bedroom he was proving to be a total pussycat.

"Don't you worry about me. This is about you," he said, his long fingers caressing the side of Skinner's face tenderly. "Now, just let go, Walter. You deserve it." He lowered his head and

began kissing Skinner again. Skinner opened up under him with a sigh, as if he had needed permission to enjoy himself. Doggett found the other man's lips looser, his body more relaxed and welcoming under him. He reached for Skinner's cock again, and began massaging it once more, with slow, languorous strokes. Before long Skinner was making moaning sounds into Doggett's mouth, and then he was trying to pull back as his climax grew near, but Doggett wasn't about to allow that. He covered the top part of Walter's torso with his own body, keeping him pinned underneath him, and set about kissing him in earnest, all the time sliding his hand up and down that warm, solid cock. Skinner finally surrendered, and gave himself up to the sensations, no longer trying to fight them. His body seemed to sink further into the mattress as he became more and more relaxed, and then he was coming, spurting into Doggett's hand as they continued their passionate kissing. Finally, Doggett released the other man, drew back a little, and looked down on Skinner.

"Good?" he asked.

Skinner was panting from the exertion, but there was a broad smile on his face. "Very good, Sergeant," he murmured.

Doggett laughed. "Good – then let's clean up and get some sleep, Corporal."

They took turns in the bathroom, and then Doggett helped Skinner into the bed. Doggett pressed his naked chest against Skinner's back and held the other man against him.

"Don't you want to...?" Skinner asked, as Doggett's still aroused cock pressed into his buttocks.

"No. I don't want to do anythin'. This suits me just fine," Doggett replied into the other man's ear. "Now go to sleep, Walter."

"Yessir," Skinner said in a wryly amused tone. Doggett smiled. Skinner was clearly unsure how to take all this concern for his welfare combined with the not entirely joking orders he was being given. Doggett wrapped his arms more tightly around his new lover's body. He had what he had wanted most in the world, right here beside him in the bed. He couldn't have been happier, but, having tasted Skinner once, he knew that he was now more hopelessly in love than ever before. A wave of foreboding went through him. The future, **their** future wouldn't be an easy one, he knew that much...and he'd fight to keep this prize he'd so unexpectedly won, no matter how hard the battle might be, or who it might be against.

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Doggett woke early the next day to find his face nuzzled against Skinner's shoulder. He looked around blearily, and then came to with a blissful smile. Skinner was still fast asleep, one large arm slung over Doggett's thigh. Doggett smiled and spent a few moments gazing at his new lover. Skinner was already looking better than he had at any point during the past two weeks. A healthy glow had returned to his skin, and the pain lines on his face had faded. He looked a lot younger than Doggett was accustomed to seeing him as well. Doggett spent

a long time just watching the other man sleep. He had never imagined that the day would ever come where he woke up in Walter Skinner's bed, with a naked, utterly trustful Walter Skinner by his side, and he wanted to savour the moment.

Finally, he dragged himself away, slipped quietly to the bathroom with his clothes, and got dressed. He let himself out of the apartment, went to a local diner, and returned bearing breakfast. Skinner woke with a start when Doggett took the meal up to his lover on a tray, along with a carrier bag full of various other goodies.

"Hey, sleepyhead," Doggett grinned. "I don't know about you but I'm starving – we didn't get anything to eat last night."

Skinner looked at him for a moment, as if he wasn't quite sure where he was or what the hell Doggett was doing in his bedroom. Doggett held his breath. If Skinner turned around to him in the cold light of day and did the denial thing he had become so accustomed to since working on the X Files then he knew he'd explode – and things would get very messy indeed. Skinner stretched and sat up in the bed, his expression neutral – so Doggett had no way of judging what was going on in his head.

"You're a gourmet cook?" Skinner raised an eyebrow at the feast laid out in front of him.

"Hell, no. Most I can manage to cook for breakfast is pop tarts. I'm hopeless in the kitchen. No, I bought take out."

Skinner gave a grin, and Doggett couldn't help himself – he leaned forward as he handed Skinner the tray, and kissed the other man full on the lips. Skinner's mouth was hesitant at first, and then opened up to him, willing and soft. Doggett drew back, a satisfied smile on his face. That answered that question at least.

"Thought I might have changed my mind?" Skinner asked quietly gazing at the contents of the tray appreciatively. Doggett sat down on the bed, and picked a buttered bagel from the tray.

"Well, last night was a bit of a surprise – for both of us I think. No telling what might happen once the moment passed. I didn't know if you were going to wake up viewing me as a huge mistake." Doggett took a bite of his bagel and watched as Skinner began to eat voraciously from the variety of foods on the tray.

"I've made a few huge mistakes in my life but I don't think last night was one of them," Skinner murmured between mouthfuls. "I'll be honest with you though, John. I'm not sure I know **what** last night was all about, or how I feel about it."

"Fair enough." Doggett nodded. "Honesty I can handle. You just keep being honest with me, Walter – that's all I ask of you."

Skinner met Doggett's gaze speculatively, as if surprised by that comment. Finally he nodded, and continued eating. Doggett sighed internally – while he was sure that Walter Skinner was a fundamentally honest man, he was also a very private man – and right now

Skinner was so lost and confused that he felt sure that the big man didn't even have the capability of being honest with himself, let alone anyone else. Skinner was adrift, floating out at sea with nothing to cling to. Doggett intended to be the other man's anchor because he was damned if he was going to allow Skinner to drift so far out into the cold that he would never be able to find his way back.

"Breakfast wasn't all I bought," Doggett said, changing the subject with a grin. He reached for the bag he'd slung on the bed. "Here." He emptied the morning's newspapers out of the bag and Skinner's face widened into a broad grin.

"I think you're spoiling me," he said, laughing.

"I think you're worth spoiling," Doggett replied, handing the other man a paper. "How are you feeling, Corporal? Are you tired today, or raring to go?" Skinner stretched his arms over his head and considered that for a moment, then relaxed.

"You, know, I'm feeling pretty good," he said. "I can't believe I slept all night. I'm feeling much better than yesterday. The drugs must be more or less out of my system I think." Doggett was pleased to hear it – and it was certainly true that Skinner was looking a damn sight better than he had at any time over the past two weeks. Skinner opened the paper, and they both sat in a mess of food, tray, drink, and newspapers, reading avidly, and catching up on the latest news. They'd been quietly eating and reading for half an hour when Skinner suddenly glanced up.

"John – what's with the whole Corporal deal?" He asked. "Last night, as I recall, you were fairly...assertive in bed."

"Does that bother you?" Doggett asked carefully, taking another bite out of his bagel, and flicking over a page in the newspaper he wasn't really reading. Skinner thought about it for a moment.

"No..." he answered at last, uncertainly. "I'm just not used to..."

"Giving up control. I know." Doggett smiled at him. "A big guy like you, powerful job – it's kind of expected of you to take charge everywhere isn't it? The women you've been with probably brought those expectations to sex didn't they?"

"I guess so. I've never really thought about it." Skinner shrugged. "I've always been so much bigger and stronger than my partners...I had to take care of them...I suppose I did always take the lead in the bedroom."

"Well, isn't it nice to experience it from a different angle?" Doggett put his head on one side and considered the other man for a moment. Skinner's jaw did a sideways clench, so Doggett guessed that whatever was going on inside was something Skinner wasn't entirely at ease with.

"Yes," Skinner answered finally. He didn't look very comfortable with that admission but Doggett was sure that he was at least being honest.

"Look, Walter, I enjoy taking charge of personal relationships – I have a clear idea of what I want, and what I want to give, and I go for it. That's just me. I don't mean any disrespect by it – quite the contrary in fact. You see, I think, Walter, that right now you need to give it up, to let go, and just enjoy someone else calling the shots for a change. Is there any part of your life you haven't had to rigidly control for these past few years?" Skinner's jaw slid sideways again, and locked into place. His eyes were downcast as he struggled with the answer to that question. "Walter?" John prompted. Skinner looked up at him from under his eyelashes – even without his glasses, Doggett noticed that Skinner still needed some way of hiding his true emotions.

"No. No, John. You're right." Skinner gave a tight smile.

"And you're so weary of that...desperately tired – anyone can see that, anyone who cares about you at least – and I care. I'm not asking anything of you, Walter. I'm just giving - for as long as you need to keep taking. I want you to lean on me all you need right now but I want to tell you this." Doggett leaned forward and put a hand on Skinner's arm. "You don't need to worry that our relationship will cause any problems in the office. I respect you, Walter – whether you're butt naked in bed taking my orders, or dressed up in a suit in the office giving me orders. Respect's what it's all about. You'll never find me takin' advantage of what we have between us – you just keep me in the loop, and you can rely on me to be honest with you in return. Hell, you know enough about my honesty by now, having been on the receiving end of it a few times, to know I won't pull any punches. I'm not Mulder or Scully, Walter. You need to be told something and I won't let rank keep me from givin' it to you straight."

Skinner gave a wry grunt. "I'd kind of figured that much," he said with a little grimacing grin.

"Good. Are we done here?" Doggett surveyed the wreckage of their meal. "Because if we are, I have some plans."

"Okay." Skinner put the tray on the nightstand and began to pull back the sheets.

"Hold it – who said my plans involved you getting out of bed?" Doggett asked with a grin. He swept the newspapers onto the floor, and toed his shoes off. Skinner answered with a smile of his own – a shy, more desperately insecure smile than Doggett could ever have imagined the other man was capable of.

"You gotta relax, Walter. I'm the one who's in charge of making it good," Doggett said, climbing onto the bed. "You just gotta lie there and do as you're told." He quickly disposed of his clothes and then reached for the last couple of items left in the bag he'd brought up to the room. Skinner eyed the tube of lube and packets of condoms nervously.

"You ever do anal sex with your lover all those years ago, Walter?" Doggett asked.

Skinner shook his head. "I, uh, went inside him a few times, but I never wanted to...be on the receiving end."

"You mean that even back then you never wanted to give up control to that extent," Doggett said bluntly. "Well, we aren't going to do anything you don't want to – but I sure as

hell intend to take you to the point where you want to. Last night you said you were in my hands – I can show you a hundred different ways to enjoy yourself if you still feel the same way this morning. So, Walter, will you let me? Are you going to give it all up for me again, Corporal?"

Skinner made a little face at the mode of address, and he was clearly uncertain where this was headed – but at the same time, there was a need in him to surrender that was almost visible in his brown eyes. Doggett smiled. He leaned over, and kissed Skinner firmly on the lips, pushed his tongue inside and gently explored within. Skinner opened up for him so sweetly and that was all the answer he needed.

"I'll take that a 'yes' then," he said when he'd finished, gently brushing his hand over Skinner's cheek. The other man looked embarrassed by the affection inherent in the caress. Doggett wasn't surprised – so many of his own gender understood the dynamics of sex and need, but were apprehensive about the emotional aspects of sex. Doggett enjoyed a fast, frantic fuck as much as the next guy, but he'd long ago come to realise that when it was good, really good, it was as a result of genuine affection between the two participants. He had therefore long since left embarrassment about expressing that affection behind him. He didn't play games in relationships, or pretend to feel less than he did, or commit less than he felt for fear of scaring the other person away. He was just himself, take it or leave it.

"What's the matter, Walter? You think that stuff's just for women? Don't go fooling yourself this is just about sex, because it isn't. You were honest enough to tell me that you don't know what you're feeling right now, but I can tell you that I'm feeling pretty damn happy. I'm in bed with a fantastic looking guy who just happens to be someone I know, respect, and care about. I'm not askin' for anything back from you, I told you that already. This is what I want to give – if that changes I'll tell you. You won't have to read it in my body language, or arguments, or what's left unsaid between us. Understand me?" Skinner looked overwhelmed.

"I think so," he said at last. Doggett guessed he'd never been in a relationship where people talked to each other like this – so this was going to be something of a learning curve. Well, what the hell, Walter Skinner's heart was a prize worth waiting for. He could be patient.

"Okay then. I want you to roll onto your front."

Skinner thought about it for a second, and then did as he was told. Doggett pulled back the sheets to reveal the most beautiful sight he thought he'd ever witnessed. Last night it had been dark in the lamp-lit bedroom, and he'd not really had the opportunity to check out his lover's ass, but now he was viewing it in all its glory; Skinner's long limbs ended in the most beautiful, taut, plump, rounded buttocks that Doggett had ever had the pleasure to witness. He let out a long, low whistle, and Skinner looked up at him, startled.

"What's the matter?" He asked.

"What's the matter? Only that there's a crime been committed all these years and I never even knew about it!" Doggett replied with a wide grin. "You've been hiding **this** under layers

of cotton and wool all this time, Walter!" he chided. Skinner looked at him as if he'd gone out of his mind, and then let out a deep, low, rumbling laugh of amazement. "Looks to me like you're a man who's not used to being complimented. Your past lovers have been holdin' out on you, Walter," Doggett said, grinning broadly. Skinner was looking noticeably more relaxed, if still very embarrassed. "Okay – you're going to have to let me play with my new toy for a while," Doggett told him. "I want you to just lie there while I get to work. I don't want you doing anything but what I tell you."

He slid down the bed, and ran his hands over Skinner's firm, golden buttocks. It was an experience of sheer sensory delight, and he went slowly, massaging, kneading, enjoying the feel of all that beautiful flesh under his fingertips.

"Open your legs, Walter," he ordered, and Skinner moved them a little. "Wider, Corporal – I need some access here," Doggett said. Skinner was hesitant, but did as he was told. "Good man. Now just hold on tight to the pillows because I'm betting you've never experienced anything like what I'm about to do next." Doggett smiled, and grasped Skinner's buttocks lovingly in his hands, then parted them, and bent his head to the dark opening he'd revealed. The effect was instantaneous. Skinner jumped into the air, a startled sound dying in his throat. The force of one of those long limbs kicking him knocked Doggett back.

"At ease, Corporal," he ordered softly, pushing Skinner back down onto the bed. "There's no way this hurts so just lie back down again."

"Christ...was that...was that your tongue?" Skinner asked.

"Yeah – and it's going back in there so you'd better get used to it, Corporal. I want to spend quite a long time drinking from this particular well so lie still."

"You enjoy this?" Skinner asked, sounding bemused, as Doggett returned to his former position and began parting Skinner's buttocks again.

"You bet. Now be quiet, Corporal – just relax and enjoy." Doggett grinned to himself as he sank his tongue back into Skinner's ass. He loved rimming and was damn good at it – Walter Skinner was going to find himself rimmed by the best. He wanted to give his new lover an experience he'd never forget. He dipped his tongue into the sensitive opening, back and forth, and felt Skinner tense under him. He knew the big man was finding it hard to just relax and be made love to like this, so Doggett stroked Skinner's buttocks gently, soothing him until the body beneath him began to sink into the mattress. Doggett went slowly, teasing the little pink opening, enjoying the way it was relaxing under his ministrations. Before long, he heard little noises emanating from Skinner's throat and his own cock hardened at the sound. God, he loved doing this! He loved the feel of Skinner's body responding to what he was doing to it, loved the sensation of this big, buttoned up, in-control man giving it all up to him. It turned him on so much. His tongue was moving faster now, pushing deeper into the crevasse he was exploring. Skinner was moaning in earnest, his body moving rhythmically in time to Doggett's questing tongue. Doggett savoured the sensations of Skinner's buttocks under his hands and the scent of the big man's body. Finally, judging that Skinner was now very relaxed and receptive, he pulled back, sat up on

his haunches and looked down with some satisfaction on the man he'd just brought such exquisite pleasure to. Skinner looked as if he'd been flattened by a steam-roller, his body loose, his limbs akimbo, an expression of amazed bliss on his face.

"Oh shit," he muttered. "That was so good. Thank you, John."

"You're welcome. Now turn over. I haven't finished with you yet." Doggett reached for the lube.

Skinner raised an eyebrow, as if surprised by the command.

"Did you think I'd make love to you this first time without being able to look into your eyes?" Doggett asked. "Come on, Corporal, move this ass." He slapped Skinner's butt lightly a couple of times, delighted by the way the skin went a soft pink in colour. Skinner rolled over as ordered, and lay looking up at Doggett, one arm over his forehead, partly obscuring his eyes.

"Move the arm, Corporal," Doggett ordered firmly. "No hiding in this bedroom."

"I wasn't..." Skinner moved his arm. "I was just resting it there," he murmured.

"I know what you were doing," Doggett said softly. He straddled Skinner's body and began stroking the big man, moving down slowly, inexorably, towards his groin. He was pleased to note that Skinner's cock was already hard and weeping. Doggett tangled his fingers in Skinner's chest hair, snagged at a nipple, played with it for a while, and then moved lower, sliding back along Skinner's legs as he did so. He took Skinner's hard cock in his hand and massaged it firmly, but didn't stay there for too long in case Skinner came before he wanted him to. Instead he sat up, and tapped Skinner's thighs.

"Open your legs for me, Corporal," he ordered. Skinner did as he was told, faster this time than the last. Doggett pushed the large, muscled thighs further apart, and then smeared lube on his fingers, all the time looking Skinner in the eye. "Okay...I'm not going to do anything to hurt you. This is all about you enjoying yourself, so I want you to just relax and let me show you my moves." Doggett grinned and Skinner, reassured, smiled back. "The only thing I want you to do is keep your eyes on me. That's all. Just keep connected so I can see how you're reacting."

Doggett grabbed a pillow with his un-lubed hand and ordered Skinner to lift his hips so he could push the pillow underneath. Then, when he had the big man comfortably arranged, he began playing, very gently with Skinner's balls. After awhile, his fingers dipped down towards the other man's buttocks, and then, without warning, he slipped one finger inside. Skinner tensed and then relaxed as he realised this wasn't uncomfortable. Doggett smiled, and reached for Skinner's cock with his free hand. His lover moaned as Doggett took it skilfully in his hand and rubbed it up and down in time to the thrusts of his fingers. Skinner was being so expertly pleased that he barely noticed when Doggett put another finger inside him. "I'm going to go deeper – hold on," Doggett said, sliding his fingers as far as they'd go. He moved them around, all the time watching for Skinner's reaction. The other man's anus was fully relaxed under his ministrations – he seemed to be thoroughly enjoying

the sensations of his own body. Doggett risked inserting a third finger and Skinner wriggled on his fingers, clearly happy to take the extra digit.

"Does this feel good, Walter?" Doggett asked.

"Yes..." Skinner looked almost beyond coherent speech.

"We can finish this soon if you want – I can bring you off, or we can take it further. Would that be too much too soon for you, Corporal?"

"I don't know." Skinner looked at Doggett uncertainly.

"Okay." Doggett nodded. Skinner had said he was numb, and Doggett had accepted that Skinner wasn't in a place where he was too sure of anything right now. All his certainties had been eroded over the past few years, until he found himself in the position of not being in touch with his own wants and needs or even the most basic desires of his body. That was understandable – so it was up to Doggett to see that he found himself again. "All right – you're enjoying this so much that I'm going to lube myself up, and we'll see if you want to take me. Going in it might burn a little, but you're nicely relaxed and so slippery inside that it shouldn't hurt for long if it does at all. If you don't like it, just holler and I'll stop."

Doggett undid a condom package and slid the rubber over his rigid cock. He longed to make love to Skinner with his cock, to show him the stars, as he always thought of it, when the world exploded around you in sexual ecstasy. Doggett smoothed a generous quantity of lubricant over his condomed cock, and then positioned himself between Skinner's outstretched thighs. He lifted Skinner's legs onto his shoulders, then took hold of Skinner's buttocks in both his hands, and slowly edged the tip of his cock into the entrance. Skinner was gazing up at him, apprehension evident in his dark eyes. He furlled his fists by his side, clearly determined to take whatever was going to happen to him. Doggett stopped and reached out to unfurl one of those fists. He covered Skinner's hand with his own.

"None of this is going to be an endurance test. You've just been through two weeks of that. This is about enjoyment. If you don't like it, we stop. It's that simple," Doggett told him firmly. "Understood, Corporal?"

"Yes, Sergeant," Skinner said with a genuine smile.

"Okay then." Doggett began pushing slowly into Skinner's body, revelling in the way the big man's narrow passage opened up to him. Skinner was tight and warm and Doggett knew he'd have to exercise some self-control to keep from coming on the spot. He slid in further and further and then, without warning, pushed all the way in and, as he did so, propelled his entire body forward and placed his hands on either side of Skinner's chest. Their faces were now so close as to be almost touching.

"Okay...just breathe..." Doggett said soothingly, as Skinner's eyes registered something close to panic - more Doggett suspected, from the unexpected sensations than from being in any distress. "Keep looking at me, Corporal, and keep breathing," Doggett ordered, looked into Skinner's dark eyes the whole time, never breaking contact. Skinner nodded and the panic

receded from his eyes. "Okay...this feels so damn good. You are so damn sexy lying here like this, under me, around me," Doggett purred, feeling like the cat that got the cream. He shifted his weight slightly, angled his cock in a little deeper and Skinner gave a gasp.

"Good?" Doggett asked.

Skinner nodded frantically. "Oh shit," he whispered.

"That's your prostate – wait until I thrust, it'll drive you wild. First though, I want you to just adjust to the feel of me inside you."

Doggett lowered his head and stole a kiss from Skinner's lips and the big man opened up immediately to let his tongue in. When the kiss ended, Doggett pushed himself back and withdrew his cock a little, then slid back in...small strokes, just to get Skinner accustomed to the sensations of penetration. Only when he was sure his partner was ready, did he begin to push in hard, with long, slow, rhythmic thrusts.

"Touch your cock – bring yourself off," Doggett instructed, panting as he moved harder and faster. Skinner's gaze never left him, brown eyes locked with blue, and soon the big man was sighing with pleasure underneath him, his hand pumping desperately between his legs. He began crying out on every inward thrust as Doggett unerringly hit his prostate each time, and then Doggett could tell that Skinner was on the verge of coming, as his eyes glazed and his voice became hoarse. His own climax was close and he stepped up a level and was now thrusting so hard and so fast that Skinner's face was a blur. Doggett put his head back as he felt his climax take him. Sweat was flooding off his body, and then he was coming hard, sheathed inside the beautiful body of the man lying underneath him. He slumped down and claimed Skinner's mouth with another kiss, aware of the other man's sticky come on his stomach between them, and pleased that Skinner had reached his own orgasm. Doggett lay on Skinner's chest for a moment, utterly sated.

"Oh shit," he said at last. "That was mind blowing. Thank you, Walter." He kissed Skinner again. Skinner's eyes were dark with pleasure, but it was clear from the expression on his face that he was too far gone to say anything in reply. Doggett smiled happily. "Looks like the earth moved for you too, Corporal. Stay still, I'm going to withdraw..."

Doggett slowly disengaged himself, removed the condom, tied it, and threw it onto one of the dishes on the tray on the floor. Then he slid back down to lie beside Skinner, his body pressed close to that of the man he had just made love to. He took Skinner's head in his hands, and pressed it against his own body, kissing the bald head tenderly. Skinner came easily – he seemed utterly boneless and beyond coherent speech. Doggett was content to just rest there with him, both of them sweaty and sated beyond expression.

They dozed, and then, after a long time, Skinner moved his head and angled up his face for a kiss. Doggett obliged, squeezing Skinner's buttock affectionately with his free hand.

"Well..." Skinner's voice sounded husky. "When you told that doctor you'd take good care of me, I'm not sure this is what she had in mind."

Doggett laughed out loud, and squeezed Skinner's buttock again. "Oh boy, you're right about that, but I said I'd get you back to health and a little light exercise combined with some bed rest is just what the doctor would have ordered I think. Hell, it's about the only way I'd manage to keep a patient as stubborn as you **in bed!**"

Skinner's laugh was a low, bass, rumbling roar that bubbled up deep inside his chest and then exploded to the surface. They both laughed together, hands clasped around each other, and then, exhausted once more, sank back into silent contemplation of what had passed between them. Doggett thought that particular session of lovemaking was the most intense he'd ever experienced in his life – and not one that he'd ever forget.

"You're mine now," he whispered to the dozing Skinner, his lips brushing Skinner's naked scalp. "You hear me, Corporal? You're mine now - body and soul. I just made you mine, just claimed you for my own, and I ain't ever letting you go again."

Skinner, half asleep, burrowed his head deeper into Doggett's neck and let out a low, contented sigh.

They spent a lazy day together. Doggett was not only wildly attracted to Skinner physically – he really enjoyed being with the other man as well. They finished reading the papers, went out for a walk and then returned to the apartment. It was comfortable – they didn't talk about their relationship, or anything heavier than an article they'd both read in the morning papers. Doggett knew that their relationship wasn't a subject he wanted to be just ignored, like so much else in Skinner's life, but he also didn't want to rush anything. So he was surprised when after they'd eaten their evening meal, Skinner pushed back his plate, looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, and then said:

"What happened to Tony?"

Doggett pushed his own plate away with a sigh. "It's a good question. Sometimes I wonder about it myself. We just went wrong, Walter." He paused. "No, that's not quite true – there were reasons. Tony needed a lot of my attention. He was younger than me, greener than me – and he had a kind of wild flamboyance that had to be reined in if it wasn't going to get him killed."

"Sounds familiar," Skinner grunted.

Doggett smiled. "I can assure you Tony wasn't anything like Fox Mulder," he said.

"Ah, but you didn't know Fox Mulder 8 years ago, when I first met him," Skinner replied softly, a faraway expression in his eyes.

"True," Doggett conceded. "But somehow I don't think Tony and Mulder would have had much in common, even back then. Tony was a good man, but...he wanted me to be something I wasn't. You asked earlier about me calling the shots in the bedroom – Tony was attracted to that side of me. Over time he wanted more than that though – and he started taking me into territory I wasn't comfortable with."

"Are we talking kinky stuff here?" Skinner shifted uncomfortably.

"Yes." Doggett nodded. "You see, for me, the turn on was in the power play between me and him. Tony liked things a little rougher."

"Don't tell me he wanted you to spank him?" Skinner chuckled, although the pink tips of his ears betrayed the fact that he was embarrassed.

"Oh, he wanted a lot more than that. Spanking, rough sex – that's not hard to deliver. I don't need it but I can sure as hell enjoy it. I even turned my hand to bondage every now and again when he needed it...but he wanted something else. He liked a kind of extreme verbal humiliation and I couldn't deliver that – and he tried to provoke me into hitting him a few times. He had a fetish about gut punching that again, I just couldn't deliver." Doggett shrugged. "I sensed he had a need to go deeper and darker and I didn't want to go there. Then..." He shook his head. "Then Luke died," he said softly. "And Tony didn't know how to cope. He was used to me taking care of him you see, and suddenly I didn't have the energy for that any more. I threw myself into the search for Luke's killer, against orders, against all good sense. It became my obsession – I literally didn't care about anything or anyone else, including him. He felt neglected, and started behaving badly in order to get my attention. I just didn't have time for that kind of bullshit. I reacted angrily and told him to leave. Sometimes I regret that...but I think we were heading for the rocks anyway. We were pulling in all kinds of different directions." Doggett paused and gazed at Skinner for a moment. "You know, that's why I figure I understand the place you're in right now, Walter. Tony wanted me to be strong for him all the time, to always be that person for him, and that placed me under a lot of pressure. Usually it's fine – it's a pressure I can not only cope with - I actually enjoy it. But when Luke was killed...I needed someone to look out for me...Tony couldn't be that person."

He sighed, took a sip of water, and then looked back at Skinner who was staring at him intently. "You're in that place I was in, Walter. You've been doing the taking care for a long time. You've been takin' all the responsibility, trying to keep people safe, hiding the truth so it doesn't hurt people, trying to make the best of a bad situation, always being the strong guy, holding others up. I saw you at Mulder's funeral, holding Scully up, and I knew how you felt watching that coffin disappear into the grave. You blamed yourself for Mulder being abducted in the first place, but you couldn't even allow yourself to experience that grief while Scully needed you to be strong. I understand that, I really do, but at some point you have to let it out –you have to let it go, or you'll go insane. I know. I looked madness in the eye during that time after Luke died. I was a mess. It was Debbie who pointed it out to me eventually. She said she'd lost Luke and she didn't want to lose me too – our friendship meant too much to her for that. So I pulled myself back together but it wasn't easy. I had to stop chasing after shadows in order to find the man who did that to Luke..." Doggett felt his jaw tightening as he said that. "I was partly doing all that chasing just to avoid the depths of my own grief. Only when I stopped did I allow myself to really feel the full sorrow of what happened to my son. It was harrowing and painful, but in a way facing up to that grief saved my life. Eventually I was able to come out the other side – it'll always hurt, sure, but at least I've been able to move on. That was partly why I came to DC – to make a fresh start. I'm glad

I did." He looked meaningfully at Skinner. Skinner smiled a gentle smile. He didn't say anything but one of his big hands came to rest over John's fingers and he squeezed, silently.

Skinner seemed almost completely recovered by the time he returned to work on Monday. In fact, he seemed exceptionally bright. There was a burning energy that radiated through him continuously. Doggett wanted to flatter himself that it was because of their fledgling relationship, to even hope that it might be a result of Skinner starting to reciprocate his feelings, but he knew in his heart that wasn't the case. Skinner was riding high on hope; he'd killed the man who'd been torturing him for two years, he'd recovered the palm pilot, and undergone those gruelling medical tests searching for a cure. Skinner was a goal-oriented person and Doggett could see that while he was taking steps towards reaching the goal of eliminating the nanocytes from his bloodstream, he was happy. At least now he could **do** something, instead of being the passive victim, sitting around waiting for Krycek to show up and press his buttons all over again. Skinner was allowing himself to believe that he'd turned a corner. Mulder had taken off into the unknown and was no longer Skinner's responsibility, his relationship with Doggett was getting him in touch with his body's needs and his own emotions after a long period of crippling numbness following the death of his wife, and soon he would get the results of his medical tests. Doggett was concerned that Skinner's euphoria was misplaced – a false hope that would bring him crashing down if anything went wrong. There was a lack of resilience behind it – all that was keeping Skinner going was a brittle façade of strength – and it was a façade that Doggett could see through all too easily.

Doggett left Skinner's apartment on Sunday night. He didn't see his lover again until lunchtime the following day when he ran up to Skinner's office as usual to see if he was free for lunch. Kim waved him in with a smile, and Doggett wondered whether his eager affection showed on his face. He knocked on Skinner's door and then poked his head around it...and stopped dead in his tracks. He had seen Skinner in his suit countless times, but somehow it was different for him now that they had become lovers, now that he knew what lay beneath the tailored lines of the trousers and the stiff bleached cotton of the shirt. Skinner looked, quite simply, breathtaking to him, standing there in his office, a file in his hand, and a distracted look on his face. Doggett was relieved when Skinner broke into a smile upon seeing him.

"Is it lunchtime already?" Skinner glanced at his watch.

"Yes – but I can see you're up to your eyeballs in work." Doggett glanced at the four mounds of paperwork on Skinner's desk and the several files around his chair.

"Two weeks worth of catching up to do. There's no way I can make lunch today, I'm afraid." Skinner shook his head.

"Need some help?" Doggett gestured at the files. "I could grab us something from the cafeteria and we could work through some of these together. You were intending to eat, I take it?" There was a dangerous edge to his voice.

"Yes, John, I was intending to eat," Skinner said with a grimace. "And if you don't mind giving a hand I could really use the help."

"No problem, sir."

Skinner looked at him as if the "sir" surprised him, but Doggett had told him he'd respect Skinner's rank at the office and he intended to do just that.

"Thank you, John," Skinner replied softly, and Doggett was sure the "thank you" was for more than just the offer of help - it was also for keeping his word about not letting their personal relationship affect their work.

Doggett returned to the basement after their working lunch, and didn't see Skinner again until they had a budget meeting with various department heads at 4.30 pm. Doggett was there as head of the X Files department. When he'd first taken over the duty of attending these meetings he'd checked with Kim for memos of previous departmental meetings and had found that Agent Mulder's attendance had been sketchy at best – and when he had been there, there had always been some kind of Mulderesque outburst that the AD had diplomatically smoothed over but which caused problems with the heads of the other departments. Doggett sympathised with Mulder – budget meetings were always tiresome - but if Mulder wouldn't take the time to attend and play the diplomatic game, then it was hardly surprising that his requests for more funding were often denied or overlooked – although Doggett suspected that Skinner frequently worked some kind of deal behind the scenes to ensure the X Files department got more than they otherwise would.

It was a kind of delicious purgatory to be sitting in Skinner's office, watching his lover go through the meeting's agenda, gazing appreciatively as the light from the window lit Skinner's burly shoulders, illuminating his domed head, square jaw and dark eyes. Doggett allowed himself a moment or two to indulge and then pulled himself together and concentrated on the meeting – he prided himself on his ability to be professional and his working life was important to him.

"Sir, the budget allocation for the X Files department is the same as last year's," he pointed out as Skinner sat down at the conference table.

"That's right, Agent." Skinner nodded.

"With all due respect, sir, we now have three members of staff working on the X Files when last year there were only two."

"I don't see why the X Files should be given more money just because of empire building," one of the other departmental heads murmured.

"The caseload has increased – that's hardly empire building," Doggett shot back.

"No, it's not," someone else said. Doggett was about to flash a smile for the support when the man continued. "It's just that now that Mulder's gone it takes them twice as long to solve their cases. It takes two agents to fill old Spooky's shoes." There was a little ripple of laughter around the table. Doggett sighed; this looked like being a long meeting. He held up

his side of the debate though, shot down their arguments, and then sat back and waited for Skinner's final word on the subject.

"Agent Doggett, I appreciate the reasons behind your request," Skinner said in measured tones, "but I can't approve more money for the X Files. It's already a very expensive department to run, and we do have other costs that take priority. However..." He cut Doggett short. "I will promise to review that decision in 6 months time rather than waiting the usual 12. If there needs to be an alteration at that time, I'll do my best to push it through."

Doggett considered that for a moment, but it was fair – and exactly the kind of response he would have expected from Skinner prior to their relationship.

"Thank you, sir," he said quietly. It wasn't the outcome he'd hoped for, but it was something.

The meeting finished late, and Doggett began following the other department heads out of the door.

"Agent Doggett." Skinner called him back.

"Sir?" He shut the door and turned back. They were alone in the room.

"I was wondering whether you were free this evening, John," Skinner asked quietly. "I thought maybe we could go out to eat and then..." He left the sentence hanging. "That is if you're not too pissed off about the outcome of the meeting we just had."

Doggett laughed. "Agent Doggett's pride is still a little wounded, Walter, but John wouldn't let a little thing like **that** stand in the way of seeing you tonight. Your invitation sounds good."

Skinner gave one of those shy smiles that Doggett had come to find so endearing.

"Great. If you want to meet me in the parking garage in a few minutes, we can drive back to my place for a...drink before heading out."

Doggett grinned, his cock twitching in anticipation. He was fairly sure he knew what the word 'drink' was a euphemism for.

Doggett endured the drive home impatiently. Ever since he'd set eyes on Skinner in the office in his suit earlier he'd wanted to do nothing but prise the big man out of all that wool and cotton. He spent the entire drive fantasising about thrusting Skinner up against the wall and kissing him soundly. They were silent in the elevator in Skinner's apartment building - both men just stared at each other, and Doggett saw his own longing reflected back at him in Skinner's hungry eyes. They paused outside Skinner's apartment while the big man fumbled for his keys until Doggett wanted to yell because he could hardly bear it, and then the door was opened and Doggett surged forward intending to push Skinner against the wall as he'd fantasised about...but instead he found two large hands on **his** shoulders and then

he was the one being thrust back against the wall. Skinner's fingers were all over his body, his mouth hard and warm on Doggett's lips. They kissed passionately for a few seconds, while Doggett tried to get his brain back into gear, and then, pausing to draw breath, he put his hands on Skinner's broad chest and without warning pushed him backwards against the opposite wall in the narrow hallway. Skinner went back with a thud, clearly surprised, and Doggett closed in and kissed him soundly, passionately, enjoying taking control again. A few seconds later he was surprised to find himself propelled backwards against the opposite wall, Skinner's large body keeping him pinned against the hard surface. The big man's hands were insistent on his body, as he tore off Doggett's tie, opened his shirt, and pressed his clothed body against Doggett's naked flesh while continuing to kiss him with a wild lack of restraint, over and over again. Doggett almost laughed out loud wondering where this particular power struggle was going to end. He waited for a long time, allowing Skinner to suck on his neck, and lick a trail of wet kisses along the top half of his torso and then, without warning, he moved again, and, grabbing Skinner, he turned the big man around and thrust him face forward against the wall. Skinner's hands and forearms landed with a thud flat against the wall, his face turned sideways. Doggett pinned him there with his own body, having the benefit of both surprise and the fact that Skinner was in a disadvantaged position with his front to the wall. Doggett held Skinner in place with one hand and reached for the other man's belt with the other.

"You're going to have to let me win this round I think, Corporal," he said.

"Like hell I will." Skinner growled, trying to turn back. Doggett thumped him back against the wall before he got too far.

"Oh yes you will, Corporal," he purred into Skinner's ear. "Because I've got a condom and lube in my coat pocket and I'm going to rip these pants off your ass and fuck you into the wall – would you like that, Corporal?" Skinner's groan of helpless arousal told him that he'd won. "Good man," he grinned. "Would you like this hard and fast, Corporal, or do you want me to go slow and tender like we've been doing these past few days?" He undid Skinner's pants, and pushed them down his legs along with the other man's briefs, exposing his naked bottom. He caressed it for a moment with one hand, while he kept his other arm against the back of Skinner's shoulders and neck, keeping him pinned into place. "I think you want it hard, don't you?" He asked in a throaty tone. "I think you want to stand against this wall with your pants around your ankles and be fucked into next week. Isn't that what you want, Corporal?" He punctuated this question by sliding one finger into Skinner's ass.

"Fuck, yes!" Skinner moaned. "Hurry..." he panted.

"Patience, Corporal. Wait for it," Doggett said with an evilly sexual grin. He reached into his pocket for the lube and coated his fingers liberally, before thrusting them into Skinner's waiting body. The other man writhed against them and it wasn't long before Doggett was satisfied that Skinner could take him. He released his own rigidly stiff cock from his pants, slid a condom onto it and then applied more lubricant. "You still with me, Corporal?" he asked, slamming his hand onto the back of Skinner's neck again, and thrusting him forwards against the wall once more. He loved the way Skinner's hands were spreadeagled against the hard surface and the other man's body was so submissively accepting beneath him.

"Yes, sir," Skinner breathed heavily, and Doggett felt a wave of pure arousal spread through him at the words. He hadn't expected to be called, "sir", didn't need to be addressed that way, but hell it was such a turn on for this man, who he'd been addressing as "sir" just an hour ago in his office, to now be using the same word to address him. Doggett grabbed Skinner's firm, golden buttocks in both his hands, spread the other man's legs with one of his own feet, and then nudged his cock into Skinner's waiting body. He sheathed himself in Skinner's musky warmth so fast that he didn't think either of them were still breathing when he ended up lodged to the hilt in the other man's body.

"Oh shit," Skinner murmured. Doggett grasped Skinner's hips and began pumping into him as he'd promised – hard and fast, barely pausing to draw breath, so urgent was their need. Skinner's head was thrown back and with each thrust Doggett found his face level with the side of Skinner's cheek. He stole a kiss here and there, his hands never leaving Skinner's hips as he thrust into him over and over again. Then he was coming and Skinner was still pushed up against the wall, and Doggett was still lodged deep inside the other man's body as he exploded out his climax. He could feel Skinner's body heat through the other man's shirt as it pressed against his own exposed stomach. When he'd got his breath back a little, he put one of his hands over Skinner's where the other man's hand was still pressed against the wall, angled his head around to kiss Skinner's mouth and, with his other hand, took Skinner's cock in his own. God it felt good, standing here with his softening cock still lodged deep inside Skinner's ass, one hand covering Skinner's hand, his lips claiming Skinner's lips, his other hand working Skinner's cock to climax, and all the while the weight of his body keeping Skinner pressed face up against the wall. It felt as if the world had stopped turning and there was just the two of them, and Doggett had never felt so good in his life. He heard Skinner moan and then felt the other man's sticky come on his hand. They stood there for a long time, trying to get their breath back, and then, slowly, Doggett withdrew. The plopping sound his penis made as he disengaged almost made him laugh and he looked down on the pair of them in their dishevelled state and shook his head.

"After that, dinner is going to be a real anti-climax," he commented, removing the condom and tucking his cock back in his pants. Skinner grinned and pulled up his own garments. He rotated his shoulders with a wince as he fastened his pants. "I think we're both going to feel all that wall slamming in the morning," Doggett said, with a wry laugh.

"I can feel the bruises starting already," Skinner confirmed. He fastened his trousers and gazed at Doggett thoughtfully. "Are you ever going to let me have the control, Sergeant?" He asked. Doggett pursed his lips as if considering the question.

"If you're very good then maybe," he conceded. "But not yet, Corporal, so you'd better get used to it."

The expression on Skinner's face implied that the big man didn't think that getting used to it was going to be a problem at all.

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In retrospect, Doggett supposed that he should have known it was all too good to last. He had gone into this relationship with his eyes open, knowing that Skinner was a man on the edge of the abyss, with many unresolved issues in his life. Their first week at the office had gone well – they'd met for lunch every day, seen each other every evening, and enjoyed some of the most mind blowing sex Doggett had ever experienced in his life. Doggett managed to get some tickets for a football game on Saturday and they made arrangements to meet in the afternoon – only Skinner didn't show up. He called Doggett's cellphone instead, and curtly offered his apologies, informing the other man he wouldn't be able to make it but offering no reason why. Puzzled and angry, Doggett got in his car and drove straight to Skinner's apartment. He pounded on the door until Skinner opened it and then pushed his way inside.

"What the hell is going on, Walter?" Doggett demanded. Skinner looked like shit – he hadn't shaved and he smelled suspiciously of alcohol. "Have you been drinking this early in the day?" Doggett demanded. "Why?"

Skinner's eyes were completely different to those he had looked into when they were making love the previous night. It was as if the shutters had come down. Skinner wrapped his arms around his own body and stared moodily at the carpet.

"It's over, John," he said in a low tone. "I can't do this any more."

"Can't do what?" Doggett asked. "Can't enjoy yourself? Can't have a good time? Can't allow yourself to be loved by someone? What?"

Skinner lifted his head at the mention of love, his eyes full of a light that died almost as soon as it began to be replaced by a dull, dead look.

"Can't see you like this. Can't continue like this." Skinner remained in that self-defensive pose, his gaze fixed on a spot on the carpet. Doggett had to fight a very real urge to grab the other man's head and pound some sense into it. Was this what he'd done to Sharon towards the end of their marriage, he wondered? Had Skinner shut down like this? Retreated behind those famous walls of his and refused to let her in?

"That bullshit might have worked with your wife, but it doesn't cut it with me," Doggett growled. "What's going on here, Walter? What's happened?"

Skinner's lips pursed into a straight line, and he shook his head slightly. Doggett knew the other man wouldn't tell him an outright lie – and something had clearly happened – so he was just shutting down, going silent on him.

"Walter." Doggett grasped the Skinner's shoulders. "For god's sake – I can help you. Don't you understand that?" He said desperately.

Skinner shook his head. "It's over, John," was all he'd say.

"Talk to me, damnit!" Doggett slammed Skinner against the wall, in a bitter parody of their lovemaking of less than a week before. The big man went back with a thump and while he

made no attempt to retaliate, his dark eyes remained resolute and Doggett knew it was no use. He would get nothing out of Skinner.

"It might be over for you, Mister," Doggett said in tones of quiet anger, "but it's not over for me – not by a long shot. I'm going to keep hanging in here, buddy, because you sure as hell need someone right now, whether you'll admit it to yourself or not."

He stared at Skinner intently, willing the other man to crack but there was no reply. Skinner's eyes were haunted, full of ghosts and demons as he stood there, his arms still wrapped tightly around his body. After several long, intense minutes of staring at each other, Doggett finally gave up. He went to the door, and, with one last look at the man he knew to be the love of his life, he left, slamming the door shut behind him.

### **End of Part One**

## Part Two by Xanthe

### **Author's Notes:**

Posted: December 30th, 2001

Doggett ran up the stairs to the 5th floor at 1pm on Monday more from a sense of perseverance than with any real optimism. Perseverance was something he was good at – and he had never been more focused on anything in his life than he was on Walter Skinner and their fledgling relationship. And Doggett, when he was focussed, was a very hard man to deflect from his purpose. He knocked on Kim's door, and then stuck his head around it.

"Is he in?" He asked.

She hesitated, and then shook her head. "I'm sorry, Agent Doggett. He's got meetings scheduled all day," she said apologetically.

"How about tomorrow? Is he working through lunch then as well?" Doggett persisted.

Kim reached for the diary and leafed through it, biting on her lip anxiously as she did so. Doggett guessed that Skinner had said something to her about ensuring that he would no longer be free to have lunch with Agent Doggett – now, or at any point in the future. He fought down a wave of anger and only just managed to stop himself storming into Skinner's office to demand an explanation for the way he was being treated. Skinner might deny their relationship if he wanted, but they had enjoyed each other's company for a long time before they'd become intimate – cutting them both off from that hurt Doggett to the core.

"I'm sorry – he's fairly busy all this week," Kim said, making a little face.

"Okay. I get the picture." Doggett thought about it. "If I need an appointment to see him then you'd better make me one, Kim. I have a report I need to hand in to him – and I'd like to discuss it with him. He is my supervisor after all," Doggett said grimly. Skinner was far too much the professional to deny him his basic rights as an agent to discuss a case with his superior.

"All right, Agent Doggett. How about Thursday, 3pm?" She offered, clearly relieved to be able to agree to something that Doggett requested. Doggett sighed – Thursday was a long way off, but he supposed it was better than nothing. He made the appointment and returned to his office to consider his next move. He had a pretty good idea what was going on with Skinner – and a few days in which to prove it.

By the time Thursday came, Doggett had had plenty of time to follow up his investigations – and to finish his report. He was in Kim's office waiting ten minutes before his appointment, report in hand. Skinner came to the door of his office dead on the dot of three; he looked immaculate standing in the doorway, but Doggett could see through that façade easily now, and it took no effort at all for him to read the state of the man beneath the wirerims and faultlessly laundered suit. Skinner's expression was hollow – there were dark smudges under his eyes which were even more veiled than usual, concealing so much and yet revealing all too much too, if you knew what you were looking for – and Doggett did. Skinner's brown eyes were more bleak than he'd ever seen them – the man was clearly not sleeping, probably drinking too much, and certainly keeping going on willpower alone. Whatever had happened had knocked Skinner for six and he was responding to it as he always did – by ignoring it, burying himself in his work, ploughing on regardless, and hoping to come out the other side. Only Doggett didn't think he would – not this time.

"Agent Doggett?" Skinner's voice sounded strained.

"Sir." Doggett got up and walked into Skinner's office. Skinner closed the door behind him, and went to sit at his desk. Doggett didn't sit. "I wanted to go through this report with you, sir," he said, throwing the report down on Skinner's desk. Skinner relaxed a little – maybe he'd been expecting Doggett to launch into some kind of personal discussion about what had happened between them, but that wasn't Doggett's style. While they were at the office he would be scrupulously professional – and he was sure Skinner would be too. However, on this occasion the personal was also professional to some degree, and Doggett wasn't the kind of man who'd shy away from that.

"What report is this?" Skinner asked neutrally, picking it up, not meeting Doggett's eye.

"It's a report on the case I've been working on over the past few weeks," Doggett said, standing his ground, his entire body still but coiled ready for battle, full of pent-up energy. "As you know, I've been investigating a case of blackmail – a man infected with a new and deadly techno-poison, being held hostage to ensure his co-operation with an agency

unknown.”

“What the hell is this, John?” Skinner bristled angrily, opening the report with furious, jerky fingers.

“Just what I said. You knew I was working on the case, sir. I told you I was working on a case file.”

“Oh cut the crap,” Skinner snapped. “You’re filing reports on me now? Are you seriously expecting me to sign off on this?”

“Not yet, no. It isn’t finished yet. You see, I went back to the doctors at the naval hospital, and they told me they weren’t authorised to give me the final information I require in order to either close the case or keep it open pending further investigation. However, they did tell me, after some hard questioning on my part, that they have finished their tests on the subject and have reached their conclusions about the technology he is infected with. I’m sure that if you were to call them they’d release the results of those tests to me, sir, in order that I can close the file.” Doggett rocked back on his heels and surveyed Skinner intently. The big man’s jaw did a sideways shift so pronounced that there was an audible crack.

“I’m not going to give that authorisation, Agent Doggett,” he said in hard, quiet tones.

“Why not, sir? I witnessed all the tests - why not allow me to see the results?” Doggett pressed.

“Because they’re private!” Skinner snapped at him.

“Is that the reason – or is it because they were a personal disappointment to you?” Doggett persisted. Skinner’s eyes darkened and for the first time he met Doggett’s gaze.

“You’re out of order, Agent,” he growled.

“I don’t think I am, sir. I think the doctors told you they didn’t have a clue how to even start treating the subject, sir. I think they told you that the technology in his bloodstream is so sophisticated that they’re ten years away from even hoping to give him a cure. I think they made it clear that none of the drugs they tested on the subject will ever be effective against this techno-poison...and I don’t think you were able to handle that news, sir. I think you did what you always do – you closed down, shut it out and everyone associated with it, got back to work, and tried not to think about it. Only trouble is, that’s not working for you any more, sir. You can’t sleep, you drink too much, you work too hard and you’re probably working out too much for too long as well. You’re looking the abyss in the face, sir. Hell, you’re walking a tightrope over it - one false step and you’re going to go tumbling right down into it, into the mouths of the sharks waiting below. You had all your hopes resting on those tests; you endured those two weeks of pain because you were sure that would be the end of it – that there would be an answer to your problem and you could leave it all behind you. That hasn’t happened and now you’re left hanging – and you refuse to let anyone help you.” Doggett finished talking, and waited expectantly for some response. There was silence for a long

time as the two men stared at each other. Finally Skinner cleared his throat.

“And all this is in your report, Agent Doggett?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. It is. There are also some recommendations for what the subject could do next – and how the X Files department could help him – if he’ll let them. On a personal level, and this isn’t in the report, I just want to say that there are people out here who want to help and who can help, but you have to let them in, sir.”

Skinner’s jaw clenched again – in fact his entire body was stiff and taut, all the muscles screaming out for some kind of release. Doggett wished he could take hold of Skinner and make him see sense but that hadn’t worked before and there was no reason to assume it would now.

“Thank you for your...recommendations,” Skinner ground out from between what sounded like gritted teeth. “Is that all?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll leave the report with you for you to consider. Perhaps you could get back to me on it when you’ve had the chance to read it in more detail.”

He didn’t wait to be dismissed. He turned on his heel, strode to the door, and let himself out without a backward glance. There was nothing left to do except wait – and hope.

As it turned out he didn’t have to wait very long – but what happened next took him by surprise. He was woken in the middle of the following night by a phone call. He reached for the phone blearily, glancing at his bedside clock as he did so. It was twenty past two.

“Yeah?” He mumbled.

“Is that John Doggett?” An unfamiliar voice asked.

“Yeah. Who is this?” Doggett sat up, suddenly wide-awake.

“This is Sergeant Fraser with the Metro Police Department,” the man said in slightly world-weary tones. “Could you confirm your occupation to me, sir?” Fraser asked. Doggett frowned, surprised by the question.

“I’m a special agent with the FBI, Sergeant – why?”

“That’s what we were told. Sorry to drag you out of bed, Agent, but we have a man in custody claiming to be an Assistant Director at the FBI...”

“Skinner?” Doggett threw the sheets off the bed and stood up. “You got Walter Skinner there? Is he hurt?”

“No – nothing beyond a few cuts anyhow. He picked him yesterday evening for brawling outside a gym. Now, it’s a minor offence, so I’m prepared to let him off without charge as a

professional courtesy – but I'd like you to come down and sign for him, sir. He gave me your name as someone who'd vouch for him – said you'd confirm he is who he says he is. He's got some ID on him but that could be a fake. If you'd like to come down here with your own ID, then I'll release him to you."

"A fight?" Doggett struggled to make sense of that. "Are you sure?" he couldn't imagine Skinner getting into a common street brawl. "Was he drunk?" he asked suspiciously.

"Surprisingly no, Agent Doggett. He seems to be stone cold sober."

"And the man he was fighting with?" Doggett began to pull on some clothes with one hand, keeping the phone nestled against his ear with the other.

"Sober too. Apparently they were sparring in the gym a little while before the incident and it turned nasty and spilled out onto the street."

Doggett sighed – suddenly this was all starting to make a horrible kind of sense.

"I'm on my way," he said.

It only took a few formalities to get Skinner released. Sergeant Fraser was a world-weary man who clearly wanted to do as little paperwork as possible and was prepared to overlook a relatively minor offence to that end. Doggett signed a release form and then waited as Skinner was brought up from the cells. Doggett's heart jolted as he caught sight of Skinner; the big man was dishevelled, his shirt open at the neck and spattered with blood. He had a cut on his jaw and his knuckles were bruised. He wouldn't even look at Doggett, just swept past him in the general direction of the door. Doggett followed him – in time to see Skinner setting off down the street. He strode to catch up with him, grabbed him by the arm and swung him around.

"Where the hell are you going, Mister?" He demanded roughly.

"Home. Thanks for signing me out, Agent Doggett," Skinner growled in reply.

"Not so fast. You do not haul me out of bed at 2 o' clock in the morning without explanation like I'm some kind of get out of jail free card," Doggett snapped. "Now get your ass in my car, Mister. You have a lot of explaining to do."

Skinner tore his arm away and looked up the street, as if he intended to walk away again.

"Walk away from me now and you can forget about me bailing you out of trouble if this ever happens again, Walter," Doggett told him sharply. "I won't be used by anyone and I think you know that you owe me. Now, get your ass in my car. I won't tell you again."

Skinner hesitated, clearly torn, then he looked at Doggett and the agent had to clench his fists to stop himself moving forward to take the big man in his arms – because Skinner's

eyes were utterly desolate and without hope.

“Okay. Where’s the fucking car?” He growled.

Doggett turned on his heel towards the car thinking furiously as he went. He knew that how he played tonight was desperately important and he wanted to get it right – Skinner’s whole future rested on what he did tonight, and how he handled the big man. He unlocked his car and got in, without looking back to see that Skinner was following him. A few seconds later, the passenger door opened and Skinner got into the car.

They drove in silence. Skinner stared moodily out of the car window, his expression glazed and faraway. Doggett stole little sideways glances at him every few blocks, but Skinner’s expression didn’t change. He barely seemed aware of his surroundings until they drew up, and then he suddenly came to.

“This isn’t my apartment,” he growled.

“No, it isn’t. It’s my place,” Doggett said.

“Why the hell did you bring me here?”

“Because we’re going to talk on my territory this time,” Doggett replied firmly. “Not in your office or your apartment – but here, in my house.”

“There’s nothing to talk about – I was sparring in the gym...I didn’t know the other guy, he’s some new kid. He said something that got me riled...I got angry. Jimmy broke us up, and ended the sparring match. I got changed and was going to go home but I ran into him outside...” Skinner shrugged.

“And you took up where you left off, huh?” Doggett pulled on the brake and opened his car door. “Well that might be the bare bones of what happened, but I want to know why it happened. Get your ass out of the car and into the house, Mister.” He got out, strode to the house, and unlocked the front door. Then he turned. Skinner was still sitting in the car, his jaw clenched tight.

“You can walk away from this if you like, Walter, but I think you know I deserve to be treated better than that,” Doggett said, loud enough for his voice to carry to the car. “You’re an honourable man – don’t make another mistake tonight.”

Then he turned and went into the house, leaving the door ajar. He held his breath as he waited to see what would happen next. A minute passed, and then another. It took all his willpower not to go back out and check to see that Skinner hadn’t just simply got out of the car and walked off down the street. Then, finally, after several minutes, he heard footsteps, and the sound of the front door being opened and then shut again, and a few seconds later Skinner appeared in the kitchen, his shoulders hunched, his gaze fixed firmly on the floor, his body language screaming out his misery.

“Take a seat.” Doggett pulled out a kitchen chair and watched as Skinner sank into it. The big man sat there uncomfortably, his hands resting on the kitchen table.

“Could I have a glass of water?” he asked.

“Sure.” Doggett poured him a glass and handed it to him. He winced as he saw how bruised and cut Skinner’s knuckles were close up. “Looks like you landed quite a few good ones on him,” he commented. He opened one of the cupboards in the kitchen and drew out a small box of medical supplies. Skinner shrugged.

“He gave as good as he got. He was a big guy – bigger than me. He could handle himself,” he muttered.

“I’m sure he could. Maybe that was why you picked him in the first place,” Doggett said.

“Picked him? He was the one making trouble,” Skinner retorted angrily.

“And why did it matter?” Doggett asked calmly, sitting down beside Skinner at the table, and reaching for his injured hand. “Come on, Walter, this isn’t like you. Swinging a punch at some asshole on an adrenaline high who thought it’d be cool to take a potshot at some high up Fibbie – isn’t that what happened? Why did you let him rattle you, Walter? Why not just walk away? Don’t tell me this hasn’t happened to you before – I’ll bet you just shrug and let it drop. You don’t retaliate and you sure as hell don’t go outside and pick up where you left off.”

Skinner’s jaw clenched sideways but he made no reply. Doggett dipped a cotton ball in iodine and dabbed Skinner’s knuckle with it. The big man grimaced slightly, but otherwise made no sound.

“It isn’t working any more, Walter,” Doggett said softly, gazing at Skinner intently as he tended to his wounds. “You can’t keep shutting everyone out and closin’ down all your emotions. What you’re feeling has to come out somewhere. Tonight it was some mouthy smartass who pissed you off – who will it be next? What if it’s Kersh? Supposing you can’t control yourself when he chews you out next? Are you prepared for the consequences of taking a swing at the Deputy Director? Kersh would love that – finally he’d have a reason to get shot of you and put a nice tame AD in your place. He could move that idiot Follmer over to Criminal Investigations. Yours is the top job after all – Follmer might be an AD but he doesn’t have responsibility for a department with the same kind of kudos CI. What use would you be to the X Files if you got fired, huh?”

“The X Files. It’s always about the fucking X Files,” Skinner snapped, drawing his hand away. “You’re just like Mulder.”

“Mulder’s gone, Walter,” Doggett said softly. “There’s nobody left to trust but me.”

There was silence for a long time. Skinner gazed into his glass of water, Doggett gazed at Skinner. Finally the big man cleared his throat.

"I read your report," he said.

"Yeah?" Doggett waited.

"Several times." Skinner winced. "Your conclusions were not...inaccurate," he conceded, with a little tip of his head. Doggett sat back, a wave of sadness flooding through him. He had been fairly sure he was right, but even so, hearing it confirmed drove it all home.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I know how much you had riding on those tests. I know how much you wanted to be free of the nanocytes."

"You don't know a fucking thing!" Skinner exploded.

"Then tell me," Doggett said softly.

Skinner stared at him, his dark eyes full of pain. He opened his mouth to speak and his jaw did a noticeable sideways shift. He bowed his head, wrapped his arms around his body and gazed steadfastly at the table.

Doggett sighed. "Talk, Walter," he said firmly.

"What good would it do?" Skinner growled.

"Maybe none – but you owe me," Doggett pressed in a no-nonsense tone. Skinner's jaw snapped sideways again, acknowledging the truth of that statement.

"What is it you want to know? That I wake up every morning knowing that today I could be at the mercy of Krycek mark two? Knowing that someone can just come along and buy me at the touch of a button? Knowing that I'm too fucking weak to just take it, to let them kill me? That they could make me do anything they wanted, anything at all, because the thought of those bloodsuckers stopping my heart again, and filling my veins with lead, turns me into a useless, pathetic parody of a man who'd rather crawl on his knees than stand up and fight. Is that what you want to know, John?"

"That's bullshit, Walter," Doggett said softly. "You're just down for the count right now. You can't keep going back into the ring and taking the punches – at some point you have to rest and get your strength back. Nobody can keep fightin' battles as long and as hard as you have and expect to still be standing at the end of it."

He wasn't even sure that Skinner had heard him. The big man's fists were furling and unfurling and he was staring sightlessly at the opposite wall.

“Walter?” Doggett put a hand gently over Skinner’s clenched fist, only for Skinner to react immediately and violently to the attempt at comfort.

“Don’t fucking patronise me!” Skinner roared, throwing John's hand off his arm, and then, with a bellow of sheer outraged frustration the big man picked up the glass he’d been drinking from and slung it against the opposite wall where it smashed into smithereens, the wet fluid staining the painted walls.

Doggett took a deep breath – this was going to take some sorting out. Skinner clearly wasn’t in a place where he could accept any kindness, but he couldn’t go on punishing himself like this either. Doggett suddenly knew very clearly what he had to do. He got up and surveyed the panting, weary man coolly. Skinner was at the edge of his endurance – running on empty. He was a danger to himself and others like this. The situation clearly called for some extreme action on his part.

“Clean it up,” he said.

Skinner’s eyes came slowly into disbelieving focus. “What?” he growled dangerously. Doggett stood his ground. “I said, clean it up, Corporal. There’s a dustpan and brush in the cupboard under the sink. Clean up that mess and then come upstairs. I’ll be in the bedroom waiting for you. Don’t be long – and don’t make me come and get you.”

“What the hell...?” Skinner began.

Doggett stared at him with his most imperious command posture. He still remembered dealing with green young marines – remembered the tone of voice, and how to stand. He had no intention of budging an inch. Instead, he glared at Skinner with steely resolve. Skinner glared back at him, his eyes angry, his entire body taut. Doggett made no move. He just waited. Finally, after what seemed like a lifetime, Skinner dropped his gaze. Doggett nodded, satisfied, and then, without saying a word, he walked over to the stairs and disappeared up them.

Doggett made it to the sanctuary of his bedroom, and then leaned against the wall, trying to come to terms with what had just happened – and what he knew had to happen next. He waited for a few minutes, tensed and taut, wondering whether Skinner was still connected enough to him to do as he’d been commanded. He only relaxed when he heard the sound of broken glass being swept up - then he went into action. He pulled an old, battered case from under the bed. He hadn’t used its contents in years - had often contemplated throwing them away - but old memories of Tony and what they had once shared had somehow stopped him. He had never expected to use them again but this time he thought he had no choice. He opened the case, and drew out the four leather cuffs, each of them fitted with a tiny lock, and two double-ended clips. They were fur lined, and comfortable. By rights they

didn't even belong to him; Tony had bought them and given them to him, and had left amid so many rows and recriminations that he hadn't remembered to take them with him when he went. Doggett sighed as he picked up the cuffs – he had little interest in the paraphernalia of Tony's fetish. He always said that if there was any bondage to be done then a couple of ties and a belt would do just as well and he'd completely balked at Tony's suggestion that they visit a sex shop and stock up on paddles, straps and other kinds of equipment. Doggett just wasn't interested. However, on this occasion he was glad of the cuffs.

Doggett put the cuffs and clips on the dresser and shoved the case back under the bed. A few seconds later he heard the sound of slow, reluctant footsteps on the stairs and then the bedroom door was pushed open. Skinner's eyes were conflicted – he was still angry and rebellious, but there was a need in his eyes as well. He needed Doggett and whatever Doggett could do for him right now – in fact he was desperate for Doggett's help. Doggett slammed the bedroom door shut behind the big man, and then went to stand in front of him.

"Think of this as the parade ground," he said in sharp tones. "Stand at attention, Corporal." Skinner stared at him as if he thought Doggett had gone insane.

"What the fuck kind of game are you playing, Agent Doggett?" He snapped. "The parade ground? I don't fucking think so." His voice was belligerent but his eyes were desperate and Doggett noticed that he didn't head straight for the door.

"Do as I say, Corporal. Stand at attention," Doggett said in his most authoritative tone of voice.

"Oh what the hell is this? I don't need this kind of crap!" Skinner growled. "Look, I appreciate you bailing me out at the police station but that's where it ends. I don't fucking need this." This time he did move. He turned towards the door and reached for the handle.

"Are you sure, Walter?" Doggett asked in a soft tone of voice. "Are you sure you don't need this?"

Skinner hesitated, his muscles bunched up and tight beneath his torn shirt. Doggett sensed the profound hesitation, and knew that Skinner wasn't sure of anything right now, least of all what he needed.

"I don't think you know what the hell you need any more, Corporal," he said in hard, staccato tones. He moved closer, until he was standing right behind Skinner. "What is it you think you need, Corporal?" He asked in sibilant tones. He could almost see the hairs on the back of Skinner's neck standing on end. The other man remained standing stock-still. "You think you need to go home and drink yourself into oblivion, is that it?" He goaded. "Or maybe you think you can work yourself into the ground to forget, or even pump iron and run yourself stupid to forget. Isn't that right? Isn't that how you always cope?" Skinner's hard muscles became even tighter. "You think you need to be alone right now – you think all it takes is for you to get away from here and you'll somehow be able to push everything

back inside and pretend it never happened but I'm tellin' you, Corporal that ain't gonna happen. You need me, Corporal, now get your ass into the centre of the room and stand at attention. NOW!"

"Fuck you!" Skinner roared. He turned around so fast that Doggett was knocked back. Skinner grabbed a fistful of Doggett's sweater and pushed the agent against the closet in one hard, smooth motion, his other fist raised ready to strike. Doggett remained perfectly still, but he could feel the sweat standing out on his forehead.

"You gonna hit me, Walter?" He asked. "Are you going to do that? Do you think that'll make you feel better? If so, go ahead. Land a few on me."

He jutted out his chin as if inviting the punch. The raging expression in Skinner's eyes faltered, and he hesitated, fist still raised.

"You want to hit me then I can't stop you. You're a big guy, Walter, and you know how to handle yourself...I bet it's been a long time since anyone bested you in a fight, one on one, huh?" Doggett continued. "I know I don't stand a chance against you so go ahead. You got me. Just hammer away. Maybe that'll make you feel better, huh?"

Skinner let out a moan of anguish. He dropped his hold on Doggett, stepped sideways, and then drove his fist into the closet with all his force. The old wooden frame nearly buckled under the weight but although it must have hurt like hell, Skinner just stood there, motionless, his fist still locked into place against the closet.

"Walter..." Doggett put a hand on Skinner's arm and gently pulled his fist away. It was bleeding, but that wasn't exactly a priority right now. He needed to stop Skinner before he hurt himself again. "Walter, look at me." Doggett slapped Skinner lightly on the face and the other man's eyes came into puzzled focus. "Look at me, Corporal!" Doggett said in a harder tone. Skinner's guilty, confused eyes met his own.

"I couldn't hurt you, John," Skinner whispered, shame-faced.

"Maybe not, Walter, but you sure as hell hurt yourself," Doggett told him bluntly. "Do you still think you don't need my help?"

Skinner's licked his dry lips. He pulled away from Doggett's grasp and wrapped his arms around his body.

"I don't know...I don't know..." he whispered, listing around in circles like a rudderless ship. His gaze fell on the damaged closet and he winced. "Oh god...I don't know," he said again, clearly shocked by what he'd done.

"I do. You want certainties you'll have to take them from me," Doggett said firmly. "Now, stand at attention, Corporal."

Skinner gazed helplessly at Doggett, utterly lost, and then, because he clearly didn't know

what else to do, he obeyed. The years hadn't diminished the big man's ability to stand stiffly at attention. He passed muster with ease. Doggett circled him, keeping well out of arm's reach, watching until he saw signs that Skinner was losing himself in the old, familiar stance, waiting for his next orders. After a few minutes Skinner's shoulders settled, and a little sigh passed from between his lips. Skinner was on the verge of lashing out every five seconds, his legendary self-control finally failing him, eroded by too many pressures and too much pain. Finally, Doggett felt it might be safe to proceed.

"Do you trust me, Corporal?" He asked sharply. Skinner blinked, still standing ramrod straight, staring ahead, his eyes glazed.

"Sir?" he asked, as if the question confused him, or he wasn't sure he'd heard it properly.

"It's a simple question, Corporal. Do you trust me?" Doggett stood in front of Skinner and looked him straight in the eye. "Do you, Walter?" He asked in a softer tone. "Do you trust me to do what's best for you? Will you give me that kind of trust? Will you give yourself up to me? I promise I'll take good care of you, but I need your trust. Don't tell me what you think I want to hear – it has to be the truth. It doesn't matter if you don't trust me but I need to know."

Skinner swallowed nervously. "What the hell has this got to do with...?" He began. Doggett interrupted him.

"Yes or no, Corporal!" He snapped. "Answer the question."

Skinner hesitated, and his jaw performed its familiar sideways clench. He considered the question for a long time, his eyes never leaving Doggett's, as if he were evaluating the man standing in front of him. Finally his whole body seemed to crumple and become smaller as he let go of the bravado and found the answer to the question inside himself.

"Yes, sir," he said in a quiet tone.

"Say it," Doggett insisted, relieved to have received that answer.

"I trust you, sir." Skinner spoke up quickly and Doggett knew that he was speaking from the heart and meant it utterly and completely. The big man's eyes were still glazed as he lost himself in the memories of an older, simpler time, when responding to orders had been his life.

"Good. At ease, Corporal." Skinner assumed the at ease position immediately, as if it were second nature to him, even after all these years. Doggett suppressed a little smile – he guessed that was something you never forgot. "Very good, Corporal. You have 15 seconds to strip, starting now."

Skinner looked at him blearily, as if trying to figure out what the hell was going to happen.

"One, two," Doggett began. Skinner gazed at him uncertainly for a split second and then suddenly leapt into action. He managed to remove all his clothes by the time Doggett had finished counting to 15 – leaving them in an untidy pile on the floor. "Good, Corporal. At ease." Doggett walked over to the dresser, picked up one of the cuffs, and returned to stand in front of Skinner once more. "Hold out your hand, Corporal," he ordered.

Skinner hesitated.

“You said you trusted me, Corporal,” Doggett said softly. Skinner licked his dry lips again.

“I do...but what are you going to do?” He looked at the cuffs, and shook his head.

“I’m going to do what you need me to do,” Doggett told him. “Now hold our your hand, Corporal.”

Skinner’s agonised gaze met Doggett’s, full of despair.

“Corporal,” Doggett nudged. “I can help you but you have to trust me.”

Skinner blinked, but then obeyed with slow, hazy movements. He looked as if he didn’t really know what was happening to him. Doggett fastened the cuff on Skinner’s wrist, making sure it was firmly attached but comfortable, tight enough not to slip off but not so tight as to restrict the blood flow, and then he locked the cuff into place. Skinner’s wrists were noticeably bigger than Tony’s and he had to fasten the cuff a notch looser – he could tell by how the leather was worn away on the setting he’d used with Tony. “Now the other one, marine,” Doggett ordered in that same brisk, no-nonsense voice. Skinner held out his other hand and Doggett retrieved the second cuff and fastened it into place.

“Now get on the bed, face down, Corporal,” Doggett commanded. There was a moment’s hesitation again. “I said move it, Corporal. NOW!” Doggett barked and Skinner, on auto-pilot, did as ordered, and lay face down on the bed. “Hold still,” Doggett commanded. He fastened the two remaining cuffs to each of Skinner’s ankles, making sure they were tight – it was very important that Skinner couldn’t get out of them. At the moment Doggett had a caged tiger in his bedroom and he knew that if he made one false move, or got anything wrong, he might end up swatted by a huge and very furious paw.

“Okay, Corporal, bend your legs back as far as they’ll go,” he ordered. Skinner reluctantly complied, bending his knees and bringing his legs up behind his back. “More than that, Corporal – is that the best you can do?” Doggett snapped. “I want those feet touching your ass, Corporal, or you’ll do 100 sit ups before we’re through.”

He hoped that Skinner would be so busy trying to obey the order that he wouldn’t think about what might be coming next. If Skinner refused at this stage he didn’t think he’d be able to accomplish what he’d set out to do. He required the other man’s complete co-operation. It was clearly a matter of pride for Skinner now though – he wanted to show that he could obey the order and he pressed his legs back as far as they could go, until his feet were indeed touching his ass.

“Good man. Hold still.”

Doggett moved quickly. He picked up one of the double-ended clips, and fastened one end to Skinner’s right wrist cuff and the other to his ankle cuff, effectively hobbling the big man

into place on the right side of his body. Skinner gave a low roar of anger, but Doggett was moving before he could react, and had already fastened the other clip to Skinner's left wrist cuff before the man knew what was happening. Skinner tried, too late, to move his left leg back down before it too could be fastened into place, but Doggett grabbed it, pushed it back, and fastened it to the wrist cuff. Then he stepped back out of harm's way with a satisfied sigh, sweat running down his forehead as a result of the mild tussle. Skinner was now lying face down on the bed, his left ankle attached to his left wrist, his right ankle attached to his right wrist, effectively bound into place.

"Fuck you, Doggett. Let me go!" Skinner growled, snapping out of the trance he'd been in.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Corporal," Doggett told him calmly. "By all means struggle though. Maybe you can manage to slip out of the cuffs." He knew that was impossible but he needed Skinner to react – was counting on it in fact. The big man didn't disappoint him. He let out a roar of pure rage, and began struggling with his bonds. His outstretched hands tried to reach round to undo the clip but Doggett knew that was impossible. Growing increasingly frustrated, Skinner managed to flip himself onto his back. He reached for the cuffs on his ankles, but they were locked into place and no amount of tugging at them released the lock. Skinner was growing increasingly panic stricken by this point. He stopped trying to think his way out of his predicament and instead resorted to pure brute strength instead. Doggett winced as Skinner pulled on the cuffs with his big wrists, trying to tear the very fabric of the leather, but Tony had chosen well, and the cuffs easily stood up to the test of Skinner's strength. Finally Skinner began to bellow, his face turning bright red as he struggled in the cuffs, searching desperately for escape.

"How does that feel, Walter, huh?" Doggett asked calmly, standing where Skinner could see him.

"FUCK YOU! YOU BASTARD!" Skinner yelled. "Let me go!"

"I asked you to tell me how that feels and I expect an answer, marine," Doggett snapped. "So start talking."

Skinner closed his mouth and gazed at Doggett with dark, obstinate, utterly dead eyes. Doggett decided to move things up a gear. He reached for his belt and undid it. Skinner's eyes followed the movement, flickering apprehensively.

"What are you feeling right now, Corporal?" Doggett asked.

"Fuck you," Skinner spat.

Doggett removed his belt from his jeans and folded it in two. "For every answer that isn't about how you're feeling, you'll feel my belt on your ass – or some other part of your anatomy if you prefer," he said. "Doesn't bother me." He reached down and flipped Skinner back on his front again, and then brought the belt down firmly on the big man's exposed ass. He winced a little as he did so. It seemed a crime to mark this beautiful backside, but the circumstances called for extreme measures and he didn't know how else to get through

to Skinner at this moment in time. He knew he was taking a calculated risk and hoped it would pay off – if it didn't he could kiss goodbye to this man's trust forever.

“How do you feel, Walter? How does this feel?” Doggett asked, punctuating each question with another hard flick of his belt. Skinner’s backside had started to turn an outraged red as each stoke hit home. The big man turned on his side, but, true to his word, Doggett just flicked the belt onto the side of Skinner’s thigh instead, and the big man soon turned back onto his front so that his buttocks were the target once more - where he could more easily take the pain. “You haven’t answered my question yet, Corporal,” Doggett said firmly. He snapped down the belt again but they were sharp, stinging flicks rather than real strokes.

“Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you...” Skinner panted, struggling fruitlessly to be released, roaring his outrage, pain and frustration as the belt continued its work and the bondage held firm. All his muscles were bunched up and taut under his skin as he struggled with all his might to be free.

“How does it feel, Walter?” Doggett said again. “Tell me how it feels.”

“It hurts!” Skinner roared. “It hurts, you bastard.”

“Good – what else?” Doggett asked, trying desperately to penetrate the numbness of Skinner’s locked-up emotions.

“Oh god,” Skinner roared, making another mighty effort to be free. “I can’t...I can’t...” He cried, and Doggett thought his heart would break as he watched. “I can’t do it. I’m not good enough...not strong enough to break free...” Skinner growled as he continued struggling, his breathing coming in hard pants, his ass now a glowing shade of red.

“Tell me more. Tell me what you’re feeling...not what you’re thinking,” Doggett said. “Let it out, Walter. Tell me.”

“Helpless,” Skinner moaned. “Exposed...can’t move freely...can’t...” He let out another mighty roar and then lay still, panting from the effort. “At the mercy of someone else,” he whispered, lying on his side again after his most recent struggle. “Vulnerable,” he added. “Oh shit...let me go...let me go...” Doggett sensed now that he wasn’t talking about his bondage, but about something that went a great deal deeper. Doggett relaxed slightly – this was what he had been hoping for. “Please let it be over...let it all end,” Skinner whispered.

“It can’t end just by you wishing it so,” Doggett replied softly. “You have to learn to live with it, Walter, and you won’t do that until you start admitting to yourself how it feels. You can’t just shut it away and pretend it’s not there. It’ll come out somewhere – it’ll rob you of sleep, make you drink to forget, make you lose your temper and your self control...until you start to break up, to fall apart...you have to face it, Walter. How does it feel?” he asked again. Physically Doggett had replicated the situation that had been causing Skinner so much anguish and frustration – the bondage simulated how hamstrung, invaded, and out of control Skinner had been rendered by the nanocytes, while the belt focused his mind on the pain of his condition, and the guilt and self-loathing that it had caused. Doggett needed

Skinner to feel that pain and frustration for himself, instead of blocking it out so that it manifested in other, more harmful ways. Skinner let out a low, keening howl, like an animal in distress.

"I've been destroyed!" he screamed. "I'm trapped. Everywhere I turn there are dead ends. Nowhere to go, nowhere to run, nowhere to hide," he whispered softly. "Just me, alone in the dark. Can't move..." he pulled on his cuffs again, pointlessly, "Can't do anything to change it...at the mercy of anyone who wants to come along and press those goddamn fucking buttons...oh god...please...."

He buried his face in the pillow and gave himself up to a long shuddering spasm of distress. "Oh god, please end this. I can't live like this. I can't...I can't... I'm sorry...I can't..." His body seemed to crumple before Doggett's eyes, his limbs going limp in their bonds. "I feel so...empty."

Doggett heard the sound of a heart-rending, half-suppressed sob, and sprang into action. He released the clips on the cuffs in double-quick time, threw himself onto the bed, and took the big man into his arms. Skinner didn't resist. His newly released arms came up and clung to Doggett for dear life. He didn't speak, but his whole body spasmed against Doggett's, his face buried in Doggett's neck.

"You can cry if you want to, Walter," Doggett said softly, gently rubbing Skinner's back with his hands. "That 'big boys don't cry' crap is garbage. I cried so many times after the death of my son...I needed to cry. You can't bottle it all up inside. You have to deal with it or it festers. Come on, Corporal, give it all up to me. Just let go. You've held on for too long. No man could have held on any longer, but now you can fall...I'm here to catch you. Just go for it, Walter." He wrapped his arms even more tightly around Skinner, and then gradually, as if the floodgates were being creaked open slowly, after a lifetime of never being used, the torrent came. Skinner bucked into him as if an earthquake had taken over his body. His mouth was open in a wordless scream and then he was sobbing in earnest. His cries rippled through his body, a primal explosion of utter distress. Doggett held on tight, going with Skinner all the way, feeling the other man's tense muscles contract even more under his embrace. Skinner's tears were raw and mostly silent. They came reluctantly, as if they had to be prised out of his body against the wishes of its owner, but once they started they were not going to be easily stopped.

Doggett held Skinner for over an hour as the waves of sadness ripped through the big man's body, and then, finally, Skinner fell silent, his hands still gripping onto John, holding him, needing him. Doggett rocked Skinner back and forth, feeling Skinner's muscles start to relax now that the tremendous outpouring of grief and frustration had subsided. Skinner buried his face in Doggett's neck and closed his eyes, refusing to look at the agent. Doggett let him rest for a while, but as Skinner's naked flesh started to cool under his fingertips, Doggett knew he had to move them both.

"Walter...I'm going to draw you a bath," he said softly. "You're getting cold lying here naked

with no blanket. You need to lie in the warm and relax. Hold on.”

He disentangled himself, rose up off the bed, and walked unsteadily into the bathroom, utterly drained by the experience they'd both just been through. He was surprised to hear footsteps behind him, and looked around to find Skinner standing in the doorway, his gaze fixed on the floor, his entire body trembling.

“It’s okay, buddy,” Doggett said, understanding the vulnerability Skinner was experiencing right now. “I’m just filling the tub.” He turned on the faucets, threw in one of those orange coloured bubble-bath balls that Monica had insisted on giving him as a Christmas present, and turned back to Skinner, opening his arms. “Come here. You’re getting cold. We need to get you warm, huh?”

Skinner came into his outstretched arms and Doggett held him close, swaying gently as they waited for the bath to fill. Skinner’s flesh was cold underneath his fingers, his skin clammy. Doggett held him tight for a long time, warming him with his own body. When the bath was almost ready, he kissed Skinner’s cheek and then drew back, but the other man still wouldn’t meet his gaze.

“Walter?” He lifted Skinner’s chin so that the other man had no choice but to look at him.

“I’m sorry, John,” Skinner cleared his throat – his voice sounded croaky. “I guess I made an idiot of myself back there,” Skinner whispered huskily. “I shouldn’t have lost it like that.”

“You damn well should,” Doggett replied firmly. “If you hadn’t then that would have meant I’d screwed up big time. You needed that, Walter.”

“So what now...is that it? Will I be okay now?” Skinner asked, in an aching vulnerable voice. Doggett smiled and shook his head at one and the same time.

“Oh Walter, what the hell am I going to do with you?” he chided softly. “No, buddy, cathartic though that was, I’m afraid your problems don’t just disappear in one go.”

“Then why...” Skinner began.

“It’s a start,” Doggett interrupted him. “Come on – the water’s ready. I want you to get warmed up or you’ll go into shock.” He turned off the faucets, swirled the water around to check the temperature and then beckoned Skinner over. “Tell you what – the tub’s not really designed for this, but I want to be close to you right now so I’ll get in first,” Doggett said.

He quickly disposed of his clothes, and then climbed into the tub and gestured to Skinner to come and sit between his outstretched legs. It was a tight squeeze for two big men to sit in the bath, and a fair amount of water sloshed over the sides, but Doggett didn’t give a damn about that. He settled back into the tub with a sigh, and pulled Skinner down so that the big man’s back rested against his chest. Skinner gave a little wince as his sore ass made contact with the water.

“I’ll rub somethin’ on that later. I’m really sorry I had to do that to you, buddy,” Doggett whispered, placing one arm around Skinner’s chest to keep the big man close to him. He made Skinner relax, so that the back of his head was resting on Doggett’s chest, their faces almost side by side.

“S’okay. I guess I deserved it,” Skinner murmured.

“No, Corporal. That wasn’t punishment,” Doggett said firmly. “Nobody deserves to be hurt, least of all you after all you’ve been through. I just didn’t know of any other way to get through to you tonight. You needed to let it out, in as safe a way as possible, so that neither you nor anybody else got badly damaged in the process. I needed to make you mad enough to really let go, while you were all trussed up and unable to hurt yourself or anyone else. I’m so, so sorry about that, Walter. How are you feeling now?” He asked, smoothing warm water over Skinner’s bruised wrists where he’d tugged on the cuffs. Then he raised one to his lips and kissed the darkened flesh gently. Skinner’s arm was as heavy as lead in his hands. Doggett winced as he saw the cut knuckles and dark bruise on the other man’s fist where he had slammed it into the closet. He checked it carefully, making sure there were no broken bones, and then released Skinner’s hand back into the water.

“I’m so tired, John. Tired beyond belief,” Skinner whispered drowsily.

“How long since you slept? Properly slept I mean,” Doggett asked.

“About a week. Ever since I got that letter from the hospital last Saturday,” Skinner murmured.

“So it was then? I figured it had to be.” Doggett brushed his lips over Skinner’s cheek. “Well, I’m going to see you get some rest this weekend, Corporal.”

“And then what?” Skinner asked despairingly. “Where do I go from here, John? Where do we go from here?”

Doggett thought about it for a moment. “All right, buddy, here’s what I want you to do. You remember I told you about Tony?”

Skinner nodded.

“Well, he and I, we had a certain kind of relationship. I think you and I need that right now too, just while you’re in a bad way.” He soothed a gentle hand over Skinner’s chest, stroking a nipple softly in the process. “Tony and I – we were in...I don’t know what he called it, somethin’ that didn’t mean a whole lot to me anyhow. What it meant, in real terms though, was that I was in charge – in the bedroom, in the supermarket, in the street, in the car – everywhere. Now, I’m not suggesting quite the same thing with you. You’re in charge in the office and that’s fine. I won’t overstep that boundary – wouldn’t want to. I think for a while at least though, that outside the office you trust my judgement because your own isn’t necessarily doing you any favours right now. I want you to agree to do what I tell you,

Walter, even if you hate what I'm asking, even if every single part of you rebels at the idea. Is that okay with you?"

"I don't think I'll find that very easy," Skinner grunted.

"I know." Doggett laughed. "I don't think you will either. Nobody said it was going to be easy and I expect there will be a few yelling matches along the way but for now I think you need a place where you don't have to be in control – where you're actually not allowed to be in control. I think you need a break, some relief from control. I'm not saying this will be a permanent arrangement – not unless that's what you feel you want at a later stage anyway – I'm just saying that for now it's what I think you need. What do you say, Corporal?"

Skinner took a deep breath and held it for what seemed like eternity, then let it out in one massive exhalation.

"All right, John," he said at last. "If you think you can handle me."

Doggett gave a low, rumbling laugh. "Walter, I'll do my damndest," he replied. "Just so long as you know that I have your best interests at heart – I care about you, Walter and I don't think you've had anyone in your life care about you for a long time. That takes a bit of getting used to, but it's one of the things you're going to have to accept."

"Okay, John. I'm so tired and empty right now I think I'd agree to almost anything," Skinner said drowsily.

"In that case I'll ask you again in the morning – I want to make sure this is something you're going into with your eyes open because once we start you're stuck with the arrangement until I think you're ready for us to lighten it up. Once we begin, you can't change your mind – I won't allow you to in case you start building up those walls again. Understood, Walter?" Doggett squeezed Skinner across the chest gently.

"Yes, Sergeant," Skinner sighed.

"Good." Doggett kissed his lover on the side of the face, and then pushed him up. "Come on, Walter, time to go to bed. God knows what hour of the night – or day it is now." He glanced out of the window, noticing for the first time that it was already light. Skinner got to his feet unsteadily, and Doggett held him up as he got out of the bath. He grabbed a towel and rubbed Skinner dry. The other man demurred, protesting that he was a grown man and could dry himself, but Doggett wasn't having any of that.

"I'm in charge here, Walter, and I want to dry you so just be quiet and let me get on with it," he said firmly, going about his task briskly. When they were both dry, Doggett found some aloe in a cupboard in the bathroom. He ordered Skinner to stand with his hands against the wall for support, butt out, and then gently rubbed the soothing gel into Skinner's still reddened flesh. He hadn't hit hard enough to cause any welts – he'd only done enough to cause outrage, not harm - but the skin was obviously tender. Skinner, stoical as ever, didn't make a sound as the cool gel was rubbed into his hot flesh. Then Doggett turned him around

and applied more to his bruised knuckle.

"This has taken something of a beating tonight, what with fighting and then that run-in with the closet," Doggett commented, taking care to smooth the gel in as lightly as he could as Skinner's fist looked swollen and painful. The other man grunted at his levity, but didn't make so much as a murmur as Doggett completed his painful work. When Doggett was done he led Skinner back to the bedroom, and they both slipped under the sheets. Doggett reached for Skinner, and drew him close. They lay spooned for several long minutes - Doggett was just dropping off to sleep when Skinner shifted beside him.

"John...would you make love to me," he requested softly.

Doggett opened his eyes, startled. "Walter, it's been a long night - you're exhausted," he chided.

"I know...I just...I feel like I need it right now."

Doggett smiled at Skinner's use of the word "feel" instead of "think." He understood where the other man was coming from though. Skinner had been emptied by the events of the evening, and, in the most basic way possible, needed to be filled again. He needed to feel something positive - and, more than anything else, he was feeling desperately vulnerable right now after having allowed Doggett to see him at his lowest point. He needed to be reassured that Doggett hadn't been repulsed by his weakness.

"Then that's good enough for me, Corporal," Doggett replied. "Nothing too strenuous though. Hold still, Walter." He reached into his nightstand drawer and retrieved condoms and lubricant. He spread the lube on one finger and, lying on his side, placed Skinner on his side, and pushed the other man's leg forward. He slipped his finger into the crevice between Skinner's warm buttocks and slid it gently in, back and forth. Skinner was relaxed after the bath, and it didn't take long to stretch him sufficiently for penetration - by which time Doggett was thoroughly aroused and ready to go. He slid a condom on, slathered his penis with more lube, and then lay down on his side beside Skinner. He pulled the other man's head back, rested his own chin on Skinner's shoulder, and then swept a hand over Skinner's body, gently soothing and arousing in equal measure. Skinner's cock was flaccid, and didn't move when he touched it. "Walter, are you sure about this?" He asked.

"Mmm. I'm just tired - too tired for that. All I want is you inside me. I don't need to come," Skinner murmured hazily.

"Okay." Doggett had asked Skinner to be honest, and he was being exactly that. He gently pried the big man's buttocks apart, and snubbed his cock into the opening. Skinner gave a little gasp, and Doggett surged forward until he was completely engulfed in his lover's tight, enticing hole. "Oh boy you always feel so good," Doggett whispered. He kissed Skinner's cheek, and then began rocking into him, back and forth with slow, tender, almost lazy thrusts. He guessed he was hitting Skinner's prostate each time from the little sounds the other man was making in the back of his throat. It felt so warm and good like this that Doggett wanted it to go on forever. Skinner's eyes were closed and it looked as if he felt the

same way. Doggett came in a warm, fuzzy climax, devoid of the more usual urgent sensations, and then placed his chin back on Skinner's shoulder with a contented sigh. They were both asleep within seconds and it gave Doggett a secret thrill to find, when he woke up briefly a couple of hours later, that his cock was still lodged deep within his lover's body.

It was past noon by the time they fully woke the next day. Doggett found that at some point in their sleep they had moved and their bodies were no longer intimately connected – instead Skinner was now facing him, his eyes closed. Doggett roused his lover with a kiss on the lips and Skinner opened his eyes blearily and gazed at him for a second. For a moment Skinner's eyes were serene and content, and then, under Doggett's gaze, all the memories flooded back in and the other man's eyes darkened as if he'd visibly lost hope. Doggett made a mental vow that his chief aim in life would be to one day always wake up beside those contented eyes, and never to have to watch their expression change into one of such hopelessness. Doggett gently touched the side of Skinner's face, needing desperately to reconnect himself with this man, to reassure him that he was in safe hands.

"That was some night, huh?" He said softly. Skinner's skin pinked and he gave a little shrug.

"God knows what you must have thought of me..." He winced. He glanced over at the damaged closet and grimaced. "I'm sorry, John," he murmured. "I wouldn't have hurt you...I was just...Christ, I don't know what I was...I've never behaved like that before." He looked desperately vulnerable.

"I know you wouldn't have hurt me, Walter." Doggett put his arms around Skinner and squeezed him firmly, bestowing a kiss on the other man's scalp in the process.

"I was a damn idiot. Getting into that fight, allowing myself to get out of control like that, getting arrested for god's sake. I'm ashamed of myself," Skinner murmured.

"Hold it, Walter. We aren't doing shame today. It isn't on the schedule," Doggett told him firmly. "What is on the schedule is a shower. Come on, Corporal. Time to move." He threw back the sheets and waited while a naked Skinner got up and then followed him to the doorway. Skinner's movements were slow and heavy, and he winced slightly as he moved. "You're stiff," Doggett said, putting a hand on Skinner's shoulder as they walked to the bathroom.

"Yeah...well..." Skinner shrugged again.

"I know. A combination of you brawling and me trussing you up last night," Doggett said, sparing neither of them with his honesty.

"Brawling..." Skinner shook his head. "Haven't been caught doing that since I was a rowdy marine out on the town. Christ, at my age. I wasn't even drunk either." He gave a shame faced smile. "Don't even have that as an excuse."

Doggett peed, then stepped into the shower, and turned it on. Skinner used the toilet, and then stood, waiting, as if unsure what to do next.

“Come on, Walter – I didn’t plan on taking this shower alone,” Doggett told him.

Skinner gave a ghostly, hesitant smile as he stepped into the shower cubicle beside his lover. Doggett grinned, and immediately enveloped the other man in a firm, loving, deep embrace, kissing him soundly. Skinner hung on like a drowning man, his hands fumbling for Doggett’s buttocks, the warm water cascading over both of them.

“Okay, Corporal. Hands on the wall, legs open, butt out,” Doggett ordered when the kiss finished. Skinner gazed at him quizzically but did as he was told anyway. His body was stiff and taut, all his muscles tensed as he stood facing the wall, his hands braced against it. Doggett gazed at him, perturbed by Skinner’s un-relaxed stance, and then it sank in; Skinner was in atoning mood. He was both ashamed and confused by his actions the previous night and didn’t know what to expect this morning. Doggett had spoken about giving orders after all, and he had used his belt on him. It was hardly surprising that Skinner didn’t know whether to expect pain or pleasure. Doggett suppressed an angry sigh – this wasn’t what he’d intended at all. Last night had been a one off, a desperate attempt to reach a man who was lost to himself, a lifeline to bring him back home. It had been unorthodox but seemed to have worked at the time, taking Skinner to a place where he could at least connect with emotions he’d said himself were numb. Now Doggett knew he mustn’t fail the other man in the aftermath of that great explosion of anger, frustration and sadness he had witnessed the previous night.

“No, Corporal, this won’t do at all,” Doggett said softly, placing a hand on Skinner’s shoulder. The other man jumped, clearly not sure what to expect. “Corporal, when I told you last night that I wanted you to let me take charge, it was because I want you to feel good about yourself, not bad,” Doggett said, running his hand soothingly down Skinner’s back as if the other man was a headstrong young colt to be tamed. “You’ve always been very adept at giving yourself a hard time...my job is to see that you’re given a good time too – to balance things out. Now just relax, Corporal. I’m going to take this very slow. The water’s warming your muscles, and I’m going to even out the kinks a little...while admiring this beautiful body at the same time.”

Skinner gave what sounded suspiciously like a snort.

“You don’t think this body is beautiful? I sure as hell do.” Doggett lathered his hands in soap and ran them over Skinner’s back, rubbing gently but firmly. Skinner’s muscles began to relax beneath his ministrations, slowly but surely, and Doggett took his time. “You should see yourself as I see you, Walter,” he murmured as he worked, his hands roving over the acres of honeyed flesh in front of him. “I love the way your muscles move under your skin – smooth...very smooth...”

He kissed Skinner’s shoulder blade and then worked his lathered hands further down Skinner’s back, massaging firmly as he went. Skinner opened his legs wider, and leaned into the wall with his upper body. Doggett suppressed a little laugh – somehow he didn’t think

Skinner was used to being admired like this, and the other man didn't know whether to be flattered or embarrassed – but he sure as hell was turned on.

“This ass...so edible,” Doggett grinned as he bent over, and ran his hands lovingly over Skinner's bottom. He inspected it carefully, but his belt had left no marks – there wasn't even any redness beyond a couple of tiny broken blood capillaries on the surface of the skin, which he knew weren't painful. He massaged the flesh firmly and was gratified when Skinner moaned softly in pleasure, not pain. The aloe he'd used had clearly taken away any last vestige of sting or sensitivity. Unable to resist, Doggett kissed the two round globes of flesh soundly. Then he straightened and stood close behind Skinner so their bodies were touching, and carefully inserted a finger into the other man's body. Skinner gasped, the water bouncing off his head as he gazed at the ceiling.

“This is good, Walter...this is real good, you feel so good to me, oh boy I love it when you give it up to me like this,” Doggett purred. He finger fucked Skinner for a long time, and then withdrew. “Turn around.”

He stepped back and watched as Skinner turned to face him. Doggett's cock was thoroughly aroused by being in such close proximity to his lover, and Skinner took a step forward and moved his hand towards it. Doggett stopped him.

“Walter...I want you to just relax and let me do things for a while. I don't want you to feel you have any responsibilities at the moment, including any responsibility for me. I can get myself off, or ask you to do that for me, but I want you to wait for me to ask.”

“I enjoy touching you,” Skinner murmured. “When you were talking to me just now, about my body...I don't find it easy talking about that kind of stuff...I never did with Sharon or she with me...I like it.” He looked deeply uncertain, and dropped his gaze to his feet. Doggett waited and was rewarded when Skinner lifted his face again. “I told you that I didn't know how I felt about what was happening between us...I knew I was attracted to you, but...I didn't know much beyond that. That's changed. I find...there are things I think about when I'm not with you...” Skinner hesitated but Doggett was patient and after awhile he began again. “Stupid stuff probably...the colour of your eyes...the expression in them. You always seem so focussed...when you're focussed on me it's breathtaking. I like the feel of your hair under my hands...maybe because I don't have any to enjoy any more!” Skinner gave a wry smile, and Doggett chuckled, encouraging him to continue. “I like the way you hold yourself...the way you move.” Skinner gave up, with a little shrug, but Doggett was impressed that he'd managed that much.

“Thank you, Walter,” he said softly. “I know that wasn't easy for you and I appreciate it. Me – when I'm with someone I just say it how it is – the bad and the good unfortunately. If you're going to suffer from my honesty you should at least enjoy the benefits of it as well!” He grinned, and leaned in close for another kiss. Skinner's cock was hard between their bodies. Doggett enjoyed the feel of it between them. He pushed Skinner against the tiled wall again, and held the other man's arms above his head with his one of his hands, keeping him pinned there while he kissed him soundly. He waited until Skinner's body melted against him, and then moved back a fraction and took the big man's hard cock in his hand.

Skinner gasped into his mouth as the sensitive organ was so suddenly stimulated, but Doggett wouldn't let him go. Water poured over them as he firmly pumped Skinner's cock while at the same time kissing him hard. Finally, he let them both come up for air, but he had no sooner released Skinner than he sank to his knees, and, without hesitating, took the big man's cock in his mouth. Skinner moaned, and bucked against him, his hands reaching blindly for Doggett's hair. Doggett deep-throated him – a technique he saved only for when he was in the mood to really spoil his partner, and Skinner gave a growl of sheer outraged pleasure, mingled with amazement that anything could feel so good. It wasn't long before he was coming deep inside Doggett's throat.

They stayed under the water just recovering from the force of Skinner's climax and then Doggett got to his feet again.

"Oh shit..." Skinner said shakily. "You'll have to teach me how to do that one day."

"I will," Doggett said with a little wink. "But in the meantime – if you want to touch, be my guest." He opened his arms wide and Skinner gave a little smile and stepped forward. He ran his fingers over Doggett's nipples, and then took each of them in his mouth, roving from one to the other while he sucked, gently, and then more forcefully on the pointed nubs of flesh. Doggett found himself moaning now – it felt so good to have this big, powerful man sucking on his body. He leaned back against the wall and gazed down on Skinner's head in something akin to disbelief as the big man sank to his knees and took his cock into his mouth. He had never expected to see this man kneel in front of him and give him pleasure in this way and it aroused him beyond belief. Skinner wasn't anywhere near as skilled as Doggett, but he was eager, and just the sight of Skinner performing this most intimate of services on him was enough to make Doggett come enthusiastically in Skinner's mouth. He didn't draw away as he ejaculated, and watched as Skinner considered the taste for a moment.

"I bet it's been a long time since you tasted anythin' like that," he commented.

Skinner looked up at him and smiled. "Yeah...I was just remembering. It felt good to have you in my mouth," he murmured.

"You have no idea how good it felt being in your mouth, Corporal!" Doggett replied with a grin. "You know, I think sometime soon you're going to have to let me take that big cock of yours in my ass." He gazed at Skinner's softened but still meaty cock with a sense of anticipation as he helped the big man to his feet again – then caught Skinner's look of surprise and laughed out loud. "What's the matter, Corporal? You think that because I like being in charge in the bedroom I don't want to feel that beautiful monster in my ass? On the contrary – I'm looking forward to it!"

Skinner shook his head, his expression slightly bemused.

"I guess I just don't know the rules of this game," he said.

“There aren’t any rules,” Doggett said firmly, turning off the shower. “No rules except enjoying ourselves at least...and that might sound easy but I don’t think it’s somethin’ you have much experience off, Corporal, which is why I’m here. I’m your Drill Sergeant for having a good time.” He grinned broadly. “Even if I have to bully your ass into it, Corporal, I’m going to make sure you get some much needed R&R!”

Skinner’s clothes were in no fit state for the big man to wear, so Doggett lent him a pair of sweatpants and a tee shirt. The sweatpants were a little short in the leg and the tee shirt clung to Skinner’s broad chest in a way that Doggett found very appealing. Skinner paused thoughtfully as he sat on the side of the bed doing up his shoe-laces. Doggett glanced over at him as he pulled on his own boxer shorts.

“Problem, Corporal?” He asked.

Skinner picked up one of the leather cuffs that had been lying on the floor and held it up.

“You took a big risk last night, John,” he commented, rubbing the cuff thoughtfully.

“I know.” Doggett paused in doing up his jeans and gazed at Skinner. “I’m sorry. I just didn’t know what to do with you, the state you were in. I needed to reach you and you were so out of control that I wasn’t sure I’d be able to.”

“I’m guessing these were Tony’s?”

“Yeah.” Doggett looped his belt through his jeans and fastened it.

“Did you do this kind of thing to him? What you did to me last night?” Skinner asked, watching Doggett intently, his eyes fixed on the other man’s belt. Doggett immediately stopped tucking his tee shirt into his jeans and turned to face Skinner.

“No, buddy,” he said softly. “Tony used to like being immobilised during sex. He liked feeling helpless – he used to get the cuffs out, not me. I didn’t mind obliging him every now and again but he usually initiated it. It wasn’t somethin’ that turned me on much – except for the fact that it obviously turned him on and that was fine by me.”

“Did you beat him with your belt too?” Skinner asked. He was still sitting holding the cuff thoughtfully. Doggett decided this was a subject they needed to talk out. He had planned on talking over breakfast about a whole host of subjects that the events of last night had raised, but as Skinner had started the subject, and seemed receptive, he decided now would be as good a time as any. He went and crouched in front of Skinner and touched his knee.

“Yes, Walter, I beat him with my belt or my hand if he wanted me to. Sometimes he’d go off half-cocked, get himself into a whole load of trouble – and he seemed to need me to rein him back in after. Again, it was his idea initially. What I did to you last night wasn’t the same

thing at all. I apologise if I got it wrong, Walter. I just wanted to recreate the way you were feeling inside – to get you to feel it instead of shutting it out. And I wanted you to let me in. If I screwed up then you gotta tell me, Walter. I hope I didn't betray your trust – I'd never want to do that."

Skinner glanced up and met Doggett's gaze.

"You didn't screw up, John. I should thank you. I was so out of control last night that I don't know what I might have done if you hadn't been there. And you must have gotten something right because being tied last night, feeling so helpless, vulnerable...that's exactly what it feels like having these fucking bastard bloodsuckers inside me, John," he said quietly. "Sometimes I...it builds up so much I want to fight someone – but there's nobody to fight, and nothing I can do to win. Every which way I turn is a dead end." His shoulders hunched miserably as he spoke. "I can't say I liked what you did to me last night, but I can understand why you did it, and you sure as hell managed to successfully recreate what was going inside by tying me and flicking at me with your belt. It's strange, but last night it felt like you were really laying into me with your belt – but this morning I can see from the state of my ass that you couldn't have done much at all."

"Hard taps is all," Doggett confirmed, squeezing Skinner's knee with his hand. "Tony used to like things a lot rougher, but then that was his choice. I didn't give you a choice so there was no way I was going to seriously lay into you. It felt worse than it was because you were in such a dark place last night. Walter, I don't think you've realised how intolerable your life has been these past couple of years. You're a proud man, and the nanocytes forced you into being someone that just wasn't you. Maybe you could bear that while Krycek kept your mind occupied on the consequences of not doing what he wanted – but the moment you allowed yourself to hope that you could soon be free...that's when it all came crashing down, Walter."

"Yes. I know." Skinner shook his head. "I didn't see it at the time. When I got that letter last week...I'm sorry about how I treated you, John, but I just didn't want to be involved with anyone while I'm still under the influence of the nanocytes."

"Can you explain that to me, Walter?"

Doggett got up and sat on the bed beside Skinner. The other man was still pale after the week he'd had and the previous night's events. His eyes were dark and there were shadows beneath them, but despite all that, there was a weary kind of peace to him, a sense of acceptance that he was in a bad way and needed help. "What was going through your mind when you blew me off last week?" Doggett pressed. Although he knew Skinner didn't find it easy talking on a personal level, he was sure that right now the other man was willing to open up and be honest. Last night had created a bond between them – Doggett had seen Skinner at his weakest, and any fears that Skinner might have had about being so vulnerable in front of someone else had been at least partly dispelled by the morning's shower session. Skinner shook his head again and gazed sightlessly into space.

"I'm not sure it was anything so coherent as a conscious decision. I just had an overwhelming need to slink off to my den and lick my wounds in private. I'm damaged

goods, John. How can I be with anyone when I can't even be sure what I'll do tomorrow, or next week? What someone will make me do? I had to cut myself off from you. You didn't deserve to be part of such a fucked-up life and I didn't think I could handle the guilt of involving you. I did that once before...Sharon died because of me."

"That's not the whole truth is it?" Doggett pushed. Skinner's eyes came slowly back into focus on him.

"What do you mean?" He asked, in a puzzled tone.

"I mean that you don't find it easy sharing your life, do you? Not the hard stuff anyway – you wall up a part of yourself and hide behind it. You don't want to let anyone in."

Skinner gave a wry smile. "You aren't the first person to accuse me of that, John. Sharon used to say the same thing. You're right and so was she, but I don't know how to change."

"You need to agree to share the crap as well as the good stuff," Doggett said firmly. "Hell, I'm a big boy, I can handle it, Walter. Speaking of which - do you have that letter from the hospital?"

"Yeah...I carry it around with me. Maybe I'm hoping that next time I read it it'll say something different." Skinner grimaced and reached for the pants he had been wearing the previous night, which were lying on the floor. He fished a letter out of the pocket, and handed it to Doggett who opened it, read it, then sat back and considered the contents.

"It's not completely without hope, Walter," he commented.

"It says that one day they might figure it out – but it could take a decade," Skinner growled in a dull, angry tone.

"Maybe – but at least they're goin' to keep looking into it," Doggett said, reading the letter again.

"Yes." Skinner shifted uncomfortably.

Doggett looked at him sharply. "Walter – you do trust these people don't you?" He asked. Skinner shrugged. "The honest truth? No. I don't. Maybe I've been supervising the X Files for too long. Maybe I don't trust anyone anymore."

"You trusted me last night," Doggett said softly. Skinner's jaw did a sideways clench.

"Yeah. I guess I did," he muttered, as if surprised to find that was the truth. Doggett folded up the letter and tucked it back into Skinner's pants.

"When you pushed me away after receiving this goddamn letter, I was so pissed off. I thought I'd never be able to get through to you again and after what we'd shared, that hurt. Christ it hurt."

Skinner glanced up, surprise in his eyes.

“You didn’t think I’d become emotionally involved with you? Is that it?” Doggett shook his head in disbelief. “You didn’t think it was possible that I’d fallen in love with you? I’m sorry, Walter, but I told you – this isn’t just a fling to me. I’ve wanted you for a long time, and there ain’t nothin’ or nobody gonna stand in my way as far as you’re concerned.”

“A long time?” Skinner looked confused. “I thought it was just when we got close in the hospital,” he said.

“Well that just confirmed to me how much I like and respect you. I was already falling in love with you a long time before then – all those lunches remember!” Doggett grinned, put his arm around Skinner’s shoulder, pulled him close, and deposited a kiss on the other man’s cheek before releasing him again. “I’m not askin’ you to feel the same way. You have enough on your plate as it is, Walter. I’m just telling you that this is serious to me, that I’m going to be hanging around come what may, and that this isn’t some kind of pity thing because you’ve been in the hospital and you have this terrible nanocyte issue to deal with. I hadn’t known you for long when you first warned me about the hidden agenda at work in the FBI. You were the only one who warned me about that and you were right. From then on I knew I liked you, and my feelings for you just grew from there.”

Skinner grimaced. “Hell, I’d been there, John; I just wanted you to know what you were getting into. I was in line to get the top job myself once. I was one of the youngest AD’s the FBI ever appointed, and I was more or less told they were grooming me to be in charge of the Bureau one day. I saw myself in you – they were doing all the same things to you, making the same old promises, and setting you up to either fail when it became obvious you wouldn’t play the game according to their rules, or to succeed if you did – the way Kersh has managed to succeed in climbing the greasy pole.”

Doggett nodded gravely. “Kersh might have seemed to be helping me in my career but I guess I always knew that appointing me to search for Mulder was like being handed a poisoned chalice. I might have been Kersh’s golden boy, but there was something about the man that I never liked or trusted. I’d seen him in action and I knew that he didn’t have any loyalty to his agents or the Bureau – only to himself. You and he couldn’t be more different. I watched you Walter – in the field and in the office. I noticed your loyalty to your agents and that quiet way you have of just takin’ care of people and asking nothing back in return, while at the same time taking no shit and giving those who deserved it a hard time. I figured you were one of the best superior officers I’d ever worked under in any field – the marines, the NYPD, or the Bureau. I noticed you tear out what’s left of your hair over the X Files,” he grinned, running his fingers through the fringe of hair on the back of Skinner’s head, “watched you take care of Agent Scully when she was pregnant...saw how she used to lean on you. I know she often visited you just to talk, and you were always there for her, day or night. Then there was Mulder.”

Doggett sighed, and glanced at the backs of his own hands speculatively.

"I don't know what it is with you and Mulder, but I watched you going crazy trying to get that guy back from god knows where, even down to digging up his goddamn coffin – and you know how insane I thought that was at the time because I sure as hell didn't mince my words with you over it. I still don't know if he was worth it – but I'll be honest with you, the only reason I ever gave him the time of day was because I figured that if a man like you thought he was worth somethin' then I had to give him a chance."

"Mulder's a good man – and he had it tough, John. They were out to screw him from the beginning," Skinner murmured, still gazing at the cuff resting in his lap with a kind of curious fascination. "I couldn't stand by and just let that happen."

"Tell me about it, Walter." Doggett gently removed the cuff from Skinner's lap, and tossed it onto the floor. He changed his position slightly, tucking his knee under his leg and turning so he was facing Skinner on the bed. "Tell me about the X Files – how it all began for you," he asked.

Skinner took a deep breath and then shook his head. "I don't know where to begin...when he was first assigned to me, Mulder would come to me with all these bizarre theories. I thought he was a crackpot, but I couldn't dismiss him as just that because his reports were so intelligent and his reputation at the Behavioural Sciences Unit was just phenomenal. He had this amazing solve rate. At first, I wondered whether he'd seen too much, spent too long in the minds of some of the worst psychos to walk the planet – maybe he was burnt out. Then...the Bureau assigned me this man to work with, said he was high up with the DOD and that it would be a good idea to listen to what he had to say, and I did – at first."

"Spender," Doggett said. "I read all about him in Mulder's files – he had a section all to himself, the bastard."

"Yeah." Skinner shook his head. "I didn't like him and didn't trust him so the harder he rode Mulder the more I thought Mulder might be onto something. It didn't take me long before I was ordering that SOB out of my office. My career effectively died on that day, John. Christ, it was 6 years ago – I can't believe it's been that long. I've been hanging on by my fingertips ever since." He shook his head. "I never told Mulder, but I did some investigating of my own about Spender. I found at least one of the places where he lived, and I got some idea of his movements, but I never could figure out who he was working for, although I followed up every lead I got. I've been around the block, John – I know the way this city works, the way the Bureau works, even the way the goddamn CIA works. I didn't think it was anything more than a political game, a power struggle, with me caught in the middle. I thought I knew the game we were playing, John. I thought I understood the battlefield. I was wrong." Skinner's dark eyes were bleak as he shook his head. "I was so wrong. This battlefield is the size of the planet, and they don't care who they kill or take hostage to their cause. Mulder was like David to their Goliath – even with my help, he didn't stand a chance. I don't think he even got close to uncovering the full extent of what's been going on."

"You know...6 years is a long time to be fighting without a break," Doggett said softly. "I have this image of you, Walter. You're like a punch-drunk boxer who has been in the ring too long. You stay in much longer and you'll be down for the count. If you get out of the ring

for a while though, and recover, then you can get back in and fight another day.”

“Maybe so, John, but you and I both know that while these fucking nanocytes are in my veins I might not have a choice as to which side I’m fighting on,” Skinner said grimly, getting up. He went to the door and stood there, his hand resting on the doorframe. “You know, I used to think I was a player, John, maybe the way you do now. I used to have so much certainty. I had the big career, I’d seen action in ‘Nam. I thought I was a hot shot, sure of myself - sure of my body, my capabilities, my life, my wife, my job – but I didn’t know shit.”

Skinner moved his hand and his body language reverted to that which Doggett had noticed the previous weekend, arms wrapped tightly around himself as if to ward off some evil that he knew had already eaten him away from the inside out, leaving him utterly defenceless.

“They got me, John and I didn’t even know it until it was too late,” Skinner said in hoarse world-weary tones, and Doggett knew that he was seeing a glimpse into the other man’s soul. “They stole it all away and I didn’t notice it was gone until I looked around one day to find I wasn’t a man any more. I was gutless, cut off from everything I’d been so sure about. Somewhere along the line, I changed, John,” Skinner told him, looking at Doggett with an exhaustion that went bone deep. Doggett’s heart went out to him – he couldn’t even begin to comprehend what Skinner had suffered so silently over the years. He’d known grief and loss himself, but nothing on this scale, and he’d never lost faith, as Skinner so clearly had. The man was on his last legs, and Doggett didn’t even know how he was still standing.

“God, how I changed. My job wasn’t about solving crimes any more, or keeping the nation safe - it was about appeasing faceless people who worked to an agenda I couldn’t even begin to understand. My life wasn’t my own any more; it belonged to my enemies – it still does - and my body is theirs to command, to hurt, and even to kill, whenever they feel like it. I’m adrift right now, John, all shot to pieces. What can I offer you when I don’t know who I am? And the way things stand with the nanocytes, they can use me to get to you, John. You don’t need this.” He shook his head, and turned to go.

“That’s for me to decide, Mister!” Doggett snapped out sharply, getting to his feet. He grabbed Skinner by the arm and pulled the other man around, roughly. “The future doesn’t come with any guarantees, Walter, but if you walk out on this, on us, then you just let them win another battle in this war.”

Skinner’s gaze was hard and bitter as he looked into Doggett’s eyes.

“What’s the point of fighting the battle when we’re out-powered, out-manoeuvred, and don’t even know who the enemy is, John?” he asked softly.

“I’ll show you the fucking point,” Doggett snapped. He pressed Skinner back against the wall, covered the man’s body with his own, held him down, and kissed him passionately and violently on the lips. His mouth was hungry and rough and at first the other man resisted, and tried to push him back, but Doggett was resolute. This wasn’t just a kiss, this was a battle all of its own. Skinner’s struggling became more muted, and then he gave way, unable to resist any more as Doggett put every single part of himself and his love into that kiss, forcing Skinner to acknowledge him. Finally Skinner’s body melted against his, and his

mouth opened up. Doggett reached out and put his hands on Skinner's head, savouring the feel of the bare flesh of that naked scalp underneath his fingertips as he continued to plunder the big man's mouth. Only when he was satisfied that he'd made his point did he finally let go. Skinner gasped for air as he was released. He gazed at Doggett for a long time, his chest heaving, his lip slightly cut, a little bubble of blood welling up on the surface....and a searching look in those dark brown eyes. Doggett held firm under that raking gaze. He wasn't sure what it was Skinner was seeking, but he intended for the other man to find it in him. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, Skinner sank to his haunches as if felled, his legs shaking violently, too weak to hold him up any more. He wiped away the blood on his lip as he glanced up at Doggett.

"You got me, John," he whispered. "I don't know how, but you found a way in somehow. Whatever you want from me...I..." He spread out the palms of his hands helplessly. "God knows what you see in me because I have nothing to offer you, but I can't fight it any more. I'm yours, John," he said softly. "Whatever you want from me, just take it. Only please don't let me down - that's all I ask - because I don't think I have any reserves left to take that, John."

Doggett looked down into those pleading dark eyes and a sensation of total love flooded through him. Let this man down? He'd rather slit his own wrists. He knelt down beside the stricken man, put his arms around Skinner, drew him close, and held him tight against his chest.

"I won't let you down," he whispered. "That's one promise I can make with total certainty, Walter. You're mine, and I won't ever let you down."

Doggett finally released the big man, and gazed at him seriously. "Walter, last night you agreed to let me be in charge in this relationship until you're feeling better. Is that somethin' you still want? I said I'd ask you again today."

Skinner shook his head, wryly. "John, I don't think I could resist you if I tried. You're the most persistent man I've ever met, and god knows I've worked with Mulder so that's saying something. As for giving up control to you - you seem to have a better handle on what's going on in my head than I do at the moment, so..." He shrugged. "Yes," he said finally, softly. "I don't think I'll be as amenable as Tony, but I must admit that the idea of letting someone else take charge is incredibly appealing right now." He rested the back of his head wearily on the wall. "What exactly does it entail?" He asked, a little warily.

Doggett laughed out loud. "That's my Assistant Director," he said. "It entails being honest first and foremost, Walter. I might push you, and that might make you angry, but I intend to be part of your life from now on - no more shutting me out. And when I tell you to do something, I expect you to do it. Don't worry - I won't ask you to do anything that you're not capable of but I might push you out of your comfort zone."

"Will you tie me up again?" Skinner asked.

"I don't know. How d'you feel about that?" Doggett asked carefully.

"Well..." Skinner hesitated. Doggett stroked his shoulder reassuringly and he continued. "I don't know if I'd enjoy it during sex, like Tony did...but maybe." He shrugged. "I did..." he hesitated again, as if he found this a painful admission. "I did, on some level, enjoy the freedom being unable to control the event gave me, if that doesn't sound too crazy." He looked at Doggett for reassurance and the other man smiled, and squeezed his shoulder firmly. "It was like I'd been liberated by the very fact I was tied. I couldn't escape and...it's strange but I felt I could say things I wouldn't normally be able to – I could hit out without hurting anyone."

"Well then I'll remember that in case you ever need it again," Doggett said reassuringly.

"What about...?" Skinner grimaced, his face flushing slightly.

"My belt?" Doggett prompted.

"Yeah." Skinner winced. "Will you use that on me again?"

"I sure as hell hope not," Doggett said fervently. "Maybe you might like to try spanking as an erotic game, Walter, and that'll be fine, but I don't get off on punishing people in a more formal way than that – Tony was always demanding really harsh beatings, but that didn't do a lot for me. Now, holding you on my lap while I spank and fondle your beautiful ass while you got off on that would be one thing, but what I did last night isn't anything I want to have to do again." He kissed Skinner firmly on the lips to reiterate that point. "If it helps you let go, and you need that, then I will, but otherwise – I told you before, I'm not here to make you feel bad about yourself or to be the means by which you give yourself a hard time, so forget it."

Skinner nodded slowly, clearly trying to get a handle on what this relationship would entail. Doggett got up. "You have any more questions, at any time, you just ask them, Walter. For now, I'm starving!"

He grinned, and reached down a hand to drag Skinner to his feet. He could feel Skinner's tremendous weight and strength as the big man got up, and he marvelled that this strong, capable man should have committed himself so trustingly and whole-heartedly to him. He would never let Walter Skinner down - of that he was sure. He felt honoured that Skinner had agreed to hand some degree of control over his life to him, and he would do everything in his power to make sure that this wasn't a decision that his lover would regret.

They ate while reading the papers, and then Doggett took another look at Skinner's bruised hand. It was swollen and puffy but he was able to confirm his opinion of the previous night that nothing was broken – Skinner had been lucky in that respect Doggett thought, because he'd certainly landed one hell of a punch on the unfortunate closet. He smoothed some

more gel on the bruised knuckles, and then wrapped the hand in a bandage despite Skinner's protests that it would be fine; he wasn't taking any chances with his lover's health.

They were both too tired to do anything other than sleep and watch TV for the rest of the day. Doggett deliberately kept things light – they'd done a lot of talking and neither of them were men who were used to in-depth emotional discussions. While Doggett was a lot less out of his depth than Skinner in such discussions, he suspected that was more because of his brutal honesty than the fact that he was any more comfortable with it than his lover. Right now, it was necessary that they talk a lot, but they also needed to hang out and chill and Doggett intended to do just that. Skinner was still exhausted after the week he'd had anyway. As the evening wore on, Skinner fell asleep, one hand still curled around the beer bottle he had been drinking from, the other, bandaged one, resting on Doggett's thigh, his bare feet propped up on the coffee table amid the remains of the newspapers and take-out cartons. Smiling to himself, Doggett reached out an arm, wrapped it around his lover's shoulders, and pulled Skinner close so that his head was resting on Doggett's shoulder, his naked scalp smooth and warm against Doggett's cheek. Then, with a contented sigh, Doggett sank back into the couch. Life didn't get much better than this - a full stomach, a bottle of beer in his hand, the news on TV, and an armful of Walter Skinner.

The following day, after a leisurely morning spent eating breakfast in bed, followed by a vigorous bout of lovemaking that left them both exhausted but exhilarated, Doggett told Skinner that they'd be going over to the Crystal City apartment to collect a supply of his clothing. Skinner frowned.

"John, isn't it too soon to talk about moving in together?" he asked.

Doggett shook his head. "I'm not suggestin' we move in together, Walter. I'm gonna be taking a bag of my clothing over to your place too. I think we should share our time between the two apartments. There might be times when I turn up at your place and don't want to go home again that evening – so this is just being practical."

Skinner considered it, and then had to agree that it did sound practical.

"I like to be organised – and that means thinking and planning ahead," Doggett grinned, getting up from the bed, and watching as his lover followed suit. He never tired of seeing Skinner's glorious naked body. He'd never have guessed the man looked this good beneath his normal office garb and it fascinated him to watch all those toned muscles rippling so enticingly beneath the surface of that taut golden skin.

"What is it they say? You can take the marine out of the military but you can't take the military out of the marine?" Skinner chuckled.

"You bet, Corporal," Doggett grinned, aiming a swat at Skinner's naked buttocks as the

other man passed. Skinner turned and granted him a slap back in return and that just inflamed Doggett to push Skinner against the wall and kiss him...which resulted in them leaving the house an hour later than he'd planned, military organisation having given way to more basic instincts.

Doggett winced as he set foot inside Skinner's apartment. The place looked uncared for in stark contrast to its usual pristine neatness; there were empty glasses and liquor bottles all around, take-out cartons on the floor, and dirty dishes stacked up in the sink.

"Looks like the last week was tough for you, Walter," Doggett commented as he surveyed the normally tidy apartment. Skinner's jaw did a sideways clench as he glanced around – the mental state he'd been in since receiving the letter from the hospital was clear from the evidence around them. "I wanted to talk to you about your drinking," Doggett said, as he began clearing the place. Skinner's jaw clamped shut, and Doggett guessed this was a touchy subject. "Hold it, Corporal – I'm not going to nag you," he said softly. "I just think there are better ways for you to deal with how you're feeling. When do you drink?" Skinner shrugged. "I don't drink often – most days I don't drink at all, not even beer. Usually months can go by without me touching a glass of whisky. I only really drink hard when I'm under extreme stress and can't handle it any other way. When that happens, I start as soon as I get home from work. That way, if I'm lucky, I'll have calmed down by bedtime so I know I'll sleep."

"Next time you feel like drinking yourself into oblivion, I want you to call me instead. Okay? I'm not talking about just having a beer, but drinking alone, for the purposes of blocking somethin' out. Understood?"

Skinner bristled slightly, and Doggett knew he was having trouble adjusting to the fact that a subordinate was handing out orders to him. He guessed that while Skinner was fine with – heck, even enjoyed – being submissive in the bedroom, the big man didn't like taking orders outside it.

"Walter, I need an answer from you," he pressed, using his firmest tone of voice to remind the other man of their agreement. Skinner picked up a bottle and threw it into the trash none too gently.

"Fine," he growled, turning his back on Doggett and slamming another bottle noisily into the trash. Doggett was over there in seconds. He grabbed Skinner's arm and turned him around to face him.

"No, it's not fine if you're going to speak to me in that tone of voice, Corporal. If you have a problem with this, you tell me. I told you I want your honesty – I don't want unquestioning obedience – I'd prefer to know what's going in your head."

"John, I've been taking care of myself for a long time. I know I drink too much when I'm under stress but it isn't out of hand – I told you I can go for months without touching the stuff and when I do drink it isn't for long. I always pull myself back together again – and

quickly. And one thing's for sure – I never, ever allow it to affect my work. I haven't lost that much self-respect. So I don't need you or anyone else telling me that I have a liquor problem or that I'm some kind of alcoholic," Skinner snapped, his dark eyes flashing.

"I wasn't," Doggett replied, meaning it. He had seen Skinner under various kinds of stresses and he suspected that the other man turned to alcohol only under very extreme or particular circumstances – and that for the rest of the time he had other ways of dealing with pressure; ways that might turn out to be even more harmful to him in the long term "Walter I've seen the kind of job you do – there's no way you could turn up every morning and get through the work you do if you had any kind of a liquor problem. You're just like a lot of law enforcement officers who end up drinking more than they should – it isn't alcoholism, just a way of lettin' off steam because of the pressures of the job. It might not be good for them, but it tends to go with the territory. I don't think you're anywhere near being an alcoholic, but you do drink alone for the sole purpose of drowning out the world when it's been gnawing at you, and that isn't good for you – you know that as well as I do. So I was just hopin' that instead of turning to drink when you're under that kind of stress, you'll turn to me instead," he said softly.

Skinner glared at him for a long time, clearly struggling with the fact that Doggett's request was so eminently reasonable.

"Okay, damnit," he muttered, shaking Doggett's hand off his arm.

"No, it isn't okay," Doggett told him, grabbing his arm again. "I told you I'd say it straight, Walter, and I will. You want to hear lies and half-truths, you go and have a talk with Kersh – he'll give you those, and then some. You want someone who says it like it is, then you come to me – but don't give me a hard time about it."

Skinner took a deep breath, and then exhaled loudly. Finally he managed a faded smile.

"All right, John. I knew this would be hard adjusting to, but you're right. I take your point, painful though it is."

Doggett smiled at him, then used the hold he had on Skinner's arm to draw him in and gave him an affectionate kiss. Skinner, as always, melted under him.

"We'll get there, Corporal," Doggett told him afterwards, his hand sweeping over Skinner's sweat-pant covered butt fondly. "We knew it wouldn't always be easy, but we will get there."

Despite his assurances to Skinner that he wasn't suggesting they move in together, Doggett didn't intend to let the big man out of his sight too often – he knew how vulnerable his lover was right now and he wanted to be around to keep an eye on him. They spent another night together in Doggett's apartment, woke early, took a shower together, and then got dressed for work. Doggett couldn't stop himself humming as he prepared for work – he wasn't usually a morning person, but there was something so good about waking up and getting

ready for work next to this man, who he'd been slowly falling in love with over the past year. He finished dressing quickly, and then watched as Skinner slowly did up his shirt, his movements hampered by his swollen, bandaged hand, and then reached for his tie.

"I'll do that," Doggett said, plucking the tie from Skinner's fingers. "You'll have trouble doin' it with your bruised hand."

He stood behind Skinner, loving the feel of their freshly shaved cheeks pressed against each other, and the combination of minty toothpaste and cologne that was emanating from Skinner. Doggett was still humming as he did up Skinner's tie slowly, savouring the closeness of Skinner's body, the warmth of his skin through the cool cotton shirt, and the press of his woollen pants against his own thighs and legs. He was so lost in his enjoyment of the sensory experience of helping Walter Skinner get dressed for work that he was surprised when his lover suddenly let out a low, bass, rumbling laugh.

"What?" Doggett asked, turning his head sideways to gaze at Skinner quizzically.

"You," Skinner said gruffly, still chuckling. "Did you know you're humming, John? I can hear the vibrations...you're purring like a cat!"

"A cat that got the cream," Doggett replied with a grin. "And very tasty cream it is too." He patted Walter's shirt clad chest appreciatively, having finished with his tie. They holstered their weapons, donned their suit jackets, and then strode out to the car together. By the time they got there, Doggett was grinning inanely. This time it was Skinner's turn to ask "What?"

"Just remembering Achilles and Patroclus," Doggett told him. "Two warriors, fighting side by side. That's you and me, Corporal. Going to work like this, both ready to do battle another day. It just feels so...good." He put an arm around Skinner's shoulder and squeezed, then released him.

"Didn't you have this with Tony? You worked with him," Skinner observed, getting into the car. Doggett paused momentarily as he opened the car door, and then got into the driver's seat beside his lover.

"Yes, I did work with Tony, but it wasn't like this. We weren't really two warriors fighting side by side. It was more like me chasing after him and hauling him out of whatever trouble he'd gotten himself into. With you, I feel you're walking beside me, not one step out of reach or lagging behind to check out somethin' else!" Doggett gave a wry smile. "Hell, I can't explain it, Walter, it just feels...right. Think of a little boy having a fantasy years ago when he first read about all those battles and those brave warriors fighting honourably in the Iliad. Think of him reading about two warriors sharing a life, sharing a tent, clearly in love with each other, both of them strong, tough men - real warriors. Imagine him wanting that relationship for himself one day - wanting it so bad it hurts. Well, you and me striding out side by side like this, goin' to work together, preparing to do battle together...that's my childhood fantasy come true."

Skinner's dark eyes were more expressive than anything he could have said, as he gave one

of those rare, heart-achingly genuine smiles that made Doggett's heart do several somersaults.

Their first few days back at work passed without incident. Doggett knew it would take time for them both to adjust to the new relationship, but he was more concerned about Skinner than himself. As Skinner had pointed out, Doggett had done this before, with Tony; he knew what it was like to work with someone you were having a relationship with - but for Skinner this was all new territory. Added to that the fact that Skinner was also having to come to terms with the new turn his sexuality had taken, as well as deal with the many personal issues he had right now, and Doggett knew it wouldn't be plain sailing.

In fact, the first couple of weeks turned out to be easier than Doggett had anticipated, precisely because Skinner was so tired and in need of respite. He needed Doggett too much to question anything about their relationship and Doggett was happy to be needed. Skinner's problems hadn't gone away though. It was obvious to Doggett that he was still in crisis. The big man was pale and frequently distracted, even during meetings at the office, which wasn't like him. Doggett watched him anxiously – now they were spending almost every night together he was getting some idea of how disrupted Skinner's sleeping patterns were. Barely a night went by when Skinner didn't wake and spend at least an hour or two just lying there. Sometimes Doggett woke and found his lover lying with his hands behind his head, staring up at the ceiling, but he knew that there were many times when he slept through Skinner's insomnia. Doggett hoped that time would iron out Skinner's habit of lying awake fretting into the small hours of the morning. He knew he hadn't waved a magic wand and made Skinner's problems disappear overnight – his lover had been through too much over the past few years to be able to shrug away his issues just because he now had someone to share them with. Doggett had always known it wouldn't be that simple. Sometimes, if he woke when Skinner was going through a bout of insomnia, he'd get up and make them both a drink, and they'd sit and talk quietly. Sometimes Doggett would just roll over, take Skinner in his arms, and hold him silently until they both dropped off to sleep again...and sometimes he'd distract the big man from his problems by making love to him. Skinner acquiesced to all these methods of dealing with his insomnia, and after a while they got into a routine where Doggett was fairly sure Skinner was getting at least some sleep every night, even if not as much as he'd have liked.

The issue of Skinner's drinking arose again a couple of weeks later when Doggett got a phone call just as he arrived at his house. He'd been going to take a shower and meet Skinner for dinner later but he knew from the tone of Skinner's voice that those plans were going to have to change. The other man was breathing heavily and he was clearly angry.

"John. You said to call when I wanted to drink. Well, I want to fucking drink," Skinner snapped.

"Okay. Hold on, Walter – where are you?" Doggett asked.

"I just got home. Normally I'd pour myself a drink but you said to call," Skinner growled.

"Can you stop at just one? If so, go ahead," Doggett said, fumbling for his car keys which he'd just thrown onto the hall table. There was silence for a moment while Skinner considered that. "Or did you want to cancel our date for tonight and just drink yourself into the floor?" Doggett pressed. Another silence, and then a wry, dull grunt at the other end of the line. "Walter?" Doggett waited.

"I want to sleep tonight, damnit!" Skinner snapped. "And I can't while I replay today's meeting with Kersh over and over again in my head. Christ, it took all my fucking strength to keep from punching his lights out today. If I drink then I can at least forget about it for tonight. I'm so fucking tired of all this, John."

"Hold it – I'm coming over, we can talk about this some more in a moment," Doggett replied, severing the connection. He ran up the stairs to his bedroom, grabbed some gym clothes and sneakers, stuffed them into a bag, then jogged back down again and got into the car.

He arrived at Skinner's apartment to find the big man sitting on the couch, still wearing his suit, his collar open at the neck and his tie undone.

"Walter?" Doggett strode into the middle of the room, took one look at Skinner, and shook his head, laughing softly. "I thought you might have wrecked the place, thrown a few glasses around, destroyed some furniture...I'm disappointed," he commented. Skinner glared at him, his mood not so easily defused. "Get your gym clothes, Walter," Doggett told him firmly. Skinner's expression changed to one of surprise.

"You want me to work out?" He asked incredulously. "I don't want to fucking pump iron right now, John."

"I know – and who said anything about pumping iron? You told me you wanted to do two things – one was to drink, which you know I'm not going to let you do..." He glared at Skinner who glared back, clearly furious at being told he wasn't allowed to do something. "...and the other was to punch Kersh's lights out. Well, I'm not Alvin Kersh, but I'm sure I can be just as annoying, so if you'd like to spar with me..." He grinned at Skinner and spread his arms. "What do you say, Walter? Think you can take me?" Skinner gave a reluctant grunt in reply but there was an anticipatory gleam of relish in his dark eyes.

"You know, I've always been impressed by the way you handle Kersh," Doggett commented

as he drove them to the gym. Skinner's sharply swivelled head showed his surprise at that remark. "Seriously – that guy gives you such a hard time. He does it to all of us, but with your rank it seems out of place for him to ride you like you're a green agent from the bullpen. I'm amazed you're able to keep your temper sometimes."

"I have to," Skinner muttered. "You and I both know that he's just looking for an excuse to fire me, John, or get rid of me by some other means – like the way he pressured Mulder into quitting. Well that isn't going to happen to me. I owe it to the people I work with to hang in here, and I'm not just talking about the X Files, but all the other people I work with. They need to know they have someone who'll fight in their corner with them, and not hang them out to dry at the first sign of pressure from above." Skinner's jaw was set in a straight line, and Doggett had a sudden sense of the other man's utter commitment to staying not only in a job he loved, but also in a place where he could be of help to the agents under his command, and where he could serve his country. Doggett was in no doubt that if Alvin Kersh wanted Skinner out of the Bureau then he had a fight on his hands. Skinner would do everything he could, using every single ounce of his strength and self-control, in order to stay in his job and continue to be a friend to the X Files.

"Kersh doesn't know what he's dealing with," Doggett commented grimly.

"No, he doesn't," Skinner replied. "If he thinks I'm going to make it easy for him he's got another think coming. I intend to be around on the day they finally bring Alvin Kersh to justice for his involvement in this conspiracy we're trying to crack. Oh yeah – I intend to be there, all right. I want to smile at him as he walks out of the Bureau and straight to jail."

There was a grim smile on Skinner's face as he spoke, and a shiver went down Doggett's spine. The man sitting next to him was not someone to be under-estimated; he was playing a hard and dangerous game, and he was playing it extremely well, with a level of cunning that would take the unwary by surprise. Kersh was an idiot if he thought he had Walter Skinner in any way cowed or subdued. Skinner was playing for time. He was taking all the body blows Kersh handed out without showing the other man that he'd landed any significant punches. It sure as hell had to hurt, but it was the clever way to play, cards held firmly to his chest, concealing his hand. Doggett let out a low whistle.

"I have a feeling that when it comes down to it you're prepared to fight low down and dirty, Walter."

"If it comes to it, then yes," Skinner replied grimly. "Kersh is getting my best performance right now, John, but sometimes it..." His dark eyes flashed intently. "Let's just say that it isn't easy," he finished softly, and Doggett was in no doubt that was an understatement of some considerable magnitude. "When I think of the number of times I've had to do the 'yes, sir', 'no, sir' routine to a man who stands for everything I despise, who's bought his position with his subservience and complete disregard for either justice or the welfare of his agents..." Skinner paused again, and shook his head. "Sometimes after dealing with Alvin Kersh I need that drink really badly, John," he murmured. Doggett nodded sympathetically.

"I hear you, Walter. I'd just like to find some other ways for you to let off steam when Kersh

gets under your collar. Talking of which – what did he say this time to get you in such a mood?"

Skinner shifted uneasily, and then sighed, giving in to Doggett's questioning stare.

"He was warning me off something," he muttered.

"Something?" Doggett raised an eyebrow.

"Something to do with Mulder. I don't know what because he was talking in riddles and I haven't heard from Mulder since he took off, but anyway, I consider myself duly warned not to get involved."

"And will you take any notice of that warning?" Doggett asked.

"Hell no!" Skinner gave a ghost of a grin. "Would you?"

"Hell no!" Doggett answered, with a grin of his own and the two men shared a long look of understanding.

Doggett stopped the car a few minutes later, and Skinner looked around, surprised.

"This is my gym," he said.

"I know." Doggett got out of the car and waited, expectantly, for Skinner to join him. Skinner got out, and looked at the outside of the building uncertainly.

"John, I'm not sure I'm welcome here after..." He shrugged.

"Only one way to find out," Doggett said, grabbing their gym bags from the trunk of his car. Skinner took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and walked purposefully towards the door. Doggett smiled to himself as he followed on behind with their bags. Skinner was so appalled by his own behaviour he didn't think he could be forgiven – but Doggett was pretty sure that other people didn't judge Skinner anywhere near as harshly as the man judged himself.

The gym was of the old-fashioned variety, in a relatively rundown area of town. Doggett had been surprised that Skinner chose to come to a place like this, but somehow it added to his lover's charm. He liked that Skinner surprised him. There were so many hidden depths to this man – just when you thought you had the measure of him he'd do something, or you'd find out something about him that completely took you by surprise. They had only been in the gym for 30 seconds when a small, wizened old man came scuttling across the floor towards them. He grabbed hold of Skinner's arm, a smile on his face.

"Slugger!" he exclaimed.

Doggett couldn't help laughing out loud, even when Skinner shot him a disgusted glance.

"Slugger?" Doggett raised an eyebrow.

"I give all my boys a nickname – gave Slugger his years ago. Named him because he just keeps slugging away. He rolls with the punches and keeps on coming, no matter how much punishment he takes. I've never saw him go down except that once..." The old man gazed anxiously at Skinner, and Doggett noticed Skinner's jaw tighten as he was reminded of the time he had been infected by the nanocytes. "You've been avoiding us, Slugger," the old man said reproachfully. "Were you hurt? Last time you stayed away so long it was because you were in the hospital."

"No. I'm fine, Jimmy. I wasn't sure you'd want me back after I went after that guy like that. I should have come by before to apologise but I..." Skinner glanced at Doggett. "I got caught up in something else," he finished. "Still, that's no excuse. I know the last thing the gym needs is to get a bad reputation with the police, so I want to apologise for my actions."

"Thank you, Slugger." Jimmy beamed. "But you took a heap of provocation from that asshole – nobody here blamed you for that grudge match spilling out onto the street. Hell, we know you – you've been coming here for years, and that asshole was a newcomer. He won't be welcome back if he dares to show his face here again, but you're a legend down here for always keeping your cool – I think some of the boys were just pleased to find out you're human after all behind that silent, poker-faced exterior, Slugger."

Skinner allowed himself a small smile at that comment. "Oh, I'm human all right, Jimmy," he said softly. "As someone has been making me all too well aware." He gave a small, sideways glance at Doggett. "I'm definitely human."

They got changed and Doggett approached the ring eagerly, looking forward to the bout.

"Did you box in the marines?" He asked Skinner as they stepped into the ring. Skinner smiled broadly around his gum shield.

"I was 1st Marine Division Middleweight Champion back in 1970," he said with a hint of amusement in his voice.

Doggett paused, his hand on the ropes. "Now he tells me," he grouched.

"You'll be fine. I'll be very gentle with you," Skinner grinned, clearly enjoying himself.

Doggett grinned back. He wasn't any slouch in the boxing ring himself, and he was sure he could at least give Skinner a good workout even if he couldn't seriously challenge him. They circled each other warily, and then Doggett stepped forward with a sharp right. Skinner parried easily, but then stepped back and began circling again.

"Hold it, Corporal!" Doggett said sharply. "I don't want you to pull your punches here. I'm a big boy and I know how to handle myself. I brought you here to blow off some steam so I want you to imagine I'm Kersh and really go for it. You need someplace where you can ease off on that masterly self-control of yours for a while."

"You're not Kersh, John," Skinner replied, still circling.

"What's the matter? You think I might break? You think you're too tough for me? Think again, Walter," Doggett grinned. "Go for it. I'll give as good as I get but I want you to break a sweat and get some of that aggression out of your system so you don't turn it on yourself. Now, hit me, Corporal – this is the only payback you're going to get for me being in charge elsewhere...so, come on...let's see what you're made of...Champ."

He smiled broadly, and then had to step back fast as Skinner came at him like an enraged bull. He ducked the blow and feinted a left, then danced back out of reach as Skinner came for him again. The big man got in a body blow, but Doggett could tell he still wasn't letting go – and he wanted Skinner to really feel he was fighting, to let the adrenaline flow so that afterwards he'd be left with a hazy glow of satisfaction for a fight well fought and not the bitter aftertaste of his own necessary but utterly soul-destroying subservient responses to Kersh's barbed taunts. Doggett didn't have Skinner's sheer muscle power and brute force, but he was fast on his feet, and his greatest asset in a fight was superb hand-eye coordination. He waited until Skinner came at him again, side-stepped the big guy, and then landed a blow to the side of Skinner's face. It was as if he'd woken a sleeping giant. Skinner's eyes showed a new respect for his opponent – he knew that Doggett was able to stand up to him, and hand out as much as he took, and so he started fighting in earnest.

Doggett put Skinner through his paces – he kept the big man constantly on his toes, while minimising any actual damage his lover might do by being just fast enough to stay out of Skinner's way. He didn't always manage it because his lover was too good a boxer for that, and Skinner got in a few blows along the way, but Doggett was too exhilarated by the bout to care. He loved this! Being in this totally male atmosphere, knowing their sparring match was being watched by the other men in the gym, two warriors practicing their skills with each other. Skinner was clearly an experienced and talented boxer; his nickname belied considerable skill – he wasn't just a lumbering fighter who kept coming back for more; he was a much more talented than that. He was faster on his feet than Doggett had expected, but what was striking was how intelligent a boxer he was. He conserved his energy, probed for weaknesses, and then silently went in for the kill when you least expected it. In this sense, Doggett was of the opinion that Skinner's boxing style was very similar to the way he conducted his career in the Bureau.

Doggett thoroughly enjoyed exploring this new facet of his lover. Skinner was as fascinating a sight to Doggett in the ring as he was in bed. The big man's tee shirt barely obscured his

hard, toned chest, and the sweat pouring off him made the tee shirt cling to his body and show off its lines more clearly. Doggett loved the raw, animal grunts and growls that Skinner made as he missed a punch, or took one. There was something almost sexual about their dance around the ring, and he found that before they'd finished he was well and truly aroused. The fighting adrenaline was turning into a different kind of adrenaline altogether. He had a feeling that Skinner felt the same way, as the big man was breathing heavily, his eyes fixed on Doggett's face, pupils dilated, with a look more akin to desire than anything combative.

"Enough." Doggett drew the bout to a close, holding up his hand as Skinner loomed towards him, going in for another punch. "I'm beat – Jimmy was right about you, Slugger. You just keep on comin' don't ya?" He leaned over and put his hands on his knees, struggling to get his breath back. Skinner stood beside him, and Jimmy came over and began untying the big man's gloves.

"Slugger's one of our best fighters – but you know you're not bad either," Jimmy commented. "If you wanted to come along more often, I'd soon get you into shape," he added. Doggett laughed, and stood up again. He caught Skinner's ripple of suppressed amusement at ex-marine, ex-NYPD, current FBI agent John Doggett being offered help getting into shape.

"You know, maybe I will, Jimmy," Doggett said, grinning broadly. "It's been good so maybe I will."

"When you've had a shower, go and see Duke out by the desk – he'll give you a form to fill in so you can join," Jimmy told him. Doggett shook his head.

"Sorry, Jimmy, no can do. I don't think we have time for a shower, do we, Slugger?"

Skinner gave him a startled look, but there was an anticipatory gleam in his eyes. He glanced at the clock in the gym, and sighed regretfully.

"John's right. We're, uh...late," he said, climbing out of the ring hurriedly.

They gathered their belongings, made it to the car, and drove home in double quick time. Doggett was thankful that it was late and there wasn't much traffic on the roads as he was in no mood to wait. They stormed out of the car, raced into Doggett's house, and as soon as they were inside Doggett slammed Skinner against the wall, his hands urgently exploring Skinner's body. They kissed passionately, wildly, their hands everywhere, and then Doggett drew back, and looked Skinner straight in the eye.

"Okay, Corporal, you got me all steamed up and nothin' except that meaty cock of yours in my ass is going to satisfy me. You up for that?" Skinner's eyes shone and he nodded. His

breathing was hard and shallow as he moved forward to grab Doggett again as if he intended to make it happen there and then. Doggett stopped him. "Upstairs. Need lube and condoms," he said, running for the stairs. Skinner followed on so close behind him that he could feel the other man's warm breath on his back as they ran. They burst into the bedroom and Doggett grabbed Skinner again, and began divesting his lover of his sweaty clothes. "Oh shit you smell hot," he purred, nuzzling Skinner's warm, damp neck. He flicked his tongue out and licked the salty skin. He could feel Skinner's hard cock digging into him through his sweat pants and the big man moaned under his caress. "Get out of those. I want that monster inside me," Doggett growled, tearing himself away only for long enough to divest himself of his own clothing. Skinner had finished undressing just as Doggett threw off the last of his clothes. The big man grabbed Doggett around the waist and threw him on the bed, as if in a continuation of their tussle in the ring. Doggett bounced straight back up, fastened both arms around Skinner, and pulled the big man down on top of him. Their cocks danced frenziedly between their bodies as they kissed frantically, hands, tongues and bodies writhing against each other. Then Skinner drew back, and looked down on Doggett for a moment, and the agent felt as if time had come to a standstill. Skinner looked like some kind of warrior-god, his powerful muscles, bunched from the recent exertion, rippling under his tanned, sweaty flesh. His eyes were dark with arousal, and yet curiously tender too.

"How d'you want this, John?" Skinner asked, the tiniest hint of anxiety reflected in those dark eyes. Doggett remembered that it had been a long time since his lover had performed this particular act with another man.

"I want to look into your eyes as you pound into me hard and fast," Doggett growled, reaching out and opening a drawer in the nightstand. He found condoms and lube and lobbed them to Skinner who caught them one handed, his other wrapped around Doggett's hard cock, massaging firmly. Too firmly.

"You'd better stop that or I'll come right now," Doggett gasped. Skinner nodded, and removed his hand. He placed a condom on his cock and lubed it, then lubed his fingers and Doggett spread his legs, feeling his ass tingling in anticipation. The moment Skinner was ready, Doggett raised his legs in the air, and placed them on Skinner's shoulders. A second later he felt Skinner's cool, lubed finger enter his body and he gasped out loud.

"Okay?" Skinner asked anxiously.

"Oh Christ, I'm fine – just get that cock of yours in my ass – NOW!" Doggett ordered, wriggling on Skinner's fingers, needing more. He'd had many more lovers than Skinner and although few of them had been possessed of a cock quite as impressive as Skinner's, he knew he could take the big man without too much preparation. Skinner grinned, and entered another finger, rotating slowly.

"That was an order," Doggett commanded. "Now, Corporal, or I swear I'll..." He never finished the sentence as Skinner grabbed his ass in his hands, and drove his cock hard and fast, up to the hilt into Doggett's body. Doggett thought the world had exploded as everything went black and then the most beautiful shooting stars sparkled right in front of him. "Oh shit," he whispered. "Fuck me, Corporal...hard and fast...ride me..."

The world came back into focus around him and he saw Skinner above him, the sweat pouring off his forehead as he pounded into him. Doggett didn't think he'd ever seen a more beautiful sight than his warrior lover, still sweaty from the fight, his limbs and arousal warmed by their earlier sparring, thrusting his powerful cock into him, back and forth over and over again, hitting his prostate with its raw force, sending those shooting stars fizzing to his brain with every forward thrust. Doggett reached down, grabbed his own cock, and began pumping it in time to Skinner's pounding rhythm. They were two warriors as one, powerful, strong, lost in an age-old dance of almost primeval power. Doggett grinned up, never taking his blue eyes off Skinner's dark brown ones, and Skinner grinned back as they shared this exquisite moment...and then the stars were falling from the sky in the biggest firework display Doggett thought he'd ever seen. He felt Skinner cry out hoarsely as he pumped to a roaring climax. Doggett savoured the moment, not yet ready to come, too engrossed by the stunning sight of Skinner's climax as the big man's body rippled in time to his ejaculations. Then he was still, his sweat dripping onto Doggett's body, his eyes still not breaking his locked gaze with his lover. Doggett sighed happily, and with one last flick of his hand brought his own cock to climax. His semen flew up onto Skinner's chest and back down onto his own, and still they gazed at each other, utterly sated by their frenzied love-making.

"Oh shit," Skinner whispered. He pulled out and Doggett felt a burning sensation and groaned – he should have let Skinner prepare him more for such a thick, heavy cock, but he hadn't been able to wait – he knew he'd probably pay for it in the morning but right now he didn't care. "That was fantastic, John. Thank you," Skinner whispered. He leaned forward, and kissed Doggett tenderly on the lips.

"Thank you, Corporal," Doggett replied, reaching out and grabbing Skinner's shoulders. He pulled the big man down next to him, rolled Skinner onto his back, then climbed on top of him and kissed him possessively. Skinner lay passively beneath him, bone weary after their crazed love-making session and its preceding sparring match. Doggett grinned down on his lover.

"You know you're not bad," Doggett commented. "If you wanted to come along more often, I'd soon get you into shape," he grinned, echoing Jimmy's words to him back in the gym.

A low, rumbling sound began deep within Skinner's chest. It got bigger and bigger until it began to vibrate through Doggett's ass and legs where he was straddling his lover, and then Skinner was laughing out loud in a helpless, abandoned way that Doggett had never thought he'd see. The laugh was infectious and Doggett couldn't help joining in, but Skinner out-laughed him by a good three or four minutes during which Doggett gazed down on his lover and thought he'd never seen a better sight in his life than the buttoned up Assistant Director Skinner finally letting go and thoroughly enjoying himself.

Doggett replayed their sparring match and subsequent frenzied love-making in his mind so often over the following week that he completely forgot about the meeting with Kersh that had preceded it – until they were woken in Skinner's apartment one Friday night a few days

later by the sound of a ringing phone.

"Christ...who's that?" Skinner asked blearily, his hand fumbling for the phone beside the bed. "Hello?" he growled but the phone kept on ringing. Doggett roused himself reluctantly, and fished his cell phone from the pocket of his jacket, which was hanging from a chair just within reach of the bed. He clicked the phone on, and gazed sleepily at the clock on the nightstand. 1.15? Who the hell was calling at this time?

"Yeah? Doggett," he muttered, but the phone still kept on ringing. Doggett glanced at Skinner in the dark – the big man looked as puzzled as he did – then realisation sank in.

"My cell," Skinner grunted, sliding naked from the bed and locating his cellphone on the dresser across the room. "Skinner," he snapped into the phone and this time the ringing stopped. Thoroughly awake by this point, Doggett sat up, partially covered by a sheet, watching Skinner's expression change from confused sleepiness to alert concern.

"Where?" Skinner asked. He was silent for while, listening to the reply, and then nodded, grimly. "Okay. I'm on my way," he said, and then severed the connection. Doggett looked at him expectantly.

"Trouble?" he asked. Skinner nodded, his expression wary. "What kind of trouble?" Doggett pressed. Skinner looked at him for a moment, as if weighing something up. "Walter, this is me," Doggett told him firmly. "What the hell is going on?"

Skinner sighed. "It's Mulder," he said.

"That was Mulder on the phone?"

"No, that was Scully. She says Mulder's in trouble. He needs my help."

Skinner opened the closet and pulled out chinos and a sweater.

"What kind of trouble?" Doggett said, getting up and pulling on his own clothes.

"I don't know. There wasn't time. She just told me to meet her at an address downtown. Look, there's no need for you to get involved in this, John," Skinner said, seeing Doggett was getting dressed.

"Bullshit, Walter. You're walking into danger then I'm walking right beside you," Doggett told him. "Warriors, remember, fighting side by side." He finished dressing and headed straight for the door.

"John, it's not the danger I'm worried about." Skinner grabbed his arm and swung him back. "It's your career I'm thinking about. Kersh specifically warned me off anything involving Mulder. I'm assuming that this is what he was talking about...bad enough if my career gets fucked up over this, but not yours as well."

"Walter, I ain't arguing this," Doggett told him. "You can order me around all you like when we're working on official Bureau business but this isn't, so I'm going with you and I'm not having a discussion about it. Scully was my partner – I'm involved too," he said softly. Skinner looked at him for a moment, and then nodded.

Twenty minutes later they pulled up on a street in a business district. There were no houses, and it was poorly lit.

"Typical place for a meet," Doggett commented, as Skinner pulled on the brake, and got out. Doggett drew his weapon before exiting the car. Whenever Mulder was involved it was usually dangerous – he wasn't taking any chances. They stood outside the car for a couple of minutes, and then Doggett saw two shadowy figures emerge from behind a nearby building. A flash of red hair confirmed that one of them had to be Scully. The other person was almost unrecognisable – he had a shaven head and a dark, straggly moustache, and it was only when he started talking that Doggett realised it was Mulder.

"Good to see you, Skinner," Mulder said in low, hurried tones. Skinner stared at his old agent, as taken aback as Doggett was by Mulder's altered appearance. "What - you don't like the new look? I thought you'd be flattered," Mulder said in those familiar monotones. "Imitation?" he prompted, as Skinner looked puzzled. "Sincerest form of flattery," he grinned running a hand over his stubbled scalp. Skinner grunted and the merest hint of a grin tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"Agent Doggett." Scully looked at Doggett warily. "We weren't expecting you." She looked at Mulder for confirmation and then at Skinner, her blue eyes uncertain.

"I asked Agent Doggett to come," Skinner said softly. Scully's eyes flicked at Doggett and back to Skinner again, confused.

"I don't..." Scully paused and the realisation hit Doggett that she didn't know how they'd managed to arrive so soon in the same car – she also didn't know why Skinner had invited him along for the ride.

"It's okay, Scully," Mulder interrupted. There was a shrewd look in his hazel eyes as he glanced at the two men. Doggett squared his shoulders – he knew about Mulder's reputation for filling in the gaps and making intuitive leaps and he was sure that the other man had somehow figured out the nature of his relationship with Skinner. Mulder's gaze was speculative, with a hint of curiosity – maybe even of regret? Doggett wasn't sure but he met the gaze with a firm one of his own, unflinching. If Mulder wanted to make something of his presence in Skinner's life, then Doggett was more than happy to respond. Mulder didn't say a word though; he just stared at Doggett for a long moment, and then relaxed and gave a small, wry smile. Scully looked at them all in turn, obviously aware of the strange atmosphere, and puzzled by it.

"I don't see..." she began again. She clearly hadn't figured it out the way Mulder had.

"We don't have time for this," Mulder said, cutting her short again. "Look, I need to speak to Skinner privately." He grabbed Skinner's arm and before Doggett could intervene, he pulled the big man towards a nearby building. Doggett turned back and gazed at Scully.

"You don't want me here?" He asked. "That it, Dana?" As he said her name it occurred to him that Mulder had called her 'Scully'. What was that about, he wondered. As far as he could tell, the two of them were involved – hell, they'd even had a baby together – so why the formality? He couldn't imagine calling Walter 'Skinner' outside the office, and he sure as hell wouldn't stand for being called 'Doggett'.

"It's just...we didn't expect you," Scully murmured, her face closed off in an expression he was all too familiar with.

"That's fine. Look, Dana, I respect you as an agent and we've worked well together, but I know you don't really trust me. One thing I want to ask you though – do you trust Walter?"

Scully's blue eyes were cold and conflicted.

"I..." She looked at Doggett for a moment, and then over to where Skinner was talking to Mulder.

"It's a simple question, Dana. Do you trust him?" Doggett pressed. Scully glanced at the ground, unable to meet his eye. "I thought not," Doggett said. "Okay, you know me, I say what I think so let me tell you this: Don't ever do this to him again. If you don't trust him, then don't you dare call him up in the middle of the night, and expect him to drive out to the middle of nowhere so he can bail you and Mulder out of whatever trouble you've gotten yourselves into this time, d'you hear me?" Doggett couldn't keep the angry tone out of his voice and Scully raised her eyes to him again, an alarmed expression on her face. "Look, I haven't got an issue with you personally, Dana – this isn't about you and me, it's about him," Doggett said, his voice hard and low. He felt a protective anger kick in at the way she was treating Skinner. He didn't care how she treated himself – he had long ago come to accept that she was an oddly disconnected woman, with a sometimes aloof manner, who found it hard admitting anything to herself, let alone anyone else, but he'd be damned if he'd stand by and watch either her or Mulder walking all over the man he loved. "You want his help – you'd better start keeping him in the loop and treatin' him like a friend and ally and not just someone you call up and whose life you endanger whenever you need him. Especially when you don't even trust him enough to tell him what the hell is going on."

"John, that's not how it is," Scully said, in a tight voice. "It's complicated, that's all, and safer if Skinner doesn't know."

"Bullshit, Dana. You as good as told me you don't trust him. Not really. Ain't that the truth?"

"I...it's not easy for me to trust people," she whispered, her hand going to her throat.

"That's fine – but if you don't trust him then don't damn well use him," Doggett snapped.

"Look, I know what you've been through, Dana. I've read the files even if you haven't told me all of it. But let me tell you, as someone who was once your partner and who has gotten to know you pretty well, that you're not the only person who's suffered because of the X Files. When your sister was killed, Skinner refused to drop the investigation and paid for that decision by taking a bullet in the gut. Have you forgotten that?"

Scully shrugged, her shoulders hunched, and her blue eyes wide with surprise at this line of questioning.

"First they tried to kill him for being a good friend to the X Files, then, when that didn't work, they tried to discredit him by framing him for the murder of his wife. Yes, you lost a sister, but he lost his wife, Dana," Doggett hissed urgently. "All of you suffered, I ain't denying that – but at least you and Mulder had each other. Skinner didn't have anyone but himself, and he took a lot on himself. I saw you during those months when Mulder was lost, and after we buried him. I saw the way you turned to Walter, how you'd lean on him for support. Then as soon as Mulder was back you were shuttin' Walter out within hours, not calling him to let him know what was happenin', not keeping him in the loop after all he'd done. You listen to me, Dana – if it hadn't been for Walter, Fox Mulder would still be six feet under gestating god knows what kind of virus. It was Walter Skinner who authorised an exhumation of Mulder's body that everybody said was insane, me included."

"I know that," Scully muttered. "I do know that. I just...that was such a difficult time."

"There have been a hell of a lot of difficult times, Dana – I'd have thought you were used to that by now. When I was going through those files I lost count of the number of times Skinner showed up and saved your butts. If he wasn't pulling you out of the ground when you were trapped, or turning up to rescue you and give you a ride home when you got yourselves into trouble, he was getting beaten up obtaining information that saved your lives, or taking on that bastard Spender for you, or protecting both your asses from the Bureau jackals who wanted your hides. You owe Skinner big time, Dana Scully. You and Mulder both owe him and you've never once thanked him for any of it – not even by giving him your trust. He's come through for you time and time again and it disgusts me to see you stand here and say you don't trust him at the same time as thinking nothing, nothin' at all of dragging him out of bed in the middle of the night to risk at best his career and at worst his life to help you out. Now, think on that, Scully, because if you ever, ever call on him for help again I expect it to be because you've told him what you're workin' on, you've listened to his advice, and you trust, respect and like the man. He deserves that much for being a damn good friend to you over the years. D'you hear what I'm sayin' to you? If you can't do that for him then do him a favour and don't call him again."

Doggett realised that his hands had bunched into tight fists as he finished his impassioned speech. He knew he felt strongly, but his outburst had taken him by surprise. It had definitely taken Scully by surprise. She stood there, her mouth opening and closing like a goldfish, an expression of shock in her eyes. Doggett knew that Scully wasn't used to being told it like it is. He had found, while working as her partner, that she was completely stunned when he had called her on her behaviour on a couple of occasions. He suspected that during her time with Mulder they had neither of them been honest about either their

feelings or their work. God knows how it had gotten to the stage where they had managed to conceive a child while still never having had a really honest discussion about what feelings, if any, they had for each other. Doggett pitied them, but he was pleased he had managed to find a way through Skinner's defences and past all those X Files scars to the big heart beneath. As far as he was concerned, Mulder and Scully could live in their strange world with their strange baby, calling each other by their last names and existing in a state of selfish, repressed self-obsession – but woe betide either of them if they expected to carry on treating the man he loved as their own personal errand boy.

"I...I'm sorry, John. I guess...it's hard knowing who we can trust these days," Scully said, her voice lost, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears. Doggett felt sorry for her – she was a woman who had painted herself into a corner, with a child whose abilities she feared, and a lover who came and went like the wind, always pursuing some mysterious quest he could never quite put to rest.

"I'm sorry too, Dana," he said softly. "I'm sorry for you, and I'm sorry for Mulder. You're both good people who've been through a lot, but your lives and your happiness aren't a priority for me – Walter Skinner's life and his happiness are. Don't mess with him again or you'll have me to deal with. He'd never say any of this to you himself because that isn't the kind of man he is, but he has someone to look out for him now and I can and will say it on his behalf."

Realisation finally flooded into Scully's eyes as she figured out why Skinner had brought Doggett along with him.

"Oh. You're...you were with him tonight...when I called. I didn't know...I didn't understand," she whispered.

"Well you do now," he told her grimly. "Can you tell me any of what's going on? What does Mulder want from Walter? Is it something to do with the baby? Is William okay? Who's looking after him?"

"He's fine. He's with my mother. It isn't about him. It's something else that Mulder's found. I..." She hesitated, and her hand went to her throat again. "I can't tell you what it is, John. I'm sorry," she whispered.

"You know...I'm sorry too, Dana," he told her. "Because the two of you really need friends right now, but you just keep on pushing away the only people who want to help you, or you treat them like dirt. Think about it," he said.

At that moment, they heard footsteps and then Mulder and Skinner returned to the car.

"John, I'm going with Mulder and Scully," Skinner told him.

"Okay. Do you need any help?" Doggett asked.

Skinner shook his head. "It isn't dangerous – it's just...it requires a security clearance that I have and Mulder and Scully don't. Take the car and go home – I'll call you later."

Doggett gazed at Skinner for a moment. His lover was a grown man and perfectly capable of making his own decisions, but Doggett needed some assurances. He took hold of Skinner's arm and led him away from Mulder and Scully.

"Walter, you sure about this?" He asked. Skinner's brown eyes met his, and held his gaze.

"Yes, John. It's like I said, nothing to worry about – I promise." Skinner's gaze was unswerving and Doggett knew his lover was telling him the truth.

"Okay. I'll see you later. Make sure you call though." Skinner nodded, and Doggett squeezed his arm. "Take care, Corporal," he whispered. Skinner rewarded him with a reassuring smile, and Doggett squeezed his arm again and then got in the car. He nodded curtly to Mulder and Scully and drove off, but not without one last backward glance at his lover in his rear view mirror.

Doggett had intended to drive back to his place, but something stopped him. He wanted to be around when Skinner got home because somehow he had the feeling that the big man would need him. He wasn't sure why exactly, but he felt sure that Skinner's feelings for Mulder and Scully were both confused and strong, and that, like Kersh, those two aroused emotions in Skinner that he often didn't know how to deal with. With a sigh, Doggett turned the car and headed towards Crystal City instead. He tried to go back to bed, but he was worried about his lover and what Skinner might be doing – a habit that reminded him uncomfortably of his time with Tony, when sitting up at night waiting and worrying had been a common occurrence. Doggett wasn't a man who found such inactivity easy. Finally, giving up in exasperation, he went downstairs and turned on the TV. Two solid hours of watching CNN eventually exhausted him, and he turned off the TV, and stretched out on the couch in the living room, waiting for Skinner to get home.

A noise woke him a little while later, and he woke up with a start as Skinner walked wearily into the dark living room. He was about to say something but the other man hadn't seen him and walked straight over to the drinks cabinet and poured himself a large glass of whisky.

"Hello, Walter," Doggett said softly behind him. Skinner stiffened and then turned.

"Busted," he said with a wince, holding up the glass in an admission of guilt.

"I wasn't checkin' up on you, Walter. I just couldn't sleep so I thought I'd wait down here for you. What happened? Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Skinner put the glass down and stretched, then sank into the armchair with a weary sigh.

"I'll remind you at this point that you promised me your honesty," Doggett said sharply. Skinner closed his eyes, and shook his head. "John, I'm just tired. I'm fine. Really."  
"So fine you want to drink?" Doggett pressed. "Come on, Walter, what's really goin' on here?"

Skinner opened his eyes again and sat forward in the chair, his shoulders hunched. "To be perfectly honest, I don't know, John. Mulder thinks he's onto something, but then he always does. He told me part of it, but it didn't make much sense to me – and he wouldn't tell me the rest. I did what he asked, and now I'm back here hoping that Kersh doesn't find out." He gave a grim little smile.

"D'you often drink after getting involved in one of Mulder's missions?" Doggett asked. Skinner shrugged again. "I don't think you should make a big deal of this, John," he growled defensively – and Doggett knew immediately that he was touching on a raw nerve, which was all the more reason not to let it go.

"Walter, Mulder and Scully call you in the middle of the night and you immediately go and bail them out like a dog who comes at every whistle."

"John, if you or Monica or any other agent I like and respect called me for help in the middle of the night I'd go and help them," Skinner said sharply.

"But would you come back and drink afterwards, that's what I'm askin'?" Doggett said softly.

Skinner closed his eyes again and passed a weary hand over his forehead.

"I don't know," he said. Then, quietly, "No."

"Walter, can you tell me about it?" Doggett pressed softly. "I know it's not easy, and maybe you don't even know why yourself, but talk to me. Tell me about Mulder and Scully if it helps. Tell me about what it's been like workin' with them all these years."

Skinner was still for a long time, his shoulders stiff and hunched. He clearly didn't want to talk, and yet there was something inside him that both wanted and needed to be expressed.

"I don't know what you want to hear, John," Skinner said with a sigh, opening his eyes and staring at a point over Doggett's left shoulder. "They were good agents – the best. Mulder, in particular, intrigued me. He's a good man, John. I know you and he didn't hit it off to begin with, but that's because he's so passionate about the X Files. He couldn't bear the thought of anyone taking his place. He more or less invented that department."

"I know. I can understand that." Doggett nodded, encouraging Skinner to continue.

"I don't know what you said to Scully tonight, John, but I think you must have said something. She behaved strangely...she asked me how I am." Skinner gazed at the backs of his hands, his forehead screwed up in a frown. "Maybe I look as bad as I've been feeling

lately, but that's the first time she's ever asked me that. I don't know what that was about. It felt strange being out there with Mulder tonight...I mean I haven't even set eyes on him in weeks and then he shows up looking so different, and Scully...she always seems to be on the verge of tears these days and I don't know why and I want to help but I don't know how..." His voice trailed off, full of despair. "I worry about what we've become...and I try and think back to when it all changed but it was so gradual I don't think I can even pinpoint it, John. One day I woke up and my wife was dead, I was infected with nanocytes, Mulder was gone, and Scully...she's changed so much I don't even recognise her any more. You should have known her in the beginning, John..." Skinner's voice changed, becoming infinitely tender, full of memories. "She was the smartest woman I ever met, and so full of energy. Passionate, committed and funny – she used to make me laugh with her reports and the way she cut through some of Mulder's bullshit. When I think what it's all done to her...how she's changed...it breaks my heart. As for Mulder, he was so idealistic. Somewhere along the way he became all messed up inside, harder, more paranoid and self-obsessed...he lost himself just as we all lost ourselves. I know I lost myself. Christ, John, what happened to us?" He asked, despairingly. "What the hell happened to us?"

"Walter..." Doggett began, but Skinner interrupted him.

"If you'd known us back then," he said, shaking his head. "I don't think you'd even recognise us. Mulder was so...alive, so full of energy. He used to make me laugh too in his own way, although I never told him that of course – he'd have been impossible to work with if I had." He smiled a wry, bitter half-smile, his eyes distant. "We might have been different people. I can't believe there was ever a time I went into work and believed in my job, in the office I hold, in the Bureau itself and in my government but I know there was. Now it seems that everything is dark and twisted, everything had a price to be paid. Innocent people have been killed and for what? Mulder's father, Scully's sister, my wife. So much lost, so little gained."

Skinner's arms came up to wrap themselves tightly around his chest, his body language screaming his misery in a way Doggett had come to know all too well.

"When I see them like I did tonight, it just reminds me of how much we've all changed, and that tears at something inside me. I can't get it back. I can't be that man I once was who believed in his job, who commanded the respect of his colleagues, who had a wife at his side – who knew what the hell he was. No offence, John, but sometimes I look at you and wonder who I am now. I slept beside a woman, my wife, for 17 years, and now I wake up to find myself in bed with a man. Is this one more example of how I've changed? Or am I going through some kind of mid-life crisis? If so, what happens when it's over? What have I become? Who am I now?" He gazed at Doggett with brown eyes blinded by despair.

"They're big questions, Walter," Doggett said bluntly, "and not ones you can expect to answer easily. It'll take time, but I think I can help you with one of them."

Skinner's eyes came into hazy focus and settled on Doggett's face with a curious mix of hope and desolation.

"I know you help Mulder because he was your agent, and because you believe in his work,

but I think there's more to it than that. I've seen the way you look at him, the way you defer to him even when I don't think he's right. I saw your face when you dug him up from his grave – I've never seen a man more obsessed or more full of hope. It went beyond simple concern for a colleague, Walter. What you felt for Mulder was much more personal, wasn't it?" Skinner stiffened, and wrapped his arms more tightly around his body. "You hero-worshipped him, Walter. I think, in a way, that you still do." Doggett fought down a wave of jealousy and continued. "Everything you ever did for the X Files department was for Mulder and Scully, but usually specifically for Mulder. I think you've been in love with him for a long time, Walter, but you didn't want to face the consequences of admitting that to yourself."

Skinner took a sharp intake of breath. He was almost doubled over in his chair, his arms still wrapped around his body.

"I don't think you've changed all that much, Walter. I think you've always been at least bisexual. You loved Sharon, but I'm betting you didn't have a whole lot going on with her sexually after you met Mulder."

Skinner looked up, and his face was pale and drawn, his eyes dark and haunted. "I did love her, John," he whispered.

"I know, Corporal, I know," Doggett said softly. He got up, went to where Skinner was sitting, and put his arms around the big man's tense, unhappy body.

"I don't think there's anything wrong in admitting to yourself that you loved Mulder, that you still do in some way, and maybe that a small part of you always will – but you can't have him, Walter," Doggett told him gently, hugging Skinner to him. "He's with Scully now, and even if he wasn't...he's not someone you could ever have. I don't think he has room in his life for any kind of proper relationship – not even with Scully, and I don't think he ever will. He's always going to be out there tilting at windmills and chasing after rainbows. What you need to decide is whether you follow him, blindly, never needing or expecting anything in return, or whether you move on, and have the kind of relationship you deserve, with someone who loves you."

Skinner stared at him blindly, and Doggett knew this was all too much for the big man to take in. He had said enough – and Skinner needed time to absorb the implications of it all and come to his own decisions. Doggett didn't view himself as any kind of second best but he'd known Skinner was numb and confused when he'd gotten involved with him; he had promised to be here to help the big man out while he struggled with his issues and that was exactly what he intended to do, in the only ways he knew how.

"Walter, come with me," he said, getting up and holding out his hand. Skinner rose, took the outstretched hand, and allowed himself to be led upstairs to the bedroom. Doggett pushed him down on the bed, and Skinner sat there, still in a daze.

"Walter, you don't need to make any big decisions right now," Doggett told him softly. "You just need to know that someone out here loves you and wants you."

He undressed Skinner gently, as if he were a small child, removed his own clothing quickly, and then joined Skinner under the sheets.

"I don't want there to be anything about our relationship that's confusing," Doggett whispered as he took Skinner in his arms and began caressing him. "I want it to be a sanctuary because that's what you need right now; a safe place to be, somewhere to rest. Somewhere to feel good about yourself, to be taken care of. I'm going to make love to you."

He took Skinner's face in his hands and slowly and tenderly kissed the other man. Skinner gradually began to relax against him, accepting the embrace, but Doggett wanted this to take a long time – however long was required to make sure that Skinner felt cared for and appreciated by someone. It might not be Mulder and Scully, whose affection the big man seemed to have courted for so long to so little avail, but he would find that there was someone out here who loved him.

Doggett lost himself in the pleasure of kissing Walter Skinner, claiming the other man completely for several long, tender minutes. Then he moved his hands and began caressing Skinner's body, going slowly again, stoking Skinner's arousal like a slow burning fire, until finally he felt the big man's cock starting to harden. Doggett kissed a nipple, then licked its twin, before returning to the original and sucking softly. Skinner made a low growling noise in the back of his throat, and clutched Doggett's body, his hands going automatically to Doggett's buttocks which he fondled and massaged with fingers full of need. Doggett started to rhythmically move against Skinner's body, rubbing his own hard cock against Skinner's. He played Skinner like a musical instrument, arousing him to the point of climax over and over again. His hands and tongue were never still, playing out a perfect melody on his lover's beautiful body, exploring skin and lips and nipples and cock and balls until he felt Skinner fully unwind in his arms.

"You're safe here, my love," he whispered. He was surprised by that endearment, but somehow it suited his mood, his need to nurture Skinner when he was feeling so lost, to give to him. Just as he had known, instinctively, how to deal with Skinner when he had been crashing out of control that night after the fight, so he knew that what Skinner needed now was unconditional love and reassurance.

"Give it all up for me, Corporal," he whispered, blowing on Skinner's neck, nuzzling his ears, and sliding his body against the other man's aroused cock. Skinner moaned, and opened his legs, allowing Doggett to slip a finger into the other man's crack. He slid his finger in and out while watching Skinner give himself up to total abandonment. Doggett paused and reached for condoms and lube. He prepared Skinner for several long minutes, moving slowly and sensuously, taking his time, until he knew his lover couldn't hold out much longer. Then he gently parted Skinner's buttocks and slid his cock deep inside his lover. He reached out and took one of Skinner's hands in his own, holding it as he gently, smoothly, glided in and out of the big man's body. He was moving so slowly that it felt as if he was in a dream. Skinner's cock was weeping, crying out for attention, and Doggett took it in his free hand. He massaged it slowly, with long, languorous strokes, moving in time to his own infinitely slow,

measured thrusts. Skinner didn't cry out – it wasn't that kind of sex – it wasn't frenzied, or passionate, but comforting, and tender, full of little kisses and gentle sucking. No biting or pounding, just very slow movements, as if in a choreographed dance. Doggett wasn't sure how many long it lasted, but it was the slowest, longest sex he'd ever had in his life, and as far as he was concerned it could go on forever. He wanted this man beneath him to feel as if he was being made love to forever, taken care of, sheltered from the storm of his emotions in this most gentle and loving of sexual experiences. Finally he felt Skinner's body become so relaxed beneath him that the big man seemed almost boneless. When Skinner came it almost took them both by surprise – there was no roaring climax, just a flickering of come, accompanied by a sated, happy sigh. Doggett stroked Skinner's hand with his thumb, and continued sliding his hard cock in and out of the big man's body until his own climax took him a little while later. He withdrew as slowly as he'd been thrusting, and then lay down on the bed and took Skinner in his arms, drawing the man to his breast, his hands firm and possessive on his lover's body. Skinner lay still and comfortable against him, utterly accepting of the intimacy.

"So...boxing and sex...these are your solutions to my problems," Skinner murmured drowsily.

Doggett laughed and kissed his lover's ear. "They're workin' aren't they?" He said softly, caressing Skinner's body with his hand.

"Yes, oh yes," Skinner sighed. "John...thank you. Nobody's ever made love to me like that before."

"You're welcome." Doggett kissed the other man's cheek. "But that's their loss. They don't know what they were missing," he whispered. Skinner gave a little smile and Doggett wrapped him more firmly in his arms, and held him until he fell asleep. Fox Mulder might have captured Skinner's heart, but it was to John Doggett he had confided his soul, and in John Doggett's arms that he slept safely at night. And John Doggett was nothing if not persistent – he had always known that Walter Skinner's heart was a prize worth fighting for, worth waiting for, and worth earning - and he intended to be here to do all those things.

End of Part Two

### Part Three by Xanthe

#### **Author's Notes:**

**Warning:** Scenes of graphic Dom/sub sex and bondage (and loving, erotic spanking!) in his part. Personally I don't think it's remotely frightening but it's up to you!

Doggett wasn't sure what Skinner's reaction would be to their conversation about Mulder and Scully – and particularly the implications of his comments about Mulder. At first he

thought there would be some immediate repercussions, or at least further conversations on the subject, and, while a part of him dreaded them in case Skinner decided to end their relationship as a result of analysing his feelings for Mulder, another part of him knew he'd prefer to get the issue out in the open and deal with it, even if he ended up getting hurt as a result. However, as the weeks went by and neither of them spoke about it, it became clear that Skinner was falling back on another of his tried and trusted methods for avoiding personal issues he was uncomfortable with – he buried himself in his work.

Their relationship continued – but the opportunities for them to spend time alone became increasingly few and far between. At first Doggett didn't realise what was going on, but as the weeks went by and he watched Skinner work long into the night most evenings, and saw how grey faced and haggard his lover was becoming, Doggett decided that he had to step in. He knew Skinner had several mechanisms for dealing with his emotions. One was to drink, but he only did that under extreme stress – Doggett didn't think Skinner was anywhere near being a bottle a night alcoholic but drink was obviously an occasional crutch for him. The other was to punish himself, embarking on physical exercise routines that were nothing short of self-torture – just as he had in the hospital. The third way was denial, and in order to keep up this level of denial he had to have a distraction – which was where work came into the equation. Doggett was something of a workaholic himself – it was only when Luke had been born that he'd woken up, taken a good look at himself, and found that there was more to John Doggett than being a cop. He was a rounded person, with many interests outside of Law Enforcement, and he owed it both to himself, his son, and his career to lead as varied a life as possible. Watching Skinner work himself into the ground, Doggett knew his lover was effectively combining methods two and three of dealing with his emotions – he was working ridiculously long hours, not taking good care of himself, and thus effectively punishing himself in the process. It had to stop.

Doggett decided that it was time to remind his lover who was calling the shots in this relationship. He knew it wouldn't be easy but if he didn't act then he was sure Skinner would end up back in the hospital – only this time it would have nothing to do with nanocytes. Doggett intended raising the subject on one of their increasingly rare dates, only to find, when he arrived at Skinner's apartment to pick him up, that his lover wasn't home. He let himself into the apartment with his spare key, waited for fifteen minutes, his temper rising as each second passed, and then, finally, he got out his cellphone and called Skinner's office.

"Skinner," his lover answered, in a snappy tone. Doggett gritted his teeth – he had hoped that Skinner was in his car on his way home, but if he was still in the office then it looked as if he'd forgotten their date altogether – or was avoiding it.

"Walter – we had a date," Doggett said calmly, thinking that maybe a genuine crisis was claiming the other man's attention.

"John? What time is...? Oh, shit. I'm sorry. I got caught up in something I'm working on," Skinner said apologetically.

"Anything urgent?" Doggett asked in a deceptively casual tone of voice, keeping a firm check

on his temper.

"No – just complicated. I don't want to leave it now, since it'll be tough to pick up my train of thought again in the morning. I'll be another hour."

"No you won't," Doggett snapped. "You'll be 15 minutes. Get your ass into your car and get home now."

There was silence on the other end of the phone as Skinner considered his lover's tone of voice and none-too-gently expressed command.

"John, I'm busy," he said finally. "And I'd like to remind you that you agreed never to interfere with my work."

"As a matter of fact I didn't, Walter," Doggett told him firmly. "I said I would always treat you with the respect due to your rank at work, but I'm not at work right now and you shouldn't be either. Now get your ass home or I'll come and get it – and believe me, I'll be in a very bad mood indeed if you drag me out to the Hoover Building tonight."

"Fuck this, you don't own me, John. If I say I have to work then I do," Skinner responded angrily.

"Your wife might'a bought that bullshit but I don't," Doggett snapped. "I know your work, Walter, and I know that right now you are using it as an excuse. I also know that if you keep this up you'll wind up back in the hospital – or worse. I'm not giving up on you, Walter. You either come home or I come and get you but I'm not dropping this and we will talk about it. So you can either have this discussion in the privacy of your own apartment, or you can have it in your office. It's up to you."

There was another silence on the end of the phone, and then Skinner growled an angry "fine" into the phone and slammed it down. Doggett replaced the phone in his jacket pocket. He didn't know whether the "fine" meant that Skinner was coming back or not but gave the other man the benefit of the doubt, and was rewarded, twenty minutes later, when he heard Skinner's key in the lock. Any doubts about whether he'd done the right thing were expelled the moment he saw Skinner's face. The other man's eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep and overwork, his cheeks were hollow, and his breathing was shallow from relying on caffeine alone to keep him going. His face was haggard and his skin almost grey. He slammed the door shut, threw his keys into a tray on the hall table, and then strode into the living room, his whole body trembling with emotion.

"Don't you ever do this to me again," he growled, coming to a halt in front of Doggett.

"Ever do what? Care about you enough to notice that you're working yourself into the grave? Sorry, Walter, but that's a promise I won't make," Doggett replied calmly. He sat down, thus defusing some of the tension in the room and giving Skinner no chance to escalate it.

"Damn you, John. My work is important!"

"I know. I also know that if there's this much work to be done then the FBI is cutting costs by not employing enough ADs because right now you're doing the work of at least two Assistant Directors, Walter. So either you speak to Human Resources, or you admit to yourself that you're trying to hide behind those walls of yours again."

Skinner glared at him, his eyes dark and angry behind the wirerims.

"I am not..." he began and then he took a deep breath and held onto the couch, swaying slightly. Doggett was on his feet in seconds. He put a hand under Skinner's elbow, and held him up.

"Not what? Not relying on caffeine to keep you going? That argument might work better if you weren't struggling to stay on your feet right now. When did you last eat, Water?"

"This morning," Skinner growled, clearly angry with himself for showing any sign of weakness.

"Well it's 9.30 now so that was at least 12 hours ago," Doggett told him.

"I'm just tired," Skinner muttered.

"I rest my case." Doggett shrugged. "You are tired, and you need a break - and I'm going to see that's exactly what you get. You're going to eat the take out I'm about to order for you, then I'm putting you to bed and you're going to stay there until I let you get up. When you go into work tomorrow you're going to inform Kim that you're taking a few days leave. You'll take Thursday, Friday, Monday and Tuesday off. I'll pick you up at 8am on Thursday morning - that's the day after tomorrow in case you've lost track of time - and I expect you to be waiting downstairs for me with a bag full of casual clothes packed for a few days in the hills."

"I can't," Skinner said flatly, sitting down heavily on the couch as if his feet would no longer keep him upright. "I can't possibly go away at such short notice. I have meetings planned, appointments to keep."

"Kim will cancel them," Doggett told him firmly. "Walter, do I need to remind you that you agreed I'm in charge in this relationship until you get a handle on your life again?"

Skinner looked up at him sharply, his dark eyes flashing rebelliously. Doggett held his gaze steadily. After a while Skinner sighed and looked away.

"John, I'm just going through a busy patch, that's all," he said wearily. "There's no need for you to worry about me."

"There's every need and I've asked around - you're no busier than usual. You're just refusing to delegate so you can bury yourself in your work. That way you can avoid some of the

issues you've been struggling with. But I have news for you, Walter – they ain't goin' anywhere. And neither am I." Doggett crossed his arms firmly and looked down into the other man's dark eyes.

"Well, then we don't agree," Skinner said, refusing to back down. "What are you going to do, John? Tie me up and drag me on vacation with you?" Doggett looked down at him steadily. "If need be," he replied firmly. Skinner gave a grunt.

"I don't believe you," he said but his eyes showed a glimmer of uncertainty.

"Just keep pushing me and you'll find out exactly what lengths I'll go to in order to keep you healthy and safe, Walter," Doggett replied. "Now I ain't discussing this any more – I get little enough time with you as it is and I'm not going to waste it arguin'. I'll expect you to be waiting for me outside your apartment at 8am on Thursday. Don't push me any further on this, Walter because I am not in a good mood."

Doggett ordered food, and they ate in strained silence. Then Doggett, true to his word, ordered his lover into bed. Skinner was so tired by this point that he could hardly keep his eyes open so he obeyed Doggett without demur and within seconds of laying his head on the pillow, he was fast asleep. Doggett sighed, and lay on the bed, fully dressed, beside his lover. He put one arm around the other man and pulled him close, then gently stroked the side of Skinner's smooth scalp with his fingers. Skinner was so tired he didn't wake up. Doggett gazed down at the other man and saw the lines of exhaustion etched on his face.

"Why d'you do this to yourself, huh?" He whispered softly. "The trouble is we're both too strong willed," he murmured. "Both of us like two bulls goin' at each other until we're worn out. Trouble for you is that you're already dog-tired before you even start, so you don't even stand a chance of winning. I like your fire, Walter, but I think you need me to be stronger than you right now, so that's what I'm goin' to be, however much it pisses you off. Better hold tight, Corporal, because I think this particular roller coaster is going to get mighty bumpy." He bent his head and kissed Skinner's smooth scalp fondly. "Christ I love you, Corporal," he whispered. "But I'm going to be one mean son of a bitch if that's what it takes to get through to you. I expect people usually just see the big, strong guy with the no-nonsense, take charge manner, and back down, figuring that you're too much to take on. Well, I'm takin' you on, Walter. Even the big, strong guys need takin' care of occasionally, after all." He smiled, his fingers gently soothing Skinner's forehead. "I ain't backing off like all the other people in your life. I'm not scared of you, Walter Skinner – I can see right through those walls of yours and the view ain't anywhere near as bad as you think it is. Just hold on, Corporal. I'll see you don't fall. Just hold on." And he kissed Skinner's head again, lost in thought about what to do next.

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Doggett had no idea whether Skinner would be waiting for him on Thursday morning or not. He hadn't spoken to the other man in the meantime, and while he wasn't entirely sure what he'd do if Skinner wasn't there, he knew he'd think of something. He was hoping it wouldn't come to that though. When he rounded the corner in his jeep dead on the dot of 8am and

came within sight of the Viva Towers his heart sank. He couldn't see Skinner. With a sigh he pulled up in front of the building...and that was when he saw the tall figure sitting on a low wall by the entrance, a baseball cap pulled down over his eyes, and a bag resting at his feet. He was wearing a red and black plaid shirt and black jeans, and Doggett's heart did a little flip. He got out of the jeep, and Skinner looked up at him from under the brim of his baseball cap.

"Thank you, Walter," Doggett said softly.

"For what? Being here?" Skinner growled. "I don't know why I am here. It took Kim all of yesterday just to clear my diary and god knows how much work will pile up while I'm gone."

"Even Assistant Directors are entitled to vacations," Doggett commented mildly. He picked up Skinner's bag and threw it into the back of the jeep, then got in himself and waited. Skinner eyed him, his jaw crunching almost audibly as he fought an internal battle over his co-operation, and then, finally, he gave in, swung the door open, and got in beside Doggett.

They were silent for the first hour of the drive. Skinner hunkered down in his seat, pulled his cap down over his eyes, and promptly fell asleep. He awoke with a start when they were well clear of DC and looked around, befuddled.

"Am I allowed to ask where we're going?" He said, pushing back his cap and glancing at Doggett.

"Sure. I was wondering what was taking you so long," Doggett replied with a grin. He was already starting to relax. It felt good, being out on the open road, driving along with the radio blaring out at full blast. "We're going to the Silvermist Mountain Lodge. We've still got a long way to drive, Walter, so why not lie back, chill out, and start relaxing."

"Silvermist Mountain Lodge? What kind of a place is that?" Skinner asked.

"It's nice – set in the hills, nobody for miles around. We get our own cabin so we can make as much noise as we like," Doggett grinned, and deliberately touched Skinner's thigh as he changed gear. He was rewarded when Skinner's pants tented slightly in response and he grinned even more widely at that. "There's an en-suite Jacuzzi, huge fireplaces, and you can order food to be brought to the cabin if you don't want to get dressed." He winked at Skinner who grunted in reply. "The hills are fantastic – lots of great walking trails, and there's a sports complex as well in case you feel like a rematch in the boxing ring, Slugger."

He paused to allow that to sink in – he knew that Skinner had to have the same fond memories he had about the fantastic sex that had followed their last sparring match.

"It's relaxed – the cabins are spaced out so you don't have to see anyone else if you don't want to – except me of course. The scenery is magnificent – lots of local wildlife. It's the perfect place to relax and get away from it all."

Skinner nodded. He gazed at the road ahead of them for a moment then spoke again.

"Did you go there with Tony?" He asked and Doggett's mood came crashing down. He glanced at Skinner angrily, but it was clear from the expression in Skinner's eyes that he hadn't intended it to be a malicious or mischievous question. There was a sense of uncertainty in those dark eyes, and Doggett wondered what that was about.

"Yes, I did," he replied. "Although it was wasted on Tony. He was your original city boy – he liked the bright lights too much. He hated the quiet out in the woods, hated the walkin' I insisted we do...he enjoyed the sex though. It was kind of liberating being in a remote little cabin on a hillside - nobody to hear him scream he said, and he used to save his kinkiest ideas for when we were at Silvermist." Doggett glanced at Skinner again to see how well that piece of news had gone down.

"Did you tie him up?" Skinner asked quietly. Doggett knew that Skinner had a strange kind of fascination about the impromptu bondage session of several weeks previously. Doggett had never tied him again, and Skinner had never asked him too, but sometimes Skinner brought it up in conversation, as if it was something he wanted to explore but didn't know how to admit that to himself – or to Doggett.

"Sure. He used to bring a bag load of stuff with him. Had to sit me down and explain how some of it worked, and I never could be bothered with half of it – it just got in the way."

Skinner's jaw did its sideways slide, and Doggett knew that this was something that they had to address – and Silvermist was the best place for that.

"I might tie you up again at Silvermist, Walter," he said softly. "How d'you feel about that?"

Skinner's body tensed, but his eyes told a different story. "I don't know," he shrugged.

"Just as part of sex – nothin' more. Nothing like last time. This time it'll be for fun," Doggett said, in a low, sexy voice. "I know how to make it really good fun, Walter."

He had the feeling that Skinner needed, now more than ever, to be given permission to let go. Skinner had spoken of finding bondage liberating and if ever a man needed to be liberated right now it was Walter Skinner.

"I'm not sure," Skinner muttered, turning his head and glancing out of the window, perhaps to avoid meeting Doggett's gaze.

"Well, that's okay – it's my decision anyway, Corporal," Doggett said. He intended to play the heavy during this mini-vacation so he might as well start now. Skinner's head snapped around, his expression surprised. "I won't do anything you can't handle, Corporal," Doggett told him firmly. "I told you that before. I might extend your comfort zone, push you a little further than you'd normally go, but that's all. You'll be quite safe with me – you might not feel that way but you will be."

"You're saying I don't have a choice?" Skinner asked, his brow furrowing slightly.

"Yup – you gave up control to me remember, Walter."

"How can I forget? You keep reminding me every five minutes," Skinner growled, but Doggett had come to realise that his lover's bark was definitely worse than his bite so he just smiled to himself and kept on driving.

Skinner was silent for most of the rest of the long drive. He didn't seem to be sulking – Doggett had long ago realised that sulking wasn't Skinner's style. He did have a tendency to go very quiet though, which was precisely what he was doing now. He was polite and answered questions when asked, but simply didn't have any conversation beyond that. Doggett knew this pattern all too well – those walls of Skinner's were in place and holding, but he also knew that with time away from the distractions of work in which to really think, Skinner might have a difficult few days, and he intended to be here to support the other man in any way he could – including by being tough on him if necessary.

They reached Silvermist in the late afternoon. Doggett felt all his cares and worries slip away as they drove further and further into the hills. It was beautiful and serene up here, and he loved the place. It had been to Silvermist that he'd driven one night after the investigation into the murder of his son had yielded yet another dead end, and it was here where he'd broken down, gone to pieces, lost himself in his tears, guilt and pain, and then slowly started to build himself back together again. The stillness and beauty of the hills had soothed him, and it was here that he'd resolved to make a fresh start of his life, and find some meaning to it even after his great loss. He hoped he could help Skinner find a similar resolution to his problems up here away from the pressing issues of work.

Doggett drew up outside the main lodge to collect their key, then drove them out into the hillside and drew up outside their cabin. Skinner got out of the car and stretched. He looked at the pretty, wooden cabin, buried deep within a copse of trees. A small pond was just visible in the distance and some ducks were aimlessly waddling around it, quacking as they went.

"This is a beautiful place, John," he commented and Doggett could see some of the tension dropping away from the other man's body already.

"Wait until you see in the cabin," he replied with a grin.

He opened the door and ushered Skinner inside. An open fire was already blazing in the fireplace, waiting for them. The cabin was warm and cosy – just one large bedroom with a King-sized bed, a kitchen, living area complete with TV, and a huge bathroom, with a Jacuzzi as promised. Doggett found the bottle of champagne he'd ordered chilling in the fridge and got it out with a smile.

"Are we celebrating something?" Skinner asked with a frown.

"Sure. Our first vacation together – and the achievement of dragging you away from your

work," Doggett replied, his smile broadening into a grin. Skinner managed a faded smile of his own, and accepted the glass of champagne that Doggett gave him.

"No toast?" he murmured as Doggett began sipping his drink.

"Maybe before we leave we'll have something to toast," Doggett replied. Skinner gave a little grunt and his shoulders hunched uncomfortably again. Doggett decided he really needed to do something to distract Skinner and get him in the mood for the vacation – and sooner rather than later. "Go and get the bags in from the car, Corporal," he ordered. "I'm going to call for some food, and then we're going to get down to business."

"And what exactly is business?" Skinner asked.

"You'll see." Doggett nodded in the direction of the car and Skinner turned, reluctantly, and went to bring in the bags.

The food was delicious. They ate on the floor in front of the fire, watching CNN. Both men sat, engrossed in the news, chewing silently. Usually they'd talk, discuss the day's news events, indulge in some light banter, argue over some issue or other in the news – both of them loved doing that, but on this occasion they were silent, each lost in his own thoughts. Doggett was preparing for what he knew would be an evening of surprises for Skinner – he just hoped he'd get it right. While he had always been forceful in the bedroom, he'd never actually taken Skinner where he intended on taking him tonight and it was a risk. He knew if he told the other man what his plans were then Skinner might refuse and yet he was fairly sure this was what Skinner needed. He just hoped he was right.

It was dark outside by the time they'd finished eating and cleared away. Doggett got up, grabbed their still unpacked bags, and took them into the bedroom. He slung Skinner's onto the bed and began unpacking his own. Skinner followed and started hanging up his clothing, then paused, and watched, warily, as Doggett pulled out the padded leather cuffs and set them on the nightstand.

"John, about what you said in the car..." Skinner began.

"Walter – don't worry about it," Doggett replied softly but firmly. "I'm taking away your choices, Corporal. You don't have to think about this, or wonder whether you want it or not. It's just going to happen."

Skinner swallowed hard, and glanced at the cuffs again.

"Corporal – just relax and trust me. This is going to be good, but first you have to let go. I know that isn't easy for you, but that's why you need it so badly."

Doggett finished unpacking and pushed his bag into the closet. Then he went over to where Skinner was standing, unmoving, still gazing at the cuffs, lost in thought.

"Come on, Corporal - finish unpacking. I want this done by the time I get back from the bathroom," Doggett ordered. He went to the bathroom, peed, and then took a brief shower to wash away the journey and to give himself time to think. His cock was already starting to ache at the thought of what the evening would bring so he jerked off quickly and efficiently in preparation – he wanted to keep going for a long time and he didn't want to worry about coming too soon. Then he dried himself, put on a robe, and walked back into the bedroom. Skinner was standing beside the bed, almost at attention, his arms hanging stiffly by his sides.

"Walter," Doggett said softly. Skinner jumped as if he hadn't even been aware Doggett was in the room.

"Sorry, John. I was miles away." Skinner gave a faded, strained smile that tugged at Doggett's heartstrings. If only Skinner would just give himself up to it he knew the other man would enjoy himself, but Skinner was still thinking too much and avoiding his feelings as a result. "John...I know you're pissed off with me right now. I can see I've been shutting you out and I apologise. I'm not sure what you have in mind for tonight but I'm assuming you want to..." Skinner paused and took a deep breath. "I don't know. Punish me in some way for screwing up these past few weeks, taking on too much at work...and I accept that. If you feel you need to use your belt on me again then..."

"Walter," Doggett interrupted him. Skinner stopped the torrent of words and looked at his lover uncertainly. "Shut up," Doggett said.

Skinner closed his mouth, and his jaw did a sideways clench. He looked as if this was some kind of nasty ordeal he had to endure in order to atone for what he perceived as all his many sins.

"Listen to me, Corporal," Doggett rapped out, going to stand in front of Skinner, invading his territory so they were almost nose to nose. "I told you I wouldn't let you use me to punish yourself, or indulge in any kind of self-torture or loathing. That isn't going to happen so don't think for a second that tonight is going to be about that. It isn't. I'm not going to use my belt on you. I never had any intention of it. Tonight is about control. It's about you giving it up to me, willingly, and me taking it and using it to break down those walls of yours and finally get you to relax. There's only one rule you need to obey tonight, and that's doing as I say - immediately, without question. That's all you have to remember."

He put his hands on Skinner's shoulders and the other man jumped and stared straight ahead. Doggett stroked Skinner's shoulders softly until his lover relaxed a fraction.

"Good man. Now, do you understand what I just said to you?" He asked.

Skinner still avoided his gaze. He shrugged, and glanced at the floor instead.

"I guess. I'm not sure what the hell good you think this will do, John, but..." Skinner shrugged again, his eyes wary and guarded, his face closed off. Doggett sensed the walls being

fortified against imminent attack and knew he had to do something to throw Skinner off-guard, and find a way in.

"I'm going to undress you," he said softly. Skinner's gaze met his own, uncertain, and questioning. "Slowly, Corporal," Doggett said. "Very slowly." He ran his fingers over Skinner's arms, up to the collar of his shirt, and began unbuttoning it. "Just relax, Walter. Arms by your sides," he ordered as Skinner's hands came up automatically to rest on his butt. Skinner removed his hands and Doggett continued unbuttoning his lover's shirt. He went very slowly as promised, and Skinner stood there, his face stony, his eyes dark, as if he was being subjected to something unpleasant, and not simply being asked to stand still while he was caressed.

"I said relax," Doggett purred, nuzzling Skinner's neck. The big man tensed. Doggett slapped him lightly on his jeans covered butt. "Obey me, Corporal. This is goin' to happen – it's just a question of how long it takes."

Doggett was prepared for it to go on all night if need be, until Skinner had given up control to him, because only then did he think he could find a way past those walls. Skinner gave a low growl – Doggett knew the problem his lover was having. They had made love in many different ways during their time together, but while Doggett had always been assertive and forceful in the bedroom, he'd never insisted on this degree of control before – and Skinner had never been less in a frame of mind to give it up.

Doggett finished unbuttoning the big man's shirt and pushed it aside gently. It never ceased to arouse him to reveal the acres of broad, tanned flesh that lay beneath the clothing and he took a few moments to appreciate it – much to Skinner's chagrin. Doggett knew his scrutiny embarrassed his lover but he ignored Skinner's embarrassment at the open admiration. He gently teased a nipple with his fingers and Skinner gave a little gasp of arousal. His hands came up to rest on Doggett's hips as he steadied himself. Doggett slapped his jeans covered rump again.

"Hands by your side, Walter. Just go with it."

He eased Skinner's shirt from his shoulders and let it slide to the floor, then bent his head to tease Skinner's nipples with his mouth. He spent several long minutes licking and sucking and gradually he felt Skinner unwind slightly, his body twisting and undulating under Doggett's insistent caress. Finally, Doggett released him. Reaching up, he scooped off the wirerims and placed them out of harm's way on the nightstand.

"You don't need to see anything, Walter," he said, cutting off Skinner's objection just as it began. "You just need to experience. Now hold tight."

Keeping one hand on Skinner's body, Doggett moved around to stand behind his lover. He kissed Skinner's shoulder blades gently, then sucked on his neck. Skinner bowed his head forward and Doggett slapped his butt again.

"Keep in position, Corporal," he commanded. Skinner obeyed, and Doggett felt the energy

beginning to build between them. It was so good to have this big, strong man, bending to his will, doing as he was commanded, and giving in to his own sexuality. Whatever doubts Skinner might have about his enjoyment of sex with another man, Doggett wanted to dispel them once and for all. However Skinner might feel about it mentally, he wouldn't be able to deny how good it felt physically.

Slowly, Doggett licked Skinner's back, from the top of his broad shoulders to the waistband of his jeans. He spent several long, languorous minutes just trailing his tongue over the naked flesh, enjoying the slightly salty taste. Then he stood up close behind Skinner, his cock pressing through the front of his robe and nestling against Skinner's jeans.

"You feel that, Walter?" He purred. "Soon I'm going to put you on your hands and knees and fuck you. How do you feel about that? Hmmm?" He kissed the back of Skinner's neck and felt the other man shudder with arousal. "You want that? Hmmm? You want me to take you from behind, with you on your hands and knees. Would you like that?" Skinner arched his back as Doggett ran one sharp fingernail down his spine. "I think you'd like that," Doggett whispered, digging his fingernail in deeper. Skinner fought it for a moment, his body arched and rigid and then gave in, and hung his head again.

"Yes, sir," he whispered. Doggett felt a thrill of arousal at the word 'sir'. Skinner rarely addressed him in this way but it made his cock instantly hard to hear it.

"I thought you'd like that, Corporal. My cock inside your ass - you on your knees, takin' it, submitting to me - I thought you'd enjoy that."

He put his arms around the front of Skinner's chest and took a nipple between thumb and forefinger, pinching lightly. Skinner stiffened against his chest.

"Hold it, Corporal. Let me play," Doggett whispered, relaxing his grip on the nipple without letting go. With his other hand he took Skinner's other nipple in his fingers and pinched down hard. Skinner stiffened against him again. Doggett sucked on his neck, relaxing him at the same time as keeping up the pressure on his nipple. Skinner gasped, and pressed back against him.

"Good, Corporal, just keep in position," Doggett murmured. He kissed Skinner's neck, and then released the abused nipple – only to pinch the other one tightly instead. Skinner barely had time to relax before he was gasping again as the new nipple began to pain him. Doggett enjoyed the way his lover leaned back against him, relying on Doggett to hold him up, allowing him to play with his body. This was good – Skinner was already giving up control to him. The energy between them was starting to glow and grow, becoming almost tangible. Doggett hoped Skinner felt it, hoped the other man wasn't just enduring this, enjoying the hurt as some kind of punishment for his perceived failings. He released his hold on the nipple, and kissed Skinner's neck again, then, instead of squeezing the nipple he'd neglected for the past few seconds as Skinner was obviously expecting, he pinched the one he'd just released again. Skinner gave a little roar in the back of his throat and tried to pull away – but Doggett held on tight.

"Back in position, Corporal!" he rapped out.

"No...fuck this...let me go," Skinner hissed, starting to struggle.

"I said – back in position, Corporal," Doggett commanded in his most authoritative voice. Skinner struggled with it for a long time, his body rigid. He tried to pull away but Doggett had his arms wrapped tightly around him, and there was an uncertainty about Skinner – he clearly wasn't sure whether he wanted to be released or not. Part of him did – part of him was fighting giving up control, but another part of him longed to give in.

"Just let it happen," Doggett purred. He wasn't doing more than pinching hard and he knew Skinner needed to be taken down before he could give anything up. It wasn't seriously hurting but Skinner was skittish and unsure and needed firm handling. Skinner's struggling slowed and then stopped, and he stood there, his chest heaving as he tried to adjust to Doggett's firm fingers, digging into his nipple.

"Good man." Doggett released the nipple and rewarded Skinner with another kiss. Then, without warning, he seized the other nipple and began pinching again – harder this time, pushing Skinner to react. Skinner gave a moan, his body quivering, but this time he didn't break position. "That's good, Corporal. That's very good. Give it all up, give it to me," Doggett murmured into his lover's ear. "Don't tense – just let me do the thinking and acting. Let me do it all."

He released the nipple, gave Skinner the kiss of reward, and then played with both nipples, gently rubbing them for several minutes. At first Skinner was tense, despite Doggett's command not to be – he was clearly waiting for the next pinch. Finally he started to relax and that was when Doggett struck again, squeezing both nipples hard this time – harder than before, holding them for a long beat and then releasing one of them but maintaining his hold on the other, so Skinner was never quite sure where the pain would come from next.

Doggett kept up the nipple squeezing for several minutes and eventually Skinner began to go with the flow, and stopped anticipating which nipple would be pinched. That was what Doggett had been waiting for. He released both nipples, moved his hands down to the waistband of Skinner's jeans and began undoing them, remaining in position behind Skinner, their cheeks touching.

"How you doing, Corporal?" Doggett asked, turning his head sideways to look at his lover. The other man's eyes were closed but his face was still a little too strained for Doggett's liking. He was still trying to figure out what would happen next, instead of just accepting Doggett's commands. "Don't think," Doggett whispered. "Just feel. Don't anticipate, just respond." He finished unbuttoning Skinner's jeans and slid his hand down the front of them. Skinner's cock was hard and straining so he was obviously aroused by his submission – something that Doggett had never doubted for a second.

"Okay, here's the deal, Corporal," he said, in low, throaty, deeply sexual tones. "This cock is mine tonight. I don't want you touching it. I don't want you coming until I say you can. You have to keep goin' for a long time and it won't be easy. Any time you think you're going to

come then tell me – I'm sure I can find a way to discourage it." He squeezed hard on Skinner's cock head as he spoke those words and Skinner let out an enraged growl. "Dampens down the need, huh?" Doggett purred, still squeezing hard. Skinner struggled again.

"I can't do this, John. I don't know where we're going...I don't know what you expect of me," Skinner hissed, his muscles bunching tight.

Doggett released Skinner's cock and began caressing it again. It wavered for a moment, but soon returned to its fully erect state.

"Yes you do, Corporal," he told the shaking man, "because I already told you. I'm going to be givin' you orders and you're going to obey them. You understand all about obeying orders don't you, Corporal?"

Skinner was silent, his head bowed, his face screwed up as he struggled with the idea of giving up so much control.

"I asked you a question, Corporal!" Doggett rapped out. "I need an answer," Doggett insisted. "All you have to do is obey my orders. That's all. I'm not asking any more of you. Now, can you do that?"

Skinner let out a huge sigh and then gave a reluctant nod. "Yes, sir," he whispered.

"Good. Now, what order did I just give you?" Doggett asked, seizing lover's cock again and squeezing it just hard enough to be mildly painful. Skinner tensed.

"Not to come, sir. Not to touch my cock, sir," Skinner managed to say between clenched teeth.

"Good, Corporal." Doggett released his cock and began stroking it gently instead. Skinner relaxed against him, and Doggett spent several minutes playing with his lover's balls, fondling them and caressing them until Skinner was boneless with arousal once more.

Doggett finally released him, and, still keeping one hand on his lover's body, walked back around to face him once more. He removed the big man's shoes and socks, then pushed Skinner's jeans and briefs down his body, and ordered the big man to step out of them. When Skinner was completely naked, Doggett took hold of his hand and led him over to the bed. Doggett sat on the bed, opened his legs wide, and pulled Skinner between them. He closed his legs around Skinner's body, and then resumed his stroking. Skinner's thick cock was now straining with need, but Doggett ignored it for several minutes. Instead he stroked the other man's inner thigh, tangled his hand in Skinner's chest hair, and then finally placed both his hands on Skinner's buttocks. He fondled those twin globes of flesh for a long time, before suddenly moving his head forward and taking Skinner's cock in his mouth. The big man gasped and put his hands on Doggett's shoulders to stay upright. Doggett drew back immediately.

"Hands by your sides, Corporal. And don't come. If you feel you're going to shoot then tell

me," he ordered. Skinner nodded, his eyes glazed with arousal.

Doggett resumed sucking Skinner's cock. He loved the feel of the smooth skin stretched over the hardness, and soon he felt Skinner's balls start to constrict.

"Sir...I need to..." Skinner muttered, in a strangled tone. Doggett drew back and squeezed Skinner's cock head hard enough to prevent him coming.

"Deep breaths, Corporal," Doggett purred. Skinner obeyed. Doggett smiled, and got up. "All right, Corporal, it's time for me to fuck you," he said in that same low, throaty tone. "I'm going to take you from behind and fuck you hard up the ass," he purred. Skinner looked at him, uncertainty etched in his expression. "Get on the bed on your hands and knees. You'll have to stay that way to keep balance so you won't be able to touch your cock," Doggett informed him. Skinner swallowed hard, still clearly unsure about where this was going – would Doggett even allow him to come, or was tonight all about Doggett taking his pleasure and Skinner being denied his? His confusion was evident in his eyes and Doggett slapped him lightly on the rump to stop him doing too much thinking. "Just do it, Corporal," he ordered.

Skinner hesitated.

"We've done this before, Corporal," Doggett reminded him. They had – but never like this, with Doggett insisting that Skinner obey him, and never being taken from behind in such an exposed and vulnerable way, and with it being so clearly a matter of dominance and submission. Skinner's cock showed his arousal but his eyes showed his fear.

"Do you want me to get tough with you, Corporal?" Doggett asked. He moved fast and slapped Skinner's backside sharply. Skinner jumped at the sting and turned on his lover angrily.

"Fuck you," he hissed but Doggett felt the words lacked any real fire.

"No, I'm going to fuck you – now do as you're told and get on the bed," he insisted.

"No," Skinner snapped, although his eyes and cock told a different story.

Doggett stepped forward, pulled Skinner into a rough embrace, grabbed the other man's buttocks and kneaded them hard at the same time as kissing his lips with a force that was almost savage. Skinner struggled for a moment, and then surrendered to the embrace. Doggett kissed him for a long time, his hands active and masterful on Skinner's body. He knew from the hardness of his lover's cock that Skinner was enjoying being made to submit – even that the struggle was part of what turned him on, and he felt it was safe to continue. He drew back, turned Skinner around, and slapped his ass hard again.

"I said get on the bed, Corporal. Do it. Now!" He ordered.

Skinner glanced at him over his shoulder from under his eyelashes, but he did as he was

told, climbing onto the bed and getting into position. Any doubts Doggett might have had about how turned on Skinner was by the scenario were dispelled by the way Skinner knelt, his ass held provocatively in the air, wiggling slightly as if to encourage Doggett. He turned his head to look at Doggett again and his eyes were light and glowing in invitation, signalling that he was ready and willing despite his apprehension. Doggett stood for a moment and just enjoyed the sight of Walter Skinner kneeling in such an exposed position, waiting for his lover's attention. His cock almost screamed with need he was so aroused.

"Get that butt up higher, Corporal," he ordered. "Offer it up for me to fuck." Skinner obeyed, raising his smooth golden buttocks even higher in the air. "That's good, Corporal, you look good like this, ass up, waiting to be fucked," Doggett purred. He placed his hands on Skinner's buttocks and kneaded them firmly. Skinner's legs were at the foot of the bed, and, raised as he was by the mattress, Doggett was in the perfect position to mount him while standing behind him.

Doggett reached for the lubricant and condoms, and opened his robe. His erection was large and purpling and he was longing to relieve it. He had every sympathy with Skinner's own straining erection but he didn't intend to let the big man come any time soon. He lubed his fingers and entered Skinner, massaging his anus. Skinner opened up to him quickly, leaning back onto Doggett's fingers, and before long Doggett was sliding his condom into place, and then lubing it.

"Ready, Corporal?" he asked, stroking Skinner's back and buttocks. "Are you ready to take me up the ass, Corporal?" he demanded more insistently when there was no reply.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Skinner panted.

Doggett smiled, the energy between them almost tangible. Skinner was finally letting go, giving in, giving it up to him and it was such a good feeling. He seized the big man's buttocks in his hands and parted them, then nudged his cock into Skinner's entrance. His lover gave a gasp as Doggett's cock breached the ring of muscle but once he was in, Doggett sank himself smoothly up to the hilt in Skinner's warm tightness. As he slid home he almost lost consciousness – it felt so good. He paused for a moment to get his breath back, and held on to Skinner's hips for support. He didn't slide his hand under the big man's body to touch his cock – he had something else in mind for that.

"How does that feel, Corporal?" he asked, adjusting his position slightly. It felt damn good to him! Skinner on his hands and knees submissively on the bed, Doggett standing behind him buried to the hilt in his lover's body. It felt wonderful.

"Feels...oh shit..." Skinner murmured as Doggett shifted slightly and rocked his weight forward, knowing he would be brushing Skinner's prostate in the process. "Oh god, it feels so good," Skinner breathed. Doggett grinned; Skinner had a submissive streak that he kept well hidden, but he knew the big man found the position – being on his hands and knees, ass in the air, being ridden while being denied the opportunity to come – as arousing as the actual physical sensations. He began to rock in and out, going maddeningly slowly. Skinner raised his head and looked straight ahead, breathing heavily.

"Take it, Corporal, take it real slow," Doggett murmured, sliding in and out at a snail's pace, enjoying the sight of the dark red flesh of his cock as it disappeared into his lover's body and then emerged again. Skinner gasped and put his head back, sweat pouring off his forehead.

"Please, sir...I need to come," he whispered.

"Not yet, Corporal." Doggett moved his hand around to Skinner's cock and pinched the head. The big man gave a groan of disappointment. Doggett kept up the pressure for some time until he was sure that Skinner had lost the immediate urge to come, and then he returned his attention to his own cock. He grabbed Skinner's buttocks and began to pump into his lover in earnest.

"Can you feel this, Corporal – you're being fucked, hard and fast," Doggett panted as he slammed in and out. "D'you like this? Huh?" He demanded, needing an answer.

"Yes, sir!" Skinner almost shouted.

Doggett laughed as he pounded, going so fast now he was a mass of sensation – Skinner's tight muscle clenching around his cock, Skinner's flesh warm and smooth under his hands, the scent of their arousal in the air, the noises Skinner made with every inward thrust, his own sweat running down his face...then he was coming, deep inside the other man's body. Coming and coming over and over again inside his sweet Corporal's tight, warm flesh. Doggett keeled forward and held onto Skinner's back as his climax subsided. Skinner remained where he was, his own neglected cock still hard with need. Finally Doggett dismounted.

"At ease, Corporal," he said softly, and Skinner flopped down on the bed, and looked at him with dark, passionate eyes.

"Thank you, sir," he said, and Doggett suspected that Skinner was living out his own submissive fantasy, enjoying calling his lover 'sir', and totally relishing giving up control to him.

"I haven't finished with you yet, Corporal," he said, going over to the nightstand and picking up the cuffs. "I'm going to tie you to the bed," he said, giving Skinner plenty of time to get used to the idea. Skinner's eyes registered panic tempered by the fascination he'd had with the cuffs since Doggett had first used them on him. "Hands out, Corporal," Doggett ordered. Skinner's jaw did another sideways clench.

"I'm not sure about this, Sergeant," he whispered.

Doggett felt a warm glow at being addressed as 'Sergeant'. It showed how into the scene Skinner was – and he was sure that the resistance was only token. He knew that Skinner feared the loss of control implicit in being tied up, but he also knew that Skinner craved it as well. He wanted to have the control taken from him but he needed help in getting there.

"It's an order, Corporal, not a discussion," Doggett told him firmly. "Obey me!"

"John..." Skinner's eyes were agonised.

"What's the problem, Corporal?" Doggett asked in a much softer tone, caressing Skinner's arm gently with his fingers. "What's going on?"

"I'm not going to be any good at this, John," Skinner admitted, shamefaced. "I have to fight it. I can't stop myself. I need to fight it. I'll let you down. I'm not Tony," he said in a hoarse tone. "I can't be what you want me to be."

Doggett remembered Skinner's uncertain look in the car when they had discussed Tony – so this was what that had been about? Skinner didn't think he could live up to Tony's prowess in the bedroom? Doggett almost laughed out loud. Skinner couldn't be more wrong.

"Corporal, I don't want a carbon copy of Tony Larsen – I'm much more interested in Walter Skinner," he said firmly. "As for fighting it – you can, as much as you like. That's part of what the bondage does for you. It gives you a safe place to let all that frustration out. I know you don't like being tied, I know it makes you feel helpless, vulnerable and anxious, but I also think it's exactly what you need right now, and that you'll feel great about it afterwards – but you have to trust me on that. Do you trust me, Walter?"

Skinner searched his face for a long time and then sighed. "Yeah, I trust you, John," he murmured. "I still don't want to be tied but I do trust you."

"Good. Then hold out your hands," Doggett ordered.

Skinner hesitated for only a second before obeying. Doggett sat down on the bed, and fastened the cuffs onto Skinner's wrists, taking his time, making sure the cuffs were comfortable and tight enough not to slip. When he'd finished with Skinner's wrists, he moved onto his ankles and spent a long time fastening the cuffs there as well, going slowly as before.

"Lie on your back, arms and legs stretched out," Doggett commanded when he was done, and Skinner obeyed without hesitation this time. The bed had a wooden headboard with slats in it and it was an easy matter to fasten the cuffs to the headboard. Skinner panicked the moment they were fastened, and pulled on the cuffs hard, looking to Doggett for reassurance.

"It's okay, Walter...you're safe," Doggett told him softly, stroking his body to calm him.

"Fight it all you like – you won't be able to get free."

Skinner's eyes flashed defiantly and he pulled desperately on the bonds for several minutes, panting and struggling. Doggett watched, making no move to either stop him or calm him. Skinner needed the struggle, and Doggett had to allow him to feel it – it was a vital part of the process. Skinner tugged on the cuffs, panting hard, until finally, exhausted, his movements slowed, and then came to a halt. He glared at Doggett like a feisty colt waiting to be tamed by a patient master.

"That's good," Doggett said softly. He reached out and ran a hand over Skinner's body and the other man struggled again but this time the resistance was brief and token. "That's very good, Corporal. Now give yourself up to me. Just relax. You can't move, you can't do anything except accept what I do to you. Trust me."

He held Skinner's gaze, trying to impart his utter trustworthiness through his eyes and expression. Skinner stopped fighting the cuffs and visibly calmed down, but even so, Doggett spent a few minutes stroking him until he was sure it was okay to proceed to the big man's feet. There was no footboard so tethering his ankles was a more complicated matter. Doggett fastened each ankle cuff to a belt, and then tied the belt around the legs of the bed. Skinner lay there, spread-eagled, looking like a starfish, his meaty cock standing fully aroused in the middle of his body. Doggett grinned.

"This is a good look for you, Corporal," he murmured.

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir," Skinner replied, lost in role. His body was shaking slightly from the effort of not fighting the bondage. Doggett slid onto the bed beside his bound lover, and began playing with Skinner's body again.

"Give it up to me, Corporal," he murmured. "You're mine – I'm going to enjoy this body – and you can't do a thing to stop me. You're out of control, Corporal. You can't make any decisions. You just have to accept what I do to you. How does that feel?"

Skinner's dark eyes met his own, and Doggett realised, with a jolt of surprise, that Skinner's eyes were free of want and care for the first time in all the time he'd known him.

"It feels good, sir," Skinner whispered hazily. "You can do what you like to me, sir. I can't stop you," he said, dreamily.

"Good man, Corporal," Doggett purred - and then he moved into action. He swarmed over Skinner's body with tongue, teeth, hands and fingernails. First he sucked on Skinner's nipples, bit on them until Skinner moaned and thrashed around in his bonds but the big man couldn't get free and soon his moans subsided into sighs of acceptance. Then Doggett scratched his fingernails along Skinner's hard, straining cock. The big man shuddered and tested his bonds again, only to find that they remained firm. Doggett blew on Skinner's balls, and on the sensitive flesh of his inner thighs, then worked his way down to the big man's toes, which he sucked enthusiastically. Skinner writhed and sighed under the many caresses but he could neither resist nor break free.

Finally, judging Skinner had been tormented and brought to the edge of climax often enough for one evening, Doggett reached for condoms and lube again. Skinner gazed at him in a calm haze, clearly not even aware of what was going on, let alone thinking about what would happen next. Doggett straddled his lover's body, and lubed himself, stretching his ass muscles with his fingers. He was going to enjoy this. Finally he slid a condom onto Skinner's straining cock, and then positioned himself over it. He held his own buttocks open and he slid down on Skinner's shaft and the big man let out a hoarse cry of surprise and arousal as

Doggett engulfed his whole length in one go. Doggett paused, enjoying the feel of Skinner inside his ass, buried deep within him. He was still in control, and he intended to use that control.

"Don't come, Corporal. I want to ride you for a long time," he purred.

Skinner blinked sweat out of his eyes and nodded. He was utterly helpless, tied down to the bed, and couldn't move as Doggett rose up and down on his hard cock. As soon as Doggett thought Skinner was close to coming he would slow right down, or stop completely.

"You have no control over this, Corporal," he told his lover firmly. "You'll come when I let you...but for now I just want to ride you."

Doggett wasn't sure how many times he slid up and down, impaling himself on that beautiful, large cock – he felt lost in the most delicious dream, his hands resting on Skinner's washboard stomach as he rocked up and down. Skinner gazed up at him, his face contorted with arousal, his dark eyes wide with pleasure and Doggett smiled as his own eyes locked with that dark gaze, and they joined together in a communion that was bringing them closer together than they'd ever been.

Doggett showed Skinner no mercy – he rode him for a long time, not allowing him to come even though Skinner begged for release. Only when he was satisfied that Skinner had surrendered everything to him did he finally allow the big man his climax.

"Any time you want, Corporal," he ordered, riding his cock as fast as he could. Skinner cried out and his entire body seemed to lift off the bed despite his bonds and the weight of Doggett on top of him. Doggett could feel Skinner's climax though the condom, could feel the big man shuddering as he ejaculated for what seemed like forever, before finally slumping back down on the bed, thoroughly exhausted. Doggett sat astride him for a little while longer, then disengaged himself, and removed the condom from his lover's now sated penis.

Skinner seemed completely out of it while Doggett released him from his bonds. The other man was still unmoving when Doggett pulled the comforter over them both, and slid onto the bed beside him. He took Skinner into his arms and kissed him on the lips, demanding entry with his tongue. Skinner surrendered easily, his whole body limp and exhausted in Doggett's arm.

"Tell me who you belong to, Corporal," Doggett asked softly when he drew back.

"You, sir," Skinner replied blindly, his lips nuzzling at Doggett's neck.

"Who is in charge of you, Walter?" Doggett demanded, his arms wrapped around his lover's sweaty body, keeping him close.

"You sir. You are," Skinner whispered.

"Good." Doggett rewarded Skinner with another deep, loving kiss. The other man's face had lost its grey pallor and he looked better than he had for weeks. "We'll get there, Corporal, just as long as you keep remembering that," he said, holding Skinner tight as they both fell fast asleep.

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Doggett woke the next day feeling energised and looking forward to a few days wrapped up with his lover – only to find that the bed was empty. He came to quickly, and called Skinner's name. There was no reply, so he got up, ran a hand through his tousled hair, and looked in the bathroom. Nobody. It was the work of a few seconds to look around the small cabin but Skinner was well and truly gone.

Doggett sat on the side of the bed, trying to figure out what had happened. He felt a pang of guilt as he recalled the previous night's activities. He'd been trying to bring Skinner down, to breach those walls to the point where Skinner could come to terms with some of the issues that he had been trying to avoid, but looking back Doggett could see that he had seriously misjudged the situation. He had waded in like a bull in a china shop. Skinner was already struggling to come to terms with his homosexuality – to make him also face his submissive side and enjoyment of surrendering control had been taking his lover too far, too fast. Doggett could have kicked himself he was so angry. He remembered taking Skinner from behind, making the other man kneel on all fours – suddenly, instead of being erotic, that seemed humiliating. He didn't blame Skinner for walking out on him. He'd tied Skinner down not as he had done before, to get through to him and stop him being a danger to himself and others, but on a whim, to prove something to both of them without giving Skinner any choice in the matter. Doggett grimaced as he recalled the way he'd made Skinner thank him for taking him up the ass. He had been arrogant and stupid and he had fucked things up between them – maybe for good. He knew that Skinner didn't love him but he'd been hoping that in time love would come. He knew that Skinner had so many problems in his life right now that love wasn't exactly a priority, and then of course there was the spectre of Fox Mulder, casting his shadow over Doggett's life wherever he went.

Doggett took a shower, trying to figure out what to do next. He knew Skinner couldn't have gone far because the jeep was still parked outside; the big man had to be around somewhere. Doggett had just finished in the shower when he heard the front door open and then shut again. He wrapped a towel around his waist and ran out into the hallway, still dripping wet.

"Walter? Christ, where have you been? I was worried," he said more angrily than he'd intended. The big man was standing by the door, fully dressed, his boots muddy.

"Sorry, John. I couldn't sleep. I got up and went for a walk. I needed to clear my head. I watched the sunrise. You're right – it's beautiful out here."

"Are you okay?" Doggett asked, walking swiftly towards his lover, and inspecting him closely. He looked weary but more at peace than he had done for a long time.

"I'm fine. I...needed some time alone. Last night raised a lot of issues for me. I needed to think about what happened," Skinner replied, looking into Doggett's eyes sharply, his expression full of meaning. Doggett felt his heart do a flip. He knew he'd been right in his first estimation of the situation.

"Did you come to any conclusions?" He asked softly. Skinner was silent for a moment, and then nodded gravely, his eyes never leaving Doggett's.

"Yes, John, I did," he said simply.

"Anythin' you want to share?" Doggett asked, his stomach full of jitters. However much Skinner had given himself up to him last night, this Skinner standing here was a man back in control of his life again. Whatever conclusions he'd come to, Doggett didn't think that the big man's future plans would include him.

"Yes. I think so," Skinner said slowly. "But...not here. Why don't you get dressed and we'll go out walking? I'll call for breakfast while you're getting ready."

Doggett nodded, his heart somewhere in the region of his feet. He knew, logically, that whatever conclusions Skinner had come to didn't have to mean the end of their relationship, but Skinner's tone had been so serious, and his expression so grave, that the signs weren't good. Doggett squared his shoulders and pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweater.

"What was it you always said?" He berated himself as he dressed. "Never fall in love with straight men or men in the closet. Serves you right for breaking your own cardinal rule, John Doggett. You deserve everything you get."

He ran a comb through his hair and then returned to the living room where Skinner had laid out breakfast. Doggett ate, but he might as well have been chewing on a lump of wood. He wanted to get this over with, whatever Skinner might have decided – he needed to hear it and get through it.

After they'd eaten, they walked out into the hills. Doggett followed Skinner – the big man seemed to finally know where he was going after all. The silence between them remained though. Skinner didn't say a word, and the further they walked the more Doggett became convinced that the other man was delaying their chat because he had bad news to deliver. Doggett's natural impatience came to the fore and he was almost on the verge of opening his mouth and demanding to know what the hell was going on – but he stopped himself. Skinner didn't need to be harangued right now. He had said he wanted to share so presumably he would – in his own time.

"The view from up there is amazing," Skinner said, pointing to a steep hill. Doggett eyed it cautiously.

"You climbed up here in the dark last night?" he asked.

"Yes." Skinner nodded. "I watched the sunrise from the summit...and suddenly everything clicked into place."

"Let's go then." Doggett nodded gruffly.

Overhead, storm clouds were gathering ominously, and the sky was getting darker, not lighter as the morning wore on. Skinner set off towards the hill, and Doggett trailed along behind. They passed one of the small walkers' huts at the bottom and the big man pointed to it.

"I nearly ran into that in the dark. Scared the shit out of me."

Doggett grunted in reply. Usually he loved walking out here, but the dark clouds overhead just added to his feeling of impending gloom. The mountain air was fresh and the wind was sharp. Skinner's long legs ate up the ground and Doggett was grateful momentarily for a companion who liked walking as much as he did, remembering Tony's heavy sighs whenever he had suggested going for a hike. That only served to remind him of what he was sure he was imminently about to face – that Skinner was about to end their relationship. They reached the top, and stood there, panting, the wind whipping around their faces.

"Beautiful," Skinner called over the sound of the wind, gazing out at the surrounding countryside. Doggett had to admit that it was – they could see for miles, and the colours of the darkening sky against the green grass below were particularly vivid.

"Walter," he said, unable to stay silent any more. "Please – I need to know what's going on...and to apologise." Skinner turned his head to look at him, his eyes dark behind the wirerims. "Last night...I went too far. I'm sorry if I freaked you out. I guess I was treating you like you're Tony, and I forgot how little experience you have with this kind of thing. I'm sorry," he said again, but the wind whipped the words out of his mouth.

"What?" He could see Skinner's mouth make the word, but he couldn't hear it. The wind had now reached a wild crescendo and big spots of rain were sliding down the front of Skinner's wirerims.

"Shit – it's going to pour. We'd better run!" Doggett cried above the sound of the rain. He wasn't sure Skinner had heard him, but his action spoke for itself as he started to run back towards the hut at the bottom of the hill. The rain started to fall in earnest before they were even half way down. Huge, fat droplets fell on his head, and before long he was soaked to the skin. He burst through the door of the hut and then turned to find Skinner hard on his heels. He slammed the door behind the big man and then peered at him in the gloomy interior.

"Christ – you're soakin'!" He exclaimed.

"So are you," Skinner pointed out. He was looking at Doggett and grinning strangely, his teeth gleaming very white in the dingy hut.

"What?" Doggett asked, running a hand across his forehead and sweeping off a fistful of water that was drizzling out of his soaked hair.

"You. You look good wet," Skinner said, and then, without warning, he grabbed Doggett's wet jacket, pulled the other man close, and kissed him hard. Doggett's initial surprise gave way to a warm feeling of the most intense relief, and he surrendered to the kiss and returned it in full measure.

"That answers one question at least," he murmured when Skinner finally released him.

"I like your hair spiky this way," Skinner grinned, running his hand through Doggett's wet locks. He kissed Doggett again, his hands fumbling at the agent's wet clothing. "Need to get you out of these," Skinner growled, his voice husky with need. Doggett almost lost his balance as Skinner pushed him back towards the wall, his hands shoving Doggett's pants and briefs down to his knees.

"You want to try it against the wall?" Doggett allowed Skinner to hold him against the wall. Skinner felt large and damp, fully clothed against Doggett's half-naked body, his eyes glowing with need.

"I want to be in you...damn...we don't have anything to use," Skinner said, his breath warm on Doggett's wet skin, his hands cupping Doggett's exposed buttocks.

"Fuck it...I want you in me too," Doggett replied. "Use spit – it won't be the first time I've tried that. Forget the rubber. I'm clean and I'm sure as hell you are too. Think you can do it here – at this angle?"

"Think you can?" Skinner challenged.

Doggett grinned widely, all his earlier fears melting away at Skinner's uncharacteristic rashness.

"If you can, I can," he replied, grabbing hold of Skinner's shoulders and hoisting himself onto the other man's hips, his back resting against the wall. Skinner balanced him there, and then opened his own pants, and Doggett felt his hard cock, warm and dry, bumping against his buttocks. Skinner spat on his fingers and drove them into his lover's anus and Doggett wriggled, wanting – needing - Skinner inside him.

"Just get on with it Corporal," he hissed.

"Wait for it, Sergeant," Skinner replied, an amused light in his eyes. He hoisted Doggett's legs further around his own hips, and then parted the other man's buttocks with his hands. A few seconds later Doggett felt Skinner's cock nudge his entrance. It took them a few seconds of manoeuvring to get themselves aligned, then Skinner thrust up and Doggett took him deep into his ass in one go. Doggett held on for dear life as Skinner pounded him against the wall. It felt good – raw and painful but so good too. Skinner's clothing was wet

against his body, and they were both cold but the impromptu sex session was fast and frenzied. Doggett's own cock was nestled between them, being stimulated by the rough dampness of Skinner's clothing with every forward thrust. Neither of them could have maintained that position for long and soon Skinner was coming and Doggett found himself climaxing at almost the same time. They stood there recovering, Doggett's legs slung around Skinner's hips, his back pressed against the wall, the big man's cock softening inside his ass, both of them panting.

"Ouch," Doggett commented, hanging on to Skinner's broad shoulders.

"Shouldn't have done it without lube," Skinner grunted, looking at Doggett anxiously.

"It's not that. My leg's gone to sleep," Doggett replied with a grin. Skinner grinned back.

"My back hurts," he commented.

"Energetic sex in unusual positions during thunderstorms is probably an activity best saved for the young," Doggett observed.

"Yeah. That was wet. And sore." Skinner manoeuvred Doggett off his cock and helped him stand back on the floor again.

"Yeah. And...sticky." Doggett commented, feeling Skinner's come trickling out of his ass and his own come sliding down his jacket, mingling with the rainwater in a soggy mess. He glanced up at Skinner and they both stared at each other for a moment before bursting out laughing.

"Oh fuck that was good," Doggett moaned, resting his head on Skinner's shoulder and wrapping his arms around the big man's large body.

"It was so fucking good!" Skinner gasped, his chest vibrating as he laughed. "You're cold though," he commented, his hands coming to rest, as they always did, on Doggett's naked ass.

"You too," Doggett replied.

"There's a fireplace over there," Skinner said, drawing away and going over to the chimney. "Christ knows why but there is."

"It's a walkers' hut in case anyone gets lost out here - or stuck in a thunderstorm," Doggett informed him pulling up his clothing. "Silvermist keeps them stocked." He opened a cupboard and found basic survival supplies – a blanket, and food rations, some kindling for the fireplace, and matches. They threw some kindling into the fireplace and lit it, and the hut soon began to warm up. Then they stripped off their wet clothing and huddled under a blanket together.

"Are you ready to talk yet?" Doggett asked. "When you brought me out here I figured you

were really pissed off about last night and had decided to finish it between us. Maybe go to Mulder and...I dunno what, or maybe just resign yourself to living without him, maybe try to find yourself a girlfriend and slot back into the mainstream again – I don't know. I'm kind of assuming that isn't what was goin' on in your head?" He squinted at Skinner in the dark hut. It was lit only by the glow of the brazier and he could just make out the other man's white teeth and the shape of his face.

"No, it isn't," Skinner said softly. "I had no idea you were thinking that, John, or I'd have said something before. I was just enjoying the walk, enjoying knowing you were beside me and we were comfortable enough with each other not to talk. You always seem to have everything figured out and you're so self-assured - I didn't guess that was what you were thinking."

"Well, I'm only human," Doggett grimaced. "And last night was pretty intense. I didn't know if you were angry with me for showing you how much you enjoyed it...because it seemed to me that you did enjoy it, Walter." He wrapped the blanket more tightly around them both, slid his hand gently over Walter's body and rested it on his lover's thigh.

"Yes I did – but you're right, it did freak me out a little. When I woke up, I was stuck in the middle of those questions that, as you made no bones about pointing out, I'd been doing my best to avoid."

Doggett winced. "Yeah. I'm sorry, Walter. I know I pushed you but I could see you sinking with this one and not coming back up again."

"I was headed that way," Skinner admitted. "Last night, when I was out walking, I'll admit I was scared by how good what we did yesterday evening felt. Today...just now, I think I needed to remind myself that I can still take charge again when I need to."

Doggett grinned. "Walter, that really ain't an issue," he said. "Anyone who's seen you in the office can testify to that!"

"Maybe it's not an issue for you but you're so much more sure of yourself with all this than I am. You've had a lot longer to get used to it," Skinner murmured. "The power games I mean, not the sex, which we've been doing pretty constantly for the past few months anyway! But I never knew the power games, the giving up control, letting you take charge of me, even letting you hurt me a bit – I didn't know that could turn me on so much. It blew me away. At first I thought it was just one more thing to worry about, but then, as the sun came up this morning, everything kind of slotted into place." He glanced at Doggett with a wry smile, then leaned closer and kissed him. "Last night was almost like a metaphor for my life generally I suppose," he continued. "I thought – why am I questioning this relationship or my sexuality when I'm having such a good time, and when it feels so right? When you ordered me around, pinched me, fucked me like that with me on all fours, tied me up – I fought you each time but when I gave in to it – it blew me away how fantastic it made me feel. I figured this whole relationship is the same. When I fight it I'm unhappy, but when I give in and go with it – I have the time of my life. So why the hell am I fighting it?"

"Good question, Walter – I'm glad you found the answer," Doggett said, stroking Skinner's thigh with his thumb. "But that's just one part of what was botherin' you. We never talked again about what I said about Mulder but I know you've been thinking about it. Did you come to any conclusions about that?" He scanned Skinner's face anxiously for an answer to that question – the question that had been worrying him most these past few weeks.

"Yes, I did," Skinner said slowly. "Mulder..." He paused, his jaw clenching, then bowed his head for a second before looking up again and continuing. "You were right in a way, John, but not completely. Yes, I did love Mulder – still do, as you said, but maybe not in the way you think. I fell in love with his energy, his passion, and his commitment to his work. I used to feel that way once, before 'Nam. I was passionate about joining up; like I told you, I wasn't drafted – I enlisted. I did that because I believed in serving my country but somewhere along the way I lost all my beliefs out there in the jungle, along with my dead comrades. After 'Nam everything was about duty and responsibility – my passion for a cause had gone. Don't get me wrong – I do feel passionate about justice and about my work, but when Mulder came breezing into my life he reminded me what it's like to have a cause - something to believe in. I admired his brain – he's clever and intuitive. You've seen him in action; you know those mental leaps he takes. I fell in love with the agent – the agent I wished I could be, the agent I might have been if I hadn't gone to Vietnam."

"I didn't know you felt like that," Doggett commented, never ceasing the gentle stroking of his thumb on Skinner's thigh.

"I'm not sure I knew it either," Skinner admitted with a wry smile. "Not until you slapped me around the face with my feelings for Mulder and forced me to see what had been going on right in front of me. I'm not denying there was a sexual attraction between me and Mulder but...I was never really Mulder's friend outside of work – we never ate together, saw each other socially, or even talked much as friends, not like you and I did even before we became lovers."

Doggett felt a wave of total relief wash over him – he hadn't realised just how much this issue had been bothering him. He had been living in Mulder's shadow in so many different ways that he'd become accustomed to it but that didn't mean he liked it. He couldn't stop himself leaning forward and claiming a deep kiss from his lover's willing lips. When he drew back, he found himself laughing from the sheer relaxation of tension.

"What?" Skinner gazed at him. "Something I said?" He asked.

"Nope, just me thinking what an idiot I've been. When I woke up this morning and you were gone I thought I'd pushed you too far last night and you'd taken off. Boy, was I worried. I should spank you for that, Corporal." He felt Skinner's cock rise up slightly and nudge his hand as he said that. "Corporal?" he questioned.

Skinner made a face halfway between a smile and a grimace, his white teeth gleaming in the dimly lit hut. "Sergeant, you can spank me any time you like," he said, bowing his head slightly with embarrassment.

Doggett grinned broadly. "I will then," he said. "When we get back to the cabin. I promised you an erotic spanking once before, and an hour or two playin' with this ass of yours could never be called time wasted."

Doggett rolled Skinner down on the wooden floor beneath him, and held his lover there while he kissed him again, their bodies warm where they were pressed naked together. Doggett felt horny just from being addressed as 'Sergeant' in Skinner's deep baritone. He liked the nickname and the power play inherent in their different ranks, and he loved that Skinner liked it too.

They dozed for a while until the rain finally stopped beating on the roof of the hut, and then they got up, got dressed, and stowed the supplies back in the cupboard. It was wet underfoot outside and the storm clouds still glowered overhead, but they no longer seemed to be harbingers of doom and Doggett felt light-headed with relief and happiness as they walked back to the cabin together.

Once inside they stripped off their damp clothes, got into robes and ordered some food. After they'd eaten they retired to the Jacuzzi. Doggett pulled Skinner between his legs. His lover came easily, and rested his naked scalp on Doggett's chest. Skinner was tired after his nocturnal ramblings and he slept for half an hour while Doggett just held him, enjoying the feel of the warm water and the weight of his lover's body pressed against him. Skinner's skin felt good under his fingers and Doggett was unable to resist stealing several little kisses from Skinner's scalp. When his lover woke they were both relaxed and Doggett thought it was time to remind Skinner of his promise back in the hut.

"Okay, Corporal," he said, pushing his lover away and rising from the tub. "It's time to deliver that spanking."

Skinner got up, his cock already starting to show some interest in the idea even as his brain kicked in with doubts.

"Sergeant, I'm not so sure about this now," he began. Doggett held out a hand and dragged him from the Jacuzzi.

"Corporal, who's in charge?" He asked patiently.

"You, sir," Skinner said, slipping immediately into role.

"That's right. So get your ass into the bedroom." Doggett put an arm around Skinner's shoulder and escorted his hesitant lover into the other room. He knew he could make this good for Skinner, and, judging by the other man's reactions the previous night, he was fairly sure that Skinner was going to enjoy this once he overcame his usual initial struggle with his own submission.

Doggett sat himself down on the bed, retrieved lube and condoms from the nightstand, and

arranged some pillows on his lap.

"Over my knee, Corporal," he ordered. Skinner raised an eyebrow, clearly baulking at the idea of assuming such a position. "Now," Doggett commanded, reaching out to grab Skinner's wrist and pull him close. The other man looked as if he was finding the whole thing absurd, to say nothing of embarrassing but he made no demur as Doggett pulled him down onto the pillows. Doggett paused once Skinner was in place, and contemplated the feast in front of him. He had always found Skinner's ass to be an object worthy of worship – it was very round, the two buttocks curving deliciously where they met the thigh, and the skin was stretched taut over the muscle beneath. Doggett spent several long minutes just caressing the beautiful bottom proffered so sumptuously to him. Skinner was now utterly relaxed, so Doggett began to tap the other man's butt gently. He went slowly, soothing and tapping and soothing again, and gradually the flesh beneath his fingertips began to heat up and Skinner began to move rhythmically in time to the slaps. Doggett increased both the tempo and the strength of the slaps now, so that his hand delivered a real sting, and Skinner began to moan as he wriggled under Doggett's hand. Sometimes he tried to move his buttocks out of the way but Doggett held him firmly and every aimed slap hit its target. Skinner's bottom was starting to glow a deep rosy pink colour in hue, and Doggett felt his own cock harden in response. One thing he had always loved when he was with Tony was burying himself up to the hilt in a warm, glowing backside.

"How do you feel, Corporal?" He asked, delivering a stinging slap and then smoothing away the skin afterwards for several seconds before delivering another stinging slap to the opposite butt cheek.

"Good, Sergeant," Skinner replied, his voice muffled by the pillows. His body writhed and arched under Doggett's insistent caresses, and Doggett could see how hard his cock had become every time he rose up to meet his hand.

"You look good, Corporal," he murmured. "Your ass looks good this colour. I think I'll have to spank it more often."

Skinner didn't make a coherent reply but somehow Doggett didn't think he was objecting. He stepped up the spanking, wondering how much Skinner could take and the man on his lap began to grunt with each slap that hit home. Doggett knew he was taking Skinner closer to that line that separated pain from pleasure so he slowed down again. There would be plenty of time to explore Skinner's limits in the weeks and months ahead. For now, he just wanted to show his lover the many ways in which they could have a good time together. He was so turned on by the sight of Skinner's long limbs kicking frantically, the feel of his warm butt, and the way he was offering himself up so sweetly in his submission that he knew he had to bring the spanking to an end. He slowed down until all he was doing was stroking, and then he reached for the lube he had placed on the nightstand.

"This will be cold, Corporal," he warned, spreading the lube liberally on his fingers. Skinner nodded and clutched the bed sheets in his fingers. Doggett parted the rosily glowing buttocks and slipped his finger inside. He loved the juxtaposition of the cool lube on his finger and the warmth emanating from Skinner's bottom. He wiggled his finger around and

then slid it in and out in a rhythmic movement. He went slowly, finger fucking Skinner for several long minutes with two and then three fingers, until he was so aroused by the sight of that warm, red bottom rising up and down to meet his fingers that he couldn't restrain himself any more. He pushed Skinner off his lap onto the bed, still with a pillow underneath him, slid a condom into place on his own erect cock, and then took those inviting buttocks in both hands, parted them, and pushed his penis in right up to the hilt in one smooth motion. Skinner gasped and his hands clutched the sheets again. Doggett grinned, and began to thrust hard and fast, unable to go slowly, needing his release. He was lost in the sheer sensory delight of the warm buttocks beneath his hands, the tight muscle enveloping his cock, the scent of his lover's arousal and sweat, the sound of Skinner's moans as he was mounted, and the sight of his lover's broad bare back beneath him. Doggett came vigorously, and then knelt where he was for a moment, blinking sweat out of his eyes. "You still with me, Corporal?" He murmured.

"Yeah..." The voice was hazy.

"Good." Doggett rolled Skinner over and engulfed his cock in his mouth, sucking hard. Skinner cried out and bucked up into him once, twice, and then came. Doggett swallowed every single drop, enjoying the sensation of his lover's come sliding down his throat. When he was done, he took Skinner in his arms and they both lay looking up at the ceiling.

"So...how did you like your first spanking, Corporal?" Doggett grinned, squeezing his lover.

"As if you need to ask, Sergeant," Skinner replied, grinning back. "I wish I knew why it turns me on so much letting you order me around left, right and centre but being over your knee, knowing you were in charge and I was helpless and at your mercy...it just did it for me."

"Don't question it, Corporal, just enjoy it," Doggett murmured, depositing a fond kiss on his lover's nose. "You know what?" He pondered, gazing over Skinner's shoulder at his rosily glowing backside. "I think we finally have something to toast with that champagne, Corporal." Skinner looked puzzled and raised a questioning eyebrow. "Your red ass!" Doggett announced, grinning. "Hang on, Corporal, I'm going to get us some champagne!"

He ran to the kitchen, returned with a bottle of chilled champagne, opened it, and then ordered Skinner onto his front again. The other man did as he was told, grinning as he figured out what Doggett intended to do. The agent sat astride his lover, and poured a small amount of the fizzy liquid onto Skinner's glowing bottom. The big man arched up, cursing, as the coldness assaulted his warm backside.

"Hold still, I want to enjoy this toast!" Doggett told his lover. He bent his head and licked the cold champagne from Skinner's hot bottom, loving the juxtaposition of the two temperatures, and the feel of liquid on skin under his tongue. Skinner wriggled, a sound suspiciously close to a giggle escaping from his lips and Doggett laughed out loud and poured more champagne onto that glorious butt. "Oh yeah," he murmured as he lapped at Skinner's ass. "This ass is definitely somethin' worth toasting – first with my hand then with the champagne!" Skinner groaned at the appalling pun, and then they both collapsed into a fit of laughter.

They spent the next few days exploring the hills, eating, and making love so many times in so many ways that Doggett lost count. Sometimes they'd talk about the news or some other easy subject, and sometimes they'd talk about Luke, or Sharon, or Mulder. Sometimes they would be completely silent, and Doggett would hold Skinner in his arms and doze with him in front of the open fire. Their time at Silvermist passed all too quickly, but by the end of it Doggett was gratified to see that Skinner's face had lost its haggard, grey cast, and his eyes were brighter and much more alive. It pleased him more than he could say and sometimes he would steal glances at his lover just to witness the change in him, delighted by his new vitality. Although he knew they hadn't figured everything out, and he was sure Skinner hadn't yet fallen in love with him - and maybe never would - he did know that they had come to an understanding and that nothing would ever be the same again as a result. Doggett had given Skinner the love, care and healing that the big man so desperately needed. The agent knew it wouldn't be long before they were both sucked back into battle again, but at least his lover had managed to recharge his batteries, and build himself back up for the next round of fighting. He had figured out some of his problems, and even if he couldn't solve them all, he had come to some kind of acceptance and understanding of them, and laid them as much to rest as he would ever be able to. More than anything else, Doggett knew that whatever happened in the future, they would always have these perfect few days to remember.

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As it turned out, they only had a few weeks of normality upon their return to DC, before they were thrown back into the fray once more. Doggett was working at his desk, making some calls about a case he was working on, when his cellphone rang. He glanced at it, saw the caller ID, realised it was Skinner, and frowned. His lover rarely called him on his cell when they were both at work - they usually saved their cellphones for private conversations and they were both too professional to have many of those at work. Doggett swiftly finished the other call he was on and answered the cell.

"Hi, Walter." He could hear Skinner breathing heavily down the phone. "Walter - you okay?" He got to his feet. "Where are you?"

"I'm fine, John. I'm at Bethesda. They've...they've had an incident. A security breach."

"What?" Doggett grabbed his jacket and shouldered himself into it as he ran for the elevator, his cell phone still nestled against his ear. "Where are you?"

"I'm at the hospital now."

"Why didn't you call me?" Doggett demanded, getting into the elevator.

"I tried - your phone was busy and I was at the DOD in a meeting when I found out so I couldn't just come and tell you. I drove straight here, John. I couldn't wait. I had to find

out...John, they're gone."

"What are? Walter?" Doggett broke into a run as he exited the elevator and headed towards his car.

"My medical records..." Skinner's voice broke up.

"Walter – I'm on my way." Doggett turned off the phone, threw himself into his car, and screeched out of the parking garage.

Skinner was sitting in a room in the hospital, gazing sightlessly at the floor, his collar loosened at the throat, his tie askew. Doggett's heart did a flip – his lover never looked anything other than immaculate at work, and seeing him like this was heartbreaking. Further down the corridor there was an open door, and various Naval Investigative Service personnel were walking in and out of it, talking and making notes. Skinner seemed remote, disconnected from the investigation that centred around him, lost in his own thoughts.

"Walter," Doggett strode into the room, crouched down in front of his lover, and touched the other man's knee. Skinner looked up. His eyes were full of anger and despair. "Tell me exactly what's goin' on," Doggett said.

"I got a phone call a couple of hours ago from the hospital. They called the NIS of course but they let me know because...because I'm the only person affected and because of my position in the Bureau. There's been some kind of security breach – not a break in, but somehow, and nobody knows how, my medical records were stolen yesterday."

"Your medical records...that's all?" Doggett felt as if he'd been kicked in the stomach so he had an idea how bad Skinner must be feeling.

"Yes."

"All the results of those two weeks of tests?" Doggett grimaced. Bad enough that someone had access to that information, but its loss to Skinner was incalculable. He knew that the other man had been secretly hoping that a cure would one day materialise but with the notes missing those two weeks of tests and the ordeal his lover had gone through now seemed like a complete waste of time – and worse, it seemed as if they might help furnish his enemies with new ammunition to use against him.

"Yes. The whole file – and not only that, all the biopsies and blood samples and everything else they were keeping in the freezer," Skinner added.

"Okay. Who's in charge of the investigation?" Doggett got up and went to the door.

"I already spoke to them – they're prepared to let the FBI be involved in the investigation in a minor way as a professional courtesy but beyond that..." Skinner shrugged. "You know

how territorial these NIS guys are," Skinner explained. Doggett nodded, and they both stepped out into the corridor and along to the room that had been broken into.

The NIS allowed Doggett and Skinner to examine the crime scene, and talk to security staff and medical personnel but by the end of the day Doggett had a feeling that this was all going to turn into one big dead end. Nobody had seen anything, there were no fingerprints, nothing had been picked up on camera and the security staff were as puzzled as everyone else. There was absolutely nothing to go on, and he could feel Skinner's tension rising as the bad news kept getting worse. They went back to Skinner's apartment late that evening with a heaviness hanging over them that was almost palpable. Skinner didn't speak a word as he slammed the door to the apartment shut behind him, and then strode over to his liquor cabinet. He poured himself a glass of whisky and downed it in one go, without even sparing Doggett a glance. Doggett didn't blame him and he didn't say anything to stop him. When he'd finished his drink, Skinner growled something about taking a shower and then disappeared up the stairs.

Doggett sat on the couch staring moodily into space for a long time. He knew how much this was hurting Skinner but he didn't know how to help the other man. All his investigative skills seemed to count for nothing – there were no leads so what the hell was he supposed to do next? He felt his own frustration rising in the pit of his stomach. This was just what had happened with Luke. Months of searching had proved completely useless and he'd had to accept failure and defeat in the end – galling and heartbreaking though that had been. He couldn't bear the thought of it happening a second time; there had to be something he could do. An idea struck Doggett. He dismissed it at first, but his reasons for doing so sat uncomfortably with him. Surely he was a big enough man to admit that he was at a loss – but that somebody else might be able to help them out? Wasn't asking for help one of the things he'd been insisting Skinner do since they started their relationship? Was he too arrogant to take his own advice? When Skinner returned to the living room a few minutes later, Doggett handed him his cell phone.

"Walter, I want you to make a call," he said.

Skinner took the phone and raised an eyebrow. "Anybody in particular? Or did you just figure out the phone number of those bastards who stole my medical records?"

"No, but I think I know somebody who might be able to help us track them down. Walter, I want you to call Mulder."

Skinner's eyes clouded over behind the wirerims, and he didn't take the cell phone Doggett was handing him. "I don't want to do that, John," he murmured.

"Why not? Mulder knows these people as much as anyone. He's also been out on his own for months, digging around. He might know something we don't. He's worth trying," Doggett insisted.

"I don't want to drag Mulder into this," Skinner said with a shrug.

"Why not? He's happy enough to drag you into his problems when he needs you. Christ,

Walter, what is it with you and all this damn secrecy? I don't understand why the hell you didn't tell Mulder the moment you found out Krycek was going to blackmail you with the nanocytes in the first place."

"I couldn't!" Skinner snapped. "It would have endangered him – and Scully – and anyone else who knows. Christ, I wouldn't have told you if you hadn't tracked me down to the hospital. This is my problem, John, and I take care of my own problems."

"And sometimes you can't and that's when you ask your friends for help," Doggett snapped back. "We don't mind being endangered – god knows we've called on you for help often enough and you've always been there for us. For me, for Scully, for Mulder – for all of us. How dare you deny us the opportunity to help you in return?"

Skinner's jaw slid sideways at that, his eyes registering surprise. "I've never exactly viewed the situation that way before," he murmured.

"I know, but it's time you did. I don't know whether Mulder will be either willing or able to help – it's a risk, sure, but you won't know unless you ask him."

Doggett handed Skinner the phone again, and this time the big man took it. He looked at Doggett for reassurance, and the other man nodded, encouraging him to continue. Skinner considered it for a moment, and then punched a number into his cell phone.

Doggett watched as Skinner left a message with Scully. Then they both sat and waited. A few minutes later, the cell phone rang. Skinner answered it, then looked at Doggett and nodded – it was clear that he was talking to Mulder. They talked for a few minutes while Skinner outlined the situation and then the call ended.

"What did he say?" Doggett asked.

Skinner sat down heavily on the couch. "He's going to do some digging. He'll be in touch."

"Well that's somethin'." Doggett put an arm around his lover's shoulders and squeezed encouragingly. "Walter, I know that wasn't easy for you but you have to give your friends a chance to show how much they care about you sometimes."

Skinner gave a faded, wry smile, and Doggett crossed his fingers behind his back. He just hoped that Mulder came through for them, hoped that the ex-agent really did care about Skinner, and most of all he hoped that Mulder had access to some information that they did not. Skinner's future depended on it.

They fell asleep on the couch and were woken by a knock on the door a couple of hours later. Skinner opened it and a few seconds later he ushered Mulder into the living room. Mulder looked a lot better than the last time Doggett had seen him. His hair, while still very short, had grown back a little and now stood in spiky points on his head and he had shaved

off the ridiculous moustache. He looked very fit and well and Doggett fought off a pang of jealousy as Mulder gripped Skinner's hand briefly and the two men shared a look that spoke of a long history and shared experiences. There was no doubt that Mulder cared about Skinner's welfare and was concerned about his current predicament. Mulder's hazel eyes took in everything – raking over Skinner's face, observing the other man's pale skin and tense body language.

"D'you have any information for us, Mulder?" Doggett asked, breaking into the mood between the two men.

Mulder nodded. "I have more than that," he said quickly. "I have an address – but we don't have much time. I don't think they'll be there for long."

"Who's they? Who are the people who did this?" Skinner demanded.

Doggett got out his gun and began checking it even as he started striding towards the door.

"I'm not entirely sure," Mulder grimaced, getting to the door first and opening it. "I don't even know whether the information I have is worth anything. It's information obtained from down the barrel of a gun so it could be a trap or a red herring, but it's all I could find."

Doggett glanced at Mulder searchingly – he had never considered Mulder to be the kind of man who could do the really heavy stuff; getting information from someone by pointing a gun at his head didn't seem to be Mulder's style – but Doggett guessed that his months outside the FBI had forced him to adopt new methods.

"Where are we going?" Skinner asked, as they travelled down to the parking garage in the elevator.

"A house." Mulder rummaged in his pocket for a piece of paper and handed it to Skinner. "That's the address – but Skinner." He grabbed Skinner's arm as Skinner charged out of the elevator. "Be very careful," Mulder warned. "These people aren't amateurs and they aren't scared of much. Shouting 'FBI' and waving a badge around is more likely to make them laugh than anything else."

Skinner grunted. He shook off Mulder's arm and jogged towards his car like a very angry rhino intent on tracking down whoever had wounded it. Mulder shot a pleading glance at Doggett. Doggett nodded, understanding the unspoken message. He caught up with Skinner by the car, grabbed the other man's arm, swung him around, and thumped him bodily against the car.

"Mulder's right. We take this slow," Doggett said firmly. Skinner's eyes flashed angrily behind his wire-rims.

"These people are after me, John. They've stolen a piece of my life and I want it back. Not only that but they might be able to lead me to the bastards who did this to me in the first place." Hope flared in Skinner's eyes and Doggett had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. Skinner was pinning too much on this and he wasn't sure the other man would be able to

handle yet another disappointment.

"Walter, I know all that, but if you go blundering in there and get yourself killed then it won't matter whether there's a cure for the nanocytes or not, will it?" He asked. Mulder had reached the car and Doggett was aware of the ex-agent watching their exchange with curious eyes. "Walter – I mean it. Just slow down and start thinking," Doggett insisted, pushing Skinner's shoulders back against the car with a thud to emphasise his point. Skinner hung there for a moment, then all the air seemed to deflate out of him, and he nodded.

"All right, John," he ground out in terse tones.

"Good man." Doggett moved his hand and cradled the back of Skinner's head affectionately. "We'll be with you," he glanced at Mulder for confirmation, unsure whether the other man planned on accompanying them, but Mulder nodded quickly. "We're three trained and experienced FBI agents so we stand a good chance against these people, whoever they are, as long as we keep our heads. Huh, Corporal?" Skinner gave a faded smile and only when Doggett was sure the message had sunk in did he release his lover.

They got in the car and Mulder drove them to the address he had been given. Skinner was silent throughout the journey – Doggett glanced at him occasionally but the big man seemed lost in thought. They pulled up outside the house and looked at it for a few seconds, trying to evaluate the danger. It looked like a fairly ordinary house and it was in complete darkness.

"Front door's not very secure – looks like just the one lock," Mulder said.

"There's probably a back entrance as well," Doggett pointed out. "One of us could cover the back while the other two kick their way in through the front."

"No," Skinner interrupted firmly. "Christ, I'm still an FBI agent and I'll be damned if I just kick down a door without knocking on it first."

"Fair point," Doggett acceded.

Mulder gave a slight smile at Skinner's insistence on playing by the rules, and nodded. They got out of the car, and all three men approached the front door. Skinner knocked, and they waited – but there was no sound from inside the house. Skinner knocked again but there was only silence in response.

"I don't think we have a choice now," Mulder said. "We have to go in, Walter."

"I agree," Skinner nodded.

"I'll go around the back..." Mulder began but Skinner interrupted him.

"No," he said firmly. "Look, we don't have a warrant to enter this house and at this point this stops being a legitimate FBI operation. It's also dangerous. I don't mind taking that risk myself, but I don't want either of you two taking it. Go back to the car and wait. I'll keep in contact with you by cellphone."

"Walter this is crazy," Doggett said forcefully.

"Agent Doggett – this is my mission. I'm in charge here. Do either of you disagree with that?" Skinner growled. Doggett exchanged a glance with Mulder who shrugged and shook his head.

"No, sir," Doggett sighed. "But it's crazy to go in there alone, without backup."

"I'll have backup – like I said, I'll talk to you on the cellphone while I go around the house - but I don't want either of you to risk your lives in what Mulder has already pointed out could be a trap. This is a risk I'd prefer to take alone."

Doggett opened his mouth to protest again but something about the look in his lover's eyes stopped him.

"I'm not arguing this, John," Skinner told him in a low tone. Doggett knew that when Skinner got this forceful there was no moving him. The other man had an obstinate streak a mile long and twice as deep.

"All right. But we're coming in at the first sign of trouble damnit," he growled.

Doggett returned to the car with Mulder, and they sat, watching, as Skinner drew his gun. The big man attached the hands free cord to his cell phone, pressed the other end in his ear, dialled, then put the phone back in his pocket. A few seconds later Doggett's car phone beeped. He put it on hands free so that they could both listen to it, and then watched as Skinner stepped back, and crashed his foot into the doorframe. The lock burst on the first kick, and Skinner glanced back at the car and waved his hand before stepping cautiously into the dark house. Doggett sat as still as a rock in the car, all his muscles tense, listening to Skinner's breathing through the cell phone connection as the other man walked slowly around the house. Mulder felt the tension differently, and fidgeted incessantly until Doggett had to fight off an urge to slap the ex-agent and yell at him to be still.

"I'm in a hallway, going towards the kitchen. Nothing in here. Looks very ordinary. I hope you got the right place, Mulder," Skinner was saying. Doggett felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. He tightened his grip on his gun, one hand on the car door, ready to run in there at the first sign of trouble. Silence, save for Skinner's heavy breathing, and then a thud.

"What was that? Walter?" Doggett cried out.

"It's okay," Skinner replied. "I just had kicked a door open. Nothing in here. Okay...I've done

the downstairs. I'm going up now."

Doggett glanced across at the house, hating the inactivity, wanting desperately to be in there with his lover.

"Just passed the bathroom – nobody in there," Skinner said, his footsteps reverberating on what sounded like bare, wooden boards. Mulder let out a long exhalation of breath. He glanced up at the house speculatively for a moment, and then frowned.

"What?" Doggett asked.

"Something about the sound..."

They both listened to the sound of Skinner walking on the floorboards for a moment and then Mulder suddenly sprang into action.

"Skinner – get yourself out of there, now, there's someone in there with you!" He yelled.

Doggett was already out of the car and running towards the house before Mulder even finished the sentence. He ran up the stairs two at a time, and slid to a halt at the top. The sounds of struggle drew him to one of the rooms, and he burst through the door to find Skinner lying on the floor on his back, an ugly gash across his forehead, fighting with a masked man who was sitting on top of him. The man had a gun and Skinner was desperately trying to keep it aimed away from his own body. Doggett let out a low roar of rage – something exploded inside him at seeing his lover in such danger and he flung himself across the room, picked up the man on top of Skinner, and slung him bodily against the wall. The gun fell to the floor and Doggett kicked it towards Skinner before pursuing the masked man who was running towards the door...and straight into Mulder, who threw him back at Doggett. Doggett grabbed the man's sweater and punched him over and over again, his mind filled with an almost murderous rage.

"Doggett! Doggett! JOHN!" Dimly Doggett heard Mulder's voice over the buzzing in his ears and stopped punching. The man fell to the floor, retching as he clutched his stomach where Doggett had pounded into him with his fist.

"Walter? You okay?" Doggett turned anxiously back to his lover who was sitting on the floor, wiping blood from his forehead.

"I'm fine. I found the samples." Skinner pointed at a desk in front of the window, and Doggett saw a case containing several vials of blood. "The medical notes have to be around here somewhere," Skinner said as Doggett hauled him to his feet.

"We'll find them," Mulder said. "I'll look in the next room. Doggett – make sure this guy doesn't go anywhere." Mulder waved his gun at the masked man panting on the floor.

Doggett nodded grimly. He went over to their attacker, pulled him to his feet, and pushed him against the wall.

"Just stay there," he growled, training his gun on the man. He glanced over at Skinner who was busy opening all the desk drawers, searching for the notes. It all happened so quickly that Doggett didn't have time to think. He saw something flash across the street through the window, and instinct kicked in.

"GET DOWN, WALTER!" He screamed as he abandoned his captive and threw himself over to where Skinner was standing, exposed, in front of the window. He flung himself on his lover and threw him to the floor at the same time as the window exploded and he felt a great tearing pain in his shoulder. He landed on top of Skinner and was momentarily winded and then the pain kicked in in earnest and he screamed as the momentum of his fall sent him rolling onto the wooden floor where he landed on his wounded shoulder. He must have blacked out for a moment because the next thing he knew he was staring up at into a pair of concerned dark eyes, and Skinner was slapping his face.

"John – John, stay with me," Skinner said.

Doggett blinked and grimaced as the pain swept over him again in a dizzying wave.

"S'alright..." he muttered but he could feel the blood trickling down his back and arm. "S'okay," he said again, struggling to get up.

"Don't move," Skinner said, tearing at his shirt. He pulled it open and pressed his hand on the wound that was steadily leaking blood. Doggett blinked sweat out of his eyes and banged his head back on the floor, struggling to stay conscious. He could see Mulder frantically pressing buttons on his cellphone, could see the worry in Skinner's eyes and he wanted to tell the big man that he was okay but he couldn't get his lips to work. Dimly he was aware that he was staring at something under the chair he was lying beside but he couldn't figure out what it was or why it was important.

"We have to get him away from the window," Skinner was shouting to Mulder. "They could fire again."

"I don't think so. I saw two people running out there so I'm betting the sniper is long gone by now. We'll take him downstairs and out the back," Mulder said. "The paramedics will be here soon."

Skinner nodded, and then moved into Doggett's field of vision again.

"I'm going to pick you up. Hold on, John. Stay with us," Skinner said and his voice sounded as if it was coming from a great distance.

Doggett was swung up from the floor into a standing position. He swayed against Skinner's shoulder for a few seconds, and then he felt himself being lifted again. He realised that somehow, and he wasn't even sure how because he wasn't a lightweight, Skinner had managed to lift him into his arms. His vision kept blurring and coming back into focus and he fixed his gaze on his lover as the big man carried him down the stairs and out to the back of the house. Skinner's jaw was clenched and his face was pale with worry. He kept murmuring

something that Doggett couldn't quite hear. They crashed out of the house and Skinner sank to his knees on the grass and gently deposited Doggett on the ground. He loomed over Doggett, protecting him with his body, pressing on the wound once more to stop the bleeding.

"Hold on, John...it's okay...hold on for me," he said. Doggett felt the world come back into focus.

"It's okay, Walter...it isn't life threatening," he managed to choke. "It just hurts so damn much."

Skinner nodded, but the anxiety didn't leave his face. A few seconds later Mulder came into view.

"Paramedics are on their way." Mulder crouched down beside Doggett. "We lost that man though – he ran off when you committed your act of heroism," he said in his usual ironic monotones.

"Did you find the medical notes?" Skinner demanded.

"Not yet." Mulder shook his head. "I'll go back in." He got up and paused for a moment, looking down on Skinner and Doggett, his expression unreadable. Then he seemed to nod to himself, and returned to the house.

"Paramedics won't be long, John," Skinner told him, caressing the side of Doggett's face with blood-stained fingers.

"Mm." Doggett could feel himself starting to shake and knew his body was going into shock. Skinner removed his jacket and placed it over him, then pulled Doggett over and held him close to his own body for warmth. Doggett felt safe, nestled in his lover's big arms...but something was still niggling him...something about the house...something he'd seen under that chair.

"Oh shit! Walter, get him out of there! There's a bomb in there!" Doggett cried, the memory coming flooding back in. Skinner looked down at him with an expression of total shock and then he dislodged Doggett, and ran towards the house. Doggett held his breath and he could have sworn that time stood still as he watched his lover disappear and then waited for them both to return, hoping that he had been wrong and hadn't seen what he thought he'd seen. A couple of minutes later he heard a loud bang. There was an explosion of glass above him and then a plume of flame licked out from the upper storey of the house.

"Shit...oh shit..." Doggett tried to crawl back towards the house. He was half-way there when the two men emerged, coughing loudly. They collapsed onto the grass beside Doggett and looked at the burning house in shocked dismay.

"I guess someone really wanted to hide whatever was in that place," Mulder commented quietly. Skinner nodded, his shoulders hunched. "Good thing I found these before you got

me out of there," Mulder said, drawing a sheaf of papers in a file from under his sweater. Skinner smiled and took the medical notes. "Let's just hope nobody had time to make any copies," Mulder said. The two men shared a grim look and that was the last thing Doggett remembered before unconsciousness claimed him once more.

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He woke to the low hum of voices. He felt tired and his entire body ached, but he knew instinctively that he was going to be fine. He opened his eyes and looked around to find himself in a hospital bed in a private room. Mulder and Skinner were sitting talking to each other in low tones – it had been their voices he had heard. He gazed at them for a moment, and experienced a familiar pang of intense jealousy. He was getting used to that sensation when Mulder was around. The two of them looked so good together, so natural; two people who had known each other for a long time, talking with the ease of long association. Doggett moved his head and Skinner got to his feet immediately and loomed into view. He was wearing a blood-stained sweater and there was a large dressing on his forehead.

"John – you okay?" he asked, his hand finding Doggett's where it was resting on the bed.

Doggett cleared his throat experimentally.

"Yeah," he said blearily. "I feel like I've gone 10 rounds with Mike Tyson but apart from that, yeah."

Skinner smiled, and squeezed on Doggett's hand gently.

"What's the damage?" Doggett asked.

"You're going to be fine. The bullet went straight through. They operated on you a few hours ago and expect you to make a full recovery." The relief in his eyes was palpable and Doggett squeezed his hand in return to reassure him. He knew the last thing Skinner had wanted, going into that house, was for anyone to get hurt and he also knew how much his lover liked to give himself a hard time. He guessed Skinner was beating himself up about this big time.

"Did you find anyone?" Doggett glanced over Skinner's shoulder at Mulder who was watching the tenderness between the two men with a curious expression on his face.

"Did you find the people behind this?"

Mulder stepped forward, shaking his head.

"No. The sniper who got you was long gone by the time we went looking for him, and the man in the house got away as well. I've been back to look at the place but it's badly burned so I don't think we'll find any clues there. Story of my life." He grinned ruefully. "Always nearly find what I'm looking for," he explained as Doggett frowned.

"A day late and a dollar short!"

Doggett returned the rueful smile with one of his own. "Yeah, I read the files," he said. "You kept goin' though. That's somethin' to be proud of. Persistence is a virtue."

"And I wish I could say it's its own reward but..." Mulder shrugged. "Every now and again I'd just like to lay my hands on some goddamn proof!"

The three men exchanged wry smiles and then a silence fell over them. Doggett struggled to sit up and Skinner helped him.

"I could do with some water – could you find me some?" he asked Skinner, wanting to talk to Mulder alone.

"I'll go and ask." Skinner squeezed his hand again and then left.

Doggett gazed at Mulder for a moment and the other man gazed back at him. Doggett found he couldn't hate his rival no matter how hard he tried.

"I just wanted to say thanks for comin' through for him," he said. "I know it means a lot to him."

"One good turn..." Mulder shrugged, making light of it.

"No, it's more than that. He doesn't like asking for help but he's been drownin' for a long time," Doggett said forcefully. "I know he's got to be feeling pleased that you helped him out. He thinks the world of you and Scully."

"And we're pretty attached to him." Mulder grinned. His grin faded, and with it went the ironic veneer. "Seriously..." He shifted uncomfortably, then looked straight at Doggett. "You're good for him, John. Scully's told me he's never looked happier than he has these past few months."

Doggett nodded, accepting the compliment and with it the implicit acknowledgement of their relationship without embarrassment.

"He deserves to be happy after all he's been through. What about you, Mulder?" He asked, curious about his rival. "Are you happy?"

"Me?" Mulder looked surprised to be asked. "I guess so," he shrugged. He bit on his lip as if considering something, scuffing the floor with his shoe, and then looked up again. "I know you've been...concerned," he said, "but me and Walter – that was never going to..." He paused again, then looked straight at Doggett, his hazel eyes sad and resigned. "Let's just say that I wouldn't have made him happy the way you do, John."

Doggett's stomach did a flip. He had no idea how on earth Mulder had guessed about his jealousy but he knew from reading the X files that Mulder had an uncanny knack for figuring out the weirdest things. He somehow wasn't surprised to find out that Mulder knew at least something about Skinner's feelings for the ex-agent, or that Mulder seemed entirely at ease

with the idea, as if it even could have been possible. Doggett had always felt a strange vibe from Mulder, and he guessed that the other man was bisexual, or maybe possessed of his own spooky sexuality where gender really just didn't matter.

"Mulder, you've got Scully. You make her happy," Doggett said softly. Mulder gave him a wry, faded smile.

"John, I don't really make anyone happy," he said sadly. "It comes with the territory, it comes with being me and what I am. I love Scully with all my heart but I can't be what she wants just like I couldn't be what Walter wants, although I was tempted to try a few years back. I'm just not someone who should ever be in a relationship. I've known that all my life. With Scully...it's complicated." He gave a sad smile. "She and I have been together so long as partners, have faced so much together, and there's so much love there. I know she should be with someone else, someone who'd be there for her, not someone like me, always on a quest, always searching for something just out of reach. Walter lucked out with you, John. Scully drew the short straw with me." He shrugged.

"Don't sell yourself short, Mulder," Doggett said, suddenly feeling profoundly sorry for his rival. Mulder wasn't indulging in self-pity – he was just telling it like it was, and Doggett admired the man for that. Suddenly he saw that his jealousy had been misplaced. He had built Mulder up into this bogeyman figure, the man who had been everywhere before him, both in his work and his personal life. Oxford educated, good looking, an amazingly intuitive agent with deductive powers bordering on genius levels – and yet despite all that, Mulder knew the weaknesses at his core, the flaws that meant he could never have the kind of relationship that other people, like Doggett, took for granted, and the aching sadness at his own centre that could never be healed.

"One thing I was wondrin'," Doggett murmured. "Back at the house you knew something was wrong – how?"

"Footsteps," Mulder said with a smile, perhaps relieved to be back on more familiar territory. "There was a double echo – like someone was shadowing Skinner, trying to match their footsteps to his."

"You're some agent," Doggett whistled, deeply impressed.

"So are you. You saved his life and mine back there," Mulder told him. "I'm glad he's in such good hands. Makes me feel less guilty for screwing up his career and then taking off and leaving him to deal with all the crap I left in his life."

"He doesn't see it that way," Doggett commented, although personally he didn't disagree with the assessment.

"Then he's kinder than he should be," Mulder said.

At that moment Skinner returned with a glass of water. "The doctor said you have to sip it," he instructed Doggett. "No gulping or you might be sick."

"Christ, just give it to me. I'm parched," Doggett grumbled. "Damn doctors with their damn orders."

Skinner grinned and held the glass against his lover's lips.

"Uh-uh. Just a sip," Skinner instructed.

Doggett grabbed Skinner's arm and tried to manoeuvre more of the fluid into his mouth but Skinner took it away with a mock-stern frown. Doggett laughed. He knew his whole face was lit up with the sheer exhilaration of being alive to share this moment with the man he loved. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Mulder's lips twist in a brief expression of regret, then the other man smiled, and slipped quietly from the room.

End of Part 3

### Part Four by Xanthe

#### **Author's Notes:**

**Huge thanks to Phoebe for doing the beta for Part 4 at a very difficult time - you're a star :-)**

Doggett endured a couple of days in the hospital and then checked himself out, thoroughly exasperated by the enforced inactivity, and less than appetising food. Skinner didn't seem to have any objections to him checking himself out – he'd spent most of Doggett's stay in the hospital grinning smugly at his lover's frustration with a "now you know how it felt for me a few months back" expression in his eyes. Nice though it was to have someone in his life who cared about him, Doggett had no intention of sitting around in bed being waited on by Skinner, and told him so gruffly as the big man drove him back to his house.

"Uh-huh." Skinner nodded.

"Are you listening to me?" Doggett demanded, non-plussed by his lover's easy acquiescence.

"Sure - and I'm certain you're going to start making sense sometime soon," Skinner replied. Doggett opened his mouth to protest but Skinner pre-empted him. "John, you're wounded – I know what that's like and I know the last thing you want is to be fussed over, but at the same time you're not in any fit state to take care of yourself. You can't wash by yourself, you sure as hell can't drive, and you need your dressing changed regularly. That's what I'm here for. Beyond that..." Skinner shrugged. "You won't even know I'm here."

Doggett grunted. Skinner grinned.

"I always knew that one day I'd meet someone who was a worse patient than me," he said with a certain smugness in his voice. Doggett gave a sour grimace and Skinner pulled up outside the house and turned to him. "John," he said softly. "You've done a damn fine job of taking care of me these past few months. Let me return the favour. Just until you're back on your feet."

"There's nothin' wrong with my feet," Doggett growled.

"What's the matter? Don't like the taste of your own medicine?" Skinner asked with a wry smile. Doggett frowned at him. "Look, John, I'm going to take care of you whether you like it or not – as you so often point out, I'm good at taking care of people."

"That's the whole point. You shouldn't have to be doin' that right now," Doggett sighed. "I don't want you to, Walter. You need a break from that kind of crap."

"I know – and I've had one thanks to you. Now it's time for you to do the same."

Doggett gazed at his lover for a long time, but Skinner's dark eyes were resolute behind the wirerims.

"You always were the most obstinate SOB I ever met," Doggett sighed at last. "More obstinate than me – and that's sayin' something." Skinner smiled, and opened the car door.

"One thing," Doggett called him back. "I need you to tell me one thing, Walter. Just how guilty are you feeling right now?" Skinner sat back down on the car seat with a thud. He took a deep breath and looked out of the window. "Look at me, Corporal," Doggett ordered softly. Skinner turned to look at him and Doggett nodded. "I thought so," he said.

"I'm not taking care of you because I feel guilty," Skinner snapped.

"I know. I know that. Walter, you couldn't know anyone was going to get hurt going into that building. You did everything you could to make sure that if anyone was going to get hurt it was gonna be you. Fate just took the whole thing out of your hands. Now, you've gotta stop beatin' yourself up about it."

"I will – just as soon as you're well," Skinner replied softly.

Doggett gazed at him steadily, and then nodded, thoughtfully. "Okay – but I think I might have to give the process a helping hand," he murmured. Skinner glanced at him, questioningly. "When I've got the use of both of 'em again," Doggett added, glancing down at his chest, where one of his arms was nestled in a sling.

"And what then?" Skinner asked, the slight catch in his voice betraying his apprehension.

"Then I'll have to deny you the use of both of yours I think. Right?" Doggett gazed at his lover insistently. He reached out with his free hand and massaged the back of Skinner's neck. "Right, Corporal?" He asked again.

Skinner glanced down at the steering wheel and then sideways at his lover, a haunted but anticipatory look in his eyes.

"Yes, sir," he said, his voice hardly a tone above a whisper.

"Good – now listen, Walter, you don't need to wait for me to suggest it. Any time you feel I can help you, then just ask." Skinner nodded, a surprised expression in his eyes, as if that hadn't occurred to him. "And of course sometimes I'll insist, like at Silvermist, because it's what you need, whether you recognise it or not," Doggett added. "Okay, Corporal?"

"Yes, Sergeant." Skinner gave a tight smile. "But right now it can wait. You're the one who needs taking care of, so let's go inside."

Skinner, true to his word, was precisely the kind of nurse that Doggett could tolerate. He didn't fuss, or nag, allowed Doggett to dictate the pace of his own convalescence, but at the same time unobtrusively made the agent's life much easier than it would otherwise have been. Doggett suspected that Skinner's bedside manner came from his own many hospital experiences – his lover was clearly being the kind of nurse he'd always wanted someone to be for him.

Skinner returned to work a few days later, leaving Doggett to his own devices during the daytime – a state of affairs that Doggett found utterly intolerable. He was a man of action, and hated being idle. He needed to be working, or working out, or making love, or at least doing something but all this enforced sitting around was driving him insane. He was able to stop using the sling after a few days, and as far as he was concerned he was well enough to go back to work – unfortunately the Bureau doctor disagreed with him. Deeply bored, Doggett took to calling Monica for an update on what was happening in the X Files office every half an hour until she lost her temper and yelled that if he was so damn interested he'd have to come down and check things out for himself. Unable to resist such an invitation, Doggett did just that. It felt good to be sitting in the office, going through the files, reading some of the new cases that had been passed their way – most of which were easily figured out just by reading the existing case report and making a few pertinent phone calls, although Doggett did put two on his 'to be investigated further' pile.

Four hours later, his arm was aching but he felt less twitchy than he had for the past few days. He was reading through a report that he thought might have been a total work of fiction for all the logical sense it made, when the door was flung wide open. Doggett got to his feet, startled, and found himself looking into the dark and none-too-friendly eyes of his boss.

"Assistant Director Skinner. I wasn't expecting to see you," he murmured, shooting a glance at Monica who immediately showed whose side she was on by making an excuse and fleeing the room, leaving Doggett to face down his angry superior alone.

"I wasn't expecting to see you either, Agent Doggett - unless the Bureau doctor changed his mind and said you're well enough to resume your duties," Skinner commented, coming into the room and closing the door firmly behind him.

"No, sir. I just thought I'd stop by and see what was goin' on my absence," Doggett replied.

"Agent Doggett, I'm delighted that you enjoy your work so much but the Bureau has a responsibility to all its personnel and that isn't a responsibility that I, as your supervisor, can allow the FBI to shirk," Skinner told him, his eyes still serious and not a little irate. "You're not well enough to be here, Agent. Go home."

"With all due respect, sir, the doctor says I can come back to the office next week, and it's Wednesday today so that's only a few more days," Doggett pointed out. Skinner smiled at his angle, but was having none of it. He put a hand on Doggett's shoulder, and ushered him towards the door.

"Go home, John," he insisted, quietly but firmly. "Rest up – you have all the time in the world to investigate apparitions and aberrations when you're fully well. In the meantime...give me your badge."

"You're takin' away my badge?" Doggett asked, stunned.

"You can have it back next week," Skinner promised, removing Doggett's badge from his pants and pocketing it. "Just as soon as I get that note from the doctor."

He walked with Doggett along the corridor, into the elevator, and out into the parking garage. "Go home, watch some TV, and get well," Skinner said, as they ended up beside Doggett's car. "But don't come back here until next week or I'll personally kick your ass."

"Are you pulling rank on me, sir?" Doggett asked, giving in gracefully. He actually rather admired Skinner's total command of the situation and resolute will. His lover had never been a pushover, but all the same it was startling to be reminded of that fact in no uncertain terms.

"Only place I can, Agent," Skinner told him with a wry gleam in his eye. He opened the car door and waited for his agent to get in.

"You know, when they told me before I began working with you that AD Skinner was a hard nosed SOB who didn't take any shit from his agents I figured they were exaggerating..." Doggett muttered, getting into the car. "Now I see that everything they said was true – and then some," he growled.

Skinner's lips turned up in the merest hint of a grin. "I'll take that as a compliment, Agent," he said smoothly. "Drive carefully, John," he added softly. "That arm isn't better yet and you know it."

Doggett sighed. "As a matter of fact it's aching like hell," he admitted, wincing as he got into

the car. Doggett could have kicked himself when he saw the guilt flash momentarily into Skinner's eyes. Skinner shut the car door and Doggett gave him a faded smile and drove away.

At least that little exchange had given him an idea for how he could occupy himself for the next couple of days. Doggett glanced in his rear view mirror at the Assistant Director, standing in shirtsleeves and tie, watching him leave the parking garage. He had been more than a little aroused by the power-play that had just taken place between them – Walter Skinner in full AD mode was a force to be reckoned with, and Doggett enjoyed seeing his lover strong and able to give back as good as he got. It made him realise how far Skinner had come since agreeing to give up control to him, but all the same, the other man still needed some help dealing with the emotional fall-out from the shooting; Doggett decided that it was time for Walter Skinner to receive a little guilt-relieving session.

Doggett planned his strategy carefully, down to the last detail. Just thinking about it aroused him so much that he had to jerk off a couple of times. The first thing he did was to tell Skinner he wanted to be alone for the next couple of days but would be in touch at the end of the week. On Friday night he let himself into Skinner's apartment, made his preparations, then sat and waited in the dark in the living room for his lover to return home.

Half an hour later Skinner showed up. He threw his briefcase down on the couch with a sigh, and then stood there for a moment, rotating his neck from side to side to relieve the week's tension. That was when Doggett pounced.

"Take your clothes off, Corporal – real slow," he ordered.

Skinner jumped, startled, and peered at him in the dark apartment. Doggett reached out and turned on the lamp on the table beside him. Skinner was looking his usual fit, edible self; what seemed like acres of white shirt were stretched tautly across his broad chest, accentuating his impossibly wide shoulders, and Doggett felt his cock stir hungrily in his pants. Skinner's eyes were dark behind his wirerims, his body stiff and tense. His eyes flickered around the room, alighted on the leather cuffs Doggett had left purposefully on the coffee table and he swallowed, hard.

"Did you hear me, Corporal?" Doggett said in firm, no-nonsense tones. "It's time for that guilt relieving session I promised you," he added. "I'm feeling well enough for that and I think you need it."

Skinner swallowed, hard, and then nodded, and bowed his head.

"I can't hear you, Corporal," Doggett snapped.

"Sir, yes, sir," Skinner replied swiftly, unconsciously standing at attention. Doggett smiled.

"Then get moving, Corporal – and make it slow."

Doggett picked up one of the leather cuffs and turned it over in his hands, aware that he was drawing Skinner's eyes to his every movement. The big man's tongue darted out anxiously and licked his lips, but his hand went to his collar and he began un-knotting his tie. He tugged it off in a swift movement, and then began unbuttoning his shirt.

"I said, slowly, Corporal," Doggett purred. "I want to enjoy this."

Skinner's hands faltered and he blinked behind the wirerims. Doggett had to work hard to suppress a laugh – hard-assed AD Skinner could face down armed men without batting an eyelid but place him in a sexual arena and expect him to perform and he was as paralysed as a rabbit in the jaws of a fox.

"Lose the glasses, Corporal," Doggett said. "They're just holdin' you back right now."

He opened his legs wide, on purpose, and sat back in his chair, still caressing the leather cuff, his body exuding his enjoyment of this scenario. Skinner removed his wirerims, and placed them carefully on the coffee table, taking care not to touch the cuffs, and then he returned to the task of undressing. Doggett opened his pants and reached inside to where his cock was already pulsing with need. Skinner swallowed hard again, clearly finding this kind of openly sexual scrutiny disturbing – and arousing if the bulge in his pants was anything to go by. The big man ran a hand across his chest, and unbuttoned his shirt slowly, as requested. His face was flushed, and he kept his gaze fixed firmly on the floor.

"Look at me, Corporal. Look into my eyes as you undress. Make it good for me, Corporal," Doggett ordered softly. Skinner flushed even more, but he raised his eyes to meet Doggett's, although the agent guessed that what his lover was seeing was pretty hazy without his glasses – which was probably for the best as he knew Skinner had a streak of shyness that went very deep. He wasn't an exhibitionist, and Doggett loved mining his rich vein of sensuality and hauling it to the surface where it could be put on display for both of them to enjoy. Skinner's blunt fingertips weren't equipped for anything like a sexy striptease, and Doggett didn't demand that of him, but he did want a show – and it was a sign of the potency of their sexual power game that Skinner obeyed him even when his every normal instinct clearly rebelled. Skinner slid one side of his shirt off his shoulder, shrugged himself out of the other side of it, folded it, and placed it with his other clothes on the couch. Then he hesitated and gazed uncertainly at Doggett.

"Come here – let's make the rest of this a little more interesting shall we?" Doggett purred, plucking the cuffs from the coffee table and then opening his legs wide. Skinner walked towards him, and came to rest easily between his widespread legs. "Hands out, Corporal, you know the drill," Doggett ordered. Skinner's hesitation was small, but still noticeable. Doggett wasn't sure that he ever wanted Skinner to obey this particular command without pausing. He liked watching the big man give himself up to his submission too much – it was intoxicating. Skinner gave a reluctant growl, and then gave in and held out his hands. Doggett fastened the cuffs onto his lover's wrists and then clipped them together in front of Skinner's torso. "Nothin' too heavy, Corporal," he said softly, rubbing Skinner's bare arms to reassure him. "You can still move around with your arms tied like this. Now undress the rest

of the way for me," he commanded. "Starting with your belt – undo that and give it to me."

Skinner nodded, and exhaled what sounded like a sigh of relief to find that he hadn't been tied in a more constricting way. Doggett smiled to himself – he knew he'd have to increase the bondage before the evening was through in order to give Skinner the liberation from self and absolution from guilt that he craved, but this was a good place to start. Skinner took a step back and struggled for a moment to undo his belt with his cuffed hands. He finally got the hang of it and, with a two-handed motion, whisked it out of his pants and handed it to Doggett.

"That's very good Corporal. Now the pants." Doggett gestured and Skinner fumbled for a moment with his fly and then lowered his pants and boxers to his ankles. "Undo your shoes and get rid of the socks, then kick off the pants," Doggett instructed and Skinner bent, almost totally naked, giving Doggett a fine view of his smooth backside as he did so. He removed the last remnants of his clothing and then stood, naked and bound in front of his lover. Doggett sighed. "You're a sight for sore eyes, Corporal," he purred. "Turn around for me. Let me look at you."

Skinner's skin was now flushed a bright red, and he rolled his eyes slightly, but, his gaze fixed warily on his own belt in Doggett's hands, he obeyed. Doggett grinned to himself and stretched the warm black leather belt between his fingers. He had no intention of using it to whip his lover but Skinner didn't know that and Doggett didn't think the uncertainty would do the big man any harm. Skinner turned slowly, revealing his naked body from every angle, offered up to his lover for his enjoyment. Doggett sighed with pleasure – the sight of a naked Walter Skinner was a very good one indeed. Skinner looked around sharply when he heard the sigh, misinterpreting it.

"Am I doing something wrong, Sergeant?" He asked anxiously.

"No, Corporal. Oh no – you're doin' just fine!" Doggett exclaimed, feasting on the sight of his lover's half erect cock. "I was just overwhelmed by how goddamn sexy you are, that's all! Now, come here." He gestured for Skinner to come and stand between his legs again. "Kneel," he ordered. Skinner did so, a little awkwardly, with his hands still cuffed in front of him. Doggett reached down and unfastened the cuffs – but only so that he could refasten them behind Skinner's back. "I want your hands out of the way, Corporal. All I want from you is your tongue," he said with a grin.

Skinner knelt obediently between his Sergeant's legs, and didn't fight the bondage as Doggett fastened his hands behind his back and out of the way. Doggett noticed the slight edge of panic in Skinner's dark eyes as the bondage went to a more demanding level, and Skinner tugged at his cuffs, testing them for a couple of seconds, as he came to terms with the new restriction. Doggett allowed him that – Skinner needed it, and probably always would.

"Okay, Corporal – I want you to suck me. You can't use your hands, I just want you to use your open mouth," he ordered softly. He put the belt around Skinner's neck, holding the two loose ends in each of his hands, and pulled Skinner's head towards his crotch. The big

man came easily, his cock lurching in arousal at the implicit bondage in the use of the belt, however mild the action was. He bent his head to Doggett's groin and soon the agent could feel his lover's warm breath on his cock through the fabric of his briefs. Skinner nuzzled his lover's straining cock for a few seconds and then looked up, his eyes confused.

"I can't suck you, sir. I can't move your briefs." He gestured with his head in the direction of his bound hands behind his back.

"Sure you can. My cock's ready to go. You just have to release it – find a way," Doggett grinned, pulling Skinner's head down with the belt again. His lover went without question, and delicately, using his teeth, took a bunch of fabric and slid it sideways. It wasn't easy and it took him a few goes to get it right, but then he succeeded and Doggett's cock popped out eagerly, freed from its prison.

"See, Corporal." Doggett caressed Skinner's naked scalp approvingly. "You're good at this."

Skinner relaxed visibly at the praise. He leaned forward and took Doggett's cock between his lips. The agent thrust into Skinner's warm, welcoming mouth, sighing with pleasure as Skinner slid his tongue down his shaft. He allowed Skinner to caress him orally for several minutes, and then decided to test the limits of the big man's bondage again.

"Okay, Corporal. I want you to just relax and take me. You're tied, hands behind your back – I don't want you to do anything except keep your mouth open and receive me. I'm going to fuck your mouth. Understood?"

Skinner nodded, his eyes flashing with arousal. "Yes, sir," he said quickly, and then he opened his mouth obediently in readiness.

Doggett sat forward in the chair, and caressed his lover's face for a few seconds, relaxing his jaw, and then, using the belt to pull Skinner's head closer, he slid his cock into the big man's mouth. Skinner remained still, and Doggett pushed in further.

"I want you to relax the muscles at the back of your throat," he ordered. Skinner shot him a look of panic, but Doggett soothed him by gently caressing his face for a few seconds. He felt Skinner's jaw begin to relax again and took that as his cue to push in further. Skinner swallowed him down easily, and then, gasping for air, he drew back, choking. Doggett laughed and pulled Skinner close, kissing the other man's mouth firmly.

"That's okay, Corporal. It takes time to learn this trick, but I promised I'd teach you and I will. Want to try again?"

Skinner nodded, and positioned himself between Doggett's knees again. Doggett slid the belt behind his neck once more, pulled him forward, and slipped his cock between his lover's lips again. Skinner accepted the full length in one go this time, co-ordinating his breathing with Doggett's thrusts, and soon he had taken the agent's entire length down his throat.

"Oh shit that's good," Doggett purred. He pulled back to allow Skinner some air and then pushed in again to get his lover accustomed to the sensation. He repeated this several times, totally in control, using the belt to pull Skinner forwards each time. His lover quickly figured out a way to breathe and relax the muscles at the back of his throat so that he could take him and soon Doggett was sliding in right up to the root of his cock, totally enveloped in his lover's warm mouth. After several minutes he thought it was time to draw the lesson to a close as he was dangerously close to coming, so he drew back completely, allowing Skinner to regain his breath.

"Okay, Corporal. I want some more lip action now," Doggett commanded. "I want you to kneel up close."

He quickly removed his own sweater, and then pulled Skinner against his naked chest. He guided the big man to each of his nipples and let him suck there for a moment, then pushed his lover's magnificent bald head down to his lower belly and allowed Skinner to linger there, before pulling Skinner's head up to his shoulder, and guiding his lover to the puckered new scar that marked his flesh there. Skinner drew back, his eyes flashing with guilt and worry, and Doggett smiled reassuringly.

"It's okay, Corporal. It doesn't hurt. I just want you to get acquainted with it," he said softly. Skinner moved his head forward willingly, and touched the tip of his tongue to the newly healing scar. Doggett caressed his lover's head as he got used to the sensation himself – the flesh around the scar was still a little tender but Skinner was infinitely gentle in his caress. "Listen to me, Corporal. I don't want you feeling guilty about this any more. I'm not goin' to let you feel, guilty," he said firmly. "This wasn't your fault – it wasn't anyone's fault but the bastard who pulled the trigger and we're going to catch up with him one day soon."

Skinner drew back, his eyes trusting but still shadowed by guilt. Doggett knew he had to step things up to drive that expression out of Skinner's eyes.

"All right, Corporal. I'm going to hobble you again, like I did the first time I tied you," Doggett said in a soft, loving but very authoritative voice. Skinner's eyes registered panic and he drew back. Doggett put the belt firmly around his lover's neck and held him in place between his knees. "It's okay, Corporal, you just have to trust me. I'm going to tie you in place, so you can't get free...I think you need that," he said firmly. Skinner's eyes calmed a fraction and he never broke his gaze away from Doggett. He was like a drowning man, hanging on Doggett's every word as if they could save him. Doggett held the ends of the belt with one hand, and used his free hand to caress Skinner lovingly, calming and soothing him as if he were a startled horse. "I'm going to tie you so you can't move...tie you down and keep you still," he whispered. "I'm going to make you accept that, Corporal. I'm going to take you through the struggles and make you accept my will. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, Sergeant." Skinner spoke up quickly, his eyes still uncertain but his body language resolute.

"And then, while you're tied and can't move, I'm going to fuck you, Corporal," Doggett told him. Skinner recoiled, although Doggett noted that his cock was hard and interested in his

words. "I'm going to fuck you when you're helpless - when you can't move or participate, when all you can do is accept and enjoy," Doggett continued in low, soothing tones. Skinner's eyes were wide, his cock weeping hungrily at the mental picture Doggett had just created for him, even though his muscles were tense and his body language unhappy. Doggett leaned forward and claimed a deep kiss, and Skinner surrendered to him willingly, giving up his lips and mouth to the caress, unable to move his hands or steady himself in any way, relying on Doggett to hold him up and keep him from falling. Doggett was more than equal to that particular task. He kissed Skinner slowly, taking his time, making love to the other man with his tongue. When they finally pulled apart, Doggett kept Skinner in position with his hand and the belt as the other man swayed in his grasp.

"Okay, Corporal – you ready for this?" Doggett asked. Skinner nodded trustingly. "Good man. Lie on the cushions and towel, face down." He pointed at the little area in front of the radiator that he had prepared earlier. "I know it doesn't have the romance of Silvermist's roaring fire but it's the best I could do," he grinned, as he got up and followed Skinner over to the cushions.

The big man lay face down as ordered, and Doggett spent a long time getting him comfortable. When he was sure that Skinner was in the best position possible, he took the ankle cuffs and strapped them into place. Skinner was quivering now, as he always did when placed in bondage, struggling with the effort of offering himself up to this act, which he both hated and needed in equal measure. Doggett calmed him as he always did, with words, and by running his hands over his lover's skin, caressing him gently.

"All right, Corporal, legs up – I'm going to fasten you into place," he said. Skinner obeyed, bending his legs behind him at the knee, his limbs trembling in earnest. Doggett took only a few seconds to fasten the ankle cuffs to the wrist cuffs, and then Skinner was locked into place. "You comfortable?" Doggett asked, adjusting several of the cushions under Skinner's chest to keep him in a position where breathing would be easy.

"No, Sergeant. I'm trussed up like a calf about to be branded. Why the hell would I be comfortable?" Skinner growled. Doggett laughed, and leaned forward to bestow a sharp slap on Skinner's buttocks, making the other man growl again, even more dangerously this time.

"Don't talk back to your Sergeant," Doggett told him reprovably, secretly thrilled by Skinner's fiery spirit. "You look pretty good like this, Corporal, with that ass of yours exposed and ready. You look pretty hot," Doggett informed him. Skinner grunted, but Doggett noted that his body sank more easily into the cushions. "Okay, Corporal. I'm going to keep you tied for a while so I can play with you. Struggle now if you want to because I don't want you struggling later."

Skinner didn't need telling twice. He rocked around on the cushions, fighting the bonds for several minutes, growling and cursing as he did so. It was an important part of the process of liberating Skinner from the shackles of his everyday existence so Doggett made no move to hurry it. Instead he busied himself by finishing his own undressing, and arranging condoms, lube, and massage oil on the coffee table. Skinner's struggles began to subside,

his breath coming in heaving pants. Doggett poured some massage oil into his hands to warm it, and then placed his hands on his lover's still wriggling body. Skinner jumped.

"It's okay, Corporal, I'm just going to take care of you." Doggett ran his oily hands over Skinner's back, smoothing out the kinks in the muscles that he found and gradually forcing Skinner to stop struggling and start relaxing. "Good, Corporal – that's good," he said encouragingly as Skinner gave himself up to the gently caressing fingers.

Doggett massaged Skinner's naked, bound body for several long minutes, smoothing oil into whatever section of skin he could reach, including the soles of Skinner's feet. His lover arched up against him when he got there and Doggett laughed out loud.

"Are these ticklish, Corporal?" He asked.

"Hell, yes!" Skinner protested. He tried to move away and failed as Doggett caught hold of one foot and began massaging it firmly. Skinner soon relaxed as he realised that Doggett's touch was too firm to be ticklish. Doggett worked for a long time, until Skinner's flesh was glistening and he was quiet and relaxed under his hands. "How d'you feel, Corporal? Are you floating free yet?" Doggett asked gently. Skinner gave a little sigh and moved his head sideways on the cushions.

"Yes, Sergeant," he murmured in a hazy, out-of-it, voice.

"Good. It's time for me to fuck you then," Doggett promised in a throaty, sexual tone. He covered his fingers with lube and slid one into Skinner's ass, finding the other man relaxed. He soon had three fingers inside Skinner, caressing him, and the big man moved his knees as much as he was able to facilitate a deeper reach. "I think you need my cock now, Corporal. Is that right?" Doggett asked.

"Yes, sir," Skinner moaned into the cushions.

"Ask for my cock, Corporal," Doggett insisted.

"Please sir, fuck my ass with your cock," Skinner said obligingly, with no hesitation. Doggett smiled. He loved seeing his lover so blissed out. It wasn't easy getting Skinner to give up his monumental control – it had to be a slow process by necessity, but the rewards were well worth the effort. Skinner was magnificent. He looked like a sleeping lion, sprawled on the cushions in an abjectly sexual position, his ass raised in the air, his legs tied to his arms, utterly unable to prevent the coming penetration even if he had wanted to, which he clearly didn't. Doggett rolled a condom onto his cock, slathered it in lube, and then knelt between Skinner's legs, and took hold of his buttocks.

"You can't stop me taking you, Corporal," he murmured. Skinner made a little whimpering sound in the back of his throat and lifted his ass invitingly. Doggett patted it. "This is all mine. You're tied, unable to stop me from exploring every inch of you," Doggett observed in a sexy tone.

Skinner didn't even move when Doggett caressed his buttocks firmly and then opened them and snubbed his cock in the big man's entrance. Skinner just lay there, loving, trusting, and needing what Doggett could give him.

"You trust me to do this, with you lying here, naked, exposed, unprotected?" Doggett whispered, sliding his cock in slowly. "You trust me to take you like this, from behind? You let me do this to you?"

"Yes, sir! Please!" Skinner panted, trying to push back to increase Doggett's maddeningly slow pace. Doggett grinned and then pushed forward the rest of the way in one smooth thrust, until he was buried to the root of his cock in his lover's warm body.

"Well if you trust me to do this, Corporal, then you have to trust me when I tell you that you have to stop feeling guilty," Doggett insisted. Skinner's body went still beneath his fingers, tensing up. "Stop that, Corporal!" Doggett ordered, pulling back then slamming his cock in again to distract Skinner. "Just remember that you trust me – that's all I want you to think about for the next few minutes."

So saying he grasped hold of Skinner's buttocks and thrust into his lover over and over again. Skinner writhed under him, but he couldn't move away, could do nothing but accept Doggett's smooth, unhurried lovemaking, and soon Skinner abandoned himself to the sensations, emitting small choked sounds of pleasure with each forward thrust. Doggett went about their love making in a slow, leisurely way, taking his time, ramming into Skinner for several long minutes, and then he came, and remained deeply embedded in Skinner's body while he kissed the big man's neck and licked some of the sweat from his broad, golden back. Finally he withdrew, but he didn't release his lover. Instead he flipped Skinner onto his back, adjusted his position until he was comfortable within his bonds, and then lowered his head and deep-throated the other man's cock. Skinner gave a cry of arousal, and tried to thrust up with his hips, but Doggett refused to be hurried. He took his time bringing the bound man to climax and then he swallowed Skinner's come.

When he was done, he lay on his side, his head propped up on his hand, gazing down on his lover.

"It's all about trust, Corporal," he said softly, caressing the side of Skinner's face with his free hand. "You trusted me to take care of you just now and I did. I trusted you to get me out of that building and you did. You have to trust me when I say that what happened in there wasn't your fault. Okay?" Skinner's dark eyes met his and there was, finally, acceptance in them.

"Yes, Sergeant," he said, in a voice that was barely more than a whisper.

"Good." Doggett leaned forward and kissed his naked, bound lover, pressing his own naked body over Skinner's. He loved the feeling of bare skin on bare skin, the scent of arousal, sweat and semen heady in the air around them. He caressed Skinner for a long time, his hands wandering over every inch of his lover's skin, just enjoying being able to play, without interruption. Skinner's body was so bewitching that it was easy to lose himself in the joy of

touching, sucking, licking, kissing and caressing it all over. His lover submitted to him easily, offering himself up, even enjoying the attention of a kind he would never normally allow himself to receive. Finally Doggett stopped and gazed at his lover.

"Do you want me to release you now, or do you want to float for a while longer?" He asked.

Skinner looked at him as if stunned that there could be any doubt about his answer, and then his eyes widened even more in surprise as he realised his reply was not what he had expected it to be. "I don't want to be released just yet," he whispered. "Hold me, please, Sergeant."

Doggett smilingly agreed, resting Skinner's head on his own chest, and holding the big man in his arms.

They lay like that for over an hour before Skinner's position finally became too uncomfortable for him to remain in bondage any longer. Doggett released him and rubbed some of the kinks out of his lover's muscles. Skinner sat there amid the towels and cushions and slowly came back to reality.

"Good?" Doggett asked, lazily rubbing Skinner's wrists with his fingertips to smooth away the marks from the cuffs.

"Yes. Thank you, Sergeant." Skinner leaned forward and kissed Doggett on the lips. "These little bastards are a revelation to me," he commented, picking up one of the leather cuffs. "It never stops surprising me that being out of control can feel so damn good."

"You look mighty hot tied up too," Doggett commented with a sly smile. Skinner smiled back, his skin flushing a deep pink.

"So, I guess this means you're back in charge," he murmured.

Doggett shook his head and rubbed the back of Skinner's neck. "No, Corporal. I'm only in charge when you need me to be," he replied. Skinner glanced at him in surprise. "I mean it," Doggett said, sitting up and speaking seriously. "I'm giving you back the control you gave to me a few months ago, Walter. You've pulled yourself back from the brink of the abyss – it wasn't easy but you did it. You're looking good, and you're dealing with things a hell of a lot better. I always said that all you needed was a break and I hope I gave you that. From now on, you and me – we're equal partners. Any time you need the cuffs, you can ask, or, like I told you before, if I think you need them I'll get them out. You can be sure I'll pull you back if it looks like you're slipping, and I might insist you give up control to me again outside the bedroom when necessary for a weekend, or a week, or a month or however long is necessary, but for now...you can have your life back, Walter." He nuzzled Skinner's shoulder with his mouth. The other man sat there, clearly dazed. "I ain't letting you go, Corporal," Doggett chided, clasping his arms around Skinner's body and holding him tight, sensing Skinner's unspoken unease. "I'm just easing up on the heavy routine that's all. I'm proud of you, buddy. You've come a hell of a long way and you don't need me breathing down your neck the whole time."

"I...it's been okay." Skinner gave a hesitant shrug.

"I'm glad to hear it – but it was always a temporary arrangement." Doggett smiled broadly. Skinner gave a small, but utterly satisfied smile in return, finally acknowledging the progress he'd made.

"Thank you, John," was all he said, but the way he said it made John Doggett's heart soar and his mind sing. He knew he had made the right decision – if he continued their arrangement any longer Skinner would chafe against it and that might ruin the delicate level of trust and affection they had built up between them. All the same, he felt a pang of loss inside. He had enjoyed rescuing Walter Skinner, and taking care of his lover these past few months – it would be hard to let go of that. Not that he intended to lose his dominant attitude in the bedroom – he suspected that both he and Skinner enjoyed that too much. It wasn't always a part of their lovemaking, but it often was, and they both loved it so he saw no reason to change that.

It wasn't easy for either of them to adjust to the alteration in the power balance of their relationship, and there were times when Doggett had to stop himself from reining Skinner back in when he thought the other man was making a mistake, but over the next couple of months they settled into a routine that made both of them happy. They were now more or less living together, although they still kept both homes. Life settled down into what Doggett soon recognised as being as close to normality as they could ever hope to achieve, given the demanding and unusual nature of their jobs. There was an easy companionship between them and as Skinner relaxed into their new arrangement, Doggett discovered a sly, witty side to his lover's personality that he hadn't seen before. Skinner enjoyed teasing the more serious, literal-minded Doggett, who took it all in good part, and found himself enjoying being teased. It felt good to be so comfortable with someone, and to have someone as reliable as Skinner to depend on. This was his fantasy come true – it was the closest to his ideal relationship, of two strong men, warriors, working and fighting and loving side by side, as he could ever hope to come. Not a day went by when he didn't count his blessings that he had found Walter Skinner – a man as right for him as any man could be, as if he'd been designed specifically to be his perfect lover.

It wasn't only that he found Skinner overwhelmingly physically attractive – there were so many things about his lover that made him so right. He loved that Skinner was good at his job, and that he enjoyed his career – Doggett felt a man should have a purpose in life, and a job that helped define him, and which he could throw himself into with passion. He loved that Skinner was a good boss, a man he could talk to both in and out of the office – a superior he could respect and admire, as well as a man he wanted to make love to every hour of every day. He loved that Skinner shared so many of his own interests, from his obsession with news and current affairs to his love of sports, especially football – a love that Doggett shared. He loved how easy it was just being with Skinner, hanging out together, drinking beer, talking - or not saying a word. They had such a comfortable relationship, never finding each other dull, or irritating. He loved making love to Skinner – loved the way

Skinner often offered himself up submissively, or sometimes came at him like a raging bull, tearing his clothes off and reminding Doggett that he also liked being in charge occasionally. There was nothing about their relationship that was wrong...except, sometimes Doggett wondered who was in Skinner's heart, and, when he was tired or down, he watched Skinner make love to him and wondered whether the big man saw Mulder when he screamed out his climax, wondered whether it was still Mulder who he was fantasising about being with, and Mulder who he really loved. For a man used to being honest and straightforward, this was a question he could never find the words to ask – because he feared the answer. He had come too far and loved too steadfastly to want to find out that none of it made any difference, that to Skinner he was a companionable interlude but not the great love of his life that he knew Skinner was to him. So Doggett bided his time in silence, but the nagging question never went away.

As Winter approached Doggett felt a different sense of foreboding – one he had encountered before, which he had fought many times but never successfully. He had thought that this time it would be different, that this time he would succeed with his new love by his side to distract him, but as the leaves disappeared from the trees, leaving them stark and empty, and the first flurries of snow fell, his libido went into hibernation and he knew he had been wrong; this was one anniversary that he would never easily be able to handle. One night, as Skinner made love to him assiduously, trying to get a rise from Doggett's normally eager cock, Doggett pushed him away with muttered apologies, wrapped himself in his robe, and hurried downstairs. He poured himself a glass of water, and paused to cup his hands in the cool fluid running from the faucet. He splashed his face with water and leaned on the sink, trying to banish the memories.

"John." Skinner's voice - soft, low and gentle. A big hand stroked his shoulders and Doggett spent a few seconds struggling with his emotions, wanting to show his lover a composed face, but unable to manage it.

"I'm sorry, Walter. I don't know what..." he trailed off. He did know and he didn't want to lie, but if he spoke then it would bring it all back, and he would have to give into it all over again; he had been through this so many times before and longed not to have to keep doing it. "It isn't you," he said in a strangled tone, his voice sounding strange to his own ears. "It's me. Not you."

"It's all right, John. I know," Skinner said softly. Doggett stiffened. "Come here." Skinner pulled him around, and wrapped his arms around Doggett's shoulders, holding him against his big chest. Doggett went blindly, not trusting himself to speak. Skinner didn't ask him to. Instead he just held him against his chest for a long time, rocking him gently. It felt good to be standing here like this, comforted in his lover's embrace; good enough that he thought it might be possible for the first time to get through this, painful as it was, without falling into the dark pit of grief that usually claimed him.

"How did you...?" Doggett managed when he finally found his voice.

"I read your file remember. Several times," Skinner murmured. "I wasn't sure how you'd want to deal with it when the time came. Whether you preferred to ignore it, or whether

you had some ritual you liked to observe; whether you'd need time to yourself, or whether you'd want me around even more. I thought I'd wait until you talked about it, but I made some preparations just in case."

"Preparations?" Doggett drew back and looked at his lover, but Skinner kept his arms loosely wrapped around the agent's lean frame.

"Plane tickets." Skinner reached into the pocket of his robe and took out a little plastic wallet. "I bought them a few weeks ago and I've been carrying them around in my briefcase waiting for the best time to mention it. When you flipped out up in the bedroom I figured now might be a good time to produce them. They're for New York – I didn't know whether you'd want to visit Luke's grave on the anniversary of his death next weekend, or whether that's too painful for you, so I made sure we could exchange the tickets and go somewhere else if you'd prefer. Las Vegas maybe, if you wanted to be completely distracted."

Doggett gazed at Skinner blindly for a moment. His vision was blurred and he had to rest his face on his lover's shoulder to get control of himself and blink away the tears. He stayed nestled in Skinner's arms for a long time, giving into the grief that washed through him, although he knew his tears weren't only about Luke. Somehow Skinner's thoughtfulness and tender kindness were a catalyst for the tears, and he didn't really understand why. Maybe because he was always so capable of taking care of himself that it surprised and touched him that anyone else could do that job equally well, if not better – that anybody would want to. He had always been the strong one for Tony, and somehow he had gotten into a pattern of never expecting his lovers to be there for him – his own self-reliance kept them at bay and kept him from ever having to trust them with his vulnerabilities. The anniversary of Luke's death blind-sided him every time. Every year he thought it would be different, that this year he'd be able to handle it better, and not fall into a slough of despair and mind-numbing grief, but every year he was wrong, and this year was no different. Having a new lover, and a busy and distracting job was not enough to stop him remembering sitting in that room at the precinct, staring out of the window at the stark, bare winter trees outside, as his boss broke the news to him about Luke's death. His first reaction had been angry denial, and then he'd wanted to get up and do something - anything; to see the body, to talk to Debbie, to be told it wasn't true...and then, finally, reality had sunk in, and his entire body had gone numb, devoid of energy, and he'd just sat there, gazing out of the window at the trees, an agonising pain twisting in his gut like a knife.

Doggett stayed with his head buried in Skinner's shoulder for a long time, soaking a silent patch of salty moisture into Skinner's robe, and then, finally, drew back.

"Uh..." He cleared his throat. He saw his own reflection in Skinner's glasses. It was obvious he'd been crying, his eyes were red-rimmed and shone a more watery, aqua-blue than usual – it was the first time he supposed that he'd really shown his lover any of his own vulnerability, and he braced himself for the inevitable rejection – and then found it didn't matter. Skinner wasn't Tony. He didn't falter, or pull away, unable to handle it. Instead he gave an understanding smile, squeezing Doggett's shoulder gently as he did so.

"New York would be good. I haven't been back there since I moved to DC." Doggett

shrugged and swallowed down hard. "I'd like to see the headstone again. Not that I think he's there in any sense of the word," he shrugged.

"No, it's just a focus," Skinner said quietly. "Somewhere to direct the grief, and all the other feelings. I also thought you might like to revisit some of your old haunts – places where you used to hang out with Luke. The ball park maybe, his school, your old apartment. I don't know. It's up to you. Just let me know what you want to do and I'll do it all with you – or I'll stay at the hotel if you want to do it alone. I won't intrude; it's entirely up to you, Sergeant. Your call."

"Thank you," Doggett said, his voice barely more than a whisper, and the word seemed inadequate to convey the depth and sincerity of what he was feeling. He allowed Skinner to lead him back to the bedroom, to put him gently to bed, and then he allowed his lover to hold him in his arms. Doggett closed his eyes – then opened them again. All he could see were the stark trees, devoid of leaves and life, just like Luke's empty, abused body, laid out bare in the police mortuary, his beloved face as white as the sheet he was wrapped in. Every year the trees reminded him of that stark, terrible day - black trunks against a cold, white sky, reminding him of the anniversary soon to arrive and giving rise to those feelings of grief and guilt and hurt all over again. Luke had been his beloved only son but he hadn't been able to keep him safe, hadn't been able to protect him. It was the worst failure any father could ever know. Your children bury you – you don't bury them. Skinner's hand stroked a loving trail over Doggett's body, and came to rest on his hip. He could feel his lover's breath warming the back of his neck, and purposefully snuggled back further so that his back was pressed firmly against Skinner's chest. Skinner moved his arm and tightened it around Doggett's waist, keeping him close, keeping him anchored. His lips brushed Doggett's shoulder, warm and loving. Doggett closed his eyes again. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe this time it would be different.

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New York was still as he remembered it. Still bustling, and lively. There had a been a time when that noise and activity had thrummed in Doggett's veins, energising him. He had viewed this city as something of a soul-mate. Driven, ambitious, tough, uncompromising, active – he recognised himself in it, and he had loved living here. If it hadn't been for what had happened to Luke he never would have moved away, and certainly not to a place like Washington DC, with its polished facades and tourist-pretty parks and monuments. Washington DC was a place of politics, a difficult, complex city, where people said one thing and meant another. It wasn't raw and honest in its dirt like New York – for a long time he'd felt no affinity with his new home at all, but affection for it had crept up on him unexpectedly. No, Washington DC wasn't in his soul as New York was, but while it could never be a soul-mate, it could be a sanctuary, and in the aftermath of his terrible grief and loss he had come to appreciate its stately beauty, its quiet confidence, gentle pleasures, and historic charm.

He had never thought he would come back, but this was different, because he was different, and because he was coming back with Walter Skinner standing by his side. Doggett shouldered his bag and glanced at his lover, surprised not only that he needed the

reassurance, but also that he didn't mind seeking it from Skinner. His lover smiled at him, and shrugged.

"You lead the way, John. This is your place."

Your place.

"It was once," Doggett murmured. "Not any more."

"You've grown fond of DC huh?" Skinner smiled, making small talk. "That's home now is it?" He headed towards the taxi rank outside JFK. Doggett followed behind, frowning.

No, he thought to himself, his lover's broad back filling his vision as he walked. Anyplace you are is home, Walter. But he didn't say it. He didn't find it easy to say anything so overtly sentimental – it wasn't him, but more than that, he had shied away in recent weeks from his earlier blunt honesty about his emotions. In the early days it had been easy to tell Skinner he loved him, and to expect nothing in return - but now his feelings were exponentially deeper, and he felt any declaration would either force Skinner to admit that he couldn't return those feelings, or else put unfair pressure on him to say that he did. Doggett didn't want a love borne out of a desire to be kind – he wanted the real thing – and he could no longer face the risk of rejection. He had fallen too deeply in love to handle that. He was aware that this issue was making him moody, that having to bite back from saying what he felt was frustrating his natural sense of honesty, but he hoped that Skinner was misreading his brooding silences as yet another symptom of his difficulty in dealing with the anniversary of Luke's death – and that hope made him feel guilty and even more bad tempered. He would never have hidden behind Luke while he was alive, so do to so now that he was dead seemed despicable.

Thoroughly unsettled, Doggett got into the taxi beside Skinner. He gazed at the bustling streets as they drove, feeling that familiar thrum in his veins again. This place had a rhythm all of its own, almost like a heartbeat. No matter what great tragedy had befallen him here, this city was a part of him, and not always a part he liked very much. They reached the hotel Skinner had booked for them and Doggett gave a whistle of surprise.

"This place is expensive, Corporal," he said, managing an awed smile. Skinner smiled back.

"Only the best for you, Sergeant," he replied.

Doggett's smile faded and he settled back into his previous grim mood as they went inside and collected their room key. Being back here for this anniversary was un-nerving him, giving him the jitters. He wanted to be here, but at the same time he wasn't sure that he could handle it – no, that wasn't quite true – the truth was that he didn't want Skinner to see him struggling to handle it. That was at the heart of it. He didn't want his vulnerabilities laid bare, even to this man who he loved more than he loved his own life.

Doggett barely noticed the plush opulence of their room, with its enormous emperor sized bed and en-suite marble bathroom. He stood by the window, staring out sightlessly at

streets he had once policed, that he knew like the back of his hand, and which now seemed alien to him – just like the man standing by his side. This man didn't belong here, in this place. He wasn't part of it. Doggett leaned his forehead on the window, remembering. He could see Luke so clearly now that he was back. Could see him running along these streets which had been his home, could remember buying his son a bagel on the deli close to his apartment block .It had been a kind of ritual – he'd pick up his son from his mother, and they'd buy a bagel and eat it as they walked down the street. He could see himself, tall, slowing down his walk to match that of the small, beloved figure by his side, both of them with cheeks full to bulging, unable to speak around the chewy bagel. Luke would take a skip step to keep up every now and again, his blue eyes shining at the pleasure of being out with his father, his spiky brown hair so like his own. Doggett raised a hand, remembering how it felt to place it on those small shoulders, guiding his son down the street, companionable in their bagel-filled silence.

"Okay, John?" Skinner asked quietly, waiting, doing nothing wrong. Doggett was jolted out of the memory, but he couldn't share his emotions, not even with Skinner. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't shake off the sensation of being detached, a ghost in a city that had once been his home. As much a ghost here as Luke was – neither of them had any right to be here now. Both of them had moved on. Returning had been a mistake.

"I'm fine," he snapped, loathing himself for the fraud he was. Christ, he'd made Walter face up to his weaknesses and deal with his problems, had forced him to be vulnerable in front of someone else, but he wasn't prepared to give the same back. He hated himself, hated this damn place for making him feel this way and hated Skinner for being here to witness it.

"Did you want to go out to eat, or...did you want to visit the grave right away?" Skinner asked softly, ignoring Doggett's snappy tone. "I know that technically tomorrow is the anniversary...but you might not want to wait until then."

Doggett felt all his muscles tense under his clothing. "Tomorrow," he said tersely, from between gritted teeth. "I'll do this properly if I'm going to do it, damnit."

"You don't have to do it at all," Skinner reminded him gently.

"Yes." Doggett turned away from the window. "Yes I do."

The evening passed in glum silence. Doggett rebuffed all his lover's attempts at conversation and descended instead into a morose mood. Skinner rose above it, seeming not even to notice it, his dark eyes always compassionate, calm and gentle. After dinner they went back to the bedroom, although it was still early. Skinner sat on the bed, while Doggett lay on the other side of it, as far away from his lover as possible, gazing sightlessly at the ceiling. Skinner reached for a book, and sat reading it by the light of the lamp. Doggett resented Skinner for being able to read, resented him for bringing him here, and was angry with himself for agreeing to it. He stewed silently in his anger and his raw and confused emotions for a long time...and then it dawned on him that Skinner hadn't once turned a page. He glanced over, and gazed at the big man, who was cast in the soothing glow of the lamp. Skinner's polo shirt was open at the neck. He was looking down on his book as if he was

reading, one of his blunt fingernails scratching aimlessly at the corner of the page. Doggett felt a wave of shame, and remembered Tony. He recalled only that his old lover had let him down, that he hadn't been able to deal with his grief and his moods but, looking back, he wondered whether anyone could have. If he was feeling bad now, several years after the event, how much worse had his behaviour been back then, when he had been in the midst of a storm of grief that he repressed and held down until it threatened to destroy him? Only when it had finally burst out of him in an explosion of agony at Silvermist, had he really come to terms with it and that had been many months after Luke's death. Was he shutting out Walter the way he had shut out Tony? Skinner's finger continued scratching at the page, and Doggett noticed that his free hand was lying on the comforter, just a few inches away from his own head; Skinner had moved into the centre of the bed, closer to Doggett, but not all the way. He'd left the rest up to his lover, as if to say, "I'm here if you need me, but I won't intrude if you don't." Doggett lay still for a little longer, and then slowly, inch by inch, he moved towards that waiting hand, and then, hesitating slightly, rested his head against it. He heard a small, satisfied sound emerge from Skinner's throat, but he didn't look up to see his lover's expression. A second later, he felt those blunt, capable fingertips gently caress his hair, and that was the closest he came to allowing himself to give in and accept the comfort his lover so obviously wanted to give him.

Doggett wasn't sure he slept at all that night. Images of Luke fogged in and out of his mind; blurred, hazy images, reminiscent of those first horrific weeks after they'd found his son's body, when Doggett had limped from one day to the next in a miasma of guilt and pain. The next day his eyes were ringed with dark shadows when he splashed water on his face to clear the mugginess from his head. They left the hotel early, and made the trip to the cemetery. Doggett remembered the last time he had made this journey. Only then it had been raining, and everyone had been dressed in black, with huge, black umbrellas. Now the sun was shining and although it was cold, it was a beautiful day with a bright blue sky. A procession of dark cars swept past as Doggett and Skinner got out of the taxi. Doggett gazed at them and then turned on his heel and walked out to where they had buried Luke. He remembered the journey all too well, couldn't forget any step of it, even though the last time he had walked it he had barely looked up from his muddy shoes the entire way. He could hear Skinner behind him, and vehemently wanted the other man gone, was busy feeling his anger and irritation that Skinner was here, that he was here, when suddenly he came upon the grave and it was as if all the breath had been knocked from his body. It was well kept – he and Debbie paid for its upkeep between them, and he guessed she visited occasionally although she had moved away from New York even sooner than he, unable to bear the memories. There were fresh flowers, and Doggett laid the ones he'd brought alongside them. He crouched down and read the words on the headstone as if they had been placed there by a stranger, and not chosen in love and grief by himself and Debbie.

Luke Martin Doggett.

He couldn't get beyond the name and read it over and over again. Skinner touched his arm, breaking into his thoughts.

"Do you want me to stay, or do you want to be alone?" Skinner asked softly.

"I don't want you here," Doggett growled under his breath, trying to keep his emotions under control. Skinner nodded, his dark eyes understanding behind the wirerims, not taking offence at either the words or the snarling tone. He walked away and Doggett gazed after him. Only when he was sure he was alone did he break down. He knelt in front of the grave, and felt the warm, salty tears stream down his face and onto the grass beneath. Grass. Last time he had been here it had been earth. Doggett gazed at the headstone sightlessly.

Luke Martin Doggett.

He could barely make out the dates that added up to 8 short years of life. He shouldn't have come back. Why had he come back? No, that wasn't the right question...

Why did you take so long to come back?

That was the right question - why had he waited until now to come back? He knew the answer immediately – because of Walter Skinner. Skinner had bought the tickets, Skinner had been by his side, a real support, when before he had been so busy being strong for Debbie while Tony had been next to useless beside him. He had come back now because he finally had someone to share this with, someone who wouldn't back away as Tony had, someone who wouldn't lean on him for support as Debbie rightly had – and what had he done? He'd pushed him away.

Doggett got up and walked, blindly determined, back down the path to where the burly, black-coated figure of his lover was meandering between the gravestones, head bowed, studying the inscriptions intently, with respect. He caught up with Skinner, and put his hand on the other man's arm.

"Sorry," he whispered.

"For what?" Skinner looked surprised. He put his hand on Doggett's back and soothed a gentle pattern on his coat.

"Shuttin' you out. I pushed and pushed at you to open up to me when you were in trouble, and yet the minute I'm strugglin' with something I shut you out. I'm sorry."

"I didn't give in any more gracefully than you – it isn't easy, John," Skinner said, still caressing Doggett's back with his fingertips. They began walking up the incline towards Luke's grave.

"I want you to be here. Luke would've liked you. He never liked Tony much – I think they viewed each other as competition for my attention. You and he would have got on great though. He was a good kid." Doggett paused, his eyes glassy again. "I should have come back here before. It wasn't like I never thought about him because there ain't a day goes by when I don't...I just never came back."

"John, it's like you said – he isn't really here," Skinner said softly.

"Some part of him is. The part we buried," Doggett murmured, coming to a halt in front of the grave. This time he didn't feel annoyed when Skinner put his arm around him and held him tight, and he didn't even try to hide his tears when they started again. Skinner didn't say a word, just stood there, holding him, as Doggett finally cleared the last hurdle in his acceptance of his grief for his murdered son.

A curious sense of peace swept through Doggett at the cemetery. He spent the rest of the day in a haze of serenity, walking with Skinner around New York, showing him his favourite haunts, the places where he used to eat, his old apartment block, the apartment block just around the corner where Debbie and Luke used to live; they walked past Luke's old school, and even visited the ball park where he and his son used to play together. Although on one level it was painful, it was also a good and necessary kind of pain, and with Skinner beside him he knew he could handle it – could handle anything. He had never had anyone he could talk to about Luke before and he found he loved telling anecdotes about his son, each one prompted by a place or a building that they visited. Skinner listened to each story intently, chuckling gently, or shaking his head silently, some part of his body always in contact with Doggett – his hand gently resting on his lover's shoulder, or soothing circles on his back, or resting on his knee.

When they got back to the hotel, late that evening, Skinner drew a bath for them both and they sat together in the warm bubbly water. Doggett gazed at the man he had just shared the most intimate part of his life with; the part that was still raw and hurting, the part that he knew could never properly heal...although time would no doubt wave its magic wand and relieve some of the hurt one day.

"Thank you, Walter," he said sincerely. "For bein' with me today. I don't think I would have come back if it hadn't been for you. I never felt I could face it before – but you know, I'm glad I did."

"Good." Skinner smiled that almost shy smile of his. Doggett was overwhelmed – he drew Skinner close, and held him, kissing his bare scalp idly as he did so.

"I want to make love to you, Corporal," he murmured.

"Any time, Sergeant," Skinner replied easily, his hand stroking Doggett's already hardening cock.

"Slow and deep and long," Doggett whispered into his lover's ear. "Right here - in the bath," he added. Skinner's eyes widened and Doggett gave a little laugh. "Well, it's sure as hell big enough," he said, waving his hand around at the huge, marble tub.

"Anything you say, sir," Skinner acquiesced easily. He hopped out of the tub and brought back lube and condoms, which he rested on the side. Doggett held out a hand to help him back into the bath and then pulled him down into the water and subjected him to a deep, claiming kiss.

"I want you inside me," Doggett said when he released him. "I want to connect tonight,

Corporal. I want to feel that monster of yours deep within me."

"Sounds fine to me, John," Skinner murmured lovingly, nuzzling the side of Doggett's face.

The tub was deep enough that Doggett was able to float on his back, his arms along the side of the bath, keeping his head out of the water, while his body floated free. Skinner knelt between his open legs, and inserted a lubed finger. Doggett sighed and lay back, allowing his body to relax and his lover to prepare him. When Skinner solicitously asked if he was ready, he nodded, and gazed dreamily at his lover as Skinner edged his cock between his parted buttocks, and then slid smoothly into his body. Doggett gasped - it was a beautiful sensation. Skinner's hard, vibrant cock filling him, while the warm bathwater swirled around them both. "Slow and deep, Corporal," he murmured, surrendering to the sensation. Skinner nodded, and slid out and then back in again with exquisite languor. Doggett felt boneless with pleasure. His lover looked so beautiful, his wet chest hair plastered against his body, his eyes guileless without the wirerims to hide behind.

"You're so fantastic," Doggett whispered, as Skinner reached out to take Doggett's hard cock in his hand. Skinner smiled and thrust slowly in and out in time to the massaging of his hand on Doggett's cock.

"I could say the same thing," he said in a low, throaty tone. "You look so hot lying here like this in the water."

Doggett smiled and flicked some bubbles at his lover and Skinner laughed – a sound that Doggett heard rarely but loved beyond words. Then they were both serious again as Skinner slid slowly, in and out of Doggett's warm, relaxed body. They made love lazily, connecting all over again through the act, both of them deeply affected by the many and deep emotions that had preceded it, and which had brought them closer together than they'd ever been. Skinner made sure Doggett came first, his come disappearing into the water, and then he brought himself off, his thrusts coming harder, making some of the water spill over the side of the enormous tub. When he'd finished, he drew out, tied the used condom and lobbed it onto a soaked towel lying on the floor, then he unexpectedly picked Doggett up bodily, put him down gently on the floor, got out of the tub himself, and grabbed one of the huge, fluffy hotel towels. He wrapped them both in it, enveloping Doggett in his arms and kissing his lover as he dried them both. Then he walked the tired agent into the bedroom, pushed him into the bed, and got in beside him.

"Are you okay, John?" He asked softly. "About what happened today? About this anniversary?"

Doggett sighed and turned so that he was facing Skinner. He traced a finger over his lover's lips. "As okay as I'll ever be, I think. Thank you, Walter. You helped me finally lay something to rest today – I don't think I could have done it alone. I needed you today – and I'm not used to needing people. It gives me some insight into how things must have been for you a few months ago when your problems were at their worst. I don't think I was as patient with you then as you've been with me."

"Bullshit," Skinner grinned. "See, that plain talking of yours is rubbing off on me. I needed someone who'd tell it to me straight, John. Today you just needed someone to be there for you. I'm glad it was me – honoured you'd let it be me."

Who else could it possibly be but you, the man I love so much, helping me say a final goodbye to the boy I loved so much? Doggett thought to himself, but he didn't say anything, just contented himself with burying his face in his lover's chest and surrendering himself to the feel of his lover's arms wrapped around his body, knowing that this was the first anniversary of Luke's death that hadn't ended with him drinking himself stupid or crying himself to sleep.

Doggett woke the next day feeling more bright and alive than he had for the previous few weeks. He took a shower and got dressed before Skinner even woke up, and then an idea occurred to him. He broached it with Skinner over breakfast.

"I was wondrin'...would you like to drop in on my old precinct, and visit my old colleagues? It seems a shame while I'm in town not to go and see them. You don't have to come with me, but I'd like to go." Doggett took a sip of his coffee and gazed at his lover.

"I'll come. Why not?" Skinner smiled easily. He glanced down at his newspaper and took a bite out of his toast.

"Tony might be there," Doggett said. "I know he's still in the same job." Skinner's jaw stopped in mid-chew, and then made that familiar sideways motion that betrayed some kind of deep emotion – although Doggett wasn't sure what it meant in this instance.

"You don't have to come if you don't want to," Doggett said quietly.

Skinner swallowed down his toast thoughtfully, and then took a large gulp of orange juice to wash it down. "No," he said finally. "I'd like to come with you."

Nothing had changed. Doggett felt a wave of nostalgia as he walked into the scruffy police station. People were walking in and out, a drunk was shouting loudly in a corridor, someone had recently dripped blood on a patch of the floor and everywhere was hustle and bustle. It was all so different from the neat, smartly dressed world of the FBI. It was a rough, tough place – somewhere he belonged.

Skinner glanced at him. "I can imagine you here," he said perceptively.

Doggett gave a wry grin and shrugged. "Seems just like comin' home," he murmured.

Skinner gave a faded smile in return. "Ever think of returning?" he asked carefully.

Doggett glanced around. Before he'd come here he would have said no – but now that he was here... he wasn't entirely sure. He didn't reply, and caught the slight flash of Skinner's eyes behind the wirerims as he put his own interpretation on that lack of response.

Doggett walked easily into the bullpen, and paused on the threshold, taking in the sights and sounds. There were some new faces – but a lot of old ones as well. He glanced around, unmoving, feeling Skinner's solid reassuring shoulder against his own. Then someone caught sight of him, and a shout went up, and before long he was surrounded by old friends, lost in a melee that saw both he and Skinner dragged into the Captain's office amid a throng of people. "John, you old dog. I knew you'd turn up here again one day," Captain O'Brien was saying, slamming him repeatedly on the back with a big beefy arm. Sam Heggarty was handing him a coffee and Marcia King had stuck a sweet, sugary donut into his free hand. Doggett looked around to make sure his lover was okay, but Skinner was just standing there, grinning, clearly enjoying this evidence of his lover's popularity among his former colleagues.

"Hey, slow down!" Doggett remonstrated, putting his hands up in surrender, one holding the cup of coffee, the other still clutching the donut. "Thanks, Marcia – I can see you haven't forgotten!" He took a large bite out of the donut and winked at the large, motherly black woman who put her head back and laughed.

A clamour of voices went up, demanding to know how he was getting along and what brought him back to New York, but the Captain drowned them all out with his huge, bellowing voice, his Irish-American tones giving him a lilting sound that brought back so many memories for Doggett that for a moment he felt as if he had stepped back in time, and that nothing had changed; he still worked here with these people, Luke had never been murdered, he had never left to join the FBI, had never even heard of the X Files...had never met the tall, handsome, burly, utterly sexy man who was standing a little way off to the side, looking bemused but pleased at the same time.

"So, John Doggett, you still one of those men in black?" O'Brien asked him. "Still running around covering up evidence of UFO's and little green men are you, John?" A guffaw went around the room and for a moment Doggett thought they must have heard about his work on the X Files – and then realised they were just making fun of the movie Men In Black. It wasn't a usual career path for an officer of the NYPD to end up working at the FBI and they were all intrigued.

"That's right, Captain," he winked. "But I'm getting mighty hacked off with all these aliens so I thought I'd come back here and spend some time with you folks who are out chasin' real criminals," he added. The room erupted again in a fit of cheering and whistling.

"Seriously, John – are you here in an official capacity?" O'Brien asked. Doggett glanced down at his jeans and sweater – hardly official FBI garb.

"No, Liam. Just...checking somethin' out," he said, mysteriously. "I should introduce you to

Walter Skinner here." He waved his arm towards his lover. "Mr. Skinner is an Assistant Director at the FBI – he's also my immediate superior so I'd be grateful if you didn't fill him in on any of the uh, more colourful incidents from my time here."

Another guffaw went around the tiny office, but Doggett didn't miss the slightly awed glances his old colleagues directed Skinner's way – his lover's rank preceded him here as it did everywhere. Whatever the politics of his position in the Bureau, out here in the real world he wielded a lot of power and he was a symbol of authority to these people. Doggett smiled – he liked the fact that at least here Skinner got the respect his position entitled him to.

"You're very welcome, sir," Marcia said, offering Skinner a donut and coffee – both of which he wisely accepted, although Doggett knew he hated donuts so it was a clever move on his part in order to be accepted by these people. Doggett flashed a grin at his lover, full of pride at the way Skinner always knew how to handle himself, and how to get along with people. It was a relief not to have to worry about Skinner, or to have to nursemaid him along when he was in an unfamiliar environment – unlike Tony...Doggett took a deep breath as his searching eyes found one familiar face in the crowd: Tony Larsen. They looked at each other for a long time, sharp, detective gazes taking in one thing, while ex-lover gazes were looking for something else entirely. Tony hadn't changed much. His blue eyes were as vivid as ever, although his face was more jowly, a concession to age which had only just started to diminish those boyish good looks that had once attracted Doggett so much. He was a little thinner around the hairline, and a little fatter around the middle – one too many donuts, Doggett guessed, combined with too many hours sitting on his ass writing up reports and not enough out chasing anyone. Tony had always had a lazy streak, combined with a tendency to go wild and run off for days on end as well – it had always been all or nothing with Tony, a perpetual rollercoaster of emotion. Doggett was suddenly extremely glad that he'd gotten off that particular rollercoaster, and was with someone much more sensible and down to earth instead...which reminded him...Doggett glanced at Skinner to find that his lover had already made the connection and was gazing at Tony – who, for his part, was still scrutinising Doggett intently, a dark, moody look brewing in those bright blue eyes. Doggett remembered how that look had always preceded thunderstorms before – Tony had never been good at hiding what he felt, and he obviously still had some strong emotions for his ex-lover.

Doggett was going to say something, but as he moved his hand to begin talking he knocked over the coffee cup he'd left balancing precariously on the Captain's desk and then he was engulfed in a melee as Marcia got splattered with hot coffee and the rest went all over O'Brien's papers and when he looked up again Tony had disappeared – and so had Skinner.

Doggett spent the next few minutes helping to clear up the coffee, while saying hello to old friends and answering questions about his job, and then, gradually, the crowd began to disperse but the Captain wanted to show him off so he was paraded around the station, shown the new computer system, reintroduced to people who, to his shame, he knew he had once addressed by name but who he had now forgotten. So it was a good half an hour before he finally got a chance to escape and go looking for his lover and ex-lover.

He found them in an interrogation room. Tony was sitting sprawled in a chair, his over-active fingers playing with a pad of paper that had been left in there. Skinner was sitting with his overcoat wrapped tightly around his body, his hands in the pockets, his untouched donut and coffee sitting on the table between them. He looked calm, maybe even a little amused, but there was a deadly kind of power in those dark eyes as they flashed behind the wirerims. Doggett paused, fascinated, as he watched the two men face off through the glass window to the interrogation room. He was about to go into the room, but something stopped him. Tony looked like a petulant child who found that someone had been playing with his favourite toy while Skinner looked every inch the adult – and a very dangerous one at that. Doggett was fascinated by the two men – they couldn't have been more different, and yet he had loved them both at some point in his life. While he couldn't deny the love he'd once had for Tony, beside his love for Skinner it seemed a very childish, insubstantial kind of emotion. The two men were talking, and Doggett was able to catch parts of their conversation.

"I think you're dancing around the question, that's all," Tony said in his familiar, lazy drawl.

Skinner raised an eyebrow. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realise this was an interrogation," he replied smoothly.

"It ain't." Tony's eyebrows furrowed across his forehead in an expression of frustration and impending explosion that Doggett remembered all too well. He watched Skinner measure Tony up, could almost see him reconciling this man, with his pale hair and air of nervous energy, being the previous owner of those leather cuffs that always raised such strong emotions for him.

"If you've got a question, why don't you just come straight out and ask it?" Skinner said calmly. Doggett suddenly had the awareness that Walter Skinner was a veteran of far more interrogations than Tony Larsen – and that his current lover had negotiated with men far more dangerous than his disgruntled ex-lover. Skinner's calm strength was in stark contrast to Tony's usual jumpy, fidgety movements and Doggett felt a sudden wave of total, paralysing, self-realisation.

Oh god – what had he done?

He'd taken this man, this strong, powerful, confident, even dangerous man, and asked him to submit? Had ordered him onto his knees? How had he even dared? Skinner was no Tony Larsen – it was only seeing them both in the same room that Doggett was aware of how completely different they were – Skinner was in another league entirely. He was a man, where Tony had only ever been a petulant, attention-seeking boy. And yet this man had offered everything up to Doggett; suddenly the meaning of that gift became all too clear to him and he was filled with a sense of awe that he, of all the men in this world, had been the recipient of it.

"Okay, let's cut the crap. He walks in here and says you're his boss and maybe you are, but you and I both know that you're more than that to him," Tony snapped. Skinner raised an eyebrow. "I saw the way he looked at you – saw the way you smiled at him...so what's the

deal? You're his fuck toy? Or he's yours? What? Why did he come back here? What's he tryin' to do? Rub my nose in it? Or maybe he's missin' me – huh? Is that it?"

Skinner gave a wry grunt and shook his head. Doggett had to catch himself from doing the same – it was absurd. He and Skinner were so much a unit, so clearly together that there was absolutely no chance of Tony Larsen coming between them. Any regrets he might have had about the way his relationship with Tony had ended suddenly disappeared.

"What's the matter – you told me to ask you straight. Don't you have any answers?" Tony demanded angrily.

"Mr. Larsen, you may ask me any question you like – I never gave you any promise of an answer," Skinner replied smoothly. Tony's eyes narrowed.

"I can't see you giving him what I used to. He doesn't like it easy – he likes it hard, challenging, and you're way too old and too damn...in charge for him. He likes to be the one handing out the orders. Christ, don't you have anythin' to say to any of this? What the fuck kind of man are you? Doesn't any of this get a rise from you? Huh?" Tony kicked out at a nearby chair and Doggett recognised all the signs of the explosion he'd predicted.

"If you have any questions of a personal nature about Agent Doggett then I suggest you address them to him," Skinner said calmly. He got up, his expression neutral and completely un-phased, the set of his shoulders utterly implacable.

"I haven't seen the guy in years!" Tony protested. He glanced over Skinner's shoulder and Doggett was sure Tony had caught sight of him, because he immediately raised his voice a little louder, clearly intent on being heard by anyone standing outside the door. "Then he turns up here like this with you in tow, both of you so goddamn polished like you stepped out the pages of GQ and it's like he's flaunting you or somethin', and he makes a grand fucking entrance, and looks at me – just looks at me like he did. I just think I have a right to know what's goin' on, that's all," he whined.

Doggett sighed and pushed the door open. Trust Tony to make a completely inappropriate scene – he was still trying to get Doggett's attention after all these years, in the noisiest, most irritating way possible – only now it was obvious to him how manipulative his ex-lover's behaviour was, and he felt a surge of relief that he was no longer so caught up in Tony's dramas that he didn't see what was going on. Tony had always been a morass of emotional energy – sometimes it had revealed a vulnerability and spirit that Doggett had been attracted to, but more often than not it had simply served to hide a dark, self-absorbed streak that he hadn't fully glimpsed until after Luke's death, when for the first time in his life he'd needed someone to be there for him – and had found that Tony most definitely wasn't going to be that person.

"Hello, Tony," he said quietly, as he walked into the room. Tony flushed, and Doggett remembered how much that subtle pinking of his pale skin had once aroused him – but not any more. Tony Larsen was most definitely history. If it was a choice between him and Walter Skinner there simply wasn't any contest. Skinner might be older and have none of

Tony Larsen's boyish charm but he had something else – something much more real, solid, and reassuring. He didn't seriously think that Tony Larsen wanted him back after all these years – but he knew that both the authoritative spark that had attracted Tony to him and the ghost of their relationship were still there - and Tony didn't know how to handle either of them.

"John...you're looking good," Tony said softly as if Skinner wasn't there, glancing up at Doggett from under his thick eyelashes; those blue eyes of his were still seductive, but somehow that little boy lost expression no longer worked on him.

"Thanks." Doggett inclined his head. "If you guys are finished here, then we should be making a move, Walter."

"Oh, I think we're finished," Skinner said dryly.

"John...I was wondering why you came back." Tony gave a shyly seductive smile, his expression hopeful. Maybe he really did believe that Doggett had come back for him. "I didn't buy all that bullshit about checking up on something. Why are you here, John?"

"It's the anniversary of Luke's death," Doggett said bluntly. "Walter and I went out to visit his grave."

Tony had the grace to look embarrassed. He stuck a finger under his collar and loosened it a little. "I'm sorry. I guess I should have figured that out," he murmured.

"There's no reason why you should." Doggett shrugged. "I'm glad you're doin' okay, Tony. Looks like you've lost that death wish of yours. I used to think you'd never live to see 35 but here you are." He spread his arms wide and gestured at his ex-lover.

"Well, I guess without you around to impress there's no point doing the death or glory stuff any more," Tony replied and Doggett thought that might have been the most honest thing he'd ever heard his old lover say.

"Yeah...I wasn't good for you, Tony," he murmured, shaking his head, remembering the many times Tony had scared the hell out of him by risking his life out of need for Doggett's attention and in the hopes of forcing him into a display of strength and dominance. Doggett sighed. Tony had suckered him in good – but he had gone along with it all so willingly, wanting to be needed, even on some level enjoying his power over the other man. It had been an unhealthy relationship for both of them. What he had with Skinner was so much more real and honest.

"Ready to go, Walter?" He asked and Skinner nodded, his eyes dark, steady and even a little amused by Tony's shenanigans. Doggett smiled. He waved goodbye to Tony, stopped off to make his farewells to Captain O'Brien and his old colleagues in the bullpen, and then, with Walter Skinner by his side, he sauntered out of the station for what he knew would be the last time. Skinner's broad shoulder was so close to his that he could feel the other man's warmth through his jacket. He didn't look at Skinner as they swept out onto the humming

New York street – didn't need to. They were warriors, strong men, walking side by side, leaving the past where it belonged – behind them.

"No," Doggett said, answering the question he had avoided earlier. "I don't think of returnin', Walter. I belong someplace else now. This..." He paused and looked up and down the bustling sidewalk. "This isn't home any more," he said softly. "Hasn't been since Luke died. Let's go back home, Walter. We're through here."

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The trip to New York somehow resolved something for Doggett – something he didn't even know he'd been struggling with – and when he returned to Washington DC it was as if he was seeing the place for the first time. He had never really let go of his life in New York – not really, not in his heart. It had been interrupted, tragically cut short, the decision almost taken against his will. He had never wanted to leave – he had just been unable to stay. Now, having gone back, he felt as if he was making that choice willingly for the first time – and Washington DC held happy memories for him. Washington DC was where he had met Walter Skinner, where he had first made love to Walter Skinner, where they shared a life together. Washington was where his work was, a job he felt passionate about. He might still have his share of problems, but for the first time in a long time he was truly content, and it was only when he realised that that he was also realised he hadn't been before.

Having left the past behind, it therefore came as a total shock to Doggett when it decided to catch up with them – in the most brutal way possible. A month after their return from New York, he received a frantic phone call from Kim first thing on a Wednesday morning.

"Hey, slow down – what is it?" Doggett said, getting to his feet, torn between running for the door and charging up the five flights of stairs to her office and staying to listen to what she had to say.

"It's AD Skinner. I...Agent Doggett, he's gone."

"Gone? What do you mean?" Doggett frowned. He had seen Skinner on Monday night and his lover had been fine. Skinner had called him Tuesday night to say he wasn't feeling so good and wouldn't be coming over, but that was it. How could he be gone?

"He's left a letter on my desk - a letter of resignation. Agent Doggett, please, I don't know what to do," she said, her voice close to tears. "You're his...friend," her slight hesitation before the word 'friend' told Dogget that she knew exactly what the nature of their 'friendship' was. "I thought you might know...after yesterday, I thought maybe..."

"What the hell happened yesterday?" He interrupted her. "No, wait. Hold it right there. I'm comin' up."

He slammed the phone down and ran up to the fifth floor, his heart pounding in his chest. Gone? Why? Where? Skinner had handed in his resignation and taken off? Without talking to him? Doggett felt a sharp pain constrict across his chest. This had come from nowhere!

He and Skinner had been happy – or at least he thought they were. Skinner didn't talk a great deal about what he was feeling unless pushed, and Doggett hadn't done much pushing of late because everything felt so right between them and he didn't want to rock the boat. Had Skinner been unhappy with their relationship? What the hell could have driven him to just up and leave without telling anyone – without telling him? It hurt so much that he had to stop and lean against the wall for a moment to get breath back before he could continue.

When the pain between his ribs had subsided, at least a little, he continued his headlong charge up the stairs, and crashed into Kim's office, breathing heavily. She looked like a frightened rabbit, her pale face in stark contrast to her red hair.

"What happened yesterday?" Doggett demanded, shutting the door firmly behind him and turning the key in the lock to ensure there they wouldn't be interrupted.

"I'm not sure. I don't even know if it's related but I..." Kim shook her head and bit on her lip, her eyes glassy with tears.

"Where's the letter?" Doggett asked, striding over to her desk. She pushed a single sheet of white paper and an envelope towards him. The sheet of paper was addressed to Kim – the envelope was addressed to the Director. Doggett's hand was shaking as he read the words addressed to Kim.

Dear Kim,

Due to circumstances beyond my control, I have been forced into a position where I have to leave the Bureau forthwith. The nature of my predicament leaves me no time to work out the usual notice period. Please hand the enclosed envelope to the Director. It explains the circumstances of my resignation in a way that he will be able to accept.

All that remains is for me to wish you well and thank you for your many years of hard work. You have been an excellent PA and I have appreciated your help.

Yours truly,

Walter Skinner.

Doggett's fingers tightened around the sheet of paper, his knuckles white. What the hell was going on here?

"Kim – what happened yesterday?" He asked more gently, seeing that she was close to crying in earnest.

"He had an appointment...a man I didn't know. I don't think AD Skinner knew him either. It was a late appointment – the man just rang and said he needed to see the Assistant Director. Something to do with some missing medical records."

Doggett took a sharp intake of breath. "Go on," he said curtly.

"It was about 5 – I was just preparing to go home and AD Skinner told me to go ahead...but..." Kim paused. "Something didn't seem right. I didn't like the man I showed into AD Skinner's office, and the Assistant Director didn't seem well – he was sweating and he looked uncomfortable – there was a really bad atmosphere between him and this man."

"Did you know who this guy was?" Doggett demanded.

"No. I'd never seen him before." Kim shook her head.

"You're sure – he couldn't have been in disguise? You'd recognise Alex Krycek if you saw him?" Doggett pressed.

Kim's eyes widened in surprise. "Alex Krycek is dead, Agent Doggett," she pointed out gently, as if concerned about his mental state if he could have forgotten a fact like that.

"I know. All the same – was this man Alex Krycek in disguise?"

"No." Kim shook her head. "He was nothing like him. He was a big, fat man, with light coloured hair. He definitely wasn't Alex Krycek."

"Okay. Go on. What happened next?" Doggett asked impatiently.

"Well, it felt wrong...so I didn't go home. I hung around, tidying my desk."

Doggett glanced at her desk – it was always impeccably neat. He'd often thought that one of the reasons why Kim and Skinner worked so well together was because they were both pathologically tidy people with ordered, well organised minds, who didn't like working in clutter. He felt a wave of gratitude to her. Good old Kim, ever the consummate PA – she cared enough about Skinner to delay going home on a hunch, following her own intuition.

"I could hear the sound of raised voices in the AD's office but I didn't go in. Raised voices aren't all that unusual in there after all." She gave Doggett a little knowing smile that he barely managed to return. "After about ten minutes this guy left. I didn't hear anything in the AD's office...I hung around for awhile but he didn't come out and there was no sound in there...so I knocked on the door and went in."

"What did you find?" Doggett asked softly, his voice catching in his throat.

"AD Skinner was sitting in his chair with his back to me, staring out of the window. I asked him whether he was all right but he didn't answer. All I could see was the top of the back of his head. I was scared." Kim took a deep breath. "I wondered if something had happened to him. Like in the movies, you know...you go over to the chair and the person sitting in it is..." She trailed off and bit her lip again.

"He wasn't dead though," Doggett encouraged her gently.

"No, but he wasn't well – he looked even worse than he had before the meeting, and he had that problem back again, the one that happened a couple of times before that put him in the hospital. His face was lined with dark veins...he looked so ill, but worse than that, he looked so hopeless."

Her voice dropped and her face crumpled. Doggett felt his heart plummet to his feet. So, whoever had broken into Bethesda had found what they were looking for – or maybe it was nothing to do with that. Maybe the palm pilot's original owners had merely decided to pick up where they'd left off when Alex Krycek had been killed.

"He kept saying 'it doesn't work'. I don't know what that meant, but he was repeating it as he looked out of the window. He had a little black box in his hand." She looked at Doggett for confirmation that was important. Doggett ran a clammy hand through his hair making it stand up in points on his head.

"The palm pilot," he said in an undertone. "Oh shit. He takes it with him everywhere – never lets it out of his sight. This guy must have activated the nanocytes and when Skinner used his own palm pilot to reverse it, it didn't work. They've somehow managed to key them in to a different signature. The palm pilot he's got is useless." He said all this out loud, pacing around the office as he did so. Kim watched him, her eyes wide and frightened.

"I don't understand what you're saying, Agent Doggett," she whispered. "Is AD Skinner in trouble?"

"I don't know." Doggett stopped short. "Yes," he added wearily. "Yes, he is. He's in big trouble. We need to find him before he does something..." He paused, his heart thudding inside his chest. Surely Skinner wouldn't...? But he remembered the look on the big man's face when he'd finished their relationship last time over the nanocytes. Those 'bloodsuckers' as Skinner called them, were his lover's weak spot. He so hated being in thrall to them that Doggett could imagine he would do anything to escape...even take that one last, final step.

"What else did he say?" Doggett asked, opening the door to Skinner's office and striding into it, Kim at his heels.

"Nothing much. He must have seen that I was worried because he pulled himself together and told me he was fine. I asked him if he wanted me to call security and arrest the man who had been in his office – that maybe he hadn't left the building yet - but he said no. He sort of laughed, and threw a crumpled piece of paper he'd been holding in his fist into the trash. He said something like, 'he's just the errand boy. He's nothing.'"

"He threw something into the trash? Do you know what it was?" Doggett asked, striding over to the trash and emptying the contents. A whole pile of crumpled paper was strewn over the floor as a result.

"No I didn't. AD Skinner assured me that everything was fine – and the lines on his face had faded. He was looking better. He told me to go home, and I...well I didn't have any reason to argue with him. I didn't like leaving but he insisted so I went. I worried about it all night, and

then when I came in this morning that letter was lying on my desk." She gestured back to the outer office.

Doggett nodded, his mind racing. Wherever Skinner was he probably had at least 12 hour's head-start on them – and he could be anywhere...if he was still alive. Doggett clamped down on that thought, and searched through the trash until he came across what he'd been looking for. It was just a short, three line note, but he could see why it had devastated his lover so much.

"You've come under new management. This is just a demonstration of what we can do. Consider yourself working for us now – we'll let you have your orders very soon."

Doggett crumpled the note in his fist and threw it angrily onto the desk. "Christ, why can't they leave us alone?" he yelled. "He doesn't deserve this...things were going so well for him. Christ!"

"Agent Doggett?" Kim's face was pinched and worried.

"It's okay. Look, Kim, I need you to do me a favour," Doggett said in a low, urgent tone.

"I'm going to Skinner's apartment to see if there's anything there. I want you to call everyone he's supposed to be seeing today and for the next few days and say that he's got sick all of a sudden. Don't reschedule anything. Give me...give me a couple of weeks to sort this out."

"Do you know where AD Skinner is?" Kim asked. "I already phoned his apartment and there was no reply."

"No, there wouldn't be," Doggett sighed. "Kim, one more thing – don't give that letter of resignation to the Director."

Kim bit on her lip again, her blue eyes worried. "Agent Doggett, AD Skinner instructed me to give the Director that letter. I..." She faltered, torn between obeying her boss's commands and wanting to help him if he was in trouble.

"Kim, trust me." Doggett put his hands on her slender shoulders and looked into her confused eyes. "If I can reach him then I can talk to him, maybe persuade him to come back...but I need time. If you give that letter to the Director that'll be the end of Walter's career. Do you want that? I know I don't – not without talking to him first to make sure he knows what he's doin'."

"I..." Kim gazed at him helplessly. "No. I don't want that. He's the best boss I've ever worked for – and he's such a nice man. He's always been very considerate towards me. If he's in any trouble then I want to help him," she said firmly. She walked back into the outer office, picked up the letter of resignation and handed it to Doggett who had followed her back out. "You take it, Agent Doggett. I'll only give it to the Director if you tell me to."

"Good. Can you hold the sharks at bay for two weeks?" He asked her, silently crossing his fingers behind his back that two weeks would be long enough. He might be a trained FBI agent but then so was Skinner – if his lover wanted to hide out of sight then he would know exactly how to go about it.

"Yes," she told him, her blue eyes clear and committed.

"Thank you. You're a godsend, Kim," he told her.

"I..." She gave a shy smile. "I just like him that's all. And you...you've been good for him, Agent Doggett. I haven't seen him like this since before his wife died. It's okay," she added quickly. "I've never told anyone...and he never said anything to me, but I knew. I could tell by the way he said your name and how grumpy he'd be if he had to cancel a lunch date with you."

"Sounds as if you should have been an agent and not a PA," Doggett commented, smiling at her. He didn't care who knew about their relationship – while undoubtedly it wouldn't be approved of in the higher echelons of power, neither of their careers was going anywhere and it wasn't grounds enough to fire either of them. John Doggett didn't hide or skulk around. If people found out then they did, and he dealt with it – and made them do the same.

"Just let me know what's going on," she told him as he strode toward the door. "And if you find him, tell him that I hope he'll come back. This place wouldn't be the same without him. Some of the PA's are scared to death of their bosses – some of the people who work here have secrets far worse than what AD Skinner is hiding," she whispered. "If he goes...I don't know who will be left who isn't..." she searched for the right words and then shrugged. "Wrong," she said at last, although he could tell that wasn't what she had intended to say.

"Don't worry, Kim. I'll find him," he told her with more confidence than he felt. I have to, he thought to himself as he unlocked the door and walked away.

Doggett let himself into Skinner's apartment half an hour later, with a sense of foreboding as to what he'd find. He reasoned with himself that there was no sense in Skinner writing a letter of resignation if he'd intended killing himself but even so, he didn't know what he'd find in the apartment. One thing he knew he wouldn't find was a live Walter Skinner. He'd either be dead or gone. Doggett turned on the lights and crept cautiously around the place, taking care not to disturb anything. There was nothing downstairs so he went upstairs, his gun drawn, his nerves jangling. There was an envelope taped to the mirror in the bathroom. It was addressed, simply, to "John".

Doggett tore it off the mirror and opened it. A sheet of white paper fell out, the same kind as the one addressed to Kim, covered in the same handwriting, unusually shaky, but still recognisably Walter Skinner's, written in black ink, probably using the pen he always used when he was writing anything by hand – the one Sharon had given him years ago.

"Dear John,

I knew you'd come looking for me, which is why I've gone. I can't let you talk me out of this and you would. I have to get away to where I can't hurt anyone and those bastards can't get at me. The thing has a range – we discovered that in those tests and I know that Krycek had to be nearby to activate it. If I clear out then they can't use me against anybody. I'm sorry. Forgive me – but don't come looking for me.

Love,

Walter."

"Like hell I won't," Doggett growled to the empty room. At least that answered his worst fear – Skinner hadn't committed suicide. He hadn't thought his lover would, it just wasn't something that Skinner would contemplate, but you never could tell what a man would do when he was this desperate.

Doggett searched through Skinner's belongings, as thoroughly and methodically as he could considering his agitated mental state. There wasn't much missing. He saw that a bag was gone, and suspected that some of his lover's clothes were in it, but beyond that there was nothing. A swift phone call to the office and a few checks later and he knew that his lover had withdrawn a substantial amount of cash from his bank account – but he hadn't taken credit cards or cheques with him. Doggett grunted, and threw the wallet of cards on the bed. Skinner knew that a credit card would be easily traced – by taking cash he was hoping to hold out on his own for long enough that people would stop looking for him...but then what? He found himself a job? He kept moving on, always looking over his shoulder? Doggett clenched his fists angrily. Christ no! That strong, dignified man deserved more than being reduced to some kind of tramp, roaming from place to place without a home, or someone to love him. He was damned if he would let that happen. The question was – where to start looking?

Doggett raced back to the office. He did the usual things, made all the normal enquiries, checked Skinner's boyhood home, and the homes of his friends, but they all drew a blank as he'd known they would. Skinner wouldn't go anywhere he could put people in danger. He would head precisely for a place where he could go unnoticed and unrecognised – but where?

Doggett spent a week, working day and night, sifting through every single clue he could. Monica helped, her dark eyes following his every move, worried about him as he drove himself into the ground in his search for his lover. Damn but if he could just find Skinner he was sure he could drum some sense into his lover's wrong-headed, noble skull. Doggett slept fitfully in the basement office only when exhaustion overtook him. His dreams were full of Skinner, lost and alone, calling for him – but he could never find him. No matter how hard he ran he could never catch up with his lover, and Skinner disappeared into the dark, his voice fading away as Doggett tried desperately to reach him.

As the end of the second week drew to a close Doggett was still was no further forward. He followed up every lead, drove out to any place where there had been a reported sighting, or

where there was hope that Skinner might be, but drew a blank wherever he went. Kim called him the day before the two weeks were up.

"Agent Doggett, I can't hold people off for much longer. I need to have something concrete to tell them," she said in a sad, resigned voice. Doggett ran a weary hand over his eyes.

"I know. I just need more time," he told her desperately.

"We don't have more time, Agent Doggett."

"Give me 'til tomorrow. I'm goin' back to his place...I'll spend the night there. Maybe somethin' will occur to me. Somewhere we haven't tried," Doggett told her.

"Okay," she replied but he could tell by the tone of her voice that she'd already given up hope. Damn but a man couldn't just disappear like this, Doggett thought to himself, but Skinner had left his car behind, had taken nothing but a change of clothes and a bag. He was a man with survival skills, used to taking care of himself – if he wanted to keep out of sight then he could, able to evade everything except a huge, organised manhunt across every state in the US, and Doggett didn't have either the resources or the authority to order one of those.

Wearily, Doggett let himself into his lover's apartment. He strolled around it for a few minutes, trying to think himself into Skinner's mind, to figure out where his lover would have gone. Maybe nowhere, a little voice told him. All Skinner had to do was to take off aimlessly, travelling by train, stopping wherever he pleased – Doggett would never find him if that was what he'd done, and yet...and yet that wasn't very like Skinner. Doggett knew his lover would have left with a plan, a place he intended to go to, even if he hadn't thought much beyond that. He was too organised to consider doing anything else.

Doggett threw himself wearily onto the bed. It smelled of Skinner, and he could have wept from the memories that this bed held. He knew how obstinate his lover was. Unless he found him, Skinner would never come back – but supposing he never found him? Doggett felt a pain that went bone deep. He had never been in love like this before, and never would again. If he lost Skinner then he lost a huge chunk of whatever gave his life meaning. He was hopelessly, utterly in love, and without Skinner he was half a person. Walter Skinner was his warrior lover, his boyhood dream of a strong, capable man who walked side by side with him into danger, who was a shoulder to lean on when he needed it and who could lean on him in return; Walter Skinner was his clever, ambitious boss, a good man, solicitous of his agents, excellent at his job...Doggett remembered how this strong man would kneel before him, or spread his legs for him, offering himself up so sweetly, how he would allow himself to be tied, conversely finding his freedom in the very denial of liberty that Doggett was able to give him...and he wanted – no, needed - to feel that firm body under his fingers again, to look into those dark, knowing eyes again, to taste those sensuous lips again. Doggett was so tired that he soon fell asleep, haunted by those dark, lost eyes, begging him not to give up.

He woke with a start early the next morning. A glance at the nightstand showed it to be nearly 6 am – it was the longest amount of sleep he'd had since Skinner had gone missing.

Doggett sat up, annoyed with himself for sleeping so long when he'd wanted to try and figure out where Skinner had gone. He fumbled for the light, turned it on, and his hand nudged the photo that Skinner kept on the nightstand. Doggett picked it up. He had seen the picture a dozen times but it had added piquancy now. The photo was of him and Skinner standing outside their cabin at Silvermist. It had been raining and his hair was wet and spiky – the way his lover liked it. A kindly passing hiker had taken the photograph for them, and Skinner had so loved the way they both looked in it that he'd had it framed. It was a good picture of a happy time. Doggett smiled and traced a hand over the glass absently. He had checked Silvermist – it had been one of the first places he had called, and he'd followed that up with a dozen or more calls to check that Skinner hadn't taken a cabin there since, paying by cash, but each time he had been assured that nobody answering that description was at Silvermist – in fact there were very few visitors as it was cold in the hills at this time of year, and nobody was paying by cash either. Doggett gazed at the picture for a long time; they were both wet and muddy – but so cheerful. That reminded him of the time they'd made love in that walkers' hut, both of them soaked to the skin but not caring. He could still remember the feel of Skinner's soggy jacket under his fingers, the scent of the rain on the other man's warm skin as he pounded into him, his thick cock filling him completely, the sound of the storm outside seeming to rage in time to their frenzied love making, the rain thrumming on the roof of the little hut. Doggett sat, frozen, and the picture slipped out from his fingers.

The hut. The walkers' hut. It was a long shot – there was no reason on earth to believe that Skinner was there, and yet...something about it felt right to Doggett. It was the perfect place to hide – there was hardly anyone staying at Silvermist at this time of year so Skinner was unlikely to be disturbed. It was shelter, even if it wasn't particularly comfortable, but Skinner wouldn't care about his own discomfort. Knowing him, he'd probably welcome it as some kind of penance for leaving in the first place.

Doggett pulled on his shoes and grabbed his jacket. He hadn't undressed last night and he looked a mess, but he didn't care about that. He considered calling Silvermist and asking them to check the hut, but decided against it. If anyone but him flushed out Skinner then the man would just keep on running, and his trail would go cold. Doggett jumped into his jeep and began driving. He knew that this could be as much of a dead end as all the other places he'd searched, but blind hope kept him going. He didn't have any other leads to follow so he might as well spend the morning driving out to the hills. What did it matter? Today was his last day – he might as well spend it driving out to Silvermist as sitting in the office fretting about Kim giving that letter to the Director.

Doggett called Kim a couple of hours later and told her to stall for a few hours longer. She agreed, genuinely pleased that he sounded so hopeful, and he knew he was setting them both up for a giant fall if he was wrong – but this felt right in his gut, and he'd been proved right with this kind of hunch before. Or was it a hunch, that little voice inside asked - maybe it was just the voice of weariness and desperation talking. Doggett pushed that thought away and kept on driving. He reached Silvermist in the early afternoon. It was cold in the hills, and he was hardly dressed for hiking, but he didn't care about that. He had a pair of boots in the back of the jeep, and a thick sweater, which he pulled on over his crumpled work shirt. He took the jeep as far into the hills as it would go, and then went the rest of the

way on foot, sliding through the mud in places. Nobody would have walked this way by choice – if Skinner was in the hut then it was a good place to hide out, at least for the next couple of cold, winter months. It wasn't linked to him, so those who were manipulating him with the nanocytes wouldn't think to look there either.

Doggett ran the last part of the way, and crashed through the door of the hut. It took him a few seconds to realise that it was empty and he sank to his haunches in despair, all the breath knocked out of him by his disappointment. He'd been so sure that Skinner would be here. So certain. He had to be here because if he wasn't then Doggett truly didn't know where else to look and he refused to accept that he'd lost one more person he loved – he couldn't face that again. Wouldn't face it.

Doggett pulled himself together, and peered around the gloomy interior. There wasn't any electricity in the hut and it took a little while for his eyes to get used to the darkness – and then a tiny flutter of hope stirred inside him. There was a sleeping bag on the floor and the remains of a meal beside it. Someone had been staying here – someone who was expecting to come back!

Doggett turned on his heel and left the hut, trying to think where Skinner would go. Of course he wouldn't sit in the hut all day long when it was so dark in there. He'd go out and get some fresh air during the day. He remembered the hill they'd climbed, and how Skinner had spoken of seeing the sunrise...the short winter afternoon was already wearing on, and the sky was streaked with gold. A sunset would be as good a view as a sunrise for a man on his own, staying in such conditions, a man considering his life and what to do with it next. Doggett ran up the hill, breathing hard, full of hope. He couldn't see anyone as he neared the top, but there was a rocky promontory on the other side, invisible from anywhere but the summit. Doggett slid down the other side towards it – and his heart missed a beat as he caught sight of a red and black plaid shirt. There was a man sitting there, dressed in faded jeans, with big hiker's boots on his feet. For a moment Doggett thought he had got the wrong person – this man had a dark beard, streaked with gray, but then the figure turned and looked straight at him, and time stood still for a moment.

Skinner didn't say anything. He just grunted, his eyes unsurprised behind the wirerims. Then, still silent, he turned back to look at the sunset as it streaked across the sky.

Doggett didn't say a word either. He just went and sat down on the rocks beside Skinner, leaning in close for body warmth and comfort. They watched as the sun began to slip down in the sky, and then, finally, after several long minutes, Skinner spoke.

"I should have known you'd track me down, John. I always said you were the most persistent man I ever knew."

"And you're the most obstinate. I almost didn't find you," Doggett replied. He put an arm around Skinner's shoulders, pulled him over, and planted a heartfelt, fervent kiss on that beloved scalp. He held Skinner for a long time, his lips pressed against the familiar warm, bare skin that he had come so close to never touching again. Now that he was in contact with it once more, Doggett shuddered at the thought of being deprived of any part of his

lover again. He knew that he truly wouldn't be able to stand it. When he finally released Skinner, the big man's head came to rest easily on Doggett's shoulder, as if it belonged there, which they both knew it did.

"I'm not coming back," Skinner said softly, not looking at him, still gazing at the sunset.

"You don't have to if you don't want to, but if you don't come back then I'm not goin' back either," Doggett told him. "I'm not losin' you, Walter, not for anything. If you want out, then that's fine; god knows you've been through enough and maybe it isn't worth it any more, but that's a decision we'll make together, and we'll live with the consequences together. No more runnin' off. Christ, Walter, that hurt so much!" He moved Skinner from his shoulder, and took the other man's face in both his hands, looking at him intently, the unfamiliar beard scratching against the palms of his hands. "After all we've been through together why the hell couldn't you come to me and tell me what was goin' on?"

"I'm sorry. I thought it was for the best," Skinner murmured, his dark eyes dropping behind his eyelashes.

"Why? I knew about the nanocytes – I was with you every step of the way during those tests and after. You could have told me," Doggett scolded.

"No, I couldn't." Skinner pulled away. "You don't understand," he said, the fading sunlight casting an eerie glow over his bearded face. "Before...before I only just managed to tolerate having my strings pulled by those bastards because I thought I could control it to some degree. I thought I could still be of some use – but I was wrong. They asked me to do things that didn't seem harmful to Mulder and Scully, but it turned out they were harmful and I just didn't know why. That was bad enough – that nearly destroyed me...that case in Africa that I gave Mulder to investigate..." He trailed off, his voice choking. Doggett gazed at him intently. "I didn't know it would hurt him the way it did. Seeing him in that hospital, knowing that directly or indirectly, I was to blame for his suffering... I couldn't stand for that to happen again. Not because of me."

"This time it's different," Doggett said gently. "Mulder didn't know about the nanocytes, but I do. I know the pressure you're under. We could deal with it together."

"Yes, this time it is different, because this time..." Skinner gazed blindly into the darkening sky. "This time, it would mean betraying someone I love...potentially ordering him into dangerous situations where neither he nor I could anticipate the outcome because we didn't have all the facts...and I can't do that, John."

"Someone you love?" Doggett repeated the words stupidly, hearing only them, not caring about anything else, his heart doing an absurd somersault. Skinner looked at him, his eyes surprised.

"You, John." He gave a wry smile, and placed a regretful hand on Doggett's cheek, caressing gently.

"Me? You love me?" Doggett's face split into a grin that he was sure stretched from one ear to the other. Skinner looked confused.

"You knew that, John. You always seem to know what I'm feeling – better than I do half the time."

"Yeah, but I..." Doggett paused, considering this. "No, I did know, Walter," he said softly, realising that was the truth. "I guess I've known since New York – it just feels good to finally hear you say it after all this time."

"Since New York?" Skinner looked flabbergasted. "John, I've been in love with you for much longer than that. Are you seriously telling me you didn't know?"

"No – I thought you were still pinin' after Mulder," Doggett laughed. "I thought you were fond of me, sure, but I didn't think you felt the same way about me as I did about you."

"After all we shared, you and I? Christ, Sergeant, why the hell didn't you just ask?"

"I dunno, Corporal. I suppose for the same reason you didn't just tell," Doggett replied.

"I should have. I just thought you knew. It seemed so obvious to me – I had no idea you didn't know. I guess we're both..."

"Men?" Doggett suggested with a grin.

Skinner laughed. "Yeah. I suppose that's it. Seriously though, John." He leaned forward and caught Doggett's lips with his own. "I do love you," he whispered as he drew back. "I've been in love with you for months and I don't think I'm ever going to stop loving you."

"I'm not sure I deserve it, Walter," Doggett murmured, gazing at his own hands. "I've been holdin' out on you. I told you I loved you easily enough right from the beginning, but I never trusted you – not until New York. I made you trust me. I kept insisting that you trust me, but I always held out on trusting you in return until New York. I think I was expectin' you to turn out to be Tony...and you proved that you aren't...or at least you did until you started this runnin' off shit." He gave a teasing smile.

"Tony was a problem for me," Skinner said, his voice hoarse with honesty. "I thought that maybe I didn't measure up to him, that you still wanted and missed him – and then I met him, and I realised he really wasn't anything for me to worry about." He exchanged a wry smile with Doggett.

"Ain't that the truth! You know, I remember seeing you sitting there in that room, talking to Tony, handling him so easily like the brat he is, and I guess that was when it finally sank in that you loved me. Maybe not consciously, but somehow somethin' changed that day. I dunno why, but it was just seeing you sitting there, dealing with him, taking his shit without missing a beat. You were so self assured, as if there was nothing on this earth that could shake what we had together, and certainly nothing as insignificant as Tony Larsen.

Something just clicked into place my head at that moment and I knew then."

"Oh, so the whole buying the plane ticket thing didn't give it away before then?" Skinner commented. Doggett had the grace to flush.

"What can I say? I can be an obtuse bastard when I try." He grinned.

Skinner gave a wry shrug, and then looked away. "I'm sorry, but it doesn't change anything. I'm not coming back," he said firmly.

"We can talk about it. I have an idea how we can turn this to our advantage," Doggett told him.

"How?" Skinner turned back sharply.

"Every time they threaten you with the nanocytes, it means there's something that's important to them. By knowing what's important to them, we're half-way to destroying them. All you have to do is tell me whenever they use them as leverage. That way we can walk into whatever it is with our eyes wide open."

"I don't know, John. That's still pretty risky." Skinner shook his head.

"So is crossin' the road. So is being an FBI agent period." Doggett shrugged. "You can't protect me from everythin', Walter, any more than I can protect you. That's just life. I think it's worth a try – there's nothing they can do to hurt us as long as you and I keep talking and know what's going on. If you find it too painful, then we'll cut and run then – but I think it's worth going back and giving this a try first. I want to nail those bastards and I know that you do too. I think we can too. I think we can find out who they are and crush them once and for all."

"I want that." Skinner gave a wry grimace. "God how I want to nail those bastards."

"And I want you to have that satisfaction," Doggett told him quietly. "But let's not kid ourselves that ridin' this out will be easy, Walter. I know how much it hurts you when the nanocytes are active in your bloodstream. I know it isn't easy handling that kind of pain and if you want to leave it all behind then I sure as hell won't blame you. God knows you've given up enough for the X Files. If it's time for you to call it quits then I won't question your decision; I'll come with you, like I said. I figure that between us we can do just about anything together. It'll be an exciting new challenge. We could travel, and think about a new kind of career. Just don't make this decision based on what's best for me, or Scully and Mulder, or the X Files. Make it for yourself. It's your call, Walter. You know I'll back you up, whatever you decide."

There was a long silence. Skinner gazed thoughtfully into the twilight sky, his brow furrowed. He didn't say anything for a long time, and Doggett didn't interrupt his decision-making process. Finally, after half an hour of silence, Skinner let out a long, explosive sigh.

"I knew you'd talk me out of it," he growled. "That's why I came out here. But I can't go back, John - I wrote a letter of resignation."

"I know. I've got it here." Doggett pulled it out of his pocket and waved it in the air. "Kim's worth her weight in gold you know, Walter. First thing she did on finding this was to call me."

"You? How did she...?" Skinner shook his head and laughed, a deep, rumbling roar of a laugh. "Kim always did know everything that was going on without being told."

"She's a treasure. When we get home we'll have to take her out to dinner in the most expensive restaurant in town. You are coming home, aren't you, Walter?"

Doggett got up, and held out a hand to help his lover to his feet. Skinner gazed at the hand for a moment, and then accepted it with a resigned sigh.

"Now?" He asked, as Doggett hauled him to his feet.

Doggett shook his head. "No. I figure we could do with a few days at Silvermist to unwind first. They've got cabins to spare. You're in no fit state to go straight back into the fray, and frankly, neither am I."

"I've been gone two weeks, John. I can't swing any more time off. I have to go back and sort out the mess I left behind at some point," Skinner said ruefully.

"A few days more won't make any difference," Doggett told him as they walked back down the hill together. "I'll call Kim and let her know I've found you. She'll be able to hold the vultures off for a bit longer. I'll tell her..." Doggett glanced at Skinner, and then grinned at his own private joke. "I'll tell her to let everyone know you're takin' some personal time."

Skinner grinned back. They walked in silence to the jeep, and got in. Doggett turned on the engine and began driving over the rocky terrain back to Silvermist.

"So..." Skinner gave a little grimace and glanced over at his lover. "I figure that you're pretty angry with me for running out on you and leaving that note. Are you going to take your belt to my ass for this, Sergeant?"

Doggett shook his head, a laugh bubbling up from deep within. He glanced at Skinner as he drove, a feeling of total relief and joy flooding through him. He loved, and was loved in return by this handsome man, this noble, strong, warrior-lover who fulfilled all his youthful hopes and dreams. He knew that with this man by his side he was complete.

"No, Corporal," he replied with an evilly sexual grin. "Oh no. I can think of somethin' a whole lot better to do with that magnificent ass of yours..."

The End

### Chapter End Notes:

I love hearing from people who've enjoyed my stories so please don't be shy! I always respond to feedback and I'm very grateful to receive friendly feedback from people who like my writing.

Angsty, story-inspired pic below courtesy of **Bodiebabe**



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