

Poker by Xanthe

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

Chapter 1 by Xanthe

The man was huge, his massive frame blocking the entire doorway. He wore a full-length black leather coat and black biker's boots and he strode into the bar as if he owned it, pausing on the threshold to gaze expressionlessly around and then making his way over to the bartender. Everybody in the sleazy establishment stopped and turned to look at the newcomer and some fingers went nervously to unconcealed weaponry and hovered there.

"I'm here to see Lynch." He told the woman who was aimlessly wiping a glass on a filthy piece of cloth. She looked at him for a moment, taking in the black combat pants, black vest, the gun holsters on each leg and the knife that was tucked unsubtly in his wide leather belt. He looked like a mean son-of-a-bitch, but she was used to them.

"Is he expecting you?" She asked coolly.

"Yes." The man said firmly. "Tell him Sergei's here."

A few seconds later he was ushered through a door and down some stairs. Sergei ducked his head as he was escorted along a corridor and through a series of low doors, finally ending up in a large basement room. It was as dirty as the bar with faded red furnishings reminiscent of some old brothel which was probably what it had once been. The lighting was gloomy, but Sergei could make out a big square table, some chairs and a pack of cards. Two men guarded the entrance to the room but his eyes flickered over them, noticing and then ignoring them. Once inside the door was shut behind him.

"So. You're Sergei." A voice behind him said. Sergei turned slowly, showing no sign of being unnerved.

"Yes. And you must be Lynch. You sent me a message."

"That's right." Lynch stepped forward into the light. He was a small, rat-faced man with a livid scar across his neck. "I run this neighborhood."

"So I had heard." Sergei eyeballed him. "And I believe you have something that I want."

"That's right." Lynch grinned and put a hand to the inside pocket of his jacket. Sergei frowned, watching every movement. "Don't be alarmed!" Lynch pulled out a fat cigar and clipped the end off it, putting it in his mouth and lighting it. "I want us to be friends, Sergei! Come and sit down." He put a hand on the other man's stiff arm and then thought the better of it as Sergei glowered at him, gesturing him instead over to the table. There was another man seated there already.

"This is Fido." Lynch grinned. The man was gross - hugely fat, his stomach lay resting on the surface of the table. His long, wispy hair was knotted into a bizarre plait that hung from the

back of his head and when he smiled he revealed a mouthful of rotting teeth.

"That's right. Fido's what they call me." Fido grinned and Sergei scowled at him. "Do you want to know why they call me Fido, Mr Sergei?"

"No." Sergei turned back to Lynch. "I want to know where you are keeping the item I want and I want to make a deal," he said briskly.

"Hey, slow down Sergei!" Lynch laughed. "In this neighborhood we like to be social, have a drink or two, play a game of cards while we talk business."

"Is that so?" Sergei's eyes narrowed. "In my neighborhood we like to talk business and then get back to work."

"Well, everyone's different!" Lynch grinned. "And as you're on my turf..." He gestured to the chair again and Sergei sat, reluctantly. Fido gave a high, irritating giggle.

"Well done, Mr Sergei, well done!" He exclaimed, leaning closer, his fetid breath making Sergei's stomach turn. "I'm called Fido, you see, because I love my dog, Mr Sergei. See her, isn't she something!" Sergei turned and saw the enormous mastiff seated by Fido's chair. "I call her sugar puff, or cherry pie, or..."

"Yes. I can see why such names would be appropriate." Sergei regarded the dog for a moment. She was as ugly as her owner, filthy dirty and even from here he could smell that the two shared the same halitosis problem. She was also big, with huge teeth and a big, slavering jaw and he could tell by the way she was looking at him that she was the only protection that Fido needed.

"My, you sure are a starchy one!" Fido giggled. "Loosen up, Mr Sergei, loosen up. We're gonna be friends."

"I don't have any friends." Sergei looked back at Lynch. "I have business associates and I have family. I don't need friends. Now, can we get down to business?"

"You sure are persistent!" Lynch grinned. "Alright, comrade. Alright. Word on the streets is that you're looking for something very particular. Something that killed your brother. That right?"

"That's right." Sergei nodded.

"And you'd be prepared to pay pretty much any price to get your hands on that thing. Yes?"

"It depends on the price." Sergei shrugged. "Let's just say that if one of my family gets killed, we always get our revenge. This is the second brother I've lost. We fished the first out of the river 4 years ago. When I got hold of the man who killed him, well, he didn't exactly look like a man by the time they fished **him** out of the river. If you understand me."

"Oh yes!" Fido giggled. "Oh yes, Mr Sergei. We understand you! We understand you very well!" Sugar Puff shifted and wagged her tail at her owner's enthusiasm.

"So." Lynch grinned. "What's this piece of merchandise worth to you?"

"Let's cut the crap. Tell me what you want." Sergei said tonelessly.

"What I want? Well...I want so many things, Sergei. However, most of all I like to gamble. And I like to gamble for unusual stakes. Do you play poker?"

Sergei shifted in his seat.

"Yes." He said at last.

"Good!" Lynch grinned. "He plays poker, Fido!" Fido leered and scratched one of Sugar Puff's ears.

"But before we go any further," Sergei said. "I need to know that you have the goods."

"Oh he does! He does, Mr Sergei!" Fido laughed. "And very pretty they are too."

"Then show me. I don't want to waste any more of my time if you haven't got what I'm looking for." Sergei spoke in the tone of one not used to social conversation. Lynch sighed.

"How's about this then?" He said, pulling out an ID and flicking it over to Sergei who stared at it expressionlessly. On it were the letters F.B.I, the picture of a man and the name, Fox Mulder.

"This isn't proof." Sergei threw it down on the table. Fido giggled nervously and looked at Lynch who looked momentarily angry. Then he smiled.

"Alright. Why not? You want proof. Of course you want proof! Let's bring you proof." He clicked his fingers in the air and one of his men disappeared. He returned a few moments later dragging someone behind him.

"This him?" Lynch got hold of the captive and pulled him into the centre of the room. His hands were handcuffed behind his back, he obviously hadn't shaved for a couple of days and he looked very pale but apart from that he seemed unharmed. Sergei got up and crossed over to take a closer look. His eyes met the other man's and they stared at each other in silence for a moment.

"It's him." Sergei said grimly, then suddenly he moved, putting out a hand and grabbing the other man's throat, pushing him back against the wall.

"You killed my brother." He hissed. The captive went quite still, his hazel eyes wide and alarmed.

"Your brother...?"

"Shut up. You killed him and I'm going to kill you."

"Not so fast." Lynch insinuated himself between them and tried to tug Sergei's massive arm away from the captive's neck. He failed. "You haven't bought the goods yet, Sergei. And there is another interested party..."

"Who?" Sergei dropped Mulder and turned angrily. "Who else wants him?"

"I do." Fido giggled. "When Lynch told me about him I had to see him. He's pretty isn't he? So pretty!" Fido got up and walked across the room. He bent down and helped Mulder back onto his feet, belching his fetid breath into Mulder's face as he did so. Mulder gagged and swayed. Fido laughed, tracing a dirty finger down Mulder's nose and along his jaw. "I'm going to enjoy you, baby!" He smiled. "We're gonna have such fun. Let's see if you can last longer than the other boys shall we? Some of them just didn't have any stamina! Barely lasted one night before I had to dispose of 'em!" He leered at Mulder then turned back to Sergei. "So, Mr Sergei, you have competition I'm afraid." And he waddled back to his chair and sat down. Mulder had paled visibly and he was swallowing nervously and convulsively. His eyes met Sergei's again, mute and pleading.

"What is this?" Sergei rounded on Lynch. "Don't fuck me around Lynch. You don't want me as an enemy."

"No, no. Calm down, Sergei. Calm down. Hear me out." Lynch moved back to the table and gestured that Sergei should do the same. Mulder waited helplessly in the corner of the room, his back still pressed against the wall, desperate to escape. "I like wagers, that's all. Gambling's just about the only thing that turns me on these days. Now this FBI man doesn't mean anything to me. But he means something to you and he means something to Fido. I'm proposing a game."

"What?" Sergei looked outraged. "We play cards for him?"

"That's right. Winner takes all. I don't need money, Sergei. I got trouble enough laundering what I got!" He grinned. "And I like a nice game of poker. Fido here does too and you've told us you play. So." He surveyed his companions. "Looks like we've got ourselves a card party!" Mulder closed his eyes and gave a little moan, his hands tugging helplessly on the handcuffs, wishing he was dead.

The game started slowly, as the men tried to get the measure of each other. For a while the hands were played in silence, broken only by Sugar Puff's panting and Fido's occasional high laugh. About half an hour into the game, Fido grew restless.

"I think we need to spice things up a little!" he smiled. "Raise the stakes some."

"How?" Sergei frowned. He was holding his own but they were all playing cautiously. Lynch had laid down the playing conditions and he knew they had a long night ahead of them. Sergei had removed his coat, revealing two more guns, one under each arm. The men guarding the door had shifted belligerently, their own drawn guns quivering at the implied threat.

"Well..." Fido got up and wandered over to Mulder who had been ignored thus far, crouching in the darkness at the other end of the room, his back still pressed against the wall.

Fido got hold of him and hauled him over to the table, into the light. "I won the last round, so I reckon I get to do something to pretty boy here." Mulder flinched. "Tell's you what. Every time someone wins a round, they get to do whatever they like to the boy."

"No." Sergei said tersely, shuffling the cards and not looking up. "I want him unharmed."

"Why?" Lynch asked. Sergei frowned.

"I wouldn't want Fido's enthusiasm to get the better of him. If he goes too far and ends up killing him by mistake...well let's just say I'll be very angry. I have 4 brothers sitting at home, waiting for me to bring Mulder back alive. Won't be any fun for them if I bring back a corpse."

"Agreed!" Lynch said. "But a little sport with the merchandise wouldn't harm anyone, would it? Fido - you make sure you don't cause him any serious damage. Just a little play. Alright, Sergei? Huh?" Sergei's brow flickered in annoyance. His eyes met Mulder's again and he shrugged.

"Alright," he said.

"Alrighty then!" Fido grinned. "Hey, I got an idea!" He ambled over to Sugar Puff and took off her collar. It was grimy and attached to a long leather lead. "Here we go, pretty. Let's get you all dressed up!" Fido got hold of Mulder and undid the top buttons of his shirt. Then he fastened the collar around the agent's neck and grinned. "You are looking more and more like my ideal date with every passing second, boy!" He laughed, patting Mulder's cheek.

"You bastard." Mulder couldn't bear the humiliation and he kicked out at Fido, throwing himself on the man, his hands struggling in the cuffs that restrained them behind his back.

"That's enough!" Mulder felt himself hauled off Fido by his hair and twisted in the firm grip, still trying to kick out. "You want to make this hard for yourself, you can." Sergei told him, pulling him back by his hair and pushing him down into a vacant chair by the table. "But I wouldn't recommend it. Now just sit down and shut up." He let go of the other man and watched as Fido levered himself up. Sugar Puff was on her feet, growling at Mulder, revealing her huge, yellow teeth. Mulder closed his eyes and put his head down, feeling like he could cry.

"You'll pay for that, pretty." Fido told him as he passed. "When I finally win you, you'll pay then." Mulder shuddered.

Sergei won the next round.

"So what you gonna do to him?" Fido licked his lips in anticipation. "Go on, Sergei, what you gonna do?"

"Nothing. I'm not interested." Sergei leaned back in his chair and pushed the cards into the centre of the table.

"Well, I think we need a new rule then!" Fido announced. "If someone doesn't take up their rights...then they should go to the runner up! What do you think, Lynch?" He asked anxiously. Lynch shrugged.

"Sounds fair to me, Fido," he said.

"Goody!" Fido got up and Mulder let out a feeble little moan.

"Sit down." Sergei said tonelessly. He leaned forward and casually backhanded Mulder across the jaw. "Now, let's play," he said. Fido scowled and returned to his seat, then he brightened up as he saw the little trickle of blood running from Mulder's lip.

"Poor boy!" he jeered. "Poor, poor, precious. Never mind. Fido will win the next round, honeybun. He'll show you some tenderness!" Mulder could not hide the ripple of revulsion that ran through his entire body. He fixed Sergei with an agonised stare. Sergei ignored him.

Fido didn't win the next round. Lynch did. He smiled at Mulder for a second and Mulder held his breath.

"Well...I don't have all that much interest in you, Mr F.B.I." He said. "Except for the fact that you wandered onto my territory and upset a couple of my people. But Fido here's my friend and I know he likes having something pretty to look at, so how about we turn this into strip poker, huh?" He got up and took hold of Mulder's ankle, pulling one shoe off. "Nice and slow. One piece at a time. We've got all night!" He grinned at Fido who wet his lips. Mulder

breathed a sigh of relief. One more round got through. The loss of a shoe wasn't so bad. However Lynch won the next four rounds and soon Mulder found himself divested of his other shoe and both socks. He held his breath and stared straight ahead as Lynch started unbuttoning his shirt, trying not to see the expression in Fido's slaving eyes. "There we go, FBI. Nice and easy." Lynch pulled the shirt over his handcuffs, tearing the sleeves and Mulder put his head down, too embarrassed to look at anyone in the room. It could only get worse from here on, he thought to himself, cursing himself for his own stupidity. If only he hadn't disobeyed Skinner. If only he'd told someone where he was going, requested back-up, even taken Scully along...no. He pulled himself up short. The thought of Scully being here witnessing this torment, or worse still, suffering it, was beyond endurance. He comforted himself with the knowledge that it could be worse. Not much worse though, he thought glumly, hoping Sergei would win the next round.

He did and Mulder happily suffered another backhander across the jaw as the price for keeping his trousers on and Fido away from him.

"Aw now!" Fido complained. "That's dull, Mr Sergei! You could be more imaginative than that. The boy's face is gonna be all bruised before I get my hands on him and then he won't be so pretty."

"I don't care how damn pretty he is." Sergei said tersely. "I want him dead, not warming my bed, Fido. And I want my brothers to get a chance to beat the shit out of him."

"Well still!" Fido pouted. "You could at least try and think up something else!"

Sergei grunted and dealt the cards.

"New rule, new rule!" Fido piped up. "Whatever you do has to be different each time! New rule, Lynch. Okay?" Lynch chuckled and swigged back some more of his drink.

"Okay." He smiled. "'Cept for me. I'm just gonna keep on stripping the lad!" Mulder bit his lip and closed his eyes, crossing his fingers behind his back.

He kept his eyes so tightly closed that he didn't know who had won the next round until he felt the hands on his trousers and then his eyes flew open in alarm. Lynch was leaning over him, grinning.

"Time to get rid of these, FBI." He laughed. "Fido's looking forward to seeing more of you!"

"No. Please...." he begged. "Please..." He looked at Sergei who shrugged expressionlessly.

"Up you get!" Lynch pulled him up and tugged his trousers down, revealing his plain, navy-blue boxer shorts. Mulder really felt as if he could burst into tears, flushing bright red with the humiliation of it all. Lynch shoved him back down again and threw his trousers onto a pile with his other clothing. "That's better, isn't it, Fido?" He laughed. Fido sniggered and smirked.

"Much better, Lynch. Much better." He let his gaze wander over Mulder's semi-naked body in appreciation. Sergei stared straight ahead, tapping his fingers on the table irritably.

Much to Mulder's horror, Fido won the next round and got up, a lascivious smile on his face. "Hey, handsome. Don't fret, honey. I told you Fido would be nice to you, didn't I?" He ran his huge fingers across Mulder's naked chest and down towards his boxer shorts. Mulder retched. Sergei shuffled the cards noisily.

"Well hurry up!" Sergei growled. "Get it over with, we haven't got all year." Fido smiled and got hold of Mulder's face in his podgy hands, holding him still and depositing a wet kiss on the other man's lips. Mulder's whole body seemed to go into spasm. Fido let go and sighed.

"Sweet baby!" He ruffled Mulder's hair. "You know, that's given me a taste for you, honeybun. Next time I think I'm going to have to get those shorts down and get a piece of your ass!" he leered.

"No." Mulder said in a strangulated whisper, looking around desperately for help. "No. Just kill me. Kill me now." He addressed himself to Sergei. "I mean it."

"Shut up." Sergei finished shuffling and handed the deck to Lynch, his eyes flickering around the room and resting briefly on the two armed guards by the door, their eyes alert, their guns still drawn. Outside the door he could see the shadows of the other two armed men he had passed when he had been ushered in.

Mulder couldn't watch the next round. He had never known such an excruciating game of poker in his entire life. The bids floated around him but he tried not to think, not to breathe. Surely this wouldn't happen, surely he'd be rescued. His jaw hurt and he knew it was already starting to bruise up. He licked away at his bloody lip, goosebumps standing out on his exposed flesh. He was terrified.

"I win! Full House!" Fido laid down his hand with a triumphant smile, getting up and crossing over to Mulder who started to shake, uncontrollably. "Come on, son. Here's where you get your present." Fido got hold of Mulder and pushed him over the table so that his head ended up amongst the cards, next to Sergei's wrists. He felt Fido's hands on his boxers and looked up in despair, straight at Sergei.

"Not so fast." Sergei said. Mulder held his breath. "You didn't wait for me to lay my cards. Straight Flush." He laid his cards down and exchanged another, expressionless look with Mulder.

Fido let go angrily and Mulder lay there, his stomach pressed against the wood, moaning to himself. "Well fiddlededee!" Fido hauled his fat body back to his chair and sat back down. "Well go on then, you damn Polack or Russian or whatever you are. Whip his butt." Sergei shrugged and undid the lead from Mulder's collar. Mulder looked up in relief, hoping the other man would undo the collar as well, but instead he brought the lead down across his shoulders with a vicious swipe. Mulder yelped, then sank back gratefully in his chair. He still had his boxers on, he hadn't been raped....one swat across the back with a dog lead was almost like a reward.

Sergei was about to throw the lead down but Fido stopped him.

"I think I'm about to get lucky!" He grinned. "Let's have the boy ready and waiting for me." He fastened the lead back on Mulder and dragged him over to his side of the table, pushing Mulder down onto his knees beside him, next to the huge dog. "Sit!" he ordered. "Now, stay!" He patted Mulder's head. Mulder whimpered.

"He's not yours yet." Sergei seemed angry, yanking the lead out from Fido's hand and letting it fall to the floor, putting his own large boot on it. "Don't try and claim him yet, Fido."

"Oooh. Someone's pissed." Fido taunted. "What's the matter, Sergei. You jealous?" Sergei made no reply. He moved his impressive shoulders as if they had cramp, his big arm muscles rippling. Fido made a face. "Mr Macho!" he taunted, putting a proprietorial hand on Mulder's head, fondling his ears and neck. Suddenly he found his wrist enveloped in Sergei's savage grasp. Sugar Puff opened her eyes and pricked up her ears.

"I don't want you getting too attached to him." Sergei warned. "I have no intention of losing, Fido." Fido's eyes turned nasty and he pulled his hand away.

"Let's keep this friendly." Lynch said. "Looks like I'm outta it!" He sat back in his chair. He'd lost all his chips. "Looks like it's a two horse race from here on." He poured himself another drink and then brought one over for Fido. Sergei's still remained untouched on the table in front of him.

Mulder could feel the dog's breath on his bare back as he knelt beside the table. He could smell Sergei's leather coat and stared glumly at the floor. If he glanced to his right he could see Fido's stained white tee-shirt which didn't quite meet his trousers, showing a glimpse of his massive gut. To his left, he could see Sergei's black-clad thighs and leather biker's boots. Please win, Sergei, he repeated over and over again in his head. I don't care what you do to me, just win, just win... He looked folornly at Sergei and then at Sergei's cards. He had a crap hand. A losing hand. Mulder gave a desperate little sigh and Sergei turned to look at him, frowning at him. Mulder's eyes were abject in their desperation. Sergei nudged him with his boot. "Quiet." He hissed. Mulder nodded and shut his eyes. Quiet, I'll be quiet, he said to himself. I can do quiet, Sergei. Just win.

"Raise you." Sergei pushed some chips into the centre of the table. Fido muttered and played with his belly button. Sugar Puff belched.

"You bluffing?" Fido glared at Sergei. "You bluffing, mean Mr Macho?"

Sergei didn't say a word, staring back expressionlessly at Fido. "I think you're bluffing." Fido said. Mulder bit his lip and clenched his handcuffed hands. Fido agonised over it for a while, then threw his cards down. "Fold! You win you big, dumb polack."

Lynch grinned, taking a puff on his cigar. "Not doing so well, Fido," he taunted. "The big guy's got you beat, huh?"

"We'll see. Old Fido may have some tricks left yet." Fido replied. Sergei snorted and shifted in his chair, collecting the cards together.

"Well go on then, Mr Sergei." Fido leaned back. "Have your fun. Enjoy yourself. Think of your poor old brother."

Sergei took a deep breath and looked at Mulder. Mulder looked back helplessly. Was Sergei running out of ideas?

"You want to wimp out?" Fido taunted. "You want me to take your place on this one? I know what I'm going to do to him next!"

Mulder could not stop the helpless moan that escaped his lips. He tried desperately to get Sergei's attention but Sergei was no longer looking at him.

"I don't care what you do, Sergei..." he said it before he could stop himself. "Just don't let him..."

"Quiet!" Sergei ground his teeth together and reached a hand across the table. "May I?" He asked Lynch. Lynch grinned.

"Oh yes. I like this one!" He handed Sergei the cigar. Sergei held it up, showing it to Mulder who stared at it and then back at Sergei and nodded, imperceptibly. With one quick movement Sergei pressed the cigar into Mulder's shoulder. Mulder didn't even murmur. He bent over double and counted to 30 in his head, then sat up again, trying to ignore the smell of his own burnt flesh mingling with tobacco in the air.

"You're running out of chips, Fido." Sergei said. "I think it's time to bring this game to a close, don't you?" Fido looked angry, his lascivious gaze passing over Mulder and back to Sergei.

"Let's bet everything then." Fido said. Mulder looked up, worried, a churning knot of fear in his stomach.

"Everything?" Sergei asked.

"Yes." Fido pushed all his remaining chips into the centre. "I win, I get the boy. You win, you get him." Mulder tried to move, to get a glimpse of Sergei's hand. It was another useless one. He moved the other way to see Fido's. Oh shit. He had a better hand. He was going to win. He made a noise, trying to convince Sergei not to bet everything on this one round then found a huge hand wrapped across his mouth.

"Will you shut up when I'm trying to concentrate!" Sergei said. Mulder nodded, trying to impart his desperate information with his eyes. Sergei released him and returned to his cards.

"Alright, Fido." Sergei nodded. "You're on." Mulder clutched his stomach and rocked back and forwards wanting to be sick.

"Alrighty!" Fido laid his cards on the table with a flourish and Sergei stared at them mutely. "Very nice." He said tonelessly, placing his own down. Mulder stared at them. 4 aces! They hadn't been in his hand a moment ago. You goddamn cheat, Sergei, he said to himself. You goddamn, amazing cheat!

Sergei was on his feet in seconds, grabbing the lead around Mulder's collar, pulling him to his feet.

"Thanks for your hospitality, Lynch," he said, shouldering himself into his coat. "We'll be leaving now." He unfastened the collar and lead from Mulder's neck and chucked them back on the table. "The key." He motioned to Mulder's wrists and held out his hand. Lynch let out a grim chuckle.

"Well, you sure know how to play poker, Sergei. It's been a fine evening's competition. Nothing like a bit of friendly rivalry. Huh?"

"The key." Sergei repeated impatiently. Lynch got up and moved his hand towards his pocket. Sergei rested one hand on his gun, the other still gripping Mulder's shoulder but Lynch pulled the key from his pocket and handed it over.

"Perhaps we can play again, soon. Huh?" Lynch smiled.

"Maybe." Sergei pocketed the keys and propelled Mulder over to the door. The guards looked at Lynch questioningly and he nodded.

"A bet's a bet." He smiled. "I always gamble fair." The door was opened and Sergei pushed Mulder out along the corridor and up the stairs, through the bar. Mulder stumbled and swayed, wishing Sergei's fingers weren't on the stripe across his shoulders, wishing he didn't feel half-dead and as if he was going to faint at any second, wishing he wasn't practically naked.

"Keep moving." Sergei hissed tersely in his ear. They got out of the bar and walked along the street. There was nobody around. Suddenly a noise erupted behind them. Sergei shoved Mulder forward, breaking into a trot, but then a huge blurry mass appeared in front of them, growling. Sergei stopped, turning, his hand still on Mulder's shoulder. Fido stood there.

"Lynch may keep his promises, but I don't have to," he grinned, holding a gun, pointing it at Sergei. "And I want a taste of that boy!"

"Keep away." Sergei's own gun was in his hand now. "Or I'll shoot. You think he tastes so good dead?" He held the gun against Mulder's head and Mulder swallowed. "It doesn't bother me if I kill him here and now or later. I'd prefer to take him home to play with but I'll do it now if I have to. Nobody is going to rob me of this, Fido." Fido frowned, staring at Sergei.

"You're bluffing," he said.

"Am I?" Sergei pressed the gun against Mulder's temple.

"You're good at bluffing." Fido still had his gun pointed at them. Sugar Puff was sitting next to him, her slobbery mouth drooling saliva onto the pavement. "Never met such a po-faced, closed-mouth son of a bitch."

"There is no way, no way..." Sergei said, spitting the words. "That I will ever let you have him. He's mine."

"Well isn't that touching?" Fido snarled, looking just like his dog. He replaced the gun in his jacket and walked closer. "Bye, bye, pretty." He reached out a finger to touch Mulder's lips. Mulder bit him and he doubled up clutching his finger.

"Come on." Sergei swung Mulder round and they ran up the street, down an alleyway, across another street until they were sure they weren't being pursued.

"You should have damn well killed him!" Mulder yelled at Sergei, leaning against a wall, panting. "You had a goddamn gun. He was down, you could have killed him!"

"And risk the dog tearing us to pieces?" Sergei asked.

"You could have shot the damn dog too!"

"Oh shut up, Mulder." Sergei said wearily putting his gun back in its holster.

"How many more times are you going to say that to me this evening!" Mulder complained.

"Alright, alright. Calm down. I just didn't want you making it any worse for yourself back in there. It was bad enough as it was. I was also worried that you'd spoil my game. Poker's about bluff. I couldn't have you squealing every time you thought I had a bad hand." Sergei fished the key out of his pocket and unlocked Mulder's handcuffs. "Are you okay?" He asked with genuine concern as Mulder rubbed his sore wrists.

"No I'm not." Mulder said. "Of course I'm damn well not. I spend two days in a basement with hardly any food or water and then I get dragged out to become first prize in some game of poker and meantime someone tries to strip me, someone tries to rape me and someone else beats up on me."

"That's not fair." Sergei looked quite hurt. "The alternative was..."

"I know what the alternative was. Don't remind me. Please." Mulder shuddered, remembering that foul smelling mouth pressed against his and involuntarily retching again. Sergei watched in silent sympathy. Mulder pulled himself together. "Where are we going?" He asked. "Isn't there any backup?"

"No. But then you must be used to that, seeing as how you never normally go anywhere with it." Sergei chided.

"Oh great. So we have to walk and me without anything on my feet." Mulder complained.

"Mulder, I just risked my life to drag you out of there so stop whining." Sergei put up a warning hand and stalked off. Mulder trotted after him, wishing he could have the leather coat but not liking to mention it. It was cold and a pair of boxer shorts weren't much protection against the elements.

"Um...thanks..." he called at Sergei's disappearing back, hoping the coat would be offered if he was nicer.

"We put the word out that we were looking for you." Sergei said, as he caught up. "But Lynch wasn't interested in getting caught up with the FBI. He would rather have just killed you and dumped your body. So we invented Sergei instead. Lynch was curious. But I had no idea he'd make me play cards for you. I thought we could do a deal."

"Why didn't you bring back-up?" Mulder whined pathetically. "Why did I have to go through that...humiliation?" he spat.

"You weren't the only one in danger!" Sergei exclaimed. "I thought I was going to have to start a gunfight in that room at one point to save your chastity! I thought we'd both end up dead. I was told to come alone. I wasn't told where to go. I started with a whole load of technical stuff wired up to me going through to a control team but we didn't know who we were dealing with. I certainly had no idea it was just a two bit-crook like Lynch. If you hadn't disobeyed that direct order I gave you and if you'd bothered to let anyone know what you were working on, we would at least have had some idea what to expect and where to look for you, Mulder! At the last minute we were informed, wrongly as it turns out, that you were being held by some sophisticated electronics gang and I was told it was too much of a risk to go in with anything technical. I decided to play it by ear, make contact and go from there. I was sent all over town before I ended up in that bar and I was watched the whole time. I couldn't even make a call."

"Oh." Mulder suddenly felt very cold, tired and hungry. "I suppose I should be touched that you even put yourself out for me," he said. "You could have sent someone else, sir."

"I wanted to be first on the scene to kick your butt when we found you." Sergei grinned.

"But I think I've done more than enough of that for one evening."

"You sure have, Sergei. And what is it with the name?"

"It's my middle name. I've always quite liked it. Perhaps if my names had been the other way round and I'd been called Sergei instead of Walter, I might have been the sort of person who wore this kind of outfit for real." Sergei glanced down at his clothing with an ironic smile. "Now come on. Let's get you to a doctor. I know the perfect one."

"Oh, Mulder!" Scully wrapped her arms around him when he arrived. Sergei had finally offered him the leather coat so his entrance wasn't too embarrassing. "I was so worried about you."

"Scully." He clutched her close, breathing a sigh of relief. "It's okay. It's all over. Thanks to Sergei." He grinned at Skinner.

"What happened? We didn't know where you were or who had you. You didn't even leave us a clue!" Scully said.

"Yes, alright. I've already had that lecture." Mulder said grumpily. Skinner started removing the guns from his holsters and some cards flew out as he did so.

"Where did you learn to cheat like that incidentally, sir?" Mulder asked, allowing Scully to sit him down.

"Vietnam." Skinner grinned. "I was always getting beat at poker until I learned to cheat. And you had to cheat well out there or you were in serious shit!"

"I've got the change of clothes you asked for on the phone." Scully put a pair of shoes on the desk and handed him a sweater and a pair of jeans as he gingerly eased himself out off the leather coat.

"Oh my god!" Scully's cool fingers found the cigar burn and the welt on his back and ended up gently tracing themselves across his bruised jaw. "God, Mulder. Who did this to you?"

Mulder looked up at Skinner and managed a faint smile.

"Don't worry, Scully," he said brightly. "It could have been much, much worse!"

The End

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters and settings are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. No money is being made from this work. No copyright infringement is intended.