

## Tenses by Xanthe

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

### Story Notes:

This story was written as a result of a challenge to write a discipline story keeping the characters and situation as close to canon as possible, and making the whole discipline scenario as believable as possible.

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#### PRESENT

Mulder glanced at his watch impatiently as he waited outside Skinner's office. He wondered what could be so important that he'd been pulled off a case he'd been investigating with Scully. It wasn't like Skinner to interfere with their work, so he assumed it must be urgent. Kim took a call, then smiled at him, gesturing with her head towards the door, and Mulder got to his feet, hoping the mystery would soon be solved.

The first thing Mulder noticed was the worried frown creasing the Skinner's forehead as the other man welcomed Mulder with a curt nod.

"Take a seat, Agent Mulder."

Mulder did as he was told, looking puzzled.

"Big case, sir." He gestured towards the huge file on Skinner's desk.

"Yes." Skinner steepled his fingers together, deep in thought, then leaned back in his chair, and gazed at his agent speculatively.

Mulder's sense of apprehension deepened. "Is there a problem, sir?" He asked.

"With your work? No." Skinner paused.

"Then why have you pulled me from this case?" Mulder bit his lip, wishing he hadn't phrased that in quite such a combative tone. Skinner didn't respond well to being needed, but on this occasion the other man didn't even seem to notice his tone. He was lost in thought, and his fingers flicked idly through the stack of papers on his desk.

"Mulder - I'll come straight to the point. Scully will have to finish this case without you - I'll send her another agent to help out."

"Why? What kind of jerk-off crap is this now?" Mulder got to his feet, fuming. "Don't tell me I have to justify my existence yet again? Am I being thrown back into the bullpen to waste my time on background checks in order to teach me a lesson for ticking off someone or other?" He demanded.

Skinner gazed at him impassively. "No. I'm sending you to Martha's Vineyard," he replied calmly, ignoring the tirade. "Let me clarify that: I'm **accompanying** you to Martha's Vineyard."

"Martha's Vineyard?" Mulder echoed, looking confused. "Why?"

"Sit down, Agent Mulder." Skinner passed a weary hand across his forehead. Mulder glared at him for a moment, then finally complied. "Mulder - I've been contacted by Detective Ray Clements in Boston. They're investigating a series of missing child cases in the Vineyard and they want to talk to you."

"They want me to do a profile?" Mulder frowned. "I don't mind, of course, but I'm surprised. The profiling unit can..."

"No, Mulder." Skinner said gently. "They don't want you to do a profile, and they don't want you there in your capacity as an FBI agent."

"Then why...?" Mulder asked, and he knew that he might as well have had "Samantha" written on his forehead because it was obvious what he was thinking.

"They want to ask you some questions. About your sister's disappearance," Skinner informed him. Mulder expelled a deep breath that he didn't even realize he'd been holding. "I've been looking through the casework they faxed through," Skinner waved his hand at the file. "And they've raised some interesting questions. Apparently they've had a new computer system installed that's thrown up some links between a number of missing children in this area dating back to...." Skinner checked the file, "1969."

"1969?" Mulder echoed incredulously.

Skinner shrugged. "Detective Clements has been newly appointed to the area. I think he wants to make his name on a big case, and this fits the bill. Everyone gets up in arms at the idea of missing kids - it's hardly surprising. It's something we all feel strongly about - and you have reason to feel more strongly than most, Mulder."

"So, what kind of a case is Clements making?" Mulder demanded, seizing the file and scanning it.

"That there's been a very cautious, very careful pervert operating in and around the Vineyard for three decades, abducting children every 5 years."

Mulder's head snapped up. "You know that's not what I think happened to Samantha," he said.

"Yes." Skinner nodded. "I know what **you** think happened to Samantha. However I'm sure Clements doesn't share that viewpoint. He just wants to ask you a few questions - it might be a good idea not to mention aliens and conspiracies to him. I'm sure it'll just cause bad feeling, and there's no need to press the issue."

"Fine." Mulder shrugged. He flicked through the file again, then leaned forward. "Sir - despite what I said...if there's any new lead, any explanation at all for what happened to Samantha...well, I'm not so far gone down one path that I'll continue down it when there's evidence to the contrary. I think I'd rather..." Mulder bit on his lip, then looked up into Skinner's sympathetic brown eyes. "I'd rather **know**, sir, once and for all, what happened to her. Even if it's bad news. Even if it's the worst news..." he whispered. Skinner nodded.

"I know, Mulder, and I do understand. This will be a difficult for you, which is why I want to stress one thing."

"Sir?" Mulder raised an eyebrow.

"You are not investigating this, Mulder. You have been asked there simply in order to answer questions. You will not turn this into a crusade, or attempt to interfere or take over the investigation in any way. Is that understood?"  
Mulder hesitated, his soul rebelling at this restriction.

"I asked if I was understood, Mulder." Skinner barked.

"Yes, sir." Mulder muttered, his eyes making it clear that he certainly understood. Whether he chose to obey or not was another matter entirely. "I don't understand why you're accompanying me though, sir. I don't need my hand held."

"No, Agent Mulder." Skinner gave a wry half-smile. "I'm sure you don't. However I will just say three words to you to help you understand why I feel my presence is required: John - Lee- Roche."

Mulder sat back in his chair. He opened his mouth angrily to protest to Skinner, but then closed it again. He still felt guilty about what had happened to that little girl because of his behavior in the Roche case.

"Mulder - I'm not making any recriminations." Skinner sighed, and took off his glasses, going around to Mulder's side of the desk, and perching on it. "But I will not stand by and let what happened with Roche happen again. Your career can't stand it, and neither can the Bureau's reputation, frankly. Another incident like that I wouldn't be able to protect you again." A look of annoyance passed across Skinner's face, and he bit his lip at his mistake.

Mulder looked up in surprise. "**You** protected me in the Roche case? You stopped them firing me?" He asked incredulously.

"Yes, I did. It took some doing too." Skinner shook his head ruefully.

"I thought...I thought maybe Senator Matheson..." Mulder sighed. "I think I owe you a 'thank you', sir," he muttered.

"Just get through the next few days without taking off and causing a mess, and that'll be thanks enough." Skinner said, patting him on the shoulder. "Now, we leave first thing tomorrow - I'll pick you up at your apartment at 7."

Mulder nodded, and left the office, his mind still reeling, both from the news about the case, and Skinner's revelation.

The journey the next day was uneventful - until they got to the motel.

"We're sharing a room?" Mulder glared at his superior angrily, as the other man collected the key from the front desk of the motel.

"Yes, Mulder, we're sharing a room," Skinner told him quietly.

"You mean the Bureau can't afford to pay for one of its Assistant Director's to have some privacy?" Mulder pressed the issue.

"Oh, the Bureau can afford to pay, yes." Skinner told him, picking up his small suitcase, "but I seem to remember that in the Roche case I asked Scully to keep an eye on you, and you ditched her. That isn't going to happen here. I'm going to be with you 24 hours a day."

"24 hours..." Mulder echoed. "I don't need a bodyguard," he snapped. They stood there, facing each other, angry hazel eyes meeting implacable brown ones, and time froze, and then rolled back 21 years...

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## **PAST**

"I don't need a fucking bodyguard!" The boy growled from underneath sticky bangs that Skinner guessed were supposed to stand up in waxed points, but which were only managing to lean at a half-hearted angle.

"Fox, honey...Fox...don't talk like that...you know Mommy doesn't like that kind of language..." Teena Mulder glanced up at Skinner, a look of hopeless resignation in her eyes. The 16 year old boy pushed past him, and disappeared up the stairs and into a room, slamming the door shut loudly behind him. A few seconds later the crashing sounds of Heavy Metal music being played at full volume pounded out from behind the closed door. "I'm sorry, Mr..."

"Agent Skinner, ma'am. Don't worry about it." Skinner shook her hand and she led him into the front room.

"Can I get you something after your journey? An iced tea?" Teena asked.

Skinner smiled at her. "That would be welcome, ma'am," he replied, glancing around the room. He set his suitcase on the floor, and then wandered over to the fireplace. There was a photograph on the mantle - a happy family snap. Mrs. Mulder and her husband, together with two kids - about 10 and 6, a boy and a girl. He almost didn't recognize the boy as the growling, adolescent bundle of surly hormones who had just treated him so rudely. The kid in the photograph had bright, shining eyes, and a wide, innocent smile, and his thick hair was neatly cut.

"He's changed a lot in 6 years," Mrs. Mulder said, handing Skinner the iced tea. She picked up the photograph, a dreamy expression in her eyes. "Of course, that was before..." she murmured.

Skinner took a sip of his tea. "I heard about the little one, Ma'am," he told her sympathetically. "I'm sorry."

"Four years. They say time heals but..." She stared into space for a long while, until Skinner began to feel uncomfortable. He had a sneaking suspicion that this woman dulled the pain of her loss with some kind of medication, but he couldn't find it in his heart to blame her for that. How did anyone cope with the loss of a beloved child? Especially an innocent little girl. Skinner cleared his throat. He had a job to do here, and he wasn't much good at dealing with other people's emotions - especially wounds as raw as these.

"I'm sorry to have to intrude on your family in this way, Mrs. Mulder, but hopefully it won't be for too long."

"No. I understand." Teena smiled at him, in a hazy, unfocused way. "My, you look quite the part, Agent Skinner," she said, her eyes taking in his broad chest, and towering frame as if noticing him properly for the first time. "If we have to have a bodyguard, then you look as if you'll do the job well."

"I hope so." Skinner nodded.

"I'm sure this isn't your normal kind of assignment."

"Well...to be honest with you..." Skinner confided, "I've only been with the Boston Field Office for a year. I'm still settling in, so I don't really mind what kind of assignments I get at this stage - it's all new to me."

"Ah." Teena gazed into the distance for a while.

Skinner cleared his throat again. "About Fox, Ma'am," he began.

Teena gave him a nervous smile. "I know, he was very rude to you, I'm so sorry," she apologized anxiously. "I don't know what to do with him these days, and Bill's never here..."

"He's a kid. We all go through that kind of phase." Skinner shrugged, knowing that his father would have tanned his hide every day for a week if he'd behaved anything like young Fox had just done.

Teena smiled weakly, seeing through his attempt to be polite. "He never used to be like this. He's a good kid, really. He has a kind heart," she said.

"I'm sure." Skinner gave a stilted smile. "However, the fact remains that he could be at risk, and he needs to accept protection."

"Oh he will." Teena told him. "I'm sure that if we can just get him to see how important it is..." She trailed off again, and Skinner sighed. This assignment was going to be much harder than he had anticipated.

"Perhaps I should have a word with the boy," Skinner offered.

"Would you?" Teena looked pathetically grateful. "I'd try myself, but he doesn't listen to a word I say these days."

"Fine." Skinner got to his feet, feeling relieved to have something to do. He hated sitting around - it made his legs twitch.

"Your room's the one next to Fox - up the stairs, second on the right. My room's across the landing, and when Bill's home he sleeps..." Teena bit on her lip. "In his study," she finished, looking embarrassed. Skinner flushed. He didn't need to know that this couple's marriage had deteriorated to the point where they no longer shared a bed. No wonder the kid was so screwed up, going through his stormy adolescent years in this dysfunctional household. A missing sister, an absentee father, and a spaced out mother - the kid didn't stand a chance.

Skinner picked up his suitcase, and jogged up the stairs. He located his room, and dumped the case. It was a small, pretty room. He wondered if this had been where the little girl had slept, but there was no sign to show that it was, so maybe it was the guest room. Skinner unpacked his few belongings, smoothed his thin, wavy dark hair back against his head, and then went and stood outside the room next door. He knocked, but there was no reply - he doubted whether his knock had even been heard over the sound of the loud music, so he pushed the door open.

The kid was lying on the bed, with his hands behind his head, scowling at the ceiling. He glared at Skinner and turned over pointedly, so that his back was towards the agent. Skinner glanced around the room. The drapes were shut, but even so, at first he wondered why it was so dark, until he realized that the walls had been painted black.

"Nice décor," he commented.

"None of your business." Fox snapped.

Skinner thought about it for a moment. He wasn't here to improve this kid's behavior, but he **was** here to protect him - and he couldn't do that if the boy wouldn't listen to him. He wasn't any great psychologist, but he seemed to remember himself at this age, and he certainly remembered the way his father, and later on, his Sergeant Major had treated him. He also remembered that it had worked. He made a snap decision, and flicked his finger at the stereo, turning the music off.

Fox sat up, a look of absolute outrage on his face. "How dare you!" He yelled.

"Shut up, and sit back down," Skinner said calmly, making sure the door was shut. "Now look, Fox, you might not like me, and I sure as hell don't like you very much from what I've seen so far, but I've been sent here to do a job, and I'm damn well going to do it."

Fox opened his mouth to protest, then shut it and glared at Skinner again.

"You can make this easy, or you can make it hard, but it's going to happen one way or the other," Skinner told him. "I'm here for a few weeks - so get used to it. And get used to having a "fucking bodyguard" around because it's for your own safety."

"Like fucking hell." Fox swore. "This is just a trick of my dad's. He sent you here to stop me seeing my friends."

"What?" Skinner was genuinely perplexed.

"He just wants to keep an eye on me, and he can't damn well be bothered to do it himself," Fox spat, "so he sent you."

"Fox, I have no idea what you're talking about, son." Skinner shook his head. He looked down at the boy's miserable face, and saw that he was fighting back tears. He felt a wave of pity for the kid, and sat down on the side of the bed. "Fox - you have heard about what happened to your father's colleague, haven't you?"

The boy looked up at him, a puzzled expression on his face. "No. What?" he whispered. Skinner took a deep breath - had nobody explained the situation to this kid? "Your father is working on a sensitive project with the DOD," Skinner told him. "You did know that, didn't you?"

Fox hesitated, then nodded, but Skinner wasn't fooled. He wondered when Bill Mulder had last spoken to his son.

"Well, last week a death threat was sent out to all the officials working in your father's department. And then, a few days ago..." Skinner took a deep breath. He didn't want to scare the boy, but he did need him to understand how serious the situation was. "A few days ago, the wife and little boy of one of your father's colleagues were murdered."

Fox's eyes widened in fear, and then he made a face, pretending at nonchalance. Skinner recognized that teenage desire to be seen as big and strong all too well.

"Now, nobody knows for sure if the death threat and murders are linked, and we're doing everything we can to track down who did this, but until we do, all your father's colleagues have been assigned around the clock protection. I'm here to make sure nothing happens to you, Fox. I'm not here to spy on you, or stop you seeing your friends - unless I think they're a danger to you." Skinner shrugged.

"Right." Fox said uncertainly.

"So I need to know when you go out, and where you're going, how long you're going to be, who you're with..." Skinner began.

Fox's mouth twisted into an angry scowl. "You wanna follow me into the bathroom and wipe my ass as well?" He growled.

Skinner took a deep breath, and kept a tight hold on his temper. "No, Fox. I'm sure you can manage that yourself at your age. Just call me if you need any help. I watched my mother toilet train my kid brother so I know how it goes," Skinner told him.

Fox made a sneering face at him, and Skinner sighed.

"Look, I'd rather we were friends, but I'm here to do a job and I'm going to do it - with or without your help. Don't push me, kid," Skinner said in a low, even tone.

Fox looked at him for a long moment, then shrugged. "Whatever," he muttered, lying back on the bed, and closing his eyes.

Skinner got up, and walked towards the door.

"Turn my music back on," the boy called. Skinner hesitated. No 'please'. It put his back up. All the same, he didn't want to make a difficult situation any worse, so he turned back and did as the boy asked.

"Fascist pig," he heard Fox mutter into the pillow as he left the room.

Skinner gritted his teeth, and closed the door gently behind him, holding onto his temper by the skin of his teeth.

He was really beginning to wish he'd had the option to refuse this assignment.

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## **PRESENT**

Mulder felt a hot flush consume his face as he tried to stare down the Assistant Director. The past stood between them like a tangible presence. *Please - don't let him remember...* he chanted over and over again in his head. *God, please, don't let him remember...*

"Not a bodyguard, Mulder," Skinner murmured mildly. "Just a concerned boss. Let's get a move on. The sooner we meet up with Detective Clements, the sooner we can get this over with, and head back to DC."

Mulder smiled weakly, and backed down, seriously freaked. He followed Skinner to their room, where he dumped his bag on one of the twin beds, and then escaped to the privacy of the bathroom. He filled the basin with cool water, and then doused it liberally over his head.

"This, is a nightmare," he whispered to his reflection in the mirror. His reflection nodded in agreement, and grinned at him.

Detective Clements was a large, burly man, whose bluff demeanor hid the one single-minded objective of his life - to prove that he was right. About everything. Mulder took an instant dislike to him.

"You're staying at the Mayflower?" Clements frowned at Skinner. "Not what I'd have recommended, sir." He shook his head regretfully, as if Skinner's choice of a motel was doomed to have unfortunate consequences. "And you must be young Fox." Clements squeezed Mulder's hand tightly, then placed his other hand over Mulder's in a vice-like grip. Mulder winced.

"Agent Mulder." He corrected firmly, ignoring Skinner's look of warning.

"Thanks for coming, son." Clements beamed. "We just have a few questions and then we'll be through. Nothing formal - we like to keep things friendly around here, Fox." He gave a smile that didn't quite reach to his dark, beady eyes. Mulder clenched his fists very tightly at his sides, and tried to smile back.

They were ushered into an untidy interrogation room, covered in papers. Clements plunked himself down with a smile, and snapped his fingers in the air. A few seconds later a tray of coffee appeared, accompanied by a whole plateful of doughnuts. Clements took a huge bite out of one, and opened the file.

"So, young Fox. I know all this was a long time ago, but we've got some new leads on all this and I have some questions I'd like to run through."

"Of course." Mulder nodded. He didn't like this man, but if there was any serious possibility of finding out what had happened to Samantha then he'd be willing to sit here day and night answering questions. Which was why he was floored by the detective's first question:

"Tell me about your father." Clements licked a line of sugar off his chin.

"My father?" Mulder glanced over at Skinner, perplexed.

"Yeah. Was he close to your sister? Maybe she was a real daddy's girl?" Clements asked.

"Not really." Mulder shrugged.

"Okay." Clements picked up another doughnut. "Did you share a bedroom with your sister?"

"What?" Mulder frowned.

"Just trying to form a picture of the way things worked in your family. Did you?" Clements pressed.

"No." Mulder snapped.

"Right." Clements made a note on the file. "So you wouldn't have known if your father was paying her visits in the night?"

"What the hell is this?" Mulder got to his feet angrily, and Skinner was right beside him, placing a warning hand on his shoulder.

"Just asking." Clements shrugged. "Come now, Agent Mulder. You know I have to ask these questions."

"No, I damn well don't. What are you implying?" Mulder seethed.

"I think that Agent Mulder has the right to know what you're getting at." Skinner said to the detective.

"Okey dokey. Sit down." Clements nodded at the chairs. Then he got out a piece of paper and handed it to Mulder. "The first disappearance our computer came up with was in 1969. That was about the same time that you and your family moved to the area, Fox. Then there was your sister, in 1973, then another little girl, in 1979. Your father was away from home a lot wasn't he, Fox?"

"Yes. So what?" Mulder fumed.

"Well, it just so happens that we've taken a look at the dates he was working away, and the dates he was at home. It seems that every time a little girl went missing, your father was in the area." Clements sat back in his chair smugly.

"You are talking about a tiny handful of missing child cases over a 30 year period. It's too small an amount to tie in statistically with any significance in respect of my father's work pattern," Mulder said in disbelief.

"Hmmm." Clements said.

"And apart from anything else he's been dead for 3 years!" Mulder protested.

"Exactly. And no more abductions have been reported during that time." Clements nodded his head wisely, as if that proved his case. "I like tidy endings, Agent Mulder. I'd like to be able to file all these cases away in the safe knowledge that the perpetrator is dead and buried."

"This is crap!" Mulder exploded. "My god, this is just garbage, Clements. Why don't you get off your fat ass and start getting out there and looking for a real kidnapper because you're sure as hell barking up the wrong tree by going after my father!"

"Hmmm." Clements said again, with a knowing look at Skinner who raised an incredulous eyebrow. Mulder couldn't stand it any longer. He got up, and stormed out of the room, kicking over a chair on the way out.

Mulder ran for a long time, just needing to work off some excess energy, and then he figured out where he needed to be. He took a cab to his old childhood home, and got out. He was surprised to see that it was clearly empty - a couple of windows were broken, and the door was hanging off rusty hinges. He pushed open the garden gate, and walked up the path. It was so strange to be here, after all these years. This place was so familiar and yet so much a part of the past. It felt...weird. Mulder jogged up the steps and onto the porch, then pushed open the front door, surprised to find that it wasn't locked.

His footsteps clattered on the wooden floorboards, as he wandered around the dusty, empty house. There were so many ghosts here, so many mixed memories. Mulder heard a little girl laughing, and the more discordant sounds of his parents arguing, night after night, while he turned his music up so that he didn't have to listen to them. He walked up the stairs, pushed open the door to his own bedroom, and glanced inside. It seemed smaller than he remembered it, and less friendly - his refuge from various storms. He walked around, recalling things he had long since forgotten, and pushed open the door to the spare bedroom, and glanced inside. He remembered one occupant of this room in particular - he'd only stayed here a couple of months, but he'd made a lasting impression on Mulder. Mulder remembered the young field agent assigned to protect him and his mother. Skinner hadn't been quite as muscular then, but he'd been a big guy all the same. To a skinny 16 year old Mulder, he had looked so tall and imposing. Mulder chuckled - he remembered being scared of this stranger, who seemed so sure of himself at a time when Mulder was floundering, not sure of anything. *Hell, he can still scare the shit out of me when he tries...* Mulder mused wryly. *Some things never change...*

Mulder wandered back down the stairs, and out onto the porch. He sat on a rusting old swing, and gazed out on the back yard. A few seconds later he heard a sound, and glanced up.

"I thought I'd find you here." Skinner said, leaning against the side of the house.

Mulder nodded. "Yeah," he muttered.

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## **PAST**

Skinner sat on the back porch, his long legs up, resting on the wooden railing. Dinner had been a tense affair, ending abruptly when Fox had said he was going out. Skinner had asked where he was going, and when he'd be back, and Fox had told him to "mind your own fucking business," and stormed off.

Skinner sighed, and put his hands behind his head, gazing up at the night sky. He couldn't be with both Mrs. Mulder and Fox the whole time - a fact which his superiors seemed unconcerned about. Skinner was puzzled by this. Surely, if there was a serious threat on these people's lives, then they should have been moved into hiding, or at least assigned a bodyguard each, but that wasn't the case. In the circumstances he had taken the line of

least resistance. Mrs. Mulder was easier to protect, so he'd stick with her for now, and let the kid take his chances.

Skinner glanced at his watch - it was late. Nearly 2 am. He heard a sound and a few seconds later Fox jumped over the back gate and walked slightly unsteadily towards the house. He'd clearly been drinking.

"Have a nice evening?" Skinner asked. Fox jumped, and looked around. "Or isn't that any of my fucking business either?" Skinner inquired.

Fox had the grace to blush. "Sorry about that, man." He teetered over, and flopped down on the floor next to Skinner's chair.

"It's hard guarding someone who doesn't want to be guarded," Skinner observed neutrally.

"Yeah. I hate, you know, rules and stuff." Fox shrugged. "Reminds me of school and dad."

"I'm not your enemy, Fox." Skinner told him. The kid put his head back and he looked curiously innocent and sad in the darkness. "I'd like to be your friend," Skinner said.

"I've got friends." Fox snapped.

"Tell me about them."

"Well they're all a lot older than me, right? I don't like kids my own age. They're too dumb. And we have a good time, right?" Fox glared at the agent as if daring him to disapprove. "And I know some girls," Fox added. "Loads of girls. I was with a couple of girlfriends tonight. I don't just have one girlfriend you know. We were making out tonight, me and, uh, Cindy and, uh, Joanne..." Fox bit on his lip, and Skinner tried not to laugh out loud at the obvious attempt to impress him.

"Great," he murmured encouragingly. Fox seemed to sense that his deception had been seen through all too easily. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a small tin, and opened it to reveal a stash of grass. He looked up at Skinner, clearly daring the other man to do something about it. Skinner didn't rise to the bait. He had his own strong opinions on drugs, formulated the hard way, but he also knew that the quickest way to encourage a kid like Fox into using them was to forbid him to go near them.

"Tell me about your other friends." Skinner said, watching as Fox rolled the joint with inexpert fingers. "Here." He held out his hand.

"No, man, you can't stop me..." Fox began, but Skinner whisked the joint out of the kid's fingers and rolled it up expertly, before handing it back. "Hey...where'd you learn how to do that?" Fox demanded.

"Vietnam." Skinner replied with a shrug.

Fox looked at him, wide-eyed. "You were in 'Nam?" He asked. "Did you ever kill anyone?"

"Yes." Skinner shrugged uncomfortably. Horror warred with fear, curiosity and respect in Fox's clear hazel eyes. Skinner felt an urgent need to change the subject. "You were going to tell me about your friends?"

"Yeah...do you want a smoke?" Fox held up the lit joint.

Skinner shook his head. "I grew out of that stuff a long time ago. I don't need it now," he said.

That comment burst Fox's little bubble, and he stubbed the joint out savagely.

"D'you have a girlfriend, Agent Skinner?" Fox asked.

"Yes. Her name's Sharon. We've been going out for a couple of months." Skinner smiled.

"You...uh, you got to fourth base with her yet?" Fox asked. Skinner could sense the flush on the kid's face, and with it the desperate need to learn about the mysteries of the opposite sex.

"Yes." Skinner nodded. He could see that Fox was just longing to ask "what's it like?" next, but couldn't. "I really like Sharon, we have a lot in common. We're friends, you know. Everything else came out of that," he told the boy. Fox nodded, uncertainly. "Give it time," Skinner said, almost certain that this mixed-up kid was far too shy to have lost his virginity yet. The boy flushed again, and drew his knees up to his chest, circling his arms around them. He was dressed in tight denim jeans, and a black tee shirt with a skull on the front. His hair had been teased into sticky peaks with wax, and he seemed to be wearing black eyeliner.

"Why did you become a cop?" Fox asked after a long silence.

"Well, being an FBI agent isn't quite the same as being a cop." Skinner told him. "I have a law degree, and I suppose you could say I'm interested in justice."

"Where did you go to college?"

"Harvard. What about you? What do you want to be, Fox?" Skinner asked, looking at the boy keenly.

"A rock star." Fox grinned.

"Right." Skinner laughed. "And can you sing?"

"No. Does that matter?" Fox's eyes were amused, peering out from under the sticky bangs.

"No." Skinner laughed again. "Your mom said you were very clever. I thought you might want to go to college."

Fox's demeanor changed at this mention of his mother. "What does she know?" he spat angrily. "She doesn't know a fucking thing."

"Fox." Skinner said warningly. He knew it wasn't his place to correct the kid, but he was genuinely shocked by his lack of respect for his mother, and he wasn't the kind of man who could stand by and not say anything.

"What?" Fox glared.

"If I'd spoken about my mother like that my father would have tanned my hide for me, and I don't like hearing you do it," Skinner told him firmly. The kid bit on his lip. Skinner saw in that brief moment something he hadn't realized before: Fox adored his mother. Suddenly it all fell into place. Bill Mulder wasn't around much, and it had fallen to Fox to comfort his mother, and take care of her as she quietly fell apart after the abduction of her little girl. Fox was just a kid - he wanted to help her, but he didn't know how, and he hated himself and her for his failure. Once again, Skinner felt a wave of pity and affection for the boy.

"My dad keeps a paddle in his desk drawer. He says it has my name on it," Fox confided. "He's not here much though, so I'm lucky - I get away with stuff." He didn't look as if he thought he was lucky - he looked utterly wretched, Skinner thought.

"I'm glad I didn't get away with too much as a kid," Skinner told him. "My dad was pretty strict but looking back, I wouldn't have had it any other way."

"Hurts like hell though." Fox grinned, his white teeth gleaming in the dark.

"Yeah." Skinner chuckled, recalling a couple of spankings in particular that had made an extremely vivid impression on him. He glanced at his watch. "Damn - it's late. I should be getting my beauty sleep."

"Lost cause." Fox teased.

Skinner gave him a playful cuff on the side of the head. "Fox..." He hesitated. "Take care with the drugs," he said, looking into the boy's eyes. "I mean it - I've been there, done that. Take care."

Fox bit on his lip, a protest flaring in his eyes, and then fading. He nodded, looking uncertain.

Skinner smiled and slapped his shoulder lightly. "Come on - you should be in bed too, or don't kids your age go to school any more?"

"I don't sleep well." Fox shrugged. "Sometimes I just crash out down here on the couch."

He got up all the same and followed Skinner into the house, and up the stairs. "Agent Skinner..." Fox paused outside his bedroom door, and glanced at the man. Skinner turned back, raising a questioning eyebrow. "I like you." Fox muttered, and then he disappeared into his bedroom so fast that Skinner wasn't even sure he'd heard him correctly.

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## PRESENT

"My old house." Mulder mused, glancing at the tumble-down place.

"Yes." Skinner gave him a strained smile.

Mulder looked at him keenly, wondering again if he remembered. It was as clear as yesterday to him, but it had just been a couple of months, so long ago - just a small job in a long career for his boss. Why should he remember it? Why should he remember Fox Mulder? Mulder flushed again. There was one specific incident that made him hope very much that Walter Skinner had forgotten teenage Fox Mulder, and only knew him as Special Agent Fox Mulder, not the screwed up kid he'd been all those years ago.

"Seems different. Smaller. I don't belong here any more." Mulder got up, and stretched his lanky body.

"You grew up. Moved on." Skinner shrugged.

"Did you come to drag me back to the lion's den?" Mulder raised an eyebrow.

"You know the answer to that already." Skinner gave a half smile. "But there's no hurry. Listen, Mulder - I don't like what Clements is suggesting any more than you do - but you're smart enough to have figured out that the more information you can give him, the quicker you can persuade him to give up this lunatic theory of his about your father."

"Oh I don't know. It strikes me that Detective Clements isn't the kind of man who gives up his pet theories without a fight - however ludicrous they are," Mulder commented bitterly. He wandered out into the long grass, and his foot touched against something. He picked up a baseball - a bit the worse for wear. It had clearly been lying in the grass for a couple of seasons. He tossed it into the air a few times, and then, with a jerk of his thumb, flipped it sideways towards Skinner. The big man's reflexes were as fast as ever, Mulder thought. The Assistant Director put out a hand and caught it cleanly, even though taken by surprise. *Never could put one past the son of a bitch...*

Mulder caught Skinner's eye, remembering so many occasions when they'd done this before, years ago, throwing and catching, talking, hanging out together. Skinner had been the first adult to show any interest in him for so long that Mulder had hero-worshipped the man. Skinner placed the ball firmly on the window sill.

"Time to go back?" Mulder's heart sank.

Skinner turned, as implacable as ever. He was the face of Mulder's duty, the one who made it clear how it had to be, and what Mulder could, and could not get away with - now, and all those years ago.

"Yes. Sorry, Mulder." Skinner shrugged. "And this time - it would really help if you could keep your temper."

"Yes, sir." Mulder muttered. "You know..." he gave the garden one last glance, "he might not have been the best father in the world, but he was still my dad. This hurts," he said honestly.

Skinner nodded. "I know," he replied, "but you're a fully trained FBI agent - you can handle a little guy like Clements. He's not going anywhere - he's just trying to make a name for himself. Hang on in there, Agent Mulder, and this will soon be over."

Mulder was in a savage mood as they drove back to the motel later that night. The afternoon with Clements had been long and exhausting. The irritating thing was that Mulder was sure there was a genuine story in all this - but it didn't involve his father. In fact, he was pretty sure that it didn't involve his sister either. He was mulling it over in his mind, treating Skinner's mild inquiry as to where he wanted to eat with a brusque reply that it didn't deserve. He didn't even notice the tightening of his boss's jaw - he was lost in thought.

"On second thoughts - I don't want to eat." Mulder snapped, as they drew up at the motel. "I'm going to crash. If that's okay with **you**, sir," he asked pointedly.

"Of course." Skinner shrugged. "You go ahead. I'm going to have a few beers. You're sure you won't join me?"

"Yeah." Mulder got out of the car, and slammed the door shut. "You go ahead - don't do anything I wouldn't do, sir." He made a face.

"And you." Skinner replied with a meaningful look.

"Yeah. Right." Mulder stomped off to the motel room without a backward glance.

He took a long shower, then changed into his sweats and tried to piece together what he had learned from Clements, and what he had picked up from the file that had been sent to Skinner. It wasn't enough though. He needed more information if he was going to come up with a profile - and the profiling side of his brain was already in gear. He couldn't have turned it off if he tried. He must have fallen asleep because when he woke up, the moon was full outside the window, and Skinner was snoring in the bed next to his. Mulder got up and went to the bathroom, then sat in the armchair, thinking about it again. His eyes fell on Skinner's pants - neatly folded over the back of a chair, and the idea hit him. He didn't even think about it. He just got up, tip-toed over, and began rooting through the pockets until he found the car keys. Then he crept quietly past his sleeping boss, and left the room.

Mulder flashed his ID around to get access to the police station, and then he made his way to Clement's office. He recovered the man's files, munched his way through a plate of left-over doughnuts, and started making some notes. It took several hours, but Mulder was soon immersed in his work. When he'd finished the profile to his own satisfaction, he went into the bullpen and pinned it up on the blackboard for all to see. Then he pinned up a doughnut on top of it. "Just to make it clear who it's for," he murmured, laughing to himself.

Finally he returned to the motel. Skinner was still fast asleep in his bed. He slipped past his boss, and settled down in his own bed. He closed his eyes, and immediately saw his old home, rundown and dilapidated, the weeds choking the yard. It had been so strange being there with Skinner again, after all these years. Mulder fell asleep, and dreamed about eating doughnuts at a birthday party.

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## PAST

"Aren't you going to be late for school?" Skinner glanced at the boy, who was sitting at the bottom of the stairs, staring at the envelope in his hand. Fox looked up, a mixture of emotions flitting across his face.

"No." He snapped.

"Waiting for the mail?" Skinner asked with a smile.

"No." Fox bit on his lip - a sure sign that he was lying, as Skinner had come to know all too well.

"I would - if it were my birthday." Skinner gave the kid a grin, and squeezed past him, tousling his hair as he went.

"Who told you?!" Fox demanded, following the man into the kitchen. Skinner helped himself to a glass of orange juice.

"A little bird." Skinner tapped the side of his nose infuriatingly.

"I wanna know!" Fox launched himself at the man, and tried to tackle him to the ground. Skinner swatted him off, and Fox ended up on the floor, helpless with laughter.

"How old are you?" Skinner grinned down at him. "Ten?"

"17!" Fox protested. "I'm 17! You know I'm 17!"

"Oh right. You just **behave** like a ten year old." Skinner teased. Fox gave him a mock glare and the big man held out a hand, and pulled the boy to his feet. He saw the envelope lying on the floor and retrieved it. "This from your mom?"

"Yeah." Fox shrugged.

"What did she get you? Something special?" Skinner asked, then wished he hadn't as the smile faded from Fox's face.

"Money. She always gives me money. That's okay." Fox said.

"Sure." Skinner shrugged. It clearly wasn't okay. Fox clearly wanted a more personal gift - something that showed that his mother had put some thought into it. "Tell you what - why don't you hold on for the mail, and then I'll give you a ride to school. That way you won't be late." Skinner said, guessing that the youth was holding on for a card from his father.

"That's okay." Fox shrugged. "I'm not expecting anything in the mail."

"I'll give you a ride anyway," Skinner told him.

Skinner noticed that Fox was right - there wasn't anything from his father in the mail. Just a couple of cards from relatives. Okay, so the kid was 17, not 10 like he'd teased, but he guessed it still must have hurt.

"I was wondering..." he began as he drove Fox to school. "Did you have any plans for tonight? A meal with your parents maybe?"

"Dad will be too busy to get back," Fox told him with a shrug, "and mom, well..." He shrugged again.

"What about your friends? Any plans to go out with them?" Skinner asked.

"Nobody know it's my birthday. Birthdays are for kids." Fox snapped.

"So you won't want to go to the ball game with me to celebrate then? I have tickets." Skinner got them out of his jacket, and held them up. Fox tried to maintain his cool, couldn't-care-less attitude, but Skinner didn't miss the way his eyes lit up. "We can eat out. My treat."

"You don't have to." Fox told him. "I mean...you shouldn't spend any money on me. I'm nothing to you, just a job - and a pain in the ass." He grinned

"I like you." Skinner told him firmly, and Fox looked happier in that moment than Skinner thought he'd ever seen him. "Of course that doesn't mean you're not a pain in the ass." Skinner grinned.

Fox punched him on the arm. "All right - old man," he said, getting out of the car. "I'll make sure to choose the most expensive restaurant in town to get you back for that comment."

"I'm sure my wallet will stand it." Skinner shook his head wryly, and drove off.

It was a good night, Skinner thought. Fox was relaxed, and full of fun. At times it was hard to believe the kid was only seventeen - he was widely read, and when he wasn't talking about anything personal he could chatter on non-stop on a diverse range of subjects, barely stopping to draw breath. Skinner even had to remind him to eat on occasion. The youth was on a total high, and Skinner knew that he'd done a Good Thing, getting the tickets. He wondered when anybody had last made a fuss of the kid on his birthday.

"You know - I was lying about the whole rock star thing." Mulder told him as they walked back to the car after the game. I want to be like you - I'd like to go to college."

"You should." Skinner told him seriously. "You're smart enough."

"I thought...one of the best universities, one of the really great ones."

"Like Harvard? Or Yale maybe?" Skinner asked.

"Well...I was thinking of Oxford." Fox confided shyly.

"I think that's a fantastic idea," Skinner said encouragingly, meaning it. He couldn't help thinking it would do the kid good to get a long way away from this destructive environment.

"And then, maybe...I could go into the FBI, like you." Fox said softly.

"If you wanted to." Skinner nodded, recognizing the hero worship. "But you might change your mind when you get older."

"Maybe." Fox shrugged. "Walter...thanks." He whispered shyly, as they drew up at the house.

"S'okay. I enjoyed it." Skinner told him, meaning it.

Skinner noticed that the first thing the youth did when he got back to the house was to thumb through the mail - although there was no sign of anything from his father. Fox poked his head around the door to the front room. His mother was sitting at the table, counting out her "bedtime" pills into a little pot.

"Did anyone call?" Fox asked her.

"No, dear. Did you have a nice time?" She smiled at him absently.

"Yeah." Fox replied, but it was as if a cloud had passed across his face, and he disappeared straight up to bed, and turned his music on full blast. Skinner sighed. It was always one step forward, two steps back with this kid.

Skinner was reading the newspaper when Mrs. Mulder received a 'phone call the following day. He heard her voice becoming more and more distressed, and finally he got up and went to investigate.

"It's Fox," she said, turning to Skinner, looking upset.

"Is he all right?" Skinner asked in alarm, his hand going to his gun.

"Oh yes, it's nothing like that," Mrs. Mulder told him. "It's just - he got into some sort of fight at school, and punched another boy. He's been suspended for a week."

Skinner felt relieved that it wasn't anything more serious.

"What am I going to do?" Mrs. Mulder looked around anxiously. "I have my bridge club coming here today. What can I do?" She looked at Skinner helplessly.

"I'll go and pick him up," Skinner told her, taking charge.

"Oh thank you!" she said gratefully.

Fox was sporting some bruised knuckles but otherwise seemed unharmed, so Skinner guessed he came out best in the fight.

"Did they suspend the other kid too?" He asked.

"No." Fox answered morosely staring out of the car window.

"Why not?" Skinner inquired, surprised.

"Because he doesn't usually get into trouble, and I do. They assumed it was my fault."

Skinner shook his head wryly. The principal had handed Fox over to him with the admonition that the kid had to learn "not to think with his fists". Skinner was surprised. He hadn't exactly pegged Fox as a fighter.

"He might have a point," Skinner said mildly.

"Oh what would you know about it, Mr. Marine? Mr. I'm-so-macho-I-killed-babies-in - Vietnam." Fox snarled at him.

Skinner slammed his foot down on the brake pedal, and stopped the car. "Don't you ever talk to me like that again," he told the youth angrily. Fox's eyes widened, and he sat back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest. Skinner started the car again, still fuming. There was a long silence. Finally Fox cleared his throat.

"What did mom say?" he asked sullenly.

"Not much." Skinner shrugged. "But I'm sure she's very disappointed in you."

Fox looked up at him, the disbelief showing on his face. "Yeah, right. She doesn't give a damn," he muttered.

"Of course she does. She's your mom. She loves you." Skinner felt like he was going through the motions. He was sure Mrs. Mulder **did** love her son, but she seemed too caught up in her own problems to show him, or give the boy the guidance he needed right now.

"Has she told Dad yet?" Fox ventured.

"No." Skinner frowned, then gave the boy a sideways glance. There was a peculiar expression on Fox's face, and with a leap of intuition, Skinner knew immediately what all this was about. Yesterday his father had failed to show up for Fox's birthday, so today Fox was trying to see if there was anything he could do that **would** get his father's attention. He didn't seem to care whether it was positive or negative attention - anything would do.

Skinner took the boy to the park to keep him out of Mrs. Mulder's way during her bridge club meeting. They threw a ball around aimlessly, and as the day wore on, Fox's mood lifted to the point where Skinner could talk to him again.

"You know..." the agent began, lying on the grass and looking at the youth, a serious expression on his face, "if you keep behaving like this, a college like Oxford won't take you."

Fox bit down on his lip, and nodded. "I know. I don't mean to fuck up the whole time," he muttered.

"You don't," Skinner told him seriously. "Look, I know life seems tough right now, but it'll get better. I promise. One day you'll look back on all this and laugh. Trust me."

"Is that what happened to you?" Fox asked him, plucking out the grass with dirty fingernails.

"Yeah. I went through a bad time when I was your age. It got so bad, I did something really dumb," Skinner said.

"What?" Fox looked up.

"I thought the world was against me, my mom and dad didn't understand me. I wanted to prove myself...so I upped and enlisted for Vietnam."

"Oh." Fox said, looking chastened. "Well, I wouldn't do anything **that** dumb," he said with a small smile. Skinner laughed.

Bill Mulder didn't come home. He did, however, have a long talk with his son on the telephone - or at least the father talked. The son listened, made periodic faces down the 'phone, and occasionally muttered a "yes, sir", or "no, sir." When it was over, he ran upstairs to his bedroom and the music started blaring out on cue. Skinner sighed. Just being in this dysfunctional household was fraying his nerves. He had never done any kind of bodyguard work before, and was finding the need for constant vigilance to be a strain.

He wasn't sleeping as well as he usually did, either. That was the reason why, a few days later, he heard Fox get up in the middle of the night, and go into the bathroom. A few minutes later there was a loud crash, and Skinner sat up. He pulled on a tee shirt over his bare chest, picked up his gun, and went and knocked on the bathroom door.

"Fox, are you okay?" He whispered, anxious not to wake Mrs. Mulder.

"Yeah. I'm fine," the kid replied, but his voice sounded taut, so Skinner turned the handle on the door. It wasn't locked, and Skinner peered inside - to see Fox scrambling around fishing some pills out of basin.

"Fox?" Skinner walked in, then stopped - the floor was covered in broken glass.

"I knocked them over." Fox said helplessly. Skinner glanced at the open medicine cabinet on the wall and the basin. There was no way the youth had managed to knock the pill bottle over without taking it out of the cabinet first. Skinner picked up the remains of the glass bottle and saw Mrs. Mulder's name on the side of the prescription, but before he had a chance to question Fox further, he heard a sound from downstairs.

"What was that?" Fox jumped, and Skinner pulled his gun up. Fox's eyes widened in fear, and Skinner placed a finger over his mouth.

"Stay here," he whispered. Fox nodded, and Skinner edged out of the bathroom, and crept cautiously down the stairs, wishing that he was wearing something on his bare feet. As he reached the bottom of the stairs, he heard a sound from the front room, and he nudged it open with his foot. He saw a man, rifling through a drawer in the dresser, and stormed into the room.

"Freeze - federal agent!" He yelled, and the intruder stared at him, a look of horror on his face. Skinner heard a noise behind him, and realized that Fox had followed him down despite his instructions. In the split second when his attention was occupied, the intruder acted - he threw a vase at Skinner, knocking him on the side of the head, and then fled through the open window. Skinner fell against the door-frame, and then scrambled to his feet and chased outside, but it was too late - the intruder had vanished.

Skinner stormed back into the house, strode past Fox, and reached for the 'phone.

"Don't you ever, ever, disobey me again, do you hear me?" He yelled at the boy as he waited for the number to connect. Fox shrank back against the side of the couch, his eyes wide and frightened. "I'm sorry, sir," he whispered, and Skinner immediately regretted his actions. He got through to the local police, and called them out, then phoned his own boss, who said he'd contact Bill Mulder and let him know what had happened. Then Skinner put the phone down and turned to the scared boy. Fox's eyes were fixed on Skinner's head, and he was shaking.

"Fox, I'm sorry." He crouched down beside the youth. "I was worried about you - I'm very concerned for your safety. It's okay now though." The boy was still looking at him as if he was a ghost, and then he reached out a shaking hand to Skinner's forehead.

"You're bleeding," Fox whispered. "I'm sorry, you got hurt because of me. I'm sorry."

"It's okay." Skinner dabbed the blood off his forehead with the hem of his tee shirt. "I'm fine, Fox. I'm not hurt - just a bit shaken up. So are you I think!" Acting on impulse, he pulled the boy into a hug. Fox was too stunned by the events to resist and he clung on for a moment, until the shaking stopped. Then Skinner released him.

"I'm going to check on your mother," he said. Fox nodded, and followed him up, clearly too scared to remain in the front room on his own.

Mrs. Mulder was fine - the tablets she had taken meant that she had slept through the whole thing. Soon the house was swarming with police officers, and FBI agents. Fox sat on the stairs like a ghost, as people walked up and down, stepping around him, asking him questions. Finally, just after dawn, Bill Mulder arrived. He glanced at his son briefly, then Skinner introduced himself, and they went into the front room to discuss what had happened.

The consensus of opinion was that this was just a straightforward burglary - a theory that was proven correct when a small-time local thief was picked up a short while later with a necklace belonging to Mrs. Mulder in his pocket. Skinner had another meeting with Bill Mulder during which he struggled to see the son in the father, but found no evidence of the bright, funny kid he'd grown to like so much in this terse, cold man. Bill Mulder thanked him for taking such good care of his family, then glanced at his watch.

"I have to get back," he said tersely. He said a few words to his wife, who was sitting staring into space, then walked back to his car, and left.

It was only afterwards, when he saw Fox still sitting on the stairs like a statue, that Skinner realized that Bill Mulder hadn't said a word to his son the entire time he was there.

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## PRESENT

It wasn't until Mulder and Skinner arrived at the police station the following morning, that Mulder got that familiar "shit, why the fuck did I do **that?**" feeling in his stomach. A part of him couldn't wait to find out what Ray Clements had made of his profile, and the way it had been posted for all to see, but equally another part of him dreaded Skinner's reaction to finding out what he had done last night. He hung back, letting the big man go first, but peered over his shoulder as they walked to catch a glimpse of what was going on in the bullpen.

"Looks like some kind of commotion," Skinner commented, striding ahead quickly. Mulder grinned silently to himself, following on behind. Ray Clements had only just arrived, and he was pushing his way through the throng around the blackboard to see what was going on.

"Out of my way!" He bellowed, and the crowd parted obligingly to let him through. He stopped short, taking in the doughnut, and the hand-written page of notes.

"What's this?" He pulled the doughnut off the blackboard, and glanced through the notes.

"I think..." Mulder said, coming into the room, and leaning casually against the wall, "that you'll find that's a profile of the man you **should** be looking for."

"When did you...?" Clements blustered, going red at being humiliated in front of his own team.

"I paid your office a visit last night and looked through your files." Mulder told him in an amused tone, completely forgetting about his boss. Skinner took a deep inhalation, and pulled himself up to his full, towering height. Mulder glanced at him, and felt his stomach do a nose-dive into shoelaces.

"Agent Mulder, Detective Clements. Perhaps we could discuss this in private?" Skinner said in that deceptively calm tone Mulder knew his boss saved for when he was really pissed.

"I think that would be a good idea," Clements retorted angrily, opening the door to an interrogation room. Skinner's hand came down with a thump on Mulder's shoulder, and he felt himself being escorted rather too briskly for his liking, into the other room. When he got there, Skinner kicked the door shut behind him, frog-marched Mulder over to a chair, and pushed him into it.

"Sit," he commanded in a tone of voice that brooked no argument.

Mulder sat.

"What the hell is going on here?" Clements fumed, pacing around the room. "Did you know about this AD Skinner?"

"Of course not!" Skinner replied angrily.

"How dare you!" Clements spat standing in front of Mulder. Mulder wiped a droplet of spittle pointedly from his chin.

"And how dare **you** make up such crap about my father!" He yelled, half rising out of his seat.

"Agent Mulder - sit down, and shut up." Skinner roared, placing his hands on Mulder's shoulders, and forcing him back down. "Now you are out of order on this, Mulder. I want you to apologize to Detective Clements and..."

"Why the hell should I?" Mulder cried, getting up again. "The man insults my family, and is clearly a half-wit, peddling this nonsense."

"Mulder." Skinner's voice was low, and dangerously calm, while Clements was having an apoplectic fit.

"You should have seen the stuff he hasn't shown you, sir!" Mulder protested. "He's on the wrong track completely. There **is** a murderer out there, but it wasn't my father. This guy acts once every five years, starting in 1969. Samantha isn't part of the equation - she was taken in 1973 - I'll bet if he looks a bit closer he'll see that there was another kid taken in 1974. Maybe she wasn't reported missing for some reason, maybe she didn't live in the same area. Then there was another one in 1979, and so on until this year - only that kidnapping

hasn't happened yet. If this lazy bastard were to get off his ass, he might be able to prevent a tragedy taking place."

Mulder stopped, running out of steam.

"Mulder, I won't tell you again - shut up." Skinner snapped. Mulder bit on his lip, and nodded. "I'll deal with this," Skinner told him. He turned to Clements. "Well, what do you have to say to that?" He asked the detective.

"You're surely not condoning..." Clements blustered.

"I'm not condoning anything," Skinner said tersely, "but Agent Mulder is an excellent investigator. If he suggests you've got something wrong, then it would be wise to listen to him."

"After he broke in here..."

"I didn't break in!" Mulder yelled.

"You're a damn liar!" Clements yelled back, and Mulder snapped. Before he knew what he was doing, his fist shot out, and caught the detective square on the chin. Clements fell back, clutching his face, and Mulder felt Skinner's large arms close around him, restraining him.

"Agent Mulder." Skinner's voice was silkily calm in his ear. "Go back to the motel and wait for me there. Now!" Mulder jumped, and nodded, sanity flooding back in.

"I..." he paused, looking down at the stricken detective, who was nursing a small cut. "I'm sorry..." he whispered. Then he left.

Mulder knew he was in deep shit. He was so sure of that fact that he almost didn't go back to the motel as ordered, but some part of him knew it would be suicidal to his career if he ran away from this. Hell, he might have already kissed his career goodbye with that punch. He returned reluctantly to the motel room, and threw himself down on his bed, wondering what would happen next.

An hour passed, and Mulder felt the gnawing anxiety in the pit of his stomach grow worse. Finally, two hours later, the door opened, and Skinner stepped into the room. He shut the door behind him, and stood there for a moment, gazing at his errant agent. Mulder sat up, swallowing convulsively.

"Sir...I'm sorry..." he whispered.

Skinner shook his head. "Mulder - one of these days you are going to have to learn to think first, and act later."

"I will, sir. I promise. It won't happen again."

"I know it won't." Skinner told him darkly.

"Why? What's going to happen?" Mulder asked fearfully. "Is he going to press charges? Is my career over?"

"No." Skinner sat down on the side of his bed, and wiped his handkerchief across his forehead. "But I had to grovel to that man for you, Mulder. You have no idea how much I hated doing that."

"I'm sorry." Mulder whispered again.

Skinner looked at him angrily. "Mulder - sorry isn't good enough. I had to promise Detective Clements that you'd be severely punished for this."

Mulder sat on the bed, staring numbly into Skinner's dark uncompromising eyes - and he saw a memory reflected there, and heard an echo from a previous time.

"Oh shit," he said.

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## **PAST**

All the headway Skinner had made with Fox over the past couple of months evaporated in the aftermath of the burglary. The youth was sullen, and withdrawn, and took every opportunity to mouth off, and answer back. At first, Skinner put it down to Fox being annoyed with himself for displaying his fear so obviously during the burglary - he assumed the kid was taking it out on him because he had seen him so vulnerable, but he soon realized it was more than that. Fox's anger wasn't just directed at him, it seemed to be directed at the whole world, including his mother. Skinner winced as he sat with them around the dinner table, and Fox lapsed into his moody silences, punctuated only by growling replies to the questions his mother asked him. Skinner felt sorry for Mrs. Mulder, being spoken to with such disrespect, and sometimes his hand itched to slap some manners into the surly boy in the way his father would have done with him when he was that age. Fox went too far one evening when he told his mother to "fuck off". Skinner turned on him, and told him in no uncertain terms that he could either be civil, or leave the table.

"You're not my father!" Fox flared angrily.

"No, I'm a human being, who doesn't like to hear another human being spoken to like that," Skinner replied. Fox glared at him, then got up and stormed off to his room. Skinner gave Mrs. Mulder an apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that," he told her. "It's just...I had a traditional kind of upbringing, Ma'am, and I can't bear to hear women spoken to in that way."

"That's all right." Mrs. Mulder actually looked grateful. "I wish...sometimes I wish his father would take more interest in him. He's too much for me to handle, and you've been so good for him, Agent Skinner. He really likes you."

"These are the tough years - he'll grow out of it." Skinner told her, patting her hand. "He adores you, you know."

"Yes," Mrs. Mulder said absently. "He's a good boy, Agent Skinner. He always was. He needs a strong, loving role model - boys need their fathers at this age. I just wish..." She picked up her napkin, and wiped her lips, then got up and quietly left the room but not before Skinner saw the tears that had welled up in her eyes.

Two days later, a police car pulled up outside the house in the middle of the afternoon. Skinner opened the door, to find Fox being dragged up the path in the firm grip of an officer of the law.

"Is there a problem here?" He asked, reaching out and putting a hand on Fox's shoulder, pulling him into his protection.

"Yes, sir there is. Are you the boy's father?" The officer asked. Skinner shook his head - his lack of hair often made him seem older than his 26 years, and he was often mistaken for someone a decade or more older. "His brother then?" The man continued.

"No. This boy is under my protection though." Skinner showed the cop his FBI badge. "Is Fox in some kind of trouble?" he asked. He glanced down at the boy, who bit on his lip, and refused to meet his eyes.

"Yes, sir, he is," the officer replied. "Can I come in?"

Skinner stood to one side, and allowed the policeman into the house, taking him into the front room where Mrs. Mulder was seated. He introduced her to the policeman, then got down to business.

"What's all this about?" Skinner asked.

"We caught Fox selling these to some other kids." The policeman held up a vial of tablets that Skinner recognized as being Mrs. Mulder's prescription medication. He suspected they contained some kind of amphetamine.

"Fox?" He asked. The boy stood there, rubbing the toe of his sneaker against his shin. He refused to meet Skinner's eye. Skinner remembered the incident in the bathroom a few days previously, and sighed. "Did you do this, Fox?" He asked. Fox finally managed to lift his eyes up to meet the agent's.

"Yes, sir," he whispered.

Skinner glanced at Mrs. Mulder, and saw the tears running silently down her cheeks. "I can't...will you deal with this please...please don't let them send my boy away..." she begged Skinner. "Please sort it out for me. Do whatever you have to..." Then she ran from the room.

"All right." Skinner said, taking charge. "Fox, go and wait for me in your bedroom. Let me handle this." Fox stared at him mutely for a moment, then turned on his heel and followed

his mother out of the room. A few minutes later Skinner heard the usual thump-thump as the boy switched his music on. He gave a grimace, and turned back to the policeman.

"He's in a lot of trouble I'm afraid," the cop sighed. "Look, I know the family and the kid, and if it were up to me, I wouldn't press charges, but this is serious. You have to see that."

"Please, hear me out." Skinner asked. "The whole family has been under a lot of stress recently, Officer." He told the policeman about the attempted robbery, and the reason why he was here, offering protection.

The cop hesitated, clearly wavering. "I can't just let this slide," he said at last. "This isn't an isolated incident, Agent Skinner. This kid has been getting into a lot of trouble. He needs to be taught a lesson."

"Oh, he will be," Skinner said grimly.

"If I could rely on the family to bring him back into line..." the cop shook his head, clearly recognizing that as a forlorn hope.

"Listen - I promise he'll be punished for this in a way he doesn't forget for a long time. Please, just give him this one chance," Skinner begged desperately. "He's got a bright future ahead of him. The last thing he needs is a criminal record."

The policeman thought about it for a moment, looking into Skinner's pleading eyes, then finally gave in. "Just see that he knows he's done wrong," the cop said, as Skinner escorted him to the door.

"Oh he won't be in any doubt about that, trust me." Skinner replied. He thanked the man, and shut the door behind him, then took a deep breath and climbed the stairs to Fox's bedroom.

He was acting on instinct as he went - but he already knew what he intended to do. He threw open the door, turned off the loud music, and walked over to the windows, opening the closed drapes and letting some light in on the darkness.

"Come with me, Fox," he said quietly.

"Why?" Fox placed a hand over his eyes dramatically, as if the daylight were attacking him.

"Because I say so. Don't make me any angrier than I already am." Skinner snapped.

Fox looked at him for a moment, as if tempted to defy him, then was clearly so scared by what he saw that he got to his feet, and sloped reluctantly towards the door. Skinner followed him out, put a hand on the boy's shoulder, and marched him down to his father's study. He shut the door, and locked it behind them.

"Hey - what are you doing?" Fox complained, looking distinctly nervous.

"I'm going to punish you," Skinner said evenly, opening one of the desk drawers.

"You can't do that!" Fox looked aghast. "You're not my dad."

"So you keep telling me," Skinner replied. "But I **am** somebody who just went to a great deal of trouble to keep you **out** of trouble. Do you realize you could have screwed up your chances of getting into Oxford? Do you know how well a criminal record would go down on your application form to the FBI?"

"I don't care." Fox snapped.

"Well I do. I like you, and I'm not going to watch you throw the rest of your life away just because you're unhappy right now." Skinner opened another drawer, and found what he was looking for. He pulled out the sleek, black paddle.

Fox took a step back. "You're not using that thing on me!" He protested.

"Yes, I am," Skinner replied "In case you don't remember, your mother just gave me permission to sort this mess out any way I could, and this is the best way I can come up with." He strode over to the boy and looked down into his scared eyes. "You see, Fox, I think you're just a kid, pushing away at the boundaries, waiting for someone to say "no", to tell you that what you're doing is wrong. I'm that person. I'm saying it. This is where the boundaries are. This is where you understand what is, and is not, acceptable." He tapped the paddle against his palm to illustrate the point. "I'm not saying it won't hurt - but you've done something very wrong, and I'm going to make sure that you know it was wrong."

"I know! I do know!" Fox protested desperately. "I'm sorry. Don't use that thing on me."

"I wish I didn't have to, but I think you deserve it - don't you?"

Fox looked up at him for a long moment, but Skinner saw something other than fear of punishment in the boy's eyes - he saw relief. The kid was relieved that somebody was stopping him going into freefall. Any doubts Skinner might have had dissolved in that moment.

"Take your pants and underwear down, and lean over the back of the chair," he commanded, taking hold of Fox's arm, and leading him over to the armchair. Fox looked at him for a moment, as if unsure whether he'd really go through with this, but Skinner remained resolute. He'd never handed out a spanking before in his life but he'd been on the receiving end of a few, and he was sure that this was the best way to deal with the boy. Fox lowered his eyes, and began to unbutton his pants with shaking hands. He slid them down his thighs to pool around his ankles, and pushed his underwear down with them, then bent over as instructed.

Skinner took a deep breath, then placed a hand on the small of Fox's back. The boy tightened his butt cheeks in anticipation, and Skinner swung the first blow.

"Ow!" Fox protested immediately. Skinner ignored him - his first attempt had been tentative, but he soon got into the swing, bringing the paddle back again with a resounding crack against Fox's buttocks.

"Fuck!" Fox half got up, and Skinner pressed him down again.

"I suggest you stay still. I've only just started," he said grimly. "You're not getting up until you ass feels like it's on fire, and you won't be able to sit on it for a week. Then you can stand in the corner to consider why your butt hurts so much, and **then** we'll talk about where we go from here."

He swung the paddle back down again, sensing the boy's mute resistance, and then again, even harder. He peppered Fox's ass over and over again, causing bright red ovals to arise on the youth's buttocks. Every swat was punctuated by a yelp from the boy, until soon he was sobbing, and his ass was flaming a bright red. Skinner didn't stop - he knew he had to make this count if he was going to stand any chance of getting through to this kid. He carried right on, moving the paddle lower to slap the top of the boy's thighs in a way that he knew from his own experience, to be very painful. Fox dissolved into a series of incoherent moans, his long arms and legs flailing. After several minutes, Skinner decided the kid had endured enough, and he stopped, and threw the paddle down on the desk. Then he pulled Fox to his feet, and shuffled the boy over to the corner.

"Get your breath back," he instructed the sobbing boy. He returned to the desk, and put the paddle away - he could still feel the heat coming off it. He sat down for a moment, and stilled his own breathing after the exertion. Fox stood in the corner, his head leaning miserably against the wall, his trousers screwed up around his ankles.

"I'm sorry," he whispered at last, and his sobs dissipated into genuine tears of remorse. "Please, Agent Skinner. I'm sorry."

"All right. You can get dressed," Skinner informed him tersely. The boy pulled his trousers up cautiously over his beacon-red behind, wincing, and fastened them up. Then he turned around, and glanced at his punisher from under tear-stained eyelashes.

"I mean it. I'm sorry," he repeated.

"Go to your room." Skinner told him.

Fox gave him a last, desperate look, then he fled.

Skinner waited, expecting to hear the usual inevitable loud thump of music, but that didn't happen. Instead he heard the muffled sounds of someone sobbing his heart out. Unable to bear it, he swallowed the last traces of his anger and walked up the stairs. He knocked on Fox's door, and went straight in when there wasn't a reply. The kid was lying face down on his bed, his body still racked with sobs. Skinner sat down beside him, reached out, and gently tousled the boy's hair.

Fox looked up at him. "You hate me don't you?" He whispered.

"No. Of course not," Skinner replied, his heart breaking. He pulled the boy into a hug, and surprised both of them by dropping a kiss onto the kid's tear-stained hair. "I could never

hate you, but I hate what you did, Fox. You had to be punished. You do understand that, don't you?"

"Yes. You were right." Fox mumbled into Skinner's shirt.

"About what?" Skinner asked.

"About me wanting someone to say 'no'. I did...I thought...it didn't seem to matter what I did. Nobody even noticed. **He** didn't notice. He didn't come back for my birthday, or when I got into trouble at school. He only came back when someone broke into his stupid house..."

"That was because he was worried about you and your mom, Fox." Skinner said, holding the kid tight.

"No, he wasn't. He didn't even talk to me." Fox dissolved into another series of helpless sobs.

Skinner sighed. "Fox - you were taking those tablets before then. You can't pin all this on your dad," he said. Fox drew back and looked at him, between hitching sobs. "You're growing up," Skinner told him. "You're reaching an age when you have to take responsibility for your own actions. I know it's hard, trust me, I really know." He sighed. "One minute I was a kid, without any responsibilities, and the next, I was a marine, responsible for people's lives...and their deaths," he murmured, grimly, fighting back his own memories. "You might feel that life has dealt you a shitty hand, but it could be worse, trust me, and you can't keep making excuses for yourself."

Fox nodded. "I want to be like you," he whispered.

"I'm nothing special." Skinner shook his head wryly.

"You are to me." Fox bit on his lip.

Skinner felt a wave of affection pass through him. "And you are to me," he said, tousling Fox's hair again with his hand.

Fox's behavior improved beyond recognition in the next few weeks. Skinner could hardly believe the change in the boy. He was eager and willing to help around the house, polite to his mother, and he threw himself into his schoolwork with a vengeance. Now, more than ever, he wanted to emulate his hero, and go to Oxford, and eventually join the FBI.

Skinner was sorry when the assignment came to an end. Fox took the news badly, but Skinner pulled him into a bear hug, and handed him a card with his phone number on it.

"Just call me any time you like, Fox," he told him sincerely. Fox nodded, blinking back the tears. "I have a gift for you," he said, as the boy walked him out to his car. He took off the dog tags he always wore around his neck, and placed them around Fox's neck. The boy looked up at him, his eyes shining.

"I can't take these!" he protested. "I know what they mean to you."

"I want you to have them," Skinner told him firmly. "So that you'll remember me."

"I couldn't forget you." Fox told him.

Skinner cuffed him lightly on the arm. "Good. I want to hear great things about you, Fox. I want you to do well at school, and have a shining career."

"Just like you." Fox grinned.

"Yeah. Maybe." Skinner grinned back.

He got into the car, and drove slowly away. As he looked back in the mirror, he saw Fox examining the dog tags, tracing the name on them with something approaching reverence.

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## **PRESENT**

Mulder sat on the side of the bed, and looked at his boss. The fabric of time between them was gossamer thin.

"Déjà vu," he whispered. "We've been here before."

"Yes, we have." Skinner's dark eyes showed that he understood the reference.

"Oh shit." Mulder muttered again. "I thought...I always hoped that you'd forgotten but you haven't, have you?"

"Of course not." Skinner shrugged. "I wasn't lying to you when you were first assigned to me, and I told you that I'd followed your career through the academy with interest. I recognized your name immediately - and went out of my way to keep an eye on you."

"You did?" Mulder looked up in surprise.

"Of course." Skinner told him. "But given the, uh, circumstances...I didn't like to mention that we'd already met."

"And that you'd paddled my butt." Mulder gave a theatrical wince.

"Exactly." Skinner said wryly. "You didn't bring it up, and I didn't want to embarrass you. Hell, I was sure you wouldn't remember me. It was a long time ago."

"But you made a lasting impression on me," Mulder told him honestly. "Here." He reached into one of the side pockets of his bag, and pulled out a set of dog tags. "I carry them with me everywhere. Um, sorry about the bullet hole - that's a long story," he grinned

apologetically, gesturing to the nick in the side of the tags. Skinner took them, and held them for a moment, clearly struggling for words.

"I had no idea..." He murmured fingering his own name on the tags.

"You turned me around, sir. I was heading for trouble, and you pulled me up short. I wouldn't have gone to Oxford if you hadn't encouraged me."

"It's good to know." Skinner grunted, handing Mulder back the tags. "However it does bring us back to today's debacle."

"I know." Mulder sighed. "It's a similar situation to last time - maybe you should use the same method of dealing with it," he suggested.

"It did seem to be extraordinarily effective." Skinner gave a wry smile. "Only I don't usually travel around with a paddle in my luggage, Agent Mulder."

"No." Mulder stared at the ground.

"However..." Skinner got up, and undid his belt. "I do have this," he said firmly.

Mulder looked up in shock. "Sir?" He asked, in a tremulous voice. "You've gotta be kidding. Right?"

"What do you think, Agent Mulder?" Skinner asked him, in a hard tone. "I know it's unorthodox, but I've been racking my brain to think of a way of punishing you adequately for what you did to Clements without it going on your permanent record, or resulting in you getting thrown out of the FBI."

"Right..." Mulder muttered uncertainly. "But a whipping, sir? I mean, I know I have to be punished, and I know you're out of options, and I really don't want to lose my job over a prick like Clements but..."

"Let me ask you one thing, Mulder - did that paddling I gave you when you were a kid work? Did it make an impression?"

Mulder swallowed nervously, considered lying, then looked up into Skinner's eyes and knew he didn't dare to.

"Yes," he whispered. "It might have hurt like hell, but the message went home. Sometimes..." Mulder took a deep breath, then continued. "Sometimes, in all the years since, I've wished you were still around, to give me the time and attention I craved back then. Hell, I still crave it. The ball games, the hanging out. I felt I could talk to you, man to man - and I sure as hell couldn't talk to my mom or dad. And, uh, I'm still not very good at judging those boundaries..." He admitted with a wry smile.

"I **had** noticed." Skinner commented. He doubled over the belt in his hand. "So, I think we should take over where we left off. I'm not prepared to let today's appalling display of bad

behavior go unpunished, but I don't want to jeopardize your career. I think, Agent Mulder, that there's still a part of you that wants someone to say 'no', to tell you when you've gone too far, and to pull you back into line. I sometimes think your behavior ever since you were assigned to me has been a challenge to get me to repeat that role in your life."

Mulder swallowed again, then gazed at his fingers. "You could be right, sir," he agreed. "But..." he looked up. "I **really** don't want to be whipped."

"I know - but I think you **really** deserve to be whipped," Skinner told him firmly. "Now get up, get your pants down, and bend over that chair, Mulder, before I get **really** mad."

Mulder felt his stomach do a double flip, and he was 17 again. A part of him hated this, and what was going to happen, but a part of him was relieved as well. In his heart he knew he did deserve this - just as he knew that he was lucky that Skinner cared enough about him, and his career, to work so hard to keep him from being drummed out of the Bureau - which was what he probably deserved.

"I'm going to hate this," he muttered, getting up, and unbuttoning his pants.

"I hope so." Skinner told him grimly. "I'm warning you, I won't go any easier on you now than I did when you were 17. You might find this hurts a lot more than you remember it."

"It couldn't, sir." Mulder told him wryly.

With shaking hands, he pushed his pants down around his ankles. His shorts followed suit. Then he bent himself gingerly over the back of the chair. He felt Skinner place a hand on his back, and closed his eyes, remembering how this felt from all those years ago. He felt vulnerable, the cool air wafting around his exposed butt, tilted up ready for punishment. Mulder felt as if his stomach had liquefied as he waited for the whipping to commence.

The first blow cracked down on his upturned bottom, and Mulder gasped out loud.

"Shit!" He yelled. Skinner ignored him, and the next lick followed the first with hard precision. Mulder felt as if two lines of fire had been painted in his flesh. "Fuck!" he moaned. "You don't have to go quite so hard, sir," he protested feebly.

"Yes I do, Agent Mulder. I don't want you to be in any doubt about the way I feel about your behavior today." Skinner told him grimly.

"I'm not, sir! OW!" Mulder cried as another stroke caressed a deep line of agony across his tender buttocks. Skinner's hand was firm on his back, for which he was grateful, as he wasn't sure he could have stood the ordeal if the big man hadn't been holding him in place. The strapping continued for several minutes - a long time after Mulder was sure that Skinner had made his point. He hadn't intended to cry, but somehow he found himself doing so, the tears running down his cheeks in rivulets, as the belt continued to rain blows down over and over again on his upturned butt. Finally, Skinner finished, and removed his hand. Mulder got up, shakily, his breath still coming in hitching sobs.

"Corner time, sir?" He asked.

Skinner considered it for a moment. "No, Mulder. I think you've learned your lesson on this occasion. Maybe next time," he said.

Mulder stared at him aghast. "Next time, sir?" he echoed faintly, pulling up his pants.

"You did say this worked, Mulder," Skinner reminded him. "And it's the only method of discipline that ever **has** worked with you."

Mulder wiped his shirtsleeve across his tear streaked face, then threw himself face down on his bed, and buried himself in his pillow. He wasn't sure what he was crying for, but once the floodgates opened he couldn't close them again. He cried for the kid he'd been, and the man he'd become, for the slurs on the character of the father he'd wanted to love him, and for the aching loss of that love inside. Then he felt Skinner's hand tousling his hair.

"I seem to remember that this was an important part of the whole event, as well," Skinner murmured. Mulder nodded, and transferred his face into Skinner's shirt, sobbing for several minutes. Finally, the spasms quieted and he sat back, then yelped, and turned sideways.

"You're really mean with that belt, sir," he complained.

"I certainly hope so, Mulder," Skinner replied. Mulder heard him clear his throat, as if embarrassed. "Were you okay...after I left? You never called."

"I figured you didn't really want to hear from me. I was just a job..." Mulder shrugged.

"You idiot!" Skinner shook his head angrily. "You were always more than a job to me. I thought I made that clear." He took hold of Mulder's shoulders, and gazed at him intently. "I don't know if your father ever told you that he was proud of you, but I am. You've turned into everything I could ever have hoped for, and I'm more proud than I can ever say."

Mulder didn't reply, just rested his face against the other man's shoulder, but inside he felt happier than he had done in a long, long time.

"You know...there have been times since when I've felt just like I did when I was a teenager, and I've longed for you to take me in hand again," Mulder admitted.

Skinner chuckled. "Well you got it, kid," he said, then he flicked a strand of tear stained hair from the other man's face. "Okay now, Fox?" he murmured, and his dark eyes were kind, and concerned.

"Yes, sir." Mulder nodded, and smiled.

"Good, because I've had enough of this damn motel. I think it's time to go home."

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## **FUTURE...**

Mulder sat in the car, feeling both exhausted, and yet curiously elated. His butt hurt like hell, but he felt he'd found something for which he'd been searching for a very long time. He glanced at Skinner as his boss drove them to the airport.

"Sir...how do you see this working out, in, um, the future?" He ventured. Skinner looked at him thoughtfully.

"That's up to you, Mulder," he replied. "I think that this kind of discipline works for you, and it seems to me, that however much you hate it, you'd respond well if I used it whenever I feel it's necessary. However, I think we're both aware how highly unorthodox all this is."

"Uh, yeah." Mulder grinned. "Shit, don't tell Scully."

"I won't tell anyone." Skinner replied, his face serious.

Mulder leaned against the window, then winced as his butt sent shock waves up his spine in protest at the movement. "Ow," he muttered under his breath. "I think I preferred the paddle, sir," he commented.

"I'll go and buy one then," Skinner told him. Mulder glanced at him, but Skinner was poker-faced, and the agent wasn't entirely sure that his boss had been joking. Somehow, he had the feeling that the future was going to prove very interesting...

## **THE END**

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