

The Wall by Xanthe



This story archived at <http://www.xanthe.org/the-wall/>

Story Notes:

Posted: 23rd July, 2000.

Wonderful graphic by **Danni**.

There's another lovely pic at the end which illustrates a scene from this story. Thanks to Sean Spencer for sending it to me.

AWARDS



Winner in the Wirerims awards in the categories of:

Outstanding Skinner Angst

Outstanding Skinner Characterisation (joint winner)

This story was written for ***The Wounded Heroes*** zine. Many thanks to dot for a great beta reading and to RAC for her hard work on the zine.

The Wall by Xanthe

Vietnam War Memorial, Washington DC.

December, 1999

It was a bitterly cold night. The man parked his car and got out, his breath clouding the air as he walked across the grass, frost crunching underfoot. He pulled his coat collar up around his neck to ward off the chill wind, but despite the cold he didn't begrudge the fact that this particular anniversary fell in December. One night every year spent shivering was still one more night than his fallen comrades had been granted.

His pace slowed as he reached the implacable black granite of the Wall, the shiny surface reflecting the moonlight, and his own image. He paused, and ran a finger over the smooth granite, feeling the engraved names beneath his fingertips. Each one had been a real person - somebody's son. He walked slowly along the Wall, his head bowed, then he turned, and walked back again. He glanced at his watch, and looked around, clearly expecting someone.

A frown creased his wide forehead, and he went to sit down on a nearby bench, taking with him the bag he had brought from the car. After half an hour he glanced at his watch again, and shook his head, his dark eyes concerned.

An hour later, he decided that he couldn't wait any longer. He opened the bag, and removed the candles - one for each lost comrade - and wondered if he should have brought an extra one this year. Stifling that thought, he straightened, and walked back to the Wall. He knew where each name was by heart - years of doing this had etched their positions in his memory. He placed the candles on the ground by the sections of the wall where his comrades' names were engraved. The candles sat in a little cluster, huddled together - his brothers in arms had all fallen on the same day. United in life by their energy, and youth, their names were linked forever in death. He lit each candle carefully, then stepped back. He was not a sentimental man but he was a dutiful one, and this was a duty that he fulfilled, every year, without fail - and usually with company.

He kept his lonely vigil all night. Waiting. He watched as each candle burned down to nothing, the faint, flickering lights melting in the night as those they honored had done so many years ago, their lives wiped out in three minutes of chaos that had changed his life, and robbed them of theirs. He didn't sleep, or eat, throughout that long night. He just sat, his black gloved hands resting in his lap, his mind far away. The tip of his nose was frozen, and his lungs ached from breathing in the cold air for so long. He was reminded of a poem, as he endured his lonely vigil. How did it go? *Is there anybody there? said the Traveler, knocking on the moonlit door...*

The man grunted, trying to remember the words, but recalling instead only the sense of melancholy and grief that the poem evoked. The cold seeped into his bones, causing at least two old wounds to ache - both of them legacies from Vietnam. He glanced over at the black shadow that was the Wall, and saw the first faint rays of the sun lightening the darkness. Dawn. He looked at his watch one last time.

"*Tell them I came, and no one answered, that I kept my word,*" he quoted. Then he turned on his heel, and walked back to his car.

Alone.

Hoover Building. Washington DC.

August, 2000

"What do you mean - he's on vacation?" Mulder asked, his voice rising an incredulous octave in pitch.

"I mean, he's on vacation," Kim replied firmly, wondering idly how Mulder could be so cute, **and** so difficult, at one and the same time.

"Where? When?" Mulder demanded. "How long?"

Kim raised an eyebrow. "The Assistant Director is entitled to take a vacation without sending out a memo to all his agents informing them of the details. Or do you think that he should email you his complete travel itinerary so that you can pester him while he's taking his well deserved break?" she asked tartly, a certain familiarity in dealing with Mulder over the years lending her tone its asperity. Mulder made her boss's life misery, and when the Assistant Director was in a bad mood she was in the direct firing line, so she had her own special grudge against the agent.

Mulder rocked back on his heels, and nodded.

"You're right. I'm sorry. It's just that I've grown kind of used to having him available 24/7 to sign 302's, and give me the green light on various X Files. I'm kind of thrown that he isn't here." Mulder glanced around the empty office, hands on hips, in an unwitting parody of its usual occupant.

"Well, he did brief his stand-in, AD Kersh, on the, uh, special nature of the X Files," Kim smiled sweetly. "So I'm sure that he'll be able to help you if you go and see him."

"Right." Mulder glanced around again, tugging his bottom lip anxiously. He clearly had no desire to work under Kersh again, with or without the X Files. "How long did you say he'd be gone for?" he asked Kim.

She raised her eyebrow at him for a second time. "I didn't," she replied, holding the door open.

Mulder parked his car, and then looked out of the window at the seedy downtown Washington neighborhood, a puzzled frown creasing his forehead.

"Well, as vacation destinations go, I wouldn't exactly put this top of my list," he murmured to himself, glancing at the rundown tenement block he was parked outside.

He had no idea what Skinner was doing here, but this was the address the Lone Gunmen had come up with. Mulder wasn't even sure why he had pursued this the way he had, but something inside didn't feel right, and he wasn't the kind of person to ignore his instincts.

It wasn't just that Skinner had taken a vacation without telling him, or even that he had taken a vacation full stop - which was unheard of in itself - it was the aura of secrecy about it. That had been like a red rag to a bull to Mulder. He had done some digging, and discovered that Skinner hadn't taken any of the huge bank of vacation time he had accrued. Instead he had requested - and been granted - a mysterious leave of absence. There was nothing on Skinner's personnel file, which Mulder had purloined, to indicate why, although it had been approved at the highest level. Skinner's Crystal City apartment lay in darkness - Mulder had checked there too, and found that his boss hadn't been seen for several days. In the grip of a mystery, Mulder had turned to the Gunmen for help tracking down his errant boss, and this was the address they had come up with.

Mulder glanced at the building again, and chewed on his lip trying to reach a decision. What the hell was Skinner doing here? With a shrug, he decided that there was only one way to find out.

The elevator in the building wasn't working, which didn't surprise Mulder. He began walking up the 8 flights of stairs, his footsteps clattering on the concrete, his nose assaulted by the distinct and unpleasant stench of urine.

JERK OFF, a line of graffiti proclaimed loudly, above a brightly hued rendition of the name ' *JOE*'.

Mulder smiled at the messages benignly, wondering whether it wouldn't have been more interesting to combine the two messages into *JOE JERKED OFF HERE* which was not an entirely unlikely scenario considering the dubious substances he could see seeping out of the dark, damp corners of the building.

Mulder was panting slightly by the time he reached the eighth floor. He checked the address: Apartment 1313. "Unlucky for some, doubly unlucky for others," he murmured, pausing outside it. One of the 3's was hanging at an angle that could have been described as 'jaunty'. Mulder raised his hand to rap on the door, and then hesitated, wondering again what the hell he was doing here, and what his reception would be. Then, with a careless shrug, he knocked anyway.

There was silence for a moment, and then he heard the thump of footsteps within the apartment, and the sound of keys turning in the lock, before the door was opened a fraction, hitting an internal security chain. Mulder just had time to take in a pair of long legs clad in black jeans, and a muscular torso encased in a black tee shirt, before the occupant muttered an angry: "Damn it, Mulder," and the door was slammed rudely in his face.

Mulder stood there for a moment, considering the shut door.

"Hmm. Playing hard to get are we?" he murmured, raising his hand to knock again. The door opened before he had a chance, and a big hand grabbed hold of his jacket and dragged him inside, slamming the door shut behind him.

"I *was* hoping you'd go away, but on second thought I just knew that was never going to happen," Skinner growled at him. "So instead I'd like an explanation, Agent Mulder."

Mulder straightened his jacket and glanced around the one-room apartment, with its peeling, discolored wallpaper, and damp walls. "Nice place you've got here," he murmured. "What's the matter? Crystal City too down-market for you?"

"Mulder." Skinner's tone held a very dangerous warning in it. Mulder glanced at the big man, then did a double take. Skinner looked totally different in these clothes; his gun nestled on clear display against a heavily muscled arm, a knife thrust casually through his belt.

"Uh," Mulder cleared his throat, wondering why seeing his boss dressed like this was having such a disconcerting effect on him. He supposed it was because Skinner was such an office animal. He looked like he had been born to wear a crisp white shirt, and tasteful tie, and read reports, and somehow he seemed out of place in this environment, dressed like this.

"Well?" Skinner's dark eyes clearly registered his irritation.

"Kim said you were on vacation, but nobody seemed to know where, or for how long. You know how I hate mysteries," Mulder shrugged.

"You tracked me down because you hate mysteries?" Skinner asked incredulously. "Did nobody ever tell you the cautionary tale about curiosity and the cat, Mulder? No, don't answer that." Skinner waved a weary hand in the air. "I suspect it isn't mysteries you hate so much as being temporarily transferred back to A.D. Kersh. What's the matter, Mulder? Missing your tame old Assistant Director? The one you had trained to sign off on your latest absurd request for a 302?" Skinner's tone was angry, and his jaw was set in a hard, belligerent line.

"No - just wondering if a friend was in trouble," Mulder stated softly.

Skinner glared at him for a moment, and then backed off with a sigh. "Mulder, I appreciate your concern, but as you can see, I'm fine."

Mulder glanced around the empty apartment, taking in the stained mattress on the floor, the half-empty whisky bottle, and the complete lack of any other furniture, then turned back to Skinner with one eyebrow raised.

"Fallen on hard times?" he asked.

Skinner frowned. "Mulder, I'm just checking something out. Something personal. I don't need your help, and I'm not in any danger."

"That would explain why you're wandering around like a walking armory in your own apartment then." Mulder gazed pointedly at the knife in Skinner's belt, and the gun under his arm.

"Drop it, Mulder," Skinner said softly. "If you really mean what you said, if you're really just looking out for a...friend," he paused, a wry half-smile hovering on his lips at this description of himself, "then drop this. Go back to the Bureau and get on with your work. I can assure you that I'll come back when I'm good and ready."

"It's an undercover op then?" Mulder wandered over to the window, and glanced outside. It gave him a good, clear sight of the front of the building, and all the way up and down both sides of the street. "Nice view," he murmured. "I expect that's why you chose it."

Skinner inhaled sharply, but refused to rise to the bait. "Just go, Mulder," he said.

"An undercover op on your own, without backup?" Mulder raised his eyebrows again. "You'd have my hide if I pulled anything like this, sir. Unless...this isn't official Bureau business, is it?"

"No," Skinner said, his dark eyes full of some emotion that Mulder couldn't even begin to guess at. "This is personal."

"I see. And you couldn't use a friend?" Mulder suggested hopefully.

Skinner shook his head firmly. "Definitely not. No." He walked to the door, unlocked it, unfastened the chain, and held it open pointedly for Mulder to leave. With a sigh, Mulder walked towards it, and exited the apartment.

"If you need help, just call," Mulder said, trying, and failing, to find some clue in Skinner's dark, unreadable eyes.

"I won't need any help," Skinner replied firmly.

Mulder looked at him for a moment, then gave up, turning on his heel to go.

"Mulder."

He turned, halfway down the corridor. Skinner stood framed in the doorway, his large body casting a shadow.

"Thanks, but I'll be fine. Just let this go."

"Okay," Mulder said, with a half-smile and a shrug. "When hell freezes over, bossman," he muttered to himself, trotting back down the stairs.

Mulder watched the queue of pale-faced people hanging around outside the door of the abandoned warehouse. He had been staking the place out for the past few days, having followed Skinner here a week ago, but he still couldn't figure out why the hell his boss was posing as a drug dealer.

His usual enthusiastic, single-minded digging had revealed that Skinner was working for a drug gang led by a minor thug called Cassidy. Further digging had turned up the information that Cassidy in turn worked for one of the biggest drug suppliers in the state - a mystery figure called Morgan. Mysteries

were anathema to Mulder at the best of times, and he had a very real feeling that Skinner was involved in something dangerous. He wasn't sure why that should bother him, but it did.

Mulder watched as the queue whittled down to nothing, the constant stream of visitors leaving the building as listlessly as they had arrived, wafting out like ghosts, clutching their little plastic packets, and disappearing into the dark night.

Mulder took a deep breath. Was he going to do this, or wasn't he? *Fools rush in...* He made his decision and began walking towards the warehouse - then stopped as a tall, familiar figure emerged. Skinner was talking to one of the other gang members, a stocky man with blond hair who Mulder knew was called Frank. They began crossing the street. Mulder paused. Something felt wrong. Very wrong. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end, and he started running even before he saw the movement out of the corner of his eye. He just had time to yell out a frantic "get down" before crashing into his surprised boss, and throwing him to the ground just as the bullet whistled overhead.

"What the hell...?" Mulder found himself looking down into Skinner's confused dark eyes.

Frank, meanwhile, had started pursuing their mystery assailant up the street.

"Mulder!" Skinner hissed. Mulder put a finger over his mouth as the other gang members ran out of the warehouse to see what the noise was about.

"He got away." Frank came jogging back, and filled his comrades in on what had just happened.

"Looks like you've got some enemies," Cassidy grunted at Skinner.

The big man shrugged, then gave an almost feral smile that took Mulder by surprise. "Hasn't everyone?" he replied.

"Who's this?" Cassidy looked at Mulder. Mulder smiled his most disarming smile in reply. Skinner glared at him.

"I have no idea," Skinner said. "Perhaps," he crossed his arms menacingly over his chest, "you should enlighten us," he snapped at Mulder.

Mulder found himself being dragged back into the warehouse. If Skinner hadn't been there he'd have been even more nervous than he was. Even so, the odds weren't exactly in their favor. Apart from Skinner, there were four other members of the gang: Cassidy was a small individual with boyish and somewhat effeminate good looks, who, Mulder had discovered, also answered to the unsurprising if inappropriate nickname, 'Butch.' The two remaining gang members went by the monikers Elvis and Scar. Mulder might have felt faintly amused by this motley collection of lowlifes, but he wasn't stupid enough to underestimate them. They were all drug dealers, and they were all armed and dangerous.

"So - who are you?" Cassidy grabbed a handful of Mulder's hair, and held his knife to the agent's throat.

"Morgan sent me," Mulder managed to choke, not looking at Skinner.

"Morgan?" Cassidy hesitated, and Skinner stiffened.

"I'm new to the organization. I'm his nephew...he said...he said I should learn the trade from the bottom up...sent me here with a delivery..." Mulder swiped in his pocket, and held up the consignment of drugs he had acquired - still wrapped up in its original packaging. Cassidy took them, the pressure of his knife easing from Mulder's throat. "It's got Morgan's seal on it," Mulder said quickly, pointing at the label on the bag. "You can call him if you want to check it out."

Mulder watched Cassidy's reaction carefully. He thought it was unlikely that Cassidy had Morgan's number. He suspected that, like a lackey, the small man awaited phone calls, and instructions. It would fit with Morgan's modus operandi, from what he had learned.

"That won't be necessary," Cassidy said smoothly, confirming Mulder's hypothesis, "but I'm still not convinced."

"I did save *his* life," Mulder added, pointing at Skinner. Cassidy thought about it for a moment, then clearly decided to give Mulder the benefit of the doubt.

"All right." Cassidy finally released him. "You can get up...and next time don't fucking lurk outside - you almost got yourself killed."

"Sorry," Mulder shrugged, and got to his feet, flashing the gang his most charming grin. He sensed that his boss was just itching to wipe the smirk off his subordinate's face with the back of his hand. Mulder turned briefly towards him, giving him a wink, and was rewarded by Skinner's low growl, and the involuntary clenching of his fists.

"So - Morgan wants you to learn the trade, huh?" Cassidy strutted around, clearly pleased that the boss had chosen *his* little gang to instruct his nephew.

"Yeah. I'm kind of...well...don't tell anyone..." Mulder lowered his tone conspiratorially, "but my uncle has chosen me to be his heir. He wants to make sure I know the trade inside out - that's why he sent me down here to help you guys out for a couple of weeks. He's a great believer in getting your hands dirty."

"Right," Cassidy nodded. "Well, you'll sure as hell get 'em dirty here. What's your name?"

"Spooky," Mulder grinned. "On account of how I don't scare easy." He winked at Frank, who grinned at him. Skinner sighed.

"I don't like it," the Assistant Director snapped. Five pairs of eyes focused on him. "Maybe Morgan just wants to put a spy in here?" Skinner suggested to Cassidy.

The little man's face twitched as he processed that suggestion. "Well, what if he does? We don't have anything to hide. We pass Morgan's cut onto him, and split the rest between ourselves. It's kosher." There wasn't much Cassidy could do about it if it wasn't, Mulder thought, as turning away the boss's nephew would undoubtedly result in a swift, and probably fatal, reprisal. He had chosen a good cover story.

"Where's the kid going to stay?" Skinner asked. "Or does he run back to Uncle every night and tell tales on us?"

"Actually, **Uncle** said I had to make my own living arrangements," Mulder piped up, an innocent expression in his hazel eyes.

"He can stay with you," Cassidy told Skinner. "As you're the one who's so suspicious of him, you can keep an eye on him. In fact..." He drew himself up to his full height, which just about made him level with Skinner's chin. "You can be responsible for him. Keep him out of trouble - show him the ropes."

"Fine by me," Skinner snapped. "You...Spooky," he snarled. "Get your ass over here. I'm going to show you where home sweet home is for the next few weeks."

Mulder flashed another charming smile at the gang before scrambling after his boss.

Skinner didn't say a word as they got into his battered car to drive back to his rundown apartment. Mulder was seemingly oblivious to this fact as he got into the car. The passenger seat was wedged up tight against the dashboard, and Mulder folded his tall body into it with some difficulty.

"Hey, where's the lever?" He looked around, trying to figure out a way to get more space for himself, and failed. Eventually, he gave up, and placed his long legs on the dashboard, knees scrunched up against his chest. He got out a packet of sunflower seeds, and stuffed a handful in his mouth, opening the window and spitting out the husks at regular intervals. Mulder kept up a continuous monologue throughout the journey, seemingly unconcerned by Skinner's response - or lack thereof.

"Interesting bunch of guys...you know Frank's got a string of convictions as long as your arm? Sure, yeah, of course you knew that. You've done your homework, right? What's weird is that Cassidy's never gone down for anything...they call him 'Teflon' in Narcotics - nothing ever sticks. Still, he's young...plenty of time...whoa - red light...never mind...did you know that sunflower seeds have selenium in them? It's supposed to attack free radicals, and help you live longer...secret of eternal life...did you ever see that movie? What was it called? You know, Ursula Andress...you're going to kill me aren't you? You're just considering the method. You have motive, you have opportunity...it's just method you're figuring out. Make him choke on his own sunflower seeds, strangle him with his own shoelaces...or just bludgeon him to death with his copy of *Martha Stewart's Good Hostess Guide*, which is a great book incidentally. Just remember to hide the body well - I'd hate to see your career come to an insalubrious end just because the temptation to kill me was too much."

The monologue came to an abrupt halt as Skinner swerved the car to a screeching stop in the street outside his apartment, and got out. Mulder fumbled with the car door, then followed his boss, making a face at the other man's stiff back as they walked into the apartment block, and up the concrete stairs. They had just got inside the door of Skinner's apartment when the big man swung around, pinned Mulder against the wall, and growled:

"If you fuck this up for me, you little shit, I promise that I really will kill you. And I won't give a damn about my career, or anything but kicking my boot up your insubordinate ass. Now what part of 'I don't need your help' didn't you understand, **Spooky**?"

"The part that ran 'I'll be fine'?" Mulder suggested, glancing down at the big arm crushed against his neck. "Let's just say that I wasn't convinced."

"This isn't about you." Skinner took hold of him by the shoulders, and shook him bodily. "Not everything in this fucking world is about you, Mulder, and this sure as hell isn't."

"No, it's about you, and from what I can see, you might be in over your head," Mulder replied, his teeth rattling inside his skull from the force of Skinner's anger. "Judging by that bullet with your name on it that you so narrowly avoided today."

"What the hell do you know about it?" Skinner's face was incandescent with rage, mingled with some other emotion - grief? - that Mulder had never before seen in his usually self-contained boss.

"Not much. Why don't you tell me?" Mulder offered softly, trying to reach the other man before he snapped completely and did him some serious damage.

The gentle tone shocked Skinner out of his fury, and his fingers relaxed their grip on Mulder's shoulders. He smoothed the agent's shirt down, and backed away from him.

"I'm sorry," he said stiffly. "There was no excuse for that." He disappeared into the kitchen area, pulled a couple of beers out of the fridge, chucked one to Mulder, and held his own to his lips, downing it in a few deep gulps. Mulder sipped more circumspectly. He didn't like beer much, but it seemed to be the only beverage on offer right now, and he certainly wasn't going to push his luck by demanding an Iced Tea.

Mulder perched himself on the edge of the mattress - which was the only available area to sit on apart from the floor - and watched his boss. Skinner was leaning with one arm on the wall, his forehead pressed to the cool glass of the windowpane, staring at nothing. Dressed in his new uniform of black jeans and tee shirt, he melted into the darkness of the unlit room, only his bare expanse of scalp clearly visible, illuminated by the glare of the neon sign flashing from the bar across the street.

"Have you ever been in love, Mulder?" Skinner asked unexpectedly.

"I try to avoid it as much as possible, sir," Mulder replied, with his usual flip deflection of anything too personal. He could have kicked himself when he saw the shutters come down over Skinner's face. Damn! The man had been trying to tell him something, and he'd just jerked him off with bullshit. "That is..." Mulder cleared his throat. "Yeah - once or twice. You?"

"Three times." Skinner carried on staring out of the window. "Jamie said taking drugs was like being in love. He said he looked forward to the hit like he looked forward to sex, and that cold turkey was like the pain of being dumped."

Mulder sat silently trying to process that information for a while, wondering if Skinner was going to say any more.

"Who's Jamie, sir?" he prompted softly after several minutes of silence.

"Jamie is...Jamie **was**...an old friend," Skinner shrugged.

"What happened to him?" Mulder asked, never taking his eyes off the other man. A tiny grimace tugged at the corner of Skinner's mouth.

"I don't know," he said, turning. "You hungry? There's some cold pizza in the fridge. Remains of last night's supper."

"I'd rather hear the story, sir," Mulder said.

"I'm hungry." Skinner strode into the kitchen, and returned with two slices of pizza. He handed one to Mulder, then glanced around for somewhere to sit. "Sorry - this isn't exactly home. I don't intend to be here long, so I didn't waste time furnishing it," Skinner muttered.

"S'okay." Mulder slid up the mattress, and sat with his back against the wall. He ate the pizza, watching as Skinner ate his. Skinner went and got another beer, then sat down on the floor, leaning his shoulders against the wall opposite Mulder, facing him. "Jamie?" Mulder prompted again.

"You never let up, do you, Mulder?"

"That's what makes me such a good investigator, sir," Mulder grinned.

Skinner shook his head. "And modest with it."

"Yeah," Mulder chuckled. "Tell me about Jamie, sir."

"Jamie...Jamie Gale was one of those people everybody wants to take care of, you know?" Skinner paused, and swigged back another deep gulp of beer. "He had charisma, I guess. Everybody loved him, everybody wanted to get close to him. He was one of the beautiful, damaged people." Skinner paused for a moment, and glanced at Mulder speculatively, then shook his head as if dismissing a private thought. "I mean, you could see that just by looking at him, and your internal 'wacko' radar was going off like a fucking siren, warning you to stay away, but you just didn't listen. You needed to be his friend - you needed him to accept you. Hell, I was 18 years old, and all I saw was this Sergeant who mouthed off to the Lieutenant and got away with it because of his goddamn charm." Skinner smiled ruefully. "Jamie showed me every single different way you could get stoned on your ass in Saigon, and he could outwit the MP's every damn time they came to pick him up - which was often enough because that kid was a goddamn trouble magnet. He didn't play by the rules - hell, I'm not sure he even knew what the rules were. He was a couple of years older than I was, and I hero-worshipped that guy. I followed him around everywhere in 'Nam, maybe hoping that some of his magic would rub off on me, maybe just because being with him was better than being on drugs. For me at least."

"He was a junkie?" Mulder asked, watching Skinner's mouth move in the eerie pink half-light. Skinner didn't answer for a long time, and then he moved his head angrily.

"That's what Vietnam made him," he snapped.

Mulder nodded, his lips wetting the top of the beer bottle, not taking a sip. He tried to imagine this picture Skinner was painting of himself as a gauche teenager, and failed. Skinner was too big, too solid, too much the boss. Had he ever been this naïve young corporal, tagging along behind the older, more street-wise soldier, like some kind of kid brother?

"Jamie was always there for me, Mulder," Skinner told him. "When I shot that ten-year-old kid with grenades strapped to his body, it was Jamie who took me out, got me smashed, listened to my maudlin

ramblings, then carried me back home. When I got separated from my unit, it was Jamie who volunteered to go back into the jungle and find me. And when the unit was wiped out in that ambush, it was Jamie who saw me through those long days and nights, when everything hurt, and all I could think of was that I was alive and they were dead, and I wished I'd damn well gone with them."

Skinner broke off, and took another long, deep drink. Mulder watched, noticing the way the other man's hand shook, the memory still affecting him after all these years.

"People say that time heals, that you can get over anything in time," Skinner said softly, "but that's bullshit. Jamie knew that. Jamie knew that there are some things you never get over, and to even pretend is a load of patronizing crap. During the months after the ambush, he was the only thing that kept me sane - and alive." Skinner glanced down at his hands, tried, visibly, to stop them trembling, and failed. "I tried to kill myself a couple of times." Skinner looked up, and the flashing light from across the street illuminated the dark depths of his eyes. "Shocked, Mulder?"

"Hell, no. You were 18," Mulder shrugged. "I don't know how the hell anyone copes with that kind of shit. When..." he paused, but the half-light lent their confidences a certain anonymity, and Skinner had shared so much that he wanted to reciprocate in some way. "When I was 12," he avoided saying it, but he knew Skinner picked up on the reference. "I used to lie awake at night, listening to the tree outside my bedroom scratch against my window. I longed for it to crash through the glass, and flatten me, smash me into a million pieces so I didn't have to live through the misery of one more day."

"I'm sorry," Skinner murmured. "You were just a kid."

"So were you," Mulder said forcefully. "I'm confused, though. Jamie was part of your unit? I remember you telling me that your entire unit was wiped out in that ambush. I thought at the time that you must have had one hell of a case of survivor's guilt about that, but where was Jamie? How did he survive?"

"Jamie was injured a couple of weeks before the ambush. He was already in the hospital when I arrived. The damn fool crawled through a minefield on his way home one night after taking god knows what. The MP's were out looking for him, and he thought the minefield was a safer bet than the court martial he'd been asking for since day one. As it turned out, he was wrong," Skinner shrugged. "The first thing I saw when I woke up was him sitting next to me, holding up a porno magazine." Mulder gave a wry smile at that. "We were both invalidated out a few months later."

"Your injuries were that bad?" Mulder asked in a shocked tone.

"Oh yeah. Hell, I was shot to pieces. I was a year in a VA hospital when I got back," Skinner told him.

"You're okay now. In fact you seem pretty healthy to me, judging by the neck lock you had me in earlier," Mulder commented with a wry grin.

"I worked hard to get back to normal, and I was young," Skinner shrugged. "Sometimes, when it's raining, I ache all over."

"Me too, but I don't have any excuse," Mulder grinned.

"I'm not so sure. I've been there - waiting outside various hospital rooms for news, remember?" Skinner lifted an eyebrow. "Over the years you've probably taken as many knocks and bullets as I have."

"I doubt it." Mulder glanced at the window. "What happened to Jamie?" he asked, knowing that this was something Skinner kept avoiding, and wondering why.

"Jamie was ruined by 'Nam. Looking back, it was always on the cards. He was one of those bright, brilliant people, the kind that just burns out. He couldn't deal with what 'Nam threw at us. He brought his drug problem home with him. First it was prescription drugs - Demerol, the stuff they gave him for his injuries, but it was only a matter of time before he was back on the hard stuff again. I've lost count of the number of times he phoned me in the middle of the night needing money, or help, or a ride to the hospital after being mugged in the street because he was stoned on his ass. I was doing a law degree at this point, and he seemed part of a life I'd left a million miles behind," Skinner mused.

"But you helped him anyway," Mulder predicted, accurately.

Skinner shrugged. "Wouldn't you? We'd been through too much together not to," he said. "Later - well, we drifted apart. I think that he didn't want to be a burden - he had too much pride for that, and I was making a success of my life, in conspicuous contrast to what he was doing. Maybe he found someone else to call."

"Or maybe he gave up the drugs," Mulder pointed out.

Skinner shook his head. "No. I don't think so. Anyway, we saw less and less of each other, but we didn't lose touch completely. You see, we had a kind of ritual."

"A ritual?" Mulder's ears pricked up.

"Yeah, not *that* kind of ritual." Skinner's teeth gleamed white in the neon light. "I'm not talking black magic here, or any of that kind of crap you usually dig up. I'm talking about paying our respects to our lost comrades. Every year, on the anniversary of their deaths, we'd meet up. At first we met at Arlington, standing outside the cemetery all night, and later we moved the whole thing to the Wall. It was Jamie who came up with the idea of burning a candle for each of them. I used to bring the candles; he'd say a few words."

Mulder suppressed a smile in the half-light. That about summed up these two different personalities. Skinner got to be practical, and his old comrade got to make the speech.

"We both wanted to make sure they weren't forgotten," Skinner continued. "You see, it's so easy to forget. To really forget the people, I mean. Their faces, their voices, their hopes, and fears, and dreams. Each of them was an individual - that's what's hard to remember." Skinner leaned back, and gazed at the ceiling, taking another swig of beer.

"Jamie would spout this stuff - things about them, each and every one of them. Just little things, like how Tom Rance snored loud enough to raise the dead, and Donny Michaels had six girlfriends on the go at the same time, that kind of stuff, but it was enough. Enough to bring them back to life, just for one night of the year, to show them they hadn't been forgotten. Not by us, at least."

Mulder felt touched by Skinner's story. There was so much he had never known about this man, and he felt honored that his boss had shared this with him. It felt like he was trusted, and Mulder found it so hard to trust other people that he fully appreciated the gift of being trusted by someone - especially someone he liked, and respected.

"Then, when the candles had all burned down, and dawn broke, we split up, went our separate ways, and didn't meet up again until the next year," Skinner continued. "Every year, without fail, no matter what was going on in our lives. We would have moved heaven and earth to be there on that night. We never missed a night, not either of us. Not when I had a gunshot wound that meant I could hardly stand, not when Jamie was supposed to be in a secure psychiatric unit undergoing treatment for PTSD, and his drug abuse problems. We were both there. Every year..." he trailed off, looking thoughtful.

"Until last year," Mulder guessed.

"Yes," Skinner whispered.

"Did you try to find him?"

"Of course. I've spent the past eight months looking for him, but there isn't a trace. All I could find was that he got involved with Morgan's drug empire, then he disappeared. I filed an APB on him, but the police aren't interested. He's just another junkie to them. Jamie doesn't have any family, nobody who cares whether he's alive or dead, except me. I used the Bureau's resources, did some digging in my spare time to see if there was any clue as to what had happened to him, but he's just vanished."

"So what are you going to do? Just go up to Morgan and ask him what happened to your friend?" Mulder wanted to know.

"Something like that." Skinner gave a wry shrug. "The trouble is - first I have to catch Morgan. This gang I'm working for are the closest I've managed to get, and that's not nearly close enough. Morgan's damn powerful in the circles he moves in. If Jamie got on the wrong side of him, Morgan could have wiped him out with a snap of his fingers."

"Jamie's a junkie, but he isn't a pusher, is he?" Mulder asked, startled. Skinner looked into his bottle for a long time, then sighed.

"You know, Mulder, I never asked. It got to the stage where I was just glad he turned up alive each year. I didn't want to know the details, but...knowing the kind of life he led...I wouldn't be surprised. He was bitter after 'Nam, Mulder. There was so much anger in him...let's just say that I don't think it's impossible that he decided to spread his problem around. Let's face it - what other kind of job would give him the same access to drugs?"

"I see," Mulder nodded, uncertainly.

"No, you don't. If you can't see beyond the fact that I'm risking my life out here looking for a junkie and a pusher, then just leave now, Mulder, because Jamie was a hell of a lot more than that to me." Skinner got to his feet, his body knotted with tension, and Mulder held his hands up.

"Hey...I wasn't passing any judgment. I just want to understand the situation."

"You can't." Skinner turned, hiding his face from the other man. "You can't ever understand the situation, Mulder," he murmured softly, and Mulder shivered at his tone. "I don't need you, Mulder. Like I said, this isn't official Bureau business. It's personal."

"With all due respect, sir, it seems to me that you need someone to watch your back. There was an attempt on your life today, remember?"

Skinner sighed, and rubbed his forehead wearily. "I guess I owe you some thanks for that," he said ruefully.

"I was wondering when you'd finally get around to it," Mulder grinned. "Let me stay. I want to help, but I realize this is your mission, and you're in charge. I'll do whatever you say."

"That'll be a first." Skinner gave a wry smile. "All right, Mulder. You might be useful to me. I have to spend a lot of time following up leads, and talking to people. It would be helpful if you could stick with Cassidy. I don't think he's ever actually met Morgan, but he talks big. Stay close to him. Find out what you can."

"Okay," Mulder nodded. "What about that bullet? Who wants you dead?" he asked.

"I don't think anybody wants me dead but I've spread the word around that I'm looking for Jamie. It looks as if somebody is trying to warn me off," he mused thoughtfully. Mulder suppressed a shiver of foreboding. "It's late - or should I say early." Skinner squinted out of the window at the gray light of dawn as it started to filter over the concrete jungle. "There's only one bed. I wasn't expecting company."

"That's fine," Mulder shrugged. It was a big double mattress - there was no reason for either of them to be uncomfortable. He had slept in far worse conditions during an undercover operation. Endless nights cooped up with Scully in a car during stake-outs sprang to mind.

Mulder got up and used the bathroom, returning to find Skinner stretched out on the mattress, his eyes closed. Mulder lay down beside him, and pondered the implications of Skinner's revelations. Something wasn't right. There was something he hadn't been told. His inquiring mind ran back over the conversation, and he knew that he had been given a clue. Something that connected, and didn't connect, something said in passing that wasn't in the right place. Finally, unable to piece the jigsaw together, he fell asleep.

Being a drug dealer meant long hours of intense boredom interspersed with moments of extreme danger. Mulder decided that he didn't like it. The adrenaline highs were an almost painful counterpoint to the tedium, and it left his nerves frayed. Mulder was impressed by how well Skinner was dealing with the pressure, though. Watching the other man work in the field was a revelation. He stayed in character, collected information effortlessly by subtle inquiry without drawing attention to himself, and never missed a thing.

Mulder grew to like the big man more than he would have thought possible. He was quiet - but prone to making comments that were slyly amusing, often making Mulder laugh out loud in surprised appreciation, and he was never anything less than a consummate professional, following up every lead he got, and phoning through the information to the Bureau to check it out. Mulder was impressed by his untiring efforts to find his friend, but aware also of a growing sense of urgency in Skinner's actions. He

didn't know how much leave his boss had negotiated to work on this, but sometime soon he'd have to accept defeat, and give up. Mulder didn't want that to happen, and redoubled his own efforts, but Morgan was proving to be a difficult man to track down. He had a massive drugs network in operation but nobody ever saw him, or knew where he was based. He used a number of small gangs, like Cassidy's, to get the drug supply out onto the streets, and raked in a considerable profit.

"I wish I'd worked with you before you took the damn desk job," Mulder commented admiringly to his boss one night as they returned to the apartment.

"You wouldn't have liked it. I was arrogant, prone to chasing after leads without backup, disobeyed orders from my superiors regularly..."

"Really?" Mulder's eyes gleamed.

"No," Skinner grinned. "Gotcha. As a matter of fact I was a model agent, which is why I'm an Assistant Director now and why you, my insubordinate friend, never will be."

"Oh well, some prices are just too high to pay," Mulder laughed, unconcerned by his lack of promotional prospects. Skinner shook his head, and opened the door to his apartment. Behind him, Mulder stiffened, seeing a shadow in the darkness. He pushed Skinner out of the way, drew his gun, and was halfway across the room before Skinner snapped the lights on. Mulder found himself with his arm across a man's windpipe, pinning him to the wall, his gun pressed to the intruder's head.

"Who the hell are you?" Mulder snarled.

"Mulder." Skinner's voice sounded faintly amused. "This is Detective Mark Raven. He's with Narcotics. He helped me set up my little operation here."

"What?" Mulder looked into the bemused eyes of his captive. Raven was a lean, wiry man, about the same age as Mulder. Skinner gently tugged Mulder's arm away from the cop.

"Mulder - I'm grateful for the protection, but he's on our side," Skinner smiled. "You didn't think I'd muscle my way into this kind of territory without permission and backup, did you?"

"Well..." Mulder released his captive, looking somewhat sheepish.

"Yes, I know." Skinner patted him reassuringly on the shoulder. " **You** would have done. Do you want a beer, Mark?"

The other man nodded, holding out his hand to Mulder.

"Sorry to startle you. Didn't Walter tell you I had a key to this place?"

"No, actually." Mulder shot a hard glare at his boss. Skinner shrugged, throwing a beer to each of them. "Keeping secrets seems to be the Assistant Director's MO," Mulder commented acerbically.

Skinner gave a wry smile. "You aren't the only one with endearing little habits, Mulder," he murmured, leaning against the wall. "Mark and I used to work together."

"Yeah - I was Walt's last partner - before he took the big job, and I transferred into narcotics." Raven grinned, startling Mulder by glancing at Skinner with an expression that was nothing short of hero worship. "Walt here was viewed as a safe pair of hands to baby me," Raven confided. "I was pretty green, and I'd been involved in a traumatic case, got shot up, lost my confidence. Walt saved my career, and got me back on track. I owe him for that."

Skinner blushed slightly, and shook his head.

"You just needed time, Mark. I didn't do anything," he shrugged.

Raven glanced at Mulder. "Yeah. He did. He's a patient man, Mulder. I threw some crazy shit at him and he just hung in there, and never gave up on me. I hope you appreciate him."

"I do," Mulder nodded, realizing for the first time that he *did*.

"Yeah. I guess that's why you're here, helping him out."

"Not that I need his help," Skinner remarked, downing his beer.

Mulder was impressed by just how much the big guy could drink. He always felt out of place with macho, beer swilling men - they reminded him of how much he didn't fit in. Nobody could ever accuse him of being a regular kind of guy. Skinner was different, though. He didn't make Mulder feel anything less than included, and part of a team. He always had. Mulder was grateful to him for that - being an outsider could get pretty lonely sometimes.

"I went to Mark when I first started looking for Jamie. When I approached him about trying to find Morgan, he laughed his head off." Skinner glared at his former partner affectionately.

"Morgan is the ultimate mystery man," Raven explained to Mulder. "Nobody sees him, nobody knows who the hell he is. If we could bring him down, we'd wipe out at least 50 percent of the drug supply in this area, but he's too damn clever, and we never even get close. We've had people working on this for two years, with no luck. I'm not sure that Walt can accomplish in a few weeks what we've been trying to do for so long, but, hell...I'll help him any way I can. No questions asked," Raven shrugged. "I don't think we're looking at a happy ending here though, Walt. I don't think there's any question of finding Jamie alive."

"No." Mulder noticed the way the hard, corded muscles in Skinner's back stiffened. "But I'll find out what happened to him. He won't just be forgotten, one more victim of 'Nam."

The theme of being forgotten was clearly important to his boss, Mulder realized. Maybe that was the legacy of Vietnam, and the appalling reception the returning soldiers had received, to say nothing of a whole country being in denial over that disastrous war for so long. Mulder also knew that however much of a success Skinner had made of his life, survivor's guilt had to be a part of his psychological make-up. Maybe he had even been driven to be so successful for that very reason. His whole unit had been wiped out, and only he had survived that ambush. Maybe he felt that he had to be successful for all of them, to live out a dream, to achieve status and a high powered career in order to prove that fate hadn't chosen unwisely in allowing him to be the only survivor. *He doesn't want to let them down*, Mulder realized with a sudden flash of insight, watching his boss's body language, and feeling a sudden

surge of affection for the big man. *He's never let his dead comrades down in the way he's led his life, and he won't let them down in his search for Jamie either.* And of course it didn't matter whether Jamie was alive or dead; Skinner knew what his duty was. Duty. Mulder shook his head. It wasn't an alien concept to him, but he had never known anyone to so completely embody the ideal as his boss.

He watched as Skinner updated Raven on what he had learned so far.

"It's helpful," Raven nodded. "You've found out a lot about Cassidy's operation, but what about Morgan?"

"I know," Skinner sighed, rubbing a weary hand over his face. "We're no closer to the truth."

"Walt - I won't ask you to give up, because I know there wouldn't be any point...but..." Raven hesitated.

"Go on." Skinner looked at his former partner searchingly.

"Well, it's just that...I know you're getting desperate, but you're starting to get yourself noticed."

"I had to. A word here or there wasn't working," Skinner replied. "It was time to take some risks."

"I'm just concerned that it might draw you to the attention of the wrong people," Raven murmured.

"Maybe that's just what I need to move things along."

"Maybe," Raven shrugged. "Or maybe it's a short cut to a bullet in the back of the head."

There was silence for a moment, then Skinner stretched his large body. Mulder winced as he heard a bone crack. Skinner had been working on this 18 hours a day for the past two weeks. He knew how little sleep the other man had been getting.

"Mark - what else can I do?" Skinner's tone was despairing. "I can't believe that one man can just disappear so completely, as if he never existed, and nobody knows what's happened to him. Hell, nobody's even seen him."

"Maybe he was abducted by aliens," Raven grinned, attempting to lighten the tension, but just succeeding in winding it up another notch.

Mulder stiffened. "It's not impossible," he commented, much to Raven's surprise.

"Mulder here is a UFO expert," Skinner informed his former partner.

"That's not why you brought him along though, right?" Raven looked baffled.

"Actually I didn't bring him along. He just followed me," Skinner said with a grimace. "But no, it's okay, Mark. I don't seriously think that the little green...sorry, **gray** men have Jamie." He nodded his head in Mulder's direction with a wry hint of a smile. Mulder returned it.

"Which is a shame," Mulder commented. "I'd like to be here in my capacity as 'expert' instead of 'willing henchman'."

"Oh, but you're doing a great job as that," Skinner told him seriously. Mulder felt a surge of pride at the praise.

"Well, I just thought I'd give the warning," Raven said with a shrug. "You know where to reach me, Walt."

"Sure." Skinner escorted the other man down to his car, while Mulder sat on the mattress, pondering the implications of the detective's visit.

"I'm beat," Skinner told him, returning a few minutes later. Mulder glanced at his watch. It was nearly 2:00 a.m., and they'd both been on their feet for the previous 16 hours. Skinner threw himself down on the mattress with a thud, and Mulder lay back, his hands under his head, still thinking. He could smell his own scent, as well as the musky odor of the man lying next to him. Hygiene wasn't exactly a priority on this job, and while they snatched showers whenever they could, there weren't many opportunities to get the laundry done. They'd both been sleeping in their clothes as well, which didn't help. Mulder closed his eyes - he just knew that he was missing something, but he couldn't work out what. He fell into an exhausted sleep, still mulling it over.

It was nearly 4:00 a.m. when something woke him. He wasn't sure what it was, a movement maybe. He rolled over and glanced sleepily towards the window, then opened his eyes wider. Skinner was standing there, looking out. His shoulders were stiff and tense, and Mulder felt as if he had intruded on a moment of intense, private grief.

"Go back to sleep, Mulder," Skinner said softly, clearly sensing the change in Mulder's breathing. "I'm fine. Please, go back to sleep."

Mulder ignored him, sat up, and leaned back against the wall. His mouth opened and went into gear before his brain could catch up.

"You and Jamie were lovers, weren't you?" He heard himself say it, then immediately wished it unsaid.

There was a long silence. Skinner continued gazing out of the window. Finally he straightened, and turned, an expression on his face that Mulder had never ever seen before, and had never thought he **would** see. Vulnerability, sadness, and an aching grief.

"Yes," Skinner answered with a simple honesty. "Vietnam was crazy. I found out a lot about myself out there. Trust me, loving Jamie was the least of my surprises. Does it make you uncomfortable?"

Mulder glanced at him in surprise, wondering what on earth he meant, then realization flooded in. "Oh..." He flushed. "You mean, me, you, here," he gestured at the mattress. "No. Shit, no!"

"But you're shocked all the same." Skinner gazed at him keenly.

"Not really," Mulder shrugged. "Surprised maybe, but not shocked. Want to talk about it?"

"Not really," Skinner echoed. "I've lived with it for a long time - it's just something that's part of me. You're the one who probably feels the need to talk."

"Well, no. I mean, I wouldn't want to pry." Mulder felt himself tripping over his own tongue, and wished the ground would open up and swallow him. "I'm sorry - it makes this whole situation much worse for you. I guess I can understand it better now."

"It was a long time ago," Skinner shrugged, "but they say you never forget your first love."

Mulder nodded, trying to imagine an 18-year-old Skinner with the invisible Jamie, a man he'd heard so much about that he felt he *knew* him, and yet who remained so elusive. He also remembered Skinner's comment the other day - about having been in love with three people in his life. He idly wondered who the other two were, and whether they had deserved this complex, serious man he'd come to know so well, and like so much.

"Go back to sleep, Mulder." Mulder couldn't see the other man's slight smile, but he could hear it in his voice. "I'm all out of revelations for now. I'm sure I could think up a few more for you in time, though."

"Of all the things I've discovered about you recently, this whole sense of humor thing has to be the most disturbing," Mulder grumbled, putting his head back down on the rolled up sweater that he was using as a pillow. He heard Skinner give a snort of laughter, and pretended to close his eyes, feigning sleep. When he was sure that Skinner had turned back to his silent musing at the window, he opened them again, and examined the other man.

Skinner was dressed in black jeans and tee shirt, and Mulder could make out the powerful muscles beneath his flesh. Skinner reminded him of a resting cat; all languid, feline grace combined with a hint of menace. He wondered whether the big man also liked having his tummy tickled, and almost gurgled out loud at the thought. Best not to go there, Mulder, he told himself. Not if you want to stay alive. Skinner was still staring out of the window, and for a big man, he looked so achingly vulnerable that Mulder had to fight off an urge to get up and go and put his arms around him. He respected the other man's pride too much to do so, to say nothing of the growling swat he was sure he'd receive, but even so, the impulse was there. Mulder had asked himself a hundred times what the hell he was doing, risking life and limb for another man's quest in this way, but in that moment he had his answer. It wasn't an answer that surprised him. Like Skinner, he had lived with that particular truth about himself for a long time. He supposed that at the back of his mind he'd always known he was powerfully attracted to his boss, but he had sublimated the desire, as he sublimated everything personal, too consumed by his own quest to take pleasure from sex, or even companionship.

Skinner was gone when Mulder woke up. This wasn't entirely unusual - the big man had taken off on several leads during the past couple of weeks, giving Mulder strict instructions not to follow him. He did always leave a note, which, Mulder admitted grudgingly, was more than *he* usually did for Scully when he got a bee in his bonnet about one of his own pet projects. Skinner was a conscientious partner - Mark Raven's obvious affection and respect for the big man seemed testament to that.

Mulder ate some breakfast, then headed out for the warehouse where the gang met. There was a delivery to unpack, and some rounds to be made before they returned to the warehouse for a long afternoon playing cards, and squabbling. Mulder had never been good at male bonding rituals, but he

played his part as well as he could, entering into the spirit of camaraderie the gang had - a camaraderie which he knew was all on the surface. These guys would think nothing of putting a bullet through his head if they thought he'd betrayed them, or if it was expedient for them to do so. He was also becoming worried about his cover story. If they didn't get a lead soon, then someone might get word to Morgan, who would undoubtedly be very interested in finding out more about his long lost nephew. Mulder didn't even want to contemplate the outcome of *that* particular meeting.

Shortly before midnight, Skinner showed up. Mulder gave him a questioning glance, which was met by an almost imperceptible shake of the head. Mulder sighed and turned back to the long queue of "clients" that they were dealing with. A few minutes later, he noticed a man slip into the warehouse, go up to Skinner, and pass him an envelope. Mulder watched as Skinner opened it. The change in the big man's body language was almost immediate. He screwed up something in his big fist and stood there for a moment, his shoulders frozen. Mulder itched to go and find out what had happened, but Skinner suddenly took off before he had a chance.

It took all of Mulder's willpower not to follow the other man, but they had already acted out a low-level antipathy towards each other for the benefit of the gang, and it would be stupid to show any concern for the big man. Instead, he continued wise-cracking with Frank, and standing menacingly with one hand on his gun as Cassidy dispensed drugs to his clients.

Mulder returned to the apartment as soon as he could get away. He wasn't sure Skinner would even be there, so he was relieved when he saw the big man sitting on the mattress, his head back against the wall, his eyes closed.

"Sir?" Mulder shrugged his jacket off and went over to the mattress...then stopped. Skinner was holding something clenched tightly in his hand, but Mulder couldn't see what it was. "Sir, are you okay?" Mulder knelt down beside the big man, and gently touched his arm. Skinner didn't open his eyes - instead, he opened his fist. Mulder stared wordlessly at the set of dog tags held clenched there. He took them, already knowing who they belonged to.

"Jamie," he murmured.

"Yeah." Skinner's voice sounded hoarse, broken. "He, uh...he always used to wear them. It was a kind of weird thing he had going. If...if..." Skinner's voice caught, and he cleared his throat and started again. "This is proof that he's dead, Mulder. He wouldn't let anyone take these off him if he wasn't."

"Who gave them to you?" Mulder asked softly.

"I've been putting the word around for weeks. This was what came back," Skinner shrugged. "I guess I know he's dead now. I've been in denial since last December, but I suppose, deep down, I always knew that I was looking for a corpse."

"I'm sorry," Mulder whispered. "I mean, really sorry. I know what he meant to you."

"He was my last link with them." Skinner opened his eyes, and they were dark and lost. "Now I'm alone."

"You're not alone." Mulder put a sympathetic hand on Skinner's arm, but the other man just shrugged it off.

"Don't fucking patronize me, Mulder," he growled, getting up and going to stand by his usual place at the window, gazing moodily at the street below. Mulder stared at him for a moment, and then, acting totally on impulse, he went and stood behind Skinner, and put his arms around his waist.

"I meant it," he whispered into the big man's ear. Skinner stiffened beneath his embrace. Mulder's hands worked gently up Skinner's arms, stroking them, and he leaned forward and kissed the other man's neck. "Anything you need from me, you take it," he urged.

At first, Skinner's body remained tense beneath the caress, then he let out a roar of inarticulate pain, and turned, thrusting Mulder up against the wall, and slamming him into it, hard.

"Don't fucking tease...don't...fucking *pity* me," Skinner hissed.

Mulder grabbed Skinner's hips in a firm grasp, taking control. "Let it out," he said. "If it helps, let it out on me. I don't mind."

"I don't...Fuck you. Fuck the whole fucking world." Skinner's voice was low, filled with barely contained misery. "I..." The anger and pain spasmed through his body. "I fucking loved him," he said in a strangled tone, his brown eyes dark with unexpressed grief.

"I know," Mulder nodded, placing one hand around the other man's waist, and drawing him close.

Skinner thumped a fist into the wall, his body suffused with tears that wouldn't fall after a lifetime of being too big, too strong, and too damn self-contained to be able to cry freely. He slammed his head down over Mulder's shoulder, crashing it onto the wall behind him, and then smashed it back again, once, twice...Mulder caught the other man's face between his hands on the third go.

"That's all you get," he whispered, needing to reach the big man, to stop him hurting himself even more. Skinner already had a small gash over one eye. "Come on. Come here." Mulder folded his arms around his boss, and held him tight, planting several kisses on Skinner's bare scalp. "Cry if you want to, if you need to. You loved him, he was all that connected you to the past, to a time that formed your life, your personality - a time that was important to you. No wonder you're hurting. You're allowed to hurt, Walter. Come on, cry for me."

Skinner struggled for a moment in Mulder's arms, but Mulder held him fast, and finally the big man's resistance broke. His body was suffused by a series of racking spasms, his arms came up around Mulder, and he held on like a drowning man clinging to a rock.

Mulder stood there, wordlessly stroking the other man's back while Skinner poured out a torrent of inarticulate grief. When the big man's body started to relax, Mulder pushed him back.

"Okay?" he asked.

Skinner nodded, his dark eyes full of some intent that made Mulder shiver in fear: Skinner wasn't himself. Mulder barely recognized the man standing in front of him. He had never seen Skinner this out of control before. Mulder felt the big hands tighten around his waist, and those dark eyes were suddenly too close as Skinner's face closed in, and his mouth angled down, claiming Mulder with a hard, biting kiss.

"Whoa." Mulder pushed him back.

Skinner stopped, and retreated as if stung. "Get the hell out, then," Skinner growled. "Just fucking well get out of here, Mulder, or I might do something we both regret."

"I doubt that," Mulder smiled. He pulled Skinner back. "I told you to let it out on me, and you can. I trust you. Just allow me to breathe, okay?"

He spoke the words forcefully, and somehow they penetrated the other man's consciousness. Skinner nodded, his fingers shaking as they unbuttoned Mulder's shirt. Mulder ran his hands over the big man's head, and gasped as Skinner thrust him up against the wall, his mouth finding Mulder's nipples, his hands urgently seeking the zip on Mulder's pants, tugging it down. Skinner stripped Mulder of his pants, then pressed his body frantically against the younger man's, his mouth and hands everywhere.

Mulder managed to slow the torrent of passion for a moment, and reached between them to free Skinner's own cock; then Skinner grabbed him again, slammed him back against the wall, and pinned him there, trapping their cocks between them. Mulder was helpless in the savage embrace, and just tried to keep breathing as Skinner devoured him with hands and tongue. The big man rubbed himself frantically against Mulder in a frenzy of fevered need that ended abruptly when he came a few seconds later. With Skinner's release came an end to his aggression. He stood there for a moment, his breath coming in heaving gasps, his body resting against Mulder as if all the life had been sucked out of him.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"No need. I offered," Mulder smiled, holding Skinner in his arms, and rubbing soothing circles on his back.

"Christ, what a fucking awful first lay," Skinner mumbled. Mulder laughed.

"Hey, it was necessary." He pushed the other man back so he could look at him, but Skinner's dark eyes were too ashamed to meet his. "Come on." Mulder lifted Skinner's head up, and gently kissed his lips. "That was just the first round. Come here. It's my turn now."

Mulder took hold of Skinner's hand, and led him mutely to the mattress.

"Not exactly the most romantic place in the world, but it'll do," Mulder smiled. Skinner didn't say a word, just stood there, exhausted both by his sexual frenzy and his grief, as Mulder undressed him and got rid of the remainder of his own clothing. Then he pulled the big man into an embrace, holding him again, kissing him on the lips, pushing inside the other man's passive mouth and exploring him. Skinner hung limply in his arms, unresisting, as Mulder claimed him for several long minutes, pouring every ounce of his love, desire, and reassurance into that kiss. Finally he released the big man, and nuzzled against first one broad, muscled shoulder, and then the other.

"You're so goddamn beautiful," he whispered. "Damn, I've wanted to get into your pants for so long."

"You have?" That roused Skinner from his shocked trance, and he looked into Mulder's amused hazel eyes.

"You bet." Mulder smiled, and ran a thumb over Skinner's mouth, and down the side of his face. "Okay, I was in denial for a long time, but I sure as hell didn't follow you here out of some misguided Boy Scout notion of honor and service. Also, realistically, I didn't think I stood a chance until..."

"Until you found out about Jamie," Skinner supplied, arching his back as Mulder's fingers pushed between his buttocks and rubbed him there, rhythmically.

Mulder nodded. "It's been a long time, hasn't it, Walter?"

"Thirty years." Skinner gave the wryest of smiles. "Nobody could accuse me of not being patient."

"No other man could ever live up to Jamie?" Mulder asked, pressing his hard cock against Skinner's now flaccid one.

"Jamie was a one off," Skinner shrugged, his body shaking with the memories.

"Come here." Mulder pulled Skinner hard against his body, so they were hip to hip. Skinner came, without demur, and allowed Mulder to kiss his eyelids, his nose, his lips, his cheeks, his chin, and finally his broad forehead. "Lie down on the bed. I'm going to take good care of you tonight," Mulder commanded. "Go on," Mulder urged, taking Skinner's face between his hands. "Trust me," he whispered.

Skinner nodded, and sat down on the bed, still trapped in a numb world of pain. Mulder hoped he could reach him there, and distract him from his grief, even if only for one night.

"Lie back." Mulder slid down on the mattress next to Skinner, and held the big man, running one foot along Skinner's leg, and gently toying with his nipples. "You're so damn sexy," Mulder murmured, his mouth roving over his new lover's body, gently, sensuously, pausing here and there to suck and nibble. Skinner started to respond, losing himself in the caress as Mulder had both hoped and intended. Skinner's hands found Mulder's buttocks, rubbed them in slow circles, kneading the flesh.

"Let me do all the work." Mulder laid another kiss on the big man's lips, and then turned Skinner onto his front. "I'm kind of a bossy bastard in bed, but I know some good moves," he grinned.

He knelt astride the other man, and began to firmly massage his shoulders and back, then moved down to cup his buttocks, before parting them and inserting his tongue in the cleft between them. Skinner groaned and bucked up into the embrace, and Mulder stroked him sensuously as he licked, calming him. The tension flowed out of Skinner's body under Mulder's ministrations, and he started to make little noises of appreciation. Finally Mulder stopped, the aching in his own cock too intense to be ignored any longer.

"Do you want me inside you?" he asked. He had no problem being penetrated, but he knew that for some men it was a deep expression of trust.

"Please." Skinner's eyes still held the desperation of a drowning man.

"I don't have a condom," Mulder said softly.

"Doesn't matter. I'm clean. I trust you," Skinner whispered, the need outweighing everything else.

"Good. Hold on, I'll find something to use."

Mulder disappeared and reappeared a few seconds later with some butter.

"Undercover hide-outs aren't as well equipped as they should be," he observed with a grin, then stopped short. Skinner had turned onto his back again, and was lying on the bed, his heavy cock hanging between his legs, and his body stretched out. His tanned flesh was stretched taut over powerful muscles, and he was so fantastically handsome, so damn *masculine* that Mulder felt as if someone had quite literally taken his breath away.

"What?" Skinner looked at him.

"You." Mulder shook his head. "You're so fucking gorgeous."

Skinner flushed, and buried his head under one arm. "Don't be stupid," he muttered.

Mulder could have laughed out loud. "Fucking gorgeous, and too fucking modest," he said, kneeling between the other man's legs. "I'd like to do this with you on your back," he told his boss, in a low voice full of sexual desire. "I want to look into your eyes. Is that okay with you?"

Skinner nodded, but Mulder could see that the big man was holding his breath, nervous about what would come next.

"I'm going to take such good care of you," Mulder whispered, stroking Skinner's cock and feeling the faintest stirring of it against his palm. "Nobody's taken care of you for such a long time, have they?" Skinner shook his head, his eyes transfixed by Mulder's, and the younger man leaned forward, and kissed him slowly and gently on the lips. "Now that's going to change. Lie back for me. Just relax. This will be good, I promise."

Skinner did as he was told, and Mulder spread the butter on his fingers, and then gently parted the other man's legs, inserting one finger inside his anus, slowly, stretching him. Skinner was tight and tense, but he soon relaxed under the expert probing. Mulder inserted two fingers, and was gratified when Skinner lifted his hips to facilitate him.

"Did Jamie do this?" he asked. "Do you want to talk about how it was between you? I wouldn't want to screw up and do something you're not familiar with."

"Jamie wasn't a great romantic. At first, we just used to blow each other, you know?" Skinner told Mulder, groaning slightly as Mulder inserted another finger, and continued that long, stroking caress with nimble fingers.

"Would you like to do that to me?" Mulder asked. "Do you want to feel my cock in your mouth?"

"Yeah," Skinner smiled, almost shyly, and Mulder grinned, completely captivated by seeing this intensely private man so unguarded. He removed his fingers, and sat astride the big man's chest. He fed his cock into Skinner's mouth slowly, rocking back and forth as Skinner sucked on him, playing with the big man's

ears the whole time. Skinner knew what he was doing - thirty years without practice or not. Mulder guessed there were some skills you never forgot. After several minutes he withdrew.

"Time?" he asked, and he was rewarded with another nod.

Mulder kissed Skinner's lips again, confirming the new bond of trust between them, then returned to his former place between Skinner's legs.

"Lift them for me." He tapped Skinner's thighs, and the big man placed his legs on Mulder's shoulders. Mulder pushed up close to him and put his hands on Skinner's buttocks, eased them apart, and snubbed his cock inside. He kept his eyes fixed on Skinner's face the whole time, to make sure he wasn't hurting the other man, then rocked his hips forward and slid inside. He pushed slowly, inch by inch, until he was completely swallowed up in the other man's body, then began to thrust.

Skinner arched his back, and made a series of little moaning sounds. Mulder adjusted his position, his hands running down Skinner's thighs caressing him, and then he started to move more quickly.

"Feel good?" he asked, thrusting in and out, then back again, over and over. Skinner nodded, his dark eyes still locked with Mulder's hazel ones.

"Oh god, yeah," the big man groaned as Mulder's cock found his prostate, rubbing him into a frenzy.

Mulder had a strange sensation of leaving his body. He could see himself, rhythmically thrusting into this stunning man beneath him, could see them both lying on an old stained mattress in a rundown apartment block, with peeling paint, and dirty walls, and it felt almost surreal, and strangely *right*. It was as if his whole life had been leading up to this one moment, when he joined together with someone he could love more than his quest, more than his own life. He had no doubt about his own feelings. This was what he had been born for - this moment, in this time and place. With a shout, Mulder came, and he felt Skinner's body spasm underneath him, clenching him hard, milking him. They remained in that position for a long time. Mulder's cock softened, but he was reluctant to leave the warmth of his lover's body, and to break the eye contact between them. Finally, Skinner reached up, and gently flicked a lock of hair away from Mulder's sweaty forehead.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"I should be the one doing the thanking. That was pretty damn hot." Mulder withdrew, and lay down beside his lover, pulling him into another embrace. Skinner rested his head on Mulder's shoulder.

"Jamie - we only got together in the hospital. I was down one day, really down I mean, out of my head with pain, and so damn depressed. Jamie got into bed beside me, and next thing I knew he was under the sheets sucking me off. It kind of went from there," Skinner shrugged. "It never felt wrong. Seeing him, kissing him, and holding him, fucking him - and having him fuck me - was the only thing that kept me going for a while, back then."

"How did it end?" Mulder asked, licking an earlobe.

"We drifted apart. There weren't any bad feelings. I guess the relationship had just run its course. The intensity had gone. We still loved each other, I don't think that could ever change, but it was less of a need, more of a friendship. How about you?"

"You're asking about men, right?" Mulder stopped nibbling at Skinner's ear.

"Yeah," Skinner nodded.

"Well, there's been more than one," Mulder admitted after an initial hesitation. "But none of them like Jamie was to you. None of them special." *Until now*, a voice inside him said.

It was nearly noon when Mulder woke. He looked around blearily, and then remembered the events of the previous night with a degree of satisfaction. He heard movement in the kitchen and Skinner emerged, already dressed. Mulder had a moment's dislocation from reality. This Skinner, the one who hid behind his wire-rims, who was self-sufficient, and guarded, was so different from the man who had lain naked and vulnerable in his arms last night, and showed him something of the soul beneath the mask. Mulder knew he wanted them both: the authoritative man of action, **and** the introspective, acquiescent lover.

"Hey." Mulder wondered what his reception would be, feared that Skinner would be in denial mode.

"Hey," Skinner nodded back, handing Mulder a cup of coffee.

"You're dressed."

"Yeah. I need to take off and..."

"Take off where?" Mulder demanded, wondering if Skinner viewed last night as just a sympathy fuck to help him through his grief, because that sure as hell wasn't the way Mulder viewed it.

"To find whoever sent me these." Skinner held up the dog tags.

"Oh shit." Mulder pushed his tousled hair out of his eyes. "There's no chance that you might give this up now that you know Jamie's dead, is there?"

Skinner raised an eyebrow. "Of course not. I need to find who killed him."

"And do what?" Mulder questioned keenly. "Kill him in turn?"

"Maybe." Skinner shifted uneasily, and the hard muscles in his arms tightened, as if in anticipation. Mulder thought about his cat analogy with a wry internal sigh. Yes, the cat had allowed his tummy to be tickled last night, but today his claws were out again, and he needed to go hunting.

"Walter, you've done your duty by Jamie. Can't you let it go?" Mulder laid a hand on the other man's arm. He wanted to add: *You've got me now. Don't throw last night away by chasing ghosts*, but he knew that kind of emotional blackmail wouldn't work on Skinner.

"Could *you*?" Skinner said gruffly, removing Mulder's hand. Mulder shook his head. His new lover knew him too well. Nothing and nobody had ever deflected Mulder in one of his quests - there was no reason why Skinner should be any different.

Skinner got up, put his gun in its holster, and slipped his knife through his belt. Mulder watched the movements, feeling curiously naked beside this fully armed and very dangerous man. What the hell had he been thinking last night? Skinner was a loner: he didn't belong in cozy fireside relationships. Hell, neither of them did.

"Who was she?" he found himself asking.

"Who?" Skinner turned, looking surprised.

"You told me that you'd been in love three times in your life. I'm guessing the first time was Jamie, and the second was Sharon. I'm just wondering who the third was."

Skinner's dark eyes flashed angrily. "That's none of your damn business, Mulder," he hissed. He strode towards the door, then hesitated, and glanced back. Something in Mulder's expression must have caught his attention, because he came back, crouched down beside the mattress, and cupped Mulder's face in his hands.

"I'll see you later? At the warehouse?" He seemed unsure. "Or do you want to do go back to the Bureau? I can finish up here alone. I don't have the right to ask anything of you..."

"Not the right, no, but if you think you'll get rid of me that damn easily, then the sex must have addled your brain. Sir. I'm not some sordid little one-night stand, and I'm not going away. Deal with it."

Skinner gave a wry chuckle, then deposited a kiss on Mulder's mouth. "Fine," he said. "We will talk about this. After..." he promised.

"Yeah," Mulder nodded, watching as Skinner got up and left the apartment. He felt more alone than he'd ever felt in his life. Damn typical. To finally find someone he could love, and then to have to share him with a damn ghost. Only his love life could turn into an X File.

Mulder waited at the warehouse for Skinner to return. He was starting to loathe Frank's crude jokes, and Scar's habit of picking under his nails with his knife. Cassidy had always been an irritating little flea, but Mulder yearned to squash him even more today. His nerves were on edge, and he tried to concentrate on the inevitable long card game, but his eyes kept flitting over towards the door. Sometime later that evening, Cassidy got a call on his cell phone and left to meet with someone higher up the food chain. Mulder sighed and glanced at his watch again, worried about Skinner. Damn, this must be how Scully and Skinner felt whenever they watched him being consumed by one of his quests. It wasn't easy being the bystander. Mulder breathed a sigh of relief as Skinner joined them just before 10:00 p.m. The big man looked as grim faced as ever, but there was something about his body language that alerted Mulder. Mulder departed to use the john a few seconds later, and waited there for Skinner to join him.

"Good news?" he asked.

"Could be. Apparently Morgan has a big job lined up for us. Cassidy's won his trust, and he's going to give him a shot at some deal he's working on. If we hang on in here for long enough, we might just get a free ride to the inside of Morgan's operation." Skinner spoke rapidly in a low voice.

"Fine." Mulder nodded.

"Don't do anything to blow our cover, Mulder," Skinner warned. "We're so close now, we must be more careful than ever."

Mulder gave him a thumbs-up sign, and returned to the warehouse.

Cassidy returned a few minutes later, his body full of hyped-up aggression.

"So nice of you to join us," he growled at the big man.

"I had some business to take care of," Skinner snapped.

"Well, now *I* have some business to take care of." Cassidy clicked his fingers, and they all gathered around, exchanging apprehensive glances. It was clear that something big had gone down, and Cassidy was furious about whatever it was. "I've just been talking to a friend, and he tells me that we have a cop among us," Cassidy snarled, circling his gang. Mulder's hand went absently to his gun, and he saw Skinner do the same.

"Who?" Scar asked, leaning forward, his eyes narrowed, and dangerous. He glanced around at his companions suspiciously. Mulder bit on his lip, feeling the tension rise in the pit of his stomach. Cop. Singular. Not plural. Was it him or Skinner they'd discovered? He could tell that Skinner was thinking the same thing, and their eyes met, just briefly, speaking volumes.

"Him." Cassidy stopped behind Skinner, a gun in his hand - pointed directly at the big man's head. "His real name is Walter Skinner, and he's a fed."

An assortment of weapons had appeared in the other men's hands as if by magic, and Mulder found that he, also, was holding a gun loosely pointed at his boss. Skinner stood quite still, unmoving, and his last words to Mulder echoed through the younger man's head. *Don't do anything to blow our cover...* But his cover was already blown. Even so, there was no way the two of them would be able to shoot their way out of this one.

Mulder watched nervously as Cassidy removed Skinner's gun, and knife, and waved him into the center of the room. Skinner raised his hands, and stood there, quietly. There was clearly no point in refuting the accusations.

"So what now, do we waste him?" Scar asked, raising his gun.

"No." Cassidy shook his head. "I'm on strict instructions from Morgan. He doesn't want Skinner dead - he wants him warned off."

"What?" Frank frowned. "He knows all about our fucking operation, Cassidy. You're just going to send him back home with his tail between his legs?"

"No, I'm going to send him back home with his face smashed in," Cassidy snapped. "This operation doesn't matter any more. Morgan's closing us down, moving us onto something bigger, and better."

The men glanced at each other, unsure about this, but Cassidy was in charge, and he seemed to know what he was doing.

"I'm going to enjoy this." Scar moved towards Skinner, flexing his arms, and Mulder wanted to say something, to somehow stop what was about to happen, but a look from Skinner made him bite his lip.

"Your zeal is commendable, Scar," Cassidy commented ironically. "But we've never given Spooky here his initiation rite, have we? Don't you think it's about time?"

Mulder felt all eyes turned on him. His mouth went dry.

"Initiation?" he questioned.

"Yeah." Cassidy gave him an almost malicious smile. "We've all been through it. Even the cop." He looked at Skinner with a sneer. "He knows the score, don't you?" he asked. Skinner looked straight at Mulder.

"Yeah. I know the score," he replied.

"He's all yours." Cassidy swung his head in Skinner's direction, and Mulder glanced around at the assembled men. It was quite clear what he was supposed to do.

"I've not...uh, that is," he began, playing for time.

Frank grinned. "Well, you did say you wanted to get your hands dirty," he taunted, pushing Mulder forward.

Scar went up to Skinner and grabbed hold of his arms, pulling them behind his back.

"First one's free," he said.

There was silence for a moment, and time stretched out into eternity as Mulder walked towards his lover. He stopped in front of Skinner, and looked into the other man's eyes, searching for a cue. Skinner looked back, his expression unchanging.

"Do it," he urged.

Mulder hesitated. *I can't, I'm sorry*, his mind gibbered, but Skinner's face was calm, unchanging, solid. If Mulder had been the rock he clung to last night, then today their situations were reversed.

"Come on, Spooky. DO IT," Skinner roared. Mulder knew what his lover was asking him to do, and why, but his fists rebelled.

"What's the matter?" Skinner leaned forward. "Are you chicken, Spooky?" he hissed. They locked eyes. Everything in the big man's expression spoke of a deep, unshakable trust. He trusted Mulder to do this;

he needed Mulder to stay undercover now that his own cover had been blown. If Mulder was discovered then their last chance of finding out what had happened to the big man's lost comrade was gone, and if anybody was going to hurt him, he wanted it to be Mulder. Skinner was beseeching Mulder, practically begging him with his eyes. *Do this for me, if last night meant anything to you. Do it!*

Mulder raised his fist, and landed a punch deep into the other man's gut. Skinner grunted and doubled over. Mulder slammed another blow to his lover's stomach before he could recover, followed by an uppercut to his jaw, and Skinner staggered, and fell against him. Mulder caught his arms, and felt the warm caress of the other man's breath on the side of his face.

"Sorry," Mulder whispered.

Skinner shook his head, and gripped Mulder's arms in his hands as he went down onto his knees, his big body buckling from the blows he had received.

"More," he replied, his voice carrying no further than Mulder's ears. "Make it convincing."

Mulder took a deep breath, then kicked the side of Skinner's face hard, his breathing coming in panting gasps. Hands that last night had gently stroked, now hit out, offering blow after blow to Skinner's bruised and swelling face. Fingers that had caressed, now punched. This body, that last night he had treated with such tenderness, tonight he kicked, and stamped on, until his lover lay at his feet, bloody and bruised. Mulder hated himself, hated the feeling of flesh under his fists, hated hurting the one person in the world he had found he could love.

Skinner's eyes continually sought Mulder's as each punch landed, and each kick connected, urging him to continue. Those brown eyes, so trusting last night, when they had made love, were trusting again today, as the big man endured this ordeal. Mulder hesitated, unable to go on, but Skinner's eyes were insistent. He wished the other man would fight back, but Skinner offered no resistance.

"What's the matter, Spooky? Had enough already?" Skinner taunted from blood-stained lips. There was a fire in his expression, and a strength that he sent straight to his lover's resolve. Mulder stamped down hard on his own weakness. Skinner needed him to do this, and do it well.

Mulder lifted Skinner's face with his hand, and sank his fist deep into the other man's jaw, longing to send him to an oblivion where he couldn't be hurt, but Skinner was as strong as the proverbial ox. Despite Mulder's best shot, he went down, but not out, lying on the floor, his hands over his head to ward off any more blows.

"I think he's done," Mulder said, drawing back, and examining his bruised knuckles nonchalantly. "What now? Want me to dump him somewhere?" He needed to get Skinner to a hospital, and he wanted to make sure he hadn't caused the big man any permanent injury. He'd been careful with his punches, but even so, he was worried.

"Yeah," Cassidy grinned. "Dump him back outside the FBI," he laughed. Mulder nodded. It had a kind of ghoulishly theatrical appeal, and suited Cassidy's sense of melodrama.

"Need a hand?" Frank stepped forward as Mulder pulled Skinner to his feet, and slung one of his arms over his shoulder.

"I can manage," Mulder snapped, almost buckling under his lover's weight.

He half-walked, half-carried Skinner to the car, and pushed him inside.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "Walter?" He reached over with one hand, driving crazily with the other.

"I'm fine. Thanks," Skinner murmured.

"For what? Beating you to a fucking pulp?" Mulder commented savagely.

"You had no choice," Skinner shrugged, then winced. He tried to straighten his battered body, glancing out as the car sped along the streets. "You're going the wrong way," Skinner muttered.

"I'm taking you to the hospital," Mulder told him.

"No," Skinner snapped.

Mulder's head swung around in surprise. "Walter - don't be fucking crazy. I have to."

"No," Skinner snapped again. "They might be following you. Take me to the Hoover building, like he told you, then go straight back. Don't draw attention to yourself. Please, Mulder." His eyes were beseeching.

"Walter," Mulder hesitated. "Fuck this, Walter. You're hurt!"

"I'll be fine. You never were very good with your fists."

"Bastard. Don't damn well joke at a time like this," Mulder fumed.

"I wasn't." Skinner raised an eyebrow, then winced. That was too much for Mulder. He pulled the car over, turned the light on, and examined the other man's injuries.

"Mulder, we don't have time for this," Skinner protested weakly.

"Shut up. If I'm going to just dump you, then I need to know you're okay first." Mulder pulled open his lover's shirt, and checked for injuries. There was some bruising on his ribcage, but as far as Mulder could tell, nothing seemed broken.

"It's just cuts and bruises," Skinner rasped.

Mulder turned the light off again and then took a deep breath, burying his face in his hands for a moment.

"I'm sorry," Skinner said. "I don't have any right to ask you to go back there."

"Of course I'll damn well go back," Mulder snapped. "If you just promise me you'll go to the hospital as soon as I leave you," Mulder turned in his seat and took hold of Skinner's face between his hands. "I know what an obstinate bastard you can be. Promise me."

"I promise," Skinner said. "Shit, I can see you're going to be a demanding boyfriend to have around."

"You bet," Mulder smiled, then carefully touched his lips to the other man's bruised face, before slamming the car into gear and speeding off again amid the sound of screeching tires.

"And remind me never to let you borrow my car, either," Skinner murmured.

"Only if you remind me never to get involved with my pig-headed, stubborn, macho boss, whose idea of a good night out is to get me to beat him up in front of witnesses," Mulder retorted.

"You didn't like that? After all the trouble I went to to set it up, as well," Skinner rasped.

Mulder sighed and gave up. It was obvious who was going to get the last word on this one, and it wasn't going to be him.

He drew up outside the Hoover building, and slowed outside the entrance.

"Can you walk?" Mulder asked.

"I don't think so. I was lying about your fists. It feels like they knew what they were doing."

The corner of Skinner's mouth turned up in a wry grin, and he opened the door, and half-staggered, half-fell onto the sidewalk. It took all of Mulder's resolve, and a stern look from his boss, to make him pull the door shut and speed off again. Even so, he couldn't resist looking back. Skinner was lying on the ground, but someone from the FBI building had run out and was helping him up. Mulder breathed a sigh of relief, and set off for the warehouse.

The gang was still there when he returned. Mulder walked in breezily, and grinned at them.

"All done," he announced.

"Good," Cassidy said, getting up and placing his gun against Mulder's temple. "That's Fed number one taken care of. Now it's time for number two." Mulder closed his eyes, and a few seconds later something cold and metallic made painful contact with the back of his head, and he passed out.

Mulder awoke with a splitting headache. He was lying on a hard leather couch, in a library. He blinked. A library? He sat up, too fast, and someone laughed.

"There's a glass of water on the table," a voice said. Mulder looked up, his vision coming into focus, and frowned when he saw the owner of the voice. The man was wearing some kind of ski mask, made of thin black silk. "You're wondering about my mask," the man stated, accurately.

"Not really," Mulder shrugged. "Presumably, you don't want me to know who you are."

"Presumably." The other man inclined his head. "Although not necessarily. I could have blindfolded you, if that were the case."

"Presumably," Mulder echoed. "Why am I here, and where is *here*, incidentally?"

"Here is my house. And you are here because you won't go away."

"On the contrary. I'd be happy to," Mulder said with a wry wince as he took a sip of water. "Just show me the door and I'll go."

"Unfortunately, it isn't that simple," the masked man smiled. "I have to assume that Assistant Director Skinner is still pursuing this, as he sent you back?"

Mulder hesitated.

"Come now," the masked man said. "The Assistant Director is very persistent. I've been aware of his activities for several weeks now."

"Weeks?" Mulder looked confused. "Then why didn't you act before now?"

"I did," the masked man shrugged. "I tried to warn him off twice, before this evening - once with a bullet, and once with the dog tags. I had hoped that a bloody nose might work, but it's clear that he's not getting the message. What does he want, Mr. Mulder?"

"What he's always wanted - to find the man who killed his friend."

"And you think that's me?" the stranger asked.

"If you're Morgan, then yes," Mulder answered.

"You don't recognize your own uncle?" the masked man inquired. Mulder gave an ironic bark of laughter. "I am Morgan, but I didn't kill Skinner's friend," Morgan told him. "I was fond of Jamie but he wasn't...stable. He was a dabbler, Mr. Mulder. He died of an overdose, and we disposed of his body. Skinner can stop looking. There's no great mystery."

"Then why not report the death?" Mulder asked.

"I didn't want any questions being asked," Morgan shrugged. "Now, will you return to Skinner and tell him this?"

"You're letting me go?" Mulder was surprised.

"Of course. You don't know where you are. You're no danger to me, Mulder. I don't want a war with the FBI. I'm not sure I could win, and I don't like to fight battles unless I'm certain of victory." Morgan gestured with his hand, and a man stepped out of the shadows. "Go back to your boss, Mr. Mulder. Tell him to drop this."

"I'll tell him," Mulder shrugged, walking unsteadily to the door.

"Mulder."

He stopped, and turned. Morgan sighed. "You sound uncertain. Can I guess that you think the Assistant Director will continue to pursue this?"

"He cared about his friend a great deal," Mulder said carefully, "and he's an obstinate man. I think it will be hard to persuade him to drop it." *Although I'm damn well going to try.*

"I see."

Much to Mulder's surprise, the other man raised his hand, and took off his mask. Mulder took a deep intake of breath. Morgan was badly scarred - the whole of one side of his face looked as if it had been shot off, or melted.

"Sometimes people wear masks because they grow weary of being stared at - and of seeing their own ugliness reflected back in other people's eyes," Morgan told him.

"Forgive me, but I would imagine that your line of work is fairly hazardous. It's hard to feel much sympathy when the rewards are in proportion to the risk." Mulder gestured with his head to their plush surroundings, and Morgan laughed.

"You're right, of course." He looked almost pensive for a moment. When he looked up, his one good eye shone with a kind of sincerity. "Tell the Assistant Director that Jamie is dead, Mr. Mulder," he said firmly. "Tell him to stop looking. Make him believe. For his sake."

"I'll do my best," Mulder shrugged.

"Goodbye, Mr. Mulder."

Mulder gave in to the indignity of having a wad of cloth soaked in chloroform placed over his face. When he woke up he was back in his car outside the warehouse. It was just getting dark.

"Great," he muttered. "Somewhere along the way I lost a whole day, and you know what?" he asked nobody in particular. "I'm damn well starving."

He glanced around to see if he was being watched, but he couldn't see anybody. With a sigh, he started the car.

"Never get involved with someone with more demons than you have," he grumbled to himself as he drove. In fact, he was dreading telling Skinner the news. He knew the other man well enough to doubt whether this would be enough to stop him, and he was certain that Morgan would think nothing of killing his boss if he didn't give this up. This game had been quietly escalating as it went on, and as far as Mulder could see, Skinner was losing badly. He didn't want his new lover to pay the ultimate price. Mulder got out his cell phone and called Skinner's office to find out what hospital the Assistant Director had been taken to, only to be informed that the other man had refused medical treatment, and gone home. With a curse, Mulder swung the car around and set off for Crystal City.

"I thought I told you to go to the hospital," Mulder snapped when Skinner answered the door. He pushed past the other man, and walked into the living room.

"You did. I didn't."

"If only you were as good at taking orders as you are at handing them out," Mulder fumed.

"Ditto to you," Skinner commented wryly, shutting the door behind his guest.

Mulder stopped short, a contrite expression on his face. "I'm sorry. It hasn't been a very good day. How are you?" He looked at his lover anxiously. Skinner had a split lip, and the side of his face was purple with bruises. There was a makeshift bandage around his wrist.

"Considering my boyfriend beat me up? Not bad," Skinner grinned. He was wearing a pair of gray sweatpants and a white tee shirt - loose comfortable clothing, Mulder thought. "More to the point - how are you?"

"Lousy. I've been knocked out and drugged, transported fuck knows where and I have a feeling that everybody knows a hell of a lot more about what's going on around here than I do. I feel like I'm trapped in a game of cat and mouse, and I don't know whether I'm the cat, the mouse, or the goddamn piece of cheese luring the mouse as bait."

"Mulder - slow down. What's happened?" Skinner walked over to his lover and put a hand on each of his shoulders.

"Morgan happened," Mulder told him. "They knew, Walter. They knew we were both with the FBI. It was all a set up. They've been onto us for weeks." Mulder quickly filled Skinner in on the details of his conversation with Morgan, watching his lover's dark eyes take it all in. "Walter - I think he's right. Give this up - hand over all you've found out to Raven. Let Narcotics deal with this from here."

"Morgan told you Jamie died of an overdose?" Skinner walked stiffly over to the couch and sat down with a wince, grabbing his ribs.

"Yes - and I believe him." Mulder perched himself on the coffee table in front of Skinner, and took hold of the other man's face between his hands. "Please, Walter. You've done your duty by Jamie. Give this up."

Skinner nodded, his eyes drinking in his lover's concern. He reached out and caressed Mulder's neck.

"Thanks. I appreciate what you've done for me." His fingers combed through his lover's hair and found the small lump on the back of his head. Mulder flinched.

"I told you - today hasn't been a good day." Mulder gave a wry smile. "I'm starving hungry, and my head's killing me."

"I'll get you some painkillers." Skinner tried to get up, but Mulder pushed him back down.

"That can wait. First, I want to get re-acquainted with you." He pressed his lips gently against Skinner's mouth, and was rewarded by the other man opening up under him, letting him in, eagerly.

"You missed me then?" Mulder asked, smiling.

"Don't be an idiot," Skinner growled, in a low, throaty, sexy tone that went straight to Mulder's cock.

Mulder pulled his lover's tee shirt over his head and carefully examined his torso for damage. Skinner had some nasty bruising on his ribs, and he winced as Mulder's fingers gently traced over the damage.

"I'm so sorry, Walter." Mulder kissed each bruise, and Skinner ran his hands down his back, stroking him.

"My fault. I got us both into this," Skinner said, but his tone was so weary and dejected that it was almost painful to hear it.

"There were never any prizes for anybody in all this, Walter," Mulder said softly. "It was never going to be a happy ending. You knew that Jamie was probably dead, and you were pretty sure you knew how he died."

"The lack of surprises doesn't take away the hurt, all the same," Skinner whispered.

Mulder pressed his head against the other man's brow. "If I could take it away, I would," he promised.

"In some ways, you have." Skinner laced his fingers through Mulder's. "I was looking for an old love, and found a new one, instead."

"I knew it. You're a closet romantic," Mulder teased.

"My dark secret's out," Skinner shrugged, then winced.

"Hey." Mulder pressed in for another kiss, then gently undid the drawstring on his lover's sweatpants. "No underwear? Another surprise. My lover likes going commando."

"To be honest, it just hurt to have too many layers around my midriff, but hey, if it works for you..." Skinner trailed off as Mulder's mouth wrapped itself around his cock, sucking hard. "Shit, that's good..." Skinner stroked his lover's hair, as Mulder gave his cock some expert attention. He tried to pull away when he was on the brink of coming, but Mulder put his hands on his thighs, and held him tight, his eyes showing Skinner that he wanted to taste him. With a little smile, Skinner nodded, and a few seconds later, his hips bucked up and he came deep inside Mulder's throat.

"That was good," Mulder told him.

"Well, you said you were hungry," Skinner commented, deadpan. Mulder did a double take.

"I'm never going to get used to this whole sense of humor thing. Who are you, and what did you do with my boss?"

"You'll see him again, at work. Here, though, alone with you, I'm just me. Walter." Skinner ran his fingers lovingly along Mulder's cheek. "Talking of hungry - I'm not sure semen is good for you on an empty stomach. Why don't you go and make yourself something in the kitchen. Then maybe I can return the favor." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively in the direction of Mulder's groin, and Mulder laughed.

"I'd need to take a shower first," he grinned.

"Make it so," Skinner nodded, leaning back, and closing his eyes wearily.

Mulder made himself a sandwich and devoured it while he turned on the shower. It felt good to let the warm water wash away all the sweat of the past few days, and it felt **really** good to have clean hair again. He toweled his hair dry, and then pulled on one of Skinner's robes, wrapping it tightly around his body before padding out barefoot into the lounge. He made himself another sandwich, carrying on a conversation with his tired lover in the other room.

"When you've, uh, returned that favor you were talking about," Mulder grinned to himself, "then we should call Raven. I have some information about Morgan that might be useful to him."

"Uh-huh," Skinner had taken to saying this every time Mulder stopped for breath.

"Yeah - it was weird, the guy was wearing this mask, and then he just took it off." Mulder took a bite of his sandwich. "I haven't worked out why. Why wear it if he was going to show me his face anyway?"

"What did he look like?" Skinner asked.

"Ugly," Mulder called into the other room. "He'd been in some kind of accident. The whole of one side of his face was blown away. He was pretty smart, though. Let's face it, he was one step ahead of us all the way through this."

He poured himself a drink, and returned to the living room still munching his sandwich to find that Skinner was no longer on the couch.

"Walter?" He noticed the door to the balcony was open, and walked over. "Walter?"

Skinner was standing on the balcony, looking down on the traffic below, a thoughtful expression on his face. "You okay?" Mulder put his drink down, and slid his arms around his lover.

"I'm fine," Skinner murmured. He turned and enveloped Mulder in his arms, taking a deep inhalation of the other man's newly washed hair. "Did I ever tell you about my kinky streak, Mulder?"

Mulder looked down to see the pair of handcuffs dangling from Skinner's hand.

"Uh, no. **We *have*** only just started dating." He coughed nervously.

"So the idea of doing it out here, in the open, in handcuffs, doesn't appeal to you?" Skinner smiled seductively, and gently nipped the side of Mulder's neck with his teeth.

"I didn't say that." Mulder returned the smile. "To be honest, doing it with you ***anywhere*** appeals." He held up his wrist, and allowed Skinner to snap the cuff shut around it, then to fasten it onto the balcony rails. Skinner crouched down beside him, and caressed his face. "I'm sorry, Fox," he murmured.

"Walter?" Mulder looked up in alarm as Skinner got up, and went to the door.

"You'll be okay," Skinner told him. "It's a warm night. I'll leave a message for Scully to come and rescue you in the morning. I'm sorry to have to do this but I don't need you along on this one, Mulder," he smiled, sadly. "I know how you hate taking 'no' for an answer and I **really** don't want you getting hurt."

"Where the hell are you going?" Mulder pulled angrily on the cuff.

"Unfinished business," Skinner murmured.

"Walter! At least leave me a gun," Mulder protested. "I'm defenseless out here."

"I don't think that anybody will be breaking in," Skinner replied, "but if you insist."

He went back into the other room and returned with a gun, placing it just at the edge of Mulder's reach, clearly not trusting the other man not to wing him in order to stop him leaving.

"Walter! Fuck you, Skinner. Come back here," Mulder growled fruitlessly, as his lover walked stiffly towards the door. He grabbed his jacket on the way out, and checked the pocket for his gun.

"Walter - for god's sake. You can hardly even stand!" Mulder protested. His lover just gave him a brief look of regret, before leaving the apartment. "Damn!" Mulder kicked his foot pointlessly against the bars of the balcony, then leaned over and looked down. He saw Skinner leave the apartment block far below, moving slowly, his arm hanging awkwardly at his side. The big man crossed the road, and glanced up at the balcony, as if trying to spot Mulder, before disappearing in the direction of the Metro.

Mulder kicked the bars again, tugging at the handcuff and wondering what the hell was going on, and what he had missed. Finally, more for something to do than anything else, he lay on his stomach and inched over to the gun. He picked it up and sat with it in his lap, trying to work out the pieces of the puzzle, running over every single conversation he'd had with Skinner in the past few weeks through his mind.

The puzzle fell into place with a snap, and Mulder went berserk, tugging at the cuff again, frantic with worry for his missing lover. Skinner had told him he would leave a message for **Scully** to find him. That meant he didn't plan on coming back. Mulder calmed down, his wrist aching, and tried to think of a way to prevent a tragedy unfolding. Through the open balcony door he could see the panic button by Skinner's front door - a wise precaution in his lover's profession. He knew that Skinner's security system was state of the art. Mulder picked up the gun, and aimed. It was a long shot, and an awkward one, and it was dark, but it was worth a try. He fired once, and missed, then a second time. The bullet pinged off the wall next to the panic button but on the third try it hit home, and the button exploded, triggering off the alarm. A few minutes later, the apartment security team arrived.

It took Mulder some time to explain who he was, and what he was doing handcuffed to the Assistant Director's balcony clad only in a bathrobe in the middle of the night. He fished out his ID and flashed that around, and after a few phone calls they were finally persuaded to let him go. Mulder pulled on his clothes and ran down the stairs, punching in Mark Raven's number on his cell phone as he went. He asked the other man to meet him at the Hoover Building, and drove off.

Mulder ran from the parking garage to his office, logged into the FBI database, and started pulling up records.

"Shit, I'm so fucking stupid," he berated himself, as he worked. He found a military file on James Gale, and pulled the record up. A picture of a young, fresh-faced corporal was attached to the file. Mulder looked at it, frowning. "No good. I need something later."

He ran through the conversations he'd had with Skinner again, kicking himself mentally for not piecing it together sooner, and brought up another file, dated 1974 - Jamie's records from the VA Psychiatric unit he had been detained in. "Shit." Mulder looked at the photograph, and buried his face in his hands.

Mulder got up and paced around his office. It still didn't make sense. Skinner didn't know where Morgan lived, so how the hell was he going to...Mulder stopped pacing, the rest of the puzzle fitting together effortlessly in his mind.

"Oh shit," he whispered.

It was well past midnight when Mulder pulled his car up beside the Lincoln Memorial. He ran down the pathway, past the Reflecting Pool. To his right, the moonlight skated over the silver bodies of the Korean War Memorial statues, bathing them in an eerie glow, making them seem almost real. Mulder moved quietly. As he got closer to the Vietnam Wall, he heard someone coughing. He stopped, and found a vantage point so that he could see what was going on before he was discovered. The memorial was well lit, and he could see Skinner standing with his back to the Wall. The harsh glow of the lights illuminated the bruises on his face and he looked tired, and ill, his whole body shaking with the effort of standing. For a moment, Mulder thought he had got there in time - then he saw the three men approaching from the shadows.

Mulder recognized Morgan immediately. He wasn't wearing his mask, and the light illuminated his ruined face all too cruelly, highlighting the raw, savaged flesh. One side of his face was unblemished, and showed that he had clearly once been a handsome man. His thick silver hair contrasted with his vivid blue eyes, and his lips were full and sensual. The other two men were clearly his bodyguards.

"I thought you'd come alone," Skinner said, his voice carrying on the breeze.

"Why? For old times sake? When did you get so sentimental, Walt?"

"I thought, as you're going to have to kill me, that you'd at least have the guts to do it yourself," Skinner replied. Mulder's breath caught in his throat. Nobody was going to kill Skinner while he was around to prevent it.

"You should have given it up," Morgan said softly.

"How could I? Forgive me for caring," Skinner shrugged, and staggered slightly. Morgan put out an arm to catch him, and the two men stared at each other for a moment in silence.

"Can you do it, Jamie?" Skinner asked.

"Can you?" Morgan replied. He took Skinner's own gun from him, and placed it on the ground between them.

"When did it happen?" Skinner asked.

"When did I become Morgan?" The other man shrugged. "A long time ago. Jamie's been dead for years, Walter. He died back with the others in Vietnam, just as Walter Skinner did. You know that, deep inside. You weren't the same man after 'Nam, and neither was I."

"Maybe I became a better one," Skinner told him.

Morgan laughed. "The implication being that I became someone worse. Maybe. I became what they made me, though, Walter. My father told me that after World War Two he received a hero's welcome. What did we get? We got brushed under the fucking carpet. We were treated as if we were an embarrassment. We deserved more than that."

"So all those years when you showed up here..." Skinner looked into the other man's face, searchingly.

"Yes. I was already Morgan. I told you - I killed off Jamie a long time ago. The only time I was ever him again was with you, once a year, out here." Morgan raised his hand and gestured.

"Then what happened to you? Why didn't you show up last year?" Skinner demanded, his tone low and angry. Mulder held his breath.

"I was in prison," Morgan shrugged. "On minor drugs charges. They couldn't pin anything big on me - my lawyers were too good. I'm a wealthy man, Walter, and I have you to thank for that."

"Me?" Skinner shook his head, bemused.

"I used to watch you, year after year, making a success of your life, settling down, getting married, doing well in your career, earning good money, and I wanted that. You moved on, Walter, and I could have killed you for that. You moved on and left me behind."

"It was that or go under," Skinner told him despairingly.

"You always were stronger than me, Walter, stronger than anyone I ever knew."

"I looked up to you. I hero-worshipped you."

"Then you should beware of putting your faith in false idols." Morgan gave a ghoulish laugh. "I wasn't worth that amount of devotion. You inspired me though, Walter. You inspired me to put the past behind me. I've been clean for a long time. Now, I just sell the stuff. It was the industry I was the most intimately familiar with, after all. Where better to make my fortune?"

"I can't believe..." Skinner struggled with the words.

"That you didn't know me? Well, you never asked. Too busy climbing the greasy pole at the FBI. You didn't really want to know what your old junkie comrade was up to, did you?"

"That's not fair," Skinner growled.

"Maybe not," Morgan nodded. "There was another reason. I didn't want to take Jamie from you, Walter," he said softly. "Or the memory of him. I was him once, just as you were Corporal Skinner, wide-eyed and naïve, with that big crush on me."

"It was more than a crush," Skinner told him seriously.

Morgan nodded. "For a while."

"Why didn't you just come and tell me you were okay?" Skinner whispered. "Once you got out of prison?"

"I had no idea you'd care this much. By the time I did, you'd already started digging, Walter. You already knew too much. Can you honestly tell me you'd have left it alone?" Skinner hesitated, opened his mouth, and then closed it again, shaking his head. "Exactly. You'd have had me followed, or followed me yourself. You'd have found out the truth one way or the other and then, like the good cop you are, you'd have brought me in. I thought that convincing you that Jamie was dead would be best for both of us. And now..." Morgan glanced at the gun on the floor between them. "One of us has to kill, and one of us has to be killed," he said. "You can't let me go - and I can't let you go. So, what's it to be?"

Skinner looked down, then nudged the gun towards Morgan with his foot.

"I can't do it," he said. "I'm not full of surprises like you. I'm still the same old Walter. You do it. I can't." Morgan looked him in the eye for a long moment, and then nodded, reaching down to pick up the gun. "One thing, though." Skinner put his foot on the gun, and Morgan looked up in surprise. "You do it. Don't get one of them to do it." He nodded his head in the direction of the bodyguards. "You owe me that much."

"Of course." Morgan picked up the gun and put his arm around Skinner, drawing him close, the gun pressing into the big man's flesh.

Mulder found that he was running, shouting, and he saw Skinner look up in surprise, and Morgan turn. Morgan snapped the gun up, aiming at him now, instead of Skinner, and Skinner was galvanized into action, one hand coming down on Morgan's arm, deflecting the shot. Mulder felt a dull thud in his stomach, a wave of pain, and his legs stopped working. He skidded to a halt, losing his footing, and then he was down.

"Mulder! No!" He heard Skinner's voice from a long way off, and then the big man was next to him, cradling his head, his face crumpled in rage and grief. "Fuck you, Jamie. Fuck you." Skinner pulled Mulder's gun and turned, pointing it directly at his old lover. Morgan's face registered a split second of surprise, and he raised his own gun towards Skinner, but the Assistant Director got there first, and the bullet slammed cleanly into the other man's chest. Pandemonium broke out, as Raven's men appeared from nowhere, and Morgan's bodyguards dropped their weapons.

"Mulder..." Skinner's hands were unbuttoning his shirt, trying to find the wound.

"S'alright," Mulder said, pushing him away. "Kevlar." He pointed at the bullet-proof vest under his shirt and Skinner sat back with a shaky laugh. "Raven insisted. Good thing."

"I thought he'd killed you," Skinner whispered, his hands shaking.

"I'm okay. You're in shock, though." Mulder could see how pale Skinner was, the bruises on his face seeming dark and livid in his white flesh.

"Jamie..." Skinner got up, and walked brokenly over to where the other man lay. Two of Raven's men were working on him, trying to stem the flow of blood, but it was clearly useless. "I'm sorry, Jamie," Skinner said, crouching down beside him, taking hold of the other man's hand, and looking into his eyes.

"Doesn't matter," Jamie smiled. "Over with. Glad it was you though," he whispered, closing his eyes.

Skinner looked up at Mulder, and the agent placed a hand on the back of his lover's neck. Skinner sat there for a moment, still holding his friend's lifeless hand.

"I've been an idiot," he whispered.

"No." Mulder didn't give a damn about Raven's people seeing them. He crouched down behind Skinner, and put his arms around his lover's cold body, holding him close, keeping him warm. Skinner was already starting to shiver in shock. "None of this was your fault, Walter." Mulder held him tight, his lips brushing the other man's head. "You couldn't have known."

"I should have known. If I'd helped him more after 'Nam...if I'd only..." Skinner bowed his head.

"Ssh. Don't," Mulder said. He took off his own jacket and placed it around the big man's shoulders. "It's over, Walter," he said. "You're going to be fine. **We're** going to be fine. Come on. Time to let go."

"Yeah," Skinner nodded, then relinquished his hold on his dead friend's hand. He tried to get up, and staggered, reaching out and finding Mulder's arms, holding on as the world swayed around him.

"Walter, this time you really are going to the hospital, if I have to drive you there myself," Mulder told him firmly.

"This time, Mulder, as you're still alive to drive me, I'll be happy to go," Skinner replied with a ghost of a smile.

Vietnam War Memorial. Washington DC.

December, 2000.

Skinner got out of his car, and made his usual annual pilgrimage to the Wall. It felt different this year. He had spent the whole day wondering whether he'd even turn up. The blood stain on the paving was long gone, but he could still see it in his mind's eye. Skinner shoved his hands deeper into his pockets, and stared at the black granite silently. He found the names of his dead comrades and repeated them, like a litany, then he stood back, his head bowed. He felt like he was waiting for something, but he didn't

know what. Nobody was going to turn up this year, as they had on so many previous years. This was a ritual he was condemned to perform alone from now on.

A footstep caught his attention, and he looked up in surprise as a familiar figure came towards him.

"It's today, isn't it?" Mulder asked.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"I read it in your private diary," Mulder grinned. "I'm joking, Walter!" He put a hand on the other man's arm as Skinner opened his mouth in outrage. "I knew it was sometime in December, so I made some inquiries. Besides, you've been acting strange all day. You didn't even glare at me when I asked you to sign that patently absurd 302 this morning."

"Was it? Patently absurd, I mean?" Skinner rubbed his hand over his eyes wearily, dislodging his glasses.

"Yeah," Mulder grinned.

"I must have gotten so used to absurd 302's that I'm unable to tell the difference between just plain absurd, and downright ridiculous, any more." Skinner shook his head wryly.

They were silent for a long moment.

"I was thinking of going home," Skinner murmured. "I wasn't even sure I'd come in the first place."

"I knew you'd come," Mulder told him firmly.

"How?"

"Because I know you."

"Can any of us really say that we know each other?" Skinner asked him.

"Yeah. We can." Mulder looked him in the eye. "We can," Mulder repeated insistently. Jamie's ghost hung between them for a moment, then Skinner gave his lover a smile that made Mulder's heart stand still.

Mulder opened up the bag he was carrying.

"I can't say the words, Walter," he said with a shrug. "*You* have to do that, this year. But I brought these." He got out the candles. "One for each of them - including Jamie." Skinner looked at them for a moment, then nodded.

"Thanks," he murmured. Mulder took his time lighting the candles, and watched as Skinner slowly, painfully, formulated the words, remembering each of his lost comrades, and including Jamie in his homage.

When the ceremony was over, they sat in silence, watching the candles burn down.

"You know - one thing always kind of impressed me about you," Mulder said as the candles began to flicker out.

"Just the one thing?" Skinner deadpanned.

"Yeah," Mulder grinned. "You told me that you only got together with Jamie in the hospital. That's after he got his face blown off by that land-mine."

"Yes." Skinner raised an eyebrow. "And that impresses you why?"

"Well, he looked a hell of a lot cuter before the accident," Mulder said with an apologetic shrug.

"I never saw his face. I just saw him," Skinner said.

"When he showed me his face - that was because he knew I'd tell you?"

"Yes. He knew I wasn't going to give it up, and he had no intention of giving himself up, so we'd reached stalemate."

"How did you know that he'd come here?"

"Sooner or later everything comes back to this." Skinner looked at the Wall. Mulder nodded, his warm breath clouding the cold air. Skinner was sitting with his hands in his coat pocket, as frozen as a statue. There was nobody around, so Mulder risked putting his arm around the other man. Skinner was never the most demonstrative of lovers, but on this occasion he didn't push Mulder away. In fact he seemed to draw comfort from the gesture, and leaned into the embrace. They didn't speak for a long time after that.

"While we're on the subject of remembrance," Mulder began as daylight filtered through the darkness several hours later.

"Mmm?" Skinner looked at him.

"You never did tell me who that third person in your life was. You said you'd been in love three times?" he prompted.

Skinner sighed, and shook his head. "Don't be an idiot, Mulder."

Mulder looked into amused dark eyes, and realization flooded in. "Me? It's me?"

"Yeah." Skinner ducked his head, looking embarrassed. "Who the hell did you think it was?"

"I dunno. Scully, maybe," Mulder shrugged.

"No. It was you. Always you," Skinner said softly.

"Why didn't you tell me that back then? When I asked?"

"Mulder, considering the circumstances, it didn't seem wise. Telling someone they're the love of your life after just one night might be enough to make the object of your affection run screaming for the hills."

"Not me," Mulder told him. "Love of your life?"

"Yeah, don't let it go to your head."

Mulder shook his head, and laughed out loud.

"It's time to go." Skinner stood up. "Same time, next year?" he asked his companion.

"Of course. Always," Mulder replied, and they walked back to the car together.

-The End-

This story archived at <http://www.xanthe.org/the-wall/>