

Walter-Watching by Xanthe

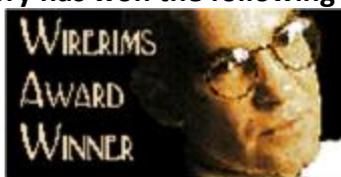


<http://www.xanthe.org/walter-watching/>

Story Notes:

Many thanks to Holmes for beta reading.

This story has won the following awards:



Winner of a Wirerims award for Best Physical Description of Skinner for the following passage:

"I like his body. I like his narrow hips, and the heavy ball sacs with the curling dark hair. It's very dark, like the hair on his chest. I like his smooth, pulsing cock, and the shapely almost-curl of his erection. I like the naked expression in eyes that I am only used to seeing guarded, and the powerful line of his jaw, the huge bare expanse of his head, the width of that strong neck, and the way he angles his head to stare up at me."

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I have no idea why I'm here. First a flight, then a long car journey, just me and my boss, out on a long winding road leading to this small town in the middle of nowhere. I'm not comfortable, and I miss Scully's familiar presence, and the ease of our communication. He hasn't spoken to me all that much, except to go over the details of the case, which are scant

enough. The man accused of the murder has no alibi, nor any witnesses to clear him. There is some circumstantial evidence - this guy's gun found at the scene of the crime - to implicate him. No motive, but the guy's crazy anyway, so he probably doesn't need to have one in the usual sense. I don't know why I'm here, and I'm not enjoying myself one bit.

Finally, (thank god!) we arrive at the hotel where our two rooms are booked. He gets the keys, I get the bags, and we separate when we arrive on the third floor. (We use the stairs - no elevator). His room is next to mine in this crumbling old ruin of a place - paper thin walls and fading wallpaper, worn carpets, you know the sort of place. Not that I care - I've slept in my car before now, but somehow, it doesn't seem like the kind of place he'd stay in. I suspect that there wasn't much choice. This town looks as if nothing has changed or happened for a thousand years - except the murder of course. Maybe nobody ever comes to visit. How sad, a whole town that's like some sort of maiden aunt - forgotten, friendless, unpopular.

I don't unpack. I can't see the point. You only have to pack up again when you leave. He said to bring enough for a few days, and I toss the bag into a corner of the room, and lay down on my bed with a sigh. I don't want to be here...I don't want to be here...I repeat the mantra over and over again in my head, gazing up at the brown stain on the ceiling, probably where the upstairs bath overflowed.

There's a knock on the door, and I open it.

"Agent Mulder. I'm going to go directly to the police station. I'll see you back here later..." He turns on his heel, but I have no intention of letting him go that easily.

"Sir?"

He stops, and I see his shoulders tense, then he looks back. There is no expression on his face, and I have the distinct impression of being out of my depth. Something is going on here, and I don't know what it is.

"Mulder." He looks wary, like a caged animal.

"You've brought me all the way out here to, to...nowhere in order just to abandon me?" I ask him. "With all due respect, why did you bring me at all?"

He doesn't reply immediately. I wish I could understand what was going on inside that naked skull of his, but I have never known a man who gave away less. You have to look really, really hard to catch even that hint of a shadow in his eyes, or the faintest twitch of a shoulder blade. Luckily, I'm good at looking hard, and I catch both.

"Good question, Agent Mulder," said wryly, as if he knows that he's done something stupid, or something brilliant, or both. Or as if the jury is out, and he's still not quite sure which, or what use he intends to put me to. Maybe that's it.

"And?" I prompt. Another hesitation. "Look, since I've come all this way you may as well let

me come with you to see this guy." I say. "I'm going to need all the information I can get if you want my help." My help. What for? To solve a murder that isn't our jurisdiction anyway? Not mine, certainly, and I've rarely heard of an Assistant Director venturing out into the field like this. Not for something so small, so mundane, so...local.

"All right, Mulder." He doesn't want me to come. I saw the struggle in his eyes, the faint settling sigh of resignation about his shoulders. He needs my help, but he doesn't want me to actually investigate this. Somehow, he wants me to come to my conclusions as if by magic. I can't do that. If he wants answers, he'll have to let me ask questions, and he clearly doesn't want that. So what is it he's hiding?

I accompany him down to the lobby, and back into the car, along a few streets. He's still not talking, but this is normal. It probably has nothing to do with me, or the fact that he thinks I'm a jerk, which I'm sure he must. I remember that conversation I had with his wife. Something about strength lying in silence. Or maybe he just never has much to say.

"Walter! Walter Skinner!" The police officer knows him. His hand is shaken and he gets a hug. A hug? This man? The one who transmits all those 'do not touch me' signals that could stop an unwanted hug at 50 paces? Oh well, the world is a strange place, and about to get stranger yet.

"Hello, Bob," he says warmly. "I'm here to see Billy."

"Of course you are," "Bob" says, nodding, looking sad. "This is a sad case, Walter. I'm real sorry."

"Me too, Bob. I'm having trouble really believing it."

"The evidence is pretty damning, Walter. You saw the stuff we sent to you."

"Yes. That's why I'm here." A-ha. One mystery solved, the one about why the Assistant Director is involved. It still doesn't explain what I'm doing here though.

We're taken to an interview room, sit down, and are given cups of coffee. It's all very civilized. Then the door opens, and the notorious Billy is brought in. So this is the man accused of the murder: average height, slim, brown hair, very vivid blue eyes, fit, and attractive and...mentally ill. Yes, it's obvious. He's mumbling nonsense to himself for a start, which is always a giveaway, and he's got an eye contact problem. He sits down, and shudders, still not looking at either of us.

"Billy," Skinner says, in such a warm, friendly, intimate, and caring tone that I have to look around to make sure it's him speaking. Billy looks up. He won't make eye contact with me, but he does with my boss, and the difference in him is amazing. Those blue eyes become electric, hopeful, and adoring...?

"Walt?" He asks. (Walt?!)

"Yes, Billy. It's me."

In a second Billy's on his feet, and advancing on my boss. I'm reaching for my gun as Billy's arms go around my boss's neck and he clings there for a moment.

"Walt!" Billy laughs. He doesn't actually kiss him, or anything, but his childlike affection for Skinner is obvious, as is Skinner's obvious affection for him. Strange. Billy goes back to his chair, and then immediately starts mumbling again.

"Billy, I need to know about this murder," Skinner says. Billy starts to shake.

"Wasn't me," he shrugs. "Wasn't, was, wasn't."

Skinner sighs. "Come on, Billy. You're in serious trouble. I might be able to help," he says. Billy nibbles on his fingernails, and glances up from under lowered lashes.

"When they come to get us, you say duck," he mumbles, "and I'll duck. And when they come to hurt us, I'll shoot them all. I will. Nobody hurt me, nobody hurt you." He reaches out one finger to touch Skinner's hand. I find all this fascinating, although I have no idea what it means. I also have a suspicion that Skinner won't tell me either.

We get no sense out of Billy, and finally give up, returning to the hotel. It's quite late, and I'm tired after the journey. What's the etiquette here? Do we eat together? Have a few beers? I might if it were some other agent I was out in the field with. But my boss? He solves that particular problem for me.

"I'm beat," he says, "and hungry. Why don't we grab something to eat then turn in? We can get going bright and early tomorrow."

"Sounds fine to me." But get going on what? Between mouthfuls I carefully probe at the edges of this mystery.

"Billy was in Vietnam with me," he says, his eyes meeting mine, and positively screaming that there's a whole story here that I am never going to be told. "He is...an autistic savant. Do you know what that is?"

I have to restrain myself from making a face. Well yes, of course I know. I have a degree in psychology for a start and hey, I saw "Rain Man" too! However such patronizing questions aren't typical of him, and he's obviously distracted, so I give him the benefit of the doubt. After the number of times he has done the same for me, I figure he deserves that much, so I just nod.

"The unusual thing is..." he pauses, looks at me, "maybe you wouldn't find it all that unusual after what you've seen. The unusual thing is that his 'skill' is in soldiering. I can't find a better word for it. He's fit, strong, obeys orders without question, and is an utterly ruthless killing

machine..."

"And you don't think he committed this murder?" I ask, finding all the evidence more and more damning.

"Let me finish," he snaps tersely, "an utterly ruthless killing machine in a combat situation. In a war." Skinner pushes his food around his plate. Despite being hungry he's obviously having trouble eating. "Billy wouldn't hurt anyone in everyday life. Apart from anything else, he needs to be given an order to kill. It wouldn't occur to him otherwise."

"And supposing someone gave him such an order?" I ask.

"I forgot to mention. He only takes orders from one person." Skinner swigs back his beer. "Me," he says.

"You?" I look confused, and feel it. They were both 18 in Vietnam, I've figured out that much from the file. It's unlikely that Skinner was his commanding officer out there, far more likely that they were the same rank.

"Yes. Billy shouldn't have been in Vietnam. That was obvious to all of us. He wasn't as bad as he is now but still, his behavior was obviously eccentric even back then. I suppose I took him under my wing - I was the only person he trusted. If our C.O gave him an order, Billy would look at me first, and I had to okay it. That's just the way it was. Our C.O. didn't mind - Billy was worth ten men. He saved us all so many times I've lost count."

"So you don't think there's any way he did this?" I ask him.

He sighs, and removes his glasses, rubbing his eyes wearily, and I feel almost sorry for him. Piece by piece, I'm understanding some of this. "No," he says, putting his glasses back on. "Absolutely not. And I'll do everything in my power to see that he isn't made a scapegoat for this."

"A scapegoat?"

"Yes. This is a small town and small towns sometimes have a certain...attitude towards people with mental illnesses."

"His gun was found at the scene of the crime," I point out carefully.

"If I need reminding of the facts, Agent Mulder, I'll ask you," he says angrily, and then regrets it. "I'm sorry. Look, I brought you along because I can't trust myself to see all the angles on this. And besides, I figure you owe me." The faintest flicker of a grin tugs at his lips but quickly disappears. "In addition, if anyone is going to find an alternative explanation for an apparently watertight case, it's you. I've been out of the field for a long time. Also..." He bends his head, a faint flush on his skin. "Also...this is my hometown, Agent Mulder. I'm not happy about having the whole world know my business. You already know more than I'm comfortable with, so I suppose if anyone's going to know more about me, it may as well be

you."

What a secretive bastard he is. He can't possibly have a more dubious background than I do!

"Anyway, I'm tired. I'll see you in the morning." He nods at me, pushes back his plate, and gets up and leaves the table without stopping to hear anything that I might have to say. I ponder the significance of the faint pulsing of the nerve along his neck as he spoke those last words, and the grim set of his jaw. This is a new game to me, this Skinner-watch. I never realized before how many nuances there are to the man. In fact, I never realized anything about him before. He was just a fact of life, but nothing to distract me from my own dramas and crises. Now I'm seeing him differently, and it fascinates me. So this is his hometown? This dull place? This is where Walter Sergei Skinner was shaped and formed? How interesting...

I sleep well enough until about 3 a.m. That's when I hear the noise from the next door room. It's the sound a cat might make, or a fox - no pun intended. It sounds like a wail, or a scream, but full of terror. I'm on my feet, gun in hand, out into the corridor before I realize it. Then I stop, listening outside my boss's door. Did I imagine it? I hop from one foot to the other, undecided about what to do, when I hear it again. This time I don't hesitate - its shrillness, and the pain in the cry make me panic. I knock on the door, try the handle, and call his name. When there's no reply, I shoot the lock off, and burst into the room, expecting to see werewolves, or vampires, or some other creature of the night at the very least. Instead I find myself face to face with my bemused, rudely awakened boss. The fact that he is also deathly pale and covered in sweat is probably neither here nor there. Probably.

"Mulder...what on earth?" A look of anger passes across his face, and he gets up. He's only dressed in his boxer shorts which is a bit scary. I don't know about you, but the idea of seeing one's boss in his underwear is quite unnerving. He pulls on his trousers (huge relief!) then glances around the room. "What the hell is going on, Mulder?" He asks tersely.

"I'm not sure, sir." I scout around the room, looking under tables and beds, and out of the window.

"For god's sake, Mulder!" He exclaims. "What is it?"

"I heard something in here. A scream," I tell him. "I thought you were being attacked."

"Well your zeal is commendable, Mulder, but I'm fine. As you can see," he tells me, his expression so annoyed and forbidding that I just back out of the room.

"Sorry, sir," I mutter.

He shakes his head at the damaged door.

"Damn it!" He curses, and by this time a small crowd has gathered - including the hotel

manager. A.D. Skinner smoothly takes over, promising to pay for the damage, and waves everybody else back to bed. He gives me a look that makes me feel two inches tall, and then returns to his room, shutting the door as firmly as he can behind him.

I can't sleep. I feel resentful. Scully would have understood. She would have done the same for me. There are monsters out there, sir, I want to tell him. I've seen them: monsters, mutants and some very malevolent men. It was possible they were out to get you because they're often out to get me! I brood on why he was so pale, and covered in sweat. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that those night terrors that I am fairly familiar with myself, were also visiting him. So, the boss has a guilty conscience, does he? Or is it being in his hometown that has triggered the nightmares? Or seeing Billy? Or perhaps he always sleeps like this anyway? I shudder. Poor bastard. That scream was heartrending in its pain. Poor, poor bastard.

I resolve not to dwell on the unfairness of it all, or make a fuss, which I think is pretty big of me. Instead, I wake up early, look at the sunlight, and decide to go for a run. I'm about to set off when I follow some strange instinct inside that tells me that, however much he might rebuff me, he's a man in need of help. So I knock on his door, wincing at the damage that I can see in the daylight - the broken lock and shards of wood on the floor. He opens the door, already up - did he even go back to sleep? He certainly looks a bit washed out.

"I'm going for a run," I say, and he nods. "It's a fine day - do you want to join me?"

He is about to say 'no', I can see that - I'm becoming good at this. Then, he changes his mind, and nods. "Why not?" He says. "I was going to go for a swim, but a run will do just as well."

A swim? Where, I wonder? Is there a pool in this little town, or does everybody just skinnydip in the local pond? I can't say that I'm pleased he chose to join me, but my curiosity about him is by now outweighing my natural antipathy towards authority figures in general, and this one in particular. The truth is that I'm becoming intrigued by him. He's ready in a few minutes, dressed in gray sweatpants and a vest. Soon we're out on the streets. He's a big guy, and I'm more streamlined and run regularly, but even so he's more than able to match me for speed and stamina. Okay, so he's obviously fit, but somehow I didn't think he was a jogging man. Besides, he's a good eight or nine years older than me, so in my youthful innocence (yeah, right!) I suppose I assumed that I'd have to slow down to let him catch up. No way! It's a struggle for me to keep up with him, and he never seems to get out of breath. Not only that, but our progress is impeded by the steady stream of people who nod to him or wave.

"Hey, Walter! Back in town!"

"Mr. Skinner."

"Morning, Walter."

An endless barrage of faces smile at him, and he doesn't quite smile back (he's not very good at smiling) but he's his usual polite self, responding to their greetings by name as if he knows the whole town which maybe he does. Finally we return to the hotel.

"You get back here often then?" I ask. We're a long way from D.C., and I can't imagine that he does with the hours he works.

"I try to." He shrugs. "But no, not very often."

"They remember you well then."

"I'm the closest thing to a celebrity they have," he almost grins. "Local boy made good or something." He looks very uncomfortable, as if he just gave too much away, and we retire to our rooms for a shower. I suppose I know what he means. It's a small town, and he has a good education, is a Vietnam veteran, and worked himself up to an important position with the F.B.I, while most of the kids he went to school with are probably running their own farms or working in the local stores.

"This gun of Billy's," I say, over breakfast. "Was it the only one he had?"

"No. Billy had a collection. They were his pride and joy. He used to polish them until they were spotless, you know, the typical soldier thing."

"I'd like to see this collection," I say, and I swear he almost bites his lip. His expression is like granite as usual, but his eyes are full of some emotion I find hard to quantify - fear? Irritation? Frustrated resignation? It's the expression of a trapped man. He nods tersely.

"All right. I'll take you to his...rooms."

Rooms. Good. There will be people there who know Billy, who can give me a more informed picture of him than Skinner whose judgement is obviously suspect given his close involvement with this case.

I was wrong about that. My life just got scarier. We turn up at this house with a pretty garden and there's this plump lady tending to her rosebushes. She must be in her mid to late sixties with her hair obviously dyed jet black when it should be snowy white. When she sees Skinner she drops her pruning shears, and runs to him. I don't reach for my gun this time because I'm getting used to all this hugging. I mean, I'll be damned, another person who likes him! Weird or what? As it turns out, it's not weird in this case because she's his mom. She grabs his head, and bestows a kiss on his bald forehead. This is hilarious because she's wearing bright red lipstick, and it gets transferred to his dome, leaving a big, smudgy, red mark. I want to laugh, or wipe it off, but I can't do either, so I study his mom instead. She's a big lady, formidable even, but she obviously adores her boy. She tucks her arm through his, berates him for not calling first, and asks him where is he staying, and why he isn't staying in his own home.

"We're here on business. I didn't want to put you out. We're in the hotel," he murmurs, torn between looking embarrassed because I'm there, and being pleased to see his mom, whom he clearly adores. "It's about Billy."

"Of course." She shakes her head, and then disengages herself from my boss to greet me.

"This is Agent Mulder," Skinner says. "I've brought him here to work on finding another explanation for all this. I'm not sure that I can trust myself to come to the right conclusions."

"You'll do what's right." She looks at him in surprise. "You always do, Walter. I'm pleased to meet you, Agent Mulder."

"Likewise, Mrs. Skinner."

She grabs my hand in a firm grasp, and smiles at me. She has his dark eyes, or should that be that he has hers?

"Please call me Irene." She has a natural warmth that her son has never had. Or maybe it's hidden. Maybe I've just never allowed myself to see it. I'm starting to view him differently now.

"Then call me Fox." I smile back because someone as friendly as she is just makes you want to be informal with them, and, despite my dislike for my first name, other people think you're being standoffish if you don't give them permission to use it.

"Fox?" She queries, looking askance at me, and then at Skinner. "That's really your name, son?"

"Fraid so," I sigh mournfully.

"It is? Well, I like your name. It's a great name!" She exclaims. "I love foxes. We get dozens in the garden. Frank would shoot them all but I like them. And I like you, Fox. Come on, let's go in," she says as she sweeps us all into the house, "and have something to drink."

So who's Frank I wonder? Skinner's dad? Presumably. Am I going to meet him too? This trip is getting more and more surprising by the second. Being introduced to my boss's folks, and on a first date too - this must be serious! I'm only kidding - I'm feeling pretty nervous if you must know, but Irene is just one of those people who puts you at ease, and soon we're getting along like life-long friends. She brings us coffee and cake - delicious cake, the sort moms should make. Mine never did, but then my mom wasn't that sort of mom. I can see that all this coziness is just killing Skinner. It doesn't matter to me that my dysfunctional childhood, and various relatives insinuate themselves into my working life for all to see, but he hates it. He's a very private person, and I'm a subordinate, and I know that if it weren't for the fact that he needs me, he'd bundle me out of here right now before Irene embarrasses him by giving me the recipe for the cake. Or worse - gets out old baby photos of him! This gives me a malicious thought, and I look around the place until I see a framed

photo on the piano. There's Irene and a tall man who must be Frank and, yes! There are two boys, one of whom, looking angelic with a full head of dark hair, must be A.D. Skinner himself, all dressed up in a bow tie and suit with a huge, gap-toothed smile on his face. Not a sight we see often these days, that big smile.

"My boys," Irene coos over my shoulder. "Wasn't he sweet?"

I nearly choke, and replace the photo on the piano, my eyes meeting his to find them displaying a studied blankness. There is just a faintest hint of a raised eyebrow, daring me to comment. Irene glances back at him, and winks at me like a co-conspirator in a plot to undermine, and generally embarrass her son.

"So cute!" I can't resist saying it, and Irene laughs out loud.

"Who'd have thought he'd turn out so grumpy!" she chuckles, and I can't help laughing with her. She has an infectious laugh. He is straight-faced, allowing himself to be the fall guy in all this, and she thumps him playfully on the arm, and kisses him again, leaving another red mark. Then, shaking her head, she gets out her handkerchief, spits on it, and rubs all the marks off him. He submits to this, as all children must. It's not a choice - when your mom wants to clean you up, you just have to let them. I must say though, I'm having a fabulous time, the best time I've had in ages. For the first time, I think this trip might actually turn out to be worth giving up a few days of tracking down mutants for. Strangely, his dignity is not affected at all. Despite our best efforts, he isn't embarrassed. This is his home, his family, and he is not formal, or distant, or forbidding here, even though I am here as well. This is a place where he is relaxed and almost jovial. I can see that almost anybody would have a hard time being anything else with Irene.

Frank is a different matter. When he enters the room a few minutes later, the mood changes abruptly. My relationship with my own dad was strained enough for me to notice the difference. Frank is tall, and thin, and bald (no surprises there!). Skinner gets up, and Frank embraces him, (at least he gets more than the handshake I always got from my dad) muttering something about it being inconvenient for Walter to just drop by, and this trouble with Billy is a bad thing, and why hadn't he phoned. Skinner nods, and is immediately business-like, and so am I, remembering why we are here.

"Billy rented a room with you?" I ask Irene.

"Yes," she nods. "He's been with us for about six years, since his mom passed away. There was nobody else to take care of him, so Walter moved him here. I insisted. We've always been fond of Billy, and he saved Walter's life, so it was a small enough thing for us to do." She glances at Frank, and I get the impression that he was not so easily convinced.

"I see." I follow her up to Billy's room, and gasp as she opens the door. There's weaponry everywhere: knives, guns, ammunition.

"Sir, this doesn't look good," I murmur to Skinner, and he frowns.

"Please don't jump to conclusions," he says. "Do you honestly think that I would have moved him here, to live with my folks, if I thought he was any danger whatsoever to anybody?" I stare into his pleading eyes. He really, desperately, wants me to be convinced, not because he wants to convince himself, because he has no doubts, but because he needs me to do more than just go through the motions on this one. His sincerity, and the depth of his loyalty are getting to me. Suddenly, I'm glad this man is on my side, and I hope that he would show the same belief in me if the situation was different. With a start, I realize that he already has, on numerous occasions, and that if I noticed, I barely appreciated it, because I was too wrapped up in myself as usual.

"All right," I nod, taking a closer look at the room, studying the pictures of soldiers that quite literally adorn every spare inch of wall space. How do you get inside the head of an autistic savant with a liking for military hardware? I find another photo, by the bed, of a unit of marines. Billy is there, in the middle, laughing in a goofy way, stunningly good looking in his youth. And beside him is Skinner, gangly and far too thin, none of the familiar bulked up muscles. He looks almost innocent but slightly grim, no wide smile this time. Was that when he stopped smiling, I wonder? In Vietnam?

I sweep my eyes around again, and try not to shake my head. Billy has no alibi, he has a history of mental illness, his gun was found at the scene of the crime, and his bedroom looks like this. I can't blame the police for arresting him. I would have done the same, and so would Skinner if he were thinking straight. I desperately want to find something here that will help Billy, but there isn't anything. Trying not to look too hopeless, I ask them to leave the room while I take a closer look.

As I come down the stairs a few minutes later, I can hear Irene talking.

"You don't look well, son," she is saying. "I thought that as soon as I saw you. You're over your divorce from Sharon aren't you? She was never right for you. The divorce was for the best..." She trails off as I make a big noise entering the room.

"Any clues?" Skinner asks me, frowning.

"Not yet. There are some other things we need to look at though. Did Billy have any friends?" I ask Irene and she grins.

"Oh yes, Billy's very loveable. There's Mr. Hale, and of course Alli..." She glances at Skinner and he frowns. She shuts up, and I feel angry. How can he expect me to solve this if he won't give me all the information?

Frank has sat himself down in an armchair, and is ignoring all of us. His silence is almost noisy in itself, as if Skinner's dad demands attention just by making everyone aware that he's sulking. It works, as I suspect it usually does, and Irene is soon clucking over her husband, getting him a drink, and generally fussing over him. Frank treats her with a surly disdain, and I see the shadowed fury in Skinner's eyes as he watches what must be a familiar scene to him. Tell me about it! I've been there - watching the dynamics of your parent's marriage, helpless to interfere, or change the patterns they've gotten themselves into,

patterns that either work for them, like with this couple, or which are so hopelessly dysfunctional that they tear each other apart, like with my folks.

"Well let's go and see Mr Hale then," I say, and Skinner nods, eager to be gone.

Irene follows us out, reaching a gentle hand to her son's arm as he goes to leave. "You really are looking tired," she murmurs.

"Too many disturbed nights, perhaps?" I venture, remembering the antics of the previous night, but Skinner gives me a look of such formidable anger that I swallow hastily, and shut up pretty damn quick. Irene has caught it all though, her eyes showing her concern.

"You should take more care," she tells him.

At that moment Frank emerges, unable to bear being away from the action for too long.

"Stop fussing over the boy!" he explodes. Boy? He's 45, if he's a day, but I suppose your own kids are always children to you. It's obvious that Frank resents the slightest attention that Irene pays to anybody but himself, and I'm as glad as Skinner is to finally leave the house, and get into the car.

"So, to Mr. Hale," I announce cheerily, and am treated to a surly grunt in reply. Careful, sir, you could end up turning into your dad...

Mr Hale is a silver haired gentleman with a cultured manner. He is also a retired schoolteacher.

"Walter! I am glad to see you!" he exclaims upon our arrival. I'm getting used to the way people are all so pleased to set eyes on the boss. He must have some charm that I've missed somewhere along the way. I resolve to try harder to find it.

"Mr Hale." We go through the tedious round of introductions again, and I learn that Mr Hale used to teach Skinner.

"You always were my best student," Hale says, smiling at Skinner. "If anyone can resolve this mess with Billy it's you, Walter."

"I hope so." Skinner shakes his head looking none too certain.

"Straight A grades." Hale tells me proudly, taking responsibility for his prodigy. "Broke my heart when he upped and enlisted for Vietnam. All that promise out there where it could be destroyed by one stray bullet. I was so angry with him for that! When he came home, I used to sit and read to him until he got better. Took me three months to persuade him to pick up his studies again."

"Persuade?" Skinner snorts. "Bullied more like. You didn't give me a moment's peace until I did."

"It worked though. Look where you are now!" Hale laughs.

"Yes. Look." Skinner seems quite lost for a moment, his eyes almost pained, his jaw twisted slightly, and I feel another surge of interest in him. All of this Walter-watching is turning into a compulsion. I can't understand why it has never interested me before. This man is an education in himself!

"He was a good student," Hale tells me, in the manner of a man with a lot of time and memories on his hands, grateful to share them with someone for a few moments.

"Never got into any mischief?" I ask slyly. Perish the thought! I'm sure he was always totally law abiding, and on the straight and narrow, unlike yours truly.

"Well...there was..."

"Mulder doesn't need to know about that," Skinner interrupts hastily.

"No, maybe not." Hale's blue eyes twinkle at us both. "Let's just say that it's the quiet ones who have the most to hide shall we?"

"Really?" I laugh, liking this.

"Yes. Still waters run deep, and all that," Hale says with another of his twinkly looks at Skinner. "Anyway, about Billy. I took a liking to him as soon as he moved here. Walter asked me to keep an eye on him, and I did. Billy is a kind, gentle soul, Agent Mulder. He didn't kill that man."

"Does Billy have any enemies?" I ask.

Hale hesitates, looks at Skinner, and back to me. "Some people fear Billy," he says. "Because of his disability. But he has a lot of friends too."

"No specific enemies?" I ask.

Hale looks at Skinner again, anxiously, but receiving no help there he shakes his head. "No," he says, and I am quite certain that it is a lie.

We return to the hotel, and Skinner is his usual, morose self on the way. I'm running out of mindless drivel, and since he won't make the effort, I don't see why I should either, so we sit in our customary silence for some time.

"Have you come to any conclusions, Agent Mulder?" he blurts suddenly, and unexpectedly.

"No. I don't have all the facts yet," I respond, thinking bitterly that I'm unlikely to get them either, with Skinner accompanying me everywhere, shutting people up with his famous terse glances. We are just crossing the lobby, when a group of people come out of the bar, and stand staring at us. Skinner stops, and there is an air of confrontation and recognition to the scene. At last! People from his past who don't want to hug him, and declare his worth. Yay!

"You go on ahead, Agent Mulder," he says softly. "I'll deal with this."

"But..." I complain. The mob looks unfriendly, and I'm genuinely concerned about his safety.

"Just do it." It's an order, said in that 'order' tone of voice, so I do as I'm told. Or I pretend to. As soon as Skinner has crossed the lobby, and gone into the bar with the men, I skip back down, and listen in on their conversation. They're sitting at a table - I count five men and Skinner. He has his back to me (I'm not stupid, and I don't want him seeing me).

I can't make out everything that's being said, but I get the gist of it.

"Leave it alone, Skinner. This is none of your business."

"You know I can't do that, Mason."

"Yes, you can. And you will. Billy's been asking for trouble in this town for a long time."

"Because of Allison?" (Who is Allison???)

"You shouldn't have brought him here. We don't like him. He isn't one of us."

"Because he's different? You never gave him a chance." Somehow this rings a bell with me. It's how I've always felt, being different, not being given a chance. Suddenly I wonder if Skinner's open-minded approach to the X Files might not have been another instance of him championing the underdog. Something he seems to have been doing his whole life.

"He's nuts. A basket case," one of the men says belligerently. "He deserves to go down."

"No. He's been falsely accused, Denham..." Skinner begins.

"No! Leave it, Skinner. Don't dig it up any more. Just go back to the big city, and leave us to run things around here or..."

"Or what?" Skinner asks softly. That tone makes me go quite still. Don't they realize how dangerous it is? It's the tone that can freeze an unruly agent, and make him quake in his boots. I should know.

"Or maybe your old mom would like to know why you send money to Allison every month," one of them says.

"Are you trying to blackmail me?" Skinner asks in a tone of angry disbelief.

"You said it, Skinner."

"It's Allison I'm trying to protect. Don't you care about your own daughter, Mason?" Skinner's whole demeanor is incredulous.

"It's too late to protect her now, when she has a four year old kid in tow. You should have thought of that before. How would your mom like to know? Supposing I was to tell her that the kid is yours?" The man asks in a sneering tone. My heart misses a beat. Skinner has a kid? Is this the real reason for the breakdown of his marriage? How many more secrets can the man have?

"Don't be stupid." Skinner is trying to hold onto his temper by the skin of his teeth, but I've heard enough. I have a name to go on, and it doesn't take me long to find out who exactly this Allison is, and where she lives. I do feel a pang of worry about leaving Skinner with these men, but I need to go out investigating without him, or I won't learn anything.

Allison is no more than 21 years old, with cropped dark hair and a sweet, elfin face. I can see why Skinner would find her attractive. But still - she's young enough to be his daughter. She lets me into her tiny apartment, and I sit down on some frayed furniture. She obviously isn't all that well off.

"I'm investigating the murder of..." I begin. She immediately, and surprisingly, bursts into tears.

"Billy didn't do it!" she says.

"Yes, I know." I tell her, surprised to find that I do. At that moment a child appears in the doorway, dressed in pajamas, and clutching a teddy bear.

"Don't cry, Mom," he says. He has dark hair, and big blue eyes. He could be Skinner's kid - but I know he isn't.

"Billy's his dad, isn't he?" I ask her. She nods.

"I was just sixteen, and I didn't get along with the other kids. I know Billy's a lot older than me, but he was so child-like, so sweet. He used to really listen to me. And he didn't seduce me! He wasn't my first either, despite what dad likes to think. I took advantage of Billy more than he did of me. I loved him. I still do. You know that film, Forrest Gump?"

I nod.

"Well, Billy's like that. He's a good person, Agent Mulder, but my dad and his friends don't

like him. They just think he's the weirdo who got me pregnant. I'm sworn to secrecy because my dad doesn't want anyone knowing that a crazy guy fathered his grandson."

"Your dad pays for this place?" I ask her.

"Him," she snorts. "No way. He doesn't want anything to do with me. No...one of Billy's friends sends a bit of money, and I get by doing cleaning work."

So, it all falls into place. Walter Skinner, white knight in shining armor, has come to the aid of the damsel in distress. The man is a revelation. You can't dislike someone who hides so many good deeds as if they are dark sins.

I return to the hotel to find that the discussion has turned nasty. I'm just in time to see one of the men, the one I've identified as Allison's father, Luke Mason, take a swing at my boss. His fist connects with Skinner's jaw, and I feel a surge of anger. Skinner pulls himself upright, and looks at his assailant with cool disdain.

"Time for you to leave," he says. I'm mesmerized by his strength and will power. No matter what the provocation, violence is a last resort for him. I remember that time I took a swing at him, and feel a wave of shame. Okay, so I was the influence of psychosis inducing drugs, but even then, when I had publicly humiliated him, he just restrained me. He didn't retaliate, or punch me back, when it would have been totally justified. Skinner the surly, authoritarian boss is rapidly becoming Skinner the saint in my mind.

"You okay?" I ask, as the men push by me, and exit the room.

"Fine." He has a cut to his jaw, and a red mark that will spread into a bruise before too long. I want to use my sleeve to wipe away the trickle of blood, but he's already seeing to it with his handkerchief. "Look, I'm tired. I'm going to eat in my room then turn in," he says, and then turns abruptly, and walks away from me. I want to follow him. I want to go and talk to him and tell him what I know. I want to say that I've been wrong about him for so long and that the more I know about him, the more I like him, but there isn't any framework for us to have this conversation. Instead I go to the lobby, and ask to speak to the manager.

Skinner's door has been fixed with a shiny new lock, and I ask to be given a spare key. The manager isn't sure, but he knows we're together and gives in. I'm taking no chances tonight. I don't want to have to shoot another lock off, and I have no intention of lying awake listening to a man I like and respect endure more nightmares. He might not thank me for my concern, but I'm concerned anyway, so he'll just have to deal with it.

Sure enough, the paper-thin walls betray their secrets again a few hours later. The scream is as heart-rending as the night before, and I get up, and pull my sweatpants and a tee shirt on. I do hesitate - I'm not sure I'd be top on his list of preferred comforters, but I've always rushed in where others fear to tread, and this is no exception!

I open the door, and peer in. He's lying, twitching, on the bed, bare-chested. I find this curiously arousing, and stare at him for a moment, feeling like a peeping tom. He looks so vulnerable, and much younger. His eyelids flutter as he dreams, the sweat drenches his pillow, and his face has turned a deathly pale color. It's so pale that I'm really worried about him. There's a big purple mark on his jaw, which is in vivid contrast to the whiteness of the rest of his skin. Then he just shrieks, at the top of his voice, and cowers against the sheet. I act without thinking, and sit down on the bed beside him.

"Hey...it's all right. You're okay. There, there...you'll be fine..." Soothing words, the sort every mom or dad knows to calm their kids, only I've always been the recipient of them before. I've never been the one handing them out. I hesitate to touch him, but he moans, and rolls over, his face towards me, his eyes still closed. If I'm lucky, perhaps he won't even wake up. I decide I'll stay to make sure that whatever is haunting him has gone, but a few minutes later he sits up with a loud shout, his eyes wide open, tears streaming down his face.

"It's okay. Are you awake or still dreaming?" I pass my hand in front of his eyes. "Please, sir. Wake up. This stuff can't be good for you." His eyes are still staring and grim, and finally I shake him, scared by the way he looks. Reality suddenly enters back in, and he comes to with a start.

"Mulder?" He murmurs, his eyes focusing on me. "What are you doing here?"

"I didn't want you to wake the whole hotel. The manager already hates us as it is," I grin.

"I was...?"

"Shouting. Yes. Like last night."

"Oh." He shakes off my concerned hand, and gets out of bed, goes to the bathroom, and washes his face. He comes back into the bedroom, and turns on the light, and I gasp. I've seen his torso before, in the semi darkness, when I delivered Krycek to him once, and more recently last night, but never in the light before. I'm not talking being amazed by his fabulous body here (although I have to say that I noticed it!) but by the very faint scarring on his back and legs. Lots of it. Like a jigsaw. You'd only see it in good light, but it's there, and it makes me wince.

"Don't stare, Mulder," he says, pulling on a tee shirt. "You know I was badly wounded in Vietnam. Of course I've got the scars to show for it."

"I guess I never really realized..." I trail off.

He shrugs. "It was a long time ago." He sits down in an armchair, looking slightly incongruous, those long, bare legs crossed. He's still only wearing his boxers, no trousers. I'm not embarrassed as I was last night. I like looking at him. I like him. I feel a familiar sense of attraction, and am momentarily astonished by myself. Don't start something you can't finish, Mulder, I say to myself in my head. As if you'll get the chance! A small mocking voice

replies.

"Well, if you're all right...I'll go..." I murmur, hating myself.

"No...I mean, go if you want," he looks confused. He's not good at asking for help, but he sure as hell needs it.

"No. I'll stay. I think you should talk about this," I tell him firmly.

"I..." He looks at me in despair. "You're probably right."

"Do you still go to that sleep disorders specialist?" I ask.

He frowns, and shakes his head. "I haven't had any nightmares for months," he says. "Only since this stuff with Billy. It brings back Vietnam. I see...I see my own dead body, I feel that pain, and the fear all over again."

"You can't take responsibility for everything," I tell him.

Who looks after him, I wonder, while he's busy taking care of Billy, and Billy's kid, and his own mom, and irritating special agents who make lots of work for him, and god knows who else out there he's looking out for? Who takes care of him? I realize without surprise, that I want to. Me, Fox Mulder, the man who can't take care of his own socks! Yep, that's about it, I've discovered a nurturing streak.

"Talk to me," he says, and he's trembling slightly. I realize that he doesn't want to be alone, and he's scared of going back to sleep. "Tell me something, anything - about the case maybe."

"About the case? Well...I know about Allison, and I know that Billy's the father of her child. I know that you send them money." I tell him. He looks astonished.

"When the hell...?"

"While you were brawling." I grin.

"Oh. Well, I suppose it was inevitable that you would go digging things up," he sighs.

"I thought that's why you brought me along."

"Yes." He shrugs. "And?"

"And what? No, I don't believe that Billy killed that guy, but I don't have any proof. Nor do I have an alternative suspect." I'll find one though, if it's the last thing I do. I'll drag that suspect back like a lioness bringing a meal for her hungry cub. I'll find that man, and lay him at your feet like a gift. I promise. "What aren't you telling me, sir?" I ask him.

He stiffens, and runs his hand over his head. "I'll probably regret this in the morning..." he begins.

"No." I shake my head. "Nothing you say will go out of this room." He looks surprised by my sincerity, and nods.

"Thank you, Mulder." He's about to speak again, but whatever it is, it must be big, because he can't look at me. He looks instead at the floor, his eyes transfixed by the faded pattern on the carpet. "Billy and I were lovers," he says. "There. Shocked, Mulder?" He looks up at me and I shrug, holding my breath.

"Hell, nothing shocks me," I tell him.

"No. Maybe not." He gives a wry grin. "I was surprised by it too. I'd had a girlfriend in high school, so I wasn't exactly a virgin, but I'd never even thought of going with a man. Billy was different though. I loved him, like a brother in arms, a comrade, but he wanted more. He needed a more physical reassurance. I don't know how it began, but I'm glad it did. I care about him a lot."

"When did it end?" I ask.

"When I came back from 'Nam. We led different lives, although I always kept in touch with him, but Vietnam ruined Billy. He could pass for nearly normal back then, but after, well, his disability just got worse. He had to be looked after, and spent spells in rehabs, vet hospitals, and mental institutions before going back to live with his mom. I found a girlfriend, and then later, Sharon came into my life. It's never bothered me, you understand, I'm not ashamed of it. Mom always says that you shouldn't be ashamed of love, only hate. It may be corny, but it's the corny stuff that stays with you." He makes a face before continuing. "I do get attracted to people, men as well as women, but not often, and I don't think I've ever fallen in love with the way people look, but what they are. I've never made the first move in my life. Maybe I'm too passive about love. I don't know." He stops, looking endearingly confused. He will regret this in the morning. It's a huge confession and not like him at all. Those nightmares must have really unsettled him. I find that I want him even more because of his vulnerability. Is he really so unaware of how attractive he is?

"I've had male lovers as well," I tell him, because his confidences require something from me.

"You have?" He looks startled.

"Oh yeah! It's not so unusual. I'm not good at relationships, but physical comfort...well, you have to take that where you find it. I'm not prissy about sex. I've seen too much to sweat the small stuff when it comes to sex. Bodies are bodies, and you find some attractive and some not. Am I shocking you now?"

"No. Maybe. A bit." He grins.

"What?"

"This. Us. Having this conversation. It's absurd."

"No. I'm glad. I've found out a lot about you today. You've got nothing to be ashamed of. Everything I've uncovered confirms that you are a man of integrity, yet you hide so much, when you've got absolutely nothing to hide. Why?"

"Now you're making me blush," he says, flustered. "I don't like it when others impute perfect motives to what I do. I'm just a normal guy with my own agenda and set of ideals."

"Your mom raised you well. I never know where the truth is, but you seem to keep it inside you, with you all the time like a perfect moral compass."

"I make mistakes like everyone else," he sighs, obviously discomfited by my praise.

"No. Your mom was right. You do the right thing, and any mistakes come out of that. I wish I had your certainties."

"I wish I had your passion, your flair," he smiles. "I'm a dull, by-the-book sort of guy. Sometimes I just want to go with the flow and see where I end up."

"Usually in deep shit, if my life's anything to go by!" I tell him. He smiles again. "Why don't you ever smile?" I wonder out loud. "What happened to you, sir?"

"I do smile," he frowns.

"No, see. You frown. You look distracted. You never smile at work. If your work pisses you off, why don't you leave?"

"It doesn't...I mean, sometimes it does, but more than that it just concerns me. Every one of these conspiracies you unearth concerns me. All the vicious predators out there concern me. Maybe I did stop smiling, when things fell apart with Sharon, and now, because of this tragedy with Billy. Sometimes there's not much to smile about."

"Hey, tell me about it!"

I'm still sitting on the bed, afraid to move in case he ends this conversation, and my eyes are feasting on his broad shoulders, and the deep rich tan color of his skin. I want to kiss away that bruise on his jaw, and take him in my arms. I want to be the one he turns to, I want to make it all better for him. I want him to love me. If someone so good and true could love me, then maybe I'd know I was worth something after all. Yet, how can I make a move on him? Yesterday morning, the very idea would have been unthinkable, but here, now, I want him. I want him so much that I can feel myself becoming aroused at the thought of touching him, of bringing him pleasure, setting a smile to his face that would stay there until daybreak.

"You must be tired," he says, waving his hand. "Thanks for talking, Mulder. I don't get to do it very often."

"You need company, someone to take you out of yourself," I say, daringly. He laughs.

"Very probably. But I'll do without. I usually do."

He gets up wearily, and I do the same. He crosses over to the bed to go back to sleep at the same time as I begin my walk to the door to return to my room. We meet somewhere midway, more by design than accident in my case. He steps to one side, and I go in the same direction, back the other way, and I'm there too. He laughs, thinking it's a mistake, and I take my life in my hands, and touch his face. He stops still.

"Please let me kiss you." I press my lips against his, and he is frozen under me, unmoving, but unresisting.

"This is not..." he murmurs as I finish. I haven't dared press my tongue into his mouth, but I want to.

"Please, please..." I can't believe the way that I'm begging, but the want and need is so great that I'm incapable of saying much else.

"Mulder...I..." He finds the hands I've placed on his shoulders, fondles my fingers thoughtfully as he removes them. "I didn't mean to give you the wrong idea." My heart sinks. "I should have made something clear." His dark eyes meet mine, and they are totally, seriously sincere. "The last time I made love to someone was the first time I had ever done so with someone I was not in love with. I did it because I was lonely, and sad about my divorce. I'm sure you remember the outcome." He gives a wry smile, and I nod, remembering the call girl. "I swore to myself then, that I would never again sleep with someone I wasn't in love with. That was my mistake you see. It's just not the sort of man I am. Other people can do it, and get away with it, but I can't. I can count the number of partners I've had on the fingers of one hand."

"I see." I know what he's telling me, and it's a kind and ingenious rebuff. I pull away from him, suddenly feeling shamed by the amount of one night stands I've had, the bodily fluids exchanged with total strangers without love, or genuine intimacy. Next to him, I'm a whore.

"No, I don't think you do," he says, not letting go of my hands, taking first one, and then the other, up to his lips, and bestowing a soft kiss on each. "I don't think you do at all." A sudden realization sweeps over me, and I feel totally humbled, not worthy to kneel at his feet. "It's all right," he says, misunderstanding. "I don't expect you to feel the same. There's no obligation."

"How long?" I put my arms around him, feeling his tense muscles under my embrace.

"I have no idea. It's a gradual thing, and I'm not one to spout off about my feelings. I wouldn't have said anything. I'm used to being a stoic!" He grins at me. "And I didn't bring

you out here on a pretext. I didn't think for a moment that you liked me at all. You never behave as if you do. I also don't spend every waking minute in the office thinking about you. Seeing Billy again just put my feelings into focus, that's all."

"Will you let me make love to you? Do you want me to?" I ask.

He nods, angles his face towards mine, and kisses my lips, opening my mouth with his own and pushes his tongue deep inside me. I feel as though I've been hit by a truck. I've never experienced a kiss like this before, not one that means so much. When we come up for air, he smiles tenderly.

"And of course my mother approves of you which is a good sign," he says. "She knew about me and Billy. She's a broad minded lady."

"She's wonderful!" I agree, tugging at his tee shirt insistently. Mothers are not an erotic topic of conversation, even nice ones like Irene.

He's trembling as I pull the tee shirt off, almost scared. After all, this is a man used to long term relationships and meaningful love affairs, or to nothing at all. I kiss his neck, trail my tongue down along his shoulder, across a broad expanse of chest, and down to a nipple. He groans, and clutches me close, his hand stroking my hair.

He's going to get the best of me, I know that much. The very best I can give. I'm not bad at sex, if I say so myself, I've had enough practice after all. I want to go hard, and fast, and devour him, so strong are these new emotions, but instead, I go slow, thinking of him. It's been a long time since he last had a male lover. I lead him slowly over to the bed, kissing him all the while, then push him down. He's level with my pants, and he undoes the drawstring knot, running his big, strong hands up under my tee shirt, kissing my bare midriff, his tongue dipping into my navel, making me squeal. I caress his bare head, finding it mind-blowingly erotic. He pulls back, and I get rid of my tee shirt, and push down my pants, and my shorts. My erection is almost painful in its intensity, and he runs his tongue gently along it, cupping my balls in his hand, licking them. It's unbearably arousing, but I don't want to come too soon, like some gauche schoolboy, so I pull away, and press him down, find his shorts, and dispose of them pretty damn quick.

I like his body. I like his narrow hips, and the heavy ball sacs with the curling dark hair. It's very dark, like the hair on his chest. I like his smooth, pulsing cock, and the shapely almost-curl of his erection. I like the naked expression in eyes that I am only used to seeing guarded, and the powerful line of his jaw, the huge bare expanse of his head, the width of that strong neck, and the way he angles his head to stare up at me.

"What?" He asks, caressing my hair.

"You. You're beautiful," I say, not even feeling sappy, meaning it.

"Don't." He's blushing! Yes, Walter Skinner blushes whenever you compliment him! It's a joy, a delight. "I'm just an old, bald guy, making a bad mistake with someone way too young

for me," he says.

"I'm not a mistake. I'm...I'm just yours," I say sincerely.

"Since when?" He mocks me, his strong fingers running lightly over my chest, finding my nipples, caressing them. "Don't tell me that you've ever thought about doing this before now."

"No. That's true, but after today I can't see you the same way again. You're not too old for me, you're perfect for me."

Can love happen this quickly? I have little understanding of love, it's always eluded me, and I've never exactly gone looking for it. I take his head between my fingers, and kiss his eyelids, his nose, his chin, ending up in that delicious mouth, just drinking in that dizzy sensation. I don't remember kisses ever being this good before. I like the scent of him, even the acrid, sweaty musk from the nightmares. I like the hardness of his body, and the fine covering of wiry hair all over his chest. I place one leg over his thigh, my erection touching his, and I find myself thrusting against him, the friction of his body exciting me almost unbearably. I want this moment of discovery to last forever, to find out every last secret this body holds. He draws me close, his fingers slipping down between my butt cheeks, and entering me as we kiss again. Shit, but he's good, knowing exactly where, and how to rub to turn me into a quivering wreck. I press my body against him even tighter, wriggling my hips to open myself up even more as he thrusts another finger up inside me.

"Shit, I'll come if you don't stop," I murmur.

He grins. "What's wrong with that?" he asks.

"Too soon."

He draws his fingers away, and I pull back, my hands going over every inch of him, touching his groin, his thighs, his knees, his toes. I end up kissing those toes, sucking them, and he giggles (yes, A.D. Walter Skinner does actually giggle!) He starts to twist and squirm, patting my backside until I let his toes go.

"Ticklish are we?" I descend on his armpits, and he catches me before I can get there, and wraps his arms around me, pinning me down under his weight. He places my hands above my head, and licks his tongue along my neck, ending up behind my ear, making me groan. His knee is between my legs, moving gently and rhythmically against my erection, and, once again, I feel as if I'm on the brink. I raise myself up, and reverse our positions, rolling him over under me, holding his hands above his head, a delicious captive beneath me. He looks like a man drowning, his arms limp and acquiescent in mine, allowing himself to be owned by me, discovered by me. His dark eyes are so passionate, so soft that I want to gaze into them forever, and he seems equally mesmerized by me. I stare down at him for a long time.

"You have no idea..." I murmur, pressing my body close to his, placing my cheek against his thudding heart to hear each giddy beat, my hands clinging onto his chest for comfort, for

love. His hands find my back, run spidering up and down, trailing fingernails until they end up at my butt, scratching lightly, pushing in me again. I go with the pleasure for a while, then pull away, tracing my tongue down his belly to his cock, taking it in my mouth, licking lightly while he groans and caresses my head. I suck firmly, insistently, until he becomes agitated, shoving his hips at me until he's on the verge of coming. I draw back as his come spurts out over his stomach, over the sheets, over me. I grin as I taste a droplet on my lips, licking it away with a relish that makes him laugh. Yes, laugh. A real laugh, the laugh of a man enjoying himself for the first time in too many years.

"Will you let me go inside you?" I ask him, and he nods.

"I was hoping you'd suggest it," he says.

"No condom," I murmur, and he just smiles, and shrugs, giving me permission anyway. It's probably the most reckless thing he's ever done! Not that he need worry about me - I'm clean, and judging by his lifestyle, so is he.

I turn him over, then run into the bathroom and look in the cabinet for something to use as lube. I find some lotion, and run back to the bed, eager to partake of the naked feast awaiting me there. I rub some lotion into my fingers, then smear it between his butt cheeks. It's a taut, finely muscled ass of course, perfect in its symmetry, a fine web of the downiest hair curling over it. I massage up into him, with long, sweeping strokes, and he sighs, and relaxes, trusting me. I position myself over him, and press into him, feeling him tight around me - a bit too tight maybe. I hope that I'm not hurting him, but he shows no sign of it, and backs up against me, opening wider so that there's a little less pressure. Feeling encouraged, I start to thrust in, pulling up on his hips, marvelling at the texture of his tawny skin under my fingertips. The aching crescendo in my cock builds up to a fury, and I can't stop myself thrusting at full force, riding deep into him until my balls are slapping against his butt. When I come, it is with so much force that I throw my head back, and gasp at the sensation. This is him under me, my boss, my lover, my beautiful, honorable man, one of the few people I actually trust in the whole world. And yes, I love him. This is love, as close to it as I've ever come, and all the more wonderful for being so unexpected.

I don't withdraw, feeling myself go limp within him, lying down on his back, his panting breath against my cheek as my head flops over his left shoulder. I trace a wet kiss on his arm, licking away a layer of salty sweat, and we both lie still for several long minutes, exhausted, exhilarated, annihilated, sated. Finally he shifts and I withdraw from him, settling down beside him, face to face, my hand on his thigh, his on my shoulder.

"Fox..." He kisses me, and again that knockout sensation blows my mind away. How does he do that to me? I hold him tight, wrapping both my legs around him, drawing his body into mine as if I wish we could be one, just for a second. Looking down on that bruised chin I am suddenly suffused with anger for those people that hurt him and my rage must show in my eyes because he looks worried. "Fox?" He murmurs. I trace the gentlest of fingers over the bruise.

"I could kill them," I whisper, feeling quite murderous. "I damn well could."

"Ah, the famous Mulder temper." He smooths my hair from my forehead and kisses me.
"Don't bother with it, Fox. It'll heal soon enough."

"How dare they touch you! How dare they!" I am beside myself suddenly with a sensation of protectiveness that I have known before - for Scully, for Sam, for my mother, even for my father, and now for him. He has joined that pitifully small pantheon of people I have loved.

"Leave it. Come back to me." He slaps my face lightly and gently, and I am filled with remorse for scaring him.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know I'd feel this way." I nuzzle at his shoulder, wanting to drink of him deeply, feeling aroused again, but there are dark shadows under his eyes, and he is desperately tired. I wonder when he last had a good night's sleep. I roll onto my back, and position his head on my shoulder, loving the sculpted feel of that nearly hairless scalp against my chest. "Sleep," I order. "Sleep, and I'll make sure nothing hurts you. I'll keep you safe." One of my hands holds his, lightly, tracing my fingertips over it until I feel his body relax, his breathing deepen. I look down, and his eyes are closed. My precious lover, naked and without artifice, asleep in my arms, has that newly discovered nurturing streak of mine working overtime. I kiss his naked scalp over and over again as he sleeps, and say the words I was too scared to say while we made love, for fear they would sound trite and insincere next to his own declaration of his feelings.

"I love you, love you, love you..." My arm goes across his chest, and hugs him tight. He is mine.

It was stupid of me, and I just didn't think. I was so eager to help him, to sort this whole case out for him that I gently disengaged myself from him about 6 a.m and, bending down to bestow a kiss on his sleeping features, I returned to my own room to shower and dress. A few phone calls, some more investigations into the dead man's background, and I have a fair idea of what has happened. Skinner is right of course. Billy didn't kill that man.

Then I'm out there, on the road to Allison's dad's farm. His name is Luke Mason, and he's out in the yard as I pull up.

"Fox Mulder." I flash him my I.D. and he frowns.

"One of Skinner's lackeys!" he sneers. "Why don't you go off, and investigate a real crime, Mulder?"

"You don't consider murder to be a real crime?" I inquire, going up to him, and without warning I punch his jaw. He staggers back, clutching his face.

"You can't do that. I'll report you," he says.

"If you do, I'll report you for taking a swing at my boss last night," I reply, seething with rage again as I remember. His face is furious, and he charges at me, but he's easily side-stepped, and I bring up my fist into his stomach, and trip him up. He goes down with a thud. "Now listen to me. Nobody attacks Skinner and gets away with it, and nobody frames someone just because they're different, and gets away with that either. I know you didn't kill anyone, but you sure as hell helped someone set Billy up. Now who is it you're protecting?" He doesn't answer at first, but a few swift kicks change his mind.

"Denham. It was Denham," he gasps, and then I'm off in my car again, down the road to find one of the other men who was with the vigilante group last night.

It's a simple enough story. If we hadn't all been blinded by Billy's gun being at the scene of the crime, and the state of his bedroom, to say nothing of his mental health, we would all have seen it a lot quicker. The dead man was a loser who owed a lot of money to a lot of people. Luke Mason's friend, John Denham killed him, and the two of them contrived to lay the blame on Billy, who was a thorn in Mason's side. It seemed like the ideal solution. I read Denham his rights, slap the cuffs on him, and haul him off to hand him over to 'Bob'.

As I enter the police station, I see Walter talking quietly to Bob, and my heart misses a beat. He's dressed for work, still looking tired and pale, but worse is the dejected set of his shoulders. Only I would notice, but now that my eyes have been opened, I can see so much that I never realized was there before. My heart goes out to him, and I wonder if he's having regrets about last night. I can feel myself bristling, and my rejection antennae start twirling. Like I've said before, I'm not very good at relationships – one night stands are more my forte.

"Sir..." I propel Denham over to where they're standing, my gift to my boss, to my lover, to the one person I suddenly discover I don't want to live without.

"Mulder." His tone is formal, but we're in company, so I couldn't expect anything else, but the expressions are there in those dark, secretive eyes, if you know how to interpret them. And I'm learning, I'm learning fast. Worry, fear, hope – the tiny jerking pulse of that nerve in his neck, the shift of his jaw, so slight as to go unnoticed by any but me.

"This is your murderer." I shove Denham forward, and explain my case. Denham knows the game is up anyway, and is soon confessing to the whole thing. Bob is pleased, and goes to release Billy immediately. We're all standing there, me doing my best not to devour my boss with my eyes, when the door slams open, and Luke Mason is standing there with a gun.

"You won't get away with this!" Mason screams. At me? At Skinner? Or even at Billy? I don't know. "You should have left it alone!" He raises the gun and points it. I'm standing next to Billy, and I don't know if it's me, or Billy he's aiming for. Either way, Walter is in action, unable to let either of us be threatened or harmed, and he charges forwards as the gun goes off. I'm in slow motion as I see his face crumple, and the flash of blood on his thigh. He slumps down in a heap, and now there's a blood-curdling howl as Billy launches himself at Mason, and the gun goes flying.

I don't have eyes for any of this. I'm at Walter's side, kneeling in the pool of red blood that's flowing from his leg. I press my hand hard against the wound. If an artery has been hit, a man can die of blood loss within minutes. I'm hysterical, shouting for them to phone for paramedics, as I clutch Walter's hand as he's losing consciousness.

"You'll be all right, you'll be okay," I tell him. He nods, growing weaker as I watch. Bob has handcuffed Mason, and Billy is cowering in the corner. A couple of officers are standing and staring, helplessly waiting for the paramedics to arrive. Nobody is near enough to hear me lean over, and whisper in his ear: "I love you." He nods before he fades out.

I never want to endure that again. He's okay, but I'm not. I won't leave his hospital room. What with Billy, and Allison, and the kid, and Irene, and Frank, and Mr. Hale, it's a bit of a crush. Even Bob visits occasionally, and then there are all the phone calls to and from the office. Poor Walter – it's like an airport terminal in his room. Finally, I just clear them all out, even Irene, because he needs some rest. Allison has decided to take Billy off to start a new life elsewhere. "Just another kid to look after!" she tells me cheerfully, relieved that her dad is in custody, and she's no longer under his thumb. Billy is happy enough to go with anyone who'll take care of him, but there are some tearful farewells with Irene. Frank is sulking of course – he obviously thinks Walter got shot on purpose in order to take Irene's attention away from him. Walter tolerates his grudging concern, and heaves a sigh of relief when the man has gone.

"Promise me you won't ever turn out like him," I say.

"What?" He frowns. "Like my dad? No way."

"Then learn how to smile again." I sit down on the bed next to him, and put my arm around him.

"Teach me," he grins, and I kiss him. It's nice to have him trapped here and he looking so vulnerable. A shadow passes across his face, the faintest flickering of some sadness that only I would be able to detect.

"What?" I ask, and he looks surprised to be so understood.

"What, what?" he smiles.

"That expression. I've become a seasoned Walter-watcher, you can't hide anything from me."

"Damn." He pretends to look displeased.

"Yeah, so all your secrets will have to come tumbling out one by one, and if the last few days are anything to go by, there's bound to be quite a few! Now tell me why you looked so anxious back then."

"When I woke up...and you were gone..." He looks lost, and I'm beside myself with self-reproach. "I thought you'd gone back to Washington," he admits. "I thought it was all a bad mistake, or worse, a really good dream! I went into your room and..."

"Oh shit. Of course. I never unpack. I tossed my bag into a corner of the room, so you probably didn't even see it. You thought I'd taken my stuff, and cleared out?"

"Yes," he admits.

"Shit." I have to put both my arms around him now. "It wasn't just another one night stand," I tell him. "Honest. I mean, I don't know how we are going to work this thing out back home, but now that I've seen, now that I know...there's no going back to how things were before."

"It's a helluva lot of trouble we've created for ourselves," he tells me.

"Yeah. That's what happens when you get mixed up with someone like me. I guess this is all that giving up, and going with the flow stuff that you were talking about." I kiss his head.

At that moment Irene comes in, and stares at us in surprise.

"I thought Fox was just a colleague," she exclaims. "I had no idea! Why do you always have to be such a secretive boy, Walter?"

"It's not what you think..." he begins, looking sheepish.

"I certainly hope it is. Fox is just what you need." She smiles at me. "And anyway I like him."

"Why thank you, Irene," I grin. "I like you too."

"Yes all right," Walter says testily. "When this little mutual admiration society is over..."

"Just like his dad," Irene sighs. "Can't bear to be left out."

Walter opens his mouth in speechless indignation, and we both laugh at him.

"I suppose I have to get used to this," he mutters grimly, and of course there is no way that Irene and I will ever be able to resist teasing him to death. That's just his role in life from now on: to be the butt of our jokes.

Irene wants him to convalesce with her but, wonderful as she is, I don't think that's something he'll be able to stand, so I take him back to the hotel as soon as he's fit enough. In a couple of days he'll be well enough to return to D.C., and then the fun will really begin. Before that though, well, it's been over a week since I've been able to make love to him, and I'm desperate! Wounded or not, he's just going to have to submit to my attentions. He sighs as I undress him on that first night back, gazing down at the dressing on his leg.

"Another scar," he mutters. "I'm getting to look like a piece of patchwork."

"It's part of your considerable charm," I murmur, gently kissing the dressing.

"Charm!" He snorts. "I've never labored under the belief that I'm particularly gifted in the charm department."

"People don't see, because you don't let them, but when you know, you wonder how you could have ever been so blind," I tell him.

"You are so full of shit." He grins, pulls me down, and holds my un-protesting face in his hands, kissing me softly. That familiar wave of light-headedness washes over me. Damn, how does he do that! I'm lost now. He was lost, and I found him, but now I'm lost. Lost in him. It's a good place to be.

THE END

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