

Whipping Boy by Xanthe



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The room was dark. Its single occupant was standing, half upright, half slumped, his wrists attached to heavy iron manacles that hung on chains from the ceiling. There was no light in the basement room. Nor was there any warmth, and the naked man in the centre of the room was shivering. The dark, purpling bruises on his skin from the beating he had received earlier were livid in contrast to the icy whiteness of the rest of his flesh. The chains holding him upright were cruelly adjusted to ensure that his feet couldn't comfortably touch the ground. So, he either stood on tiptoe, or the weight of the manacles on his wrists dug into the flesh around his hands and cut off the circulation in his arms. Either way, he was in constant discomfort. The beating earlier had been severe – the steel tipped ends of the whip had torn into body, creating welts wherever it landed, but it had been his captor's fist that had created the most damage, bruising his jaw and closing one of his eyes, so that now he didn't have the strength to even try to struggle to stay upright in the manacles – he just slumped, half unconscious.

Skinner wasn't sure how much time had passed since he had walked into this trap, maybe a day, maybe two. It didn't matter. He wasn't expecting to be rescued any time soon. Nobody knew he was here. Nobody much cared whether he came or went these days. He knew he had been isolated and effectively sidelined at the Bureau, and had few friends there these days. Kersh wouldn't send out a search party that was for sure – not until he had given his

wayward Assistant Director enough time to die. For Skinner was sure that Kersh was somehow involved in this. Not directly of course, but this whole ambush stank of FBI involvement. Ambush...not the first ambush he'd been caught in, and he'd survived the first all those years ago in Vietnam against all the odds...maybe he would survive this one too. Maybe. Or maybe he'd finally run out of luck.

Skinner's head sank even lower. It was hard to breathe like this. Hard to physically get the air in his lungs but he didn't have the strength to stand upright. He hadn't thought it would come to this. Sold out by his own people, by an institution he had given his life to. He tried to figure out the details, tried to keep his fevered brain on track for long enough. First a file had arrived covertly in his office, pushed under the door. A cursory look marked it as explosive, and less than an hour later he had been called into Kersh's office and while the existence of the file hadn't been directly referred to, it had been tacitly acknowledged. He had been forbidden to follow up any investigation relating to the contents of the file – Kersh had made that quite clear. And that, Skinner now realised, was just the bait set to trap him. Dangle the carrot, watch him bite, and then pounce. Like an idiot he had walked straight into it, had ignored Kersh's orders as the Deputy Director knew he would, and had ended up here as a result. He had been acting against orders so he hadn't put the careers of any of his agents at risk by involving them, or taking them along as backup – just as Kersh had anticipated...it always came back to Kersh. The questions his captor was asking all related to material so confidential to do with the vast conspiracy Mulder had uncovered that this had to be a carefully planned trap. And Skinner wasn't expected to survive it. No, he was expected to spill his guts, slowly, but surely, the information tortured out of him, and then he was going to be killed. Kersh would feign sorrow, he would be buried with full honours and then a new, less troublesome Assistant Director would be appointed – another of Kersh's lapdogs. A 'yes' man – as Skinner so clearly wasn't and never had been.

The sound of the door being unlocked made Skinner flinch, involuntarily.

"Please..." he rasped, his tone despairing, as his captor entered the room. "I need some water."

"Tell me the whereabouts of Agent Mulder and you can have as much water as you like," the man said. A mask obscured his face, and Skinner didn't recognise his voice.

"I've told you before...I don't know. Mulder isn't with the Bureau any more. He isn't an agent any more...He isn't required to report to me any more...I don't know where he..."

He heard the sound of a fist striking flesh before he felt it, and then his face had been knocked back, blood spraying out from the newly created cut on his jaw.

"He might not be an agent any more but he **is** your friend. You must know where he is."

"I don't. I wasn't told. They didn't tell anyone." And they wouldn't tell me anyway, Skinner thought to himself, because even now, after all these years, they still don't trust me. They never have and they never will. Oh, they tolerated him, they came to him when they needed help, but they didn't trust him the way they trusted each other. He was always on the outside, and always would be. It didn't matter what he did, or what part of himself he sacrificed for their cause, it would never be enough. Even if he died for them, here in this lonely basement cell, hanging from the rafters like an animal, he suspected it still wouldn't quite be enough to prove to them that he had been worthy of their trust.

"I don't believe you."

Out of the corner of his eye, Skinner saw his captor reach for the whip he had left hanging from the cell wall. "No," he whispered hoarsely. "Please. No more."

"What did Mulder know? Why did he leave so suddenly?" The voice asked. That was information Skinner did have – but he wasn't going to tell this hooded man anything. Whether Mulder and Scully wanted his loyalty, whether they **deserved** it, didn't matter – he couldn't change who and what he was. He would die here in this room, his blood soaking the walls and his screams reverberating off them, but he wouldn't say a word. Mulder, Scully and their child would be safe. Their secrets would be safe – they would always be safe with Skinner because he would sooner betray himself than ever betray his friends. So he shook his head mutely, as his captor shook out the fronds of the whip.

"Why do you protect them?" He could almost hear the sneer in his captor's voice. "Why, Walter? Why?" The words echoed around his skull, but he had no answers. The whip was like a knife, it sliced into his flesh making him scream despite himself. He hadn't meant to cry out, but the pain was so intense that he didn't have control over his own voice any more. The screams came from deep within, unbidden, choking, like a wild animal in pain.

"What have they ever done for you, Walter?" His captor asked, in a sibilant tone.

"They're my friends," he whispered, playing for time, willing to say anything to stop the whip cutting his skin again – anything except what his captor wanted to hear.

"Friends? They use you," his captor taunted. "They've always used you. They use you to sign off on their reports, to haul their asses out of trouble at the Bureau, to show up when they need rescuing, to smooth over the consequences of their actions, to provide information. You're their whipping boy, Walter." There was a smile in his captor's voice, and he began to

shake his whip again, making Skinner flinch. "You sacrificed your career for them, after all. You take all the blame and none of the glory. You're just good old dependable Walter, there in the background. You only exist as a foil for them. A sidekick. Do they care that your wife died because of your involvement with them? Do they care that you took a bullet to the gut for them? Do they even know that you were infected with a deadly poison because of them? Do they know that the nanocyte infection was recurrent? Did they understand how it was used against you? Did they care about the toll that must have taken on you? A man like you – so used to being in control of himself, suddenly at the mercy of the poison in your own blood. That must have been hard for you. Did they know how hard? Did they even care?"

The whip swung out again in a deadly curve. It bit into his skin but nothing hurt as much as the words that hung in the air between himself and his captor.

I don't care if they know – and I don't give a damn if they care about me or not," Skinner growled, fighting back the only way he knew how. "Do you only do things for what you'll get back in return? For the kudos? If so, then I pity you. I don't regret any of what I've done – I did my best. I've walked a hard path between helping them and not being seen to help them too visibly in case their cause suffered as a result. I kept in the know so that I could keep on helping them...I..." He stopped, realising he had been goaded into saying too much, into giving too much away. Concentrate, Walter. Stay alert. That had been such an easy trap to fall into. His captor laughed, circling him, stroking the whip over his body softly. Skinner shuddered, repulsed by the obscene caress.

"It was a shame you killed our ex-operative, Alex Krycek, and got your hands on that palm pilot of his. I would have enjoyed playing with that toy, but it would appear you've had those little nanobots in your body neutralised, Walter. You have no idea how disappointed we were to find out about that."

"I'm sure." Skinner bowed his head sarcastically, and then flinched for the blow that, as expected, was soon forthcoming. The whip tore into the flesh on his back and soon the room was full of the sound of his own screams once more.

"So, we have to fall back on the good, old-fashioned forms of torture," his captor said grimly, pausing for a moment and gathering the fronds of his whip in his hand.

"How does it feel, Walter, to have no friends? No real friends at least. Do you know that there is nobody who cares whether you live or die? Did you know that? You could die here, Walter." Skinner felt a hand lift his chin, so that he was looking into his captor's eyes, visible through the slits in his mask. "Nobody will come for you. Nobody cares. Your wife is dead, and you're not a man to make friends easily. Mulder and Scully were the closest you came to it and they don't even trust you. Maybe you don't inspire friendship, Walter."

"It doesn't matter," Skinner said softly, because it didn't. He had loved his wife, deeply, and he protected those he loved. He cared about Mulder and Scully as he had never cared about anyone except Sharon, and so they had his protection whether they wanted it or not, whether they cared or not. He wasn't a man who wore his heart on his sleeve. He didn't need any reciprocation. He helped them because they had convinced him that they were right, because he admired them, because they were courageous in their battle against evil, as he had always strived to be. He didn't always get it right, but he did what he could as best he could. He had never needed praise, could live without love if need be, but he couldn't live with himself if he didn't live up to his own expectations. Sometimes he fell short of what he expected of himself – and he was tougher on himself than he had ever been on any of the agents under his command – but he did what he did in silence, behind the scenes, without fuss, and with as much dignity as he could muster no matter how humiliating the circumstances. That was just the way he was.

"Ah, but of course you're the strong, silent type. I was warned about that," his captor sneered. "You're never showy, are you, Walter? You're not the big, bold hero, making all the noise and getting all the attention. You're not...Fox Mulder for example. Do you wish you were? Is that why you're protecting him now?"

Skinner managed a hoarse laugh at that. "No," he whispered. "I can safely say that I've never wanted to be Fox Mulder."

"Why not? People notice him...he's the man on the white horse, riding to the salvation of the planet. Isn't that a role you would prefer for yourself, Walter?"

Skinner shook his head. "No," he replied, truthfully. >He admired Mulder's passionate, all-consuming way of throwing himself into his quest for the truth, but Skinner didn't see the world that simply. What to Mulder was so clearly black and white, was, to Skinner, so often a shifting mirage of greys. Maybe what had happened to him when he was 18 years old had taught him caution; maybe his entire experience in Vietnam had taught him cynicism, but one thing he did know was that if you got removed from the battlefield then you couldn't fight any more – and sometimes it was necessary to fight hard and dirty on the sidelines. You might not emerge covered in glory, but you got a hell of a lot accomplished and you made it easier for the rest of your side, for the man on the white horse as his captor so sneeringly put it, to gain victory. That was the way he saw it at least.

Another blow from the whip made him jerk upright in his manacles.

"Don't fall asleep on me, Walter. We have work to do," his captor told him.

"Fuck off." Skinner bowed his head, his throat dry, his voice hoarse from lack of water and the shredding effect of his own screams. "You won't get anything from me."

"Do you think they'll rescue you, Walter? Is that what you think? Do you think that all you need to do is hang on and that they'll come for you? They won't," his captor said softly. >"They won't come because they don't even know you're missing and they don't know because they are too caught up in their own dramas. Apart from anything else, you're expendable. You remind me of an old warhorse, Walter, still clinging stubbornly to outdated ideas of loyalty, and protection. Nobody will rescue you, Walter, because you aren't important, and because nobody cares. You're all alone down here, with just me for company." The whip flailed out again and soon Skinner was lost in the sound of his own screams.

At some point he lost consciousness and when he awoke he was alone. His wrists hurt from carrying the weight of his body and his flesh felt as if it had been torn from his muscles and bone, skinned alive. It was still dark. And cold. He remembered a time in 'Nam when he had been alone, lying on the forest floor, his body damaged almost beyond repair. He remembered a bright white light, and a woman's voice. How he longed for that light again, to be held in those otherworldly arms and soothed as if he were an infant. His captor was right. Mulder and Scully wouldn't come for him because they were locked in their own struggle right now. Mulder was on the run, and Scully, as usual, was valiantly trying to protect him. They wouldn't even notice he was missing. When did he ever see them these days anyway? Scully was still a Bureau agent but she was on maternity leave, and Mulder had unearthed some new facet of the conspiracy – which was why he had left so abruptly. Kim might wonder where he was but the Bureau wouldn't actively investigate for a few days – Kersh would make sure of that. And in a few days he would be dead. Skinner felt cold inside as well as out. His captor had been right about many things. Nobody would mourn him. Mulder and Scully would grieve for a while, but nobody would really care, as Sharon might once have done.

When had his life become so devoid of love?

And why, only now, hanging here from these hooks like a piece of meat, when it was too late to do anything about it, did he have to discover that he cared?

It takes a big man to face up to himself, but alone in the dark, lost, cold, and in pain, Skinner looked inside himself and found that he missed that one thing he had been lacking in his life for so long...and he wept.

More time passed. He had no idea how much, lost in the bitterness of his own thoughts, but then the door clanged open again.

"You've had time to think, Walter. I do hope that you've come to some decisions," his captor's cold voice hissed in his ear.

"Yes. I have." Skinner somehow managed to draw himself up to his full height.

"Well?" His captor stood in front of him, his voice expectant.

Skinner's only reply was to use the last, tiny amount of moisture he had left in his mouth to spit defiantly in the other man's face. >Then he surrendered himself to the pain. If he had to die, he would at least die protecting the people he cared about. Nothing else mattered. Not his life, or his hopes and dreams, or anything else. Just that. The whip lashed into his body but he no longer cared. He surrendered himself to the pain because he had no choice, and yet, in having no choice, he was making the only choice he could – the only choice he knew how to make. The noise of the whip on his body was loud, like a hammer, but after a while he no longer felt the individual blows. The sound of his screams merged with the sound of the whip, slowly reaching a crescendo – and then a different sound reverberated through the room. A loud, booming noise startled him, and he watched, as if in a dream, as his captor fell to the floor like a stone, a bullet hole gaping in his head, blood soaking into his mask.

"Oh Christ," a man's voice said. "Christ, Walter, what have they done to you?";

"Help me get him down. Search that bastard's pockets for a key," a woman's voice rapped out, low, and full of concern.

Skinner's vision was blurred by sweat and his own pain, but he felt a stab of thanks in his heart. They had come. Despite everything, they had come. His captor was wrong. There were people out there who cared about him. People who cared enough to ignore Kersh's orders not to look for him, people who cared enough to be concerned when he had gone missing, people who cared enough to search for him. Gentle hands unlocked his manacles, and he felt a man's hard body against his flesh, holding him up and shielding him from further pain as they lowered him to the floor. A woman cradled his head on his lap and spoke soothing words, caressing him with strong, kind fingers as the man spoke urgently into his cell phone, calling for help. Skinner closed his eyes and lost consciousness once more.

The next few hours were a haze. He was barely conscious as he was examined in the hospital, given pain meds, his wounds treated and dressed. His two agents remained with him throughout. Somewhere, in the hazy recesses of his mind, he was surprised. Something was wrong, different, not what he had expected...and yet, at the same time, something was very right - surprisingly right in fact. His body hurt, but it would heal and Skinner hated hospitals. He also hated his own weakness, and more than that, he could hardly bear to live with the fact that he had been trapped and hurt by his own people – although he knew the trail would already have gone cold and would never lead back to Kersh. After an overnight stay in the hospital, Skinner discharged himself against medical advice. Like a wounded animal, he just wanted to go home, to lick his wounds and be alone – but his agents had different ideas. They brushed aside his mumbled assurances that he could take care of himself, and insisted on taking him to his apartment where they undressed him, put him between the sheets of his bed as if he were a baby, and then took up guard in his bedroom, watching over him. He slept for what could have been days, and woke to overhear snatches of their conversation..

"I'll see Kersh rot in hell for this. We'll find the evidence." Him. Pacing the room angrily.

"Later. He needs us right now." Her. Softer, soothing, calming.

"Did that bastard think we wouldn't look for him? Did he seriously think we'd accept all that BS about an unexpected death in the family? Christ. It makes me so angry. Did he seriously think that a man like Skinner would be without friends in the Bureau?";

"You respect him a great deal." She sounded thoughtful..

"He's the finest law enforcement officer I've ever worked for. I'd trust him with my life.";

"I've read the files. He's certainly been a friend to the X Files. I'm not sure **I'd** have signed off on some of those reports!" She gave a throaty little laugh. Skinner liked the sound. There hadn't been enough laughter in his life of late. Her tone changed, and became fond and tender. "I liked him the moment I met him," she murmured softly..

"Yeah – we all saw you checking him out."

"I was **not** checking him out!" She gave another of those laughs..

"Like hell you weren't!";

There was an easy, teasing camaraderie between them that Skinner wanted so much to be part of. He tried to bring himself to full wakefulness, feeling guilty for listening in on their conversation but his mind was still fogged and it was like moving through treacle. A silence fell over the room..

"Mulder and Scully must be crazy," she murmured. "All these years working with him, all the help he gave them, and they didn't see what was right under their noses! I feel sorry for them – and for him. He deserved better. He'll **have** better now.";

"It's him then, Monica?" Doggett asked softly. "He's the one you saw?";

"I thought you didn't believe in all that – what was it you called it at the time? 'Clairvoyant bull'?" There was a chiding note in her voice..

"I didn't believe it...until today. But you found him without any clues at all – it was as if you knew where he was."

"It was strange." Skinner felt her long, cool fingers caress the side of his cheek. "I could just see that basement room so clearly in my mind. I was drawn to him like a magnet. I just followed my instincts. I knew...that it was important. That he was the one."

"It's been a couple of years since you had that dream – can you be sure?"

Skinner was surprised to feel Doggett's hand gently come to rest on his own, comforting, and reassuring..

"It's been years since I **first** had it," she corrected him. "But I've had it regularly ever since. I just didn't tell you – you reacted so badly the first time!"

"Well what did you expect? We'd been an item for a couple of months and then you were talking about this other guy. One who we were **both** supposed to be with. That's a lot for a guy to take in!" He remonstrated. Skinner wondered for a moment whether he was still back in that basement, lost in a fevered hallucination.

"Too much as it turned out." There was a slightly hurt tone in her voice..

"Well, you can be a lot to take, Monica and I didn't know then what I know now," his tone was wry. "I've seen so much working on the X Files that your dream that you, me and Walter were destined to have some kind of bond doesn't phase me at all now.";

"Bond!" She laughed. "That wasn't what I dreamed and you know it, John! It was much more intimate than just a bond - much, much more."

"Well, your dreams are scary. And besides, I don't like to say it out loud in case it doesn't come true."

"Oh, John, it already has. It wasn't right for you and me before because he wasn't with us. He's here now. I didn't realise...I didn't realise you wanted this so much.";

"Monica...I long ago came to terms with the side of myself that enjoys being with other men. My main worry now is that Walter here won't feel the same. But I can honestly say that my first reaction on meeting him was pretty much the same as yours!" ;

"You mean you checked him out?"

"Ah, so you do admit it!"

She gave a low, throaty laugh. "There was just something about him. I knew he was the one the moment he shook my hand, but still the time wasn't ready. I'm not a patient woman, John. It wasn't easy holding back and waiting for it all to work out. I wish I could have spared him this.";

"Walter? Are you okay?" A glass of water was pressed to his lips..

"I'm...fine." His throat was still croaky, and his body hurt all over, but he was surprised to find that he **was** fine..

"You insisted on discharging yourself from the hospital but we couldn't just leave you here alone." Monica's dark eyes were full of affection. Her smile was infectious and he found himself returning it. It felt so strange. He barely knew her and yet...he could vividly remember the moment he first met her. Something had sparked from her hand straight into his as they shook hands. "Are you always this stubborn?" She asked. It was then that he noticed that she was holding his hand, as if she belonged by his side. Doggett was standing beside him, a little smile on his lips and an affectionate and curiously hopeful look in his opaque blue eyes..

"I'm afraid so." Skinner gave a wry smile and she smiled back delightedly. Her smile was so full of warmth, so unrestrained. He was more used to people holding back, and hiding their feelings. Monica wasn't like that – she liked him, and she wanted him to know it. Doggett helped arrange his pillows and then perched, a little awkwardly on the side of the bed. ;

"And I'm afraid that I can be equally stubborn!" Monica flashed him that enchanting smile again, and he glanced at Doggett for verification. The other man sighed and shook his head ruefully in confirmation.

"That makes three of us then, because I sure as hell ain't a pushover," Doggett commented.

"That's why you're not going to get rid of us anytime soon," Monica informed Skinner. "John is straining at the leash to go after Kersh but a serious attempt was made on your life and you're our first priority. We might not get Kersh this time but we'll get him – don't you worry." She sounded so certain, so intent. Skinner felt oddly reassured. ;

"In the meantime, we're just going to be hanging out here, taking care of you until you're well again. You'll need help bathing and you won't exactly be doing any grocery shopping for a couple of weeks," Doggett said.

They both looked at him, as if expecting him to argue and he opened his mouth, fully expecting himself to do so, but instead the word "okay" came out instead. Monica and Doggett exchanged a look of surprise, clearly not expecting it to have been that easy.

Skinner tried to take this all in, unsure how he was feeling. They both looked so strong, so sure, so full of concern for him and his welfare. It touched him. It had been a long time since he had felt like this. They were both clearly off-duty and he wondered whether they had been suspended from the FBI over their decision to search for him. John was wearing a pair of stonewashed jeans and a USMC tee shirt that was a little too large for him.

"I hope you don't mind me borrowing this. I felt entitled and my sweater was... uh...covered in blood," Doggett said apologetically. Skinner didn't mind. The gray tee shirt suited Doggett. It showed off the hard lines of his toned body. Skinner felt a distant memory return, seeing Doggett like this, in the USMC tee shirt, reminded him of old friends, similarly clad, many years before – and one in particular who had been more than just a friend, and who had taken Skinner's love to the grave with him after that ambush in Vietnam. ;

"I don't mind. It looks...good on you," Skinner said, and a flash of surprise showed up in Doggett's eyes. The other man shot a look at Monica, and she returned it with a knowing smile of the kind Skinner felt sure he was going to find very infuriating – and yet oddly comforting too. ;

"When we go back to work, back to the X Files, we'll need to have your word that you won't pull a stunt like this again," Doggett chided him. "From now on you keep us in the loop, Walter. We're a team – and we'll need to act as one if we're going to defeat our enemies within the Bureau."

Skinner wasn't sure when they had become on first name terms, but he liked it. It had been a long time since anyone called him by his first name with such affection in their tone. It wasn't the use of his first name that made him choke though. It was Doggett's stern tone of voice, and the knowledge that he was part of something again – not on the outside, but integral, and central, a vital member of the team. Skinner swallowed hard. He wasn't used to sharing his emotions with anyone, and it was hard to have been seen by his two agents, naked, beaten and at his most vulnerable. The walls he had built around himself had been breached and it wasn't going to be easy for him to come to terms with that. ;

"Whipping boy," he murmured, gazing sightlessly over Doggett's shoulder and out of the window. He knew that he would be scarred both physically and mentally by the ordeal he had undergone these past few days, but a part of him wondered whether he could even face the journey back to health. What was the point? He had come face to face with the failure of his life during his captivity and some of his usual certainty and strength had been shaken. He was so tired of it all. Doggett frowned, and exchanged a concerned look with Monica.

"He said I was their whipping boy. Taking all the blame, getting no thanks." Skinner looked down at his bandaged wrists. He had never seen himself like that – it wasn't an image he had of himself, and yet, right here, at his lowest ebb, he wondered whether there hadn't been some truth to it. ;

"Oh, Walter." Monica's eyes were shining as she slid her arm around his shoulder, and pulled him close. Normally he would have resisted, but he was too weary, and it felt nice to be held, and comforted. He wasn't a man who found it easy to accept comfort but maybe his recent experience had changed him. "Things are different now, Walter," Monica told him fiercely, looking to Doggett who nodded his confirmation. "From now on, they're going to be different. You have to trust me on that."

Skinner gazed at his two agents for a moment. Their faces were so expectant, full of this secret they had shared for so many years. He wondered whether he should tell them that he had overheard their conversation and that Monica's dream was wrong, that he wasn't the man they were looking for, this man who was supposed to share their lives, and who was destined to be so important to them both. That man was someone else, or else her dreams weren't truly clairvoyant. Skinner was about to say the words, but something stopped him. He remembered being alone in that dark basement room, alone with his pain, and he remembered his regret.

Skinner smiled, and squeezed Monica's hand, then reached out and touched John's arm.

Maybe it wasn't too late for him. Maybe he could choose a different path. Maybe it was time to move on.

Maybe it was time to allow himself to be loved.

The End

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