

Hostage
by Xanthe



This story archived at <http://www.xanthe.org/hostage/>

Story Notes:

AWARDS

This story won the following awards:

Outstanding X File in the Wirerims Awards



Best Angst

Best Psychological Muldertorture

Best First Person story...

...in the 1999 MTA Purple Heart awards.



Joint winner of the Best Angst category in the 1998 Whammy slash awards.

One of the central themes of Hostage was inspired by a particular passage from Debra Baker's lovely story: Balancing Act. She very kindly gave me permission to explore it in my own way in this story.

Thanks to Holmes for the usual excellent beta reading. Wonderful pic courtesy of Mika.

Hostage by Xanthe

What is the first thing you should do upon being released from a psychiatric ward after being held in restraints and menaced by monsters? I don't know. Here's the first thing I do, though. I dismiss Scully with a curt "I'll see you tomorrow," and I go out cruising.

It never takes me long to find what I'm looking for, because all that I'm looking for is willing flesh. Tonight is no different. I find it, and convince it to let me take it to a motel room to fuck it stupid. I'm so incoherent that he probably thinks I'm drunk. I don't do anything to dissuade him from that thought. The drunker he thinks I am the better. It'll make what comes next easier to accept - maybe. My kind of loving isn't all that gentle at the best of times - at least when it comes to men. I wouldn't - couldn't - hurt a woman, but men...they're different. They're the dark side of me, and I hate that side of myself, and I hate them for provoking it.

This one reminds me of another body, with dark hair, green eyes, and a pretty face...Alex Krycek, the prettiest lay I've ever had. I never liked Alex, but the passion was so hot that the steam almost came out of our goddamn ears. I was never gentle with him, even back at the start when I halfway loved him. He knew just how to press all the right buttons in order to make me come at him with my fists. He knew where it would inevitably end up. We never talked; we just got on with it. Whenever I run into the bastard now, it starts all over again. My fists itch to plant themselves in his face, in his flesh. It's all I can do to express the desire, because I won't fuck him now. I can't. He betrayed me. He gutted me like a fish, took my insides out, and left them hanging there. To think I mistook what we had for love. I'm a fool.

Thinking of Alex just makes my mood uglier, even worse than usual. When I get like this, I'm not kind, and I make no pretense of it. I don't have time for all that phony friendliness shit tonight, not after what I've been through. My urgency, and need for violent release are easy to see, even in the dim light of this low life bar we're in, so don't feel sorry for my pick up. He's no victim du jour. He's a big guy, and just like Alex, he could hand it out as easily as he could take it if he wanted to. I pick them that way on purpose. If I get any inkling that a man doesn't want what I have to offer, I stop right then and there. I'm no kind of monster. I have an instinct about picking the "right" guys.

Needless to say, tonight's Mr. Right pays the price for the dubious pleasure of a night of passion with Fox William Mulder. I give him a session of kicking, scratching, biting, and bruising lovemaking that leaves him looking like he's gone ten rounds with Mike Tyson. As for me, I look like shit as usual. One of these days maybe I'll pick one up who'll turn the tables, and end up killing me. I don't give a damn about that. It's one way of dying.

I slip out of the bed in the early hours, when the fury inside me abates, and fade back into the darkness. I never told him my name. I never do. I pay for the room though - he deserves that much.

I take a shower to wash the scent of sex from my body, and examine the wounds: scratches, bites, and bruises. Our angry passion has taken its toll, but the release was so good. I needed it. I've had a goddamn hard-on since my boss wrestled me onto a desk a few days ago. How the hell should he know that's my idea of foreplay? Then, just when he got me aroused, he consigned me to limbo - tied to a bed in a psych ward, at the mercy of monsters. I wasn't even able to get rid of the damning evidence

by jerking off because of those restraints. It's no wonder that I needed a frigging release. It's no wonder that I took it out on the first man who'd let me.

I re-work the scenario in Pincus's office in my head as I stand in the shower, only this time it ends the way I want it to. Skinner pushes me down; I slap him with all my force. He bites my neck, my shoulder, while I run my fingernails down that broad back, until the blood flows. He pulls me up, hits me, hard, and I riposte with a kiss that makes his lips bleed. Then I fuck him, or he fucks me, because I don't care which, and I walk out and never see him again. Only I can't do the last part, because I work with him. I made that mistake once before. One night stands are much better.

I jerk myself off to this fantasy, with the water and tears running down my cheeks at the same time. I just wish I didn't like him. I don't want to like him. I wish he wouldn't do the stuff he does - selling himself to Cancerman to find a cure for Scully, saving my butt on more than one occasion, proving he cares in these little ways that tug at me, and make me resent him for it.

I get into work late. Fuck it. I figure they owe me. Scully had to go into the lion's den by herself. I'm not sure what she told him, and I don't really care. I just know that I don't want to see **him** right now. If I close my eyes, I can remember how it felt to have him hold me, and my arm jerks involuntarily, throwing the punch, starting the fight/foreplay. I've been here before, after that time in the hallway, when I was out of my head on drugs. They made me lose my inhibitions. Luckily for me, he didn't understand that it was foreplay for me that time either. The anger and the sex are irretrievably combined for me. I couldn't separate the two out if I tried. It's easier by far not to have sex at all. That's the way I usually deal with it. As for the anger - ah, well, I'm not so good at dealing with that. It spills out all the time, in little ways, gets me into trouble. I can't help myself.

Six days later, Skinner calls us into his office just after lunch. He's his usual stunning self. I don't bother fighting the attraction any more because it's been there from the moment I first saw him. It's just another part of me, another layer, and it's so well hidden he'll never see it. He's watching me, those dark eyes wary and tense. He doesn't know where I'm coming from any more. Maybe he never did, but he doesn't give up trying to find out all the same. I should probably be grateful. A lot of bosses would have kicked my disobedient ass out of the Bureau a long time ago.

"There's an emergency situation." He examines a file he's holding, but he isn't reading it. He's reading me instead. I smile, disarmingly. Last time I sat here, I was "monster boy". Today, I'll be "model agent" I think. Why not? One of my teachers once described me as "mercurial". My mother was surprised. "He's very quiet at home," she replied. Well of course, I would be. Anyway, Skinner quits studying me when he realizes I've noticed, and I raise an inquiring eyebrow at him. Scully, in turn, raises one at me. It's Eyebrow City in here today. I wait for Skinner to raise the stakes with both eyebrows, but instead he clears his throat, looking concerned.

"It's a..." he pauses, looks directly at me. I smile encouragingly, "...hostage situation." He doesn't look happy about it. "A man is holding nine people hostage in a convenience store in Leesburg."

"I'm not disputing the seriousness of this situation, but it doesn't sound like an X File. How does this concern us, sir?" Scully asks smoothly, shooting me a glance.

"This guy is nuts." Skinner looks at me. I make the connection. He thinks I'm nuts too. "It may not be an X File, but the hostage taker has specifically requested that...he...that is, he read some article about the Duane Barry case..."

"He wants to talk to me." I say for him, since he's taking so long to get to the point.

"Yes. I don't think it's a good idea though." Skinner pauses. "Mulder, you've just come from one hostage situation. I'm, uh, concerned..."

"About the effect it'll have on my mental health? Don't be." I smile at him, whisking the file off his desk. "I'll be fine. And if this guy won't talk to anyone else I don't have a choice, do I?" I get up, preparing to leave immediately. Skinner nods, exchanging a worried look with Scully.

As I leave the room I hear him say: "Watch out for him, Scully. Please." And something inside me feels squeezed, making it hard to breathe. I have to get some air as soon as possible, so I run out of the building, and into the street, gulping furiously. I love her, and I love him. I don't know what stops me from saying it. I know I make them anxious, and that they worry. I know that I seem crazy, that I run off, and do strange things. I know all that. I wish I could stop. I wish I wasn't moody, and often inexplicable. It's the curse of my hopeless, fucked up past, and my hopeless fucked up brain chemistry. I hope, I really hope, that they see beyond that, that they remember the times I'm fun and entertaining. Most of all, I hope they realize that even though I've left scores of broken lives in my wake, I don't want theirs to be among them. I love them both too much. Sometimes that love seems like an ache. If I could just...I picture my lips on his, biting, tearing...if I could get that out of my system, if I could have that one night with him, letting the passion overwhelm us both, then maybe that would be enough. I don't know. It's a kind of loving. The only kind I can give.

"Mulder." Scully's hand slips into my arm. "Are you okay, Mulder?"

"Sure, I'm fine!" I smile brightly.

"How do you feel about this?" She points at the file. "Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"Of course. It's my job." I say reassuringly as we set off. "Anyway," I wink. "It's great to be in demand!"

She gives a tight little smile, as we get into the car. She isn't fooled. She never is.

The guy has them holed up in a convenience store opposite a motel. He's going crazy by this time, screaming that he'll kill one of the hostages if he doesn't get to speak to me. It's been over three hours since the crisis began, and it's now nearly 5 p.m. The motel reception area has been turned into our operations room, with tables, chairs, blackboards, phone systems - the normal stuff. A tall, blond guy, with a long nose and an expression of distrust on his face, shakes my hand.

"Agent Mulder. I'm Agent Gallagher. I'm the SAC of the Hostage Rescue Team."

"And you're really pissed he wants to talk to me and not you, right?" I take off my jacket, sling it over the back of a chair, pick up the headset and put it on, then fumble for a packet of sunflower seeds in my jacket pocket.

"We have to go along with whatever he wants." His words merely answer my question.

"What do we know about him?" I lean back, throw a seed into the air, and catch it in my mouth. I can see a little nerve in Gallagher's neck start to twitch.

"Not much. We thought at first it was a hold-up gone wrong...maybe the cash register didn't have enough in it to suit him, and he decided to see if he could collect some ransom money. But now we're not so sure. He hasn't made a ransom demand yet...and he doesn't appear to know, or really care, who his hostages are, the way you'd expect him to if kidnapping them had been his primary objective. Until we got more information, and you got here, we were at a loss as to how to proceed. It's not even as if we can starve him out, or send people in with food to see what's going on in there. The convenience store has enough supplies to keep them all fed for weeks."

"Well let's hope it doesn't come to **that**," I joke.

"That's up to you," Gallagher shrugs, but his statement is a challenge.

"I'm aware of that," I reply softly. "Now tell me more about the hostages."

"There are nine of them - the convenience store had a staff of four - they're all in there. In addition there were some people paying for their gas - a mother and her daughter, three guys. "

"There's a kid in there?" Scully looks at Gallagher, her eyes showing something that only I understand.

"Yeah. A little girl, about 8 years old," Gallagher reads off his list. "Lisa Perry."

Lisa. I write the name down on my pad, and make a butterfly of the "i" with the dot being the head. Lisa.

"Do we know who this guy is?" I ask. Gallagher shakes his head.

"Just that he's called Pete, and he's got a gun. We're running DMV checks on the license plates of all the cars in the parking lot, to see if we can get some more information on him. With any luck he was dumb enough to drive his own car."

"Run those checks faster," I snap, and his face tightens. I'm not making a new friend here.

At just that moment, all hell breaks loose, as a shot fires out of the convenience store opposite, cracking some glass, and glancing off of one of the vehicles in the forecourt.

"Next time that's someone's head," a voice yells in my ears, and reverberates around the room on the speaker. Silence falls as the various milling people stiffen, become alert. "I want to talk to Mulder. Now."

I glance at Gallagher, and he nods, and flicks a switch. I can speak directly to "Pete" now.

"Pete, this is Agent Mulder," I say, as calmly and soothingly as I can.

"How the fuck do I know if that's true?" he demands.

"You asked to speak to me, Pete, and now I'm here," I tell him. "How can I prove it to you?"

"You're not that other jerk-wad are you, disguising your voice?" I glance at Gallagher. It's a good description of him.

"No, Pete. I really am Agent Mulder. You read about me in a magazine?"

"Yeah. You spoke to that guy? The one who heard voices in his head?" Pete's voice is a whisper. Like someone else not a million miles away, he really wants to believe. "They said that you were the only one who listened to him, and believed him. Well, I hear voices too, Agent Mulder."

"Oh shit. He's a schizo. Great," someone in the room mutters. I ignore them.

I know the rules. Acknowledge the delusion, but don't enter into it. That, apparently, was my mistake with Duane Barry. So they kept telling me at the time.

"What do the voices say, Pete?" I ask him softly.

"They tell me that we have to prepare to die. They tell me the little ones must die first. They say the children will be saved in the afterlife."

Fuck. This isn't looking good. I draw something absently on my pad, lost in thought.

"Pete, you don't have to believe the voices," I tell him. "I don't think you really want to believe them, do you?"

"I don't know what to believe. Maybe it would be better for everyone if I just shot my brains out. Maybe I should just let one of you shoot me," he says, and he sounds desperate.

"You can believe me, Pete. I know what it feels like not to be believed, and to have everyone turn against you. I've been there, Pete. If the voices are starting to help you remember your past, like Duane Barry's voices did, I can help you remember safely. No one has to get hurt. Why don't you put the gun down, and come on out. We could talk about this more face to face."

Gallagher clearly doesn't like this approach, but I'm going with it.

"No. I don't know whether I should listen to you, or to them," he whispers.

"Me, Pete. You asked for me. You know I can help you. You should trust me."

I don't know how long this conversation goes on for. An hour or more, and always the same. Me coaxing, him stalling. Sometimes I can hear sobbing in the background. Maybe the kid, maybe her mother. Or one of the guys. Hey, men can cry too. I should know. Finally, Pete stops talking. Says he needs time to think.

"You'll be here though, Agent Mulder. Won't you?" he begs.

"Yes, Pete. I'll be here."

"You won't let me down? I can trust you?"

"Yes, Pete. You can trust me."

"If I want to talk to you...?"

"I told you, Pete. I'll be right here. I'm not going anywhere."

He hangs up, and I lean back with a sigh.

"It's going to be a long haul," Scully says, handing me a cup of coffee and a sandwich.

"Thanks." I murmur, hoping I'm up to it. It's only been an hour, but already I'm exhausted by it. I have enough delusions of my own - entering into other people's warped minds isn't good for me, but I've already started to do that. Scully knows it, and she isn't happy.

"Careful, Mulder. He may not be what you think he is. Remember, Duane Barry talked a good game too," she says. I nod, ignoring the food, drinking the coffee. On the pad in front of me, a dozen or more butterflies are sketched in black ink. Absently, I pick up the pen, and draw a cage around them.

They give us rooms in the motel, although we don't have a change of clothes. This could all be over in hours, or it might take much longer. The word "Waco" springs to mind. Pete calls intermittently, and I talk to him, try to persuade him to let the hostages go, but he isn't playing ball on that one. Scully is rushing around, talking to the local police, and conferring with the Hostage Rescue Team to see if there's anywhere that they can get a clear shot of Pete. There isn't. He's at the back of the convenience store, and he rarely moves anywhere near the front, where the cracked glass shows evidence of the gunshot he fired. They position themselves anyway, just in case.

"Just keep out of sight," Scully warns. "We don't want to push him over the edge."

"He's already there," one of the men comments. "Fruitcake." He makes a spiraling motion with his finger next to his head.

"He's crazy, but he's not stupid," I tell them. "Don't make that mistake. If he sees you, then we are in big trouble."

"He's certainly delusional. Maybe schizophrenic..." Scully begins.

"Which is all the more reason for not leading him in his suggestible state," Gallagher interrupts, glaring at me.

"Do you have a problem with the way I'm handling this case?" I flare, angrily. That anger again. I can't keep it inside if I try.

"Hell, yes. He's delusional, and you're just helping him create even more of a fantasy world than he would on his own."

He doesn't back down in the face of my anger, and that just makes me worse.

"So, Pete isn't the only one who's read about my performance in the Duane Barry case - right?" I ask.

"Right," he growls. "You're pulling the same bullshit you pulled with the Duane Barry situation. We have a lunatic with a gun threatening to shoot little girls, and you're worried about their kidnapper's experiences with little green men. Now this guy's nuts - so we have to accept that he'll only talk to you. But I'm the SAC in this case, and you'll do what I say. I won't tolerate you going off on some personal crusade. There will be consequences if you do." He's practically red in the face at this point, and his long, thin, nose has gone white, right at the very tip.

"I don't know what you've read about me..." I begin.

Gallagher positively glowers at me. "I've read that you took Duane Barry to UFO International Airport to chase after little green men. I've heard rumors that your actions may have caused the injury of one of the hostages, and the abduction of your partner. The poor judgement you exercised in that case shows that you're more used to chasing after things that go bump in the night, than sitting down and getting results the hard way. You don't have the training or the experience for this. If you'll do as you're told, we might just get those people out alive. If you don't - well I hope you can handle the guilt, Mulder."

I feel like I've been slapped in the face. Scully is furious. She pulls Gallagher arm, hisses: "A word with you in private, sir," and whisks him away. I bury my face in my hands, and rub my eyes. Fuck. Can I handle the guilt? Isn't that my life story?

"Why don't people ever like me?" I whine plaintively to Scully when she returns.

"I like you. I know what you went through for me," she smiles, and that warms my heart, but we don't have much time to talk because she hates being idle, and sets about following up the leads on Pete. A few hours later, she returns with an impressive file of material. Unfortunately, so does that prick Gallagher. Only the file he has isn't on Pete. It's on me.

"I don't know what the hell AD Skinner thought he was doing - sending you down here to me, but this time last week you were in restraints in a psychiatric ward. And frankly, that doesn't surprise me," he rants, glancing at his colleagues. They're on his side of course. They've already decided I'm as nuts as Pete is. My reputation has preceded me, as always. I've given up fighting it, but I feel weary, dejected. It's hard enough keeping up with Pete's demands, without having a battle with the people who are supposed to be on my side.

"You don't want me here. Fine. I'll go." I fling down the headset, and make for the door. I don't mean it though. I wouldn't leave Lisa or the other hostages hanging out there. Scully knows that, and I know it too. Pete's built up a rapport with me. I get to the door, kick it, then come back, and sit down again.

It's at precisely that moment that **he** decides to put in an appearance.

He's looking furious. His eyes are flashing behind the wirerims, and he has that angry set of the mouth that pulls his jaw taut and always gives me a clue to the fact that I'm in deep shit. Only this time his anger isn't directed at me.

"Agent Gallagher..." he locates Gallagher with unerring accuracy - it must be a trick they teach you in AD school. "I'm Assistant Director Skinner."

Gallagher looks worried - he's obviously hoping that Skinner wasn't outside the door a few moments ago when he made that crack about him.

"I got a call to say that things weren't going too well down here." Skinner's face is positively incandescent with controlled rage. "Not only that, but I've been informed by my office staff that a personnel file on one of my agents has gone missing. Now, I don't know what the hell is going on, and I don't care. I'll be taking over control of this situation from now on." He holds out his hand for the file and his expression just dares Gallagher to argue with him. Predictably, Gallagher doesn't, and sullenly hands it to him. "Fill me in, Agent Scully."

He puts the file into his briefcase without even looking at me. He just takes off his coat, throws it down on a chair, loosens his tie, rolls up his shirtsleeves, and gazes expectantly at Scully, who is clutching the file of material she's gathered on Pete. My stomach is in knots. Just great. Now that **he's** here, I can disappoint the two people I care about most in one, easy, efficient step. I shoot Scully a poisonous glance. It doesn't take a Sherlock Holmes to figure out who called Skinner. She shoots me back a poisonous look of her own, not prepared to take my censure on this subject. The name "John Lee Roche" might as well be written on her eyeballs. Last time Skinner told her to keep an eye on me, I ended up letting a serial killer loose on the public. This time she wasn't taking any chances on what I might do. I can't really be angry with her, though, especially as she's responsible for getting Gallagher put in his place. I bite my lip, and nod at her, and taking it for the capitulation that it is, she nods back.

She turns her attention to our surly rescuer, and answers in calm, measured tones that show she's not about to be bulldozed by any man in this room. Way to go, Scully. That's what I like best about this woman. She's half the size of most men, and twice as strong. She's got balls.

"His full name is Peter Anthony Lomax." She puts a picture down on the table. I'm surprised - he's younger than I thought, and darkly attractive, almost pretty, with delicate, boyish features. He reminds me uncomfortably of Alex. "He's 31. He used to work as a long distance truck driver but he had a breakdown a couple of years ago, and he doesn't do much now."

"A breakdown?" I glance at her.

"A nervous breakdown," she shrugs. That's all the information she has on that.

"No voices?" I push.

"Not that we know about."

"Did anything trigger the breakdown?" I ask, feeling my way around this, trying to get a handle on it. I can sense Skinner's eyes on me like a kind of X-ray vision, boring into me.

"Yes. Pete was abandoned as a child. He was brought up in a Catholic children's home. A few years ago the home was investigated, and some of the priests there were brought to trial on charges of abuse and neglect."

"They were acquitted, right?" I guess the scenario accurately. Scully nods.

"Pete gave evidence. He had to relive the experience in the witness stand. After that, he fell apart."

"Poor bastard," I murmur, absently crunching on a sunflower seed.

"Yeah - a poor bastard who just happens to be holding nine other poor bastards hostage," Gallagher cuts in. "I know where my sympathies lie, Agent Mulder."

"It's not a question of sympathy," I turn on him angrily. "Pete's as much a hostage as those people he's holding, Agent Gallagher. The only difference is that he's a hostage to his past. He was screwed up, and fucked up when he was just a kid. You don't have any sympathy with him now because he's 31, and he's holding a gun, but imagine he's 9 years old, and someone's beating up on him, or worse, and nobody will listen. I bet you'd kick ass to help the 9 year old, but it's too late - you weren't there then, and neither was I. His cry for help came too late. Now he's 31, and we can dismiss him as crazy. If he was 9, we'd want to scoop him up, and take care of him."

They're all staring at me, and I shut up. Way too much information, Mulder, I curse myself, my eyes falling on Skinner, and seeing the compassion there. I have a brief fantasy of hitting out, of a tangle of our bodies, his hard flesh against mine, his manly face wiping out every memory of Alex's boyish good looks, and then it's gone. I get up, unable to stand still, pacing around the room for a moment.

"You can't become too involved, and you can't turn this into some stupid UFO case like last time." Gallagher looks to Skinner for confirmation but he refuses to take sides, like the good little AD he is.

"Becoming involved is my modus operandi," I inform Gallagher tersely, ignoring his swipe at the X Files. "It doesn't mean that I don't want to resolve this situation, and get those hostages out of there as much as the next person."

"That's a given, Mulder," Skinner says softly. He's gotten up too, and he's flicking through that file of Scully's, but as he wanders past me, he puts a hand on my shoulder, and brings me back to the table, placing the file in front of me. I sit down, but he doesn't move his hand. I can feel the heat in it, boring through to my shoulder blade, and, strangely, it calms me. I read what he's pointing at.

"I don't think the convenience store was a random hit," he informs us. "I think he came back here for a purpose."

"Back?" Gallagher glances at Scully. She nods.

"His last known address was somewhere in Montana. He's moved around a lot, but this is his home town. And the convenience store..."

"Oh shit." I check the addresses and look at Skinner, and then at Scully, for confirmation.

"That's right," Scully shrugs. "They closed the children's home after the trial. The building was condemned, and pulled down."

"The convenience store stands where the Home was?" I can feel my breath catch in my throat. This is more dangerous than I thought. There may not be ghosts, or aliens, but this will require just as much of me as those quests do.

"Yes," Scully nods again.

"I bet he didn't know that. He came back here looking for closure, something he didn't get from the trial, and even that's been denied him. He found a convenience store instead of what he was looking for - that's what sent him over the edge." I state, understanding at least some of what must be going on inside Pete Lomax's head.

"Oh come on. All this crap about closure," Gallagher shakes his head. "It doesn't matter, Mulder. All you have to do is talk him out of there without anyone getting hurt. You're not here to psychoanalyze the guy. A satisfactory outcome to this situation, as far as I'm concerned, is if we can shoot this guy through the window, but I expect Agent "bleeding heart" Mulder would be against that."

"Stop pouting about getting your wrist slapped, Gallagher," I snap back. "A hostage negotiation is always a quasi-therapeutic endeavor, and you'd be using the same strategy if you weren't so pissed at me. And another thing - I wouldn't be against anything that got Lisa and the others out of there alive." I'm getting more and more angry as I speak, and Skinner's hand tightens warningly on my shoulder.

"I think that's what we all want, Mulder," he states softly. "Agent Gallagher, when was the last time you had some rest? You're looking worn out. Why don't you go and grab some sleep? I can take care of things here."

Gallagher knows he's being dismissed, and nods grouchy, shooting me an angry glance as he goes. He's obviously convinced that not only have I ruined his career, but also that all the hostages will be dead by the time he returns. It probably wouldn't surprise him if I pulled the trigger on them myself.

"And you, Mulder. It's been 17 hours." Skinner sits down again, that hand finally relinquishing its place on my shoulder. I want to pull it back. "You need some rest."

"I can't." I point to the headset. "He calls at random intervals, and he expects me to be here to talk to him."

"He must need sleep too." Skinner points out.

"He takes naps," Scully explains, stealing one of my sunflower seeds. "He's got the hostages tied up in there so they can't overpower him while he sleeps."

"And food." Skinner glances at the discarded sandwiches and chips in front of me. "You need to eat, Mulder." He knows, without being told, that I'm not eating. He reaches for the phone and orders take out from a restaurant in town - the whole works, vegetables, rice, and a tempting choice of main dishes.

It's at that moment that the boy pushes his way through the throng of people, accompanied by a tall dark-haired man, with a worried frown on his face.

"Sir?" The kid addresses himself to Skinner. "Are you Agent Mulder, sir?"

"No. I am," I tell him, smiling disarmingly, or so I hope.

"I'm Timothy Perry." He bites on his lip, and looks up at the man accompanying him. "He's got my mom, and my sister."

"You're Lisa's brother?"

He nods. "This is my uncle. My parents are divorced. I don't know where my dad is. I was in the car - Mom went to pay for the gas, and Lisa wanted to use the bathroom so she went with her. I didn't know what to do." His face crumples. "I ran. I should have gone to help them."

"No." Scully shakes her head vehemently. "You did the right thing, Tim. If you'd gone in there, you'd be a hostage too."

"I wish I was. I wish I was in there instead of Lisa. She's just a kid. She's only eight, Agent Mulder." He's looking at me beseechingly. "Get her and mom back. Please. I'll do anything for you."

"I'll get them back, Tim," I tell him. "I promise." It's a stupid thing to promise, but if I fail, being lied to by a federal agent will be the least of his problems. "How old are you?" I ask. He smiles, attempting bravado, not wanting me to see how scared he is.

"Twelve." His uncle puts his hands on Tim's shoulders, pushing him back into the throng of people milling around in the small room, but Scully and Skinner are exchanging glances, and I can feel myself grow cold.

"Mulder." Skinner's voice is low and insistent, demanding my attention, pulling me back from the abyss of my own wrecked childhood. "Mulder - don't let any of this influence you in what you're doing."

"What's the matter? You think that just because I can't get my own sister back, that I can't get his back either?" I taunt. Unfairly. His eyes, his damn eyes, speak volumes to me, and I don't want to hear any of it. I'm not going to allow Lisa to die in there. Tim will get his sister back if it kills me, or Pete, or both of us.

Scully eats the meal that Skinner ordered for us, talking to him in low tones. I don't join in. I've turned the bars of the cage around the butterflies into a net. It looks much better. And a cage was stupid anyway - they'd just fly through the bars. Skinner sends Scully off to crash out for a few hours, and then turns his attention back to me.

"You're not sending me off to bed too, are you, sir?" I joke, winding some noodles around my fork.

"Without supper?" he says pointedly, glancing at my full plate.

"I'm not hungry," I murmur.

"That doesn't matter."

He isn't angry, but he's not going to back down either. Not for the first time, I feel the force of his will. It's as strong as my own, but so very different. If I'm mercurial, filled with the energy of fire, rising and falling in peaks and troughs, then his strength is calm and understated in expression, but equally intense. He rises and falls with me, matching me in pace, but he won't be ridden out. He's the rock that my storms rage around, and pound down on. Unyielding, always there, always strong enough to bear the brunt of me.

"Just eat it anyway, Mulder," he says softly, and, inexplicably, I find myself obeying, forking the food into my mouth, chewing on it without pleasure, swallowing it down. I'm rewarded by a softening of the lines around his mouth and, for the first time, I know that he loves me.

It's not a startling revelation. It's just something I know, have known maybe, for a long time. I have never given the slightest thought as to whether Walter Skinner might be gay, straight, bisexual, or have necrophiliac tendencies. I don't know whether his love for me is avuncular, paternal, or sexual. I just know that it **is**. It exists. And it warms my soul, because I love him too. It isn't just sexual either, although he attracts me like a stray cat to a hearth. And like that cat, I want to bask in his warmth for just a moment, before I have to go back out into the wet and cold once more.

His eyes don't leave my face as I eat, and somehow I know that I'll swallow every last thing on my plate for him, even though it tastes like mud washed down with brine. I've just finished when we get another call from Pete.

"Mulder. Buddy." He sounds brighter than I do.

"Hi, Pete. Look, when are you going to come out and talk to me?" I respond in kind, as if we're old friends.

"Not yet, Mulder. I...wanted to see the kids, Mulder."

"Yeah, Pete. I know. But they aren't there any more, are they?" I hold my breath, wondering if he'll notice that we've done some digging on him.

"I just wanted to help them." Pete's mood has changed abruptly. "I didn't want them to cry any more, buddy." In the background, I can hear the sobbing again. "Stop that!" Pete snaps. "Nobody needs to cry any more. Stop it." He sounds out of control, and I will whomever it is to be quiet. Instead the voice becomes a high, keening sob. "I said shut up!" Pete yells, and the next thing I know there is a sudden thudding sound, and the sob stops. Abruptly. Pete returns to me. "I shut her up," he informs me.

"Was it the kid?" I ask, trying to keep the frantic note out of my voice. "Did you hurt the kid?"

"No. Her sniveling mama. I hate all that sobbing crap, Mulder. I'll pull the blanket over my ears so I don't have to hear it, but sometimes they hit me, and then I stop. I hit her, and she stopped." My hand grips my pen so tightly that I nearly snap it in two.

"Pete, please - she's scared. If her sobbing upsets you, why don't you just let her go? Let them all go, Pete. Then we can talk."

"You're my friend, Mulder, you understand," he tells me. "You'd know why I had to shut her up. I can't stand the fucking crying. I can't fucking stand it." And he severs the connection again. I feel a hand close over mine, and glance down. I've torn great rips in the paper with my pen, and my hand is still moving, back and forth, but he stops it with his own, pressuring me gently to drop the pen.

"Some people, when others cry...it can seem like a sign of weakness. For some people - it makes them angry. Irrationally angry. They need to exert their power, crush the person they perceive as weaker. They can't stop themselves," I whisper. "But it's their own demons they're crushing, their own weakness they're afraid of, their own tears they're trying to hide."

Skinner nods, his hand still covering mine. Maybe he's not even aware of it, but I am. His heat is flooding through me again, calming me.

"Agent Mulder - I need your objective opinion now. He's already hurt one of the hostages. We don't know how badly. Do you think we should risk taking him out?" His dark eyes are earnest. He's very concerned about those hostages, and he's concerned about me, and the effect this is having on me.

"It's dark." I stare glumly out of the window, forcing my brain to work. "We stand less chance of getting a clear shot in these circumstances. I don't think he'll hurt anyone else."

"You don't **think**?" Skinner's raised eyebrow makes it clear that isn't good enough.

"No. He won't hurt them," I say more firmly. "I don't think he really wants to, but he will if we push him, or if they push him."

"Is there seriously any prospect of talking him out of that building, or of talking him into letting the hostages go?" Skinner asks, in a business-like tone, finally removing his hand from mine.

"Yes," I reply without hesitation. "He really believes I'm on his side, that I'll help him. He wants me to talk him out of this situation."

"Fair enough," Skinner nods. I get up, and stretch, my bones cracking back into place.

"You must be beat." Skinner shakes his head.

"I can't risk going to bed. He might call," I tell him, and he puts his head on one side, considering this.

"You could take a nap. Like he does - we'll wake you when he calls."

"I can't," I shrug. I'm too worked up to sleep. He nods quickly, anxious not to disturb the clearly fragile grip I have on my temper right now.

"All right. Sit down."

He points to the chair, and gets up as I obey his command. Then I feel his fingers dig into my shoulders. I stiffen, as my muscles protest.

"Let your head roll forward, Agent Mulder. That's right. Just relax - this is a Skinner special, and I'm pretty good at it."

I allow myself a wry smile at the thought of AD Skinner being good at giving neck rubs. I can just see the writing on the men's room walls across D.C.: "Expert massage. Burly Assistant Director offers personal attention..." That's not a good thought. It brings me images of us, in a bed, attacking each other with our tongues, hands, cocks...fighting, kissing, loving...as it was with Alex, or any of the other men I've bedded. Too many of them to remember, too many of them with names I never bothered to find out.

His fingers feel good, probing my shoulders, relaxing me. I want more. The other members of the team are hanging around - talking, eating, smoking. Nobody pays us any attention - there's nothing intimate about what he's doing. We're both fully clothed, and I'm clearly tired, and on edge, after a long and difficult day. They're wrong though. It **is** intimate. In a room full of people, standing on the brink of a nightmare, he's making love to me with his fingertips, caressing my soul with his heart. I can feel his body pressed against my back, and that heat floods through me again. I can smell his scent, the cologne and deodorant now no longer able to hide the raw smell of his sweat. He leans forward, and his breath is warm against my neck.

"Let it go, Agent Mulder," he murmurs. The massage becomes a low, constant caress, and my eyes shut.

"You're a fucking fag, Mulder."

"Mulder likes to take it up the ass."

"Hey, pretty boy, Mulder!"

"What's the matter with you, cocksucker?"

"Fox the faggot."

"What?" I sit up with a start.

"You were dreaming." Skinner is sitting opposite me. He's taken his tie off, and his glasses, and undone the top button of his shirt. His appearance is the same as it was at the police station during that business with the call girl, only this time he doesn't have that haunted expression in his eyes. He looks calm, capable, and in control.

"I was asleep?" I ask incredulously, staring around the room. "For how long?"

"Half an hour or so," he shrugs. "Cat naps are all he's giving you, Mulder, so you need to take them when you can."

I shake my head, stagger to the bathroom to pee, and glance at myself in the mirror. Shit, I'm a mess. Unshaven, unkempt. My hair's sticking out at all angles, and there are dark shadows under my eyes. I collect some water in my hands, and splash it over my face. My teeth feel furry. I wonder if anyone here has a toothbrush. It's an absurd thought so I brush it aside, and return to the operations room.

Skinner gives me a faint ghost of a smile as I walk back in. In my mind's eye, I can see his naked body, twisting under my none too tender ministrations, and the words of my dream come back to haunt me. They're all taunts that have been thrown at me in my time - a legacy of my looks, my strange interests, the fact that I "run like a girl" as the school basketball coach once told me. Only in my dream, the person taunting me was my father.

A few minutes later, Pete is on the line again, and I find myself stepping back into his world.

"The bible says..." his voice is strained. "The bible says that the little children must suffer, Mulder."

"It doesn't say that, Pete."

Scully has come back into the room, and her eyes meet mine. They're pained.

"Suffer the little children," she quotes in a whisper, "to come unto me."

"Yes it does!" he yells. "Brother Michael showed it to me, in black and white. That's why they hurt me. God told them to."

"Pete, that's not what it means." I don't know where to go with this one. How can I explain the language? And how the hell can I shake this conviction?

"This kid should suffer, as I suffered. All the children should suffer. And all these people should know, they should feel what I felt."

Pete rambles on for several long minutes, and nothing I say makes any inroads into his tortured mind. Finally he hangs up. I curse, feeling my whole body start to shake.

"Damn those bastards for what they did to him. 'Suffer the children...?' Of all the screwed up..." I kick the table, clenching my fists tightly. Then I feel a wave of guilt, noticing the look on Scully's face. I don't mean to sound like I'm criticizing her, or her religion.

"It's all right, Mulder," she shakes her head. "There are bad apples everywhere, in every institution. It's not always obvious who they are, or what evil they're capable of."

She's trying to reassure me, but all that makes me think of is Alex. How the hell did he get into the Bureau? Why didn't anyone notice what **he** was, or what he was capable of?

I close my eyes, and put my head back, but all I can see is an image of children suffering. Lisa crying out as Pete hurts her mother. Samantha calling my name, begging me to rescue her. Caitlin counting up to twenty, with Roche's gun pointed at her. And me...me crying in the dark with a pillow over my head so that he won't hear me, and come and silence me in his own brutal way. My tears are like a signal to him, they set off something inside him that makes him want to hurt me, by any means possible, and they confirm to him how weak I am. The little faggot son he's rearing - it sticks in his craw, and chokes him.

Suffer little children...I'm not even aware of the anger as it takes over, and I send a chair flying across the room with one flick of my hand. The crashing sound makes everyone jump, and the tip of

Gallagher's nose turns white again. I have an image of another chair, in a different place, a long time ago, spinning and spiraling away from me as I ran for the door, trying to escape my father's anger, and the smell of whisky on his breath. I didn't make it to the door that time. I almost don't make it to the window this time, but Skinner, guardian angel to the fucked up, has seen what's going on. He propels me over to the window with one hand, and with the other he has it opened, just in time for me to retch my guts out.

He stands behind me, blocking the view, and I can just bet that he's got an expression on his face that's forbidding the assembled voyeurs from staring at me. I finish heaving, and stand upright, feeling shaky, leaning against the wall for support, and find a glass of water thrust into my hand. I gulp it back in one go, and finally meet his eyes. Not because I want to, but to reassure him that I'm okay, that I can continue with this. He's worried - I can see it clearly. Worried because he thinks I'm so crazy I might fuck this whole thing up. And worried about me, too. About what's going on in my head, and what screwed up memories all this is dredging up for me.

"Okay now?" he asks softly, and for one brief second his hand cradles the side of my face. It doesn't stay there for long enough to be intimate, but all the same, it is.

This is all too close to home. I want to give up. I would give up if it weren't for Tim. I can see him sitting in the far corner of the room. Someone gave him and his uncle permission to stay - Skinner probably. He isn't so obsessed with protocol that he won't bend the rules occasionally, in order to be compassionate. Compassion. That's what I'm seeing in Skinner's eyes right now. It's as if he knows every single thought that's going on inside my brain. I hope for his sake that he doesn't. I hope he doesn't see the way I'm making love to him, the dark, frenzied passion I want to draw him into. If he knew, he'd loathe me, the way my father loathed me, the way I loathe myself. I draw myself back from that abyss, and look at Tim again. He never takes his eyes off me. I hold his entire life in his hands, or at least, Pete and I both do, between us. I know how helpless he feels. I know how useless he feels. I know how guilty he feels, running off, not stopping to be taken hostage himself, becoming a different sort of hostage instead.

I walk shakily to the table, and sit back down again.

"Mulder?" Skinner sweeps away yet another crop of dead butterflies, and turns over a fresh page on the pad. "I never took you for an artist," he jokes, attempting to jolt me out of my mood.

"I'm not," I snap, suspecting a hidden insult, an inference that butterflies aren't a macho kind of doodling, or some crap like that. Crap my father was an expert at handing out. Skinner's eyes register only concern at my brusque response, and I immediately feel guilty.

"I can see what he's thinking, but I can't make him stop thinking it," I muse out loud, trying to rectify the situation. Skinner nods, encouraging me to talk it through. "I know why he's doing this, but that won't help us get Lisa or the others out of there. I know he's scared, I know that in his state of mind he's a kid again, that he doesn't believe he has any power except what he's getting from that gun."

"Just our luck," Skinner shakes his head ruefully, and I give him a questioning look. "He's been running and hiding from this for most of his life," Skinner explains. "Now he's decided to face up to it, only he's picked a hell of a way to do it."

"Yeah," I nod in agreement. "Despite what all the best psychobabble says, maybe it would have been better for us if he'd kept his past sealed inside, gotten over it, and gotten on with his life.

"Only, forgive me, I'm not a psychologist, but I'm under the impression that doesn't work?" He gives me a searching look. "That it finds a way to come out? The pressure builds up until it finds an outlet? In his case, an explosive one."

"Psychologists? What the hell do we know? We're full of crap." I can't meet his eyes, and my pen starts demolishing another set of butterflies.

When Pete returns, he seems to have got himself back together.

"Mulder - I've decided to let someone go," he whispers hoarsely.

"That's good, Pete." I nod.

"It is?"

He sounds pathetic, not sure whether he's doing the right thing. That's the card I'm playing right now. If I can get him to listen to me, and not to the voices in his head, then my version of reality might win out. He's obviously seeking approval. I can imagine the scared kid he was, cowering in some dormitory, hoping not to draw attention to himself, trying not to make anyone angry. That kid isn't very far below the surface now.

"Sure it is, Pete. I'm proud of you, buddy. Now why don't you let the little girl go, huh? Why don't you let Lisa and her mom go?"

I can see Skinner nodding, beckoning someone over, and whispering a hurried instruction.

"I...I'm not sure."

"Yeah, you're sure, Pete. You hate it when kids cry, don't you? You'd hate it if Lisa cried. She's a brave kid, but she's only 8. You remember what it was like being 8, don't you, Pete?"

He's silent for a moment.

"I remember," he whispers after a long while.

"Then let her go."

"I need to think..." he murmurs.

There is silence for a moment, and then I hear a whoop over by the window. Skinner rushes over there, and then turns to me. I'm drawn to his face, to that large body, like a magnet, finding it instinctively and unerringly in the throng of people. He puts both his thumbs into the air, grinning broadly at me, a grin I don't think I've ever seen before.

"She's safe, Mulder. You got her out," he says.

"And her mom?" I ask. He shakes his head.

"Just Lisa. But it's something, Mulder."

I should be pleased, but my heart, inexplicably, sinks. I feel a shiver of foreboding creep along my spine. Someone is going to die here before this is through. I just know it. Skinner is back at my side, a casual slap of his hand against my shoulder, and the hand stays there too long. They're small, these gestures of support, of encouragement, of love, but I don't miss any of them. Each one creeps silently under the walls that shield my heart, and worms its way deep into my soul. When this is over...when this is over, I promise myself I'll do more than devour him with my eyes.

Scully swiftly takes charge of Lisa, coaxing all manner of information out of the little girl. Lisa has two dark braids, and solemn dark eyes. I see my sister everywhere - in Scully, in Diane - I even saw her in Phoebe, god help me. Maybe that's why I find relationships with women so hard to sustain. Maybe that's why I want men. Or maybe I'm a cock-sucking little faggot after all, like I've been told for most of my life. I inevitably see Sam in Lisa. Skinner knows it. Those dark eyes never leave my face as I watch Scully find out as much as she can from the kid, before she's whisked off to the hospital with her brother and uncle by her side. She hasn't been hurt, but she's badly shaken up, and in shock.

"Get my mom back too, Agent Mulder," Tim says, and I can see the hero worship already beginning in his eyes. It makes me want to laugh. Don't worship me, kid, I feel like saying. I'm a screwed up fag who has had at least twenty flashes of homosexual desire while sitting at this table, staring at his boss. Yeah, even while I was getting your sister back, one part of my brain was fucking Walter Skinner. I'm most definitely **not** hero material. He is though. Skinner. I've delved into his war record, for my own perverted purposes, and he's the genuine article. He's a brave man, a good man. And I want to hurt him.

It's another sixteen hours before Pete releases his second hostage, and by then I've talked myself hoarse. Skinner makes sure that I'm eating the standard three meals a day, but I only eat as much as I think he'll let me get away with, and he has to stand over me, and practically spoon feed me, to get that much into me. The lack of sleep is getting to be a problem as well, and I need a shave badly. I also smell. I've been wearing the same clothes for over two days, and the air in this place is stale.

"Listen..." Skinner leans forward across the table, as night falls again. "Why don't you take a shower, freshen up? I've brought a change of clothes for you and Agent Scully."

"You have?" How the hell did he manage **that**, I wonder? I don't remember giving him a key to my apartment. Still, that hasn't stopped him before, as I recall. He gestures to a gym bag sitting on the floor. Someone brought it in from his car earlier. I remember wondering about that at the time.

"We'll call you if he needs to speak to you again." Skinner tells me. I exchange a glance with Scully, and she nods.

"I'm going to the hospital, to have another word with Lisa and the other hostage," she tells me.

"Why?" I glance at Skinner. "What's going on?"

"We need all the information we can get," Skinner says, almost apologetically.

"You've given up on me talking him into surrendering, haven't you?" I guess, feeling the fury well up inside me. "You've decided to take more extreme measures, and you weren't going to tell me, were you? I'm your lead negotiator! How dare you keep me in the dark!"

It feels like a betrayal. It's about more than just being out of the loop, no matter what I just said, and Skinner knows it. If I don't talk him into giving himself up, they'll have to kill Pete. There are no alternatives. It's that simple. And I don't want that. It's not that I've been drawn into his crazy little world, just that I know where he's coming from. He's dangerous right now, but I sense this isn't the sort of man he used to be, not what he really is inside. Given time, medication, some psychiatric help, I think he could turn himself around.

"Mulder, nobody is going to do anything without consulting you," Skinner says rapidly, taking hold of my arm and holding it tightly. "Now just go." He pushes me towards the door, handing me the gym bag.

"You won't do anything while I'm gone?" I ask, and it's almost a plea.

"Of course not. No." Skinner shakes his head, and I know I can trust him implicitly, just as Pete can trust me. At least I think he can trust me. Oh shit. I grab the bag and walk off to find my room.

It's a relief to be away from those faces, those bodies, the smell and press of them, the watchful eyes. I've been the central performer in this three ring circus for two days non-stop, and life in the spotlight is taking its toll. It seems strange, almost eerie, to be in this silent room. I open the bag Skinner gave me, and fish out some of my stuff. Jeans, a sweatshirt. He probably couldn't find anything more formal in my apartment. I wince at the thought of him in there, remembering the mess it's in. I was going to pick up some shirts and a suit from the cleaners on the day all this began. I brush my teeth, then find a towel and go to the shower, luxuriating in the feel of the water and the soap, scrubbing my flesh hard to rid myself of the stale odors. In the middle of this bliss, there's a sudden commotion outside my door, and Gallagher charges in.

"Mulder." He throws me the towel. "He's gone loopy. You need to get out here, and fast." So that's how I find myself running back into the operations room half-naked, and dripping wet.

Pete's been spooked by one of the Hostage Rescue Team members on the roof. The gunman got careless, and Pete saw him. Now he doesn't trust me. Great. Two days work undone in five careless seconds. It takes me the best part of an hour to calm him down again, and when I start this process I'm standing there in my towel, feeling like I'm starring in some damn porno video since everyone's eyes are fixed on my naked torso. Skinner, acting the guardian angel again, takes pity on me.

He disappears for a second, then returns with my clothing, and hands it to me, item by item.

"Okay everyone. Give him some privacy," he growls, waving a hand, and they turn their backs, or avert their eyes. I'm still talking to Pete, gradually calming him down, as I dress myself, saying "thank you" to Skinner with my eyes. He nods, curtly, then disappears again. It doesn't take a genius to realize that he's gone to chew out the hapless guy who caused this crisis, and I'm **really** glad I'm not in his shoes.

"How are you doing, partner?"

It's Scully bearing yet more caffeine. I haven't seen much of her for the past few hours as she's been questioning the other hostage. I run my hands wearily over my face.

"I'm holding up okay. Don't worry about me," I tell her with a smile.

"You're both tired." I think for a moment she means Skinner, but of course she means Pete. This is as intense for me as it is for him. Yet Skinner has been here too, and I'm certain that he hasn't slept once. Maybe he's taken his catnaps when I have, but he's been with me for every step of this ride, a constant, reassuring presence beside me.

"How much longer do you think he'll hold out?" I ask her, returning to the topic of Pete. She shakes her head.

"I don't know."

I can see the worry in her eyes.

"Scully, what is it?"

"Mulder...this guy doesn't want anything." She sits down next to me, talking rapidly. "He's not asked for money, for a helicopter to get him away. Nothing. He's mentally unstable, unpredictable...Gallagher is already making noises that we should no longer consider negotiation as a serious option. He's pushing at Skinner hard to convince him to take the convenience store by force."

"Not yet," I snap. "Just give me a little more time."

"It's not up to me." Scully shakes her head.

"It isn't up to Gallagher either. Skinner's in charge," I say. Scully can't look me in the eye, and I get the sinking feeling that she knows more than she can say. My eyes scan the room, and I find Skinner talking to Gallagher, in low, intense tones, one eye on me the whole time.

"Damn Skinner. He's not going in there yet." I put the headset down, and am about to go over there and argue my case, when another call comes in.

"Mulder." His voice is a low rasp.

"Pete - you must be tired, buddy. I know I am. Why don't we end this, huh?" I tell him.

"I don't know what to do, Mulder." He sounds forlorn. "If I give myself up...you wouldn't let them shoot me, would you, Mulder?"

"No. Of course not. Nobody's going to shoot my buddy. I promise." That's the second rash promise I've made since this started.

"I don't wanna die." He's sniveling, like a kid. "I used to," he volunteers unexpectedly. "But now I don't. When I was little, they used to take me to a room..." he hesitates. "When I was in there, when they...I used to want to die then."

The room has fallen silent, and I can see my own stricken look reflected back in Scully's eyes. Skinner has returned to my side, his intense gaze heating me once more.

"You're not a kid any more, Pete," I tell him. "Nobody can hurt you now. You're too big. Too strong." Who am I kidding? I don't think I sound convincing. There's a flash in Skinner's eyes, and I know he can tell that I don't believe what I'm saying. Pete knows too.

"You're wrong, Mulder. It hurts all the time. It hurts inside," he whispers.

"Well you've held this inside for a long time. It's only hurting because it's coming out now."

"They let them go." Pete's voice is breaking up. "When they should have shot the bastards who did those things to little kids...they let them go...why should I let these people go, Mulder? I should do to them, what the law should have done to the people who hurt me..."

"Pete, listen to me. Hurting those hostages won't get you justice, or revenge."

"It's too late for justice. I didn't get any justice. They let them go." I can hear the snap of a magazine being slammed into a gun. Skinner's on his feet and making for the door.

"Wait!" my voice is a yell. "Pete, no. We can talk about this. You trust me, don't you, Pete?"

"I..."

"Pete - abuse, neglect...you're not alone in that suffering. I know about both of those," I say it quickly.

"Oh what the fuck is he doing now?" I hear Gallagher say sharply behind me. What I'm doing is hanging myself out to dry here, offering myself up to a whole room of hostile faces in a bid to save innocent lives.

"You know?" Pete clings onto that like a lifeline.

"Yeah. Pete, you and I have a lot in common. We're alike. That's why we're such good buddies, isn't it? We understand each other. I'd like to see you, Pete, talk to you face to face. Hey, I don't even know what you look like," I lie, glancing at the picture on the table.

"I've got dark hair, blue eyes." Pete gives a little laugh. "Brother John said he had to take me to the room because I was so pretty. He said God made me pretty so that Brother John would notice me, and touch me." I flinch, as if someone has physically hit me. If I could get up and run right now then I would, but every eye in the room is on me. I can't back down. I tell myself that the only eyes that matter are the dark ones right next to me, the ones willing me to be strong, to keep going, until all this is over, no matter how much it hurts. I'm finding it hard to concentrate though, or to remember to breathe.

"That wasn't your fault, Pete. You have to believe me," I tell him desperately. "You can't help the way you looked as a kid. People will always find a way to hurt you, if they really want to. They'll always find something about you to make you feel guilty, to make you feel responsible for what they do to you. Something you can't change, something you can't help."

"Mulder you're not in any shape to continue this negotiation," Gallagher hisses. "You're identifying with him far too closely for your own good, or his. I suggest that you stand down." He's striding towards me, reaching out a hand to grab the headset from me, but Skinner gets to his feet, intercepts Gallagher's arm, and roughly pushes him away from me, whispering something fiercely. My boss returns a few seconds later, and stands beside me, his thigh touching my shoulder. I have no doubt that he's doing it on purpose. The solid warmth of his flesh against mine, and the tacit support of his closeness reassures me. Pete has been silent for several minutes, so I push on with my line of reasoning.

"It seems weird that we've never met, Pete. I'd like to speak to you face to face. Would you let me do that?"

"I'd like that," he says tentatively. "But I'm not giving up these people."

"You don't have to give anything up, Pete." I reassure him. "I'll come over there. We can talk."

"You'll listen?" he asks.

"Yes, Pete. I'll listen."

"No tricks? No guns?"

"No, Pete. You can trust me. Give me five minutes, okay? I'll come over."

"Okay, Mulder. Okay buddy." I can almost hear the childlike smile in his voice before he severs the connection.

"Mulder - this is not approved procedure..." Skinner begins, bending his face down so that I can see every line of worry in his frown.

"I don't give a damn about procedures," I tell him.

"Like we didn't know **that**," Gallagher snorts. "Just like the Duane Barry case all over again. What are you? John Fucking Wayne and the cavalry, charging in whenever it suits you?"

"And storming the damned store, and shooting him and whoever else gets in your way, ISN'T like John Wayne?" I yell. "We've reached an impasse! I'm just trying to end this situation!"

"And whose gonna die to make that happen?" Gallagher yells back.

"That's enough," Skinner says in a low, intense tone. "Gallagher, get me a kevlar vest and a wire. Mulder - are you sure about this?"

He turns his back on Gallagher and addresses himself directly to me, taking my arm and pulling me over into a corner. I want to shake him off, to hit out at someone, but now is not the right time to be having a tantrum.

"It's a lot less extreme than going in shooting," I say bitterly, still stinging from the unfairness of Gallagher's words. "Look, sir, I'm sure I can get him to give himself up if I can just see him, make him look at me."

"All right." He nods. "But, Mulder?"

"Yeah?" His face is inches from mine. I can smell him, breathe him. If I moved just a small step forward I could touch him, kiss him.

"Bring him to the window, don't become another hostage. Don't go into the convenience store, just stand outside."

"Promise me you won't shoot him unless you have to," I beseech him.

"Agreed. But you must promise me that you won't go in there unless you have to," he says urgently. I hesitate. "Mulder." His tone is soft, but it's not a plea, it's a command.

"Yes, sir." I look him in the eye. "Yes, sir," I nod, affirming it. "I promise."

"Good." He touches my arm, briefly, and then Gallagher returns with the vest. Skinner helps me into it, his fingers sending electric thrills through my body, jolting my jaded, weary senses awake. Then I'm fitted with the wire, and Scully tugs at my sleeve, her eyes scared.

"Be careful. Good luck." She crosses her fingers at me, and smiles.

"Superstition, Scully?" I tease. She just shakes her head, and crosses the fingers on her other hand.

Skinner follows me to the door.

"Say whatever you want to, whatever you need to, in order to get him out," he tells me. "It's an open wire. We'll hear all of it."

That's his way of reminding me that any personal information I give away, is going to be relayed to the three dozen or so police officers, FBI agents, paramedics, and other hangers on that are milling around.

"And if it gets dangerous, throw yourself down to the ground, and let the gunmen do their work. All right?"

"Yes." I can feel my stomach churning, and I suppress an urge to kiss him goodbye. He looks so worried. "I'll be okay," I tell him.

It's only a short walk, but it's eerie. All those people, all that silence. I stand a few paces away from the door of the convenience store. I'm an easy target if he should want to shoot me, although the vest should protect me from too serious an injury. Of course, he could always shoot me in the head.

"Pete. Hey, buddy," I call. I hear a rustling inside the convenience store, and can see someone move to the door. I hold my breath as it's opened, but my heart sinks when I see that he's got one of the hostages with him. It's Lisa's mom. She has a bruise on her jaw, and Pete's gun is held against her head.

"Mulder?" He blinks in the sunlight. That bastard Brother John was right. He **is** pretty. Even with three days worth of stubble on his chin, unwashed, and unkempt, he's still pretty.

"Hello Pete." I smile with as much charm as I can manage. "Hey, why don't you send Mrs. Perry back? I'd like to talk to you alone. You know, just you and me? Man to man."

It's a bit lame, but I don't know how else to get him on his own.

"I dunno..." He licks his lips nervously.

"Pete. It's me," I say gently. "Come on, buddy. I've been talking to you for, what is it? Three days now? We know all about each other."

"Were you..." he pauses. "Were you here too? In the home?"

"No, Pete," I shake my head.

"Then who hurt you, Mulder?"

I hesitate for a long time, then glance at my shoes.

"My dad," I tell him.

He stiffens, his eyes flashing angrily. "No!" he shouts. "Your dad wouldn't do that. A dad wouldn't hurt his kid. Dad's take you out fishing, and play ball with you, and all that stuff." I realize I've touched on his own personal fantasy of what growing up in a "normal" family must be like.

"Some dads do, Pete. Mine didn't," I shrug. "Maybe his type of abuse wasn't the same as what was done to you. Maybe it wasn't as bad, but it still hurts inside, when I remember it."

"Did he have a room where he took you?" Pete's eyes are glazed and desperate.

"No, Pete." Shit, I hate to think what was done to him in that room. I can't accuse my father of sexual abuse, but there are other ways you can screw up a little kid, and he seemed to know every last one of them.

"You didn't have the room?" He shifts, moving the gun slightly, and I can see Mrs. Perry's eyes widen in fear.

"Let her go, Pete. Then we can talk all you want. You can tell me about what happened in the room." I'm speaking in a low tone, with total sincerity. Pete seems reassured.

"You won't hurt me? I can trust you?" he pleads.

"Of course." I spread my arms wide. "I'm not armed, Pete. I just came here to talk."

He thinks about it for a moment, then pushes Mrs. Perry back into the convenience store. I heave a huge sigh of relief.

"Why don't you come out here?" I suggest. "This is kind of personal stuff, isn't it, Pete? We don't want to have to shout. You could give me the gun. We could talk..."

I think he's mesmerized by the sound of my voice. He's nodding, taking a couple of tentative steps forward, and then he pauses, and I honestly believe, that when he lifts that gun up, he's going to hand it to me. Only he never gets the chance. A shot rings out, and hits him cleanly between the eyes. He goes down without a sound.

"NO!" I can hear the scream in my voice. I turn around, looking for help, knowing that he's already dead. Pandemonium breaks out. Mrs. Perry is crying, a horde of personnel are descending on where I'm kneeling beside Pete's body, somebody is picking me up, and I'm pounding my fists uselessly against a solid chest. "He was giving himself up. He was giving me the gun...he was..." I cry.

Skinner shakes his head, enduring the buffeting. "It looked as if he was going to shoot you," he tells me, trying to grip my fists, to keep me still.

"You gave the order? You promised!" I accuse, turning away from him, wanting to escape from the pain inside.

"I didn't give a specific order, Agent Mulder. They had standing orders to shoot if it looked as if he was going to open fire. I'm sorry if it was a mistake, but they did their best."

"Oh yeah. You're just like Gallagher. Pete's death was always your best case scenario too, wasn't it? Less paperwork that way."

"No, Agent Mulder. The hostages coming out of this ordeal alive was always my best case scenario," he tells me sincerely, then he grips my head, and looks into my eyes, making me look into his. "And you coming out of this alive too. Now, you're tired, and stressed. It's been a long few days. Agent Scully will sort the rest of this out. You are going to rest."

"I can't rest," I object.

"The hell you can't." He manhandles me into the operations room, and calls Scully over.

"Agent Scully - I want you to wrap this up," he tells her tersely. I can see by the way that she's looking at me that she's worried about my state of mind. Like Gallagher said, only a short time ago I was in restraints in a psychiatric unit. My mental health is not something that either of them feels confident about.

"What about Agent Mulder, sir?" she asks, as if I'm not there. And I'm not sure I am. I can feel the room swimming around me.

"I'll see to Agent Mulder," he replies grimly, as if it's a threat. Oh go ahead, Walter. You can threaten me any day.

"Very well, sir." She squeezes my arm supportively, and then takes off to give out her orders. Skinner gives a few orders himself, to the remaining personnel in the room, and then comes over to me. The

room is now empty, and I'm no longer under the spotlight. It seems weird, after the claustrophobic atmosphere of the past few days.

"I'm not staying here," I tell Skinner as he pulls me up, and walks me along to my motel room. "I can't stay here." From my window I can see Pete's body. Can he seriously expect me to get any rest in here?

"I wasn't going to suggest it," he tells me, grabbing the gym bag and stuffing my meager belongings into it. "But I need to be on hand until the details have been taken care of, and you're in no fit shape to haul yourself back to D.C. There's a hotel half an hour down the road. I'll check you in there, then find out how Agent Scully is doing."

"He was giving himself up," I whisper, sitting on the bed, staring at him. "He trusted me, and I betrayed him."

"He was an armed man, holding hostages. You did your best in very difficult circumstances. You got all those hostages out of there alive, and don't think I'm not aware of what it cost you personally to get through that negotiation. I'm proud of you, Agent Mulder. Did you hear what I said?" He grabs my head, forcing me to look into his eyes again. "I'm damn proud of what you did here, Mulder. It was good work. Now come on."

I'm too bone-tired to protest. I allow him to pull me out of the room, his hand gripping my arm tightly. He pushes me into the car, and we set off. I don't even remember arriving, or him undressing me down to my boxers, which he must have done. The next thing I remember is opening my eyes, and seeing Scully sitting next to me.

"Hey, you okay?" She leans close, smiling.

"I thought you were supposed to be up to your neck in paperwork," I murmur. The room is dark because the drapes are shut, but it's light outside.

"Skinner's taken over for a while. He wanted someone to stay with you in case you woke up disorientated." She holds my hand in her own for a moment, and I gently finger the cool flesh.

"He's coming back?" I ask her, my heart in my stomach. I want to see him. I desperately want to feel the heat of the man, to know that he's nearby.

"Yes. Soon." She glances at her watch. "Why don't you take a shower, and I'll be back in half an hour with something to eat?"

"Sounds great," I mumble, sitting up, and wondering why my head is pounding.

"Mulder?" She hesitates at the door.

"Hmm?" I glance at her, running my hand absently through my hair.

"That story you told Lomax about your father. Was it true?" There's a long silence, and then I smile.

"No, Scully. Of course not," I say a little too brightly. "I was trying to win his confidence, to get him to trust me."

"Well you had me fooled. You certainly improvise well under pressure." She's not sure whether she believes me or not.

"Yeah, well, I'm a psychologist remember?" I smile at her, and she nods, and grins back.

Skinner joins us for lunch, or dinner, or whatever the hell meal this is. He looks tired. I wonder if he's had any sleep since this whole thing began. They talk quietly about the case, shooting little glances at me, but after establishing that the hostages are all okay, I don't join in. It's Scully's turn to take over the clearing up operation.

"Nearly finished now," she smiles. "Looks like you could do with another few hours sleep anyway. When I get back, we can go home."

"Home. Yes," I nod, wondering where the hell that is these days. Not my messy apartment with its faux attempt at fish-keeping domesticity, and sure as hell not Chilmark, where the ghosts of my father and sister dwell. I can't even begin to think of my mother's house as home. I've only been there a few times, at Christmas and Thanksgiving, and I never stayed long. I ask too many questions, and we always end up arguing.

"You'll be okay?" Skinner asks, without any mawkish embarrassment. "I'll be next door if you need anything." He gestures to the interconnecting door.

"Fine," I shrug, and he leaves.

If I need anything? What I usually need after episodes like this, is a hard body to savage with my lovemaking. Any body. His body. I can lose the anger, and the rage, in passion...if only I'd be free to go again when it was all over. I don't know if he'd reject my advances, but I don't think so. I usually have a pretty good instinct for that. He's big, strong enough to take my fury, and to return it. I've seen the flashes of his temper, and his strength, in the past, and I want to feel it again. I want to feel him crush me underneath him, or against him. I want to lose myself in sex, in pain, in hurting someone else as much as I hurt inside. I want to abuse, to be abused. It's what I know. I lie on the bed, watching day turn to night outside the drapes, but whenever I close my eyes all I can see is Pete's dead body, and that blurs and becomes my father's dead body after Krycek shot him...Krycek. One nemesis killed by another.

Something inside me snaps, and I don't think I'm remotely rational as I go to that interconnecting door, and storm through it.

He's sitting at a table, going through some papers. He should rest, a part of my mind is thinking. He must be tired. I want to love him. I **do** love him. I just wish it wasn't this sort of love.

"Agent Mulder?" There's a surprised expression on his face.

"You said if I needed anything?" It's almost a snarl.

"Yes." He gets up. "Are you well?"

"I do need something." I close the distance between us, not knowing, or caring, what I'm about to do.

"Is it something I can...?" he stops. I'm too close, my eyes fixed on his lips hungrily, my body shaking, predatory.

"I need you."

I slam him back against the wall, my hands on his shoulders, holding him hard, waiting for his inevitable response, to see the fire in his eyes, the angry passion, but it doesn't come. He stands there, passively.

"Mulder?"

"It was your order. We could have saved him."

I need to blame him for what happened, to justify to myself, and to him, why I'm doing this. I pull him forward, slam him back again. Damn, but he weighs a ton. His glasses are dislodged, and fall to the floor. We both ignore them.

"Mulder."

His eyes are too close, uncovered. Dark, and intense. I can see the passion, the flicker of desire, and it's all I need. I close in, cover his lips with mine, force myself inside him, devour his mouth with my tongue, bite down on his lip with my teeth, and all the time I'm waiting for his fury, for him to match my anger with his own need to consume and possess. It doesn't happen. His lips open up beneath mine, and he accepts me, and every ounce of my rage. His hands have moved to caress the front of my chest gently, undoing some buttons. He can't reach any further, as I still have him pinned to the wall. And yet he could move. He's ten times stronger than I am. He could move.

"Is this what you want?" he asks softly.

"Shut up. Just shut up!" I kick out, sending the chair he was sitting in flying, and the image collides in my mind with the chair in the operations room earlier, and the chair I crashed into as I tried to escape from my father's drunken rage all those years ago. Skinner's eyes meet mine, and they're calm, compassionate, affectionate, and sexual.

"I can take it," he whispers. "I can take all of it."

I pull him towards me, tearing open his shirt, my mouth lingering at his neck, his chest, down onto a nipple, closing around it, biting hard. I can hear him take a shocked breath, feel his hands grasp at my shoulders for support, but I'm not going to stop. I have his shirt off, and my hands are kneading his neck, roughly exploring down his body, undoing his belt, his pants. I can't stop now unless he uses his strength to make me. He could. He could punch me, hold my hands behind me, march me back into my room, sue me for assault for all I know or care. He doesn't though. Instead his hands smoothly remove my shirt, and then he wraps them around my neck, pressing his mouth against mine for another kiss.

His body is my battleground, and I fight a hard, bloody war. There's a dark, cold place inside me and it hurts. Transferring that pain to him, shouting that rage, that fury, releasing those demons onto his flesh is a release. He is me - his masculine body a reflection of my own. He is the dark side of me, the side of night, of sex: raw, primal, usually kept leashed, and now given free rein. This is the wild thing - the dance of sex, and hate, of love and pain, that I need right now.

"Hurt me back," I whisper, gripping his arms until his flesh turns white. "Make me feel something."

His only answer is to draw me in against that large expanse of chest, surrendering to me as I take the pain of the last few days, and of a lifetime, out on his body.

I don't remember the process by which we both removed the rest of our clothing, I just know that I had to feel his skin against my own. His body is hard - harder than Alex's was, and my teeth tear at the skin, and my fingers claw at his back as I lock him into my brutal embrace. He arches his neck, his erection sliding against mine. I clasp him close, my fingers closing too tight around his arms, my mouth sucking a line of bruises down his neck, and I thump him down hard on the bed beneath me, waiting for him to struggle, wondering when he'll fight back. His fingers fondle my cock, my balls, and he almost croons as he caresses me, brings me close to climax. I draw away, not wanting to come yet, needing to sate my passion, my desire, and my rage, first. I don't care whether I'm fucked, or I do the fucking, it's meaningless to me, but he isn't responding as I expect, and I need to do more, to go further, to convince myself I'm alive, to flood myself with sensation - pain, pleasure, both - it doesn't matter.

I can hear our breathing, and it sounds harsh and unnatural. The sounds of sex, of struggle. There's a long mirror beside the bed, and, for a moment, I catch our frenzy, and grin at myself, my reflection unrecognizable. If I had become a vampire, with blood dripping from my mouth, I wouldn't have been surprised. Faggots, a voice inside me laughs. Fucking queers. I gather him up, wanting to roll him under me, to enter him, hard and fast, but something stops me. His face is so familiar. I know him. He isn't just nameless flesh, he's Skinner. I know the outline of his lips, the way he stands when he's pissed off, usually with me. I know the way the light catches his bald head as he sits in his office during late afternoon meetings. He reaches up a hand to my face, in a tender gesture, wipes away some sweat.

"It's okay, Fox," he says, and I pull back, sharply.

"Don't call me that." I bite his neck, crush my hand brutally around his erect cock, and stoically he endures each attack, yet still he doesn't fight back.

"Hit me," I whisper in his ear. "Hit me, damn you."

He gives a little shake of his head.

"For fuck's sake...hit me..." I slap him hard, waiting for the anger I know he must want to unleash upon me, hoping that he will meet my fury with his own, but instead he traces his hands through my hair, in a gentle caress.

"Do it...please...hurt me..." I beg, delivering another slap. He shakes his head again.

"No," he says firmly, and the fury explodes inside me.

I don't remember much about the next few hours. Just that the frenzy continued until we both had our climax, and that he took everything I handed out, accepting it, not denying me anything except my own pain. And when the darkness receded, he took me in his arms, and held me against his body, the sweat cooling on both our skins as we slept.

When I wake up, I feel only a dull ache inside, but the intensity, the anger, the stress of the past few days has gone. I'm myself again. Mr. Hyde has turned back into Dr Mulder. Loathing myself, hating my lack of control, I ease myself out of his embrace, preparing to leave. I could shower, get dressed, head back to DC. When we meet again, we could both pretend to forget.

I turn to glance down at him, and wince at the sight. His broad shoulders are bruised, torn by my savage bites and caresses, and there are long red scratches down his back, legacy of my nails. His lip is cut, a little bubble of blood welling up in the wound. I hate myself even more now, and long to be gone, but he chooses that moment to open his eyes.

"I'm sorry," I shrug. "I'll go. I'm sorry."

He raises himself up on his elbow, and draws me back down again.

"No," he says, and now, when I try to leave, I find out at last just how strong he is. One burly forearm is wrapped around my stomach, and I can't escape from it. His lips press gently against the back of my neck. I'm struggling in his grip, fighting to get out, but he won't let me go. His arms hold me down as they have before, never offering me what I want, never striking me, just restraining. Finally, I go limp, worn out by the battle. I succumb to the bitter emptiness inside, and want to weep from the gnawing self-hatred. I lie back, listless, and stare into his eyes as he looks down on me.

"Fox," he says, the expression in his eyes so tender that it makes tears prick in the back of my eyes.

"No. I don't like to be called..." I begin, but he puts a finger over my mouth.

"Fox," he says again, and I realize why I don't like my name. Until now I've only heard it spoken in reproach, disappointment or anger. I don't remember anybody ever saying it like this before - as an endearment. His lips gently brush mine, then he turns to my neck, and kisses that too. Long, slow, tender kisses. I can feel the heat rise up inside me, and I press against him, trying to scratch, to bite, to descend once more into fury and chaos. He stops me, holding me down with one arm. He could have stopped me last night. How easily he could have stopped my onslaught. I wonder why he didn't.

"Faggot. Who'd have thought you'd be a fucking queer? A cock-sucking, brown-nosed, fairy." I say the words to wound, because one of his large, gentle arms is holding me tight, making sure that I can't stop the tender caress he's subjecting me to. He looks up, and I wait for the anger, the hurt, to register in his eyes, but it isn't there.

"Who called you those things, Fox?" he asks, reading me, understanding me, in a way I never would have expected from him. Not from him, of all people. My eyes are filling up with tears in earnest now. I don't want this. I didn't come here for this.

"Having a nickname like 'Spooky' is nothing compared to some of what I've been called," I tell him, wishing that his mouth would stop those teasing little kisses he's bestowing on my neck. His hand comes up, and runs silky fingers through my hair.

"They're ugly names for an act of love." He pulls back the sheet, and runs a hand down my thigh, down to my knee, and back again. "Is there anything ugly in this?" he asks softly, stroking me. He takes my hand to his chest, and runs it gently along his body. "Or this? In two people sharing themselves?"

"Why are you doing this to me?" I ask him, the tears flowing down my cheeks.

"Isn't it obvious?" He smiles, and the color of his eyes is like warm chocolate, meltingly delicious.

"No," I mutter resentfully, trying to brush the tears away. He holds me down, preventing the action, and with his free hand he wipes the salty flow from my cheeks, then kisses each of my eyelids.

"Because I love you." He says it without embarrassment, or expectation of reciprocation. "Hush." He places a finger over my mouth again, although I have no idea what, if anything, I was about to say. "And I wish you could love yourself." He kisses my Adam's apple, lightly. "Last night..." he says, and I flinch from what I was, and what I did, last night. He wraps both arms around my body, nestling me under his chin. "Last night, you showed me what you know about love. And this morning, I want to return the favor."

His body is too large, his authority too compelling to be ignored. I'm putty in his hands as he explores me with gentle, tender lips, and caressing fingertips, the lightest gossamer touch of his flesh against mine. Even when my body yearns for urgency, to be overwhelmed, he goes about his work slowly, and will not be hurried.

I have never known my body explored so slowly, thoroughly, or lovingly. Each part of me discovered, revealed, as if he's peeling back my soul to look at what lies at its core. And I know now that last night, he was the one in control, for all my frenzy, and overpowering need. He allowed me to take what I wanted from him because he is kind. It's a kindness I have glimpsed in brief snatches over the years, and which is usually kept hidden beneath the taciturn strength. Maybe his kindness is the true sign of his strength.

Now he has no need of disguises, as he finds his way unerringly around my body, nuzzling here and there, licking, nibbling, and making me gasp with the subtlety of his caresses. I've never been touched like this before. It's always been as it was last night. I repress the need for so long, that when it comes out it's urgent, and savage. As his lips return to mine once more, I allow his tongue to push into my mouth, in a slow, lingering kiss, that leaves me reeling. When he finishes I have to draw him back again, for another, and then another, making him laugh.

Finally, he lays me on my front, and kisses his way over every inch of my back, and butt. His fingers slip inside me, bringing me to the brink of climax with their probing. When he finally enters me, smoothly, painlessly, he brings me to a state of ecstasy that I have never known with any partner before, male or female.

Afterwards, he gently pulls himself out from me, and holds me against his chest, his legs wrapped around mine, making me feel safe, loved.

"When you want to talk about it, then I'll listen." He kisses my hair. "If you never want to, then that's fine too."

"I don't deserve..." I begin, a wave of self-loathing sweeping through me, making me wretched.

"Fox," he interrupts me, his voice giving my name inflections of love that send shivers down my spine. "I don't know what he said to you, or what he did to you, or the names he called you, to make you feel this way. But I'm not him. I'll be your lover, but not your father. He's dead. Let him go."

"I'll try, Walter."

I relax in his arms, playing with the unfamiliar name on my tongue, and I can feel the smile on his face as he rests his cheek against mine. I may have a long way to go, but I think Walter Skinner just solved a different kind of hostage situation. For the first time since I was 12 years old, I think I can taste freedom.

THE END.

This story archived at <http://www.xanthe.org/hostage/>