

Summary: Walter receives a gift. And then another. And that's just the beginning.

Categories: [X Files](#) Characters: Alex Krycek, Dana Scully, Ensemble, Fox Mulder, John Fitzgerald Byers, Melvin Frohike, Original, Richard Langly, Skinner/Krycek, Walter Skinner, Well-Manicured Man

Genres: Slash

Warnings: Abuse, Adult Situations, Complete, Dark Themes, m/m, Violence

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Series: None

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Story Notes:

Disclaimer: Not mine, never were, I have no money.

Notes: This takes place...well, it's noted in the story. Canon goes right the fuck out the window, although certain things did take place. "S.R. 819" did not since this replaces everything just before the movie. So...most of season 5 didn't happen either, like the nonsense with that faux-kiss. If you saw the little bit at the end from when the first part was first posted, ignore the name, I changed it. Thank you Bill and Ursula for beta, you guys did great in a pinch!

This is for Mort's birthday. I don't know what day it is, but I THINK it's today. So, I decided it's today and it's today. Period. Happy birthday, Mort! I hope you're feeling better and you have a wonderful day! All my love to you!

1. [Chapter 1](#) by Amazon X

Chapter 1 by Amazon X

*_*_*_*

TWO MONTHS LATER

SKINNER'S OFFICE

6:57 PM

Skinner sat at his desk, writing out his notes in shorthand for Arlene to type in the morning. He was so focused on his work he did not hear the man enter room. He did hear the gurgling sound, and looked up quickly. There stood the Englishman, Clarence Barstow Higgins, holding a baby. There was a brightly colored bag slung over his shoulder.

"What are you doing here?" Skinner demanded. "How the hell do you get into this building?"

"Mr. Skinner, please, I have someone for you to meet." Walking out from behind his desk, Skinner looked down at the infant in the man's arms. "This is your daughter, Mr. Skinner. I thought it was about time you two should meet."

Stopping in his tracks, Skinner continued to look at the child. She was bundled tightly against the cool April evening. Higgins reached out and thrust her into Skinner's arms. Instinctively, Skinner pulled the baby close and looked into her face. Her cheeks were as pink as her blanket, setting off the bright color of her eyes. Skinner actually pulled her up closer to him to see how green her eyes were.

"Amazing, isn't it? Her eyes are exactly like his. When you remove her cap, you'll see she only has one little curl of dark hair. Truly an adorable child, not unlike my own grandchildren."

Skinner took the baby to his couch and sat with her in his arms. He was a little rusty since the last babies he'd held were Sharon's nine nieces and nephews, over four years ago, but it was like riding a bike: you never forget. The little girl looked up at him and Skinner would swear for the rest of his life, even knowing that she was too young to even focus her eyes, that she recognized him as her father and smiled up at him. He laughed out a sob and the tears rolled down his

cheeks. "She's beautiful. Is she..."

"Healthy? Quite. Dare I say, she's perfect." Skinner looked up at him, a mixture of disbelief and fear in his eyes. "And perfectly human. Completely human, to be frank. It was the only reason why our smoking friend let me bring her to you. I couldn't bear to allow him to terminate her."

"Terminate her? He wouldn't..." Skinner instinctively pulled the child closer to him.

"Mr. Skinner, remember who we're talking about. He would and he almost did. I managed to...persuade him to allow me to bring the child to you. It is your decision what to do about her. But that is a decision that you will have to make without me. I must go now."

Higgins placed the diaper bag on Skinner's desk and turned to the door. Just before leaving he turned back to Skinner and said, "She doesn't have any papers, so you'll have to get that settled. And she wasn't named."

"Krycek didn't name her?" he growled, annoyed. He looked down at the little girl who had stopped squirming and fussing and had gone to sleep.

"He wasn't exactly...in the position to be very paternal."

With that, Higgins was gone. Skinner watched the little girl sleep for a few moments when he heard sounds in his outer office. He dismissed it as the cleaning crew. And that was just the beginning.

As if in slow motion, the knock sounded on the door and it swung open gently. Skinner looked up from the baby to see Mulder's astonished face. He stood there a moment, not moving, nor speaking. The latter shocked Skinner a bit since Mulder always had something to say about everything. He knew he should make the first comment.

"Agent Mulder, this is my daughter, Natalya." The name just flowed off his tongue, without any forethought.

"She's...that's really...have you called Scully?" he managed after more silence.

"No, Mulder. She just showed up. I've been watching her. Please, call Dana for me, thank you."

Skinner settled back and loosened his grip on the baby to allow her to sleep comfortably. It seemed like only seconds passed while Mulder called his partner and she drove back to the office from her comfortable living room. Skinner looked up as the woman walked over, handing her coat to Mulder.

"Is this her, sir?" she asked, sitting beside him.

"Dana Scully, this is Natalya Melissa Skinner. Natalya, this is your Godmother, Dana Scully."

The tears welled in Scully's eyes and Skinner honestly thought she'd burst out crying. Being the consummate lady she was, she pulled a tissue from her sleeve and blotted her eyes. Again presentable, she took the baby from Skinner's arms and looked down into her suddenly awake face. She leaned closer to her, most likely to kiss her, but Natalya began sneezing abruptly, spraying Scully's face in baby spit. All three adults erupted in laughter as Skinner took the baby back.

"She must not like my perfume, sir," Scully said, dabbing her cheek. After a centering deep breath, Scully asked, "Are you keeping her, then, sir?"

He nodded gently. "Yes, Dana, I am. But I do expect a great amount of help from you both. My Godparents were a very big part of my upbringing. I wouldn't have it any differently for my daughter. Mulder," Skinner said, looking up at him, "please have the Gunmen contact me. She'll need a birth certificate. I'll supply the name."

"What name, sir?" Mulder asked, bewildered.

"Her mother's name. Alexander Nicholai Krycek is not going to fly, is it?"

"No, sir. Is there anything else I can do?" he asked.

"We can do, sir?" Scully added.

"I need...things for her. All I have is in that bag. Can you check it for me?"

Both agents began laying out the meager supplies in the diaper bag; an extra change of clothing, not including underwear, two spare diapers, an empty bottle, a can of liquid formula and one rattle. Skinner felt that Higgins must have just grabbed those items from a local store quickly as he ran with the baby.

"Can you both go and get me everything I'll need, including new-parent books, please? My wallet is in my jacket pocket, hanging behind my door. I'll stay here with her. I'll need a car seat, especially. Take the American Express card. That only has my first two initials on it on purpose. That's the card I give to Arlene to shop for me. You'll be able to duplicate the signature on the back. Please hurry. I want to take her home."

Mulder fished out the card while Scully took one last look. "Sir, if your arms tire, I think it would be safe to lay her on the couch, so long as you sit beside her and keep an eye on her."

"Dana, there is no way I will put her down." Skinner didn't even notice them leave. And ninety minutes later, as the infant continued to sleep in his arms, Skinner did not hear the hustle and bustle of all the packages being brought into his office. He looked up and frowned.

"Why didn't you leave everything in the car? I have to take her home." Mulder sighed and they followed the big man out to the parking garage, nodding briefly to the night security officers.

Finally, at two in the morning, after Mulder and Skinner struggled with the crib and bassinette and various and sundry other items, Skinner lay her down, on sheets Scully had washed in his laundry room, while keeping a concentrated eye on the baby sleeping soundly, Skinner left the baby in her crib. Throughout all the cursing and banging, when Skinner's next door neighbor rang over twice to ask about the noise, they finally erected the crib, a swing and a lovely beech wood high chair. Scully knew it would coordinate with the light wood in Skinner's kitchen.

The two agents bid their boss a quiet farewell and he told them to take the next morning off. Skinner went back to his guest room, now a nursery, and watched the little girl sleeping. After a few moments, though, age took over and he decided it was time to sleep. It was an unrealized wish.

Skinner took a fast, warm shower, dressed in his most comfortable pajamas and settled in his bed, baby monitor with him the whole time. He laid his head on his pillow and closed his eyes, not thinking about anything, but letting the exhaustion just take him.

After what felt like a few minutes, he was jolted awake by the shrill screams of the baby. He stumbled from the bed, grabbing his glasses and lunged into the other room. He turned on the bedside light and illuminated the room to make his way to the wailing infant. Scooping her up, Skinner walked to the guest bed and sat, rocking the baby gently, shushing her, cooing

nonsense words to her, the way he'd done with his younger relatives.

Natalya cried a bit more, but quieted down a little. Skinner reached out to stroke her cheek, but she turned her head and began sucking at his finger. "Oh, I see, you're hungry, sweetie. Let's go down to the kitchen and Daddy will make you a bottle, won't he?"

Skinner laughed at himself using baby talk to her. He carried her down to the kitchen and looked around for a place to lay her. He sighed. "There wouldn't be a chance you'd fit in that high chair yet, would there? No, I didn't think so." He walked out of the room, whimpering baby nestled against his chest. As he headed toward the stairs, he spotted the bassinette in the corner and smiled. He lay her down and rolled it into the kitchen. Natalya began to quiet immediately. He quickly made her bottle using water heated in his electric kettle to mix with the formula powder.

He shook it vigorously, making sure there were no lumps and tested the temperature on his wrist as they always told you to. It felt perfect to him, so he rolled her bassinette back into the living room, gathered her up and put the bottle to her mouth. Two big green eyes opened and she stared at him as she drained the bottle. He was fascinated by how much she drank. He threw a dishtowel over his shoulder and after only a few pats, she let out a little burp and looked as if she smiled up at him.

"You are so absolutely beautiful, baby. You look like your father." He knew it sounded odd, but there was no way he was going to call Alex her mother. He wasn't going to get caught up in the crap of "Which is the mommy and which is the daddy" that so many people wanted to label gay men who raise children. He would tell Natalya about her other father and how much he loved the green-eyed devil.

Walter decided that the bassinette was comfortable enough for Natalya to sleep in, so he carried it up the stairs, vowing to get another for that level, and put it right next to his bed. Natalya didn't even change her breathing as he turned off the light and lay down.

The light went on five minutes later, but it was actually 4:30, an hour and a half later. Walter blinked as he searched for his glasses and reached for Natalya. She was wet. With a sigh, he carried her into her room, and he stumbled a bit, having thought of the converted guest room as her room so quickly, and changed her diaper. When he laid her back in her bassinette, he knew it would only be an hour or two before she would remind him that she was around. As if he would ever forget.

Later in the morning, around the time he should be entering the office, Skinner picked up his phone and called his assistant. He ignored her question about the crying baby in the background and just told her that he had personal business to take care of and would not be in. He hung up the phone and began "the walk". He'd never understood "the walk". It looked silly. Then he actually had a baby in his arms, starting to quiet as he gently swayed her while singing "I'll Follow the Sun". It was one of the few Beatles songs he knew he could manage with his rich baritone voice. And one song that he knew Krycek loved the most.

When finally he thought he had her asleep for a while, the doorbell rang, and her screaming began again. With a great sigh, Skinner lifted the noisemaker and carried her to the door. He hoped it was a bounty hunter, the smoking man, hell, one of those gray monsters Mulder always said existed. Anything to stop the screaming.

Next best thing: Mulder and Scully. "Get in here you two, now!" He handed Natalya to a highly confused Mulder and sat heavily on the couch. Mulder smiled down at the baby who began to coo a bit, then started crying again.

Scully sat down, opening her briefcase and said, "Mulder, take her upstairs for a bit. See if you can get her to sleep. I need to speak with Walter."

Mulder, realizing Scully meant business by using Skinner's first name, shrugged and took Natalya up to her bedroom. Skinner looked over at Scully on the couch beside him and asked, "What's wrong, Dana?"

She smiled at his use of her given name as well. "Well, I took the liberty of examining Natalya when you and Mulder played 'This Old Crib' upstairs. I had grabbed some supplies I keep in case of a Mulder emergency, which is usually often. I took a blood sample and ran it through the lab at Quantico. She was drugged, sir. Only sedatives, which is why she slept so long. And probably why she's so cranky now. I'm going to guess that they kept Krycek tranquilized until he was due, then kept the baby tranquilized. She may be detoxing. That will be difficult."

Skinner dropped his head into his hand, then uncharacteristically grabbed the thick crystal bowl on his coffee table and threw it at the wall. It shattered and restarted the crying baby. He looked over at Scully and asked, "How difficult will it be if she does this here? I can take time off to be with her."

"I think it would be best to take her to a hospital to be examined completely. Mulder called the Gunmen on the way here and they are working on a set of Pennsylvania papers for her. Birth certificate, application for social security number, health records, everything. They're going to hack into a hospital several hours away from your home town to add her information. An emergency birth. Then, you'll be covered. But you should take her to a hospital here in Virginia, so there is no question. OK, sir?"

"No, I can't. How do I explain she's been tranquilized? No, I'll be arrested for abuse. You'll just have to take time off and help me." Skinner emphasized his words by crossing his arms.

"Sir, I don't have any vacation saved up. I'll need to ask Kersh for compassionate leave. I don't think he's very compassionate, but I can help you."

"Fine, then. I'll take all the help you can offer. I'll have keys made for you and you can use the guest room to sleep in if you like."

"Sir, I..."

Skinner sighed and lay back against the couch. "Sir, you get some sleep. Mulder and I will take Natalya to my apartment..."

"No!" he shouted, surprising her. Mulder had finally quieted the baby and they both looked up at the ceiling. "She'll stay here. I'll try and nap today. Just...Dana...please don't leave me. Please?"

Scully smiled and nodded. Skinner stood before her and hugged her. "Of course, Walter. I'll stay with you."

Skinner placed a kiss on her head and she walked him up the stairs. They passed the guest room, where Mulder was standing over the crib, speaking down to the baby, but he didn't hear what Mulder said. He went into his own room, leaving Scully and Mulder with the baby, closed the door and lay on the bed. He didn't have much time to think before falling right to sleep.

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FOGELSVILLE, PENNSYLVANIA
OCTOBER, 2001

Walter Skinner hurried to pack his briefcase to leave his office. He had just enough time to get home before he had to meet her. Of course, he was never late when he had to pick her up early. She would be furious if she had to wait. And how could he look down into her sparkling, light

eyes and not do everything to show her how much he loved her?

Holding her tiny frame in his big strong arms could cure any hurt, any ill that overcame him. Seeing her smiling face first thing in the morning was all he ever thought he could want. Her kisses could push away any fear of the future for them. It was as if they were the healing balm his life needed. It was right there, and all he needed to do was reach out for it, and he would have it.

He pulled around the front of the official-looking building and saw her standing there. Weaving through the throng of students, he smiled up at her as he ascended the steps. Wearing her long wool coat, with her bag slung over her shoulder, stylish beret covering her crown of curls, all in the same shade of pink. She was such a little lady for a three-year-old. "Daddy!" she shrieked before running at him, disproving the previous assumption of maturity.

Walter squatted on the steps and caught the running bundle of pink in his arms and held her high. His afternoon was free of classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so he didn't bother to leave her at the daycare late. "How is my pretty pink princess?" he asked, kissing both of her cheeks. He smiled and nodded to the aide who had waited with Natalya until Walter got there. No matter the weather, she insisted on waiting on the steps for her father. A completely single-minded child he had.

"Good, thank you. How are you?"

"Very well, thank you. You look like you want to take your daddy to a fancy restaurant and buy him dinner," he said, securing her in her car seat in the back of his new Expedition. He'd upgraded from the one given him, and after having driven the old one for so long, he found he liked SUVs.

"No, we can't. Aunt Dana and Mulder are coming for dinner! You're cooking for them, right?"

"Yes, my love, I am. How was school today?" he asked, pulling onto the main road of town.

"Lousy. Josh Davis messed up my dress." The pout on her face was enough to break Walter's heart.

"How did he ruin your dress, baby?" he asked, looking at her in the rearview mirror.

"He got blood on it."

Walter shook his head. No matter how well she spoke, and how easily she read, and how good she was with the large crayons writing her name and letters, she was still three and a half, almost four. She didn't quite get the concept of elaboration. "How did that happen, Kitten?"

"I hit him," she said, losing interest fast.

"Wait, wait, wait. Why did you hit him? Did he hit you first?" Walter was gripping the wheel with a white-knuckled grasp. If that kid hurt his little girl...

"I told him to get me a flower and he said no. So I hit him." Walter chuckled a bit at that, but quickly looked back at Natalya, who had taken a book out of her bag and was reading quietly.

"Natalya, look at me in the mirror," he said. She'd done that before, to talk to him. "That was very bad. Did you apologize to him?"

"No," she stated and looked back at her book.

"Little girl, I'm speaking to you. Look at me." She looked up at him and closed the book. She may

have her father wrapped around her finger, but she knew who wore the pants, Walter thought. "I've told you not to hit other children unless you're defending yourself, haven't I?"

After a moment, and a deep, put-upon sigh, she answered, "Yes sir."

"Well, that means we're going to the Davis' home and you're going to apologize to Joshua, aren't you?"

Another sigh and eye-roll, "Yes sir."

Walter smirked and turned the car down Elm Street toward the Davis home. It was a modest two-story four square home, with a prize-winning tulip garden right in front. Before Walter even had even gotten Natalya out of her car seat, Mrs. Davis was opening the door and stepping out onto the porch. "Hello, Walter," she called out cheerily with a smile, as Walter followed Natalya up the steps.

"Good afternoon, Jessica. I think my daughter has something to say to Joshua." Looking down at Natalya's down-cast face and fully protruding lip, Walter fought not to be overcome by the feelings, the memories of his lover. Walter often times lay in bed, wondering if Alex was still alive. But that wasn't important at the moment.

Jessica turned to the doorway and called Josh out onto the porch. He had two comically large tissues stuffed in his nose, one showing a tinge of dark blood. Walter fought to keep a straight face, noting with guilty pride that his baby got the bad boy in both nostrils. "Joshua, Natalya wants to say something to you."

The little girl remained silent. Both adults looked at her. Walter looked up at the boy a moment and deduced that if he frowned any harder in the cold late afternoon air, his face would stay that way. Deep down, a devilish little voice said, "Would serve that boy right. He should have gotten Natalya a flower in the first place." The voice came along with the memory of sparkling green eyes, of course, but he didn't look at them.

"Natalya, apologize to Joshua for hitting him. Nice young ladies don't act like that, remember?" Walter admonished.

He watched as his little girl took a deep breath and looked up at Josh. "Sorry I hit you."

"S'ok."

The little boy turned around and went back into the house. Jessica shook Walter's proffered hand, accepting his apology as well and turned to go back into her home. Walter led Natalya back to the truck and secured her in the back again. When they were almost back at the house, he looked at her in the mirror again. "That was very brave of you. I won't punish you for this, since I know admitting you were wrong was bad enough. But should this ever happen again, you will not only have to apologize again, I'll make you do it at school in front of your entire class. And I'll ask your teacher to keep you from playing at recess. And don't ask what you'll lose here in the house. Understood?"

Two sparkling green eyes looked up at him as she said, "Yes, sir." Then he saw the tears start to drip down her face.

"Aw, Kitten, you don't have to cry, it's over," he cooed at her. He turned off the engine, having entered their driveway and went straight back to carry her from the truck to the house, her little bag in his empty hand. A little wet face with a cold, red nose buried itself under his collar as he unlocked the door and entered the home. "Come on, Kitten, give Daddy a smile? A little one?"

She looked up at him and started crying again. "OK, no smiles." He carried his charge to her room and proceeded to strip her of her soiled dress, down to her underwear and redressed her in her favorite pink fleece sweats. He slipped thick pink socks on her feet and sat beside her on her bed as she whimpered. "OK, you wanna tell me what this is about, little girl?" he asked.

"You're gonna make me say sorry in front of my class!" she shouted.

The sound reverberated off the pink walls, white laminate furniture and mirror-covered sliding closet doors. The white carpet did little to deaden the sound. He'd even gone as far as putting a white cotton canopy on her bed, eyelet ruffles all the way around, to make sure sounds could be heard, but not pierce his head. As Walter looked back at Natalya's life, she was a relatively good baby. She started sleeping throughout the night once Walter found out that the altitude of his condo bothered her. When he'd taken her to his parents' home for a weekend retreat, she slept soundly, only waking once to be fed and changed. He made his decisions then and there.

After retiring from the FBI when his daughter was 6 months old, he promptly paid the daycare bill, packed up, sold the condo and changed his residence to Fogelsville, PA. It was difficult at first to adjust to life outside the bureau. Having the Masters degree helped when he inquired at Lehigh to teach. His years at the bureau gave him enough clout, as well as the letter of recommendation from the Director, to choose his subjects. Walter was a modest man by nature, not even asking for an office, but was given his choice of offices, including currently occupied ones.

True to character, he chose a small office with a small window, overlooking the quad where the students would sit and talk, or play a fast game of touch football or Frisbee. Occasionally, he saw a pair of lovers sharing sweet kisses, and some daring to go a bit further. That brought him thoughts of his lost lover. And he usually blamed his red eyes and stuffed nose on allergies. But Walter Skinner didn't have any allergies.

Mondays and Wednesdays were his worst days with three classes. Tuesdays and Thursdays were easier, one class in the morning and office hours. Fridays, he did not have classes, giving him a three-day weekend. Those three days were spent at home, teaching his daughter to read, attempting to write, and playing the guitar. Hers was smaller, a ukulele actually, but she learned quickly. He taught her as many Beatles tunes as she could learn, but he always played for her the one she loved the best, "I'll Follow the Sun." He dared not tell her he'd also sung it to her other father, many nights when his back and legs were screaming in pain and he couldn't take any medicine for it. The singing seemed to calm her as well.

"If you hit Joshua again for no reason, yes, I will make you do that. Otherwise, you're safe. OK?" He smiled down at her, noting that he did that a lot lately.

"OK, fine. Can I watch TV before dinner?" she asked. She didn't care much for television, but it was her subtle way of telling him she was miffed at him. Usually, she was content to read, color or play dolls.

"No, I'd rather you read something. What do you want for dessert, tonight?" He sat looking down at her reddened face.

"Chocolate ice cream," she said.

"How did I know?" he asked, smiling. "Come on, time for you to finish reading 'The Adventures of Capitol Kitty' to me." It was her favorite book about a kitten that becomes the resident mascot of the Capitol building.

They made their way down to the kitchen where Natalya sat at the large wooden table. Walter had taken up his old pastime of wood working and had made mostly new furniture to furnish the house. He had kept his parent's bedroom intact, only replacing the mattress on the bed and the

study was exactly as it had been in his father's day.

His greatest achievement was the mini table and chairs he'd made for his daughter for her tea parties. There was a huge table, about her height, and eight chairs, two with arms, one for her and one for him. Various and sundry stuffed animals occupied the other chairs at times. Everything was currently stored in the basement, where Walter had set her up with her own little "playhouse". When the weather was warmer, he was going to build her one in the backyard. He would make her an entire home, sans bathroom. But he'd been reading up on plumbing and sewage management, trying to figure out a way to get her some running water, but a flush toilet would be entirely too much trouble.

As Walter cooked, making a simple spaghetti and meatballs dinner, Natalya read her story to him. She read slowly, as if she was carefully deciphering every word, but Walter made sure she understood what she was reading, and not just pronouncing the words. What good is being able to read if what you're reading has no meaning to you?

While she was putting her book away, the doorbell rang. Walter quickly went out to open the door and admit the happy Godparents. Mulder had been a little flustered at being asked to be the godfather, being Jewish, but Scully walked him through it. "Mulder, really, Episcopalian is just Catholic light," she'd joked.

"Hello, you two. Get in here, dinner's almost ready." He accepted the hug from Scully and Mulder's hand shake, then the bottle of red wine. Mulder quickly hung the coats while waiting for the inevitable pounding of feet as the girl of the hour ran down the stairs. She always checked her appearance before greeting Mulder.

"Mulder! Aunt Dana!" came the squeal and thump-thump-thump and Mulder had two arms full of giggles. She gave the same enthusiasm in her hug to Scully, but did not attempt to run the little woman over as she did with her Godfather.

"I thought you were going to wear that pretty pink dress I love so much," Mulder said, sounding disappointed.

"Josh Davis got blood on it."

"Excuse me?" Scully asked. She and Walter had a habit of speaking to Natalya as if she were an adult, not using baby talk with her. They attributed her early grasp of speech to that fact. Mulder, however, always had his own agenda.

"Did you pop him one?" he asked, knowing the little girl all too well.

"Sure! I told him to get me a flower and he said no! So *BAM* in the nose!" She looked so proud of her accomplishment, Walter didn't have the heart to stop her from boasting about bullying.

"That's enough, kids. Why don't you all get washed up for supper?"

Walter laughed as his daughter was walked up the stairs by her Godparents, one hand in each of theirs. The dinner proved to be just as pleasant as they always were. Each week, the couple arrived to chat and catch up with their former boss and current friend. Afterward, they sat in the living room, drinking coffee and talking about their investigations. Walter listened intently, wishing he were once again back in the office, leading investigations, yet thankful that he wasn't. With the number of hours he spent either in his office or in his home, concentration on bureau work would never have allowed him to have any kind of relationship with Natalya. And in the past three years, it had become everything to him. Both of his former agents noticed.

"Walter, what are you planning on doing for Halloween?" Scully asked, sipping at her mocha

java.

"Oh, I'm a fool this year. We got her a Dorothy costume and I'm dressing..."

"Don't tell me!" Mulder interrupted. "The Wicked Witch of the West." The smile on Mulder's face was priceless.

"Mulder, be serious!" Walter chastised. "I'm going to be Toto."

Both of them laughed uncontrollably. Walter did his best to hide his blush behind his coffee cup, but was soon laughing with them. "Yes, I have a man-sized Yorkie costume. I am so humiliated, but, it's for the baby, so it's OK."

Everyone stopped laughing when a sleepy Natalya trotted down the stairs in her pajamas, rubbing her eyes with one hand and dragging her Pooh Bear in the other. She crawled into Walter's lap and pressed her face into his neck, whimpering. "What's wrong, Kitten? Bad dream?"

He felt her nod her head into his neck. "OK, you want to stay with us a while?" More nodding. "OK, baby. You stay here. I was just telling Aunt Dana and Mulder what we're going to be for Halloween. They like it."

She sat up and smiled widely. "Daddy's being Toto for me! We have a dress and the shoes and the basket. And he's gonna learn how to braid my hair!"

"I thought you were scared from your dreams," Walter said, cautiously. "What exactly was this bad dream?"

"Well...uh..." She buried her face in her father's neck again, threatening to strangle him with her hug.

"OK, OK, calm down. Did you just come down here so that Mulder can put you to bed again?" he asked, half chastising, half smiling. She looked up at him, guiltily and smiled.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," she said. "Please?"

"Don't ask me, ask Mulder."

Natalya turned to him and gave him her most winning grin. Mulder was putty in her hands. "OK, one more story, and that's it." She squealed in delight and jumped from her father's lap to Mulder's, just missing hurting him seriously. He stood, hoisted her high in his arms and started toward the stairs. "Did I ever tell you about the Great Mutato?"

"No," she said, and giggled.

"No? Oh, let me tell you about him..." he was saying as he disappeared into her room.

Scully smiled up at them. "Thank you, Walter," she said absently.

"For what, Dana?"

"For letting us be a part of her life. It's almost as good as having my own."

"One day, Dana, we will find a way to help you. I promise."

She turned to him and gave a sad smile. "I know, Walter." She waited a moment, testing his

mood, and then asked something she hadn't in three years, and wouldn't dare if Mulder was there. "Do you think about him, Walter?"

He stiffened as it struck. Quickly, realizing his company, he cleared his throat and sipped his coffee. "No, I don't. Natalya's mother died in birth. That's all she knows. And she knows not to ask any more about it."

Scully nodded and left it at that.

*_*_*_*

NOVEMBER, 2001
FOGELSVILLE CENTER

Walter hauled the huge cart of food to the truck, listening to the delightful chatter of the little girl seated in the front. She was explaining how excited she'd be if she had a kitty. Not a dog, like Walter wanted, but a kitty. Her Daddy would always be her best Toto.

All Walter cared about at that moment was getting the food into the truck and getting his baby home. He'd been thankful that it was Thanksgiving week, Thursday being the holiday, he wanted to get the turkey into the garage refrigerator so it would defrost slowly for five days. Scully and Mulder were coming for the holiday, with the Lone Gunmen, who had stayed in touch with him over the years. Frohike turned out to be a font of knowledge regarding childcare. Walter suspected the man was a father himself, but had alienated a child or two over his life.

Byers enjoyed visiting and loved teaching Natalya to play the piano a very fine upright Walter had bought. Langly would sit with her and draw for hours. Walter had no clue Langly was such an accomplished artist. He stuck to simple things with Natalya, though, crayons and finger paints. He'd told Walter that she was showing a strong grasp of color and shape placement, wanting balance on her pictures, wanting her trees and animals to look "right" which most often they did. She would be a fine artist if she kept at it.

He was barely paying attention when he pulled the cart up to the truck and went to put her into her safety seat. She was staring at the front of the truck oddly, as if she was working a problem. He turned to follow her line of sight and saw the body. Someone had dumped a body by his truck. He pulled her back and reached instinctively for his weapon, the weapon he returned to the FBI when he retired. The service weapon he was allowed to carry, under federal statute, that he didn't think was fitting to keep when he was with his daughter, was locked in a box in his den safe. No, this time, he would have to protect his child like a wild animal, with his naked hands.

"Be very quiet, Natalya. I'm going to look, OK?" She nodded, but didn't seem scared, just curious. Walter started toward the body. It moved and he stopped. He looked around and it seemed the entire parking lot had gotten very quiet while he was checking out why there was a dead body near his truck. He looked back one last time at the baby before creeping around the front.

He was cautious and careful, prepared to defend his daughter with his life, and when he realized..."Holy shit! Alex!!"

Walter knelt before the unconscious man and checked his vitals. He was still breathing, but he was dirty, smelly, he had several bruises on his face, and Walter knew there were more on his body. He checked the pulse again, feeling how light it was and knew he needed to get Alex home. He turned to his daughter and began quickly getting her into her chair.

"Daddy, who's that man?" she asked, trying to look past him at the body on the ground.

"He's my friend. He's not well, very sick. We need to get him home quickly. Can you be Daddy's best girl today and do everything I tell you?" He gave her a serious look. He'd only used the

strong tone and harsh look when he was upset with her and she was about to get a spanking. She just nodded, looking at him as if she knew the spanking was coming anyway. He stroked her face and said, "I'm going to go get the man now, so you be good for Daddy, and I will make sure we have extra story time tonight."

She smiled widely. Walter moved to the front of the truck, hoisted Alex in front of him and dragged the sagging man into the front seat of the truck. He strapped Alex in with the seatbelt and ran around to get the groceries into the truck. And of course, no one had been anywhere near them to see a thing. They may as well have been in New York.

He pulled out of the parking lot and made his way carefully, albeit quickly, back to the house. He could see Natalya in the back, staring intently at Alex, but she didn't look scared at all. She looked curious. And the entire trip home, all of twenty minutes, she only spoke to admonish Walter for talking on his cell phone without the hands-free earpiece. "Daddy, that's bad, use the ear thing!"

"I don't have time, Kitten. I need to make sure Aunt Dana and Mulder get to the house as soon as possible. They need to help Alex, if he needs it." Walter pulled a little too quickly around a corner and the tires squealed. He tried to keep the truck on the road but, Alex, if possible, seemed to get even paler. Reaching the house, things became a blur.

"Kitten, go on upstairs and play in your room while I take care of Alex."

"Is he going to be OK, Daddy?" she asked, blinking up at him.

"I'm going to do everything I can to make sure he is, OK, Kitten?" She nodded and went to her room.

Walter got most of the groceries into the kitchen, the perishables at least, where they sort of needed to be, then went to get Alex out of the truck. The man had not moved. He half-carried him into the house, up the stairs and laid him out on the bathroom floor where he proceeded to strip him of the filthy, smelly clothes. Alex had soiled himself, evidently. Walter was quick, piling the clothes in the corner, using baby wipes to clean the mess before settling Alex into the tub to spray him down with the shower massager head.

It was convenient that Walter wasn't disgusted by body functions. Fatherhood did that to you, having handled plenty of Natalya's accidents all over his lap, his shirt or in his arms. It was also convenient to have the removable shower head so that Walter could better rinse Alex as he washed the thin, bruised body. He felt around, and did not feel any broken bones in his limbs, nor broken ribs, nothing major that would be protruding through skin. So Alex was safe until Mulder and Dana arrived.

He hauled a warm, clean and dried Alex to his bed, the bed where they both had slept for months and months together, cultivating a love that still gripped Walter's heart tightly. He leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to Alex's slack mouth. The quiet gasp from the open doorway made him jump and he turned to see Natalya standing there, hand over her mouth.

"How long have you been there?!" he thundered at her. She stepped back in fear.

"Since...you brought him up." He took a deep breath and walked out of the room, pulling the door mostly closed behind him. They went to her room and they sat on the floor together, the place where they had conversations about important things, in the middle of the play area.

"You watched me clean and wash him?" he asked and she nodded. "Did you want to see what a naked man looks like?" This was puzzling to Walter. She was entirely too young for that.

"No! Aunt Dana showed me a book. I don't care 'bout that. But...you kissed him..."

"Does that bother you?" She shook her head.

"Is he your son?" Walter realized she didn't quite understand the relationship.

"No, he's my lover. I love him very much."

"Like you love me?" she asked, with a bit of trepidation on her face.

"Oh, I could never love anyone like I love you. I love you most of all. Alex is...your other father."

"Huh?" He knew she was very confused, but she deserved to know. "You said my mommy died. You said her name was Alexis. You lied?"

After taking a shaky breath, a tear slipped from his eye. "I'm sorry for lying to you, but I didn't want you to think your other parent was out there somewhere and didn't want to see you. Sometimes people think that when a parent is gone and can't come home, the parent doesn't want to. Alex...his name is Alexander Nikolai Krycek, and he couldn't be here. He was in trouble with some men who wanted to kill him. And they would have hurt me, and you, to do that. So he left. You following?"

She shrugged. He would keep reinforcing points to her over time, like the fact that Alex couldn't be here, instead of wouldn't be here. He knew Alex had always said he didn't care about the fetus he carried, but Walter knew in his heart that if Alex had seen how wonderful a baby Natalya was, he would have been there.

"OK, well, we have to be really careful until I can find out what's going on. So, no going to the windows or the door unless I say it's OK. And no answering the phone." She pouted at that last bit, just beginning to be able to manage holding the phone by herself. "When Alex wakes up, I'll introduce you to him. Now, let's go and put the rest of the groceries away. Wait for me in the kitchen. I want to set up the monitor in the bedroom so we can hear him if he wakes up."

Natalya nodded and they went about putting things back together until the doorbell rang. Walter took a deep breath and answered it, holding his hand up before they walked into the house. "I will not have any animosity toward him, period. He is Natalya's other parent, and her happiness comes first. She doesn't know the details, but she knows that he's her other father. OK?"

Both agents nodded and entered the house. Natalya quickly launched herself into Mulder's arms, hugging him and kissing his cheeks. "OK, little one, OK, relax." He put her down so she could hug Dana. They walked into the living room where Walter asked, "Mulder, would you do me the favor of spending some time with Natalya while Dana and I check out Alex? Sounds good?"

Natalya nodded and started to talk to Mulder about buying her a kitten as he helped her with her coat, scarf and hat. She firmly stated she was old enough to put her mittens on herself. With the little girl safely out of the way, Walter and Dana went up to find Alex still sleeping soundly in the same position. Dana asked if any of the bruises on his abdomen had darkened or gotten larger, and she nodded at Walter's firm "no".

"Well, I don't think he has any internal injuries, but you never can tell. Just watch him carefully. Do you think..."

"What? That he's back for good? Who knows? He's been out since I found him."

"Where exactly did you find him?" she asked, leading Walter down to the kitchen. She sat him in a chair and started to make tea. Walter proceeded to tell her the story about Alex lying

unconscious by the truck, and how well Natalya behaved and thanked her profusely for showing up to help. "It's not a problem, Walter. With the precious gift he gave you, how can we really be angry with him?"

The change in Dana's attitude didn't surprise Walter a bit. The only one they needed to worry about was Mulder.

*_*_*_*

Alex rolled over in the large bed and yawned, trying to stretch but his injuries stopped him. He vaguely remembered Walter's voice, but thought it was a dream. There was muted sunshine coming through the light sheers on the window. He slowly opened his eyes to see another pair of eyes, remarkably like his own, staring back at him. He sat up quickly. "Who are you?" he asked harshly.

The little girl with dark, curly hair and bright green eyes stared at him. "I'm Natalya. I live here. Who are you?"

He yawned again and scratched his chest. He looked at the clock beside the bed and saw the time, seven twenty-one. "You got a dad?" he asked, ignoring her question.

"Yeah, downstairs."

"You wanna go get him for me, kid?" Alex was annoyed with this little girl and her questions. She should just *know* who he was.

"Tell me who you are, first. Mulder tells great stories, but I don't know if I should believe him about you. Daddy says he loves you."

"Mulder?" he said quickly and started to sit up. His bruised belly protested and he sat back down. "Is Mulder here?"

"No, just me and Daddy. Alex...you're...my other daddy. Right?" she asked, chewing a thumbnail. The look on her face was enough to make Alex crack a bit of a grin, her sadly expectant wide eyes.

"Yeah. Sorry, kid." It was all he could think to say. The doorway behind the little girl was filled by Walter's body. His face was neutral as he looked at the man in his bed. "Hey, Walt. What's up?"

"Nothing but you. Feel OK?" he asked. Alex was surprised he wasn't getting the third degree.

"Feel like sh...garbage. I gotta p...go to the bathroom," he said.

Walter smirked and said, "Kitten, how about you go down to the kitchen and see if you can get a bottle of water for Alex while I help him out?"

She nodded and left the room, staring back at Alex every few minutes. When she'd cleared the doorway and they heard her going down the stairs, he walked over and sat on the bed. "Are you sure you're OK? Seriously, I can't take you to a hospital if..."

"No one's looking for me. Trust me. I'm free and clear." Alex closed his eyes and settled back onto the pillows. No one wanted him anymore, most likely, not the man sitting beside him, either.

*_*_*_*

Walter looked down in the pinched and haggard face of his former lover. Alex looked as if he was

giving up his life to him. Walter would gladly take him. "So you're safe to stay here? You swear it?"

"Why? You want me here?" he asked, frowning.

"Of course! Alex...when I told you this was your home so many years ago, I meant it. I want you here. I want you to get to know what wonderful little girl..."

"Who the fuck are you?" Alex asked. "You aren't the tight-assed, stuffed-shirt AD I know and...what the fuck..."

"Alex, a lot has happened since they took you. I've...my life is all about my daughter. I've come to be able to say things, to express how I feel more easily because of her. If you need a place to stay, and want to stay here, you are welcome to live here as long as you like, in my bed or the guest room. But I think it would be a crime if you didn't get to know Natalya..."

"Why did you name her that?" Alex asked. Walter smiled gently.

"That was my mother's name. I hope you like it."

Alex nodded and gave a small grin to Walter. "Hey, I'm gonna wet the bed like some kid if you don't help me up. I'll let you hold it."

Walter shook his head and said, "Not yet. Soon, though. When you're recovered."

Alex snorted as Walter helped haul him to his feet. "I've 'recovered' enough. That's all I've been doing. Christ, that's why I'm all bruised up; my body was so stressed from all the healing they made me go through."

Walter stood before him in the bathroom as Alex sat on the toilet. He looked up at Walter and asked, "When did we begin toileting together, lover?"

"Since you shit yourself after they left you for dead near my truck," he said, gruffly, turning to grab his bathrobe from the back of the door. "Alex, I have a daughter. You think wiping a dirty ass is a new thing for me?"

Alex looked up and tilted his head. "She looks like you."

"Are you blind?" Walter asked, helping Alex with the robe. "Not only does she have your eyes, but she has your nose, thankfully. My nose is not for a girl." They smiled at each other for a moment. "What do you think of her?"

"Fuck, Walt, I just got here...man, after what they did to me...let me get my head straight, OK?"

Walter nodded sadly. Alex would find it odd that he was not the center of Walter's universe any longer. He would find it jarring, all the changes in Walter. If Walter were honest with himself, he'd say the changes surprised him, as well. In a good way, if he were brutally honest. He was an older man, looking forward toward his twilight years, which loomed closer and closer every year. It wasn't unheard of for a man his age to have a heart attack, fatally so. If honesty were to cut to the bone, he was thankful Alex was there, so that at least one of Natalya's parents could be there, always, or so he hoped.

When he had helped Alex back to the bed, and thrown some sweatpants and a t-shirt at him, Natalya walked in with the bottle of water. She climbed on the bed and sat beside Alex, looking down at him thoughtfully.

"Daddy, we weren't properly introduced, you know?" she stated, cocking an eyebrow up at her father, suspiciously looking a lot like Dana.

"You're correct. Natalya Melissa Skinner, this is your other father, Alexander Nikolai Krycek. Alex, this is your daughter, Natalya. Or as I call her, Kitten. Or princess. Or..."

"I get it, Walt," Alex interrupted. Natalya held her hand up to Alex and he took it, shaking it gently.

"Did you make the nesting dolls?" she asked, suddenly.

Alex looked up at Walter, questioning. Walter shrugged, but Natalya continued on. "I like them, but I have newer ones. I have the Little Mermaid, and Cinderella, and my favorite, Beauty and the Beast!" She sat up, pleased with herself.

"Why is that your favorite?" Alex asked, confused look on his face.

"Belle has curly dark hair like me! So does Wonder Woman, too. And..."

"Yeah, I get it, kid. Role models." Alex gave an exasperated look up at Walter, who scowled back. "What?"

"OK, Natalya, get your drawing book out. Langly will be by later for art."

Natalya frowned and reluctantly crawled off the bed. Walter waited until her bedroom door closed firmly. She was a very smart little girl.

"Alex, I'm only going to tell you this once. That little girl is my whole life. Do not upset her. Do not insult her. She's barely four years old and she's...incredible. She's so advanced for her age; I may not put her in school, but home school her myself. She has incredible artistic and musical abilities. You saw, she's only three and a half years old. She never used baby talk. I'm so...amazed by her..."

He looked down at Krycek who was giving him a look that he couldn't translate. "What?"

"You look like one of those parents who...you know, goes on about their kid."

"I *am* one of those parents. And she's your child, too. It would do you a world of good to get to know her."

"Well, can I get my shit together first? I mean..."

"And that's another thing. No more swearing. I don't, Mulder and Dana don't. She knows the words, and knows they aren't polite, but if you talk like that, she'll swear just to rebel against me."

"Why is she rebelling?" Alex asked, trying to lie back.

"I won't buy her a cat. I love cats, myself, but Dana and Mulder ran into a case once with feral cats, and they were attacked. Dana won't go near them anymore. We tell Natalya she's allergic, so I can't have one. I'd rather a positive role model like Dana visit, than comb cat fur off everything."

Alex laughed and shook his head. "You got answers for everything, don't you?"

Walter smiled. "With a smart child around, you learn to think quick."

Alex nodded and lay back against the pillows. Walter sat on the bed beside him and smiled

down. "Alex, may I kiss you?"

"I thought you'd never ask." Alex reached out and pulled Walter's mouth down to his, kissing the other man deeply. They held onto each other, kissing and hugging, just trying to get back to where they once were, once when they were younger, in love and more innocent. Walter almost laughed into the kiss, thinking that Alex could have been innocent then, but it fit the times.

Alex pulled away and took a deep breath. "Wow, just like I remembered. You always could curl my toes, you hot sexy..."

"OK, I think that's enough for you. Little ears could be lurking." Walter stood to walk out of the room.

"You used to be more fun."

Walter gave him a sad smile. "I used to be childless. If I had to give my baby up, I wouldn't go back for anything."

"Not even for me?" Alex asked, seriously.

"No, not even for you. As much as I love you, Alex, and yes, I do love you, I can't love anyone more than I love that little girl. I hope you can understand that."

Alex just shrugged and lay back in the bed, closing his eyes. Walter would not regret saying those words, as he walked out into the hall and saw his daughter lurking. "How long have you been there?"

"You really love me more than him?" she asked, giving him the best Scully eyebrow he'd ever seen.

He laughed and lifted her into his arms. "I could never love anyone as much as I love you."

She hugged him tightly and kissed his cheek, giggling.

*_*_*_*

Alex lay in the bed with his eyes closed, not sleeping. Yeah, the kid was cute, but she was too damn nosy for his taste. Kids should be quiet in their rooms and not in adults' business. She'd just have to learn to back off. She was cute, though.

He slept a little longer, then hauled himself from the bed to pad to the bathroom. He sat there, looking around at the decor, and shook his head. It was pleasantly appointed in sunny yellow and corn flower blue accents around a base of bright white. As bright it was, it looked as if Skinner scrubbed the porcelain daily. He'd remodeled a bit since Alex lived there last.

When he went back to the bedroom, he found Natalya sitting in the middle of the covers, holding a small birdcage. He stood there a moment and asked, "What's that?"

A spray of curls swung about as she turned to him. "This is my parakeet, Tweety. Isn't he pretty? He doesn't talk."

"Well, Tweety doesn't belong in my bed, kid." Alex got back on the bed and stretched out.

"This is my daddy's bed," she said, a little flash of defiance in her eyes.

"Right, and I'm one of your daddies, so I get to sleep here. Take the bird back to your room, OK?"

Natalya looked up at him and shrugged. She took the cage and as she left, she said, "You can come see Tweety in my room later. We'll be waiting."

Alex watched the little girl walk out of the room and shook his head. He slipped back into the bed and lay back against the pillows. After ten minutes, he couldn't sleep so he sat up to look around the room. It was exactly the same, minus the television Walter had put in there for Alex to watch in bed. Otherwise, it was as if Alex had never left. He never left in the first place. He was taken. Which was probably why Walter had welcomed him back.

Did he know where Alex was? Could he have helped Alex escape? Did they make Walter choose between him and that kid? And Alex was positive he chose the fucking kid. That bastard! He thought to himself. He threw back the covers and stomped down the stairs. He made a beeline for the study, knowing Walter spent a fair amount of time in there.

He barreled into the room and let the door slam back against the plaster wall, knowing the doorknob did a bit of damage. Walter looked up from the term papers he was grading, a bit startled. "Alex? Is something wrong?"

"You mother fucking asshole! You son of a bitch! Did you know where I was? Did you know where I was kept? And gave me up for that fucking kid? I should have flown to Switzerland and had that thing cut out of me like I said I would! You fucking bastard!"

"Shut up!" came a shrill scream behind Alex. Then next thing he knew, there were little feet, with surprisingly solid sneakers, kicking his bare ankles. He stepped away and reached back to slap the little annoying brat when a growl from across the room stopped him cold.

"You put your hands on her, and I will be calling the M.E. for you. Don't test me on this, Alex." Natalya looked up at Walter and backed off quickly, going back to her small desk in the corner and sitting in her chair. She stared forward with wide eyes.

"You didn't answer my questions, Walt. Did you know where I was and what they did to me?" Alex asked, in the deadly tone from his former days as an assassin.

"Alex, if I had known, I would have rescued you long ago. As it was, Mulder and Dana could not find you. They tried; for three and a half years, they tried every lead that the Gunmen could come up with and nothing. I'm sorry if you don't believe me, but that's the truth. Now, apologize to Natalya for almost hitting her."

"Fuck you, crazy man, that's bullshit. This was my fucking house before it was hers. Who the fuck does she, and YOU think you are talking to me like that!"

Walter walked out from behind his desk and stopped in front of Alex. "Natalya, please go to your room and wait for me there. Make sure Tweety's cage is clean and he has water." The little girl ran to her room so fast that she left a swirling dust trail behind her.

Without blinking, Walter said, "If you ever raise a hand to my daughter again, I'll kill you and bury you in the back yard."

"She's my daughter, too. What if I decide to take her away from here, from you? What are you going to do, Walt?" Alex tried to put as much ice in his voice as possible.

"I dare you. The FBI will find you faster than you think. And my daughter knows how to get away from a kidnapper. I'd love to see you prove she's yours when I have her birth certificate. Your name isn't on it, you know. Now, I'm going to pour myself a drink. I suggest you have one and calm down. After I check on Natalya, you can tell me about what happened to you for the last

three years."

Walter walked out of the room, brushing past Alex and went up the stairs quickly. Alex took the opportunity to get himself a glass of vodka, the kind he always drank, and sat on the wide back porch that he loved so many years ago.

*_*_*_*

Walter knocked on Natalya's door and found her sitting on her bed, holding her Pooh Bear. "Kitten, can I come in?"

"Sure." He walked over and sat on the bed with her. He reached out and wiped a tear from her cheek.

"Come here and give me a hug," he said quietly. She crawled into his lap and let loose crying. He held her and soothed her until she'd finally calmed, looking up at him with watery green eyes.

"Why was he gonna hit me?" she asked. "I thought that...he was my daddy, too. You don't hit me."

"Alex is never going to do that ever again. He thinks that I knew where he was for three years, and that I chose you over him." Skinner continued to stroke her hair.

"I heard what he said. What happened to him?" She hiccupped.

"Let's get your face washed and set you up with something to do for a while. I'm going to ask him what happened. And then he and I are going to have a talk."

"What did he want cut out of him?" she asked quietly, after they came back from the bathroom.

"What?" Walter asked. His mind began to spin. He didn't want to have to think about telling her about her origin. It seemed he had no choice. He only hoped that as smart as Natalya was, she would actually understand him.

"I was inside him, wasn't I? He's my mommy, isn't he?" she asked, innocently.

"In a way, yes. Does that make any sense to you?" Walter wasn't sure why he was telling her. Most three-year-old children didn't understand the facts of life, but Natalya wasn't like most children.

"Not really. I know the parts that make a baby...but...I don't get it." She rubbed her head as if she was really trying to work out the problem.

"Sweetie, you have plenty of time to understand the way you were born. Right now, just know that yes, you grew inside Alex and no matter what he says when he's angry, the one thing I remember very well was Alex sitting in the office while I worked, rubbing his belly, singing your favorite song to you. Whether he wanted to admit it or not, he loved you."

Natalya nodded, still looking sad. "Can I stay here and read for a while, please? I...uh...he..."

"You scared?" She nodded, sadly. "Then you stay here. I won't let anything happen to you, I promise."

"I trust you," she said and kissed his cheek.

Walter was reluctant to leave her alone, but thought that if he was going to get to the bottom of what happened to Alex, he'd have to. He made his way down the stairs and found Alex on the

back porch, watching the sun go down. "So, you wanna come inside and talk to me? I'm not sitting out here in the cold November night, Alex."

Without a word, Alex went into the living room, where Walter reappeared with a glass of scotch. Alex sat on the couch and Walter took his leather chair. "You wanna tell me what that outburst was about? You really frightened Natalya and you're going to apologize later. Now, talk."

"Man, just...did you know where I was?"

"No, Alex, of course I didn't. I would have rescued you. I wish I could have. As it was, I had no idea where you were. What did they do to you?" Walter sat forward, wanting to go to Alex and hold him.

"What didn't they do to me! When they got me back, I was 'tranquilized' until they cut the kid out." Alex looked a bit disgusted.

"She was tranquilized when they gave her to me. She detoxed in my apartment. I know what they did to you..."

"Fuck if you don't!" Alex shouted, jumping to his feet. He began pacing the room as he elaborated on the last three years. "They took out the uterus, so they could study it. And they left me there, half aware, open-gut like a fucking fish. They removed everything that connected me to the kid. They could not figure out how it happened, so they tried to do it again. They cut my arm off, re-grew it and then..."

"Oh, God, Alex...they didn't..." Walter couldn't help letting the moan slip out of his mouth.

Alex flopped back on the couch. "Yeah, seven times they cut this arm off. Seven fucking times..." A brief momentary slip of his mask and tears dripped down Alex's face. Walter hadn't seen him this way since the hormones had raged in him when he was pregnant, and never before that. "When they realized it wasn't going to work, you know, with inserting the semen the first few times all sterile, they tried getting some big guy to fuck me. He fucked me until I bled and came in me, like you did that time. I was so drugged out; it was my fucking suggestion. The words just slipped out. When my arm didn't work, they tried the other one. Then my legs. Spender was so fucking pissed he had them cut off all four at once just to punish me..."

By this point, Alex was weeping and Walter immediately moved to his side to hold him, stroke his hair and kiss his cheeks. Walter rocked him slowly, waiting until he'd calmed. It was the most extraordinary moment they'd had in their relationship, so unlike Alex to show open emotion without some reason; hormones, a sad movie, something.

Alex had been hard as stone before, no emotions when they had sex before the pregnancy. He'd barely tolerated the kissing Walter insisted on. The man in his arms who was releasing a flood of emotions was a new person, someone completely different, changed by years of torture, anger and indifference. This was an Alex that Walter would have to learn about all over again.

Alex calmed down and sat up fast. "Shit, sorry, that came out of nowhere. It just...I..."

"Alex, you built up all that pain and sorrow over more than three years. It needed to get out. If you hadn't released it, I would have forced you to. If you need to cry like that again, just...go into the bathroom, lock the door, turn on the shower and let go. No one will bother you."

Walter was rewarded with a grin. "You always wanted to take care of everyone, huh? That's why you kept the kid, didn't give her to Scully."

"I kept Natalya because as soon as I saw her face, with your eyes and nose, my curly dark hair, I

knew that I could never look upon her and not love her with all my heart. Giving her to Scully wasn't an option I could live with." Walter kissed Alex's forehead again.

"Why didn't you marry her? I mean, that would have been the smartest thing, huh? You both get the kid, and you take care of them both, too. Then you're happy." Looking down into Alex's eyes, Walter saw that he waited for Walter to reject him, to tell him that he'd asked Dana and she refused.

"Why would I marry someone I didn't love to take the place of someone I do love? I could never replace you, Alex. I wouldn't even try." Another kiss, this time on Alex's mouth. Walter allowed Alex to deepen it, welcomed the questing tongue into his mouth. He knew Alex wanted to reconnect, and if Alex wanted to make love that night, Walter wouldn't deny him. He would just remind Alex to be quiet

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