

White Picket Fences

By Michele Briere

Note: Welcome to my award-winning (Wire Rims 2000 –1st place tie for Outstanding Schmoop, 2nd place for Outstanding Skinner Series and an honorable mention for Outstanding Skinner/Mulder story/series.) X-Files fan fiction story, White Picket Fences! All the separate chapters are here in this one, big, PDF file. Chapter bookmarks are set up for navigation, if you want to use them.

The majority of this story is nothing but NC-17 fluff, mostly between two men. If it isn't your thing, don't read it. If you are under age, don't read it. This is your final warning.

This story has been edited for spelling and punctuation errors, and nothing else. All canon errors and anything just plain stupid has remained. I take full credit for any and all things stupid and immature; I began writing stories by using X-Files for practice, and the new writer shows! Boy, the changes I would make, if I wanted to!

Just a few notes about topics on the story:

- 1) this issue about the boys running around after their baths -I was house sitting one weekend, and the grandsons of one of the owners came for a visit along with their mother. The owners were due back later in the evening. The boys were little, so, as little boys will, they were running and screeching through the water outside in the courtyard. It was a warm summer morning. The police showed up. Apparently a neighbor heard two small boys screeching and automatically called the police on the house owned by two gay men. That kind of ignorance irritates the crap out of me.
- 2) Kids singing -I was also irritated by the public schools deciding that music wasn't as important as sports, despite evidence to the contrary.
- 3) Hugs and kisses -when I was growing up, fathers didn't usually show that kind of affection to sons. It's fairly common, now, but not then. I like it. I find it sweet, watching a dad treating his son with the affection he would show a daughter. I think boys need it, just as much as girls.

If you look up my e-book on Kindle or Nook, called 'In Plain Sight' (use my name, as I think there are a few books with that name), you will find some familiar characters, as well as a familiar small town, all with different names and a different situation. Those original characters are combinations of the characters in this story and in my Stargate fanfic, Anunnaki. No smut, though. Sorry!

Enjoy!

And remember that writers like email, so drop me a line at michelebriere44@aol.com

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Prolog

The Fall of the Consortium began with a knock on Walter Skinner's door. Sitting at the breakfast table in his dressing robe, Skinner was reading the morning paper, shaking his head over the latest report in a series of assassinations around the world. Since some high-ranking US officials were also victims; the story was making Skinner's life hell and running all of his agents ragged. The victims were all among the more elite, scientists and leaders, but no other common thread had been found. Mulder had rambled on the subject one day recently in Skinner's office; he insisted that all the victims had been members of the Consortium. A secondary series of stories had been of buildings and ships exploding, obviously the work of an underground political group who had yet to make their announcement claiming responsibility. All of Skinner's agents were putting in triple time.

Skinner frowned, wondering who would be knocking at 6:30 in the morning. His brow cleared, it had to be Mulder. His agent was the only one who had a habit of knocking at the strangest hours.

"Who is it?" he called out.

"Mulder." Skinner was beginning to feel like getting a two bedroom apartment and just inviting the man to roomie with him. He opened the door and stood still.

"This has got to be a reoccurring nightmare," he said, seeing the man Mulder held by the scruff of the neck. This time, Scully was there, too, holding a gun on the other side.

"Good morning, sir. We have a present for you," Scully said cheerfully. Skinner opened the door, inviting them in.

"Gee, Scully, and I didn't get you anything." He closed the door and Krycek put his hand up in self-protection.

"Now, Skinner, hear me out first. I went to Mulder, he didn't find me." Krycek spoke quickly before Skinner could get in the first hit. Mulder released him.

"I think you may want to listen to what he has to say, sir," Mulder said. Krycek brought his hand up slowly, indicating his pocket. Skinner nodded. The man reached in and slowly withdrew a small case and Skinner tensed.

"Just a show of good faith," Krycek insisted. He opened the palm pilot and used the pen on the small board. "You better hit the head; you're about to feel as though you're passing the world's biggest kidney stone," the man advised him.

"What? What kind of game are you...?" Skinner got a strange look on his face and ran up the stairs.

Mulder smacked Krycek on the back of his head. "What the hell was that?! Scully, you better check and make sure he's alright." Scully followed Skinner's path up the stairs after giving Krycek a deadly glare.

"Chill out, Mulder! The critters have to get out somewhere." He received another smack and a shove toward the couch. Mulder handcuffed him and stood over him with the gun, waiting for Skinner and Scully to reappear.

They came down about twenty minutes later; Skinner was as white as a sheet. His robe was unbelted, sweat dripped down his chest to his black silk pajama bottoms. He kept an arm wrapped protectively around his stomach and sat down gingerly. Scully looked at Mulder and gave a nod; he'd be fine.

"Sorry, sir, that was unexpected," Mulder apologized. He put a case of computer disks on the coffee table. "Tell him what you told us!" he demanded of Krycek.

Krycek pointed at the case with both hands, the metal clinking. "That is all the necessary files, proof positive, to take down my employers."

Skinner opened his eyes, filled with exhaustion and pain, and looked with suspicion at the leather jacketed man. "Why."

"I have my reasons. I've shown my good faith," Krycek was saying. "Let me go. You take all the credit, information given to you by a secret informant. Taxpayers money well spent for the FBI's top agents. Good PR. I've also done a little editing in the files and removed certain familial ties." He looked at Mulder as he said that. Mulder wondered exactly how many people knew who his biological father was; it seemed as though everyone had known except him.

Skinner looked at the case without touching it. "Have you examined them?" he asked Mulder.

"A couple at random, sir. I glanced through them; they appear to be the real thing. I checked some information that I know as fact and it does bear out on the disks."

"And your recommendation?"

"I would suggest that this be kept under wraps until we get our hands on Smokey. If we go public with this first, he'll disappear." Skinner nodded his agreement. Krycek shook his head.

"What do you mean no?" Mulder was ready to smack him again.

"I mean it's too late. Where do you think I got this information from? I killed him and took it from his own files."

Mulder and Scully sat down before they fell down.

"Say that again," Skinner insisted, sitting up slowly.

"He's dead. I killed him. Fed him to a cougar with some hungry cubs. I took a great deal of pleasure in watching them snack." Krycek reached inside his jacket again and pulled something out, throwing it on the table next to the case. A half used pack of Morley's.

The next two years were spent in a continuous world-wide shock wave. One slam after another as people from all over the world were hauled before a U.N. war tribunal. Time was saved with a sudden surge in the suicide rate as people under investigation killed

themselves rather than face a death squad with the charge of treason against humanity. Those countries that didn't hold their own court-martials willingly handed over their guilty leaders. A surprising number of countries placed themselves under martial law until new leaders could be hastily elected. Russia and China closed their borders as revolutions in those countries began.

The United States remained under its Constitutional government; having so many elected officials had for once proved to be a boon, along with a president who was actually innocent of something. A humorous news broadcast showed the man quipping that he was feeling left out from a popular party. Since the president was only in office for 4 years, maybe 8, there was no point in recruiting him; he wasn't in power long enough to be of any real effectiveness to any long term plans. Only a few of the higher placed senators and congressmen had been called onto the U.N. carpet. Most people were amazed, considering that everyone thought that all political players were guilty of something. U.S. citizens discovered that the only thing their leaders were at the most guilty of was common stupidity and ignorance.

The disk containing the vaccine code was put onto the internet by a certain party of three geeks who have remained nameless, offering the vaccine free to anyone who wanted it. The CDC and WHO immediately began production, sending the vaccine to all doctors and health organizations to be offered free to everyone. The Consortium had synthesized it a few years earlier, keeping it for themselves and a select few.

Mulder spent his due time crowing, taking pride in his fellow humans for not wiggling out; too badly, that is. Militaries were quickly organized and instructed on withholding any invasions. A sub-story continued at the same time; a Fifth-column within the clone ranks had come forward, requesting immunity. Mulder and the Kurts rallied them, declaring them a slave race deliberately created to serve the invaders. They only wanted their freedom. They were all sterile; they only wanted to be allowed to live the remainder of their lives as free people. People around the world who had existed under the yoke of oppression at one time or another had immediately stood up to sponsor the strangers. Since the clones were all trained in science, the scientific community took them in with great pleasure, replacing their shamed members who had turned traitors.

The Human Race was quite loud in its trumpeting dare for anyone or anything to try and take over their planet. Space remained quiet.

Skinner spent his time before the Tribunal, as he had expected to. Mulder and Scully stood by his side, defending him before the world. Krycek had arranged for the files to reflect nothing of Skinner except that he was a victim of blackmail, with his very life at stake with the flick of a switch. The files containing the blue-prints for the palm pilot and the nanites were entered as the main evidence, along with Skinner's medical records of his stay in the hospital, his actual death, and subsequent miraculous revival, all verified by the attending physician. Skinner was the only person in thousands exonerated due to special circumstances beyond his control.

Krycek had also arranged for his own name to be taken out of the files. Just to keep continuity, he replaced his name with a fictitious one. The three agents could honestly say that they had never known anyone named Salacious Crumb. A certain man in Hollywood took a quite vocal exception to the name.

The strange assassinations and bombings around the world continued after a four month silence, but since it was proven from the files that the victims were all Consortium members, only a half-hearted attempt was made to investigate.

Mulder had his suspicions but he kept them to himself.

Although Skinner was welcomed back to the FBI, he turned in his resignation for an early retirement. He was 51; he wanted to live the other half of his life in relative peace and quiet for a change. He stayed around long enough to see Mulder finally taken as a serious player. Offered Skinner's position, Mulder threw out a shock wave when he refused, politely. How could he continue to investigate his cases if he was stuck behind a desk? He agreed to be bumped only up to ASAC, that way he wouldn't be permanently paper-bound. The Hoover rocked again when he nominated Scully. After all the blue-tape of proper channels, she accepted.

Skinner was quite happy to help Scully move in, and had even handed over Kimberly as a welcoming present. Both women were pleased with the arrangement; any other assistant would be scared out of the building after dealing with Mulder for a week. Mulder was not amused.

With the help of a convincing phone call out of the blue from an old friend, Skinner moved to a small town in the Virginia country-side, taking over as Sheriff for the sleepy little den. He could keep busy, fish when he wanted to, prop his feet up on the porch railing and wave at the neighbors. What could happen in BFE, Virginia?

Chapter 1: A Quiet Day At The Office

"Shut up, Tommy Lee!" Skinner yelled into the cell. The drunk cackled. Skinner felt as though he were being watched and turned around, almost jumping out of his boots. Mulder was slumped against the door jam.

"Jesus, Mulder. What are you doin' here?" Skinner sat at his desk and shuffled some paperwork. It had been six months but Mulder hadn't changed a bit; maybe a few more streaks of white at his temples. He's probably going to have his mother's white hair, Skinner thought absently; damned if it won't make him look distinguished. Mulder came in and sat down, propping his feet up on the desk, ignoring Skinner's glare.

"You're developing a bit of a twang there, Skinner," Mulder commented as he cracked open a seed bag.

"Just call me Polly Parrot," he muttered.

"Polly wanna crackah?"

"*Goddammit*, Tommy Lee!"

"My couch has been invaded by Russia," Mulder stated abruptly. Skinner paled.

"Shit. I thought he was dead by now. What is he doing at your apartment?"

Mulder knew that brown-eyed innocent look. "He's been telling me some interesting stories." He spit a seed into a paper cup, taking his time.

"Are you going to elaborate or do I have to drag it out syllable by syllable?" Skinner tapped his fingers on the desktop.

"Is there something you'd like to confess before I beat the shit out of you?" Mulder offered instead.

"Yee-haw! You go, boy!"

"Shut! Up!" Skinner yelled into the tank. He could feel himself starting to panic, wondering just what exactly Krycek had let spill. "I don't know what you're talking about, Mulder."

Mulder hit the desk in anger. "Bullshit, Skinner!"

"Yeah, bullshit, Skinnah!"

"Shut up!!!" they both yelled. Skinner stood and walked the long way around the desk past Mulder. "Let's talk outside."

The men stepped onto the porch, past the curious receptionist and several deputies. The midday air was beginning to become hot. People walked past and waved with a friendly "hey, Sheriff!", as they looked curiously at the city-boy and his fancy Taurus. Skinner put his hands on the railing, leaning down for a moment as he thought.

"Mulder, I don't know what he's been telling you but I'm not going to try and justify my actions, not to you, not to anyone. I had my reasons for doing whatever I did in the past and I won't apologize for it."

"Don't give me that crap, Skinner, I'm the one that stood by you and fought for your exoneration. That isn't what I'm talking about." Mulder spun Skinner around by the

shoulder. Skinner looked at him in surprise. Mulder took a step closer while Skinner took a step back.

"Krycek told me something interesting, about you. Something that maybe you should have discussed with me, oh, about nine years ago? You've made me wait nine fucking years, Skinner!" Skinner continued to back up in alarm until he was cornered against the post. He paled again, hoping that Krycek didn't spill what he should have forgotten about. Mulder was nose to nose with the older man.

"You're a coward, Skinner," Mulder informed him. "Well, I have news for you; it is my opinion that being in the closet is a shameful thing. I'm not ashamed. And I refuse to hide from the public." Mulder brushed his mouth across Skinner's, electricity sparking. "You make the next move or there won't be one," he said softly.

By the time Skinner remembered to breathe, Mulder was gone, headed back toward the city. Skinner took a quick look around. No one was giving him any funny looks. He strode into his office, shut the door and picked up the phone.

"Krycek!" he barked into Mulder's answering machine. "I know you're there, boy, you answer that phone or I swear...."

"Well, shit, Skinner, take a Prozac," came the familiar husky voice.

"How could you tell him?! You promised! I was drunk when I told you!" Skinner paced as he spoke.

"Oh, quit whining! Biggest damned whiner... I've learned something recently, Skinner. Life is too short to waste and you've wasted half of yours already. Consider this my retirement gift to you. Now get some backbone and do something about it." The line went dead. Skinner stared at the phone. That was twice in the past ten minutes that someone had called him a coward.

People stared, craning their heads and tripping over themselves as the denim clad, flannel shirted man strode down the hallway, boots clomping on the floor. He strode past Scully's office, not taking notice that Kimberly choked on her coffee and quickly dialed the inner extension. He looked into a nearby office, which was empty. A careful look around the bullpen, ignoring the incredulous stares, and he found what he was looking for.

It took Mulder a moment to realize that something was going on. He looked up just in time to see a pissed-off sheriff bearing down on him. Mulder backed up until the wall stopped him. Two long arms caged him in, hands planted firmly on the wall on either side of him, baseball hat dangling from one hand.

"How's this for public?" Skinner challenged him. Skinner kissed him hard, quite visibly using his tongue. Mulder made a small noise in the back of his throat. The file fell to the floor, papers scattering, his hands fluttering until they found a trim waist to hold on to before sliding up around a strong lean back.

The room was silent except for ringing phones. Scully opened her door and looked out, biting back a shocked grin. Kim was peeking wide-eyed over her shoulder.

"Skinner!" Scully barked, rearranging her face into a frown, "Stop seducing my agent, he has work to do!" She slammed the door shut. Skinner sucked on that pouty lower lip before giving it a lick.

"My place, Friday night," he said, his baritone a low rumble.

Mulder nodded weakly. "Yeah, sure... whatever." And he slid into a chair before he melted to the floor.

Skinner clomped over to Scully's office.

"Ride 'um, cowboy," someone muttered.

"I fully intend to," Skinner called back as he walked into her office and shut the door.

After a moment, the office erupted in a babble of noise. The men didn't quite know how to handle the scene they witnessed and looked embarrassed as they made jokes, while the women huddled in clutches, gushing over Skinner's long legs and tight ass, looking like he had been poured into his jeans. They descended on Mulder, demanding details first thing Monday morning and giving him first night pointers. Thirty minutes later, Scully's door opened as she and Skinner left for lunch. The office noise quieted a little.

"Fox! Remember to bring the wine," Skinner called out on his way past. Mulder buried his face in his hands. He created a monster!

Friday night, Skinner opened the door and watched as Mulder parked his car and walked across the lawn. Skinner was actually relieved; he had been afraid that Mulder wouldn't show up through sheer obstinance. He had been rubbing his hands on his pants all day, wiping away the nervous sweat, wondering what the hell he had gotten himself into this time.

"Hi," he said as Mulder came up to the porch.

"Hey." Mulder handed him a brown bag with the wine in it.

Well, that was stimulating conversation, Skinner thought, kicking himself. He shut the door and found Mulder looking around the living room.

"You're looking a little peaked, are you alright?" Mulder asked with concern.

Skinner nodded. "Just nervous." Shit, what did he say that for?!

Mulder took the bag back and put it down on the table. He stepped up close to Skinner and put his arms around the man's neck.

"Don't be nervous. We don't have to make polite conversation, we already know each other. We don't have to do anything if you're not ready. I want you; I've wanted you for years. I can wait if you need me to." Mulder softly calmed him. Skinner tentatively put his arms around Mulder's waist and just held him, as he had wanted to do for years.

"I'm sorry if I went too far at the office. Have they been giving you a rough time?" Skinner asked after he relaxed. Mulder chuckled, his fingers playing with the small fringe of brown and silver hair and laid his head on Skinner's wide shoulder, drinking in fresh clean scent of the man.

"No more than what Spooky got. I can deal with it. Actually, several people have come out since then; they figured that if it was ok for us to be so open, they could do it, too."

Mulder pulled back slightly to look into Skinner's eyes.

"I'm glad you came after me, I was afraid that I went too far," he confessed. He kissed Skinner lightly on the mouth, just brushing their lips together. Skinner rubbed his hands up and down Mulder's back, enjoying the feel of the man, the sinuous muscles, feeling so different from a woman's softer, more rounded body. He enjoyed being with women, found them attractive, was turned on by them, but there was just something about Mulder that called to him, something...primal.. that aroused every cell in his body.

"Candles on the table, music in the air. Something smells great. I would never have taken you for a romantic, Walter," Mulder murmured approvingly. Skinner kissed the side of his neck, slowly turning them around. He was glad that Mulder was pleased with the atmosphere that he tried to create, he wasn't sure if it was acceptable for a man like it was for a woman.

"I have my moments," he whispered, sucking gently on an earlobe.

"God, I hope this is going to be more than a moment," Mulder said fervently. Skinner lifted his head and looked into the passion filled hazel eyes.

"Mulder, I've.. never..." He knew that he wanted Mulder, and he knew the mechanics, but he lacked the experience. He had to be honest, Mulder needed to know. What if he disappointed the younger man? God knows, he never expected Mulder to be even

remotely interested, much less have things progress to the point where he had to worry whether or not he could please the man. Mulder leaned back a little to look into Skinner's face with a bemused expression. He gently, slowly, stroked the high cheek bones with his fingertips. Skinner swallowed hard and shut his eyes for a moment, reveling in the delicate touch.

"I've wanted to, with you, in fact I shocked myself when I was able to admit it, but if you don't want to, I'll understand." His heart was about to jump out of his throat as he babbled, waiting to see what Mulder was going to do. Mulder kissed him. Slowly. Claiming Skinner's mouth as his own territory, as Mulder's tongue made an inspection of the moist, sweet cavern.

Skinner slid his hands up the man's back, keeping one wrapped around his waist, the other hand carding the dark hair as he returned Mulder's kiss. Mulder reached between them and cupped Skinner's cloth covered erection, eliciting a moan from the man as he firmly squeezed. Skinner lost what little sense he had left.

"Why don't you show me your room? I want to make love to you," Mulder stated directly. Skinner flushed and nodded, unable to speak, thankful that Mulder was going to take the lead for their first time. He took Mulder's hand and led him up the stairs.

They undressed each other, taking pleasure in the other's body, touching, tasting each patch of skin uncovered, until they were a tangled mess laying across the bed. They laughed as they bumped noses, moaned and groaned as they explored each other's body.

Mulder paused as he leaned over Skinner, kneeling between his legs. He cradled Skinner's head in his hands, looking into the man's eyes as he slowly entered him. Skinner stroked his face with wondering fingers, over lips swollen from passionate kisses, the taste of each other on their mouths. He was expecting pain, but Mulder had taken the time to make sure he was open and prepared.

When Mulder was all the way in, he took a moment, giving Skinner a chance to adjust, before beginning their ride into another world. Mulder moved slowly in and out, both of them wanting their first time together to last as long as possible. Neither of them spoke, they only looked into each other's eyes, entrusting their souls to each other as they came together.

Skinner kept his legs wrapped around Mulder's waist, refusing to let him go as they calmed down, wanting to keep that incredible feeling alive as long as possible.

"I've dreamed about this for nine years. If I'm still dreaming, I hope I never wake up," Skinner said to him, his voice husky.

The morning sunlight drifted through the window framing the head of the man sleeping next to him in an ethereal glow. Skinner had been awake for a while, watching, listening to Mulder as he slept. He unable to believe that the man was actually curled up next to him, exhausted after their first night together. Skinner shifted and winced a little; his entire body was pleasantly sore. He was pleased when Mulder turned out to be as enthusiastic and creative in bed as he was in the rest of his life. It had been a long time since Skinner had romped all night; hell, it had been a long time since he'd romped at all.

A call of nature forced him from his silent musings. He snuck out of the bed and did what he needed to before looking at himself in the mirror. He almost didn't recognize himself. He needed a shave. The shave turned into a shower; he stood under the hot stream, letting the warmth soak into his muscles. A cool blast hit his back and a pair of arms encircled his waist from behind.

"Is there room for two in here?" a sleepy voice asked.

"Absolutely."

A hand slid down and cupped his genitals. Skinner chuckled.

"I think we broke it, Fox," he mourned, looking down. Mulder leaned around to peer down the front to the package in hand.

"Bummer. We're not 16 anymore, Walter," Mulder commiserated; he wasn't exactly up to snuff himself yet. Skinner turned and stole a long good morning kiss before lathering the man up with soap. They took their time washing each other until the water started to run cold and their fingers were pruned.

Later, they sat together quietly on the porch as they drank their coffee and read the morning paper; Mulder the sports and Skinner the financial section. They read to each other from the national and local news. More trials and assassinations were going on, although it looked as though things were finally beginning to wind down.

"They're re-quoting you again," Skinner commented.

"Yeah, they can't think of anything new to say. No one has even called me in a couple of weeks," Mulder complained.

Skinner swatted at him with the paper. "Pedestal getting a little too high?"

Mulder didn't look up from the Knick's scores. "They should have something new to talk about fairly shortly once word of this gets out," he warned gently. "I meant what I said, Walter, I won't hide. If you want out, say so now."

Skinner took the paper away from him and turned his face. "Move in with me." To prove his point to the startled man, Skinner leaned in and took a long slow kiss.

Someone cleared their throat uncomfortably. Skinner took his time responding. It was his first deputy.

"Good morning, Kyle. This is my partner, Fox Mulder. Be nice, he's going to be moving in shortly and he shoots better than you." Skinner informed the man. Kyle had never seen a man flamboozled by a kiss before, much less from a kiss by another man. He liked Sheriff Skinner, though, so he'd try and adjust, despite his own queasiness. A lot of things were happening in the world that he'd never given much credence to before so this was just one more to add to the growing pile of weirdness. He honestly thought that Mulder was with that pretty little red-headed filly that was always with them on the TV. Kyle was ready to surrender all reason.

"Yessir." Kyle knew that Skinner was kidding about him being a bad shot, he wasn't, but he had a feeling that Mulder was a better shot. He knew who Mulder was, of course, everyone who paid attention to the world news knew who both of them were. Their little town had been proud and surprised to have Skinner take over as sheriff in place of a boring retirement. Skinner had given everyone standing orders to dissuade any reporters from asking questions, so whenever one showed up, everyone would either clam up or start telling big whoppers in protection of one of their national heroes. Skinner loved the South; they were so conscientious of duty and honor. The reporters eventually stopped coming around. Kyle wondered if the world knew this tidbit of information. He shook Mulder's hand.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Mulder. Good job with the, well, everything." Kyle gestured to the world at large and Mulder chuckled, understanding what the man was getting at.

"Thank you, but I had a lot of help." He patted Skinner's knee. Kyle watched the movement and swallowed hard. This was going to take some getting used to, but, hey, he was country, he could live with it. So long as they didn't try anything with him.

"Yessir. Uh, sheriff? I hate to disturb your Saturday mornin' peace but Miz Carmody is screechin' about bats again."

Skinner raised his hands in exasperation. Bats were common in rural areas, but there were no reports of rabies. "What does she expect me to do about them? Tell her to buy a cat."

"Yessir. But she insisted that this one turned into a man." Kyle cleared his throat again, twirling his hat in his hand uncomfortably.

Skinner stared at him for a moment before turning to Mulder. "I think that this is your department."

"...and so I looked out my window and there it was, the biggest most ugliest of God's creatures that I have ever seen, flyin' about my window tryin' to get in. I just blinked and all of a sudden a man was standin' there in the shadows! He tapped on the window and I said 'be gone, creature of Satan! I do NOT give you permission to enter into my home!'. It's one of their rules, ya'll know. Now, I'm a good Christian woman, sheriff, no man is gettin' into my bed until I'm properly wed, certainly no creature of the night! He left, ran right off, so scared that he didn't even fly away."

The men nodded understandingly as they took notes. Skinner didn't dare contradict the woman, all 400 pounds of her with curlers in her hair and a bright pink mummu tenting her body.

He looked around the living room, it was immaculate, not a thing out of place. He noted a video box on top of the TV, making out the title; '*Salem's Lot*'. Skinner made a notation of it. If nothing else, Ms. Carmody gave him plenty of practice writing reports. He'd much rather be lounging around the house with Mulder, who had decided to be generous and leave this X-File to Skinner.

Hoskins went outside to the side of the house to inspect the area. He bent down and waved at Skinner to join him. Skinner went out, followed closely by Ms. Carmody. They looked at the ground. Skinner was surprised to see footprints.

"Ah-ha! I told you, Sheriff!" Ms. Carmody caroled triumphantly. The men looked around and spotted a candy wrapper nearby. Skinner picked it up with a pair of tweezers. The chocolate was still fresh on the inside. He held it up to Hoskins.

"Who do we know with an addiction to *Mars' Bars*?" he asked his deputy.

A short time later, the men had cornered the squirrely little man in the barber shop.

"Where were you earlier this morning, Reggie?" Skinner asked him. The short, skinny barber trembled and collapsed into a chair, breathing hard.

"Please, Sheriff, I meant no harm," he whined in a high voice. He mopped his brow with a cloth handkerchief.

"Reggie, what possessed you to peak into Ms. Carmody's window?" Skinner knew that the barber wasn't a bad man, but to go around peering into windows?

"I, she, Oh Lord, sheriff, she's just so beautiful! I just had to see her, I couldn't help myself."

Skinner stared at him.

"Excuse me?"

"She has those big beautiful blue eyes, full lips just ripe for kissin', and that voice! I'll probably be damned for it, but I go to church every Sunday just to hear her sing." Reggie sighed and fanned himself with the cloth. Although Skinner himself didn't attend the Baptist church, much to the reverend's disappointment, he could still hear Ms. Carmody belt out those hymns every week as the music echoed down the street past Skinner's home. The woman did have an excellent voice.

"So, are you saying that you're in love with Ms. Carmody?" he asked the barber. Reggie flushed and nodded.

"Yes, sir, I have been for years but I know that she'd never give me the time of day, so I just worship from afar," he sighed with love-struck certainty. Skinner waited for a moment, getting hold of himself. He couldn't see it, but to each his own...

"Reggie, I'm going to give you a piece of advice that was recently given to me: Life is too short to waste. You need to go and say something to her. Even if she turns you down, at least you can say that you tried. Bring her some flowers and ask her to sit on the porch with you." Skinner tried to dispel the uncharitable image of Reggie being squished under the woman. As Mulder had taught him, anything is possible.

"Do you think so, sheriff? Do you think I have a chance with her?" Reggie asked hopefully.

"Well, Reg, you won't know until you try. Go for it. And no more peeking into windows."

"Yes, sir."

When he got home, Skinner found Mulder on the phone with Scully so he put the intercom on and told them both the story. Scully laughed and asked Skinner if he was sure he could handle the stress of the job. Skinner informed her where she could stick the stress.

Chapter 2: Green-eyed Shadows

Something woke him up. He was still as he listened. Mulder was snoring lightly next to him but that wasn't it, he was used to that sound. He heard it again, it sounded like someone was in the kitchen. Skinner leaned over. "Fox. Wake up," he whispered. Mulder stirred and blinked.

"Wha.."

"Shh. Someone is in the kitchen," Skinner whispered in his ear. Mulder was instantly awake. They silently dragged their pants on and unholstered their guns. They carefully made their way into the hall. A light was coming from the kitchen. They slinked around the wall.

"Freeze!" they yelled, jumping into the open doorway, guns drawn. Two small faces stared up at them in surprise and the men immediately pulled their guns up.

"Chill, guys," a weary voice said. Krycek took his head out of the refrigerator. He put a bowl of left-over chicken on the table.

"Krycek, what the f.. what do you think you're doing?" Skinner asked. Krycek stopped in mid-reach for the glasses.

"Feeding these boys, what does it look like?" he completed his quest for the glasses and poured milk for the two boys sitting quietly at the table. Mulder looked at the boys, identical twins about four years old. They had dark hair and were dressed in blue jeans and black sweaters, also identical.

"Tell me you haven't taken up kidnapping," Skinner said suspiciously.

"Only certain children," the man responded. He looked up from the chair to see Skinner's lawman expression. "Oh, come on, Skinner, even you're not that blind. Look at them." Krycek jerked a finger at the boys who were carefully eating the chicken. The men came into the room and took a close look at them. Mulder drew a breath.

"Krycek, didn't anyone tell you about condoms?" The boys looked up at Mulder with moss green eyes surrounded by a ring of thick black lashes. Krycek snorted.

"Nice try, Mulder. Try again. While you two are out here playing house, I'm still working. I rescued them from the tanks," he said around a chicken leg.

"The what?" Skinner looked back and forth at the men, not following.

"The tanks?! Oh, God, Krycek." Mulder sat down. He waved for Skinner to sit. "Later," he said, gesturing toward the boys. Skinner resigned himself for a session of double talk until the explanation.

"I've been sifting through more of the experimental crap and I came across my ID. Since I was unaware of ever having volunteered for lab duty, except for my new arm, thanks for asking by the way, I checked it out." He looked disdainfully at the milk and fetched himself a beer. "Someone must have gotten wind that I was on the way because by the time I got there, the lab was almost completely destroyed. The firebugs hadn't gotten there yet, though. All the tanks were dead except these two." He looked at the boys with an odd expression.

"What was I supposed to do, Mulder?" he asked softly. "It would have been like killing myself. I'm no angel, but these two are still innocent."

Skinner absently wiped the mouth of the nearest boy. "Someone tell me what's going on," he said easily, not wanting to alarm the children.

Mulder turned to him. "They're not his sons, Walter, they're his clones."

Skinner froze. Mulder turned back to Krycek.

"There was nothing else you could have done, Krycek," he reassured the man. The boys were finished with their late dinner and were beginning to look sleepy. "Come on, let's get them to bed and then we can talk." Mulder handed his gun to Skinner and picked up one of the boys while Krycek took the other. Skinner went on ahead to put the guns in his room before going into the guest room to turn down the covers on the bed. The boys were striped down to their underwear and tucked in. Krycek touched their hair hesitantly before turning out the light.

They went into the living room where Skinner poured them all a drink. Krycek sat at the end of the couch with his head thrown back, staring at the ceiling.

"Walter, I've told you about the tanks," Mulder said. "Remember the Clones' story? And about all the tanks with more of them being grown?" Skinner thought for a moment and nodded; science had never been his strong suit, he was a poli-sci major. He got into the legal aspects of the Clones' case and glossed over the scientific parts. He trusted what Mulder and Scully told him, while they listened to his legal advise.

"They're like big seven foot fish tanks, only each one has a person growing in it. I saw Kurts that were nearly completely grown and others in various stages of growth, from fetal to teenager." He turned to Krycek.

"Alex, I don't mean this to sound snide, but why were they cloning you?" Mulder asked.

Krycek shrugged. "I guess they were done with me," he said.

"What do you mean, done with you?" Skinner asked. Krycek lowered his head.

"They only clone people they have a continued use for. After the original is dead." he said expressionlessly. Mulder nodded; Sam was killed when she was still a child, but her adult clones were walking around.

"You're next on the hit list."

Krycek gave a hollow laugh. "Yeah, I guess they got kinda pissed at me." He drank down the glass of scotch and grimaced. He hadn't noticed what Skinner gave him.

"Jeez, Skinner, do I look like a Highlander to you?" He got up and helped himself to the vodka.

"So what are you going to do with them?" Skinner asked him. Krycek sat and stared at the men. Skinner stared back.

"No!" Skinner pointed a finger at him. "You cannot leave them here, are you crazy?"

"What else am I supposed to do with them? I don't have a permanent home, I don't have the world's most secure job, and I'm not exactly father material. Maybe I should just drop them off at the nearest orphanage?" Krycek said sarcastically. "They may be newborns, Skinner, but they are house-trained. Just feed and water them, wash them and give them a bed."

"What?! They are children, not dogs. You have a responsibility to them, Krycek." Skinner was growing disgusted with the man. Krycek glared at him.

"I really don't think so, since I had nothing to do with their development, except for stolen DNA which wasn't my fault, but I will make sure that they are kept safe. Should I take them to the nearest Kurt and drop them off? What kind of a life is that? I'm not complete scum, Skinner, I do wish for them to have as normal an upbringing as possible, God knows I sure as hell didn't. What would you like me to do? Should I go down to the nearest unemployment office and sign up? 'Well, Mr. Krycek, and what was your last job?' 'Well, Mr. Official Sir, I can proudly say that I am responsible for the chaos the world is currently in at the moment, I'm the one that turned over the evidence on the Consortium. I have thirty glorious years with the bad guys, seventeen of which I spent running around the world assassinating people.' Wouldn't that impress them?" he stood in front of the men, daring them to refute him. Skinner rubbed his face; Krycek was right. Damn.

Mulder stood up. "Let's go to bed and sleep on it. We are all tired." He held out a hand and pulled Skinner to his feet. "Alex, I'll get you a pillow and blanket for the couch." Krycek nodded a silent thanks.

Later in bed, Skinner tossed, unable to sleep.

"One Krycek is bad enough, but three?" he muttered. Mulder sighed.

"There is only one Krycek. The boys are clones. The other clones I've met all had separate personalities so I think that it is safe to assume that the boys will, too. Our personality is from nurturing, for the most part. But, Walter," Mulder turned Skinner's face toward him. "Krycek is also the one who turned over the evidence, he saved our lives and the lives of those children." He kissed Skinner lightly. "We can't turn those children over to a stranger or to the government. There are still pockets left over that haven't been found. They will find out about the boys and take them back to a lab, if they don't kill them outright. I certainly don't want them raised by some asshole that will turn

them out to be worse than Krycek. Picture it; eighteen years from now, I could be chasing them all over creation trying to kill them before they kill anymore innocent people. We can't allow that to happen. We can't allow them to be raised as assassins. They have the potential to be good people. We can turn their bio-engineered talents toward the law, instead of away from it. They're just children." He stroked Skinner's cheek lovingly. Skinner could find no argument, Mulder was right.

"Alright, Fox, alright."

When they awoke the next morning, Krycek was gone. The men really weren't surprised. A quick check showed the boys still asleep in the guest room, a large envelope stuck to the door with another computer disk. The men read the note, unbelievably.

"We need to make sure there is nothing wrong with them. What if they get sick or break something?" Skinner asked. Mulder instantly thought of green goo and cursed Krycek for leaving so fast.

"Scully, would you get your little black bag and come out here, please? No, nothing is wrong, just a little preventive medicine." Mulder hung up the phone after a confirmation.

"She isn't going to like this," Skinner warned.

Two hours later, Scully looked into two pair of green eyes. She turned to the men, her own blue eyes speaking volumes. She turned back to the boys, speaking gently to them as she turned them this way and that, doing the doctor thing. She looked them over as they stood, still clad in their underwear.

"Well, they appear healthy. No signs of physical injuries, they're quiet, which is a little abnormal in boys but then they may be a little traumatized. God knows, I would be."

She sat them at the table and poured milk into the cereal, looking with disapproval at the sugared stuff. She tilted her head toward the livingroom. The men followed her out.

"Where is he?" A.D. Scully asked. Mulder blinked in innocence.

"Who?" he asked. Scully glared at him.

"Do I look stupid to you? I'd know those eyes anywhere, now where is he?"

Mulder tossed his arms up and sank onto the couch.

"We don't know, Scully," Skinner said quietly. "He dropped them off here last night and was gone by morning." Scully paced.

"Let me get this straight. Alex Krycek brought his children here, out of the blue, and left them?"

"Scully, they're not his children," Mulder said. He looked at Skinner. "I thought you told her while I was getting changed?" Skinner shook his head.

"I thought you told her."

Scully looked back and forth at the men.

"*Someone* tell me *something!*" she began to shout and changed it to an annoyed hiss. Mulder hated hurting her.

"They're clones, Scully. Like Emily. I think they are a more advanced series, though. They aren't showing any signs of a blood problem. Here, he left this addressed to you. His note said that it contains their bio-data." He handed her the disk.

Scully stopped and looked at it. She sat down abruptly and shut her eyes for a moment.

"Well. A social worker needs to be called, you both know that," she said. The men shook their heads.

"What do you mean no?" she asked. She could tell they were still hiding something.

"Gentlemen?" she said with a warning. Mulder looked at Skinner.

"We have to tell her," he said. Scully sat back, waiting for it.

"Krycek's note. He says I'm their godfather and grants me temporary custody." Mulder hung his head, waiting for the storm to hit. He handed her the note.

The boys came into the room, having done with their cereal.

"Come on, kids, you need to get dressed before you get a chill," Scully said. She put the folder down and herded them up to the guest room. In a few minutes she called down clothing sizes to the men, instructing them to go to the store while she put the boys into a bath. Knowing when they've been out-parented, they did as ordered. In a panic, Scully opened a window and called down to them just as they were starting to walk down the street to the local mercantile.

"Don't let Mulder pick out colors," she instructed Skinner. Skinner waved to her, trying not to laugh. Mulder wasn't amused.

She was relieved when they came back with jeans and t-shirts, along with the pre-requisite under-things. And lots of toys. Scully looked on disapprovingly as Mulder unloaded them.

"They're learning toys," he defended himself. She picked up a teddy bear.

"Everyone needs a teddy, Scully. Even you." He handed her a third one and kissed her cheek. "I didn't get me one, I already have one." Skinner smiled at them as he got the boys into fresh clothes. Red flannel checks for one and blue flannel checks for the other. His heart felt strange as they steadied themselves by putting their hands on his arms and shoulders. He surprised himself by giving them each a hug and a pat on the fanny. Mulder knew there was an actual human inside Skinner.

"They need names," Skinner said. Mulder froze in amazement.

"We forgot to ask Krycek if they had names!" Mulder suddenly remembered.

Skinner was still on the floor with the boys. "Did Alex give you names?" he asked them. They looked blankly at him, still not talking. No one was going to push them for speech; after all, they were only a few days old. Skinner looked up.

"I refuse to call them Alex 2 and 3," Scully said. The men agreed. They thought about it.

"Well, want to stick with the ethnic angle?" Mulder suggested. The others didn't know what he meant.

"Alex –Alexei..." he waved a hand. They got it; a Slavic name.

"Can I suggest Pavel? I like it, it flows," Mulder said.

"How about Sergei?" Scully said. Skinner snorted.

"I don't think so. How about Ivan? It's a good strong name. Paul and John, for short."

"Now all we need is a George." Mulder found a comb and ran it through their thick dark brown hair.

"What about Ringo?" Scully asked.

"We have a Ringo. Gunmen?" Mulder reminded her. She forgot that Langley's name was Ringo. Poor man was doomed from the start, she thought. Skinner looked back and forth at them.

"Alright, you two. How about it, boys, Pavel and Ivan. Do you like those names?" he asked the kids. They nodded shyly. Skinner looked closely at them.

"You know, I can't tell them apart," he confessed to the others. Mulder and Scully had to agree.

"I washed them, neither has any identifying marks." Scully said.

Skinner rummaged in the bags of new clothing. All the jeans were blue but the t-shirts were different colors. He held out the shirts to the boys.

"Which one wants the white?" he asked them. One of the boys pointed. Skinner handed the whites to him along with the red t-shirts.

"Which one wants to be Ivan?" he asked. The first one did. "Good. Ivan will wear white and red, Pavel will wear blue and green. At least until we can tell you two apart, alright?" they nodded.

Chapter 3: Adam

The woman approached hesitantly. She had already tried their home, but no one was there. A young girl in the yard next door told her to try Sheriff Skinner's office.

"Yes, ma'am, may I help you?" the receptionist asked. The strange woman in front of her was thin and didn't look well, she was possibly homeless, so Becky spoke gently to her, not wanting to spook her. A child hid behind her skirt, shyly peeking out.

"Could I see the sheriff? It won't take long." She clutched at her bag.

"I'll see if he's available, can I tell him what it's regarding?"

"It's a personal matter," she whispered. Becky nodded and dialed the extension.

"You can go in, first door on the left." Becky directed her down the hall.

The woman walked slowly, holding the child's hand. She knocked and entered at the bid. The man looked up, his face friendly. Becky had quickly rung him back and said to be extra nice, this one looked like an injured bird.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm Skinner, how can I help you."

The woman had been afraid to approach him; he seemed so serious and commanding on the television.

"Actually, sir, I need to speak with Fox Mulder but I've had a difficult time reaching him." She spoke in a soft voice. Skinner indicated a seat.

"Well, he's usually home after 6, you can leave a message with me, if you'd like." He noticed the child peaking out. "Hey, little guy." Skinner gave him a reassuring smile. The boy came forward a little and Skinner gasped, his eyes widening.

"Oh, my God," he whispered. He looked at the woman and she gave a watery smile, nodding. Skinner picked up the phone and hit the speed dial. It was answered on the second ring.

"You'd better come home, now. No, the boys are fine, I'm fine. Just get home." He hung up and stood.

"It's about an hour from the city. Why don't we take this back to the house?" he suggested. She nodded; that was probably a good idea.

Mulder raced home, panicking. Normally it took him an hour and ten minutes, he made it in forty-five. He found Skinner in the kitchen, the heart of their home. The woman at the table brought him up short.

"Rhonda??"

"Hello, Fox." She held out her hands for him to take and he belatedly bent to kiss her cheek.

"It's been, what, about 8 years?" He'd had a brief fling with her and he wondered just how much trouble he was in with Skinner. "Fox, you have another visitor. He's waiting in the boys' room," Skinner said gently. Mulder looked at him.

"Huh?" said the walking dictionary.

"Go and say hello, and then come back down here." Mulder could see that Skinner was being insistent so he gave Rhonda's hands an apologetic squeeze and went on his mysterious errand.

Thirty minutes later, Mulder came back into the kitchen, his face white. He didn't say a word as he opened the top cabinet, took down a shot glass and the bottle of scotch. He looked at the glass for a moment and took a slug directly from the bottle.

"That's ... I... you..." He took another slug. Skinner took the bottle away from him and sat him down.

"When.. why didn't you.. oh, my God, I have a son!"

"...so by the time I found out I was pregnant, we had already split up. I did leave you a message with the PBX operator for you to call me. You never did. I thought that you just didn't want to talk to me anymore. You had that pretty partner, so why should you call me?" Rhonda wrung her tissue and dabbed at her eyes.

"I'd read about you once in a while, in the papers. I honestly thought that you were crazy, coming out with all that monster and alien stuff, so I thought it was for the best that you never knew about him. When all this started a couple of years ago, and I saw that you had been right, I felt so guilty, Fox. I called you again, really I did, several times. I even left notes on your door." She blew her nose. She couldn't have known that notes and messages had a bad habit of being intercepted during that time.

"I never got any messages, Rhonda. I would never have left you on the lurch; I take responsibility for my actions. I would have helped you, whatever you wanted. I would have been there for you." He rubbed her shoulders. He couldn't blame her for thinking that he was crazy; there were times when he thought he was crazy. Who wants their kid raised by a crazy father?

She dug into her bag, taking out a large envelope of papers and handed him one.

"I've told Adam that you didn't know about him. I didn't want him to blame you for anything; it wouldn't have been fair to either of you. I think he understands; he's very smart. I've done my best to do right by him, given him the best I could," she said, a mother's pride shining through. Mulder read the paper and frowned.

"What is this? Rhonda, this is a medical report. Am I reading this correctly?" He couldn't believe what he was reading.

"Yes, it's correct. I'm dying, Fox. The prognosis is maybe two more months. Brain cancer; it's in a bad spot, inoperable. I tried everything from chemo to holistic healing. How soap opera." Her laugh was slightly hysterical.

"Will you take him, Fox?" she asked in a whisper, her head bowed. Mulder drew her close, holding her.

"Yes, of course, I will." He looked over her shoulder to see Skinner in the doorway. Skinner nodded, he would stand by Mulder.

Mulder rocked her gently until she stopped crying. He handed her the box of tissues.

"Rhonda, I need to make sure that you understand the situation here. You do realize that I am in a relationship with another man, don't you? I'm not going to leave him, I do share his bed, in this house. Adam would be living with the both of us and my two godsons." He had a sudden nightmare vision of her relatives descending on them with pitchforks and CPS workers.

Rhonda waved a hand.

"I know and I don't care. Adam will have two fathers and two brothers. You're a public figure, Fox; if there were any problems, someone would have dug it up by now. And I would like to think that this small town America wouldn't have a sheriff that abused

children. I must say, though, I was very shocked when it hit the papers about the two of you. Rocked right through," she admitted.

Mulder smiled a little.

"I think that we were shocked more than anyone else, actually."

She looked at him, her eyes red-rimmed.

"Is he a good man, Fox? Are you happy with him? Is he good to those children?"

Before he could respond, the front door burst open and two small whirlwinds rushed through.

"Hi, Uncle Fox!" They clamored over him, surprised to see him home during the day, stealing hugs and kisses before running off into the kitchen to demand cookies and milk from 'Uncle Walter!'.
Rhonda laughed. "Well, that answers that."

Rhonda laughed. "Well, that answers that."

They set up the couch, which had a hide-a-bed in it, so that Rhonda and Adam wouldn't have to go to a hotel for the night. Mulder couldn't take his eyes off the boy, his son. There was no denying who Adam's father was, he was the spittin' image, as their rural neighbors would say. His eyes were more blue than hazel, his jaw-line slightly wider, the nose was a definite improvement in Mulder's opinion. Skinner was amused to point out that Mulder's pouty lower lip had been given to another generation. All in all, though, there was no denying who young Adam Mulder's father was.

Mulder spent an hour on the phone, talking with Scully. She had known that one day his past would come back to haunt him. She couldn't wait to meet his son. He faxed her a copy of Rhonda's medical report and Scully informed him that everything that could be done, had been done. The best thing that he could do is to make sure that Adam was prepared.

He lay against Skinner's chest, thinking, as he absently twirled chest-hairs around his fingers.

"Are you ok with this?" Mulder asked quietly. A large hand stroked his back.

"I'm very happy for you, Fox. You'll be a great father, I know you will, you've been wonderful with the twins. You've brought out the best in them, despite their dubious parentage, and I know that you'll be even better with Adam; he has a better set of genes to work with," he teased Mulder gently.

"Hey, you know what we should do tomorrow? Take everyone into the city and do some shopping. Get a bunk for the younger ones and let Adam pick out a bed for himself. He'll need a dresser, too. Maybe some clothes. Pick up some more groceries. I think we may need to consider an addition to the house, those boys are going to outgrow that bedroom fast."

Mulder climbed on top of Skinner and leaned down for a kiss.

"That's all I am to you, just a paycheck," he whined. Skinner ran his hands along Mulder's ass.

"Naw, I love you for more than your money." He squeezed the cheeks suggestively. Mulder licked at Skinner's lips.

"I knew you had some depth to you." He kissed Skinner hard. "Make love to me," he asked against Skinner's mouth. Skinner turned him over onto his back and untied his draw-string pajama bottoms. He reached in and cupped Mulder's genitals, rubbing them gently.

"Did you lock the door?" Skinner asked. Mulder nodded. One embarrassing walk-in had been enough. Mulder shut his eyes and let himself float away with the sensations that his lover was causing in him. He moaned approvingly as Skinner licked at a nipple before sucking on it. That hot mouth and tongue seared a blaze across his torso before heading below his waist. Mulder arched his back and hissed, being mindful of the noise, as Skinner took his cock into his mouth. He kicked off his pajamas, giving Skinner room to prepare him properly. He almost cried out as a tongue entered him.

"God, I love it when you do that," Mulder breathed, he could go all night on that feeling. "Wait wait.." Mulder pushed him away and turned over onto his knees. He hugged a pillow to him, getting comfortable. Skinner spread his cheeks and dived back in with his tongue. Mulder buried his face in the pillow, letting out a small screech as his hips quivered. He rocked back and forth gently as he moaned his pleasure until he couldn't take it anymore.

"Do it, do it, do it, now, pleeeeeazze..." he begged. Skinner sat up and slowly pushed his cock into the tight ass.

"Oh, fuck, yessss..." Mulder bit the pillow as he groaned. Skinner paused for a moment, waiting for the muscles to loosen up, before taking them both for a long slow ride over the edge.

The boys were thrilled with having a new playmate. Adam kept watching Mulder curiously all through breakfast. Mulder wasn't going into work that day, so he took his

time, much to the delight of Ivan and Pavel. Too much childish glee at that hour of the morning was too much for Mulder.

"Boys!" he whistled to get their attention. They looked at him in surprise. "I think that this would be a good time for books. One hour of math, please." They groaned but went off for their workbooks. Rhonda looked at him, also surprised.

"Aren't they a little young for math?" she asked.

"They're very bright," was all Mulder said, sipping his coffee.

Rhonda looked proudly at Adam who was sitting quietly, watching everyone.

"Adam reads at a 6th grade level. We have a little problem with numbers, but everything else he just whizzes right through. He was talking sentences at a year."

"Sounds like someone we know," Skinner commented.

"You've done great, Rhonda. It's really good that you've encouraged him to learn, you'd be surprised at how many parents hold their kids back simply because they don't understand why their kid is different from other kids." Mulder touched Adam's hair, smoothing it. It was the same color and texture as his. Mulder was fascinated by the boy.

"You have a great mom, Adam, do you know that?"

The boy nodded. "Are you really my daddy?" he asked.

Mulder didn't flinch away from the pointed question. Skinner stood against the counter, watching them. He had been quiet and unobtrusive, wanting to make sure that Adam centered on his new father before getting to know him.

"Yes, I am. Is that ok?" Mulder thought his heart was going to stop as he waited for the answer. Adam stared intently at him. Skinner saw that look everyday, he fell in love with it.

"Can I call you Daddy?"

"That would make me very happy." Adam held out his arms, wanting 'up'. He was big for seven, but then Mulder was an early starter himself, looking fifteen when he was twelve. Mulder lifted him with a grunt and settled the child on his lap. He hugged the boy, pressing kisses to his head and face. "Thank you," he mouthed silently to Rhonda.

After breakfast, they walked over to Madison Howard's office, the local lawyer. Rhonda gave him the papers her own lawyer had drawn up giving Mulder shared custody until her death at which time he would have full custody. They called in the notary and pulled Deputy Hoskins off the street to sign as a second witness.

They reigned in the twins, who never seemed to stop running, and packed them into the van. Skinner had long since given up his Taurus for a family sized mini-van. One did not shop for two growing boys with just a car.

Skinner noticed that Rhonda was looking a little wrung out.

"Are you alright?" he took her elbow and sat her down on the steps.

"Actually, I'm feeling a little tired. It's been a busy few days for us," she apologized with a small smile. Mulder came over and squatted down.

"Listen, why don't you stay here? Get some rest. It isn't too often that this house is quiet." He squeezed her hand, letting her know that it was alright. The men had forgotten that she was a very sick person. She nodded and went to the van first to let Adam know.

"You have fun with your father and Uncle Walter, mind what they tell you," she admonished him. She held his face and gave him a couple of mommy-pecks on his bow mouth. The twins watched curiously. "Love you. Be good."

Mulder accompanied her into the house and put a blanket at her feet as she lay down on the couch. He put the phones on voice mail, and fetched her a glass of water and the remote for the TV before he left. He handed her the cordless phone and his cell phone number with orders to call him if she needed anything.

"Fox?" He stopped at the door and looked back in. "Thank you," she said, half asleep already.

Six hours later, the men were wincing at their poor abused credit cards. A bunk bed set, a child's single with a red race car head board, a new dresser, a full set of clothes, educational books and toys, a bicycle, a handful of comic books, and lunch at Micky D's; the men were as maxed out as their credit cards. The twins had begun throwing temper tantrums due to tired feet and the lack of a nap so they were bundled into the van. All three boys were entangled as they fell asleep before they were even out of the city. The boys were maxed out, too. The men let out exhausted breaths.

When they got home, the boys were still asleep so the men carried them into the house and put them to bed for another hour. The van could be unloaded later. It wasn't D.C., no one would break into the van. Especially the Sheriff's van. Rhonda was also asleep on the couch. Mulder straightened her blanket. Something about her face made him stop. His heart pounding, he put his fingers to an artery and waited. Her skin was cold. He looked up at Skinner and shook his head. Skinner called Doc Wilkins over to formalize Rhonda's death.

Mulder smoothed her hair, remembering his one night with her; quite by accident, they had created a miracle that night. He went to wake up Adam.

"Are you awake enough to listen to me?" Mulder spoke softly so as to not wake up the twins next to him in the big bed. Adam nodded and rubbed his eyes.

"Do you remember what we talked about? About how sick your mom is?" He nodded again, his eyes scared. "She knew you were safe now, Adam, so she knew that it was ok to die." Mulder gathered the child into his arms, rocking him as he cried. "Do you want to go downstairs and say goodbye to her? You don't have to if you don't want to." Adam sniffed.

"Did it hurt her?" he croaked.

"No, son, it didn't hurt her. She just went to sleep. Not a regular sleep, it's a special kind of sleep, where she won't wake up anymore." Not the best thing to tell a child, but then how else did one explain death?

Adam held tightly to Mulder's hand as they walked down the stairs together. The smaller hand was sweaty and trembling. They stopped halfway across the living room. Adam looked at her. He turned away and Mulder quickly picked him up, hiding his face.

"It's ok, son, it's alright." The boy clung tightly to him, shaking, as Mulder stroked his back and hair. Mulder looked over to Skinner.

"I'm going to put him in our bed. He's going to be traumatized. Would you mind dealing with everything so that I can stay with him?"

Skinner touched both heads with their identical brown silky hair.

"You go on, take care of him."

Mulder nodded and turned.

"Fox? Are you alright?" Mulder leaned around Adam and brushed Skinner's lips, not saying anything as he carried his son upstairs.

None of Rhonda's family could be found; a check with Adam said that he had never met anybody, so they buried her in the town's cemetery. Scully set a couple of agents to track down any family that Rhonda might have left. Adam had a couple of sleepless nights, being afraid that he wouldn't wake up either, but after realizing that everyone else woke up after their sleep, he began to relax. Being so young helped him to cope. Mulder found a picture of Adam and his mother in her wallet, so he framed it and gave it to the boy, thinking that it might help him.

It only took two more weeks for chaos to reappear.

"Tell me again about the proper use of condoms, Mulder?" Krycek said with a gleam in his eyes after meeting Adam.

"It. Broke." Mulder annunciated. He was becoming irritated trying to figure out just how Krycek always seemed to know when there was something going on that he could stick his fingers into. Mulder had turned the house upside down looking for bugs, he even had the Gunmen come in with their equipment, but nothing was found.

"Yeah, I've heard that one before. Try another chapter."

Mulder looked around for little ears; the boys were outside playing in the yard under the watchful eye of Mrs. Chavez.

"Fuck you, Krycek."

A thunder of feet ran in minutes later.

"Alex! Come and see the kittens!" Ivan and Pavel tugged at his hands.

Krycek grimaced. "Kittens. Oh boy," he said. "Mulder, you do realize that they are bio-engineered to be like me, don't you?" he complained.

"That's a scary thought, Krycek; however, the FBI could always use more talented agents. They just need their talents pushed in the right direction." Mulder gave him a saccharine smile, one he had learned from Scully. It made him feel like shit whenever she used it on him. Krycek looked as though he were being dragged away to a firing squad.

Skinner felt that this was punishment enough for all the crap Krycek pulled on him in the past. He knew that most of the time Krycek was just full of it; the man didn't have to visit, he didn't have to be nice to the boys, and he certainly could have stopped them from dragging him off to see a litter of kittens, if he really wanted to. Somewhere deep down inside, was a civilized human being waiting to break out. Skinner thought that it would be a cold day in hell, but stranger things have happened. He suddenly chuckled; the notorious Alex Krycek, expert assassin and all around bad guy, brought to his knees by two 4-year olds and a litter of kittens.

Chapter 4: Snakes and Snails and Kitten Tails

Scully and the three kittens looked at each other; no one was impressed. The little fur-balls had taken over one end of the couch and gave her a 'just try it' look when she attempted to remove them. Scully scowled.

"Scully, they're just kittens." Skinner was trying very hard not to laugh at her. Krycek had promised all three boys a kitten of their own, once the kittens were old enough to leave

their mother; of course neither Mulder nor Skinner could break their hearts and tell them no. Krycek presented the men with a bag of kitty litter and a scoop, and then left.

Mulder had been afraid to tell Scully, so when she came to babysit for the weekend, she stopped short at the wiggling black furry mound on the couch.

"Mulder!"

He rushed past her, running shoes on. "Sorry, Scully, gotta go," and was gone out the door.

"You're a chicken-shit, Mulder!" she called after him.

"Scully, you really need to get over this phobia of cats," Skinner advised her. He picked up the kittens in one lump and put them in their kitty-bed. Little black noses poked up at him, purring loudly.

"See? Not a problem." He gave them each an ear scratch, earning himself looks of complete adoration.

Scully glared at them. "They're staring at me. Are you sure these are kittens; they look big." Panther cubs!

"They're staring at you because you're staring at them. And yes, they are only ten weeks old. These are Maine Coons; they're supposed to be big." He gave her shoulders a shake. "Be brave, soldier, you're a big bad Assistant Director now, show no fear," he growled and scowled.

"Does the phrase 'up yours' hold any meaning for you?" She tossed her overnight bag on the couch and shrugged out of her coat.

"That's the spirit, Tar!" he roared as he raised a fist in solidarity. Scully wasn't too sure about this new Skinner, he was so much more relaxed now that he was in semi-retirement. Maybe living with Mulder and three rambunctious boys had addled his brains.

Scully had checked her date book and had discovered that Mulder and Skinner's 1st year anniversary was coming up. With three small boys in the house, there was no way they could celebrate properly, they hadn't even had a whole year to themselves before being saddled with parenthood. Mrs. Chavez was good for a few hours, but she put her foot down at taking all three hooligans for the weekend. Just the thought of asking Krycek to stay and babysit was enough to induce nightmares.

So Scully surprised the men with a homemade gift certificate redeemable for one weekend sitter. Even Skinner was moved to plant a kiss on her cheek. Scully hadn't been too sure about this relationship. Mulder needed someone physical, he was a toucher. He had always kept a gentleman's hand at her back when they walked, he would touch her

hand or shoulder when he was worried, give her small kisses on the cheek when he was really anxious for her. He even liked to cuddle after sex or even just watching TV.

Skinner had never seemed the physical type at all, in fact he seemed to go out of his way to keep people at a distance. Or so Scully thought until she walked into their kitchen one day just after Mulder had moved in. Mulder had made himself right at home on Skinner's lap, where the older man had his hand buried under Mulder's shirt, stroking a nipple, and his face buried in Mulder's neck. Skinner and Scully both turned red while Mulder laughed it off. The surprising scene at the office notwithstanding, Scully didn't think that Skinner had it in him. If this happier, more relaxed Mulder was any indication, Skinner did indeed have it in him, with plenty to spare. Scully was envious.

"Where are the boys?" she asked, following Skinner upstairs.

"Playing in the back yard. We told them they could stay up until we left tonight. Normally it's dinner about five, baths and bed about eight for the younger ones, nine for Adam. Up at seven, they should be ready for lunch at around eleven. Ivan and Pavel take a nap for about an hour after they eat. Sometimes Adam does, he's outgrowing the need for it. If he doesn't want to, don't push him. He's been a little moody lately, no big surprise, it must be genetic. He won't say what his problem is, but just be aware of it."

Skinner took her into the boys' room and showed her where everything was.

"They usually dress themselves, the twins will tell you if they need help, they're pretty self-sufficient. Don't think of them as normal 4-year olds, big mistake. They all spend about a total of 4 hours a day on the weekends learning, so don't let them fool you. An hour here and hour there, doesn't matter. Have them show you their workbooks. We discovered that if we let them have the weekends off, by Monday we're all exhausted because they'd gotten bored by noon on Saturday, and it takes them an extra day to get back into study habits again. We only make them study on the weekends for our own sanity, believe me.

"Adam is turning into a bit of a computer geek so if he wants to spend part of his learning time doing some research on the 'net, it's alright. I'm not too sure about the influence that the Gunmen are having on their honorary godson." Upon learning about the boy, Scully sent presents and eagerly waited meeting him. Mulder took a month to begin bonding with Adam before inviting her and the Gunmen over to meet their new godson. Scully had been dubious to share the title of godparent with Mulder's three weird friends, but she knew she would fall in love with the boy as soon as she met him. Frohike's first comment to her was to ask her if she wanted to consummate their new parenthood together.

Skinner striped the beds and gathered up dirty clothes, tossing them into a hamper. He took out fresh sheets from the hall closet. Scully helped him re-make the beds and followed him into the master bedroom.

"You can sleep on the couch if you want to, but it's more comfortable up here. There are fresh sheets and everything on the bed.

"I wrote out a few pages of general everyday things and emergency instructions." He handed Scully a manual about 30 pages thick.

"Will you just find Mulder and leave? I do have nephews if you'll remember, I can take care of things. Don't worry."

Scully woke up on Saturday morning with a suffocating feeling, her head felt hot and ballooned. There was a low buzzing sound in her ears. She groaned, hoping she wasn't coming down with anything. She opened an eye and panicked; she couldn't see! Everything was black!

"Mew?"

Scully screeched and quickly sat up, dislodging the kittens from her pillow. She spat out fur and rubbed at her face. Aries, Joxer and Petunia, their militant Queen, turned their noses up in a huff and stalked off the bed indignantly, tails high in the air with unspoken commentary.

A thunder of footsteps ran from down the hall.

"Aunt Dana?" The boys crowded around the doorway, still in their footed PJ's.

"It's ok, the kittens startled me, that's all," she assured them. She watched nonplussed as they climbed up onto the bed.

"What are we doing?" she asked. One of the twins took the remote control from the nightstand and turned the TV on.

"It's eight o'clock. We always watch Looney Tunes with Uncle Fox. He says it's a ligious sperence," the boy lisped at her quite seriously. The other boys nodded.

"I see."

"But we can't tell Uncle Walter. Uncle Walter says cartoons rots our brains," twin 2 said with grave authority.

"And Daddy says but he's watched cartoons all his life and look at him," Adam proudly quoted his father.

"Uh huh." Scully reserved any additional comment. Twin 1 leaned in conspiratorially.

"Butcha ya know what, Aunt Dana? When Uncle Fox leaves for work, Uncle Walter watches Dark Shadows." He giggled behind his hands, green eyes twinkling.

"Yeah, and his eyes go like this." Twin 2 used his fingers to open his lids wide.

Scully burst out laughing. She let them have their hour of insanity ala Mulder.

The morning was fairly routine, Scully didn't know why the men felt it necessary to write a 30 page book just for two days of three well behaved boys. If only her own nephews were as well behaved. They ate their breakfast in a noisy peace before spending an hour with their workbooks.

By 11am the twins were missing.

Scully ran all through the house in a panic, searching every nook and cranny. She ran out onto the front lawn to look up and down the street. She called to the children in the yard next door; no, Senora, they haven't seen Ivan and Pavel yet that morning.

Scully ran back into the house. How was she going to tell Mulder and Skinner that she lost them? Oh, God, how was Krycek going to react?!

"Have you tried the roof?"

She looked in horror at Adam who had sat through the entire episode calmly sitting on the couch with a book and his kitten, Petunia.

"The roof?!" Scully had visions of two little bodies rolling off the roof and falling to the ground with a sickening thud.

"Page 1 of the Manual; 'keep them away from the roof'," he quoted. Scully raced back out to the front yard and looked up. Two pairs of binoculars peaked over the rise of the roof.

"What are you two doing?!!! Come down from there now!!" she yelled in a panic. She was suddenly looked at through the binoculars. The two bodies wiggled backward, disappearing from view. Scully raced around to the back yard, anxiously inspecting the ground. The screen door opened and the boys stood there with their hands on their hips, binoculars dangling from their necks, glaring at her.

"Aunt Dana! You blew our cover!" they scolded her. She stalked over, bent down and shook them by the arms.

"Don't you EVER go up there! You could have fallen and been killed! You scared me half to death!! What did you think you were doing?!" Part of her wanted to hug them in relief and the other part wanted to tan their butts but Mulder refused to use corporal punishment

on any of them so Scully had to respect his wishes. Scully had a feeling that Mulder had a personal issue there, but she wasn't going to try and force him to talk.

"We were on a stake-out. You blew our cover," they repeated, as though it was obvious what they were doing. Scully could see that she was going to have to have a talk with the guys about discussing 'shop' within the hearing of little ears.

"No stake-outs until you are grown up," she insisted. "The roof is dangerous even for adults. Grow up, go to college, go to Quantico, and then I will be more than happy to let you go on all the stake-outs you want. Twenty years, it isn't as long as you think it is. Understand?"

They rolled their eyes, but agreed.

"Yes, Aunt Dana."

Scully didn't trust that innocent acquiescence.

She took them in, fed them, and sent them to their naps, insisting that they take the kittens with them, before collapsing on the couch with the Manual. She had glanced at it before, but assumed that the guys were on nervous parent over-kill.

Page 1:

!!! Keep them away from: !!!

(unless accompanied by an adult other than Krycek)

the roof

the flour

the laundry room

the medicine cabinet

the fish tank

our night stands

pending

Scully was afraid to ask.

"Adam, why the flour?"

"They wanted to make snow-angels but there wasn't any snow."

Scully had an image of the kitchen and the boys all covered in white powder.

"And the fish tank?"

"They insisted that Calistoga had a cold, so they took him out, puts Vicks Rub on him, and put him in the dryer to warm him up."

Scully had wondered why there had been an emergency trip to the Sears Home Center. That explains the fish tank, the laundry room and the medicine cabinet. Scully jumped up and rushed to the tank, anxiously counting the fish. She noticed two small rocks at the bottom of the tank; R.I.P. Calistoga and R.I.P. Evian III. The card on the outside of the tank declared it Mulder Manor, written in a childish scrawl. She tossed in a pinch of flakes to the starving survivors; Crystal, Arrow, Calgon, Perrier and Fred.

She went back into the living room, feeling the need to tread lightly.

"There are two RIP's," she stated, not sure she wanted to hear the response. Adam hadn't looked up from his book, he was engrossed in a Hardy Boy's Mystery. Scully would have thought that he'd be outside playing, running off energy, but instead he had spent the day reading. He had even sent Pavel and Ivan away in irritation, burying his nose further in the book.

"Evian the Third wanted to go to work so they painted her different colors and put her in Daddy's briefcase." Which explained Mulder's new briefcase.

"And the night stands?" she asked weakly.

"They found some weird thing that looked like a big bullet and was playing torpedo bombs in the sandbox with it. Daddy and Uncle Walter really wiggled out about it but they wouldn't tell us why. Alex was here, he was laughing so hard he cried and rolled on the ground. Daddy said a really bad word, the f word, and told Alex he was going to bomb him if he didn't shut up." He shrugged with a perplexed frown, not understanding adults.

It took Scully a moment but she quickly turned bright red and choked back a laugh. Maybe next year, she would just get them a gift certificate to the Castle.

A few hours later, Scully was startled out of her book with a resounding crash. She rushed up the stairs and found Adam throwing toys and books across the room and the twins yelling words that Scully had no idea that they knew. And not all of it was in English, thank you Krycek! The kittens ran down the hallway in fright, almost tripping Scully as she entered the room just as the twins jumped on top of Adam, all three flying with fists. Scully plucked the twins off.

"STOP! NOW!" she yelled. "You two, sit over there. Adam, you sit on your bed." Scully caught her breath as the boys sullenly obeyed. "Alright. Now. Adam, why were you throwing things?" Adam wiped his tear-streaked cheeks and sniffed.

"They were touching my stuff!" he shouted, pointing a finger at the younger boys.

"Uncles say share!" they shouted back.

"It's MINE!" Adam shouted as he stood up. He made a move toward the boys and Scully blocked him, shoving him out of the room.

"Go into your father's room, now. I'll be there in a few minutes," she ordered him.

"I want my Mommy!" Adam cried and stomped out. The door down the hall slammed shut, rattling the pictures on the wall of the staircase. Scully pressed her fingertips to her temples and took a deep breath before turning to the twins who still sat on the bed, sniffing.

"I know that your uncles say to share, and they're right; sharing is important. But -it's also important to ask permission first." Scully squatted down in front of them. "Would you like it if Adam played with your things without asking you?"

They shook their heads slowly.

"Then you understand how Adam feels right now. Thinking about him playing with your toys without asking you makes you feel angry doesn't it? It's a very bad feeling, isn't it?" They nodded. Scully took their hands in hers.

"I need you two to do something very important for me, will you?" They nodded again. "You know that Adam's mommy died just a short time ago, right? He's feeling very sad about that because he loved her very much, and when people feel sad sometimes they get upset at other people for doing small things. So what I need you to do is to be nice to Adam. Ask before you touch his toys, just doing that will help him to feel better. Will you do that?" They sniffled and nodded. Scully pulled them into a hug, stroking their soft hair. Their little boy smell tugged at her maternal strings as she gave them kisses on their cheeks.

"Now, I'm going to go and talk to Adam. I know that Adam is the one that messed up this room, but if you would be big boys and clean up the mess, that would make me very happy. We will go and get some ice-cream after dinner if you do a good job."

"Yes, Aunt Dana," they said.

Scully left them to start cleaning up the room, and went down the hall. She opened the door to the master bedroom and quietly closed it behind her. Adam was laying on the bed face down, crying deeply. Scully sat beside him and ran her hand gently over his back before pulling him up into her arms. He buried his face in her chest, sobs racking his body. She rocked him, crooning in his ear.

By dinner time, Scully put them back on their schedule as written in the Manual.

After dinner, the boys did an hour of studies and Scully took the time to do some of her own paperwork, so she introduced them to the concept of study groups with everyone sitting around the kitchen table. She turned on her laptop and stared at the blurry screen. She had left her glasses on the night stand after reading a couple of chapters in her book before going to sleep the night before. Scully made an effort to avoid looking at the actual night stands themselves, trying not to think about they may contain. Maybe she would sleep in the couch that night.

As she walked back down the stairs, she paused to look at the framed pictures decorating the wall. She shook her head, unable to believe that either of the men were so domesticated. A wave of fondness rushed through her, most of the pictures were of the children, some she had copies of. There was a beautiful one of Skinner standing behind Mulder. Skinner had one arm around Mulder's waist, fingers locked with the younger man's, his other hand on Mulder's cheek, turning his face around to the side to look lovingly into each other's eyes. If it had been just three years earlier, Scully would have been afraid for both of them; their relationship would have been the perfect excuse for the Consortium to get a hold on Mulder. She would have to ask them if they would mind if she had a copy.

Further down, she was surprised to see a picture of Sharon, a beautiful close-up of just her face laughing into the camera, her green eyes sparkling brilliantly. Another of their wedding photo. It was strange to see Skinner with even half a head of dark brown Mediterranean hair. It never occurred to Scully to wonder what his family's nationality was, but he looked Italian with that dark hair, brown eyes, and olive skin. From the time Scully had first met him, until he became involved with Mulder the year before, she could count on one hand the number of times she had seen his smile even just a little, and never such a wide happy smile like in his wedding picture. It took ten years off of him. Scully smiled softly, knowing that Mulder wasn't the jealous type, selfish enough to deny someone the right to their past, to someone his partner had once deeply loved.

Scully remembered Sharon's funeral. Skinner hadn't known they were there, hadn't known that Mulder had kept daily track of Sharon's hospital reports. Skinner would have taken it as an invasion of his privacy, but Mulder had felt the need to show some sort of support, even if Skinner didn't know about it. So they stood off at a distance, near the trees, making sure they were behind Skinner where he wouldn't see them. Very few people were there, neither Skinner nor Sharon seemed to have any extended family. The two agents had stiffened at the approach of Smokey, shocked at the man's audacity. They couldn't hear what was said, but they could see that Skinner was angry as he ordered the old man to leave. Once Skinner was alone, he knelt at the site and bowed his head, his shoulders shaking. He took off his wedding ring and tossed it down into the grave. With tears in her eyes, Scully took Mulder's arm and they left the man to his grief. Scully wondered how they explained Sharon to the boys.

There were pictures of Mulder's family including a copy of one she was familiar with, the one of him and Sam as kids. He may have been only 12, but Mulder must have matured early; he looked about 15. As usual, Mulder was a step ahead of the rest.

Samantha had been a casualty of the Consortium's work. Mulder cried over her, but he cried with relief; at least he knew that she wasn't in pain in someone's lab. The Sams he had met had all been adult clones of the child that had died. One picture of Adam's mother, Rhonda. Scully had never met the woman, hadn't even known about her, but some quick mental arithmetic pointed to a time when Scully and Mulder had been at odds and weren't talking much except about work. Astonishingly, one of Krycek with the twins. Scully had never seen a picture of Krycek other than his FBI I.D. His moss-green eyes glowed from a frame of thick black lashes as he seduced the camera. Although she would be the first to volunteer to throw the switch in the gas chamber, even Scully had to admit that the man was very pretty. It occurred to her that all she had to do was to look at the twins and she knew what he looked like when he was a boy. What kind of a bribe did Mulder have to make to get Krycek to pose for this one? Scully was unaware that 'please' worked well with the man, especially when it came from two miniature versions of himself. Very few people said 'please' to him; they ordered, begged, bribed, cajoled, wheedled and whimpered, but no one ever just said a simple, polite, 'please' to him.

The wall was filled with different variations of the men and the boys; Scully was happy for them, they had made a family out of a strange menagerie that had no one else to turn to except each other. She felt another rush of envy and quickly pushed it away.

At the bottom of the stairs, she frowned, something nagging at the back of her mind. She turned and went to look at the pictures again. Her gut clenched at a sudden suspicion. Scully refused to acknowledge that she sometimes had premonitions just like her mother did; it ran in the women of her family.

Scully went back into the kitchen; the boys were making their way through their workbooks. She was amazed that it was working; how do you make three boy-geniuses settle down? Feed their minds. She knew that Adam was naturally a quiet reader, but the younger ones? They never walked when they could run, and it always made her look twice to see two 4 year olds working on 5-place addition and subtraction, and reading on a second grade level. And a 7 year old doing 2-place multiplication and reading on a sixth grade level. The boys were quieter than usual; Adam was looking a little pale, his eyes still a little red-rimmed.

She booted up her computer and plugged in the phone line. Once she logged into her office system, she began a search through high level security files, starting with personnel files. She really wasn't surprised to find Krycek's file missing and no sign of his existence with the FBI anywhere, even his time with Mulder had disappeared; but what did shock her was that she was half-way through Skinner's personnel file when it disappeared from her screen. Nothing she did would retrieve it. She was able to find all of his reports from the time he began as a field agent up until the most recent reports just before he left, but she couldn't find any personal information on him. Scully contemplated calling the Gunmen to find it, but she didn't trust them not to report to Mulder; she knew where their loyalties were and she wasn't ready to say anything to him yet.

Especially not an insane suspicion.

Scully called up the DMV files, hospital records and obits; there was no record that Sharon Skinner had ever existed. Scully's e-mail pinged ten minutes later as she still ruminated.

>Be careful what you seek, for you shall surely find it. Are you prepared to destroy the fragile pieces of your so-called best friend's life? Is the information you seek worth his life? Are you the one slated to cast the first stone? Be a good friend and drop it. The information has nothing to do with you. -AK<

Scully stared at the screen. The files she was looking in were obviously flagged to wherever Krycek was. Was her curiosity worth Mulder's happiness? What if she did find what she was looking for? What use was the information? There was nothing illegal about it. Scully hated it when Krycek was right. His involvement did tell her that she was on the right path, although Scully felt that he made a mistake in showing his hand so early; she could have been looking for anything but Krycek panicked. So, the man could be tripped up. Interesting. His weakness is his family. Everyone's weakness, actually. Krycek and Sharon Skinner were siblings?? That alone told Scully how Skinner got involved with the whole mess. Scully wondered how much Mulder knew. The 'cast the first stone' line grated on her; she would wait until it was necessary to approach the subject. She absently wondered if Krycek had actually read the Bible or had heard about the two parables that he mentioned. Did the Bible burst into flames when he touched it? she thought uncharitably.

She would drop it for now, but she intended to have a long conversation with Krycek the moment she caught him alone.

Scully woke up early Sunday morning and went down to make breakfast, picking up the paper from the porch. When she walked into the kitchen, she felt a blinding pain in the back of her head and fell to the floor, unconscious.

When she woke up, movement floated in front of her eyes. She groaned at the throbbing in her head.

"Doctor Wilkins! She's awake!" came a yell beside her, sending another wave of pain through her head.

"Don't yell, Ivan," the older man said, coming quickly into the room. Scully recognized the town's old doctor as he stood beside her. He took her wrist in his hand and looked at his watch. A second person moved in next to him, Deputy Hoskins.

"Miz Scully? Can you hear me?" Wilkins asked. "Do you know where you are? Do you know who you are?"

Scully's searched her mind and then her body.

"I'm fine. Are the boys alright? What happened?" She tried to sit up, but fell back when a wave of dizziness shot through her. Wilkins patted her shoulder.

"Don't move yet, give yourself time. Pavel and Ivan are fine. Adam is missing. Do you remember what happened?" Hoskins had his notebook out.

"I was about to make breakfast. I think I was hit from behind. Then I woke up here." Scully suddenly panicked. "Oh, God! Where's Adam?! I have to find him! Call Mulder and Skinner!" she struggled to rise but the room spun. Wilkins held her down.

"They've already been called, ma'am, they're on the way home. It's going to take them about 3 hours. My deputies are searching the town, we've printed the kitchen, living room, and the doors. Just let me handle this." Hoskins put out a restraining hand.

"NO! You don't understand! Mulder has a lot of enemies; any of them would love to get their hands on him, even through his son. I need to call my office, get some agents out here, I need to call Mulder, I need to..." She shut up as another wave went through her. Scully tried to recall if she had seen any familiar names on a recent list of inmate releases and escapes. Who was still at large?

"I'm aware of Mulder's history, A.D. Scully," Hoskins assured her. He had done a great deal of research when he found out just who was moving into town with Sheriff Skinner. "Mulder said he would get in touch with your office. He also gave me orders that if you say that you're fine, I'm to ignore you and tie you down." He quirked a grin at her; he was shocked at first when Mulder told him that, but he could see that the lady was making a good try at getting ambulatory and re-establishing her rank.

The boys pushed their way into Scully's view just as she was about to tell Hoskins what he could do with Mulder's orders. They knelt down next to the couch, identical expressions of worry on their faces.

"Aunt Dana?" She held out her arms to them and gave each a hug.

"I'm fine, are you two alright? Did you see or hear anything? Did you see who took Adam?"

"We were asleep," Pavel informed her. "A noise woke us up and we saw a man go out the door carrying Adam. He put something across Adam's mouth and nose and Adam was still asleep."

"Chloroform, ma'am." Hoskins clarified. "We found the cloth outside on the lawn. It's bagged for evidence."

"We yelled at him, but he didn't stop and you wouldn't wake up on the floor so we called Uncle Walter's phone 'cause he said we could and he said to go to the station so we did and Deputy Ruvie called Deputy Kyle and Dr. Wilkins." Pavel brought Scully up to speed in a quick burst.

"We was scared, Aunt Dana." Ivan put his head down on Scully's stomach.

By the time the men returned, Scully had several teams of agents in town to join in on the search. Their car sped down the street and screeched to a halt at the curb in front of the house. The men jumped out and raced to the house only to be stopped by a loud piercing whistle in the air. They looked across the street to see an agent standing on the porch of the station house, waving them over.

They ran into the station and met Scully coming out of the conference room which she had set up as a command post. Mulder looked her over and pulled her into his arms while Skinner barked for an update.

"Can't leave you alone for a minute, can I?" he heard Mulder make a weak joke. Mulder had fidgeted and trembled the entire way home. He had been so white that Skinner was afraid that he was going to pass out. At one point, he had reached over and put a comforting hand on Mulder's leg only to have his hand taken and squeezed to the point of circulation cutting off.

"I'm sorry," was all she could say.

"It's not your fault, Scully, you couldn't have known."

At the sound of their voices, the boys raced out of Skinner's office and threw themselves at the men, wrapping their arms and legs around them and holding on tight.

"Uncle Fox? Please bring Adam back, we won't play with his toys anymore, we promise." Ivan whimpered in Mulder's ear. Pavel agreed, nodding on Skinner's shoulder.

"What?" The men looked to Scully for clarification. She briefly told them what happened on Saturday.

"I was going to tell you about it later," she added.

Mulder lifted Ivan's head up.

"Pavel, look at me." Mulder waited until he had Pavel's attention also.

"This was not your fault," he stressed. "Adam being missing has nothing to do with you playing with his toys. A very bad man took him and we will find him and bring him back home. Alright? Do you both understand?" The boys sniffled and nodded.

"Scully, what agents are here?" Skinner asked over Pavel's shoulder. She gave him a rundown of the agents on duty. Skinner only knew 3 out of the 8. What a difference 18 months can make. He took Ivan from Mulder. "I'd like a guard with them, just in case. If you wouldn't mind my borrowing a couple of your men. Preferably someone who has experience with children."

"That's fine with me. Giuliani has a large family, I believe." She motioned to Agent Giuliani and his partner, Simon Carlson. The men followed Skinner into the holding cell. He put the boys down on the bunk and took their shoes and pants off before laying them down.

"Pavel's in red, Ivan's in yellow," he pointed the boys out to the men. "Their safety is your number one priority. Only 4 people take them out of this room. Myself, Agent Mulder, AD Scully or their father. He's on his way to town. The boys call him Alex; you'll know him when you see him, they look exactly like him." He wasn't about to try and explain the true relationship, Krycek will just have to deal with the parental title.

"AD Scully says you have a large family; you can deal with children?" he asked Giuliani.

"Yes, sir. I have 5 of my own, and 11 nieces and nephews."

Skinner gave the man a second look.

"Well, then you know all the tricks to avoid." Skinner poked the boys in their bellies. "Agent Giuliani is wise to you, so no games." They gave him innocent 'who, us?' dimples. "You take a nap until 3:30 and then you can come out to the office. But don't get in the way, everyone is working hard to find Adam. You can sit and do some work in your books, or play quietly." He straightened the blanket over them and gave each a peck before standing up.

"Don't think of them as ordinary 4 year olds," he warned the agents. "They're extremely bright, so don't let them fool you."

The men looked at the two small children laying in the bunk, blinking up at them innocently.

When Skinner returned to the conference room, several more agents and deputies had returned from the search to check in.

"Anything?" Skinner asked. "Where's Mulder?"

"Nothing. We've been waiting for ransom demands but none have come in. And he's in your office." Scully's voice held a note of compassion. Skinner turned abruptly and left the room. In his office, Mulder stood at the window, his back to the door. Skinner shut the door, went up to Mulder and put his arms around the man.

"You know something?" Mulder began, "I never really thought about having kids. I've always liked them, but I never saw myself as a father. Even having the twins in the house, I've felt as though it were an extended babysitting weekend. I love the boys, but in an abstract way. Know what I mean?" Skinner gave a nod.

"You're their uncle, Fox, not their father. The type of love you feel for them is proper," he reminded Mulder.

"I know. But then Adam.... it still feels weird. Abstract. Like he's not mine and I'm still babysitting. Now he's gone."

Skinner turned Mulder around.

"You have nothing to feel guilty about. Nothing." He gave Mulder a shake. "Women have 9 months to get used to a baby and fall in love with it. It's normal for men to take longer. A baby is an abstract concept for a man until it's born. When it's born, it's a shock because all of a sudden we're responsible for a life. Sure, some men fall in love with their children at first sight. But others take longer, a slower process. It's normal," he insisted.

"You didn't even get a chance to get used to the idea while the baby grows. You got one thrust upon you walking and talking. No one expected you to be in love with him at first sight. You love him, and it gets stronger every day. I think that in the long run, the love will be deeper when it grows slowly. The roots grow stronger and deeper. You've only known him for a couple of months, Fox, give it time." He kissed Mulder gently.

"We'll find him and give you that chance to find that deeper love. I promise." He held Mulder close, stroking his back.

Half an hour later, a soft knock disturbed them.

"Enter." Skinner bid whoever it was. He still stood with Mulder, holding him. At least Mulder had stopped trembling. He wanted to go immediately on the search, but they needed to wait until the first recon units came in and reported. Skinner also wanted to wait and see what Krycek would bring them.

"Beg pardon, sheriff, Mulder." Hoskins had become used to seeing the men together, but was still respectful of their privacy. Mulder turned quickly, hopefully, but Kyle held up an apologetic hand. A commotion could be heard out in the main reception area.

"Slight problem, sirs. A couple of agents are trying to arrest Mr. Krycek." Hoskins was puzzled; he knew that Krycek radiated danger, but he knew nothing about Krycek that warranted an arrest. Sheriff Skinner seemed to trust the man, he knew that Krycek visited regularly with the twins, and Skinner never once told him to keep his eye on Krycek.

"Shit," the guys muttered together. "We forgot about that." Skinner admitted with a grimace. They entered the front room just in time to see Pavel and Ivan race across the room, clad in only their t-shirts and underwear, and throw themselves at the agents holding Krycek. The boys began pounding on the men with their small fists and kicking ankles with bare feet, yelling and threatening the men with severe bodily harm if they didn't release their Alex.

"What the hell is going on?!" Scully came from the direction of the restrooms.

"Scully, call off your dogs," Krycek snarled. Carlson and Giuliani were right behind the boys, attempting to get hold of them. Ivan clung to Ericson's leg until the man screamed.

"SHIT! The brat bit me!" He released his grip on Krycek and kicked his leg, dislodging the boy. Ivan scrambled out of the way and Ericson went after him.

"Ericson!" Krycek barked. "Touch that boy and you die here and now," he promised. Skinner and Mulder quickly moved in and plucked up the boys who climbed around to their backs, clinging like monkeys as they peered over the men's shoulders to glare at the two agents.

"QUIET!" Scully yelled. Eight adults and two children gave her their full attention. "Now. Agent Ericson, report."

"Ma'am, this is Alex Krycek, we spotted him going into ASAC Mulder's home. We were arresting him for B&E and detained him for questioning in regards to Adam's disappearance. He could have been going into the house to grab the twins, so we...."

Scully held up a hand to stop him.

"I know who he is, all too well. I can't condemn you for doing your job, Agent; you actually did something that extremely few people in the entire world have managed to do, you not only spotted Krycek, you also nabbed him. Every government agents' wet-dream capture; however, there are two problems. One –he is no longer on the wanted lists. And two –well, see for yourself. Take a good look at the boys' faces." The agents all looked puzzled but turned to look at the boys.

"Now, take a good look at Krycek."

They turned to Krycek. Ericson looked back and forth at them. The other agents all drew breaths. One of the older agents, Jacobs, took in the various people present; historical figures in the race to save the world from invasion. He was around in the Hoover during the major part of the shake-up, he himself got questioned by in-house security simply because of his age and experience. They assumed that he knew at least something.

"You know, considering exactly who is in this room, I have a feeling that the subject of Krycek and these boys, his sons? and why they are living here? is one subject that I don't care to delve too deeply into." Jacobs knew he was a good agent, but getting messed up in Krycek's arena was not something he was brave enough to do.

Ericson was appalled. "AD Scully, this is Krycek! Who else would have a reason to take Adam?! Sorry, Mulder, but...!" he couldn't believe that no one was doing anything about the situation.

"Ericson, you were a weenie at the Academy, and you're still a weenie," Krycek pronounced with contempt.

"Yeah, weenie!" Ivan spat out over Skinner's shoulder and stuck out his tongue at the agent.

"Ivan!" Skinner snapped. The tongue was pulled back in. Krycek looked at Ivan and then at Skinner, slightly puzzled.

"Ericson, there are dynamics here that you are unaware of based on a need to know basis. You don't need to know." Mulder informed the agent. "However, I can tell you that there is no need to arrest Krycek for B&E, he has a key to the house. He comes and goes all the time, visiting the twins. Also, we called him, we've been expecting him. Believe me, Krycek is the last person that would take my son. Beyond that, if there is anything else you need to know, we will tell you."

Ericson didn't like it, but he followed orders.

Skinner motioned to Giuliani and Carlson to take the boys back for their nap.

"Ivan, we will discuss your language later, young man." Skinner warned the boy. He found Ivan's behavior curious, the boy wasn't normally so truculent.

"Yes, Uncle Walter." Ivan sighed. He had no doubt that his uncle would follow through with that promise. Being carried past Krycek, the boys took quick pecks from him and made him promise to play with them later. Krycek cocked his head, looking at Skinner again and back at Ivan. Something occurred to him and he stifled a chuckle.

"Mulder, I checked with some informants; as far as I can tell, none of this is coming from within." Krycek followed the agents into the conference room. "That isn't 100%; due to

circumstances, my information network is no where near what it used to be. It doesn't feel like Consortium work, though. Not their style. Besides, I don't think that any remaining members are in any position to be concerned about revenge. They're too busy trying to get themselves back together. They've even been too busy to come after me, much less concern themselves with one little boy." He walked up to the work board and studied the information and evidence.

"So you say." Ericson muttered. Krycek spun around and went into the man's face. Scully and Skinner pulled them apart.

"Enough!" Scully snapped. "Ericson, not another word out of you unless it's constructive to this case. Unless you have evidence that points directly to Krycek's involvement, you will refrain from attacking him. Krycek, control it."

He glared at Ericson for a moment.

"I'm going back over to the house and take a look around, then I'm going to start searching the surrounding area outside of town," he announced.

"I'm going with you," Skinner and Mulder announced together. Scully began to object.

"Scully, please. I have to do this," Mulder said quietly to her. As ASAC, his place was at her side directing the agents, not participating in the field investigation. But Scully understood his need; he lost one child, he couldn't lose another one. She did find it strange that there was no ransom demand.

"Krycek, if anything happens to them, I'll skin you alive," Scully warned the man. Krycek gave a nod and turned abruptly to leave.

"Kyle, hold down the fort," Skinner called out to the deputy as he left.

The men returned 3 hours later, sweaty and dirty and tired, but with no news. Skinner dragged himself to the work board and marked off the area they hiked on the map. They had covered every square inch and found nothing except litter, snakes and bugs.

"Where's AD Scully?" he heard Mulder ask.

"That head wound of hers kicked in, so Doc Wilkins is forcing her to rest," Kyle reported. Skinner knew Scully had to be in pain if she took herself temporarily off duty.

"Where is she?" Mulder asked.

"At your house, sir. She took the twins with her."

The men must have been tired, they completely missed seeing the boys playing on the sidewalk with the neighbors kids. As they walked across the street, Skinner could see that someone had brought out the chalk; he made a mental note to wash down the sidewalk in the morning. Carlson and Giulini stood nearby, still guarding the children. Several other agents were standing by, waiting for orders.

"Agents, take a break," Skinner called out to the guards. They looked at Mulder first. Skinner forgot, he no longer had the authority to give these men orders. Mulder waved them off, and the men gratefully walked over to the diner for something to eat. Mulder went in to check on Scully.

The boys ran over to them. They were covered in black streaks.

"Krycek, you can bathe them tonight." Skinner informed him.

"Did you bring Adam back?" Pavel asked.

"No, not yet." Skinner took the small filthy hand in his. Ivan held out his own blackened hand to Skinner. He had a lump of something in his palm.

"It's coal." Skinner told the boy. Ivan rolled his eyes.

"I know it's coal. Smell it." Ivan held his hand higher, stretching up on his toes. Skinner bent down for a sniff.

"It smells like petroleum."

Ivan stamped his feet in a fit of temper. Skinner lifted an eyebrow; Ivan was hardly ever impatient.

"That's 'cause it is proleum. It's also what that man smelled like," the boy hissed in annoyance. Skinner was about to order an early bedtime, the day had been too much for the twins to process.

"Get me the locations of all the old coal mines," he called to Deputy Ruven. "And have everyone come out here."

"Pavel, there's no point in getting angry with Uncle Walter over something if you don't explain it to him." Krycek said reasonably as Ruven rushed back to the station house.

"Yellow, Krycek, -Ivan." Skinner said, used to correcting people. Although, with all the black streaks, Ivan looked more like a bumblebee. Krycek waved a finger at the boys.

"Change 'um back," he ordered them. The boys sighed in resignation but they stripped off their filthy shirts and exchanged them. Skinner watched in amazement.

"First Aunt Dana, and now you," the mouthy twin, now in red, grumbled. "You're no fun today, Alex."

"What....?" Skinner was flabbergasted.

"They were in disguise." Krycek explained. "Your uncles can't tell you apart, don't confuse them," he admonished the boys.

"Hold it." Skinner held up his hands in defeat. "Ignoring the color change for the moment; what did you mean by first Aunt Dana and then Alex?"

The boys shrugged their shoulders.

"Nothing, Uncle Walter."

"It'll go harder on you if I have to ask Aunt Dana. I'll make you listen to Uncle Fox lecture you for a week," he warned them. Ivan hit Pavel on the arm and crossed his own.

"We were only playing." Pavel said in explanation.

"Playing at what and where?" Skinner asked, dreading the answer. Pavel hung his head and mumbled.

"Speak up, please. And look at me."

Ruven was on his way back with a map. Skinner sent an agent into the house to get Mulder and Scully.

"We were undercover," Pavel spoke loudly, knowing they were in trouble.

"Where? Don't make me ask again, young man, you two are in enough trouble already."

"On the roof," Pavel confessed as he hung his head again.

"You broke an established rule, tomorrow you are both grounded for a week. You can thank Uncle Fox for my not spanking you. And you will apologize to Aunt Dana for going on the roof, I'm sure you scared her very much. We will discuss your swearing in the morning, and you will have a separate punishment for that. In." They shuffled off to the house just as Mulder and Scully were coming out. The boys mumbled their apology to Scully and she kissed their dirty cheeks, thanking them.

A simple grounding might seem easy to some parents, but for two hyper-active children, it was a nightmare. Of course, since Skinner has to stay home with them all day, he gets punished, too.

Skinner turned to look at Krycek.

"I never told them they could play on the roof," Krycek protested. "I'm not a complete idiot, Skinner."

"Don't think I don't know some of those Russian words they've been using. You and I will discuss that later."

They spread the map out on the porch and the agents and deputies gathered around. The town was developed about 100 years earlier after the mines closed down and families decided not to leave and instead put their energy into farming. It was still a small town, having just over 1000 members.

Skinner's eye was caught by a trail on the other side of town. He remembered the trail, it was one of the first ones that he and Mulder took the boys hiking on just after Adam came to them. It was memorable because the twins took the opportunity to try out their new tree-climbing skills. Adam had run on ahead up the trail, and the boys were walking behind them one minute and gone the next. The men searched frantically for several minutes before looking up. They yelled at the boys to come down while seeing visions of broken arms and legs and head wounds, yanked on their ears, and continued on their hike.

The trail ended at an old coal mine. The surrounding area was a graveyard of old rusted mining equipment. Wheel barrows, mine carts, picks and shovels all in the process of disintegration, half buried in the earth. The air had been pungent with the smell of pine, earth, rust and petroleum.

"Fox." Skinner pointed out the trail. He could see that Mulder remembered the place. With permission, Mulder split up the agents with the deputies and gave them directions to stake out. Himself, Skinner and Krycek would go in the front door.

Scully called Carlson and Giulini on the radio to come back to the house. They would remain on guard with her and the children.

Skinner, Mulder and Krycek made their way up the trail, climbing over rocks and tree roots in the path, while the other teams went up the back way and around to the sides. Mulder was silent in his anxiety, Skinner and Krycek were both normally quiet people, so the hike up was punctuated by bird calls and insect buzzing.

As they came upon the mine, they heard the sound of a hammer hitting rock. The sound echoed out of the mouth of the mine. The yard in front was littered with food wrappers and soda cans, all fairly fresh. They crept closer, keeping to either side of the entrance. The hammer sounded again and they heard a weary voice,

"No." Adam!

Skinner held Mulder back from rushing in.

"They could be waiting for you and Adam is the bait," Skinner whispered. "Let me go in first, Krycek second. You stay here and watch the entrance for any runners. I'll get Adam

free and send him out to you." Mulder nodded his head, agreeing. There were still plenty of people in the world who would love to get their hands on him. If he went in and was captured along with Adam, there was a large possibility that they would both die. If he stayed at the entrance, he could catch Adam coming out and get him to safety.

They waited until the other teams were in place before Skinner and Krycek went in.

Skinner inched his way into the mine, thankful that it wasn't one of the downward shafts; this one went into the mountain. The sound of the hammer grew louder, alternating with Adam's bored sounding "No.". Skinner was puzzled but at least the boy didn't sound hurt, for which he could be thankful. As he crept down the tunnel, he could see a glow about another hundred yards in. Skinner shut off his penlight and silently made his way along the wall. He motioned for Krycek to hold a couple yards behind him. Skinner risked a peek around the corner. Adam! He was sitting on the ground, still dressed in his pajamas, which were torn and dirty. He looked none the worse for wear. The hammer was pounding against a wall just beyond Skinner's vision. Every few strikes it would stop. Something was tossed at Adam, who picked it up, said "no", and tossed it behind him onto a growing pile of rocks. His head rested in one hand while he scratched in boredom at the dirt floor, tossing small pebbles away.

A motion out of the corner of his eye caused him to look up. His eyes widened in surprise at seeing Skinner. Skinner put his fingers up, motioning Adam to silence. Skinner stepped in further, he could see the kidnapper hammering away at the wall, muttering to himself. Unfortunately, the man chose that moment to turn around.

"Hey...!"

"Adam, RUN!" Skinner yelled. The boy was up and past him in a flash. Krycek joined Skinner, his gun trained on the strange man. He man stood in overalls, gray hair patchy on his head, his clothes and skin blackened with coal dust.

"Freeze! You're under arrest!" Skinner barked at him. He recited the man's rights and ordered him to put the hammer and chisel down. The man just stood there with a confused look in his face.

"But you don't understand, I need the boy," he said, as if that explained everything.

"Buddy, take my advice; shut your mouth and get a lawyer." The last thing Skinner wanted was for this man to be set free on a technicality. There was a temptation to just leave and let Krycek have him, but Skinner wouldn't be able to justify the action to himself as he put his badge on his uniform in the morning.

"The boy is necessary for my work. Please bring him back," the man pleaded.

"Why is he necessary?" Krycek asked. Skinner was thankful, he couldn't ask the question without it coming into play during a trial.

"Because. He is the son. The father would have been better, but the son will die." The man nodded to himself, agreeing with his own reasoning.

"The son will die for what?" Krycek insisted.

"To find more oil. The aliens said that it was necessary. They are a superior race to ours, so they should know what is necessary."

Skinner held back a groan. The man was a fruitcake. They had begun to come out of the woodwork when the stories hit the papers, along with several books and a couple of movies of the week. They had tried to keep it quiet, but someone had leaked the story of Mulder's hybrid status to the public. Since the Tribunal was the only ones with that information, it had to come from someone on the inside. But how did this loser come to that information, it wasn't even in any papers?

Krycek scowled, he had a new mission to ferret out.

Skinner caught Krycek's eye. The man was off in his own little world. On the third beat, they rushed him, tackling him to the ground. They quickly disarmed the man and cuffed him.

"Clear! Get in here!" Skinner yelled down the tunnel. Within moments, they could hear the sound of feet running toward them. In a matter of minutes, the room was filled with law enforcement agents who took charge of the kidnapper.

Skinner walked out of the mine. The sun had set, it was dark but he could see Mulder holding Adam, talking softly to him, stroking the boy to reassure them both. Mulder saw him and nodded for him to join them. Skinner went over and put his arms around them both. Agents and deputies walked around them, politely ignoring them. Mulder handed Adam to Skinner and walked over to Krycek. He pulled Krycek in for a hug, surprising the man.

"Spasiba, moy brat," Skinner heard Mulder say softly. Skinner sincerely hoped that none of the others heard it, and if they did, that they didn't understand it. Krycek kissed each cheek European style and pushed him away to walk back into town.

They had a full house that night; Adam was bathed, fed and tucked into the master bedroom, while Krycek was cornered and forced into giving the twins a lecture on the proper use of language. Personally, he thought that their guardians were going a little overboard on that subject. He'd have to remember to send Skinner a case of Ex-Lax. He slept in Adam's bed, his 6 foot frame about a foot and half too long for the boy's bed. Scully slept on the sofa bed, not at all happy about sleeping under the same roof as him, but it was too late for her to drive back into the city. It wasn't until after Krycek left at

dawn that she remembered that she wanted to discuss certain information with him. Looking back, she could see that he seemed to go out of his way to avoid her the evening before.

Mulder was going to take Monday off to make sure that Adam was alright.

Skinner felt that it was a good thing that the next weekend was the FBI's annual picnic. What could happen at a picnic?

Chapter 5: Mulder Madness

"Hey, you going to spend the night in there?" Skinner stood in the doorway. Mulder was in the bathtub, reading a report. He absently pushed his glasses up.

"HmMMM?"

"You've been in there for half an hour; are you pruned yet?"

A small body pushed past Skinner, shoving his hips to one side. The bathroom and the doorway were small, the house having been built around the turn of the century when everything was smaller. Skinner's broad shoulders almost filled the width of the door. The boy lifted the lid of the toilet and Skinner quickly reached down to re-adjust the child. He knew it had to be Pavel; Ivan had better aim. The men still couldn't tell the two apart by looking at them, but they did learn that although Pavel was a little quicker mentally, Ivan had better hand-eye coordination.

Mulder glanced up and then turned a page. "I'm almost done." He shot a glance at the child's back and shook his head.

Pavel finished and turned toward the tub, his eyes barely open, his face swollen from sleep. His dark hair stood on end, wildly poking up in different directions.

"...mmb..lm...late," he mumbled a reprimand as he rubbed at his small pointed nose, the very tip slightly upturned.

"I know I was late tonight, I'm sorry."

Mulder had to work late, not getting home until after 10. Pavel leaned down for his goodnights and went back to bed. Skinner followed him out, tucking him back in and making sure that Ivan and Adam were alright, straightening their covers. He smoothed their hair, giving each a kiss. He could smell the bath water on them in combination with their unique little boy smells. He never thought that he could love a child, but he did; with three of them. It was easy to love Adam, he being Mulder's; but the twins, clones actually, of Alex Krycek... Skinner looked at the boys, Alex Krycek at approximately 4

years old. It was surreal enough to begin with, but he reluctantly began to love them, too. Mulder had been right, the boys each had their own personality, despite their genetic structure. Skinner found it amusing that Krycek himself could be felled by one look from these two.

When he returned to the bathroom, Mulder had a head full of soap. He pointed a soapy hand toward the folder on the counter before dunking. Skinner picked up the folder and sat on the floor to read it, his back up against the counter. It was an update of the search for Rhonda's family. The bottom line was –negative results. Skinner frowned and re-read the report. He could find no fault with it, Mulder had been keeping his agents on their toes with his insistence to details.

"This smells," he warned. Mulder unplugged the drain and stood up, grabbing the towel off the rack. Skinner stood and got out of the way.

"I know. I even called in a favor at WP; if she was in Witness Protection, it's deep. No records with the DMV or at Vital Statistics. Rhonda Montgomery never existed."

Skinner followed him to their bedroom.

"Last resort; in the morning, I'm calling Krycek," Mulder informed him. The men had Krycek's cell phone and pager numbers, but they avoided using it unless it was an extreme emergency. It was bad enough that the man showed up at unexpected moments, the last thing they wanted was to willingly invite him, but for the second time in two weeks, they were going to do exactly that.

With no records of Rhonda anywhere, Krycek was the last resort in trailing her family's whereabouts. His pointed ferret nose had a gift at sniffing out things that wanted to stay hidden.

"Did you still want to go to the picnic tomorrow?" Skinner asked as Mulder retrieved a fresh pair of pajama bottoms, dressed and got into bed.

"Yes, of course. I'm team captain, I have to be there for the game." Mulder curled up against Skinner's back, too tired to do much of anything else.

It was a sunny day, blue skies held only a smattering of clouds. The temperature wasn't overly hot, about 80 degrees. Perfect for a company picnic. The FBI held their annual picnic inside the local football stadium with guards at all entrances for obvious reasons; wouldn't want some pissed off ex-con to sit in a tree taking pot-shots at all the agents with their families all in one place. They also didn't have to worry about bringing in port-o-potties. The stadium was noisy with kids running everywhere, getting underfoot and into everyone's hair. Those that had hair. Frisbees whizzed overhead and into the macaroni salad. The main attraction, at the moment, was the baseball game.

The various departments at HQ split up into 4 teams. Two games went on in the morning, and the two winners would play in the afternoon. The winners of the play-offs received an extra vacation day.

Godley's Saints verses Mulder Madness were about to finish the morning round. It was the bottom of the 9th, 2nd strike. Dawson stepped up to the plate, dug in, wiggled his butt, raised his bat, and glared at the pitcher who completely ignored him. The pitcher shook off the first code from the catcher, but took the second. The ball fired down the mound and hit the catcher's glove with a resounding snap.

"Strike 3, yer OUT!" cried the umpire. Dawson threw the bat and stomped off the field as Mulder Madness tossed their gloves in the air and jumped around, hootin' and hollerin' like a bunch of yokels. They rushed the pitcher's mound and slapped and hugged his royal Madness with enough force that he would swear that he'd have bruises in the morning. A smaller body forced his way through the men and wrapped his arms around Mulder's waist. Mulder lifted Adam up onto his back.

"Alright! At 3, we cream the Profilers!" Mulder yelled. The men howled their agreement and left to find food and their families. Adam stole Mulder's baseball hat as they made their way back to Scully's picnic blanket.

"Look! There's Pavel and Ivan!" Adam pointed to a group of children with a soccer ball.

"I hope that means that Walter brought them and that they didn't decide to drive themselves." Mulder wouldn't put it past them to buddy up on driving a car; one steering and the other working the pedals.

"Daaad," Adam reprimanded him.

"Yeah yeah, be nice, I know." Mulder dropped the boy onto the blanket. Skinner was sitting talking with Scully. Mulder looked Skinner over with a leer; he was wearing raggy jeans and a sleeveless t-shirt. Mulder thought that it was a good thing that Skinner wasn't wearing his cut-offs or he's be fighting off the vultures with a stick.

"Are you picking on the twins again?" Skinner asked with an accusing frown.

"And why are you late?" Mulder asked instead.

"We had a flat. The boys took the time to ask about car maintenance."

"Oh, God, no!" Mulder and Scully looked at Skinner in horror. He was about to snap at them when he saw the gleam in their eyes.

"Very funny." He dug his own hat out of a bag and adjusted it on his head. Sunburn on a bare scalp was not a nice thing.

Adam had spotted a pair of binoculars in the bag and took them out for a look around. "Look, Dad, that man on the stage singing looks just like Alex!" Adam exclaimed. In a panic, Mulder took the glasses.

Scully looked at a copy of the day's events. "Says the group is Nick's Mounties. I wonder what American patriot thought to hire a Canadian band for an FBI event?" she mused.

"Looks a lot like him. A hell of a lot," Mulder muttered as he studied the dark-haired man in the red maple leaf t-shirt with the guitar who was jumping around the stage and belting out a rock song for the teens and young adults who were dancing on the grass.

"He isn't Alex, Alex can't sing. I heard him when Pavel and Ivan wanted to hear the dragon song. The kittens ran from the room," Adam informed them.

"What dragon song?" Mulder asked, putting the glasses down. He missed Skinner's wince.

"You know, the one that Uncle Walter sings to them, about Puff."

Mulder and Scully craned their heads around to look at Skinner.

"Reeeaaally?" they crowed.

"I do not sing," Skinner growled, refusing to look at them. Adam reached over and patted him on the arm.

"Don't be shy, Uncle Walter, I think you sing good," he said reassuringly. Before the others could gang up on Skinner, a frisbee landed a couple of feet in front of their blanket. A man ran over and stopped to tie his sneakers before picking up the disk.

"Psst. Mulder," The man hissed under his breath.

"Hey, Jacobs, what's up?" The three adults on the blanket looked at him curiously. Adam waved at him, remembering him from helping with his rescue from the crazy man.

"There's a bet goin' down that I think you should know about," he whispered.

"Yeah? On the ball game?"

"No, well yeah, but this isn't about that one. Someone blabbed to the Profilers about you guys. You know. Not that it's a secret, but still.. the Profilers don't believe it so a new bet got started. Get proof by the end of the day; yes and the kitty goes to us. No and the kitty goes to the Profilers. Last time I checked, the pot was up to \$735. No one from our office is saying much of anything to confirm or deny."

Mulder leaned back toward Scully and smiled with a slow grin. Skinner swore under his breath.

"Foxxxx..." he warned.

"Place your bet, Jacobs. We party major on the Profiler's dime after the Madness wins the play-offs." Mulder blew a bubble with his gum and let it pop. Jacobs grinned and was off with his frisbee.

Skinner glared at Mulder.

"Aw, come on, Walter, the Profilers deserve to be taken for a ride. They're Profiler's for God's sake, and they can't even see what's in front of them. We have the same address, do they think we're sharing a house to raise three motherless boys together? Besides, you owe me; you cornered me in the bullpen." Mulder leaned back further, his hair brushing Scully's thigh. She looked down at him with a crooked eyebrow.

"As A.D., I'm in denial over what I just heard. What do you think you're doing?" she asked.

"Stealing more Profiler money for the good of the Cause." He reached up and gave a gentle tug on a red lock. Several yards away, two Profilers rushed to put more money in the pot.

Skinner could see that this was turning into one hell of a day. He should have stayed in bed. So far, he'd endured a call from Krycek, one of the kittens being shaved -it was complaining of the heat according to the twins, and cleaning up a science experiment in mold that he discovered -the twins had discovered chemistry. Skinner then found himself trying to explain to Adam that Playboy was not on their reading list no matter what his father said about the quality of the articles. Thankfully, Adam was still too young to understand the pictures; he thought that they were anatomy lessons and wanted Skinner to name the different parts. Flushed, Skinner told him the proper names of the various parts of the female anatomy and silently swore revenge on Mulder for being out on a run. He would wait until later to reprimand Mulder for leaving the magazine where Adam could find it. He put it back in the master bedroom for later reading. He was bi, not gay. This was all before 9am, before he left the house. Skinner needed to run over to the station house for an hour, so Mulder took Adam to the picnic in his car, needing to get to the field early for warm-up. He couldn't look after the twins and play in the morning game, so he left the twins for Skinner to bring with him later. Midway into the city, they had a blowout. As Skinner was changing the tire, the twins became interested in the underside of the van. They would only get back into the van when he promised a lesson in automobiles when they got home.

Skinner's attention was brought back to the present by the twins ran up and presented him with a frisbee printed with FBI on the top.

"Uncle Walter, teach us how to play with this," they insisted.

"Please," he prompted.

"Please?" they wheedled. Skinner took them off to a more open area.

"Great, just what they need, to start target practice." Scully bemoaned. She noticed Adam looking strangely at her, studying her as though he had never seen her before. For some reason, she felt herself turning red.

The annual picnic was being held at the local stadium, which was enclosed with locking gates. Guards remained at the gates, only allowing in people with FBI badges or special permits. A couple hundred agents in one place at one time would be too tempting a target for an enterprising sniper. Using the stadium was also cost effective in the sense that there were bathrooms, a kitchen and health department approved concession stands for the food.

The baseball nuts in the crowd were being entertained by members of the Orioles, the national team from Baltimore who were holding batting practice for anyone who wanted to try it, while music was at the opposite end of the field. Skinner walked around the field with the twins scampering out in front of him, playing tag around peoples' legs. They had quickly grown bored with the frisbee, finding the aerodynamics too much of a variable to deal with.

"Boys!" Skinner called them over. "Don't play around people like that, you'll trip someone." They ok'd him and demanded money for cotton candy.

"The last thing you two need is sugar. You may have popcorn." They grumbled but agreed and shared a soda along with the popcorn. Skinner had forgotten about the sugar in the soda, but at least it was minute compared to the candy.

While they walked, Skinner found himself greeted by people from the office, agents that had worked under him. Most were uneasy with him, mostly because they were unused to seeing him out of a suit; a few because they didn't trust him, no matter what the U.N. tribunal had judged, and felt that he should have been in jail at the least.

"Your sons?" Starks asked, nodding toward the boys who were watching a man in front of them. Skinner was on the alert, the boys were paying too much attention.

"No, it's complicated, just think of them as my nephews." His true relationship to them could fill a book.

"What are they doing?"

The boys had begun to follow the man on silent feet, dodging behind people. Skinner rubbed his temples; he felt a headache coming on.

"They're practicing their skulking skills." Starks gave a surprised laugh and Skinner shook his head. "Don't ask. Just pray that they use their powers for good." He shook Starks' hand and went to fetch the boys. Starks laughed again. Skinner followed the boys with resolution. He caught up with them and grabbed them by the scruff of their necks. "Alright, boys, enough of that. Uncle Fox's game is about to start so let's get over to the playing field."

"But, Uncle Walter, that man keeps taking things from people." Ivan protested. "We want to watch him."

Skinner knelt down to eye-level with them.

"Are you sure?" he asked them. They nodded sincerely. Skinner stood and motioned to Agent Parker, who was nearby with a group of agents. He knew Parker.

"See that man? My nephews say they've watched him taking things. Keep an eye on him, will you?" He was out of his jurisdiction. He could arrest the man and turn him over to locals, but not on the say-so of two small children.

"Yes, Sir." Force of habit made the agent snap to Skinner's unspoken order. Parker unobtrusively made his way through the crowd, watching the suspect.

On the way to the playing field, Skinner tried to keep a tight grip on the boys. SAC Gallagher stopped Skinner to shake his hand and say a few words. Gallagher was one of the many instant promotions that occurred a couple of years earlier. He introduced his wife to Skinner. The woman was very pregnant. The boys were fascinated by pregnancy. They stared at her large belly as if trying to see the baby inside. Pavel gave her a gentle poke.

"Pavel!" Skinner was aghast that the boy would do such a thing. He began to stutter an apology but Marina Gallagher laughed and ruffled Pavel's hair.

"No harm done, Mr. Skinner. Children are naturally curious." She took Pavel's hand and laid it against her belly. Not to be left out, Ivan placed his next to Pavel's. They waited a moment and suddenly pulled away, startled. Skinner would swear that if they were cats, their hair would be on end, ears pricked forward and whiskers twitching.

"How'd it get in there? How do you get it out? Why does it have to grow in your belly? Is it a boy or a girl? Is there only one? How big is it? What...?" the boys both began asking questions as fast as they could.

"I'll answer all your questions when we get home." Skinner promised them, his face flushed with embarrassment. The Gallaghers both laughed. Skinner decided to get the boys away before they asked something he would really regret. This was Mulder's fault for encouraging them to ask questions.

Skinner got them about fifty yards before the next incident. They walked close to a family, parents doing their best not to be humiliated by their son's hair done up in a yellow and orange rooster's comb. The twins stopped dead in their tracks, their eyes wide in amazement. They tugged on Skinner's hands and he squatted down to their level.

"Tell Uncle Fox that aliens are here." Pavel whispered. Skinner choked back a laugh and promised to tell Mulder. Yes, he certainly would tell Mulder about this one.

They stopped for a bottle of water and a bag of popcorn to take to the game. While they stood in line, the boys noticed another teenager, this one with his pants hanging halfway down his butt. The boys whispered to each other. Before Skinner could stop him, Ivan went up to the boy and tugged on his shirt to get his attention.

"What?" the teenager said rudely.

"How old are you?" Ivan asked, hands behind his back as he studied the older boy.

"What?? Seventeen, why?"

"Well, we were wondering. We're 4 and we can pull up our pants. Maybe you can ask your parents to teach you. It's really easy," he said helpfully. Pavel nodded and gave his own pants a hike up in demonstration. The older boy took a step toward Ivan in anger. Skinner straightened his shoulders and puffed out his chest. The teenager took notice and stomped out of line. Skinner got their water and popcorn, and hurried the boys to the stands as fast as he could, hoping that nothing else attracted their attention.

They reached the stands at the bottom of the second inning. He found Scully and Adam and sat the boys down.

"What's with you?" Scully asked, noticing his harried expression.

"Let's just say I need a vacation from all of my recent vacations."

"Uncle Walter."

"Yes?" Oh, no, what was Pavel looking at?

"That boy over there looks like Mr. Grady's bull."

Skinner and Scully both looked. Scully laughed. Another teenager, this one with a nose-ring and shaggy brown hair. The teenager was overweight, making his overall appearance rather bullish.

"Just watch Uncle Fox, please. It isn't nice to comment on people, it's rude." He gave Scully a look.

Thankfully, the twins were happy to stand on the sidelines with Adam to cheer on the Madness. Skinner wasn't sure that the twins understood what was going on, but they copied the reactions of the crowd and Adam, yelling and cheering, booing and hissing, when everyone else did. Skinner cheered along with everyone else, all the while wondering if he could get Mulder to wear his uniform to bed.

By the bottom of the nine inning, the Madness were at bat. The game was tied, 12 to 12, with only 1 out. First base had a man on it and Mulder stepped up to bat. He struck out twice and stepped back to swing his bat and stomp off his irritation. He suddenly called a time-out.

"What's the matter, Mulder? Wimping out? I'll accept the towel," Moore shouted from the pitcher's mound.

"Up yours, Moore," Mulder shouted back. "Even if I get Eastman home, we still win." He pointed his bat to his runner on first. "I just need some luck. Be right back." He jogged over to the stands, put one knee next to Skinner, and dipped the man backwards, kissing him hard. Skinner was brought to his senses by a roar of catcalls and whistles. The boys thought it was funny, and were also laughing.

Mulder stepped jauntily up to bat again. In shock, Moore threw the ball directly over the base. Mulder swung, hitting the ball deep into right field. Eastman was off like a jackrabbit, with Mulder close behind. Eastman made it over home base as Mulder got stuck on third. Moore threw his glove down as the crowd erupted in cheers.

Wives and kids ran out onto the field to hug their heroes while Jacobs chased down the money holder. Mulder slapped hands with his team-mates before hugging the boys and Scully. He put his arms around Skinner and held on tight.

"Thank you. Love you," Mulder whispered to him.

They put the boys down to sleep on Scully's floor, washed up, and went to a pub down the street from the Hoover. Before they left, Skinner called a hotel and made a reservation for that evening, and then whispered a suggestion to the twins. Maybe Aunt Dana could explain babies to them, after all, she is a doctor. The men beat a retreat out the door, just as the boys marched into the kitchen to confront her on Uncle Walter's excellent suggestion. The men heard a scream just as they shut the door, "SKINNER, get back here!!"

Chapter 6: Spotted Confessions

6:30am.

"Fox, wake up."

Fifteen minutes later.

"Fox, you're going to be late for work. Up and at 'em."

Ten minutes later.

"Fox William Mulder, are you playing hooky?"

"Mphf?"

Skinner stared down at the man half hidden under the covers. He was getting concerned, it wasn't like Mulder to be lazy on a work day; if he wanted to stay home from work, he would just say so. Skinner put out a hand to shake a shoulder. As soon as he touched Mulder's skin, he drew his hand back. Hot! Skinner pushed the hair from Mulder's face and touched his cheek. Burning up!

"Fox, you have a fever. Wake up and talk to me for a minute. Come on." Skinner sat on the side of the bed and gently turned Mulder over. He gasped. Mulder's chest was covered in red spots.

"Fox, you never had chickenpox?!"

Mulder cranked open one blurry eye.

"Don't shit me, Skinner, of course I have. I don't remember when but I must have," he croaked. He pulled the sheet back up over his head. Skinner picked up the phone and dialed.

"It's me. You won't believe this. He's got chickenpox." Skinner held the phone away from his ear; he could still hear the howling laughter. He shook his head, the woman had no mercy.

Several weeks earlier, little Jonathan Riley came down with chickenpox. The town's moms sent all their healthy kids over to play with Jonathan. Every mother seemed to know that it was better for chickenpox to occur when young; kids got over it faster and easier than adults did. It could get dangerous with adults, the disease could turn inwards, instead of out. If it went in, it could effect organs and do a great deal of damage, or it could turn into shingles. So, Skinner sent all three boys to visit with Jonathan. Only Adam actually came down with the spots two days previously. Since the twins had yet to be sick even a day, Skinner could only assume that they had a great defense system. He himself had chickenpox at 8, so it never occurred to him that Mulder was never exposed as a child.

He went into the bathroom and got the Accu-Temp and stuck it in Mulder's ear for a few seconds. 101. He went for the aspirin and water.

"Turn over for a minute. Come on, I want you to take this aspirin."

Mulder swatted weakly at his hand.

"Fox, either this aspirin goes down one end, or I'll put it up the other end." Skinner warned.

Mulder turned over indignantly. He grabbed the white pills and the glass of water. "You're a bully, Walter." He returned to his covers, pulling them up over his head.

Whining and bad temper from a 7 year old was expected and easily dealt with, but coming from a 40 year old man –Skinner wished he was a drunk because he knew he was going to need that drink.

He went down to the kitchen to find the boys finishing up their breakfast.

"Where's Uncle Fox?" Ivan asked as he placed his bowl in the sink, teetering on the tips of his toes.

"He's in bed. Don't bother him, he has Adam's chickenpox." Skinner tilted Ivan's face up and ran the washcloth over it.

Pavel took his face out of the cereal bowl. "Really? Is Uncle Fox going to get spots like Adam?" Pavel asked with entirely too much glee.

"He already has them. Leave him alone, boys, he isn't in a good mood," Skinner warned them. He could see the wheels turning in their heads. He sent them to clean their room, "and don't bother Adam, either" and let them watch an hour of TV before getting their workbooks. Thankfully, they had started kindergarten and he could take them over in a few hours for a half-day class. They were way ahead of the other children, but the men sent them anyway so that they could learn proper socialization skills with their peers.

Skinner stopped in on Doc Wilkins and returned back home with a tube of anti-itch ointment, Acyclivor and a lecture on the dos and don'ts of adult chickenpox. Mulder was still asleep, so Skinner put a glass of water and a bowl of fruit next to the bed, stroked the spot of brown hair peeking out over the sheet. Adam was sound asleep, although he didn't feel as hot anymore. Skinner put the Accu-Temp into his ear. 99. Skinner picked him up and placed him in next to Mulder, leaving some water and fruit for him, too. Satisfied, he took the twins with him to the office to ensure that the Mulders had some peace and quiet.

Two hours later, his doorway was darkened. He looked up to see Krycek standing there glaring at him.

"What the hell is your problem?" Skinner asked him. He took a closer look at the man and bit back a laugh. Spots! "You never had them either?!"

"Either? Who...? Mulder? Is that why he's not answering his phone?" Krycek turned to head back out of the building. "This is your fault, Skinner!" he called back. Skinner chuckled. He didn't remember seeing Krycek during the outbreak, but that didn't mean anything; Krycek often made a midnight run into town, dropping things off for the boys if he happened to be in the area, or checking on them and leaving before either Skinner or Mulder knew about it. For a cold-blooded assassin, the man could sure be a mother-hen. Uh, oh. Where did the boys get to?

Skinner went to Doc Wilkins for another tube of the ointment and medication.

The bed dipped slightly. Two voices shushed each other. His eye was pulled open and a light blinded him.

"Hey!" Mulder croaked. He jerked away and turned his back.

"Maybe we should take his temture?" The two bodies climbed over him and tried to push a thermometer into his mouth. Mulder clamped his mouth tightly shut and growled.

"Do it the other way. 'Member when Mizzez Chavez took the baby's temture? She had to put it in the baby's bottom."

"OUT!" Mulder sat up and roared. Pavel and Ivan scrambled out the door with their genuine Doctor Aunt Dana medical kit. Krycek came in as they rushed past him. Mulder took one look at Krycek's face, moaned, and buried himself in the sheet again. Krycek took two of Mulder's aspirin, kicked off his boots, and stretched out on the other side of Adam.

An hour later, Skinner came in to check on Adam and Mulder. He stopped in his tracks at the doorway of the master bedroom. His bed was occupied by not only Mulder and Adam, but Krycek, with Adam sitting between them watching cartoons on the TV. He was starting to itch, someone had covered him in ointment. The kittens covered the bottom half of the bed, looking like an ornamental blanket.

"Krycek, get out of my bed," Skinner ordered him, annoyed with the man's audacity. The kittens ignored him, they were happy with the status quo.

"Haven't you ever heard of sickrooms? What's the point of having three sick people in three different places? It's easier for you to take care of us this way." Krycek didn't bother to open his eyes.

"Take care of you?? Do I look like Florence Nightingale to you?" Skinner looked at Krycek incredulously. The man didn't respond except to pull the sheet over his head. Skinner could see that he was in for a long week. Well, he couldn't sleep with Mulder until the lesions were scabbed over which wouldn't be for about another week. It looked like the couch was home for the time being. Wait a minute, why should he give up his bed to Krycek??

"Maybe the three of you should be on the sofa-bed?" He wouldn't have to carry food and drinks up and down the stairs.

"Got any juice, Walter?" Krycek asked, his voice muffled by the covers.

Skinner roused all three of them and sent them downstairs, with Mulder swearing under his breath,

"What ever happened to 'in sickness and in health'?"

"We're not married. And Alex is right, it's easier for all of you to be in one place, and the easiest place is downstairs. It's close to the kitchen, more fresh air, and I can keep a better eye on you. Adam, I'm placing you in charge. You keep these two in line."

Adam scratched his chest, grinning. His grin was lopsided due to a missing tooth, which came out a week earlier.

"Does that mean I can punish misbehavers?"

Skinner ruffled his hair.

"Absolutely. You can withhold the itching ointment."

King Adam reigned supreme, insisting on being entertained with games and readings. Skinner ignored the plea of the men for intervention.

The next day, the construction crew arrived to begin remodeling the house, much to the delight of the twins who now had new entertainment. If Skinner had hair, he would have been tearing it out.

A few months previously, the men had bought the small house next to them. It had been empty for a couple of years after old man Malcolm died. His children were all grown and living out of state, so they sold it to Skinner and Mulder cheap. It was only a small one bed-room house, but it would serve. They called for bids on attaching the two houses into one, taking out the smaller kitchen, expanding their current one, turning the basement into a playroom for the boys to play in on rainy days, giving the new bedroom to Adam. The livingroom would be expanded into half of the other one, with the left over walled off into an office for Mulder and a guest room.

The smaller house would be cut up first, taking the side off the house, literally, to be expanded to their home. The construction crew would do everything they needed to first in the smaller home, before displacing the men and boys to complete the job. Skinner decided that he must have pissed off someone in a previous life.

Scully grimaced at the man on the couch before heading up the stairs. She had waited a week until the three had scabbed over and were no longer infectious, to come for a visit.

"Scully, don't go up there," Krycek warned her. She paused, unable to believe what she heard.

"Excuse me?"

Krycek continued to surf the channels, an annoying male habit as far as the female half of the population is concerned. To make matters worse, in Scully's opinion, the kittens were enjoying someone to drape themselves on and to elicit scratches from. She couldn't believe how big they had gotten! And not even a full year old yet! The kittens remembered her and gave her holier-than-thou glares.

"They not roommates, Scully, they're lovers. You really need to get that clear in your head. How do you know you won't be interrupting anything? Fox may be going crazy with all the itching, but he's still in love with the big goon. Just yell that you're here and wait. I promise not to bite." He turned the TV to the news channel and reached for the tube of ointment.

"On second thought, maybe walking in on them one time would make that clear to you. Go on up, I think Walter's helping Fox with an oatmeal bath. Maybe they'd enjoy your company." He covered his chest and arms with the stuff, sighing in relief before covering his face with it. He tossed the tube to Scully who automatically caught it. Krycek turned on his stomach, pointing to his poc-marked back. He was scabbed over but they still itched as they healed.

"Come on, Doc, what happened to that oath? Do me, baby."

Scully had a mind to find a can of itching powder, but her conscience got the better of her. She shooed the kittens away. They turned up their noses at her and left.

"Since when do you use their first names?" she asked as she put on gloves. She knew he was right; she had spent many a night on that sofa-bed, trying to ignore sounds drifting down from the master bedroom.

"Have either of them ever asked you not to?" he countered. Scully frowned.

"Mulder.." she began.

Krycek interrupted her, "Yeah, when you first met him, right? About ten years ago?"

Scully finished his back and recapped the tube, pulling the messy gloves off. She was suddenly reminded of something off the subject.

"Krycek, Sharon..."

"Drop it, Scully," he warned, not letting her complete her thought. She had heard that soft tone before; smart people paid heed to that tone. And lived another day. She shivered, remembering that this man was not as tame as he appeared. She really wanted to be there the day Krycek was finally caught at something illegal.

Scully stood at the foot of the stairs and yelled up, "Hey, I brought lunch!"

Mulder clutched at Skinner's forearm as he came in the large hand. They both chuckled as Skinner rinsed him off.

"Which one do you think needs rescuing more?" Skinner asked. He was kneeling on the floor beside the tub, gently sloshing medicated water over Mulder. He kept his hand around Mulder's softening genitals as he ran the washcloth over Mulder's back, soothing the itching skin. He was wearing latex gloves on the recommendation of both doctors, Wilkins and Scully.

"You know what? I think that we will have to experiment with latex later, that was an interesting sensation," Mulder commented.

Skinner had no plans on doing anything else in the water, but shortly after he got in, Mulder decided that his back wasn't the only thing that needed to be rubbed.

"Probably Scully; Alex has been nastier than usual lately," Mulder stood up and took the towel to dry himself.

"Oh, I don't know about that, you're not exactly sugar sweet when you're sick," Skinner responded. Mulder bent to dry his legs, deliberately pushing his ass up against Skinner's groin as he bent over.

"They can wait." Skinner said, holding Mulder against him. Skinner unzipped his jeans and pulled his cock out. It had been a couple of weeks, masturbation was quickly losing its appeal. He was already semi-hard from getting Mulder off in the bath. Skinner overlooked the poc-marks covering the tight ass in front of him as he stroked himself into a full erection.

"Tell me now if you're not feeling up to this," Skinner advised him.

"I want it, do it hard and fast." Mulder reached into the cabinet and took out the lube and a condom. He bent over the tub, grabbing onto the edge as he spread himself before Skinner. Skinner moaned at the sight of that tight tiny opening.

"Maybe I should ask Scully if oral is alright," he teased Mulder. Skinner really wanted to go down to his knees and use his mouth.

"Later, I don't care, just do it," Mulder grumped at him. Skinner rolled the condom on and squeezed out some lube.

"Yes, dear." Skinner obeyed and entered Mulder with surprising abruptness. Mulder caught his breath at the suddenness of it.

"Am I hurting you?" Skinner asked, stopping in concern. Mulder took a breath.

"No, no, fuck me, come on," he panted, pushing back. Skinner pulled back and pushed into the tight heat.

Downstairs, Scully turned bright red as Skinner's shout echoed from the bathroom. Krycek laughed.

"Are you sure you still want to go up there, Scully?" he asked between chuckles.

"Where are the boys?" she asked, looking around for little ears. Krycek waved a hand.

"Relax, Pavel and Ivan in school for another couple of hours, and Adam is watching the construction." He turned the channels again. Scully looked at him curiously, trying to be clinical about what was going on up there.

"That doesn't bother you?" she pointed toward the ceiling. Scully would have thought that a man like Krycek would be too macho to accept the men in their current lifestyle. Krycek shook his head.

"Scully, I've done and had done to me more than you can ever imagine in your wildest fantasies or your worst nightmares, and I've seen too much in my life to get obsessed about the sex life of two adults. If those guys can take some pleasure in each other, I'll be the first one to defend their right to do so. You may not approve of my methods, but I am a freedom fighter, Scully, and that includes the freedom of those men to fuck each other right through the mattress, if that's what they want. I'd even defend your rights, no questions asked." Krycek didn't look at her, but spoke as he surfed the channels. She wasn't sure what to make of the look on his face or the haunting in his eyes.

"Kry.. Alex. If you need to talk..." she said gently, her eyes opening to what his life may have been like. May still be like. What 'worst' nightmares could have happened to him? Scully suppressed a shiver.

Krycek took a quick look at her and saw that she was serious.

"Thanks, Scully. I'm fine."

"So. Are you both still alive down here? Do we need to mop up any blood?" Mulder startled them as he came down the stairs, finger-combing his wet hair into some semblance of order. Skinner was close behind him.

"No blood down here." Krycek said. "Did you remember to clean the bathroom? Don't want the boys finding anything strange. Walter, do you think you can yell any louder? I don't think the West Coast heard you."

Mulder laughed as Skinner buried his red face in his hands. He turned to go back up the stairs but Mulder pulled him back into the room, patting him on the back.

"It was Fox's fault, he.. never mind," Skinner mumbled and went into the kitchen for dishes and utensils.

"What was Fox's fault?" Krycek called after him, deliberately egging the man on. Skinner handed out plates and forks.

"Shut up, Krycek. Not a word, Fox," Skinner growled, unable to look Scully in the eye.

"Actually, I'd be interested in the details," Scully informed him with an arched brow as she sat in the chair. She hadn't actually attempted to tease Skinner before, but maybe Krycek had a point about the formalities of the past ten years. Mulder opened his mouth to answer her. Scully could always count on Mulder to be blunt with her.

"Fofoxxx..." Skinner warned him. Mulder shut his mouth.

Later, he mouthed to Scully. She had no doubt that she'd get an earful at the first opportunity. She leaned over for a close look at him, unable to get over the fact that he was covered in chickenpox at his age. It looked like a really bad case of acne. He put his plate down abruptly and wiggled, doing contortions while trying to get at his back. Krycek picked up the ointment and motioned for Mulder to sit down.

Scully watched the two dark heads close together and frowned. She looked at Skinner, but he didn't seem concerned as he divied up the food. It occurred to Scully that maybe Krycek visited for more reasons than the twins. Krycek always did have an interest in Mulder. Scully had a feeling that she was missing something but couldn't quite put her finger on it. She'd kill Mulder herself if he was cheating on Skinner.

A short time later, the twins returned from their half-day kindergarten class. After swarming all over the adults and eating what was left of the food, they grinned their dimples and batted their thick black eyelashes at Scully until she caved in and read them a story before they went down for their nap. Scully watched them sleep as she lay on Adam's bed, wondering how a man got from being a beautiful precocious child to a killer.

Scully went downstairs to find everything quiet. Krycek was quietly reading on the couch and the other two were nowhere in sight. Maybe Skinner needed to go over to his office, she thought. She went into the kitchen for a glass of water and looked out the window into the back yard. She almost dropped the glass. The men were laying in the hammock, naked. Mulder was laying on top of Skinner, kissing him passionately as he ground their groins together. Scully looked closer and felt a rush of desire between her legs. Mulder was actually riding Skinner's cock! He lifted up and threw his head back as he sat back down. Skinner reached between them, stroking Mulder's cock.

Unable to help herself, Scully put her hand between her legs and squeezed firmly, biting back a moan. She unzipped her pants and put her hand inside to stroke her aching clit. Two hands suddenly appeared on either side of her. A startled scream was suppressed by one of the hands.

"Shhhh," Krycek whispered in her ear. He looked out the window over her shoulder. "They're hot together, aren't they?" He covered her hidden hand with his own. Scully burned with humiliation at being caught. "It's ok, Scully, I jerk off to them all the time. Why don't you forget for the moment that we hate each other, and let me help you? How long has it been, mmmm? Years?" He touched the tip of his tongue to her neck. Scully was taken by the action in the back yard; Mulder leaned down to suck on a nipple and Scully could see Skinner's cock buried in Mulder's ass. She was surprised that Mulder wasn't split in half with that thing.

Krycek slowly worked his hand into Scully's pants along side her own hand. His fingers shared her juices off of her own before moving her fingers aside. He stroked her clit with an expert touch and Scully whimpered, pushing back against him.

"Tell me you want this, Scully. I don't want to hear any cries of rape later on. I can make you feel good, I can get you off, fast, slow, hard, gentle." He put the other hand under her shirt and cupped her breast, taking the nipple between his thumb and forefinger. Scully bit back a cry and spread her legs a little further apart. "Do you want me to fix this problem, Scully?" he whispered insidiously into her ear. "Anyway you want it, anywhere. You want it like Mulder's getting it? You want it straight? Do you want to be fucked, Scully?" the devil slid a finger into her vagina.

"Oh yes," she finally admitted with a sob. Krycek lowered her pants and took his cock out of his sweats. He rubbed himself against her ass, letting her feel him. Outside, Skinner had turned them over, giving Scully a good eyeful of his tight ass as he fucked an obviously happy and contented Mulder.

Krycek bent her over the countertop.

"Straight," Scully quickly warned him. The world stopped for a moment when he entered her vagina. She could feel the itch growing inside of her and it needed to be scratched. "Fast and hard," she instructed him. Krycek pulled back and slammed into her without a word. Scully saw stars. He reached down front and rubbed her clit, pinching it, his fingers seeming to know exactly where to rub hard and fast. Scully bit her palm to keep from screaming.

"Come for me, Scully. Skinner's going to come soon, come with him." Krycek whispered harshly as he fucked her. Scully's entire body was focused on his thick cock doing it's best to tear her in half. He pulled back and slammed into her again, her ass jiggling with the force of his thrusts. "See how he's bunching up? Come with him, Scully, come on do it." He thrust into her faster and harder, his fingers on her clit matching his actions. Tears flowed down Scully's face as she screamed into Krycek's hand that suddenly covered her mouth. He hissed and came with a grunt, biting back his own yell. Scully turned her head around and saw Kyle Hoskins behind her.

Scully jumped up, disoriented to find herself in Adam's bed. She had fallen asleep. Her dream came flooding back and her face got hot. Not in this lifetime, she silently vowed. Thankfully, the twins were fast asleep. And since when did Deputy Kyle enter her dreams?

Skinner looked around as he heard footsteps on the stairs, he had wondered where Scully had gotten to. He sat at his computer, typing a letter for Deputy Hoskins. Scully came into the room and he looked up.

"Are you alright? You're all flushed. Please tell me you're not getting sick." He waved a vague finger at her face. If anything else, she turned redder.

"I'm fine. I fell asleep on Adam's bed." She cleared her throat and got a glass of water. She risked a look out of the kitchen window, logic telling her that Skinner was sitting there at the table, not outside. Mulder was outside, however, and sitting with Krycek in the kids' pool. Krycek's bare chest reminded Scully of her dream.

"What are they doing?" she asked, watching the men talk. Skinner continued to type. "Hmmm? They decided that they were both still itching and they both wanted another oatmeal soak. Only one tub. So they filled the pool with the stuff."

Scully watched as Mulder leaned in to say something, intensifying his speech with a hand shaking Krycek's shoulder. Krycek nodded, looking at the water. Mulder put a hand under Krycek's chin, lifting his eyes.

Scully couldn't stop herself, "Doesn't that bother you?" she pointed out the window. Skinner looked up, not knowing what was bothering her. He knew that she and Krycek didn't like each other, and he could appreciate that, but he didn't understand what her problem had been all day. He looked out the back door. Mulder was gently shaking Krycek by the ears. He spread his arms wide, gesticulating as he spoke.

Skinner shrugged. "Alex is obviously having a problem with something and Fox is trying to shake some sense into him. Why should it bother me?" he looked curiously at Scully. He suddenly remembered that there were things that Scully was unaware of, and it wasn't his place to inform her. He didn't want to be in the same country with her when she found out. He had warned Mulder to tell her right at the start.

"You're not in the least bit jealous?" she asked, her hands on her hips in disbelief. Skinner tried to see the scene from her viewpoint. Two men, sitting in a kiddie pool, skin, talking intently, some touching... Skinner began to understand what Scully was getting at. "Scully, I trust Fox. Believe me, there is nothing going on there. Alex has some issues that need to be worked out. We all keep forgetting that Fox does have a psych degree, and if anyone needs a shrink, it's Alex Krycek."

Scully sat at the table with a frown.

"They've become friends. You know how touchy-feely Fox can be with his friends. Would you rather they were enemies?" he countered with a raised eyebrow. Scully drummed her fingers on the table.

"No, I suppose not," she admitted. "It's just... Krycek?!"

Skinner took his glasses off, giving her his attention.

"Listen, Scully. You don't see Alex as often as we do, you haven't gotten to know him as we have. You see an FBI agent's wet dream capture." Scully flushed again, much to Skinner's mystification. "We know someone that will put his life on hold for the welfare of a child. Someone who will drop everything in an instant and come halfway around the world to read a bedtime story to three boys who are perfectly capable of reading their own books, or to bring Mulder a tray of baklava from Greece. I once expressed a fondness for fresh dates, and the next thing I know Fed-Ex is delivering a jar of them straight from the Middle East. I don't ask how he gets food past customs." He could see that Scully wasn't satisfied. Skinner didn't see much of a choice, he was going to have to talk to the guys about talking to Scully. He finished his letter, saved it, and printed it. He hit Ctrl-N and brought up a new blank document page and turned the laptop toward Scully.

"I would appreciate it very much if you would write a letter of recommendation. Kyle Hoskins is going to apply to the Academy. It would look very impressive for him if he went in with Rec letters from all three of us." He succeeded in turning her attention.

"Really? That's wonderful! I was very impressed with his work on Adam's abduction. I can't say I'll be sorry to take him away from you, though." She began addressing her letter. Something crossed her face, alerting Skinner.

"Just take good care of him for us."

"I'll take very good care." She fumbled over the keyboard and backed up a couple of spaces. She flushed again.

Bingo!

Skinner decided that it was long overdue for a certain stubborn red-head to join the ranks of couple-dom.

"I'm going to see what the guys want for dinner. Cook-out alright with you?"

"Mmmm? Sure."

Skinner bounced across the lawn. Mulder and Krycek noticed him and looked at each other with 'uh-oh' written across their faces. Skinner squatted down next to the pool. It was a good sized kid pool, three feet deep by ten feet long; perfect for hot summer days. And nights.

"We are having a cook-out for dinner," he announced. Mulder eyed him suspiciously.

"Why?"

"Because. You don't mind if I invite Kyle, do you?"

Mulder continued to look at him.

"What are you up to, Skinner?"

Skinner raised his hands in innocence.

"You don't like Kyle?"

"I like Kyle fine. Stop flashing those browns at me or I'll go down on you right here I don't care who is watching. Why are you making it a point of inviting him over tonight?"

"Oooooooh!" Krycek cooed. "I'd pay to see that show."

"Don't encourage him, Fox. I just thought that with Kyle alone, and all of us here, it would be the neighborly thing to do."

Mulder thought for a moment before trying to snap his wet fingers.

"Ah-HA!" he pointed accusingly at Skinner. "Matchmaking! Who've you got him pegged for, Alex or Scully?"

"Hey! I don't do boy-scouts."

"That's right, there's not a gay or bi bone in Kyle's body. Scully it is. I approve."
Krycek was being ignored.

"Excuse me? Was that a crack? Do I scream 'Queen!'?" he whined as he gestured with a wrist.

"Mary," Mulder taunted him. Krycek shot an armful of water at Mulder, drenching Skinner in the process. Mulder was up in an instant, tackling Krycek and taking them both under the milky medicated water. Skinner received another soaking. He reached under and pulled them up by the hair. The men sputtered.

"I swear, you two are just like the boys," Skinner accused them.

They shrugged, "Well, considering..." Krycek began. Skinner held up a hand, stopping him, suddenly serious.

"That's another thing. Fox, I warned you. You should have told Scully. She's getting suspicious. Just now, she thought that Alex was flirting with you."

Mulder hung his head over the side briefly, his hair dripping.

"You don't know the half of it," Krycek said. The men looked at him. "Somehow, she put me and Sharon together. I've been avoiding her questions."

Mulder groaned and raised his hands in defeat.

"Alright, alright. After the boys are down for the night?"

"May as well. Just take her gun away first," Krycek requested.

"Somethin' smells good." Kyle came through the side gate into the back yard. He had a bag in one hand and a young girl's hand in the other.

"Hi, Missy!" the boys yelled, happy to see her. She waved at them.

"Who's this?" Scully asked, smiling at the gangly red-headed girl.

"Evenin', Miz Scully," Kyle drawled with a slow cowboy smile. Scully was stricken temporarily speechless and Skinner gave himself a pat on the back with an 'I-told-you-so' expression at Mulder.

"This is my daughter, Melissa. She's visitin' with me this weekend. Missy, this is Miz Scully, Mr. Mulder's boss and friend."

Scully shook the girl's hand, delighting the child with the grown-up custom. Melissa looked to be about twelve years old, but hadn't begun to 'blossom' yet. Scully could see a beautiful young woman lurking behind the skinny tom-boy.

"Kyle, I forgot that you had Missy this weekend," Skinner was dismayed. With the craziness of the past couple of weeks, he hadn't remembered Kyle's visitation week. "I don't want to take away any of your time with her."

Kyle shook his head, putting the bag on the table.

"No, it's fine, Walt. We'll just have time together here. Besides, she hasn't had the 'pox yet."

Scully touched the short red curls.

"I had a sister," she said. "Her name was Melissa, too, and she also had red hair. We called her Missy."

Melissa stepped closer.

"Really? Where is she?"

"She died quite a few years ago. Maybe after dinner, I'll show you her picture, would you like to see her? She was very pretty, just like you." The girl blushed, positive that she wasn't really pretty, the lady was just being nice.

"Missy, come and play!" Adam called out, trying to push both Ivan and Pavel on the swings. Missy hesitated, looking at her father before running over to take over as Ivan's pusher.

"She's lovely, Deputy Hoskins," Scully said with a light smile.

"Thank you. And please call me Kyle, I'm not on duty, ma'am."

Krycek rolled his eyes and Mulder picked up his feet, placing them on the chair next to him. Skinner walked behind them and bent down.

"You two behave," he whispered.

"Dana. Kyle," Scully offered. They smiled at each other.

"At least this one doesn't have bucked-teeth." Mulder thrust out his teeth. A dinner roll hit him on the head. Scully heard him.

Kyle took a non-alcoholic beer from the bag and handed one to Scully before making a hesitant gesture toward the lawn chairs.

"Sherriffff!" came a salute from over the fence. Skinner, Mulder and Kyle moaned. Scully and Krycek looked around at them.

"Come on back, Miz Carmody," Skinner called out. "It's your turn to chase bats!" he hissed at Mulder. The gate opened and Ms. Carmody strode in, her purple muumuu and floppy hat swaying as she marched across the lawn toward them. She was pulling Reggie along behind her.

"Oh, ya'll are havin' a party," she waved at everyone. "Good, we can tell you all at once. Ya'll are the first to know! My dear Reginald has asked for my hand! I have accepted!"

Krycek sputtered into his beer and Skinner gave him an unobtrusive pinch.

"Hi, Miss Adelle! Hi, Mr. Reggie!" The children ran up to the couple. She patted their heads and Reggie wiggled his fingers at them. The town's underground communication system, run by the children, knew that when parents said no to sweets, Ms. Carmody said yes. She was good for hugs and scraped knees, and she was also very generous on Halloween, and that made her Number One in the eyes of the kids.

The happy couple accepted everyone's congratulations before excusing themselves to go find the Reverend.

"How... she.. he.. splat!.." Krycek couldn't find the words.

"Be nice, Krycek," Scully reprimanded him. "You don't know her medical history. She seems very nice and he loves her, just as she is. That's all that matters." Scully looked to Kyle and he nodded, gazing into her eyes.

"Uncle Walter, are the hotdogs ready yet?" asked Pavel, bored with the adult stuff and looking for something more important.

"Yes, I think so. Get your plates." The children rushed for paper plates and huddled around the grill. Hotdogs for the kids and steaks for the adults, with sides of potatoes and corn-on-the-cob, green salad and macaroni salad. Standard American cook-out fair. The kids filled up and sat at their own smaller picnic table with sodas. Skinner turned the steaks, brushing BBQ sauce on them, and checked the larger potatoes.

"You guys planing on anything for Pavel and Ivan's birthday next week?"

Skinner, Mulder and Scully all froze, staring at Krycek. He waved a smug finger at them. "I knew you forgot."

Skinner looked at Mulder in dismay, "How could we have forgotten that?" he asked.

"Maybe because they weren't..." Mulder began and stopped, remembering that Kyle wasn't 'initiated'.

"That's no excuse," Krycek said. "Just because I brought them after last year's birthday is no excuse to forget the birthday of your only nephews. Do you remember Adam's birthday, at least?" Krycek saved the moment, seeing the confusion on Kyle's face.

"Can I ask something?" Kyle leaned forward toward them. "I've been curious. I thought that I could figure it out for myself, but the clues are almost non-existent. Not even a last name to pick up on. Which of you is their actual uncle?"

They were all silent for a moment.

"That is a very good question," Skinner said, preparing a plate with a medium-rare steak for Kyle, while Scully took just salad and a potato. "Unfortunately it has a very long and complicated answer. Let's just say that Mulder is first in line and I'm second." Kyle was too much the polite southern boy to push the obvious evasion.

Pavel ran back over for another hotdog, ketchup dripping down his cheek. Skinner cleaned him off before handing over the other 'dog.

"Boys, what do you want to do for your birthday next week?" Krycek called over to them. The boys looked up with the same shock on their faces that the adults had.

"We have a birthday next week?" the twins echoed. Krycek glared at Skinner and Mulder who raised their hands.

"Next Thursday, big five year olds."

The boys jumped up and rushed over, clamoring over Krycek. They demanded to visit the petting zoo.

"The petting zoo." Krycek shot a look at the men. Mulder gave him a saccharin smile.

"Can Aunt Dana come too? And Deputy Kyle and Missy?" Ivan asked.

"Dep-U-ty. And yes they can, but you'll have to ask them," Mulder told him. The boys begged and pleaded with Scully and Kyle.

"Yes, of course I'll come to your party," Scully assured them.

"I'll come, too, but I'll have to ask Missy's mother if it's ok for her to come."

"Anyone else, boys?" Skinner asked, setting a plate in front of Mulder. "Any of the kids in your class?"

The boys fell quiet. Ivan climbed up onto Krycek's lap and leaned back against his chest. Skinner paused and knelt down to eye-level.

"What's the problem?"

Pavel kicked at the lawn. "They don't like us. They call us weirdos 'cause we're smart." Skinner pulled him in for a hug.

"Why didn't you tell us?" he asked. Pavel and Ivan shrugged but didn't say anything.

"Adam, are you having any problems in school?" Mulder asked his son. Adam shrugged also, his eyes downcast.

"I always have kids picking on me for being smart, I'm used to it," he said with a show of bravado. Mulder pulled him onto his lap.

"Listen, boys, you need to tell us this kind of stuff. We can't help you if we don't know about it," he told all three boys. "I understand about being teased, I really do. I was teased in school, too for being smart. And I won't insult your intelligence by telling you to ignore them; words hurt, sometimes even worse than punches. But I will tell you this; be patient. I know that it's a long time, but when you're all grown up, being smart will pay off. Kids who don't learn things won't have good jobs, people don't respect them and they won't make any money. You will all have jobs that pay very well and people who will respect you because you are smart. Kids who don't learn will be stuck doing absolutely nothing, and you will be able to travel all over the world, doing what ever you want."

"Can we travel with Alex?" Ivan asked, sitting up with bright glittering eyes. Krycek lifted his ferret nose smugly.

"I thought that you wanted to work with me and Uncle Fox so that you can do stake-out duty?" Scully asked quickly. The boys thought about it. Kyle watched everyone with amusement.

"Uncle Fox travels sometimes, don't you, Uncle Fox?" Ivan asked.

"Yeah, we can work with Aunt Dana and Uncle Fox and travel. Do we get to have a gun and a badge, too, Aunt Dana?" Pavel jumped excitedly in the ring of Skinner's arms. Krycek grimaced. Scully ruffled his hair.

"Absolutely. You can even arrest people and put them in jail." Scully looked directly at Krycek. The boys cheered and went back to their dinner.

"Keep dreamin', Scully." Krycek leaned over and said in a low voice. Scully bit into a carrot with sharp teeth. Kyle was back to being confused.

"Can I be a FBI agent, too, Daddy?" Adam asked solemnly. Mulder nodded. Skinner watched them together, enjoying their interactions.

"I would be very proud to have you on my team. But there are a lot of rules about getting into Quantico Academy. You either have to have an excellent record as a police officer like Deputy Kyle here, have been in the military like Uncle Walter, be a doctor like Aunt Dana, and have straight A's all through school like me, including at least 4 years of college. That's why it's good to be smart."

"No one wants to be a housewife like me?" Skinner pretended to pout, making Adam laugh. Mulder sent him back to his dinner with a pat on his fanny.

"Is this something we should be talking about?" Mulder asked Skinner calmly, staring directly into his eyes.

Skinner didn't know what he was referring to at first. "What? No. No, Fox, that wasn't a complaint. If I had a problem being the primary caretaker, I'd speak up right away. I'm content, for the first time in my life. I wouldn't have things any other way. Except to wish that your boss wasn't so greedy with her best agent and would let him get home on time more often." He leaned across the couple of feet to kiss Mulder gently on his mouth. "I've always wanted children, Fox. Even if we did get them in an unusual fashion, I'm happy."

Mulder brushed a finger over Skinner's mouth and cheeks before nodding.

"Alright."

Missy was looking at them wide-eyed. The men noticed.

"You didn't tell her?" Skinner asked Kyle. Kyle shook his head uncomfortably.

"I didn't know how to bring up the subject. This isn't something that a father usually talks about with his daughter."

Missy clicked her teeth and rolled her eyes.

"Daddy, I know about gays. I do live in the city, you know. I was just, you know, surprised. I just thought gay guys wore make-up and talked funny. I saw two high school girls kiss; they were all over each other. I even saw Flea kiss Anthony right on

stage on a video. Now they sometimes wear make-up," she informed him with a knowledgeable air. Kyle was positive that he didn't know his child. Mulder chuckled.

"Welcome to modern times, Kyle," he said.

"Who is Flea and Anthony?" Kyle was sure that it was going to take a while before his confusion settled. Why would someone named Anthony kiss a flea?

"Chili Peppers!" the boys all yelled.

"Take it on the other side..." they warbled off key playing air-guitar, making the rest of the adults laugh and clap. Kyle was even more confused, wondering where a spicy herb fit into the equation. He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

Before Kyle and Missy left, Skinner presented him with copies of all three letters of recommendation that Scully was personally going to present to the admissions board. Shocked and touched, Kyle gave the men hearty hand-shakes and shyly pecked Scully's cheek.

Skinner gave the boys their baths, needing to be doing something instead of waiting around before their meeting with Scully. He couldn't even begin to guess how she was going to react. He did a mental count of locations of all the guns in the house. When he could stall no longer, he went back downstairs. Scully was sitting on the couch, looking suspiciously at the three men. She knew something was in the wind.

Skinner and Krycek sat in the furthest chairs, while Mulder sat next to Scully, ready to tackle her.

"Scully..." Skinner didn't quite know how to begin. Just spill it, Marine! "Scully, Sharon's maiden name was Krycek." They waited.

"I figured that out already," she simply said.

"Yes, and I'd be interested in knowing how you figured that out," Krycek said, annoyed; he had gone to a lot of trouble to keep their histories secret. Scully shrugged,

"You both have the same eye-color. Green is very unusual. Pictures." She pointed toward the staircase. "What I really want to know is what Mulder has to do with all this. Besides being your ex-partner and Skinner's...-friend. The word boyfriend seems so trivial and lover just doesn't work," she complained off the side. She watched all three speak without speaking.

"None of this goes outside this house, Scully," Skinner warned her. "The boys don't even know. For their own protection."

Scully nodded her agreement. Krycek opened his mouth,

"My biological father is/was Smokey."

Scully took a moment. She turned to Mulder, her eyes wide in shock. Mulder nodded.

"I only found out last year, Scully. From Alex."

"And I only found out a couple of years before that."

Scully covered her mouth and melted backwards.

"Wait a minute. That means that you and Skinner are.. Krycek and Skinner are.. you and Krycek... you and Sharon.."

Krycek snorted. "All in all, Smokey fathered 10 of us, that I know of; only me and Fox are left. I refer to it as the Grand Cluster Fuck."

Chapter 7: Home On The Range

Note: The zoo is based on three real places that I combined for this story; the Children's Petting Zoo and Aquarium in Vancouver, BC's Stanley Park, and a museum in Palm Beach, Florida that I remember going to as a child; it had hand's on discovery exhibits and a live reptile room. I enjoyed it, Mom did not.

The zoo was fairly crowded, but that was to be expected for a sunny Saturday morning. Kids laughed and yelled, pushing and shoving each other in friendly competition in their excitement. Parents stood in the ticket line, already looking harried first thing in the morning. The big bald man standing alone in the line, his back straight, shoulders set in a commanding presence, looked out of place. The baby looking over her mother's shoulder in front of him cooed, pointing a wet finger at him. Skinner pointed a finger back, giving the chubby cheek a gentle flicker. The baby giggled, flirting with him in baby fashion. He made Mulder stand off to the side at the gate entrance with the kids, seeing no point in all of them standing in the line, the kids getting restless with the slow pace. The boys were trying to do cartwheels, Adam and Pavel barely getting their legs up to hip level. Ivan caught on to the skill fast, his feet flying straight over. The other kids with their group were trying, only Elana Chavez was able to catch on but her sister Maria was close behind. Skinner only hoped that when they got home, they didn't decide to use the trees as parallel bars.

They had the twins' formal birthday party on Thursday which surprisingly went off without a hitch. Fifteen kids all together, including the birthday boys and Adam, and the five Chavez kids from next door, along with Jonathan Riley, late of the chickenpox, and several other kids from the neighborhood. All converged on the Skinner/Mulder back yard for hotdogs and burgers, cake and ice cream. To the great surprise of the men and Scully, Krycek demonstrated a new skill, swearing to them that he would NOT be a happy camper if news of his skill became public knowledge. Krycek could make balloon animals, along with hats and swords for the boys and tall pointed hats for the girls. Pavel and Ivan immediately took to 'dueling' with their new swords, poking and bashing each other in the middle of the lawn, taking turns 'dying' heroically. Adam found it much more interesting to keep the current reigning princess company, to Mulder's great amusement.

Mrs. Chavez baked a large chocolate cake, decorated with two monkeys wearing party hats. The kids were on a sugar high for the rest of the day, as were the kittens who decided that they wanted to lick the cream frosting. A pony piñata was tied to the tree, Pavel won the coin toss for first hit but only made the paper animal spin around. Ivan took his chance and it burst open on the second strike, sending candy and toys all over the lawn where the rest of the kids converged in a tidal wave to collect the booty. Mulder went around with a camera attached to his eye, taking pictures of the twins' first birthday party. Scully simply watched him, unable to believe that she was seeing the domestic side of her long time partner. She didn't realize that he snapped her picture just as Ivan planted a sticky chocolate kiss on her cheek.

After dumping the boys into the bath and then into bed, where they went out like lights, the men decided to leave the mess for the morning and collapsed into their own bed, promptly falling asleep. In the morning, they discovered that elves had been at work; the birthday mess had been cleaned up. Krycek denied it, declaring housework beneath him, however he graciously accepted Mulder's thanks on his way out the door to work. On Saturday morning, the men piled seven kids into the van, the rest were taken by three other carpools. Scully would meet them at the zoo. It was short notice to reserve a pavilion, but A.D. Scully pulled some of her new clout, sweet-talked a big-wig into a favor, and suddenly a pavilion was freed up for them, complete with restrooms and electrical outlets. Krycek was running late, having a last minute errand to run which he refused to elaborate on.

By the time Skinner took his turn at the ticket booth, the rest of their party had arrived; eight more kids plus four parents. The supervisor went over to the group to stamp hands, delighting the kids with temporary tattoos on the backs of their hands.

"Dana?" The adults turned at the sound of a voice calling over to them.

"Hi, Mom." Scully hugged her mother before bending to hug and kiss her nephews. The supervisor stamped their hands also, taking money from Mrs. Scully. Margaret Scully took Mulder's face, giving him a hug and kiss, also.

"Hi, Mom, I didn't know you were joining us," he said, kissing her cheek. "Dana makes A.D. and suddenly she has all kinds of secrets," he teased. Margaret shook Skinner's hand, unsure of the large man. He had always been kind to her the few times they had met in the past. Margaret looked him over, still not quite believing that Mulder was 'with' him. She had such high hopes for Dana and Fox. She was then introduced to the boys, taking an immediate shine to them. Scully bashfully introduced Kyle and Melissa to her mother. Margaret was taken with them, thinking that Dana was right, Melissa did remind her of her own Missy, only with Dana's tomboy look about her. Kyle politely "ma'am-ed" her, shaking her hand.

"Bill didn't come with you?" Scully asked, looking around for her older brother. Margaret shook her head.

"No, he wanted some peace and quiet." She looked affectionately at her three grandsons running around with the other kids. Mulder was relieved, he couldn't stand the asshole. They rounded up the children, put everyone on a 'buddy' system, and gave orders to remain with their adult. Skinner took the twins, Mulder took Adam and Miguel Chavez. They left Krycek's ticket at the booth after Mulder called his cell phone to let him know. Mulder shrugged at Skinner's questioning look, he didn't know what Krycek was up to. Krycek spoke briefly to the twins by phone, promising that he would be there. And they were off.

The first stop was to the souvenir shop where the boys wanted t-shirts and hats; Tasmanian Devil for Pavel and Pepe lePew for Ivan, who was always hugging and kissing someone or something. Skinner found their choices appropriate; he bought an extra Taz shirt for Krycek and a Marvin the Martian shirt for Mulder. Marvin was wearing a bikini. Adam went with a baby Orangutan whose hair was on end, eyes wide open in surprise. Mulder immediately put his t-shirt on, modeling for the Scullys and the Hoskins who laughed at him. Mulder picked a Baloo t-shirt and tossed it at Skinner. At the urging of the boys, he put his new shirt on while Mulder sang "the Bear Necessities" off key. The boys clapped and laughed. Skinner thought that Mulder was spending too much time in front of the Disney videos with the kids.

They made their way through the park, dragging the men on a zigzag course back and forth across the streets. Ivan suddenly squealed and jumped as he danced in place, his hands covering his bottom. They turned around to find that a goat had taken a liking to the boy's shorts. The kids laughed and all reached out to pet the animal, making noises over the coarse hair and antlers, peering closely at the strangely shaped pupils. The adults took the prerequisite pictures.

A nearby hut turned out to contain cages with open tops which allowed the children to reach in and pet rabbits, ducks and guinea pigs. A stomp drew their attention. A female peacock stomped her foot, warning them away from her nest which held a single egg. Pavel reached out to touch her, but Skinner took one look at her beak and pulled him away. No little finger snacks for Mrs. Peacock today.

"She may be uncaged, but she's still wild," he explained. Pavel pouted but he was quickly distracted by the reptile room across the way. A handler had a snake around his neck, letting kids come up slowly to touch it.

"I don't think so," Mulder shook his head but Skinner took his arm and dragged him.

"Come on, Indiana."

Adam's eyes were wide with excitement as the handler gently placed a small python around his neck. Mulder knelt to eye level and snapped a picture. Each of the boys had to hold the snake, too. Most of the children in the room were boys, the girls having decided to stick to the bunnies. Except Missy, who discovered a pet tarantula.

"Oooohh, Daddy, feel! It has fur! It's soft like a cat!" she held her hand out to Kyle who put out a finger to touch it.

"You're right, it does feel like a cat," he commented with surprise. Scully had enough of a problem with cat's fur on a cat, she wasn't going to deal with cat's fur on a huge spider. Around the corner was a poultry coop. Everyone wanted to reach out and touch the white silky chickens, with their unusual feathers, but the birds jumped out of the way. A nearby rooster crowed his pride at his 'girls'. An attendant took the children into the hatching room where they could play with baby chicks.

Skinner kept watch on the twins who had so far been too excited to find any mischief to get into. They sat on the straw covered floor holding the small fluffy creatures. "Easy, boys, very gently," Skinner warned them. Ivan tried to place a small airy kiss on a chick and Skinner heard a groan in back of him. He turned to find Krycek grimacing at the sight.

"You guys are corrupting them," he complained. "Chickens are for eating not playing with. Those things should have been scrambled eggs with bacon a long time ago." The attendant glared at him. He saw her and snapped his gum with a wicked grin. "With diced peppers, onions, mushrooms and Tabasco sauce," he taunted her. "Maybe a brandy on the side with a raw egg."

"Knock it off, Alex, the kids are having fun." Mulder snapped a picture just as Pavel held up a chick to Krycek.

"It's cute, Alex, and soft and fuzzy. It's feet feel funny, hold it," the boy insisted. Before Krycek could do anything, the attendant clapped her hands for attention.

"It's time for them to go back into the cage for their lunch," she took the chick from Pavel's hands and expertly rounded up the others, all the while keeping an eye on Krycek.

"That's alright," he told the boys. "Those rabbits are nice and fat, should make good Hasenpfeffer. With potatoes and carrots. Little baby onions." The attendant stiffened, her eyes wide with anxiety.

Scully took pity on her and patted her shoulder. "Ignore him, we do," she advised the girl. "He's just trying to get a rise out of you."

"Yeah, just trying to get your goat. Hmmm, haven't had that in a while, either." Skinner forcibly turned Krycek around and shoved him out the door before the poor girl was reduced to tears.

"What, you don't like goat? Alright, how about lamb? With mint jelly? Haggis?" Krycek could compromise on dinner, he was a reasonable person.

"You're impossible, Alex," Mulder said. The boys ran over to the next pen, which held black pot-bellied pigs. The pigs snorted with childish pleasure at having their rough hides scratched by their visitors. "Where have you been?" Mulder asked.

Krycek handed him a large envelope from his jacket. "Getting some information that you've been looking for."

Mulder stopped in his tracks. He looked at the envelope and then at Adam, who was nose to nose with a pig, trying to imitate the snorts. Mulder sat down on a nearby bench.

"Don't read it now, there's too much and this isn't the place for it," Krycek said.

"Just give me the gist of the story."

"You can relax, the old man had nothing to do with this. Rhonda Alexander was a runaway at 16 from an abusive home. She left behind a father who really loved his little girl. The man's still alive, say the word and he won't be." Krycek snarled in disgust. Mulder shut his eyes and grabbed Skinner's hand, holding on tight. Skinner took the envelope and handed it back to Krycek.

"She must have gotten some counseling, Fox, she seemed very together the short time I met her, and Adam was well adjusted. You showed her that not all men are scum of the earth."

"She did get counseling. Shortly after she left home, she was picked up by a stranger. Lucky for her, this stranger was a member of a private half-way house. She finished school and used underground sources to get her name changed and the paperwork to go with it. She was a smart kid."

"Who is this bastard and why wasn't he arrested?" Mulder growled.

"James Alexander. Senator James Alexander."

An elderly couple walked by with their granddaughter and looked with disapproval at the men's laced fingers. Krycek straightened his shoulders and glared at them. They hurried along.

"You don't need to play guard dog, Alex, thank you," Skinner said, amused by the man's display.

"Alexander is on the Tribunal!" Mulder protested.

"And he was one of the few that voted for my conviction." Skinner remembered the man, slightly older than him, middle aged paunch beginning to spread his waist, but still considered to be a handsome man, by the reaction of most women. Skinner didn't trust him the moment he first saw Alexander. He didn't like the man's eyes.

"That explains why she didn't try too hard to find me when she found out she was pregnant," Mulder commented. "I was too public; if she was photographed with me, or if the wrong person saw us together, her father would have found out where she was. And he has the clout to take Adam," Mulder moaned.

Over my dead body, Krycek thought, feeling more like the older brother than number nine. Although since Jeff died at his father's hand, he was actually the youngest. He already had a plan in the works, but his law-abiding brothers didn't need to know about it. He could probably talk Mulder into letting him go, but Skinner would snap him up and hand him over to Scully.

"What's going on?" Speak of the devil. Scully strode over to them, seeing a serious huddle.

"Later, Scul," Mulder begged her, seeing Kyle and Margaret in the background. She stood staring at him. He'd have to give her something.

"Alex found some information on Rhonda. She was a runaway at 16 from an abusive home." He made sure that the boys were still out of ear-shot. Scully gasped and squatted down in front of him, taking his hands.

"God, Mulder! Is there anything I can do?"

"No, Scully, don't do anything. I need to go through the paperwork first." The last thing he needed was Scully to start digging with Rhonda's real name and draw attention to them.

Pavel and Ivan ran over to tug on Krycek's hands, pulling him toward the pigs. Pavel tugged on his hands while Ivan pushed from behind. Margaret wasn't sure of what to make of the strange dark-haired man who radiated danger, but those boys of his seemed fond of him. She'd have to remember to ask Dana about him.

"Baked ham, with pineapple and brown sugar... mmmmm.."

Scully shook her head.

"He really needs to eat before he comes into contact with animals. Never go shopping on an empty stomach."

"Well, why don't we round up the kids?" Skinner suggested. "It's almost lunch time. We told everyone to meet back at the pavilion at 11." And Mulder could use some time out. As Skinner had suspected, it took the better part of an hour to get the kids organized enough to herd them back to the picnic area. Pavel and Ivan, and several of the younger children all zoned out on blankets before lunch was done, so the adults took the time to relax.

Skinner sat on the grass with Mulder a foot away, looking over the papers.

"How will he find out, Fox? No one knows about her. He can't claim that Adam isn't yours, a man would have to be blind not to see you all over him." Mulder's hair waved in the slight breeze as Skinner spoke softly, the sable brown strands shimmering and a glint of silver sparkling once in a while as the sunlight hit it. "And you have an entire town to back up your claim that you're a good father. He wasn't. We have the documentation to prove that. It isn't as though you're without contacts in the Senate, he isn't as all-powerful as you think he is."

Mulder laid back on the grass, hands behind his head as he stared up at the blue sky, thinking.

Margaret watched them from across the pavilion. She couldn't hear what they were saying but it amazed her that Mr. Skinner could be such a gentle person, she would never have suspected it of him. She began to relax as she saw that Skinner was actually good for Fox who seemed much calmer and happier than she had seen in the years that she had known him. And Dana; Dana was practically radiating in the presence of Kyle Hoskins and his daughter. She was in love on a level that she had never known with Fox. Margaret knew that Dana and Fox spent some time together, Dana didn't hide that from her, but no news of weddings came and Dana didn't seem particularly upset, so Margaret just expressed her disappointment and let it go. Margaret was happy, her babies were all grown up. Now who was that disagreeable man that had the nerve to father those adorable twin boys and where was their mother?

Skinner looked at his watch.

"It's almost 1. We should wake up the children if they still want to see the whale show." Mulder nodded and stretched as he sat up. Skinner brushed the dirt and grass from his back. Mulder smiled sweetly but with a little sadness in his eyes as he leaned over for a small kiss. Skinner knew that it was a real possibility that Alexander could find out about

Adam and make waves, but there was nothing they could do until the time came. He'd have to keep a close eye on both Mulder and Krycek; Skinner knew this vulnerable state that Mulder was in, Krycek would be able to talk the man into just about anything. It wouldn't be the first time that Mulder stepped out of bounds; for that matter, it wouldn't be the first time that Skinner stepped out of bounds. There was no way he'd let anyone take Adam from Mulder.

"It's whale time," Adam announced, plopping himself down next to his father. To his surprise, he was pulled into a strong hug. Mulder held on for a long moment, breathing in his son's now familiar scent and being comforted by it. He leaned back and held the small face between his hands.

"You know that I love you, right?" Mulder asked, staring into Adam's blue eyes shaped like his own. Adam nodded, suddenly scared.

"Fox, you're frightening him," Skinner said softly. Mulder took a deep breath and relaxed. He ruffled Adam's hair and kissed his cheek.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I'm feeling a little insecure at the moment, that's all," Mulder explained. That was one of the changes that Mulder insisted on making a conscious effort of, being more open of his feelings since his own father had been closed to him. Skinner didn't mind the change, since it was a problem that he had also. In the past year and a half, Mulder had forced him to be more open with his feelings, more open than he had ever been in his life. Skinner could feel a weight ease from his heart every time he expressed himself. He should have done that with Sharon, but then he wouldn't be with Mulder. It was a vicious cycle, those 'what ifs'.

"Go wake up the kids. Let's go see a whale." Mulder gave Adam a pat on the fanny to send him off.

The entrance to the aquarium led directly into a cave-like grotto filled with tanks set into the walls of rock. The tanks were filled with creatures from the Atlantic, 'local' areas just off the nearby coast. The children expressed awe and wonder at some while laughing at others and making disgusted sounds at the stranger creatures. Some tanks held various colored frogs and snakes, not just from the local area but from tropical jungles, signs declaring them poisonous.

The grotto led to the outdoor tanks which held the larger mammals. The children screeched in laughter as they ran up to the otter's tank to watch the funny creatures playing. They were just in time for feeding. An attendant stood on the platform and tossed raw oysters down to the otters who rolled onto their backs to nibble daintily on the treats. Roars of laughter poured out again as one of the otters excreted as he ate his oyster. One of the helpers took a long handled net and scooped up the matter while they were told that all such matter was collected and analyzed, the hormone levels checked to make sure that the animal was healthy. Skinner could hear the embarrassment coloring her voice as she lectured the visitors.

After feeding, the kids dragged Skinner and Mulder down a ramp, into an underground watch area where they could see the otters playing under water. On the other side were seals, just as playful, and gentle white beluga whales in a third tank. The warning bell rang for the Orca show and the boys pulled the men back up to the top. They scrambled for seats up front, wanting to be splashed. The men let them but decided to stay further up where they could still see them but could avoid a shower. They let the boys know exactly where they were.

The Orca swam lazily in the large tank, accompanied by a dolphin. The attendants came out and the creatures went up to them, opening their mouths like children begging for a treat. Herring was thrown into the cavernous opening as the Orca bobbed in the water. The attendants began their show with the whale showing off speed as it glided around the tank. A warning was given just before its fluke sent a wave of water over the side of the tank. The children screamed their pleasure and surprise at the soaking as they scrambled out of their seats to find parents who wisely stayed out of the splash area. The twins, Adam and Miguel came running up and crouched between the men's legs. They were completely soaked, but happy.

Skinner turned to say something to Mulder and noticed that his attention was elsewhere. He was talking quietly with two men on the other side of him who were together, if the laced fingers were any indication. Skinner could see that the men were wearing wedding bands. One of them gestured toward his ring as he said something low to Mulder who nodded thoughtfully. Skinner had a feeling that Mulder was going to be bringing up a new subject soon.

It wasn't as though he hadn't thought about marriage, but since it wasn't legal in this country, he saw no reason to stress over it. Putting on rings did not make a person married. He should know, he worked hard enough on his own 17 year marriage. But he would wait until Mulder brought up the subject. He looked at Mulder's relaxed face, hazel eyes shining like silver in the sunlight; yes, he'd marry Mulder in an instant.

The boys shrieked again as the dolphin raced around the pool and jumped out of the water. Ivan laughed and did his little dancing in place in his excitement, leaning against Krycek's shoulders. Skinner took a look at Krycek's face and saw that the big blow-hard was happy, too. He was always surprised when Krycek relaxed enough to let the dimples show. He could admit that Krycek was a good looking man, even hot on occasion, but even he wasn't stupid enough to get involved with Krycek on a romantic level. It would take a much stronger person than he to keep Krycek on a leash. Skinner gave an inward chuckle; literally a leash, if his suspicions about Krycek's preferences were correct.

The house was quiet for a change with the twins down for their nap and Adam out at a friend's house. Skinner was on-call that Sunday, so he had his uniform shirt on with a pair on skin tight jeans. Normally, the jeans would have ensured that Mulder would be all

over him, but Mulder had been unusually pensive all weekend. Skinner expected it, after reading the paperwork that Krycek had dug up. Rhonda left a shitty situation. If her father suddenly appeared on the doorstep, Skinner was sure that he'd shoot the man.

Skinner sat in his chair reading the paper, having nothing better to do than to wait for the phone to ring. He had forwarded the office phones to his home, seeing no point in sitting around the station doing nothing, when he could be sitting around the house doing nothing with his family or taking walks around the town with them as he did his rounds. He looked over the top of his glasses at the man sprawled out on the couch, staring out the window. Mulder wore only a pair of frayed denim cut-offs, unconsciously looking wanton and ready to be ravished.

"What's on your mind, Fox?"

Mulder shrugged.

"You've been quiet all weekend. Having a problem at work?" he asked, trying to get Mulder to talk about it. He knew what the problem was, but if he brought it up, Mulder would only dig in deeper.

Mulder shook his head.

"Did I do something or forget something?"

That got him a glance.

"No, you've done nothing." He went back to his inspection of the outside world. Skinner folded his paper and set it on the table. Mulder suddenly found himself covered by a 180 pound sheriff.

"Walter..." he protested as he sank into the cushions.

"I thought that one of our agreements was that we'd talk to each other?"

Mulder sighed and stared into golden brown eyes just inches from his own. He raised a finger and traced the eyebrows, still dark brown, delicately trailing his finger down Skinner's smushed nose and over his high cheek bones.

"Did you like being married?"

Skinner raised his brows at the unexpected question.

"I enjoyed it very much, why?" He never could second guess where Mulder's mind was going next but this wasn't it.

"Just curious. What did you like about it?"

Skinner took his weight off and sat on the floor next to the couch.

"Well, I guess I enjoyed just being with Sharon. I felt as though I was a part of something important, that I belonged. She made me feel safe. No matter how bad my day had been, what I had seen, I kept myself alive because I knew that I'd be waking up next to her." Mulder nodded, playing with Skinner's fingers.

"Fox." Skinner turned Mulder's face toward him. "You make me feel that way. I love you, never doubt that. The day this country legalizes same-gender marriages, I will put a ring on your finger, I promise." He carded the silky brown strands and leaned down to brush their mouths together. Mulder opened his mouth and Skinner deepened his kiss, caressing the hot moist cavern with his tongue as he felt a heat wave rushing through his body. Mulder gave a small whimper and moved restlessly. Skinner lifted his head.

"We can't play now; kids, remember?" he said, his voice husky with need. He kissed the nearby nipple, the tiny bud standing at attention.

"Then stop teasing me, dammit," Mulder bitched. He heard himself. "God, I think I'm PMS-ing," he moaned.

"It certainly wouldn't be the first time I've been sent to the store for tampons."

Mulder flew off the couch and tackled Skinner. After several minutes of mock punches and strangulations, they became aware of being watched. Skinner looked up upside down to see Adam watching them with his 'adults are weird' expression.

"If you guys are done playing, we need a umpire." Adam rolled his eyes at the display his Dad and Uncle were making.

"Playing?!" Mulder grabbed the boy and dragged him down to the floor. He pulled Adam's shirt up and blew a loud raspberry on the boy's belly making him screech with laughter.

The phone rang and Skinner went to answer it. He was glad to see Adam laughing, Mulder wasn't the only one that had been out of sorts lately. Moodiness definitely had to be genetic, he didn't care what the so-called experts said.

"Dad?"

Mulder stilled at the serious tone. He brushed the hair from Adam's face, thinking that it was time for hair cuts. He propped his head on his hand as he lay next to Adam.

"Hmmm?"

Adam pulled his knees up, figgiting.

"Are you a bad person?" he whispered. Mulder sat up, shock written on his face. Skinner saw him and quickly ended his call.

"What??"

"Matthew Johnson said that you and Uncle Walter are bad people and that me and Pavel and Ivan shouldn't live with you."

Skinner sat on the floor next to Mulder. Matthew Johnson was Reverend Johnson's 14 year old son.

"What else did Matthew say?" Mulder asked.

Adam shrugged, his face splotchy with white and red patches.

"That you do... things... that good people don't do." He plucked at his shirt, unable to look at the men.

"Did he tell you what kinds of things?" Mulder asked gently. Adam gave a jerky nod. Mulder looked at Skinner who nodded back; they'd have a talk with the good Reverend.

"Sit up, Adam." Mulder tapped his knee, giving him a small shake. Adam sat up and crossed his legs, looking at the floor as he fidgeted with the rug. "Uncle Walter and I love each other," he began. "I don't believe that love is a bad thing. Matthew is entitled to his own opinion, just as you are and just as everyone else is, but whatever Uncle Walter and I do in the privacy of our bedroom is nobody else's business. We don't hurt each other or anyone else. Yes, we make love, that's what adults who love each other do. When you grow up and fall in love, you will too. It doesn't hurt, it feels good, sometimes it's the most beautiful feeling in the world."

"If it feels good, how come you yell?" Out of the mouths of babes..

Skinner flushed and coughed. Mulder took his hand, lacing their fingers.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know that we were loud enough to disturb you," he said evenly. "You know how when you get so excited about something that you just start yelling? Why do you yell?"

Adam thought about it.

"Because.. it just kinda feels funny inside until it comes out."

"Because the pressure builds up until it has no where to go except out?" Mulder clarified. Adam nodded.

"That's why I yell. It feels so good that the pressure builds. I'll try not to be so loud."

"Adam, do you think we're wrong?" Skinner asked, dreading a positive answer. Adam shrugged.

"I don't know. I like being here. You and Daddy are nice. Mommy had a boyfriend once, and he hit me with his belt. It hurt really bad and Mommy yelled and threw things at him until he left. You yell at me sometimes and get angry, but you don't hit, not even Pavel and Ivan when they do something really bad." His tone made it clear that Adam felt a definite need for a hand taken to two small bottoms. Skinner silently agreed.

"So, other than the fact that the twins are out of control, you're ok with this?"

Adam nodded, his head still down.

"What else did Matthew say?" Mulder guessed. Adam was quiet for a moment. A wet droplet appeared on his hand.

"He.. he said when I grow up I have ta kiss boys, too. I don't wanna kiss boys!" Adam began to cry. Mulder pulled him onto his lap as Skinner got to his feet and stormed out the door.

He stalked past the construction crew who were sitting around eating lunch. They started to call out to him but remained silent after seeing his face. He could hear the choir practicing as he entered the church yard. They stopped abruptly as the front door banged open. Skinner looked around the hall but didn't see Johnson.

"Where is he?" he demanded. Miss Cordelia pointed a hesitant finger toward the offices. Johnson jerked his head up in alarm when his office door crashed open.

"Sheriff??"

Skinner put gorilla knuckles on the desk and leaned over the man who shrank back.

"I have a 7 year old boy crying on my livingroom floor, soaking his father's shoulder, because your son took it upon himself to tell my son the gay facts of life. In detail." Johnson's face reddened and he began to bluster. Skinner cut him off with an arm swipe through the air. "If you have something to say about my private life, be a man and say it to my face because if Matthew says one more thing to any of my boys, I will personally arrest you for emotional and mental child abuse. Of both your children and mine. Am I clear?"

"Crystal. But Sheriff, you are the one hurting those children. God..." Johnson said stiffly.

"I'm not the one teaching them intolerance and hate. Adam was wonderfully innocent until your son got hold of him." Skinner turned on his heel and marched out of the office,

his back stiff with anger. He had put up with Johnson's attempts to win him over to his congregation and listened with a great deal of amusement when Johnson tried his hand at Mulder who responded with a lecture on the pros and cons of the various world religions and their historical backgrounds. Johnson didn't make a second attempt. They refused to allow the children to attend any of the churches; Mulder insisted on teaching them comparative religions until they were old enough to make a reasoned decision. The twins were confused on the entire issue and Krycek wasn't much help.

"Just tell 'em you're Jewish." There were no synagogues in town. At Mulder's pointed look, Krycek had raised his hands in innocence.

"What? My mother was a Russian Jew. I even had a bar mitzvah. I speak Hebrew. Really!" He spoke eight different languages actually, not that it mattered....

"I had a bar mitzvah, too, that doesn't make me Jewish," Mulder had responded.

"Actually, it does," Krycek had said. "neither of us practice it, though. The old man had a thing for Jewish women. I don't know..."

Skinner had been surprised, he had known about his former mother-in-law, but not about Mulder.

"I'm feeling out of place here," the Italian Catholic had complained.

"There's one problem, Alex," Mulder had pointed out, ignoring Skinner. "One trip to the boys locker room, and everyone will know that they aren't Jewish." The twins were uncircumcised.

Krycek shook his head, "I refuse to mutilate two perfectly good little pee-pees. If they want to get it done when they are adults, that's their business. I'm a very bad Jew, Fox."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Alex. You're just very bad period."

The conversation had deteriorated from there.

Skinner walked back into the house to find Mulder in the chair with Adam on his lap. The boy was getting too big for laps, but Mulder held him anyway. Skinner squatted down next to the chair.

"If anyone ever says anything like that to you again, you come and tell one of us right away. Promise?" Adam nodded solemnly. "What about Pavel and Ivan, has anyone been bothering them?"

Adam shook his head.

"They tried but Pavel told them that he'd sic Alex on them if they didn't shut up. Everyone is afraid of Alex," Adam said, confused. He liked Alex. Alex was nice to him and he was funny.

"Some of the kids said that Alex comes over here.. to.. do that stuff that Matthew said," Adam confided, his cheeks reddening. Mulder buried his face in Adam's hair with a moan, shaking his head.

"No, son. Alex is your uncle, just like we are Pavel and Ivan's uncles. He's my brother. Alex comes here because we are his family."

Adam took a moment to digest the new information.

"So can I call him Uncle Alex?"

Skinner chewed the inside of his cheek to hold in his mirth.

"I think that would be very nice. I'm sure Alex would like that," Skinner said with a straight face. He hoped he was around the first time Adam called Alex Uncle, he'd like to see Alex's face.

Noise started up outside again, signaling the end to lunch.

"Alright now?" Mulder asked. Adam nodded, much more content with his world. "Good. Why don't you go wash your face and we will go out and play."

"I don't want to play anymore. Can we just go for a walk?" Adam pleaded.

"Yes, of course. And stop for ice cream?"

Adam nodded. That sounded like a good idea to him. He went upstairs to wash the dried tear stains from his cheeks.

Mulder exhaled into his hands.

"I can't protect him," he realized.

"Not from everything, no. But you can help him face life with all its ups and downs, all the good and bad. I think that you dealt with this problem very well and answered his questions with maturity, thereby giving him a good strong foundation to fall back on for future reference. You did good, Fox." Skinner shook Mulder's knee in emphasis. Mulder nodded, his eyes shut as he centered himself.

"Where did you go?" he asked.

"I couldn't wait. I went and read the riot act to Johnson. Lost my temper," he confessed. He told Mulder everything that was said.

"I feel a snowball starting," was all Mulder said afterward.

"Should we call a meeting for contingency plans?" Skinner asked.

"I think so. And include the Gunmen. Alex isn't the only one with deep contacts. Just in case."

"What do we tell the boys?"

"The truth, as much as they can understand. But we will cross that bridge when we come to it." Mulder leaned forward, holding Skinner's gaze. "You don't need to go through with this. I can move back into the city and take the boys with me."

Skinner felt a knife slash through his heart and a roaring pound in his ears.

"Don't you ever say that to me again!" he snarled, grabbing Mulder's shoulders. "My life is with you, no matter how messy things get." He kissed Mulder hard. "You are not going to waltz through my front door, turn my life upside down, and then leave when the honeymoon is over. You're mine, Fox, and I will stand by you come hell or high waters. You wanted marriage? This is it, baby, not a piece of paper, not a ring. This!" He put his mouth to Mulder's again, pouring his heart into the act until they were both out of breath. They rested their foreheads together, breathing hard. Skinner heard a sound in back of them.

"Your... our... son is waiting. Go and spend some time with him," he whispered hoarsely. Mulder nodded, cupping Skinner's face to brush their lips together before standing up. Adam stood looking at them with wide eyes. Skinner bent down and placed a kiss on the top of his head in apology for scarring him.

Soon after, the twins woke up. Pavel proudly presented Skinner with a tiny white tooth with a bloody root. Skinner peered at the new gap in the front of Pavel's mouth.

"Well, at least I'll be able to tell you two apart for a little while." He'd better hang on to the tooth, seeming to recall that DNA can be extracted from teeth. He'd ask Mulder about it later.

"Not for long." Ivan wiggled a tooth, the same front tooth that Pavel just misplaced. They sat on the front porch, the boys spread out on the floor with their books and a bowl of grapes, and Skinner in his chair with his book and an iced tea. He wasn't making any headway in his book, he just kept re-reading the same paragraph over and over. He could handle the problems that he felt coming their way, but he knew that Mulder was unhappy about his ringless finger.

"What do you think about commitment ceremonies?" Mulder had asked several nights earlier. Skinner had been waiting for him to speak up on the subject.

"I don't think about them. I've never understood them. They just don't seem real to me." He knew that wasn't what Mulder wanted to hear but he had to be honest, he took his marriage oath seriously and he just couldn't get serious about commitment ceremonies.

"Sheriff, hey." A hand waved in front of his face, breaking his inward gaze. The boys giggled at him. Skinner blinked, a face coming into focus.

"Emilia. I'm sorry, I was thinking about something."

The woman on his porch step smiled.

"That was obvious. Would you like to talk about it?"

Skinner had met her a few times. She lived outside of town on a farm with friends in a small commune project. She was about five years younger than him, her pleasant face smooth and unlined, hiding her age well. Her long black hair hung in a braid down her back, the tip curling against the curve of her butt. Their first meeting was due to Reverend Johnson making noise about the 'commie-pinko satanists' living in their town. After a couple of routine questions to satisfy his paperwork, Skinner headed back to Johnson. Having heard Mulder digress into lectures on religions many times, Skinner had no problem giving Johnson the basics of Wicca. He gave Johnson a talk on tolerance and instructions to see Mulder if he had more in-depth questions. Skinner actually liked Emilia and her friends, they were always polite and friendly when they came into town on an errand. He thought that Emilia was pretty despite the extra 50 pounds which only rounded her nicely. If he had been a free agent, he would have given her some serious consideration. She was smart, sensible, up on world affairs; an interesting person to talk with. He liked her hair and she had unusual pale ice blue eyes surrounded by thick black lashes, with lush kissable lips.

"...Would you like to talk about it?"

"Not unless you know anything about commitment ceremonies," he responded dryly.

"What would you like to know?"

Skinner could see that she was serious. He motioned to the chair beside him.

"You and Mulder discussing it?" she asked. Normally a private person, Skinner found himself answering her.

"He's been dropping hints the size of UFOs. I don't see that these things are real. I know he's hurt by that, but I don't want to lie to him."

Emilia nodded thoughtfully.

"And if they were real, would you do it?"

"Here and now," he said emphatically.

"Did you know that marriage as we know it, is relatively new, in the historical sense?"

Skinner shook his head.

"Most tribes had a system we call 'hand-fasting'. Different names, same thing. See, it used to be that most marriages were for convenience, not love. For reasons of state, or families healing old wounds. But once in a while, two people would find each other. They would discuss terms of agreement, what he would bring to the marriage, what she would bring, who owned what, who was head of household, not always the man, and who had custody of any children that issued. The contract would also include a time limit, at which time vows could be renewed if they so desired. If not, they just took what was theirs in the agreement and left. They announced their intentions and the couple would invite specific people to witness their vows, oaths sworn to each other, and a priest or shaman would bless their union.

"Then the Church stuck its hands into the pot. It convinced people that only a priest of the Church had the right to marry people, according to their own rules, which placed women in subjugation to the man. No where in the Bible is there a marriage by a priest, only blessings of one.

"A modern commitment ceremony is a direct off-shoot of hand-fasting. It's the same thing, actually. Our Christian government doesn't recognize it, but non-Christians around the world do recognize and honor a hand-fasting as real."

Skinner leaned forward in thought, his hands clasped between his knees. He looked at his left hand, so long without a ring. He missed being married; the realization shocked him.

"We're not Pagan," he said, still looking at his hand.

"That doesn't matter, your oath is to each other, not a deity." She touched his back with a light hand, making him look up. "The ceremony is to formalize what is already in your heart." She poked once at the center of his chest.

"What's the point if the government and our society in general doesn't recognize it?"

"Our society, for all its claims of being modern, is still playing by Puritan rules. If you and Mulder took vows, would you honor them? Would he?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"Would your families and friends honor them?"

That was a little tougher. Skinner thought about the people he would invite to this party.

"Yes, I believe so."

"Then what difference does it make if the IRS and insurance companies don't?"

Skinner had no answer but he had a feeling that he was being a little anal about the subject.

"We would decide on the rules for our marriage, stand in front of people and tell each other? That's it?" It seemed too simple.

"Yes. And rings, if you want them. You can recite poetry to each other, sing, tell each other how you feel. Whatever you want. Just remember that these are vows; you will be taking them in front of witnesses. If you break your vow, you shame yourself in their eyes.

"If you'd like, I can facilitate for you, bless your union. You'd help write everything that is said, no deity need be named. I can recommend someone else, if you'd rather. No hard feelings."

Skinner felt better about it all now that he had a clearer picture.

"Thank you, I'll think about it and talk with Fox."

She patted his hand and stood up to leave.

"Wait, what did you need? You stopped by for something," he reminded her. Emilia crooked a smile and shrugged.

"I didn't need anything. I just had a feeling that I should stop by." She stole a grape and wiggled her fingers at the boys before leaving.

Ivan jumped to his feet and climbed onto Skinner's lap, straddling his legs to face him. Skinner groaned under the compact weight. Even at 5, Krycek was a sturdy boy. With that type of body structure, Krycek and the boys would be over-weight if they weren't so active. No, Skinner thought, Krycek was far too much the peacock to allow that to happen.

"Are you going to marry Uncle Fox?" he asked, his eyes glittering.

"We're thinking about it. But don't you tell anyone because we may not," Skinner warned him.

"Can we help in the wedding?" Ivan asked, thinking positively.

"Yes, you may. And Adam, too."

Ivan bounced excitedly. Skinner stilled the movement, feeling the backs of his thighs dig into the edge of the chair.

"You're too heavy to wiggle like that, Ivan, it hurts my legs. Listen, I want to ask you something. It's important. Does anyone say things to you about living here with us?" Ivan shrugged and played with the badge on Skinner's chest.

"Not really. Sometimes. We tell them to shut up, they're stupid." His disgust with his peers was evident. Skinner had wondered if Krycek's impatience with most people was a learned response, but it seemed that it came naturally. Another thing to add to the list of what to break the boys of; they needed to learn respect for others, no matter how much slower people are.

"Yeah, they say you're not really our uncles because only a mommy or daddy's brothers can be uncles and we call Alex Alex not Daddy and you and Uncle Fox and Alex don't have the same last names so you can't be brothers so you can't be uncles," Pavel said in a burst. Skinner's head spun for a moment. He could see they were going to have to work on sentence structure with Pavel; project number 1001.

"They're wrong," he said. "Uncle Fox and Alex are brothers, they just don't have the same last name. Not all brothers and sisters have the same last name." Skinner saw no point in keeping things from the children, not with the potential problems developing. It would be easier to explain Mulder and Alex's parentage, than it would be to explain why it was a secret. One would arouse more suspicion, the other would not.

The boys perked up with the new information.

"Really? Can we go tell them?" Ivan asked. Skinner shook his head.

"There is no need to tell anyone anything. You need to learn 'discretion'. That means that there are times when you don't tell people things that they don't need to know. It's none of their business or it's private. If they ask, you can say that Uncle Fox is Alex's brother, but that's all you have to say and only if they ask. And tell us who asked." That really wasn't clear, but he saw no other way of explaining it to them. Maybe he could cut down the boys' tendency to gossip, especially about things that go on in their home.

They were disappointed but quickly got over it. Pavel changed the subject abruptly and Skinner's head spun again.

"Uncle Walter? Did you know our mommy? Was she pretty?"

The light dawned. The boys were always interested in mothers but Skinner had been assuming that it was the female equation that was puzzling them, since they were used to an all male household. The other kids had mommies, why didn't they? What could he say? They weren't old enough to understand the truth.

"I'm sorry, I don't know. I never met her." Well, Alex was pretty, but he didn't think that's what the boys wanted to hear, and he certainly didn't know who the egg donor was. God help them all if it was Scully. Skinner took a closer look at the boys. No, he couldn't see anything of Scully in them, just Alex.

"Do you have a picture of her?" Pavel asked. Who....? Oh,....

"No, I don't."

The dawning light grew brighter over Pavel's head.

"Let's ask Alex!" he suggested to Ivan. They raced into the house.

"Whoa, what? Boys...." Skinner followed them inside. Alex wasn't in town...

Pavel picked up the phone and dialed a number he had obviously memorized.

"This is Pavel. We want to see what our mommy looked like, could you bring us a picture? Bye. Oh, yeah! Uncles are getting married and Uncle Walter said we can help! Bye!" he pressed the pound sign and hung up the phone. Skinner stared in amazement before bursting out laughing. For a year and a half, he and Mulder had been tearing the house apart looking for microphones and cameras, trying to figure out how Krycek always knew when to put in an appearance, and all the time it was two gossipy children and a voice mail!

Skinner picked up the phone and hit the redial. There was no announcement, just a beep.

"Alex, I think we need to discuss the definitions of the words 'gossip', 'spies-in-training' and 'privacy'. We also need to have a meeting, so get back here as soon as you can. Something has come up." Skinner pressed the pound sign and hung up at the multiple beep.

"What's the number?" he asked Pavel who sighed and recited it. Skinner couldn't believe it! All that time they had been paying for long distance to call the mobile phone and the boys got a toll-free number! Krycek owed him quite a bit of money for the phone bills. "No more calling Alex without discussing it with us first. Alex does not need a daily update on what goes on here. He can ask us if he wants to know." First hurdle on the gossip problem.

"Yes, sir," they said, dejected. Ivan poked Pavel for letting their secret out. Pavel the Informer, Ivan the Lover; Skinner wasn't sure if he should feel sorry for the future or for the present.

He sent them out to play with a stern reminder of their discussion.

Mulder slid in the door around them. He was sweaty from his walk around the neighborhood. Skinner followed him into the kitchen where Mulder opened the refrigerator door and drank from the water jug.

"Is Adam alright?" Skinner asked. Mulder nodded.

"I think so. We had a long talk. About sex and girls and boys and preferences. I didn't expect this talk to happen for another few years.

"You know, Walter, I need to ask myself; where did Matthew get the information and why was he even remotely interested in it. He seems to have a lot of knowledge for a boy who's supposed to be straight. I think we need to keep an eye on him. If he comes out in the next couple of years, he's going to need guidance. Other than his father's. We really can't say anything to him without permission from his parents until he's legal age, but we can set a visual example for him." Mulder put the jug back and leaned over the sink to splash water on his face.

"I agree." Skinner stepped up behind him and put his hands on Mulder's hips. He nuzzled the sweaty neck and shoulders.

"Walter, I'm filthy," Mulder complained as he dried his face on a dish towel.

"Don't care." Skinner licked the salty skin. "You said to set a good example, what better example can we set than showing that two men can be open and honest and happy and not have to resort to meeting in dark alleys to do things unspeakable. I had a visitor today." Skinner's heart was beating fast, almost drowning out his hearing. He hadn't been this nervous even when he asked Sharon to marry him.

"Please tell me Alex is not in town. A little of Alex goes a long way." Amen...

"Alex is not in town. No, Emilia Clairmont stopped by. She was telling me a story. About something called hand-fasting."

Mulder spun around with Skinner's hands still on his hips.

"Do you know what that is?" Mulder nodded, staring wordlessly at Skinner. "I found it very interesting. Wanna give it a try?"

Mulder gripped the front of Skinner's shirt in his fists.

"Was that a proposal?" his voice was hoarse. Skinner brushed their lips together, enjoying the fact that he had just managed to shock and surprise Mulder. Not an easy fete.

"Yes it was. Marry me?"

Mulder slammed Skinner up against the opposite counter and rained kisses on him.

Chapter 8: Natka Three Times On The Ceiling

The old woman stood on the doorway, suitcase in hand, reminding Skinner of his Sargent. She looked ancient, standing there in a gray woolen coat and a large suitcase. Her hair was steel gray, piled in a bun on top of her head, covered with a scarf.

"Sasha say I come here," she insisted in a thick Russian accent. "You call Sasha." That was a clear order if Skinner ever heard one. It took him a moment to realize who 'Sasha' was; the Russian names Alexander and Alexei carried the nickname Sasha. Skinner motioned her inside and dialed Krycek's cell phone.

"Yeah," came an answer.

"Who is this woman on my doorstep?" Skinner asked.

"Great! She got there alright, I was kinda worried." Krycek sounded proud of himself. Skinner was becoming more afraid by the minute. "That's Natka, she's your new nanny."

"Excuse me?" No, he couldn't have heard that right.

"A nanny. For the boys? You've got the spare room now, let her take care of the boys, cook and clean, and she'll be happy. Don't worry, my treat. I'm paying her."

"Alex, we don't need a nanny," Skinner hissed into the phone, not wanting the woman to overhear and be insulted.

"Of course you do. And they need a woman in their life, someone to mother them. Besides, she was my nanny. Look at it this way; she's a built in babysitter. Later!" He hung up before Skinner could protest again. Krycek had a nanny? Skinner remembered that Sharon had a nanny, but it never occurred to him that by default Krycek would have had a nanny also. Skinner took a breath and turned to face the woman.

"Well. It seems that Alex is in a mood to surprise people." He smiled hesitantly. She was having none of it. He motioned with his hand toward the door. She waited and followed him out of the office, past the curious looks from Becky, Ruvin and Kyle.

"Hey, Sheriff? You want me to call back those construction guys and set up another house?" Becky and Ruvin snickered.

"Yeah, yours," Skinner called back to Kyle.

Natka took a look around the new room. Skinner could see that some redecorating was about to happen. She put her suitcase on the bed. The kittens followed them and stood in the door, their heads cocked and ears tilted forward as they studied their visitor.

"Where are boys?" she asked.

"Um, in school. They'll be home soon. They..."

"You are my Sharia's man?" she asked, interrupting him.

"Yes, ma'am. Walter Skinner."

She stepped closer, looking him over critically.

"My Sharia tell me in letter. She very happy when married. You good man to her. You work hard, not lazy, and good to her in bed," she said, struggling with her English. "When she die, she in pain?"

"No, Ma'am. She died at peace." He hoped she did. Sharon slipped back into her coma after waking briefly to speak to him. He hoped that there was no pain while in a coma. Sharon told this old woman about their sex life??

Natka's eyes softened with unshed tears.

"She was beautiful child," was all she said.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Why you have no baby with my Sharia?" She looked suspiciously at him. Skinner found himself answering the personal question.

"I can't. War injury."

Natka nodded her understanding.

"War bad thing. Too many boys die. You lucky you live. My Sasha say you with man?" Her eyebrow went up, not quite believing Alex's story. Skinner wondered if this was a way to get her to quit.

"Yes, I am. His name is Fox. Fox Mulder. We are getting married."

She only nodded. Skinner was sure the shock would have at least started an argument.

"You have shaman woman for blessing?"

Skinner knew that this had to be the weirdest conversation he had ever had with anyone, much less a stranger.

"Yes, we have one," he said, thinking of Emilia. How did she know...? Krycek and his twin spies.

"Good. I send for my village shaman woman if you no have one." She began to bustle about, taking things from her suitcase and filling the drawers of the dresser. She saw his confused expression and patted his hand.

"I from Siberia. Lots shaman woman in Siberia. And Ukraine and deep in Russian villages. Priest good, but only shaman woman can give spirit blessing."

Skinner definitely needed to have a nice long talk with Krycek.

The screen door slammed close and Skinner heard the sound of running feet.

"Uncle Walter?" they called out.

"In here," he called back. Pavel and Ivan came to a sudden halt at the sight of the strange woman. Natka clapped her hands and tears filled her eyes at the sight of them.

"Oooohh! My Sasha! Come here." She bent down to gather the suddenly shy boys closer and peppered kisses on their cheeks, clucking over them in Russian. Skinner wondered just how much Krycek told her.

"Pavel is wearing blue and Ivan is in white," Skinner introduced them. "Boys, this is Natka. Alex sent her to be your nanny. A nanny is like a babysitter but she lives with us all the time and helps us."

"You call me Natti, yes?" she encouraged them as she smoothed their hair. The boys nodded, fascinated by this strange person.

Skinner left the room to allow them to get acquainted. He redialed Krycek's number.

"Yo!" Can't he ever just say a civilized 'hello'?

"How much does she know?" Skinner asked quietly.

"Are you kidding? She was our nanny. I've known her all my life. I've known him all my life. She knows about the boys. Don't let her looks deceive you, remember she's Cold War raised Russian; she knows how to keep her mouth shut," he warned.

"Which reminds me; Russia's borders are still closed, how did you get her out?" Russia and China closed their borders several years earlier when all hell broke loose.

"I didn't have to, she came over with my parents just after Sharon was born."

"Then why... I don't mean this to sound as bad as it does, but why does she sound as though she were fresh from the village?"

"What are you talking about? Wait, is she pulling that country bumpkin routine?" Krycek laughed. "Let me guess, she arrived wearing those dull gray 'citizen' clothes, right? Forget it, Walter, she is from a small village but she's one classy broad with a taste for theatrics. She speaks English better than my college professors."

"Just tell her I said to drop the act, I squealed on her. Hey, what's this about a meeting and a wedding? Was Pavel serious? You and Fox getting married? How you gonna pull that one off? Don't tell me you're falling for that commitment crap?"

"Hand-fasting."

"Hand-fasting?! Walter, you wild man you. Whatever. Am I invited?"

"Do I have a choice? Since when do you wait for an invitation? Yes, of course, you're invited. No date set yet, we're still in the initial planning stage. But, listen, we had a small problem the other day." Skinner told him about Adam's run-in with Matthew Johnson and his own subsequent meeting with the Reverend.

"Really," Krycek said softly. Skinner winced, Alex was pissed.

"So, between the potential trouble that Johnson could cause and James Alexander, we're calling a contingency meeting to discuss options. You, Scully and the Gunmen."

"The who??"

"Fox's freaky friends?" Skinner reminded him.

"Oh, right. Freaky isn't the word. But I've already anticipated problems. If I see that the boys are in danger, and you and Fox can't deal with it, I will come in and get them out. All three. And hide them until I feel that the coast is clear again. I won't tell you where; if you don't know, you can't tell."

"But..."

"No arguments, Skinner. Those boys are mine and Adam is my nephew, my blood. I will protect them, but you need to keep me updated on these little happenings. And quit blocking the boys from leaving me messages, I depend on that information. Call the meeting if you want to, but nothing changes; I will take them."

Skinner squeezed the bridge of his nose; Krycek was in full Krycek mode.

"Alright, I'll talk to Fox and get back to you."

Skinner had no doubt that Krycek would keep his word; they could wake up in the morning to find the boys gone if Krycek's ferret nose smelled trouble. Skinner had to admit, if anyone could make the boys disappear, Krycek could. He didn't know if he should be reassured or worried. It was an unpleasant reminder that he was only a glorified babysitter, no more no less than the new nanny.

"Uncle Walter, can we go out and play?" the boys ran in asking.

"How about lunch first and then a nap?"

They pouted and dropped to the floor in a passive protest, proving to Skinner that a nap was indeed in their immediate future.

"A nap first, I think," he said, looking down at them, unimpressed. Natka bustled down the hall to them.

"I do dis," she announced firmly. Skinner could find no reason not to let her start right away.

He agreed and pulled The Manual out of a drawer. "This is The Manual. We can't survive without it. My office and cell phone numbers are on the speed dial if you need me for anything. The children know all of our numbers. Make yourself at home. Oh, and Alex told me about you; he said to tell you to drop the act."

Natka was still for a moment before bursting out laughing.

"That boy always was a brat," she said in perfect English. Pavel and Ivan stopped their wet noodle imitations and stared up at her in amazement. She tore off the ugly gray scarf and shook out her shoulder length gray hair, the severe look suddenly disappearing.

"Come on, malchick, you heard your uncle, kruvart -bed." She waved the scarf at the boys to get them moving.

"A chick is a baby chicken," Pavel said, wrinkling his nose.

"Malchick, it means boy." They followed their interesting new playmate to the stairs. The kittens followed too, eagerly looking forward to an afternoon nap in order to recover from their morning nap and to prepare for their late afternoon nap. Ivan ran back, holding out his arms, face raised and mouth puckered. Skinner dutifully bent and touched the soft bow mouth. Natka smiled a little sadly.

"Alex was a lover, too, believe it or not. We nicknamed him 'mushmouth'. It didn't last long."

Skinner wondered at her regretful tone.

"What happened?" he asked.

"His father happened."

Skinner stood at the side of the road and looked both ways. A car was coming, so he waited. It was a yellow moving van and it stopped in front of him.

"Hi, could you tell us where Easton is?" a young man of Native American decent with a black ponytail poked his head out the window and asked. Skinner pointed down the road.

"Three more blocks, turn right go 1 block, turn left, that's Easton."

The young man shook his hand, smiling a friendly thanks.

"Welcome to town, I'm Sheriff Skinner. Let me know if you need anything. Home is here, office is there." He pointed out the places.

"Preston Skyhawk. This is my partner, Joe Williams." The young man across the seat lifted a hand in greeting. The other hand was stretched out along the back of the seat, his hand resting lightly on Preston's shoulder. Skinner wasn't blind.

A small dog suddenly popped its head up over the window sill. A white Chihuahua with one brown spot over its right eye. It yapped once and gave a shiver characteristic of its breed. Skinner held out a finger. The dog sniffed and gave a nervous lick.

"This is Agamemnon," Preston said, introducing them. "Be careful, he'll lick you to death."

Skinner raised an eyebrow as he scratched the dog's head.

"An auspicious name for such a little lover," Skinner commented. The men agreed. The dog climbed up onto Preston's wide shoulder and sat, a king on his throne.

"Yeah, he marched right into my life and took over, gave no quarter, just insisted that I obey his every command," Preston said, giving Agamemnon a loving caress.

"We're told this is a quiet, peaceful little town, Sheriff." Preston said. Skinner heard the unvoiced concern. He nodded,

"Very peaceful, except for Saturday nights. The bar tends to get a little rowdy then. Don't hesitate to speak up if you have a problem, my deputies are good people."

Preston reached into a pocket and pulled out his wallet. He handed Skinner a business card.

"Same for you, speak up if we can help. Later." They drove off to find their new home. Skinner looked at the card; ACLU. He should know by now that looks are deceiving. Kyle and Ruvin were standing on the porch of the station when he got there.

"Movin' in or out?" Kyle asked.

"In. The Ramsey place," Skinner responded. He gave the men a brief rundown on their new neighbors. "ACLU," he said, showing them the business card.

"Interestin'."

Skinner waited. "Are you going to elaborate on that?" he asked Kyle who shrugged.

"Nothin' meant, Sheriff. Jess that we seem to be popular lately."

Skinner waited. "How so?"

"Well, Sir, jess that that's the fifth movin' van in the past two months. Movin' in, that is," Kyle said in a slow drawl.

"Interesting," Skinner echoed. For a small sleepy little town in the middle of nowhere, the movement of five households was the equivalent of a mass migration. Ruvin adjusted his hat.

"Yes, Sir, interestin' in that they all seem to have somethin' in common. A 'course that could just be coincidence."

Skinner waited. "I'm about to smash your heads together," he warned Heckle and Jeckle.

Kyle tut-tutted. "Now, Sheriff, don't get your knickers in an uproar. If you weren't so busy playin' kissy-face with your honey bear, you'd notice these things," Kyle teased him. Skinner had the good graces to flush as Ruvin snickered. "All Ruvin meant was that our new neighbors are all either wearin' pentacles or are gay couples."

"Can you picture the Rev's face the next time he does a head count of the town?" Ruvin laughed as he crossed himself over his blasphemy. He slapped Kyle on the shoulder and excused himself, going to his car.

"Speaking of kissy-face, there was a familiar car in town early this morning. Parked right outside of your place, Kyle," Skinner said. Kyle turned red.

"Don't know what you mean, Sheriff."

Skinner patted him on the shoulder as he moved toward the door. "Mulder and I have both taken bullets for her, we've both literally died for her. More than once. Don't hurt her." He went into the station at the end of his friendly warning. He liked Kyle but Scully's well-being came first.

"No, Sir, I won't," he heard the quiet promise.

He went to his office. The phone immediately rang as he sat down.

"Walter, there's a woman answering our phone."

Skinner shifted the phone to his other ear as he shuffled some paperwork.

"I know. That's Natka, Alex hired her. She's the new nanny. She was his and Sharon's nanny." He glanced over one of Kyle's perfect reports and signed it.

"They had a nanny? I can't picture it. She must be ancient, how's she going to keep up with the boys?"

"Actually, she's about 65 or so, still very active. She's an interesting person, I think you'll like her. Pavel and Ivan already do and the cats approve of her. I was thinking about it; this could be a good thing. Not only will the boys have a female influence but it should also halt some of Johnson's innuendo about the boys living in an all-male household. Sort of a chaperone type figure."

Mulder laughed lightly, warming Skinner's day.

"Alright, you don't have to convince me, I think it's a good idea, we should have thought of it ourselves. Hmm, now we don't have to worry about being interrupted for midnight glasses of water and things," Mulder said in a low murmur, sending a zing straight to Skinner's groin. Skinner quirked the side of his mouth and shook his head.

"Feeling a little neglected?" he teased in a low, silky baritone drawl.

"What are you wearing? No, wait, how did she react about us?"

"She asked if we had a shaman woman to give a spirit blessing."

Mulder barked a laugh. "Are you shittin' me? Trust Alex to find a politically correct, open-minded senior citizen. Oh, did you talk to him about the meeting?"

Skinner sat back in his chair and shut his eyes. He gave Mulder a rundown on the conversation he had with Krycek.

"I'll call him, see if I can get him to lighten up a little," Mulder said. "I don't think things will get that serious. I think he's going to need to put together paperwork, though, just in case some do-gooder official comes sniffing around. I don't think they will accept his story of cloning as legit, especially since the boys haven't been registered as clones. We don't want to do that, they'll be put under government jurisdiction and taken away. He's going to need to establish paternity papers."

"I didn't hear that," the Sheriff said. As far as he was concerned, Alex was the boys' father, period, papers or not. He didn't see much of a difference; either DNA was used to create a baby in the mother, or it was used in a lab, the same outcome occurred. He understood that biology did not make a father so much as who raised the child did, but obviously Alex had a paternal issue that he needed to deal with. With Smokey as the paternal issue, Skinner really couldn't blame Alex for having problems with fatherhood.

"Hmmm, maybe he can say that they were in Russia and he snuck them out when the borders began to close...." Mulder mused. "That would explain the lack of paperwork. We've been lucky so far that no one has thought to ask us for it. Their mother died in the uprising. They were over there visiting family when it all went down. No one can deny that they are related, a person would have to be blind. Trauma could explain why the boys don't remember anything beyond a year ago..."

As Mulder contemplated scenarios, Skinner could only be thankful that Mulder chose to be on the side of law. He shuddered to think of what could have happened if Mulder and Krycek had been raised together. Now that was an interesting thought, would he have married Sharon at all if he had met Mulder first? No, wait you idiot, Fox would have been a teenager. You're nine years older than him, remember? Alex was 12, so Fox would have been 13. Just a year after his sister was taken, ouch. That thought gave Skinner pause and he silently groaned over his advancing age.

"Walter, are you listening to me?"

"What? Yes, the boys don't remember anything. I was just thinking that I'm glad that you and Alex weren't raised together, God help the world if you had been."

"Very funny, ha-ha," Mulder responded dryly.

"Will you be home for dinner, honey?" Skinner said nasally, deliberately whining.

"I should be out of here normal time tonight. Nothing going on that I need to be here for. Want me to pick up anything?"

"Not that I know of, but you might want to call back home and ask Natka, I think she's cooking."

"Do I need to be scared?"

"I have no idea."

The road was dusty as the squad car slowly pulled up to the front of Summerland ranch house. Skinner could see a rider a short distance off as he got out. The rider came closer and he could see Emilia sitting on a black Morgan.

"Hello, Sheriff, what brings you out here?" she asked, swinging down from the horse. Skinner held out a hand to the animal. It smelled him and knickered. Skinner gave the soft velvety nose a rub.

"Not much. We have new neighbors moving in. A couple of men and their dog. My deputies tell me that we've had quite a few new people moving in lately."

"Oh? Fancy that." She gave the horse a stroke on his hind quarters and a pat.

"What are you up to, Em?" Skinner asked. She opened her eyes wide in innocence, blinking at him.

"Who? Me? Sheriff, I declare, I don't know what you are talkin' about," Miss Scarlet protested. "Just because I mention to a few friends how much I like it out here, is no reason to assume that I have anything to do with anything."

"Uh-huh. And the fact that our new neighbors are either wearing pentacles or are gay is just a coincidence."

"Absolutely, Sheriff Sir." She gave him a salute, British style.

"Now, if you're done interrogating me, I have a few videos for you to borrow. Various hand-fastings. I thought that you and Mulder would like to take a look, just to get an idea."

Skinner and Mulder lay back in the bed, watching one of Emilia's videos. The bride was beautiful with a garland of flowers in her hair and a simple ankle length white cotton dress. The groom was in white muslin, a lei around his neck. She and the groom were both barefoot, reminding Skinner of hippy weddings.

"Looks like a rerun of 'Hair'," Mulder commented, echoing Skinner's thoughts. Mulder had been doing that more often lately, making Skinner wonder about another 'episode'. Like they needed another problem in their lives. No, Skinner thought, Mulder always was a good guesser. "I refuse to wear flowers and a dress, Walter. There is only so much I will do in the name of love."

"Well, don't look at me to wear it. How about the muslin that guy is wearing? I like it, looks comfortable."

Mulder gave the man a second look and then looked Skinner over.

"Yeah, I can see it. It would look really good with your olive tones. You have a great tan, it's disgusting. And you have nice feet, we should go barefoot, too."

Skinner raised an eyebrow and looked down at his feet, perfectly ordinary to him, if a little too skinny. He wiggled his toes.

"Is there a fetish you haven't told me about, Fox?"

Mulder snuggled a little closer, his head propped up on Skinner's shoulder. He put a proprietary hand between Skinner's thighs, just resting it there as he watched the people dancing wildly in a circle.

"It's no fetish, you do have nice feet. Most men don't, they're all knarled, pale pieces of flesh with corns and ingrown nails, strange tufts of hair on their toes. Ickh. Yours are nice; they're slim, tapered, nice high arches, trim ankles, you keep them nice. See mine? Short, fat, stubby toes. I like yours much better." Mulder put his feet next to Skinner's, banging them together, Skinner's larger feet dark and tanned next to Mulder's slightly shorter, paler ones.

Skinner chuckled into Mulder's hair; only Mulder could make feet into a work of art. "Alright, white muslin and barefoot. And I happen to like your feet; they are not short, fat and stubby toes."

They watched another minute of the video.

"Please tell me you don't want to try that circle dancing thing," Skinner pleaded. Mulder snorted.

"No, I don't think so. Reminds me of playing 'Ring Around The Rosy' when I was really small. The true meaning of the song..."

"Fox, focus," Skinner interrupted an impromptu lecture good-naturedly. Sometimes listening to Mulder talk was like listening to one of Pavel's speeches.

"Hmmm? Oh. I would like live music, though. We'll have to see if Emilia has any ideas on that end. I don't know any musicians, do you?"

Skinner shook his head.

"Maybe I can talk the boys into making you sing the dragon song," Mulder teased.

"I do NOT sing," Skinner growled, feeling his face heat up. Mulder chuckled, reached over for the phone and dialed.

"Hey. Quick question. I don't suppose you know anything about Walter's singing abilities? Really. Uh-huh. Really? Thanks." He hung up and turned to Skinner with a shit-eating grin. Skinner could see he was in trouble.

"According to Alex, you were a choir boy in church. Says your Mom told him about it when you got engaged. You even had solos until your voice changed."

"Mamma was senile." Skinner refused to look at Mulder.

"Mamma?" Mulder sat up and turned to face him, his eyes sparkling with mirth.

"She was Italian, Fox, all Italian mothers are Mamma. Don't start on my Mamma," Skinner warned him.

"Oh, come on, Walter, one stanza of Ave Maria," Mulder begged, sounding like the twins.

"No."

The video was forgotten as Skinner was jumped. By the time Mulder was done with him, he was ready to sing the Hallelujah Chorus.

"Uncle Walter? Can we get earrings?"

Skinner sputtered into his coffee. He carefully wiped his chin before looking over the top of the paper at the two imps.

"Excuse me?"

Pavel and Ivan looked expectantly at him.

"Alex has a earring," Pavel reasoned. Ivan nodded, agreeing with his brother's wisdom.

"Alex is an adult, he's allowed to make strange choices concerning his body. You will need to wait until you're 18."

They knew that tone brooked no arguments so they sighed and went back to their eggs. The first thing Natti did that morning was to put her foot down on cereal. Oatmeal passed muster, but all the boxes of 'that crap' had to go. Her boys would eat healthy breakfasts; all five boys. Six when Alex was home. Mulder started to put up a fuss even before Adam and the twins could, but Natti crossed her arms and stared him down.

"Yes, Ma'am," he had muttered in surrender. For her first morning, they got eggs benny, ham and toast. Whole wheat, much to the disgust of the children. After making sure that they began their breakfast, she went upstairs to gather dirty clothes and start a load of laundry.

"I'm outta here," Mulder announced, rushing through the room as he straightened his tie and jacket. He distributed pecks all around. Natti came out of the washroom and handed him a paperbag.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Lunch. It's better for you than that fast food garbage," she informed him.

"Thanks, Mom." He surprised her with a peck on the cheek. She blushed and shoed him out the door.

"Big flirt," she complained with a sparkle.

"He has his moments," Skinner acknowledged.

Just after noon, Skinner and Kyle came out of the diner from lunch when Skinner realized that he had lost Kyle's attention. He had been giving Kyle pointers at Academy survival. He looked around to see what had captured the younger man's attention. A black car that looked like the one in the most recent James Bond movie was sitting outside Skinner's house. His front door opened and a man in a black suit and tie came out.

"Alex?!" Skinner said incredulously. Krycek spotted him and pointed to his office.

"Now that's almost enough to make even me consider tryin' a guy," Kyle admitted in awe.

"Don't tell him that, you may not make it to Quantico with your virtue intact." Skinner knew just how persuasive Krycek could be when he really wanted something.

They went to the station house and knew which way Krycek went by following Becky's glassy-eyed stare. She was practically drooling. They went into Skinner's office. Krycek turned at the opening of the door. He was dressed in his usual black, but without the leather. His tailor-made suit draped over him in a cascade of perfection. The three-button suit cut across his broad shoulders and down to his waist to rest evenly at his hips where the pleated slacks fell to the tops of his black patent leather shoes, Italian, that shone like black mirrors. The linen shirt beneath was a pale cream which stood out against the black silk tie with thin gold paisley piping. His hair had a fresh trimmed businessman look, instead of his usual severely short spikes. He was fiddling with a cufflink.

"What is that?" Skinner asked, rubbing delicately at the lapel.

"Escorial wool."

"Es... Alex, this is a \$4,000 suit!" Skinner pulled his hand away. He could be just as much a clothes horse as Mulder and Krycek, but he'd never spend four grand on one suit.

"What's Escorial wool?" Kyle asked. He hesitantly touched the lapel, double-checking to make sure his hand wasn't going to be bitten off.

"Escorial sheep, Australia and New Zealand, originally Spain," Skinner said. "Their wool is short and curly, it gives the fabric a sort of elasticity like Lycra. It won't wrinkle and it looks a little luminous. Only 80-100 tons per year are manufactured. That's less than one percent of the world's cashmere production."

"Are you trying out for a James Bond movie or are you undercover?" Skinner asked as he walked around Krycek. "You look like you just stepped out of GQ."

"Walter, are you coming on to me? You'd better get Fox's permission first," Krycek murmured as he frowned at the stubborn 14-carat gold cufflink. He thrust his hand out impatiently to Skinner who fastened it for him. Skinner took a closer look at it.

"That's mine!" he accused, outraged that Krycek would rummage through his dresser.

"And thank you for having such good taste and sharing."

Skinner reached up to straighten the tie, knowing that it would be useless to attempt to retrieve his best cufflinks.

"Who taught you how to knot a tie?" he complained as he adjusted it.

"You did, so shut up," Krycek responded, batting his hand away and readjusting it himself. Skinner caught Krycek's left hand and stared at the watch. It had a normal face with hands for local time, and around the face it had three smaller circles with three international times. Around the top edge were the words 'International Watch Company' in a flowing script. Skinner remembered seeing it in one of his credit card magazines; it cost just over \$3,000. He took another look at the suit and knew where that magazine had disappeared to.

"Alex, that's an IWC! What the hell did you do, rob a bank?!" Skinner put his hands over his ears. "No, I don't want to know. Why are you here in this expensive monkey suit?"

"You don't want to know that, either. Hoskins, would you excuse us?" Krycek's order was masked in a polite request.

"I left photos for the boys," Krycek said after the door was closed. "The pictures are spliced, my face and my mother's from when she was about 30. I feel an Oedipus complex coming on. I talked with Natti, she'll tell the boys stories that I've just outlined

for her. Just go along with whatever she says and call me if you have any questions. Hopefully, this will hold them until they're old enough for the truth."

"They'll be resentful at living a lie," Skinner warned him.

"I know, it can't be helped. If we tell them now, it'll only confuse them. God knows what kind of emotional damage that would do. At least by waiting, they'll have a halfway decent childhood."

Krycek stopped fiddling with his tie, smoothed his sable brown hair, elegant silver at his temples, and walked out of the room. Kyle was standing at the front desk talking with Becky. Skinner avoided his questioning gaze and uneasy frown.

As they walked outside, six tornadoes came tearing around the corner at them. Adam and the twins dove for Skinner and Krycek, hiding behind them as the other boys came to a sudden halt at the sight of two badges and their worst nightmare.

"Go beat 'um up, Alex!" Pavel yelled, shoving Krycek's butt to get him motivated.

"And ruin a four thousand dollar tailor-made suit? Give me one good reason."

"They was hurtin' Holly Anne! Go punch 'um!" Pavel landed a small fist on tight right glut in demonstration.

"Walter, they're developing twangs," Krycek complained, ignoring the fly swatting at him.

The other boys began yelling their protests of innocence at Pavel's accusation and Skinner's boys yelled back until he put a halt to the noise with a shrill whistle.

"Everybody in the conference room," he ordered, pointing at the station house. All six boys warily trudged around each other and into the building. Adam and the twins headed for the conference room, familiar with the station's layout. They sat at one side of the conference table while T.J., Billy and Joey sat at the other side, glaring at each other from across the divide. All six boys were covered in dirt, their faces, arms and legs scraped, shirts torn, shorts filthy. The other boys glanced nervously at Krycek standing at the door, inspecting his nails.

"Alright, boys," Skinner said, sitting at the head of the table. "The prosecution always speaks first. Adam, as senior prosecutor, let's hear your opening statements." At Adam's confused look, he clarified. "Tell us what you think these boys did wrong."

"T.J., Billy and Joey were holding Holly Anne and Joey was trying to look up her dress and she was crying and yelling and they wouldn't let her go."

The defendants began to argue and Skinner rapped on the table for attention.

"Order in the court! No speaking out of turn, you'll get your chance. Now, Joey, you can be senior defense. Do your clients plead innocent or guilty?"

"Innocent!" the boy stuck his tongue out at the prosecution.

"None of that!" Skinner responded, "Tell us why you're innocent."

Joey was stumped for a moment.

"Because we are," he finally said. Krycek snorted, Skinner ignored him.

"Next; prosecution, present your case. Since there is no physical evidence such as pictures or videos, we will accept statements from eye-witnesses. Did you actually see this happening or did someone tell you about it?"

"I saw 'um," Adam stated emphatically. The twins nodded.

"Tell us exactly what you saw."

"We were playing kickball in the dirt lot and Holly Anne was a cheerleader and when she jumped, her dress went up and Billy laughed and pointed and him and T.J. and Joey ran over and T.J. and Billy held her arms while Joey tried to lift her dress up and see what color her underwear was." Adam had been taking speech-making lessons from Pavel. "Everybody laughed and Holly Anne yelled and cried so I went to help her 'cause you and Daddy say to help people and not to pick on girls. Pavel and Ivan ran and helped me try to get them to leave her alone and they started hitting us so we hit them back," he stated with warrior's pride. Skinner rapped again to quiet the defendants.

"Pavel, is that what you saw happen?" Skinner asked him. Pavel nodded and pointed to the boys as Kyle quietly entered the room and gave a small nod at Skinner; he called parents.

"They're always picking on people," Pavel accused the boys, using surprisingly few words.

"Ok, and Ivan?"

"T.J. hit me, see?!" Ivan stood up and lifted his filthy shirt, revealing a bruise on his left ribcage. Krycek growled and T.J. audibly gulped.

"Very well, does the prosecution rest? Have you told us everything?" Skinner asked Adam who nodded.

"Yes, Sir."

"Defense, what do you have to say to this? Joey? They say they saw you trying to look up Holly Anne's dress. Did you do that? Yes or no only and no lying."

Joey slumped in his chair, eyes downcast.

"Yes, Sir," he whispered.

"T.J., did you hold Holly Anne's arms while Joey did this?"

T.J. nodded, unable to speak.

"Billy, did you hold Holly Anne, too?"

"Yes, Sir," he whispered.

"Then I pronounce T.J., Billy and Joey guilty of assault. That's very serious, boys. As your punishment, you will all apologize to Holly Anne. And I will ask her if you did," he warned them. Skinner leaned forward and gave them his best A.D. glare. The boys looked back at him, their eyes suspiciously bright.

"You will never ever touch a girl like that again. Girls are people, too, just like you. Would you like it if someone held you down and tried to look at your underwear?"

The boys shook their heads, mouths quivering.

"Girls are not play toys, you will show respect for them. And you three," he turned to his own boys who looked surprised that he turned on them.

"No fighting. If you see something wrong again, you get an adult, understand?"

They nodded, "Yes, Sir," they echoed.

"You were right to try and help, but get someone in authority first."

They 'yes, sir'd' him again. "You three go home and clean up. Ask Natti to clean your scrapes and remember to say please and thank you to her."

On their way out the door, Krycek stopped them. One at a time, he lifted shirts, arms, legs and turned faces up to the light, counting scrapes and bruises. After each child, he glared over at the guilty party who visibly wilted under his gaze. He put his dark glasses on, straightened his tie and cracked his knuckles, following the boys out the door.

Skinner avoided looking at Kyle, afraid he'd crack up and ruin Krycek's game. If it was a game.

"Sheriff? You won't let him hurt us, will you?" Billy whispered hoarsely.

"No, I won't, just remember what I said." Skinner felt another mark damning him, but maybe there will be one less abuser in the future if he allowed Krycek to scare it out of them now. "You three just stay there, your mothers are on the way to get you."

Mothers. That was even scarier than Krycek. The boys groaned and slumped down further in their chairs.

Skinner stood and went over to Kyle. "Would you mind going over to Holly Anne's and checking on her? And take some of that counseling literature with you, she could have nightmares or behavioral changes from this. Talk to her mother about it. She may be only 7, but this could still shock her." As a father of a girl himself, Kyle was prepared to wallop the boys himself. He nodded and left the room.

Skinner waited until all three moms were there so that he wouldn't have to repeat himself. Billy and T.J.'s moms were suitably outraged and marched their boys out by their ears. Joey's mother, Vernice, simply shrugged and waved a hand.

"Boys will be boys, Sheriff," she said knowingly.

"Really. I have never assaulted a female in my life and the last time I checked, I was male. We were taught respect in my home."

She laughed artfully. Skinner never liked her, she was one of those small town girls who tried very hard to be holier-than-thou and let everyone know that she was too good for their little town, yet she never seemed to have the gumption to leave for the big city. She tried several times to get into Skinner's life when he first moved into town, and continued to try once in a while even after Mulder moved in, positive that she was irresistible. Being a Sheriff's wife would bring her that much sought after prestige.

"Yes, but Sheriff, you.. you're.. well.. Joey has normal instincts."

"I see. It's normal for boys to assault girls. So, if three men held you down and tried to lift up your dress, that's alright with you because that's just how 'normal' men are? Have you ever been raped, Mrs. Fielding?" he was pleased to see her blanch. "I've seen women in such states that if I were to describe them, you'd have nightmares for the rest of your life. Would you like to hear some? No? Why, those men had 'normal' instincts?"

Mrs. Fielding flushed under his dressing down.

"What is little Holly Anne supposed to learn from this experience? That her role in life is to be some man's play toy and she should just start getting used to it and spreading her legs for any male who wants her? If she were my daughter, I'd be hell-bent to find the boys who treated her so disrespectfully, and if one of my boys ever lifted a finger to harm a girl, I can guarantee you, he wouldn't be sitting down for a year." He dismissed her with a nod toward the door.

"Oh, and Mrs. Fielding? I'm just as 'normal' as the next man."

He waited until she left before releasing his breath. That's one he might be hearing from the mayor about. He knew he went a little overboard on her, but the boy had to be learning the behavior from somewhere and if she remained apathetic, Joey would have no reason to alter his actions.

Mulder listened without interruption as Skinner unloaded his day on Mulder's shoulders.

"Well, I don't think I would have lectured her, but that's me. You did what you had to, just let it go," he said when Skinner was finished.

"I wish I could have seen that court session. That's an impression that should stick with them for a long time. Also wish I could have seen Alex's act."

Skinner was too tired to even lift a corner of his mouth.

"I wonder if it was an act. He was pissed. Listen, Fox, something is going to have to be done about Kyle. Alex showed up wearing eight thousand dollars and driving an easy one hundred grand. I made the mistake of mentioning 'bank robbery' and 'undercover' within Kyle's hearing. Then Alex drags me off for a private conversation. Kyle's antennas have been fully extended all day."

Mulder gave him a rap on the shoulders before digging in for a message.

"Sounds like you've been walking around with your foot in your mouth all day. Hmmm. Kyle does like to hear X-File stories, doesn't he? He's even pointed out a few details that escaped me. I actually solved one because of him. Let me talk to Scully; if she ok's it, I'll start on him while he's still at Quantico. I could use a specialist on my team. Go with the 'undercover' explanation for now, it isn't so far from the truth. Accidentally drop a few hints toward, oh, say NSA. Kyle can search all he wants to, the NSA will never admit to anything one way or the other. I'll bring him in slowly, on a need-to-know basis."

Skinner shut his eyes and relaxed into the shoulder rug, feeling the day's stress flow out of his body. After about a year and a half, it still took him by surprise that Mulder was such a physical person once he put his trust in a relationship. Skinner took one of the hands and pulled Mulder around to the front. He put his hands on Mulder's hips and buried his face in the center of Mulder's chest, resting his forehead at the sternum. The sparse crinkly hairs tickled his nose and eyelids. No longer lanky, Mulder had become subject to that middle-aged curse, a lower metabolism. Skinner didn't mind, his own belt needed to be let out a notch.

"I should run more often," Mulder said, running his hands lightly over Skinner's head and shoulders. Skinner wuffed into the light fur and placed a kiss on the slight rise of Mulder's stomach.

"You're fine, Fox, I have no complaints. Run for yourself, not for me." He looked up into the face of his beloved. "What about me? I've put on about 20 pounds myself. If you're not happy about it..."

Mulder shut him up with his mouth.

"My bear," he informed Skinner possessively. "My Baloo-bear." Before Mulder could kiss him again, Skinner held him back.

"Fox. That's the fifth time in the past two days that you've said what I was thinking."

Mulder shut his eyes, searching. He shook his head. "I'm not 'hearing' anything," he finally said, much to the relief of both of them.

"One twinge and you call Alex for medication." Skinner would put it down to Mulder-weirdness unless it became worse.

Mulder promised him. The last thing they wanted was for him to be back in the nuthouse.

An hour later, sprawled out on the bed facing each other, Mulder was munching his ever-present seeds which Skinner decided was an indication of an oral fixation. Not that he was complaining about an oral fixation. He took the cap off his pen and opened the notebook.

"So. First. What's the normal time frame? A year and a day?" he asked.

"Yes, but we've already been together longer than that. How about five years?"

"Ok. 'Fox Mulder and Walter Skinner will be bound together' ...sounds kinky, Fox,... 'bound together in union for five years and a day, at which time this contract may be renewed or dissolved upon the agreement of both parties'. What next?"

"Ummm, what about what we bring to the union?"

"What, you mean like what we each own? That's pedantic, do we really need to list property? Let's skip that part; our bank accounts are separate, you know what you own, I know what I own. We can fight over the rest. How about what we promise each other?" snap, munch.. "To love, honor and obey?"

"Not! Love and honor, yes, but can you really see either of us obeying? Don't get shells in the bed, Fox. How about, 'I bring to you my heart and my soul, I will honor you and

our union with my body and mind, and I will speak of you and to you with pride and loyalty?"

"...Walter!...I...!" sniff, blow...

"I like that, that was good...'bring to you my...'. There. Next. Provisions for the kids?" sniff, crack, munch... "We raise them together, of course. 'We raise them in the light of...' God, that's too white-light."

"Alright, Butch, how about 'we will raise the children together, as parent and child, and give to them the love and nurturing that they will need to grow into healthy, loving adults'."

"That's good. So, that leaves what? Dissolution?"

"Yeah, I think. Hmmm. 'In the event of dissolution, we take with us that property which we brought into the union. Property bought together will be divided or sold and the profits divided evenly'. I think my divorce lawyer would have a cow over this contract. Children?"

"Adam comes with me, of course, but what about Pavel and Ivan?"

"You're their actual blood relation."

"Yes, but that doesn't necessarily mean that I'm the best choice. They go back to Alex and he can make the decision."

"Alright. 'In the event of dissolution, Adam Mulder will remain with his father, Pavel and Ivan Krycek will return to their father'. If Alex wants to hand them right back to one of us, he can."

"I'd rather they went to you, you've been their primary parent and you can deal with them better than I can. Although, in five years they'll be ten and probably ruling the world by then."

The men looked over their simple contract, made a few minor changes, and approved it.

"After the ceremony, we'll take it over to Harry and get it notarized," Skinner said. He'd type it up on his computer, put it into legalize.

"Let's do it this weekend," Mulder said impulsively.

"What, this weekend??"

"Yeah, sure! What are we waiting for? We call a few people, order some pizzas... I call Scully, Margaret and the guys for me. Who do you want to call?"

Skinner was at a loss for words.

"I... well.."

"Walter, don't you have any family left? You never talk about them."

Skinner was silent as he swallowed the pain of memories.

"No one, Fox. No one that I would invite," he finally said when he could speak.

"No one?" Mulder asked gently. "No distant cousins, aunts, uncles you'd like to reconnect with?"

Skinner shook his head. Mulder took his hand, silent as he reviewed his words.

"I don't remember any of my relatives. I think that maybe my parents kept them from us, probably to protect them from being snared in the web. Maybe that's what you did?" Skinner was silent as faces came to him, unbidden. Black haired, olive skinned cousins, boisterous, loud family dinners on Sunday afternoons after church, christenings, baptisms, first communion parties, confirmation parties, birthdays, graduations, weddings and anniversaries. His father...

"Fox, I... you don't understand. I loved being with my cousins, but my father... the DeLucas were the typical, loud New York Italians. The Skinners were not. My father moved us to the North West. I learned that real men don't hug and kiss each other, or discuss their feelings. I have nothing in common with my cousins anymore."

"That's crap, Walter," Mulder informed him bluntly. "You are not your father. When you were a child, he was responsible for your behavior. As an adult, you are responsible. If you don't like something, change it, but don't blame it on your past. Now I can understand wanting to keep your family away in order to protect them, but you don't need to do that anymore. It's safe, Walter. And you're more like your Italian side than you think. You're a very affectionate person, once you relax enough to give in to it, you're very loving and you hug and kiss very well, thank you. You've just become so used to bottling it up, that you've forgotten how to use it."

"Let me contact them for you, please. I can explain that you were protecting them because of your job, that's close enough. And if they've been paying attention to the news these past few years, they'll understand. Hell, Walter, I've known enough Italians in my life, once they find out that you are *The* Walter Skinner, you'll be a hero to the family. A true pison."

"Is that family with a lower case 'f' or Family with a capitol 'F'?"

Mulder shook him in reprimand.

"No bad Italian jokes. So will you let me? I'll be very diplomatic, I promise."

Skinner felt his heart racing, scared that Mulder would come back either empty handed or with a contract out on him. Oops, Fox said no bad jokes.

"Alright. But tell them about us up front. I don't want to meet them only to have them walk away when they find out. They're Italian, macho and Catholic. And they'd be finding out that I'm about to marry a Jewish man in a Pagan ceremony with our three sons and the world's number one bad guy in attendance as best man."

Chapter 9: Italy Invades Suburbia

He made Mulder promise not to tell him how the search went until it was over and done with otherwise he would go crazy with the details. Mulder informed him that he'd be out of town for a few days and Skinner held his tongue from asking why and where. At least he was able to get Mulder to hold off for a couple of weeks on the ceremony; after all, they didn't even have their clothes or the rings. Before Mulder left for his mysterious trip, Emilia was going to come over and discuss the ceremony.

The table rattled and one of the kittens made off with a strip of bacon before he could catch it. The other two kittens ran off after their mate, eager for their share of the loot.

"I think Alex has been training them," Mulder said.

"Wouldn't be surprised." Skinner folded his paper and laid it on the table. "Guy Cesar has been killed."

Mulder paused for a moment.

"The big-wig of Micro-Link?"

"Un-huh."

Mulder shrugged, only vaguely interested.

"They're slowing down," he commented, taking a mouthful of his eggs. The strange assassinations had continued with every law enforcement agency in the world scratching their heads and pulling out their hair in frustration. Skinner looked suspiciously at Mulder.

"Foxxxxx???"

Mulder looked up, eyebrows raised.

"What? I don't know anything," he protested. Skinner had a feeling that the answer was closer to home than he cared to admit. He never did find out why Krycek was dressed to the nines last week. If he needed to infiltrate the billionaires circle, he was certainly dressed for it. Skinner picked up the phone.

"Alex's House of Ill-repute!"

"Where are you?" Skinner asked, not that he expected the truth.

"Sun bathing in the Himalayas. Why?"

"I don't supposed you've been to Milan lately?" Skinner could hear a Jamaican accent in the background.

"Nope. Why, you wanna go? I can recommend this great little bistro on..."

"Never mind." He hung up, knowing he wasn't going to get anywhere with Alex in that mood.

"Where does he get all that money?" he wondered out-loud.

"Is that a question you really want an answer to?" Mulder asked, sipping his coffee. Skinner wrinkled his nose.

"Probably not. I wouldn't want to have to explain to the boys why they can only see him on visitation days."

The doorbell rang. Before either of them could get it, the house shook with the thunder of feet as all three boys raced to the door.

"Uncle Walter! Uncle Fooxxx! It's Miss Emilia!" one of the twins yelled. Skinner leaned around the side.

"In here," he called out to Emilia. He looked down at his bare chest. Too late to dress. Pavel escorted her in.

"Good morn... oh, my..." she breathed in a southern drawl. She stopped short and then slowly advanced, sashaying into the kitchen. She propped a hand on the back of Mulder's chair.

"Honey, anytime you get tired of him, I'm not too proud to take sloppy seconds," she informed Mulder. Skinner flushed as Mulder gave a light laugh.

"I tell you, Em, he's even better when he's all sweaty from..."

"FOX!"

"...yard work. Faith, Walter. Have a seat, Em, can I get you anything? Besides Walter." Mulder poured her a cup of coffee just as Natti came through the room. She looked at their visitor and then with disapproval at Skinner. She went into the laundry room and came back out, tossing a t-shirt at him. Skinner gratefully put it on, having seen no way to gracefully leave to get dressed. Mulder introduced the women.

"That was cruel," Emilia said, indicating the shirt. "I was enjoying the view."

"Yes, but I'm 69; that's too much for my heart to take," Natti said as she wiped Pavel's face with a damp cloth. Pavel scrunched up his face at the indignity.

"You're not 69!" Emilia declared in disbelief. "55, 56."

Natti waved the cloth at the men.

"Don't marry each other, one of you marry her," she advised them.

"Do I have to choose? Why can't I have both?" Emilia asked. Natti paused in her clean-up.

"Good point. She's economical, too. Marry her."

"If you two are quite done," Skinner said, knowing that his head was red. It was bad enough that he had to deal with Alex on a part-time basis and who knew what the twins were going to come up with on a full-time basis; now Emilia and Natti were instant friends despite the generation gap thanks to his bare chest. He was never going to walk around without a shirt again.

"Uncle Walter, Natti made us clean our rooms," Ivan complained, put-upon, as he shuffled into the room. He draped himself over Skinner's lap in exhaustion.

"Good, your rooms were pig-sties. They scared even me. Did you do any work in your books yet this morning?"

Ivan giggled as he swung his legs. "Yes, I did geograpy. I learneded about da Nile." The adults laughed and Ivan stood up, not understanding what he said that was funny, but he smiled shyly.

"Now there's an omen if I ever heard one," Natti commented dryly.

"Pavel, what about you?" Skinner asked. Since Mulder didn't always make it home for dinner or even in time for their bed, they had gotten into the habit of using breakfast as family discussion time.

"I did English but I don't understand about when to use periods and stuff because a sentence is a sentence until it's done and we don't say period or exclamation point so who cares if..."

"Pavel!" Mulder said over him, covering his ears. Pavel's mouth snapped shut in surprise. "Bring your book to me after lunch and I'll help you until I have to leave for my plane. What about you, Adam?"

Adam wrinkled his nose.

"Fractions," he said as if it was strained spinach.

"Remind me later," Skinner said. They split up the tutoring to their strengths; they were both good with most subjects but Skinner was better at math than Mulder, whose logic tended to be fuzzy at the best of times, however Mulder was the one to go to for history and philosophy. A couple times a month, Scully made it over for lessons in physical science.

Adam nodded, "Ok."

"And Natti is teaching us Russian, just like Alex," Ivan said proudly as he climbed up onto his favorite perch. Skinner steadied him.

"Hopefully, she isn't teaching you the same words that Alex is," he said, having been subject to a few of those choice words from Krycek.

"Da means yes, nyet means no and thpathiba means thank you," Ivan informed them, lisping slightly through the gap in his front teeth.

"Is that right?"

"Da."

Unable to resist, Skinner hugged him, squeezing the small sturdy body tightly. He suddenly felt his heart shatter. Not knowing what the change was in his uncle, Ivan simply accepted the affection.

Reality disappeared as Skinner breathed in Ivan's unique little boy smell, feeling every strand of the dark silky sable hair against his cheek. He gloried in the feel of the chubby little arms that were barely able to reach around his waist, little fingers clutching trustingly at his shirt as Ivan rested his head contentedly against Skinner's chest. Skinner stroked the straight back, shoulders broad for a boy his age. He patted the little bottom and held Ivan's face between his hands, drinking in the luminous green eyes and thick black lashes, chipmunk cheeks with their hidden dimples that appeared only with a ready

grin of that perfect bow mouth. Skinner kissed him and set him on the floor before excusing himself in a husky voice.

He left silence behind him. Mulder shrugged at the women and children and excused himself.

Skinner lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling, hands clasped at the center of his chest, positive that he was having a heart attack. He wasn't sure what he was thinking, if he actually was thinking. He hadn't felt that zoned out since he smoked weed in 'Nam. This was even better than that, this was a high he never wanted to come down from. He could have been on his bed for years and he would never have known it.

The door quietly opened but he didn't hear it. It could have banged open and he wouldn't have heard it.

"Walter, are you alright?"

Skinner's eyes stung. He wiped at them and was surprised to find his hand returned wet.

"You're scaring me, Walter, talk to me now," Mulder said urgently.

Skinner took a shuddering breath.

"I..." he cleared his throat. "I think I just fell in love." He wiped his face again.

"It hurts, Fox, why does it hurt? I love you but it doesn't hurt like this does." He rubbed his chest, trying to make the ache go away.

Mulder lay down beside him, propped his head up with one hand and put the other hand on the center of Skinner's chest.

"It's alright, Walter. I think that's why the human race survives, because we have that capacity to love our children so deeply. You've been their father for over a year now, it's natural for you to love them, especially Ivan, he takes prisoners everywhere he goes."

"But he isn't my son, Fox." Skinner was positive that hurt even more.

"Not biologically, no. And technically speaking, he isn't anyone's son. Any dumb male can lay a seed, Walter, not every man is able to be a father. Alex freely admits that he isn't father material and I don't think he will ever be ready to be a father. Someone needs to love those boys, and I don't think he'd mind if it was you. Now, I do love them, but I'm their uncle. They need a father. Don't be afraid, Walter, just accept it and the pain will go away."

Skinner lay quietly, letting Mulder's monotone voice sooth him.

"Think about this, Walter; why did Alex leave them with us? Why does he visit all the time? He trusts us. We are all the family that he has and he's just as starved for family as you are. He's wild because he's had no one to love him. He sees the boys as a way of being able to have what he never did, a way to start over."

"And if Alex suddenly does take them away?" he asked, unable to accept that scenario.

"Then you will grieve just like any father who loses a child and you will go on with your life," Mulder said coldly.

Shocked by the words that he didn't expect to hear, he turned his head to look at Mulder.

"That's harsh."

Mulder lifted a brow, "Would you rather I candy-coated it? Patted you hand there-there? Yes, Alex could take them and there would be nothing we could do about it, not without letting the entire cat out of the bag about them. But what would he do with them? Put them in fatigues and grease-paint and set them to practicing war games? Have one walk up to some rich widow, pretend to be lost, and while she's clucking over him, the other one gets away with the family jewels? So to speak?"

Skinner turned his head, slightly pissed at Mulder's attitude. As he opened his mouth to tell Mulder where to shove his counseling, Mulder said,

"How's that pain?"

Skinner shut his mouth. His pain was gone.

"Bastard," he said. Mulder had deliberately turned his attention someplace else. Mulder gave him a shake and thumped Skinner's chest.

"Get yourself together and come back downstairs." Mulder leaned in to kiss him. Feeling a rush, Skinner opened his mouth and eagerly accepted the soft questing tongue. Having a nanny for the boys was already proving useful.

"Don't leave yet," Skinner whispered his plea. They get so little private time together, that every second is precious. He turned on his side and placed a hand over Mulder's crotch, giving him a firm squeeze. Mulder chuckled and licked Skinner's lips.

"Is there something you'd like to have?" Mulder asked playfully in a low velvety whisper that sent a chill of pleasure along Skinner's spine. Mulder put a hand over Skinner's hip and slid it around to cup a tight cheek. Skinner felt the hand slowly extend downward until it was between the apex of his thighs, pressing firmly against the fabric of his sweats to rub at his small entrance. He moaned and unzipped Mulder's jeans and reached in. He drew his favorite toy out of hiding and stroked it until it was hard and long, both of them breathing hard against each other's mouth.

"Turn over, baby," Mulder said hoarsely. "On your belly."

Skinner instantly released him and turned over, tossing the pillow away to lay flat on the mattress. He felt Mulder move to straddle the back of his thighs, kneading his buttock and massaging his back. Mulder leaned in, pressing his erection against the crease of Skinner's ass as he licked at Skinner's back, taking nibbles of skin. Mulder sat back and pulled at the waistband of Skinner's sweats until they were resting just below his high rounded cheeks. Skinner felt a cool wave of air waft across his heated skin.

"God, I wish you'd let me take a picture of you like this," Mulder breathed in reverence. "This has got to be the best ass I have ever seen. Playgirl centerfold of the year, right here." He found a pillow and put it under Skinner's stomach, lifting his ass higher into the air.

"Oh, that's even better. No, don't move," Mulder said as Skinner made to bring his knees forward a bit and widen them. Skinner lay still, letting Mulder play. Skinner shivered in pleasure as Mulder kissed his exposed skin, teasing him with a quick dart between the cheeks. Mulder chuckled at Skinner's moan and leaned over him, once again rubbing against Skinner's ass. Mulder took a suck of his neck. Skinner didn't care if he did leave a mark as he tilted his head for more. Mulder gave a hard bite and suck on his shoulder. Skinner whimpered, moving his hips, needing. Mulder whispered insidiously into his ear, things that he'd never say out loud. Suggestions, torments, fantasies.

"God, Fox, please..." Skinner begged when he couldn't take it anymore. Mulder sat back and pulled Skinner's sweats a little further down, but not completely off. Skinner felt like a wanton slut as he raised his ass for Mulder, feeling Mulder's jeans against his skin. Mulder only uncovered the part that he needed, also.

Skinner heard the side table open and anticipated the cool gel, hissing none-the-less when he felt Mulder enter him without the expected fingers stretching him. Skinner bit the mattress and accepted the invasion willingly, pressing down on his muscles to take in more, needing to be stretched and filled.

"Don't come, Walter," Mulder whispered urgently in his ear. "I want to swallow you after I come inside of you."

Skinner reached below and put pressure at the base of his cock, forcing himself not to stroke it instead. Mulder got up on one knee and slid into him with strong, sure strokes. Skinner cried out into the bedding at the waves of undiluted pleasure that shot through him. Mulder rode him swiftly but not with the urgency of a quick fuck, just fast enough to fulfill his own pleasure before clamping off a yell as he came. Mulder waited until the last spasm before withdrawing and turning Skinner over onto his back, claiming Skinner's cock before he was even settled. Mulder sucked hard, insistently demanding his thirst to be quenched. Unexpectedly, Mulder clamped his fingers down on the base and

took Skinner's balls into his mouth, one at a time, to give them thorough attention. Skinner threw his head back, trying not to yell as Mulder licked, sucked and pulled with his teeth.

"Fox, please..." Skinner begged, needing to come. Mulder attached himself like a hungry calf, sucking and pulling until he got his reward.

When he had sucked Skinner dry, he climbed up, straddling Skinner's waist. He took Skinner's head between his hands and kissed him hard, sharing the sweet salty liquid.

"Mine," Mulder said fiercely, a sticky milky string stretched between their mouths. It quivered as they breathed hard and ragged. His cock was cold and damp as it lay snug between them against Skinner's stomach, but Skinner didn't care. He put his arms around Mulder and held him tight against his torso.

After sharing a shower where Mulder knelt behind him and made him come once more, using his tongue and fingers, Skinner lingered over his dressing while Mulder hopped back downstairs with a leisurely off-key whistle.

Skinner's ass was one big pleasant ache, still tingling from the unexpected workout. Fancifully, he wondered if anyone could see a difference in him. He felt as though he were glowing. He paused in his search for deodorant, wondering where all this stuff was coming from. He decided that he was in desperate need of a good game of football. With no rules. He'd wear a helmet with a nose guard, though; enough was enough.

He found Mulder alone, sitting at the table with his laptop. Skinner thought he looked cute with his glasses perched on the end of his nose. The house was quiet.

"Where is everyone?" he asked, getting a drink of ice water.

"Em took them all out to the ranch to visit with her horses. I gave her a copy of our agreement to look over. I told her that we hadn't been able to decide on the what to do with the ceremony itself except what we were going to wear and that we didn't want to do that circle dance thing."

Skinner found a tray of brownies that Natti had hidden in plain sight on a shelf in the refrigerator. It was on the top shelf, but she was obviously out of touch with the industriousness of boys. Boys of any size.

"Thank you, Fox," he said, biting into a chewy slice. Mulder glanced up.

"For what?"

Skinner shrugged, "Just... thank you."

Mulder nodded; he understood.

Skinner spent the next two days drinking in every move that the boys made. They weren't sure what was going on with him, but he forced himself not to make them uncomfortable. He took extra time with them, walks around the neighborhood, listening to each and every word out of their mouths, finding a sudden fascination with the world as seen through the eyes of someone new to it.

Mulder called them the first night to let them know that he had landed safely and to give them hotel information. Skinner knew by the area code that he was in New York City. He bit his tongue against questions, refusing to get his hopes up. He had lived for over 20 years without his family; he thought he had hardened his heart against that powerful urge, but it returned with a vengeance. He knew it was going to hurt like hell if Mulder returned with bad news. Italians may be family oriented but they also gave new meaning to the word 'disown'.

The German side of his family were also unforgiving, but they did so much more quietly. Wordlessly, in fact. Skinner grew up knowing that the quieter his father became, the more likely it was that he was due for a lecture on being stoic and holding in his natural exuberance. His mother quickly became disenchanted with her strict, cold husband, but the Catholic Church was still at a point where anyone who divorced was forbidden to partake of the Sacraments, which was a virtual death sentence to Catholics. Some stricter parishes actually excommunicated. Divorce was verboten, no matter what the circumstances. That rule didn't change until the 1970s but by then it was too late. Skinner would have welcomed their divorce. He knew that her side of the family would have taken her back instantly. Whenever they visited his aunts and uncles and cousins, they all stayed away from his father, saying uncomplimentary things about the man in that effusively spoken language that young Walter was denied learning. By the time he was an adult, he no longer knew his cousins, except to receive a card at Christmas, Easter and his birthday. He saw no point in getting reacquainted after he returned from Viet Nam and then after college, where he met Sharon. Being a gung-ho pro-American vet, he was ready and willing to help his new father-in-law in the mysterious project concerning the protection of his country. He wondered if it was too late after all the mistakes that he had made.

Skinner sat on the porch step, sipping an iced tea as he watched the boys playing tag with the neighbor kids, taking enjoyment in their screams of innocent delight. The phone rang inside and he reluctantly got up to answer it.

"Hi," Mulder said. "I hope the cupboards are well stocked." Skinner felt as though he had come in in the middle of a conversation.

"What? Fox?" He heard the phone being fumbled with as someone fought with it from Mulder's hands.

"Gualtiero? Is that you, caro mia?" an elderly woman's voice came on the line. Skinner's ears filled with the roar of sound. "This is your Zia Ginny, caro." She began to cry.

"Zia?" Skinner whispered hoarsely. He vaguely remembered his Aunt Regina, his mother's older sister, as a wonderful place to lay his head as a child when he was tired. She always smelled of fresh bread, pasta and garlic. She wailed loudly at the sound of his voice.

"Si! You bello amore, he show us your picture; you are bene bello! You look just like-a you grandpapa, my beloved Papa, God rest his soul. Please, we miss you, caro." Her English broke up even more, the harder she cried.

"Zia Ginny, please stop crying," he begged her, clearing the frog from his throat. "I. I miss you, too." She wailed louder. Skinner held the phone from his ear at arms' length. He could still hear her. He had forgotten how loud they could be.

"I think I hit the jackpot, Walter," Mulder said, taking the phone back. "They won't stop feeding me. And your Aunt Regina -hmmm? Oh, sorry, 'Zia Ginny' -showed me about a ton of baby pictures. What a cute dickens you were with all that dark brown wavy hair."

Skinner couldn't speak as he listened to the excited babble in the background of a mix of Italian and English.

"Hey, babe?" Mulder murmured understandingly. "I'm flying home first thing in the morning. Warn Kyle to prepare the troops, we're about to be invaded by Italy."

After learning that twenty relatives were driving down, and that was just the initial greeting party, Skinner flew through the house to take stock. He had also forgotten that his mother was number three of six children. When Natti was finally able to get out of him what the problem was, she took the keys to his van and went into the city for a major grocery buy at the wholesale warehouse. Krycek wasn't much help, having shown up not minutes after Natti left. He sat on the couch and watched with great amusement as the unflappable Walter Skinner ran around like a chicken without a head.

"Damn it, Alex, DO something!" Skinner yelled at him. Krycek shoved a piece of gum into his mouth.

"Like what?"

Skinner waved his arms.

"Go... go over to the motel and see what's available. We need all of it!"

Krycek sighed and reluctantly stood up. The boys followed him out like goslings, Adam, Pavel and Ivan.

Skinner abruptly sat in the middle of the floor and took a deep breath. The kittens sat in front of him with their heads tilted, watching him curiously. He reached out to pet one, Joxer, he thought it was. He began to calm down. At least Skinner had the great joy of seeing Alex's face when he heard, "Hi, Uncle Alex!" for the first time from Adam. Alex had froze, the twins sliding off of him as he turned whiter than a snow covered glacier. Skinner would swear the man actually began to panic. Skinner understood Krycek's problem with 'daddy' but what was his problem with 'uncle'? He'll mention it to Mulder.

"In case you haven't connected the dots, Alex, you are his uncle," Skinner reminded him, halting the panic attack.

"I don't do 'uncle'," Krycek informed him acidly.

"You'll do 'uncle' for Adam. He's the only nephew you're ever likely to have," Skinner informed him back.

"Actually, if you will recall, there were ten of us to start with. I think me, Fox, Jeff and Sharon were the only ones without kids. Sorry, Walter. Although I can take Fox off that list, obviously. Not that I want to have anything to do with the rest of them. Most went into the 'family' business, the rest are just plain psychotic."

It suddenly occurred to Skinner that this man was technically still in-law to the invading force that was about to descend. Sharon died before she could force a divorce out of him. Another first he wanted to see, when Krycek figured that out. He won't tell Alex, he didn't want Alex suddenly scared out of town before they got there, and Skinner had a feeling that Krycek was going to stick around if only to see the show.

Having calmed down thanks to the ancient wisdom of cats, Skinner stood up for more logical planning. He had no idea what to do with a large family. He called in the Cavalry. An hour and a half later, Scully looked around the living room. She then went downstairs to the newly remodeled basement which was now the children's bad-weather playroom. It ran the length of the house, including the recent addition. She returned upstairs and began to point imperiously as the two men and three boys jumped to do her bidding. Kyle came by to watch his lady-love at work and stood at the door, grinning at the men until Scully decided that he was in the way. He was strong and able-bodied; he could work, too. She sent him out to Natti who returned with a van full of groceries. When he was done with that, Scully handed him a rake and sent him out to the yard. Kyle swore he would never again make himself noticeable when Scully was in this mood.

By nightfall, the playroom was cleared of all children's paraphernalia. A call to a rental store in the city yielded a truck loaded with several large couches containing hide-a-beds, chairs, tables, a large screen TV/VCR, stereo and floor lamps, all colors and styles to Scully's exacting specifications. The door to the playroom was removed and put into

storage and the doorway decorated with a few family pictures from the stairwell and drawings that the excited children insisted on sharing with their new cousins. Scully approved the drawings and asked for a couple to take back to her office. The children beamed with pride and rushed up to their rooms to make her plenty to show to Uncle Fox's friends at work.

Scully went upstairs, crooking her finger at the men to follow. She led them to Skinner's room and looked around.

"Old ladies like to make themselves at home and look around no matter what they say to the contrary, so take out anything you'd rather she didn't see." Scully glanced at the side tables meaningfully. Skinner flushed as Krycek chuckled wickedly. "And remember to change the sheets when you get up tomorrow. Don't leave any dirty laundry in the room at all, take out anything. The bathroom must be spotless. Old ladies will notice one spec of dust, one spot on a glass surface, one hair in the tub. Marine clean," she informed Skinner. He resisted the urge to salute.

"Children's rooms are expected to be messy, don't worry about them. A clean child is not an active child and therefore not a healthy child. Any smaller children they bring with them will be put in with the boys for naps, sleeping bags for them will be fine or sheets. Remember, Catholic families think in terms of 'litters' not 'a child'. Only Mormons are worse. If the children think it's a sleep-over party, they'll be thrilled. Get them popcorn and sodas, put in a small TV and VCR, a handful of kids movies and they'll love you forever. Babies will remain with moms, most parents bring their own temporary bedding for their babies so don't worry about that, just make sure that they can use one of the rooms as quiet space. Older children will squat wherever they want to if they get tired, don't worry about them either.

"The plumbing may be a little stressed with a group that size coming, so make sure you have all the necessary emergency tools for stopped up pipes. You can let it be known that the station is open for bathroom use if these are too busy. Just make a joke of it and they won't be offended. If they're observant enough, they'll figure it out for themselves." Scully marched out of the room with the men tagging along behind her. Natti was already in the upstairs bath with a rag and bucket, which Skinner was thankful for; he hated bathroom detail. He started on the livingroom until it was spotless and dust-free, no easy task with the kittens trying to help. They thought he was playing hockey with the dust-balls so they kept trying for their goal line. It was a good thing that the kittens weren't on any teams or the Canadians would have competition for the Stanley Cup.

There was nothing else to do except to wait. He had one day; they'd be there for Sunday dinner the next night.

Mulder was home by 9am, loaded with presents, letters and photographs. Most of the gifts were food items, breads, cheeses, wines, cookies and cakes. Skinner looked at all of it and then down at his extra twenty pounds. Mulder shoved a florentine into his mouth.

"Manga," he said. Skinner chewed and swallowed. It was melt-in-the-mouth butter and almond heaven!

"Funny. What the hell are we going to do with all this? It's enough to last the year."

"Are you kidding? This is just a sample. When I left, all the women were either baking what they could there, or sending the men out to shop for non-perishables to bring with. They were giving instructions right down to the brand, ounce, what store to buy it at and how much to pay. I swear they were cranking out about a ton of pasta and rendering down an entire crop of tomatoes."

It may have been before noon, but Skinner opened a bottle of wine anyway. He was risking his life with this bottle but he needed it. It was a homemade wine. He took a sip. Smooth! No vinegar taste, lots of flavor...

The boys came in and stopped dead in their tracks at the laden table. Their eyes became as round as saucers.

"One," Skinner sternly allowed. Krycek made off with three canolis, a plate of butter cookies and a bottle of home red.

Mulder only just noticed the doorway to the basement. Skinner sent him down for a look-see.

"Wow! Can we keep it like that?" he asked when he came back up.

Skinner collapsed on the couch with his glass of burgundy.

"Tell me, Fox," he finally said. Mulder sat next to him and took a sip from the glass.

"They really do miss you. They have pictures of you at all different ages. Zia Ginny said that your mother sent them to her in secret. There are three huge photo albums of just you, the lost sheep being kept imprisoned by a father who was obviously the Anti-Christ. I didn't tell them about my father. They even had several pictures of your wedding. There was one of the entire party? And there was a dark-haired teenager standing next to Sharon. I couldn't believe it! Long hair! I told them who it was, they had given up on getting their curiosity satisfied.

"When I told them that I was there representing you, the air was filled with Hosannas and some guy, I think it was your cousin Riccardo, he called cousin Dominic, who's a priest, and ordered a thanksgiving mass in your honor. They made me go, Walter. I told them I wasn't Catholic, but they forgave my imperfection. Father Dominic is coming in the first

wave, prepare to have the state of your soul discussed. When was your last confession? He's actually pretty cool, though."

Skinner shuddered. The first wave?

Mulder nodded, hearing him.

"They're almost ready to draw straws to see who comes out first. They weren't sure what to make of us, there were a few rumbles, but Zia Ginny announced that God has obviously returned you to them, therefore they will accept you as is. Even Father Dominic bowed low before her. And they did know that you were you. They had clippings from every newspaper they could get their hands on and videos of every televised appearance. They're proud of you, Walter." Mulder shook his knee in emphasis. "They thought that you didn't want to contact them. They were respecting your presumed wishes. I told them that you were undercover and got a little lost but you came back and did the right thing. You have a lot of cop cousins; they understood. Said something about wise-guys.

"As far as they are concerned, you are the Second Coming."

"Is it too late to take Alex up on that offer of his favorite bistro in Milan?" Skinner asked, staring at the ceiling. He had been inspecting the ceiling quite often lately, he decided that it needed a few cracks repaired and to be repainted.

"Oh, and they said something about cousin Renaldo on your grandmother's side owning the Parkside, so they were going to drop in on Aldo and get him to put them up."

Skinner knew he had heard the name of the hotel before. He thought hard.

"The 4-star at Harrison and 72nd? That's a cousin?" Skinner only stayed there when the tab was on Hoover. Mulder nodded.

"That's the one. Cousin Mario said to let Aldo know anytime you want to stay a night or two. Call and talk to Aldo personally, introduce yourself."

That took care of the housing problem.

The canoli thief slinked in, the bottle of wine dangling from one hand and a photo album in the other.

"I don't fucking believe this!" he stated in disbelief, looking closely at a picture. He put the book down, looked in the mirror and touched his short hair before measuring down with his hand to just past his shoulders. He shook his head, unable to believe that he was once that young.

"Oh that's nice, Alex, great thing for the children to see," Skinner reprimanded him, pointing at the bottle. Krycek rolled his eyes and took it back into the kitchen to put the cork back in.

"If you're done wallowing, we need to go over to the local lawyer," Krycek said when he came back out. The men looked at him.

"Harry's? Why?" Skinner asked. Krycek took a sheaf of papers out of his backpack.

"To get the guardianship changed," he said on his way out the door. Skinner and Mulder looked at each other. Skinner could see that Mulder knew something.

"Wait a minute!" Skinner yelled in a panic, running out the door after Krycek. "Changed to what?" he pulled Krycek's arm to make him stop. Krycek handed him the papers.

"From Fox's temporary guardianship to your permanent guardianship." Skinner was positive that he couldn't handle one more shock. He could find no mockery on Alex's face. Skinner opened the papers and quickly scanned them. He felt the blood drain from his face. Alex was telling the truth, he was giving Skinner full guardianship of the twins.

Mulder placed a hand on Krycek's shoulder, giving him a pat of approval. Skinner could do nothing else; he caught Alex in a bear-hug.

"What's going on?" Scully asked, coming up from the walkway with a uniformed Kyle in tow. Skinner pushed past them and marched Krycek over to Harry's. Mulder took Scully's hand and pulled her along, telling her a very long and involved story on the walk over.

They tossed the boys into a bath for a quick wash and then into nice clothes. Much to their disgust, they were forced to sit on the couch and either read, work in their books or watch a movie. No running and getting dirty and sweaty. Scully went back to Kyle's house, although both Skinner and Mulder said she could stay. She felt in the way on the family occasion and nothing Mulder could say could change her mind. Natka was of the same opinion and headed out to Emilia's at the invitation of the younger woman.

Everytime a car was heard, Skinner looked out the window. His heart was pounding, never having been so nervous in his life.

"Hey, AD! You can deal with this," Mulder said. "You've had dinner with the President and Janet Reno, testified before senate subcommittees and the Tribunal. You've faced down assassins, UFOs, Scully and Krycek..."

"Hey!"

"...not to mention informing the world that the big macho ex-Marine was living with a man and raising three sons."

"This is family, Fox. Family is worse than all of that put together. And I'm not macho." Skinner paced the length of the living room.

"Oh, really? And who was it that spent last Cinco de Mayo trying to drink the Mexicans under the table in the name of German/Italian honor? Tommy Lee has a new hero. And who was it that insisted that the boys start to learn football instead of that 'prissy' soccer? Shut up, Alex. Who was it that took them out into the woods for target practice? As though certain people need the encouragement."

"It was just .22's," Skinner protested.

"Stud."

Skinner waved a hand at him, dismissing him and his crazy talk. It made perfect sense to Skinner to begin teaching the boys proper firearms maintenance, considering the background of the three men in the room. Who knew when something would happen and the boys would have to protect themselves? Which reminded him, he'd have to see about hand to hand defense, that was one of Alex's crappier talents. Skinner was proud that it took two strong men to hold him down in order for Krycek to get in a hit.

"Someone's here!" the boys jumped up shouting excitedly.

Damn, thought Skinner, Mulder did it to him again. He pointed a finger at Mulder and shook it. Mulder stood up, took the finger, and gave him a light brush across his mouth for reinforcement.

He quickly reviewed the photos, placing names with faces. He knew he was never going to remember all of them.

Zia Ginny burst into tears and held on tightly to him, babbling in a mixture of English and Italian. To his eternal embarrassment, she declared to the world at large that she changed his diapers and bathed him, and now look how big and handsome he was! As if her handling of his naked baby self was the cause. If only his sainted mother was alive to see her baby, God rest her soul!

The kittens took one look at the descending hoard, puffed their tails, and disappeared to the top of the bookshelf to stare down in disbelief.

Skinner was kissed and hugged by more people in the next five minutes than he ever remembered before. He even got big smacking kisses on the cheeks from the men, big bears that declared him too skinny and for Mamma to fatten him up properly.

"Walter, I'm your uncle Carlo, I'm your mamma's youngest brother," a man not much older than him clasped Skinner's hand between both of his. "I'm only 10 years older, so just Carlo. This is my son, Marco, and my beautiful daughters, Anna Maria and Christiana. We named Anna Maria after your mother. And my first grandchild thanks to Anna Maria, Elana who is 4."

He could see that Carlo wasn't exaggerating, his daughters were very beautiful. Uh-oh, where was Alex?? He gave the young ladies a peck on their cheeks and shook Marco's hand.

"You look like my mother," Skinner heard himself say to Carlo. The man's face lit up with surprised pleasure.

"Do I?"

"Yes, you have the same eyes and facial shape."

Carlo gave a hearty laugh and gave Skinner another hug.

"And you look like your grandpapa." Carlo gave Skinner's head a rub. Skinner looked through the photo album, he saw a picture of his grandparents and saw himself in about another thirty years. He wasn't displeased, he could live with it.

"Cousin Walter? Is all that alien stuff true?" Marco asked eagerly. That wasn't the first time he had heard that question, so he gave his young cousin the same answer he gave everyone who asked,

"Ask Mulder for stories, he'll talk your ear off." Marco set off on his mission with his sisters and a couple other cousins his age in tow and descended upon an unsuspecting Mulder.

"And I'm your aunt Florence, Walter. I'm 11 years older, so just Flo. This is my husband Matteo Palmiri." The woman kissed his cheek and wiped off the lipstick smudge with her thumb. "I have five children, but I only brought Matti Jr. and Frankie today, and my four youngest grandchildren to play with your nephews; Frankie Jr. and Paolo belong to Frankie, Rosa is Dean's and Teresa is Julia's. Julia is home nursing a cold."

Skinner saw a young teenage girl in a pink dress with her thick hair braided in a long rope down her back.

"I remember you," Skinner heard himself say. "You shared your ice cream with me when Mario stole mine. You were my first crush." Flo beamed with delight and patted his cheek.

"Matti, you have competition," she informed her husband.

He next came face to face with a priest.

"Fox warned me you'd be in the first wave," Skinner said with good humor. Father Dominic had an easy smile.

"The first wave? Yes, that's a good way to think about it," he said with a chuckle, shaking Skinner's hand. Something about the man's face caught his attention. Another memory clicked and he snapped his fingers.

"Wait a minute. Dom Quatrini? The bully who used to beat up the weaker kids for milk money?? You owe me \$1.25!"

Fr. Dominic blushed as the cousins hooted and yelled.

"Yeah, he's still stealin' money, only this time it's for a different cause!" someone called out, which brought another round of laughter. Skinner looked around.

"Zia Ginny?" he called over to her. "I'm starting to remember people. I remember that your sons were bullies. They scared me." Even the accused laughed and pounded each other on the shoulders. Zia Ginny put a loud smacking kiss on Mario's face before boxing his ears.

"Don't worry, Walter," Mulder spoke up. "You tell me if they bother you and I'll beat them up for you." The men barked in disbelief, taking in their barrel shapes and Mulder's slight build. Skinner wouldn't hurt Mulder's pride by informing everyone of Mulder's scorecard in the fight ring.

All in all, 23 cousins, aunts and uncles showed up in the initial greeting party, 17 over 21 and 6 under. There were more waiting in the wings for their turn.

The women took over the kitchen and declared it forbidden territory to the men. Large pots were brought out and water set to boil for the pasta, while fresh baked bread was cut up and piled high with lunch meats and cheese for snacks.

The boys immediately made off with Flo's grandchildren, and the 20-somethings had cornered Mulder who was regaling them with the story of Big Blue. Anna Maria took his hand and gave it a rap, declaring him an unfeeling beast for deserting his partner and letting her dog be eaten. Skinner bit back a chuckle at Mulder's expression of wounded pride as he held his paw protectively close. He'd have to remember to introduce Anna Maria to Scully.

"Walter, come here." Mario of the ice cream caper took him aside. Skinner invited the men downstairs to the newly furnished family room. He found himself surrounded by five older cousins and Just Carlo. He felt an interrogation about to happen.

Mario produced a bottle of wine and glasses and poured all around.

"Salute," he said, raising his glass. The others echoed in response.

"Now, Walter, will you tell us what happened with your Sharon? Mulder would only say that she died, that it was your story to tell," Mario began. The all looked at Skinner, waiting.

Skinner knew he'd have to face the inquiries about his wife, but he assumed that the subject of he and Mulder would be first. He sat forward, gazing into the ruby liquid.

"Walter, you don't need to talk about her if you don't want to," Fr. Dominic said gently.

"She died because of me," he heard himself say, much to his own shock. "I know the stories that have been in the news about me, Mulder and Scully, what's been happening because of what we uncovered. That movie was complete nonsense, not one truth in it. But all the stories put together is just the tip of the iceberg. Innocent people died along the way, because Mulder and Scully wouldn't play the game and because I started to pull away and ask questions. I'm not innocent here, guys, but Mulder's sister was and Scully's sister was. Sharon died at the hands of her own father when I refused to play anymore. If I'd stayed with them, she'd still be alive."

The men were silent, shocked at his confession. He'd understand completely if they went home immediately.

"Do you know what disappoints us most?" Mario asked. Skinner forced himself to face his jury. "That you didn't come to us. This is what we're here for, Walter. Family isn't just for good times, it's for bad times, too. Your pain is our pain, your struggles ours." Mario reached over, put a hand on the back of Skinner's neck and gave him a shake. "Capesh?"

"If you will tell us where she is buried, we would like to pay our respects."

Skinner promised to give them the site before they left.

"Now... Walter... a man???" Mario jerked his thumb toward the stairs. Skinner took a sip of his wine to cover his embarrassment.

"That wasn't my idea, Mario," he said. "I never had any plans on going anywhere near another man. Until I met Mulder. There are times when I think that we have no choice in the person that we fall in love with."

Fr. Dominic gave an inscrutable smile but remained silent.

"What? Couldn't you, you know, 'work' with women after Sharon?" Riccardo asked as delicately as he could.

"I could 'work' fine, Ricky. I didn't make myself clear; I like women, they turn me on just as much as they do you. Quite unexpectedly, I fell in love with a man. Fox is the only man I have ever been attracted to and he's the only man I have ever been with." For some reason he couldn't quite grasp, he felt the need to be as open as possible with his family. The men were silent as they contemplated his words. He could see that they were still confused. Except for Fr. Dominic and Carlo, who were sitting silently, watching and listening.

"So," Ricky searched. "You're what? Dat acey-ducey?" He toggled his hand back and forth with meaning. Skinner had to think for a translation.

"Bisexual, Walter," Fr. Dominic supplied. That was a word Skinner knew. He nodded his thanks.

"If a label must be applied, bisexual will do," he confirmed to Ricky.

"Huh." Ricky contemplated his wine.

"And you're gonna marry him? Two guys can't marry!" Mario protested. Agreements sounded from all quarters.

"It's a different kind of marriage," Skinner emphasized. He could feel the attention from Dom, the white collar glaring. "It's..." he searched for an explanation that they would understand. He didn't think that they were stupid, but that they lived in a different world where some things needed to be translated from one form of English to another. He turned to Dominic. There were too many Dominics. "It's a hand-fasting."

Fr. Dominic nodded. Comparative religions and cultures were a part of seminary school. "Walter and Mulder are only going to make promises to each other with a private contract between them," Dom explained to his brothers and cousins. "They'll have a party, invite friends, possibly family, to witness their promises to each other. That's all, no Church blessings or anything like that. They call it a marriage because they are forming a union together."

"Huh," Mario said the magical word of contemplation. "So, Dom, you approve a dis?" They all looked at Fr. Dominic.

Dom took his time answering.

"As a priest of the Holy Roman Catholic Church, no, I do not. I cannot." His brothers and uncle Matteo were relieved that their world was still in order. Carlo was still silent. "However." The men quieted their mutterings. "I don't believe that either Walter or Mulder have asked for approval from any of us."

The four men rocked back and made loud noises, waving their hands and arguing on top of each other at full volume. Skinner had seen too many board meetings degenerate into this, so he waited until they ran out of steam, calmly sipping his wine as Carlo refilled his glass.

Mulder came down baring a large tray piled high with sandwiches. He put the tray on a table, arranged a couple of plates, and handed one to Skinner, sitting next to him on the couch. They watched the show as they ate. Skinner's jaw cracked as he tried to get a full bite. He gave up and attacked it one layer at a time. The bread was thick and crusty, mustard on the bottom followed by salami, ham, bologna, provolone, a second story of the same, topped with tomatoes, olives, onions, lettuce and oil and vinegar. Pickles on the side.

"Flo says this is a light snack," Mulder said. "To 'tide the boys over'."

"It's good. Definitely not Subway," Skinner said, picking an olive off his shirt and popping it into his mouth.

"What's the discussion?" Mulder asked, watching Mario shaking his hands at the air as he shouted something in Italian. Ricky answered with full gesticulations.

"Us," Skinner responded, taking another nibble.

"Cool. What's the score?"

"I'm not sure, but Carlo and Dom aren't making much of an effort, so I think it's 2-4 them."

"Bummer. But you know what?" Mulder took a sip from Skinner's glass.

"What?"

Mulder leaned over confidentially.

"Zia Ginny likes me."

They clinked sandwiches.

Movement at the bottom of the stairs drew Skinner's attention. He motioned for Pavel to come over. The boy skirted around the furniture, keeping his eyes on the 'discussion'. He pressed close to Skinner, standing between his legs for protection.

"Why are they angry?" Pavel whispered close to Skinner's head. Skinner put an arm around Pavel's waist.

"They're not angry, that's just how they talk when they're excited."

"Oh." Pavel watched the big hairy men waving their arms and shouting at each other. The last time he saw people do that, Uncle Walter put them in the can until they calmed down. Maybe they need a time out?

"Can we go outside and play?" he asked.

"Yes, but stay in the yard. It's getting dark and dinner will be ready soon."

"Ok." He reached for Skinner's sandwich. Skinner held it for him and watched with amusement as Pavel attempted to get his mouth around a piece of it. All he was getting was a corner of bread. Mulder stopped eating his own and watched with equal amusement as Pavel looked at it, puzzled. He knew there was good stuff in it, he could see it, but it refused to get close to his mouth. Skinner chuckled, taking pity on him.

"Here." He separated the sandwich in the middle and held out the top half with the veggies on it along with a layer of meats. Happy, Pavel sank his teeth into it, smearing his chin, cheeks and nose with olive oil. They were unaware of having attracted attention until the men roared with laughter. His cheeks puffed out like a hoarding chipmunk, Pavel snuffled through his wrinkled nose and buried his face in Skinner's neck.

"Which one is this, Walt?" Mario asked. Skinner gave the little bottom a pat and Pavel turned around, one arm around Skinner's neck as he looked shyly at the men. He chewed his mouthful, deciding that everything was ok.

"This is Pavel, his twin is Ivan. The older boy is Fox's son Adam."

"How come they got Russian names?" Frankie asked suspiciously.

"Because their father is Russian-American."

"And their father is your brother?" Frankie pointed at Mulder.

"Yes."

"But they call Walter uncle," Frankie protested.

"I am their uncle." Skinner was enjoying himself.

"How can you be their uncle?"

"Because their father is Sharon's brother."

Mario sat down, holding his head in pain.

"Now, wait, wait..." Mario waved his hands above his head. Frankie had given up. "So... their father is Mulder's brother and Sharon's brother?? But... that makes Mulder you're brother-in-law!"

"Yes."

"But we didn't know that until a few years ago," Mulder added.

"What? How can you not know your own brother-in-law?" Mario asked in disbelief.

"Because I didn't know my brother or sister."

"How could you not know your brother and sister?"

"We weren't raised together. Different mothers. We didn't know about each other."

"Uh-huh." Mario scratched his jaw in thought. "So.. where is their mother?"

"Died in childbirth," Skinner said, gently for Pavel's benefit.

The men waved their hands in sympathy with a round of "poor bambinos!".

"Why are you their guardian instead of their own father?" Mario suddenly asked. Skinner needed a moment to re-orient his mind.

"That's an even longer story; take my word for it, this way is best."

Behind Skinner's head, Mulder waved a cut-off signal and pointed at Pavel. The men nodded sagely.

"Walter!" Flo stomped down the stairs and glared indignantly. "Who is that.... person.... raiding the kitchen!"

Skinner and Mulder had an idea as to whom she was referring to. Skinner turned Pavel's face toward her.

"Does he look like this?"

"Ah! Si! That's him," she declared, waving a dish towel.

"That's Alex, Flo, remember I told you about him? Sharon's brother in the picture," Mulder reminded her. Her frown cleared.

"Si, si! So, why does he not introduce himself, unh?"

"He's shy," Skinner offered. Flo was still for a moment.

"Oh, you!" she clicked her teeth, dismissed him with the towel, and went back upstairs.

"Matteo!" she yelled down. "Don't you bunch of gossiping old goats monopolize Walter!"

"Si, mamma!" Matteo yelled back up. He looked at Matti who shrugged in masculine sympathy.

"That means they want to pump you for information," Matteo told Skinner.

Pavel picked up Skinner's glass, looking for something to drink.

"No," Skinner said, taking it from him. "You're too young for that."

"Why?" Mario asked, spreading his hands. "A sip won't hurt him."

"Mario, he's 5."

"So? We had sips and watered-down glasses when we were 5. It's just grape juice."

Frowning in disapproval, Skinner none-the-less held the glass for Pavel to take a sip. Pavel made a face and sputtered. The men roared and slapped their knees. Skinner gave Pavel a piece of bread to clear his palette. It was time to put the cousins on their ears.

"Wine is fermented grapes," Skinner told the boy, knowing Pavel would run with it.

"ACK! Bad!" Pavel tore into the bread as ferociously as he could minus one front tooth. "Grape juice is good fresh, not with bacteria," he declared.

"But that bread has bac-TER-ia," Mulder reasoned.

"This yeast is a good bac-TER-ia, that yeast makes alcol and alcol is a poison. Put a Mr. Yuk face on it!" he ordered Skinner, pointing imperiously at the bottle. Pavel had been paying too much attention to his Aunt Dana. Skinner held in his mirth.

"Some adults like wine; if I put a Mr. Yuk face on it, they won't drink it."

Pavel thought about it. His uncles could see the wind-up.

"I don't understand why do adults want to drink poison poison is bad it hurts organs and kills the liver and makes people talk funny it smells bad it tastes bad it makes my tongue feel funny it makes you 'rest Tommy Lee all the time and he throws up and makes a smelly mess and he stinks and his teeth are black..."

"He's possessed! Dom, do something!" Frankie shouted in panic to Fr. Dominic. The men laughed.

"This is no 5 year old! Walter, you lied to us!" Mario declared.

Later in the evening, after the loudest dinner that Skinner had ever attended, the evening quieted with the children crashed out in the twins' room, cuddled together on the beds and spread out on the floor, fast asleep from an exhausting day. The teens and 20-somethings took over the family room and the large screen TV and DVD. The adults sat out on the porch, enjoying the evening with the starry sky and the crickets chirping.

"Now, Walter," Zia Ginny began.

"Ma'am?" The wine had loosened Skinner up considerably; he was holding Mulder's hand, their fingers laced. Zia Ginny gave Riccardo's arm a swat since he was the closest one to her.

"Now that's manners!" she informed her son.

"Si, mamma."

Mario snickered at his brother's expense.

"Walter, this hand-fasting thing. How is this going to happen? Will you be having a party or a reception? Are you just going to announce it as a done deal? What?"

"We'll have a small party. Fox wants live music."

Zia Ginny folded and unfolded her fingers.

"This isn't a family type a party?" she asked innocently. Mulder chuckled and put his feet up on the railing.

"Zia, is that a hint?" he asked. Zia Ginny hmped and turned her face away as her sons and nephews chuckled. The women clucked at their husbands to behave.

"Actually, we haven't set any plans, yet," Skinner told them.

"So, what are you waiting for? An engraved invitation from yourself?" Flo asked. Skinner wasn't sure, himself.

"We don't have our suits yet..." he began.

"They'll be here tomorrow." Krycek stepped up onto the porch, startling them.

"And where have you been?" Mulder asked.

"At Emilia's."

Skinner made the belated introductions.

"What will be here tomorrow?" he asked Krycek.

"Your suits. You wanted white linen. I got your measurements from your tailor and sent them to a contact in Cairo. The suits are done, they'll be here by Fed-Ex tomorrow."

"Cairo? Egypt??" Mario asked in disbelief.

"Alex!" Mulder cut off the sarcastic reply that he could see about to happen.

"Thank you, Alex," Skinner said, diverting his attention. "That was very generous of you." The ruffled feathers were smoothed.

"Ok, so you have clothes. What else?" Flo itemized on her fingers.

"We haven't shopped for rings, yet," Skinner said. Mario picked up the cordless phone and dialed.

"Al! Bring out a tray of your best gold wedding bands. Mens. Naw, just mens. Tomorrow. It's for cousin Walter. Yeah! Maria's Walter." Mario reached over and picked up Skinner's wrist to look at his fingers. "About a 10, I'd say, maybe an 11. Bring a selection." He looked at Mulder's hand. "Bring between 8 and 11's." He gave the person the address and hung up.

"Rings are taken care of," he announced.

"Who was..." Skinner pointed at the phone. "Never mind. Another cousin, right?" He was impressed; on a bad day he wore an 11.

"Cousin Alphonse, on Grandmamma's side," Mario admitted.

"Next!" Zia Ginny announced. Skinner sought Mulder's opinion.

"Catering?" he suggested. The women glared at him. Mulder surrendered.

"Music?" he dared to ask instead.

"No Sinatra!" Skinner, Mulder and Krycek all yelled at once. The others disapproved but relented.

"Marco!" Carlo shouted into the house. A moment later, the young man was standing in the doorway.

"Yes, Papa?"

"Get your guitar. Sing a song for your cousin." Marco hopped off the porch and out to their car. "He never goes anywhere without it," Carlo confided to Skinner. Marco was back with a beat-up old guitar. He sat on the railing and tuned it with expert fingers.

"Anything in particular?" he asked Skinner. Skinner didn't know.

"Rock?" Mulder suggested. "Love song, nothing too saccharine but not metal. Something positive." He rattled off a list of his current favorites to give Marco an idea of his preferences. Skinner had heard Mulder singing along to them with the CD or radio. He had to force himself not to get earplugs.

Marco sang and Skinner saw a slightly shy young man come alive. A lot of people can sing, but very few can create magic. Marco was a master adept of the highest degree. The others beamed with pride as he serenaded them. When he finished, not all the cheers came from the porch. The music had attracted the neighbors, a few of the Chavez men were leaning over the railing, whistling and clapping. Marco stood up and sketched a bow, showing Skinner a born ham.

Skinner and Mulder looked at each other and agreed.

"Would you like to play at our hand-fasting?" Skinner invited his young cousin. "If you're not comfortable with the occasion, just say so. We won't be offended." Mulder murmured his agreement.

Marco shrugged,

"Not a problem. A gig is a gig. I have a band, or did you want just the guitar?"

"You got a tape with you, Marky?" Carlo asked. "Get his a tape, they can listen to it and get back to you." Marco ran out to the car again.

"Padre," Miguel called out. "You Catholic, Padre?"

Dom nodded and answered him in Spanish. The Chavez men lit up and pleaded with him to join their family for a moment. Dom excused himself and went to the other yard.

"So," Zia Ginny brought Skinner's attention back to the subject at hand. "Clothes, food, rings, music. Any other excuses?" She dared him to find something. She cried out and put a hand to her head. "Aie, Dios! What am I doing? I cannot believe that I am encouraging you in this!"

"Now, Zia, if you're going to be that way about it, what's the point in my inviting you to the party?" Skinner teased her.

"Ah-HA!" she said triumphantly. Her sons laughed. "Come here!" she pointed at the floor beside her. Skinner saw no choice so he went to her and crouched in front of her. She took his chin firmly in hand, forcing him to meet her eyes, which he was fascinated to see were the same color brown as his.

"Let's get one thing clear, carino mia. I do not approve of this union, make no mistake about that. It is against God's will, what you do. And I know what you do, I have cable TV." She nodded knowingly.

"Yes, Ma'am," he responded automatically. His heart began to thud again. He hadn't realized that he needed her approval so badly.

"But we lost you once, I don't want to lose you again through sheer stubborn pride. You're Mamma was too proud to come back to us, and look at her now! No! Your home is at peace, those children are healthy and well-loved, and it is obvious to a blind man that you and Fox love each other. No, I do not approve, but I can see that you have grown into a good man and I do approve of that.

"I do not understand about this hand-fasting thing, it is not a marriage. A marriage is between a man and a woman, blessed by a priest of the Church in the eyes of God. But there is too much violence in the world, men killing each other, mamma's hurting their bambinos. Awful. So, if you want to take an oath that you will be good to each other, love each other, and raise those children in a home of peace, filled with amore, ok, I can accept that."

Skinner knew that was as close to a blessing that he was going to get. It was more than he was expecting. He took her hands and kissed her palms. Not realizing how badly he wanted the approval of his family until he had it, he found himself blinded by tears of relief as he buried his face in her lap. Fox had freed his demons, Ivan had thawed his heart, Zia Ginny thawed his soul.

Chapter 10: Wedding Bell Blues

The morning saw the return of Natti who took one look at the pitiful starving children and herded them into the kitchen. She was pleased to note that her kitchen was spotless even if it was crammed with food.

The smell of ham and pancakes woke up the rest of the campers. With the smaller children in the twins' room, the teens had fallen asleep in the family room, their parents

leaving them there at the insistence of Skinner and Mulder, and went back to their hotel late the previous evening.

"Walter, don't pancakes qualify as 'crap'?" Mulder asked from the doorway, looking at the Micky Mouse faces on the griddle.

"Yes, Fox, I believe that they do," Skinner confirmed.

Natti chased them out with the spatula.

Skinner felt cleansed, purged of all his sins, after he cried himself out on Zia Ginny. She made no protest as she held and rocked him, nor did his big burly cousins berate him for it. He was self-conscious afterward, his eyes red-rimmed and swollen, until he was shaken by the scruff of the neck with Mario's beefy hand.

"That's what Mammias are for, Walt," Mario said in a gruff but gentle way.

He held tightly to Mulder, not saying anything, simply needing the security of his lover's arms until he fell asleep. He awoke early, having only slept a few hours but feeling refreshed. He watched Mulder sleep and woke him up slowly with gentle, easy lovemaking.

As the men dressed, the boys gathered on the bed for their morning discussion. They were still rumpled from sleep but happily stuffed with Micky Mouse pancakes. They talked excitedly about their slumber party with their new cousins and all the food and sweets. They weren't wild about getting lipstick on their faces but they clearly flourished in the attention. The twins were amazed that Rosa and Paolo were the same age as they were and they weren't twins! Adam was quite happy to spend time with eight year old Teresa with the long curly brown hair. Skinner saw the flushed, glowing look of a budding crush and shot a look at Mulder who acknowledged it with a slight nod.

"Yo! Walter!" came a yell from the stairwell. Skinner stuck his head out the door.

"Come on up," he invited Carlo as he buttoned his uniform shirt.

"What's this?" Carlo asked, seeing the boys sprawled out on the bed with the kittens.

"Breakfast is family time," Skinner explained, tucking the shirt into his jeans. "Fox is sometimes late for dinner or out of town because of work, so we catch up on each other's lives over breakfast. The table was a little too noisy this morning."

Carlo looked dismayed. "I'm interrupting! I'll wait downstairs."

Mulder gave his shoulder a squeeze, "You're fine, Carlo." He threaded his tie through the collar and Adam jumped up to his feet, standing on the bed.

"I wanna!" he reached out eagerly. Mulder stood in front of Adam, who concentrated intently on tying the knot properly. Mulder murmured pointers and guided his son's hand when he needed to.

Carlo watched them.

"Sometimes it seems so long ago that Marco was that age, other times it was yesterday," he said, melancholy tinging his voice. Skinner looped his belt through and sat to put his shoes on. He didn't know his uncle very well, but he had seen enough agents with a problem to know that Carlo had something on his mind.

"You boys got out of studying yesterday," Mulder informed them. "How about practicing compositions and reports today? That's writing skills, observation and communication. Pavel, I want to see that you've been paying attention to those punctuation rules that we've been working with you on. Why don't you write us letters about yesterday? All the different people you met, the different foods you tried, what you liked and what you didn't. What are the interrogation questions?"

"Who, what, where, when, why and how!" they chorused.

"Right. So make sure you cover all those questions in your letters. Adam, try for two pages, twins try for 1 page. You can do a little on and off during the day, show them to us before bed. Ask for help if you need it." That was an easy day for them, so they quickly agreed. Skinner could see that Carlo was incredulous.

"It's for our own sanity, believe me," Skinner wryly informed him as they shooed the boys out of the room and sent them to get dressed.

"Is Marco the youngest?" Skinner asked Carlo as they left the room. "None younger at home?"

They paused on the stairs as Carlo stopped to look at the pictures.

"He's the baby," Carlo confirmed. "My wife, Rosa, died when he was only six months." It seemed to Skinner that Carlo spent more time looking at the photos of himself and Mulder, than the others, although Sharon got a second look. "Beautiful," Carlo murmured. He saw the one of Krycek and the twins and shook his head, muttering about the miracle of genetics.

"That's terrible, Carlo, I'm sorry," he said. "May I ask what happened?"

Carlo snorted.

"It was 1983, Walt, tainted blood happened."

Skinner stopped in shock.

"AIDS?! How... are you and Marco... alright?" Skinner knew too many people who had died from that horrible disease. Thankfully, one of the side-effects of the Vaccine was a strengthened immune system. AIDS was still around, but it wasn't killing as it once did. People now lived with the help of strong 'cocktails'.

"We're fine. She had a hard pregnancy, spent most of it in bed, almost lost him 3 times. They finally had to take him a month before term. They gave her blood for the operation. She was in the hospital for a month. When she got home, she was very weak. By the time she was healed and ready to resume 'relations', she was getting sick. I was never exposed to the virus. Marco has been tested routinely every year of his life since then. Still negative. He's fine." They stood at the front door. Carlo watched his son kicking the soccer ball around with his cousins.

"My niece Sylvia, Flo's second daughter, was over helping me one day. I had my hands full with Rosa. Sylvie nursed Marco right next to Lou, Jr. and Flo came and took the girls when Rosa got real bad. I think that hurt Rosa more than anything else; she was too weak to nurse her baby in the beginning, and when she got home from the hospital, she had dried up. The doctors advised against inducing the milk since she was still weak. I had started him on formula, but he was crying one day and wouldn't stop. Sylvie put Lou down and put Marky to her breast and that was that."

They went out onto the porch as a van from the Parkside pulled up to the curb. The 20-somethings rounded up the younger ones.

"I'm very sorry for your loss, Carlo, truly," Skinner said just before he was surrounded by younger cousins thanking him for the party, as though it had been his idea.

"Papa, can I go back with Frankie and Mickie?" Christiana asked Carlo. He took her face and kissed her with a loud smack.

"Yes, you may, cara mio."

Christiana thanked him and turned to hug Skinner. She kissed him on the mouth and declared that it was sure a waste of prime male. Skinner flushed at the cat-calls.

"Believe me, Chris, it isn't being wasted," Mulder said, exiting the door behind them. He winked at her and those old enough to understand giggled and snickered, some of the guys making disgusted noises.

"Walter, would you mind if I hung around? Dom has some business with your neighbors and he'll need a ride home," Carlo asked.

"I don't mind at all, make your self at home. Just remember to prostrate yourself properly before begging to enter Natti's kitchen."

Carlo laughed and promised.

"Papa, can I stay and ride back with you and Dom?" Marco asked. Carlo looked at Skinner who nodded in agreement.

Everyone else shouted their good-byes and boarded the van. The neighborhood was suddenly quiet. Skinner was amazed, he could actually hear the birds again.

"I'm outta here, too," Mulder declared, putting his jacket on and grabbing his briefcase. He kissed Skinner in his rush off the porch with an "I'll call if I'm going to be late!" He turned to see that they had an audience.

"Sorry. It's next to impossible to get Fox to understand the term 'discretion' when it concerns us and the public. I suppose I should be thankful he hasn't wanted to try sex in public. God knows he's jumped me everywhere else."

Carlo laughed and clapped him on the shoulder.

"It's alright, Walt, we're family not the public. I work in the New York City public school system, I've seen damned near everything and a few things I could have gone the rest of my life without seeing."

With Skinner's permission, Marco spent the morning on the computer surfing the music pages and patiently answering little boys' questions. After being surprised once too often for his own comfort, Marco went up to Skinner with, "Are you absolutely positive those are children? Not 100 year old midgets in disguise?"

Skinner assured him they were children.

Carlo tagged along with Skinner on his morning walk around the town. Skinner didn't mind; unlike the others, Carlo seemed to be a quieter person.

"What's up with the boys, Walt? That's pretty heavy-duty summer school work for their age, isn't it?"

Skinner picked up a bottle and tossed it into a nearby receptacle.

"You don't understand," he said. "All three boys have genius IQ's. The twins are a little higher than Adam's, but we don't tell them about any of that. They know they're smart, that's all. We found out very quickly that the only way to keep them out of the worst of their mischief, and to keep them from getting bored quickly, was to feed their minds. Unfortunately, the public school system in this country is among the worst in the world. We're taking children with a hell of a lot of potential, and turning out stupid adults. So between that and the fact that there are no private schools nearby, we home tutor them. We began sending them to the town's public grade school this spring, just for socializing purposes with peers. They were starting to alienate the other kids in the neighborhood."

"Fox has college level English, ancient history, and comparative religions. He also has a psych degree that he never uses except for profiling. He's brilliant, Adam comes by his brains naturally; don't give him an inch, Carlo, Fox'll take you apart like the world's easiest jig-saw puzzle. I'm good with numbers, competent with English comp and modern history. Dana Scully is a medical doctor, a forensic pathologist, so 'Aunt Dana' comes over for physical sciences when she can. They write out their homework longhand and then type it into the computer and save their work.

"We had a small problem with the state board of education at first, but when they saw the boys' test scores, it was either let us home-teach them or send them away to a special boarding school. The board sends someone to test them once in a while, they go away confounded but happy."

Carlo stopped in amazement.

"Walter, that's astounding! I teach 10th grade social studies, and I do agree with you about the quality of graduates. What most people don't understand is, there are about 45 kids to a classroom with one teacher. That's 300-360 students per teacher per year. Teachers don't have time for one-to-one with special needs kids. We already take work home with us every night, papers to read over and grade for those 300-360 students. My work day is from 6am to 11pm-midnight. My salary is only based on what I do in school, not including home. The average teacher's salary is about \$18,000 a year. That's very low, especially for inner-city teachers who have a higher danger factor, so the profession isn't attracting more teachers. Without more teachers, states refuse to allocate the funding to build more schools. The national board sees no choice, they need to make room for incoming students, so we are forced to lower the quality of the tests, lower the bell curve, and get the kids out whether they're ready or not. It's a problem that has snowballed into epidemic proportions. Most schools have already cut out music and arts programs to reallocate that money toward the basics, despite the fact that students who excel in music and art, usually excel in the basics. God forbid anyone should suggest dropping any of the sports programs which cost more than all the Arts and Music programs put together!" Carlo was clearly exasperated, his arms waving effusively as he spoke, his New York accent dropping his 'R's' into 'A's' in his agitation.

They were coming back to the station. Kyle was sitting on the porch, his attention on the shouting that he heard coming from their direction. Skinner waved him down and Kyle relaxed into a ready position.

"I read something about the subject of charter schools coming up again," Skinner mentioned. "What do you think of those?"

Carlo took his time answering.

"Well, it's a good idea in theory, but most of them are bullshit. So long as they teach the standard requirement of the state, they can do whatever else they want. Most are biased in some area or another, various religious teaching their own far right-wing agendas. Very

few of the teachers are actually qualified to teach. There are a few good ones, but not enough to make a difference."

Kyle was introduced to Carlo.

"Kyle, what would you think of a charter school for Missy?" Skinner asked. Kyle's eyebrows went up at the subject matter.

"I think that would have to depend on the curriculum and who the teachers are. Not that I'd have much say where she goes to school, I can't see Marilyn allowing that to happen. But you know, I've heard quite a few dissatisfied parents commenting on your boys. They're jealous. They wish the school here taught their kids half as well as your boys are taught. Maybe you should start a school."

Shocked at the suggestion, Skinner could only stare at his deputy who had suddenly grown another head.

"That's a good idea, Walt, I could look into it for you, if you'd like," Carlo offered. Skinner shook his hands at them both. As though he had the time for running a school! "I don't have time to teach a school! I don't have that much patience, nor the desire. I'm happy being a cop. If there is a school, it needs an actual teacher to run it." A sudden thought occurred to Skinner. He turned to Carlo. "How much to you like city life?"

Mulder sat at the kitchen table, called home for lunch by Skinner. Their Egyptian linen suits had arrived just before he got home, along with cousin Renaldo with a case of gold rings. They tried on the suits, which fit perfectly. They chose rings next, so that Aldo could get back to his shop. Asking for the total with a wince, Skinner was moved that Aldo insisted on charging him wholesale. And for Maria's son, Aldo would take a check without a call to the bank to confirm funds. Skinner made the proper noises at Aldo's largesse, sending the man away happy and proud of himself for doing his familial duty.

"You're thinking about what?" Mulder asked in disbelief.

"A charter school," Skinner said. "To teach kids to their own abilities, not just the state requirements."

"You've had too much vinegar and garlic these past two days," Mulder accused him. "Your brain is pickled."

"Actually, Mulder, I can name six kids off the top of my head that I know for a fact their parents would be more than happy to have them learning in a better environment," Emilia chimed in from the counter. "You charge the families on a sliding scale as to income. Anywhere from, say, \$50 a month per child to \$200 a month, \$2,400 a year per child at

\$200, get 4 more added for 10 kids that's about \$24,000 a year. That's only 10 kids. There are about 100 kids in this town. One teacher full-time or two part-time, for 10 kids, living in this town, that's a fortune for the teacher."

Mulder did the math himself and was reluctantly impressed.

Carlo looked at his son.

"You're the one always complaining about school, Pop," Marco reminded him. "You always tell me if I want a change to happen, I have to make it happen."

"Wise-guy, eh?" Carlo was clearly proud of his son, however.

There was something about Marco that Skinner couldn't quite put his finger on, and he was beginning to think that the attention that Carlo was giving he and Mulder went beyond simple curiosity. He'd wait and see if Carlo gave an opening.

Dom came in the backdoor, wiping his feet politely. Marco moved and offered his older cousin his seat. Skinner introduced Dom and Emilia.

"No holy wars," Mulder admonished them. "I declare this house and it's property to be neutral ground. You two can play Highlander out in the street."

"Well, there goes my entertainment for the day," Em drawled. "You sure are a party-pooper, honey."

"Highlander neutral ground is on religious ground, Mulder, not private property," Dom reminded him. Mulder thought about it.

"Oh. Then I declare this property.. uh.. Sacred Great Rite Grounds!" he said pompously. Emilia, Natti and Dom laughed, getting the joke. Looking at the boys, Mulder said to Skinner,

"You remember that chapter in the arcane magic book that I read to you?"

Skinner thought about it. He remembered a chapter on sex-magic that Mulder had insisted on reading to him by candlelight, after which Skinner was royally jumped.

"God, Fox," he groaned. "Don't you have to go back to work?" Mulder smiled wickedly at him. Skinner saw promises glinting at him.

"Like it's my fault that you reek of testosterone? If you weren't so hot, I wouldn't... uh.."
he looked at the little ears again. The boys were watching them closely. "Never mind."
Mulder gave up, he'd inform Skinner in detail about every steaming inch of him later when they were alone.

"Bye, dear," Mulder teased on his way out.

"You've known him for how many years? Why haven't you killed him?" Carlo asked Skinner.

"Because I'm a sucker for punishment."

"Well, now, there's an opening," Krycek said, walking into the room.

"I don't think so, Alex, vanilla suites me fine, thank you. Why don't you take the boys up and put them down for their nap?"

The twins cheered, thinking that was a wonderful suggestion.

"Alex, you wanna take a nap with us, too?" Ivan graciously invited him. "Can we have some vanilla ice cream after our nap?" Ivan asked from Krycek's back. Skinner was sure he was going to die of a stress induced heart-attack. He turned and spotted Marco staring after Krycek. The young man was flushed. Ahhhh, Skinner pieced it together. He winced inwardly, Alex Krycek was not a good subject to lust after. Not if someone wanted to stay in one piece, that is. Not that Skinner had any doubts that Alex would refuse his handsome young cousin, on the contrary; he was afraid that Alex would chew him up and spit him out.

"Uncle Walter? I think I'll take a nap, too," Adam said. That surprised Skinner, Adam hadn't needed a nap for months.

"Are you feeling alright?" Skinner asked, concerned. Adam nodded.

"Yes, I just didn't get much sleep." His face was slightly pinked. Skinner remembered that there was a certain young lady in the room with them during their sleep-over. No more boy-girl sleep-overs for Adam. He could remember having sleepless nights at 7 and 8 being torqued over a pretty girl. He hadn't been old enough yet to do anything about it, but he remembered feeling as though he should be doing something other than tossing and turning and composing bad poetry. Another two years or so. Something seemed to be in the air.

"Alright, go ahead, no more than an hour, or you won't be able to sleep tonight."

"Ok."

"Those are great kids, Walter," Dom commended him. "If I may, though, I'm a little concerned over that man, -Alex?"

Thank you, Dom, perfect opening, Skinner thought.

"I understand your concern, Dom, really I do, and at one time I would have shared it. The story of Alex could fill an entire library and I can tell you almost nothing of it. Let's just call Alex a national security secret. He is extremely dangerous and armed at all times. I can guarantee you that he's carrying at least one gun and one knife at this moment. The boys are safe, the world is not."

Dom nodded, disquieted. Skinner knew there would be more questions in private.

"That's what you meant downstairs yesterday. About this being the better way," Carlo said.

"Yes. Alex makes no pretense at being a father, so he brought them here to us. He even refuses to let them use any parental title for him. We can refer to him as their father if we have to. The boys are happy which makes Alex happy, and a happy Alex is a safer Alex."

"Sheriff!"

Skinner was showing his uncle and cousins around the town. The word spread that there was a visiting Priest in town, so Dom had been besieged several times by the few local Catholic families. Their town had been without a Priest for several years since the last one died of old age. Because the local parish was so small, the Church hadn't seen fit to send another one, so the Catholics had to take a long drive out of town whenever they wanted to attend Mass. Carlo and Marco were good-humored about it, teasing Dom for it being his own fault, all he had to do was remove the collar.

Stopping a speeding car full of teens and giving them a ticket and a warning was about the extent of Skinner's exciting day on the job, so far. Carlo informed Skinner that his job was too stressful, he should find something slower to do. Skinner was about to respond when he was hailed. He saw Johnson marching down the street and groaned, swearing under his breath. His head was already starting to kill him. The men looked at him curiously.

"Yes, Reverend? What can I do for you today?" he said politely.

"You can do something about those boys of yours!" Johnson ignored the other men.

"Could you specify? They spent the weekend with family, what could they have possibly done this time that offended you?"

"They told several children in my parish that some female dragon named Tea-a-mat was the Creator!" Johnson was brick red with indignation. It took Skinner a moment before the reference clicked.

"They are in the process of learning about Ancient Middle Eastern religions, Reverend. They're going in chronological order. Tiamat was Babylonian, they haven't gotten to

Judaism yet. Maybe in a few months; I think Egyptian is next. Although they have expressed some interest in the Baltic traditions, since they are of Russian..."

"WHAT?!"

Skinner was sure Johnson was about to faint from lack of oxygen.

"You.. Father," Johnson pointed at Dom, looking for divine intervention with their heathen sheriff. "You can't possibly approve of this!" he pointed at Skinner. Father Dominic took a moment to contemplate. He turned to his cousin.

"If they're playing in Mesopotamia at the moment, Fox may want to consider a brief foray into the Queen of Heaven stories, they've always been personal favorites of mine..."

"WHAT???!!!!"

The cry of a child drew their attention from the game. Ivan was dragging Pavel by the hand across the road from their yard, walking determinedly toward Skinner. Pavel was crying and bowlegged. Skinner walked out to meet them and picked Pavel up. He waved Natti away who came running to the front door.

"What's wrong?" he asked, smoothing Pavel's hair and back in comforting circles. Pavel continued to wail.

"Hu...hu... hurts!" he got out, burying his face on Skinner's shoulder.

"What hurts, son? Come on, I can't fix it if you don't tell me. Ivan?" They're hardly ever apart, Ivan should know what happened.

"He fell and hit his penis on a rock."

Pavel nodded against his shoulder. Skinner felt his own 'penis' twitch in sympathy. His arms felt weak by the time he got Pavel inside. Pavel wasn't that heavy. He needed to start working out again, that's all there was to it. He sent Becky for a glass of water.

"Alright, let's see." He set Pavel on a table. The men trailed along behind them. "Why didn't you tell Natti?" he asked Ivan.

"She's a girl!" he said, aghast.

"Oh, right." What could he have been thinking? Since when were they body-conscious? Trying to get them into clothes after a bath was a chore in itself. Pavel steadied himself with his hands on Skinner's shoulders, sniffing, but putting up a brave front because Uncle Walter would make it better. Skinner lowered Pavel's pants and looked at the

impact site. He could see that a bruise would darken on his inner thigh but there was no torn skin. A little red. He gently pressed around Pavel's groin.

"You tell me where it hurts, Pav."

Pavel nodded, his bottom lip sticking out in a pathetic pout. Skinner continued to circle inward and stopped when Pavel howled. Left testicle. Skinner could feel a swelling in the area starting. He gently pulled the pants back up and lifted Pavel again. He carried Pavel into the bathroom and set him down.

"Try and pee, we need to see if there's any blood. Here, blow." Skinner held a wad of tissue under the runny nose and wiped when Pavel cleared out his sinuses.

Pavel stood in front of the bowl and waited. A few drops trickled out. Pavel let loose and Skinner was relieved to see no discoloration.

"I think you're alright, let's take you home. I want you to lay down for a while with an ice bag on your groin. It'll help keep the swelling down."

Skinner could hear the TV from the family room when he entered the house, so he took Pavel downstairs. Natti would bring an ice bag down. He waved off her apologies, but how could he blame her when the boys got away from him all the time?

"What happened to him?" Krycek demanded. Skinner laid Pavel down on the couch and gently stripped his shoes and pants off.

"He fell and gave his testicles a good wack, calm down." Skinner took the bag from Natti and lowered it gently. Pavel screeched.

"IT'S COLD!"

"It has to be cold or it won't work." Little by little, he was able to condition Pavel into accepting the ice bag.

"Alright?" Skinner asked Pavel, smoothing his hair back. Pavel nodded. "I have to go back to work, so Alex will stay with you. See the clock? You can take the bag off in 15 minutes. When is that?"

Pavel looked at the clock on the wall.

"When the big hand is on the 5, 10, 15." He pointed at the numbers. Skinner kissed him and stood up, pulling a throw blanket over him.

"Hey, Pavel, want me to sing to you?" Marco asked, kneeling next to the couch. "I know a lot of songs, you can help me." That sounded like a good idea to Pavel. Marco went to get his guitar. He had a lot of little cousins and a demanding niece.

"No Puff no Puff no Puff no Puff...." Krycek intoned under his breath. After a quick consultation of the play list, the twins yelled,

"PUFF!!!"

Krycek cried out in pain and fell back onto a couch.

"This is your fault, Skinner!" Krycek accused him. "You just had to buy that 'Peter, Paul and Mommy' tape, didn't you?"

"Adam says you've sung it to them, too," Skinner informed him. "Dare I ask how you know the words?" Krycek opened his mouth to swear and Skinner stopped him. "Little ears." Instead, Krycek barked out something in Italian, causing Carlo and Dom to burst out laughing in admiration.

Skinner hadn't realized that there was a small entourage following him around with Pavel until he turned and saw the men still behind him. He jerked in surprise and motioned them back up the stairs. Johnson was upset again.

"Now what?" Skinner asked, hands on his hips. He was getting seriously annoyed with the man and the haze in front of his eyes wasn't helping matters.

"You handled that boy's genitals and kissed him on the mouth."

Skinner looked at his cousin and uncle. They shrugged.

"And?" Skinner finally asked when nothing else seemed forthcoming.

"And? Isn't that enough?" Skinner could see that Johnson was truly upset.

"How else am I supposed to check for damage if I don't touch him?"

"Take him to the doctor. Let a professional see to him."

Carlo muttered in Italian to Dominic.

"Let me get this straight," Skinner counted off on his fingers. His head was starting to boil. "I can't love the person I chose, I can't be allowed to raise children, I can't teach my children comparative religions, I can't touch them when they're hurt and I can't kiss them? If that about the gist of it? Please, tell me if I'm missing something." The tone would have sent even Mulder running for the first plane out of the country.

Johnson's eyes widened in alarm as Skinner slowly advanced toward him. He began to back up.

"I seem to recall that David loved Jonathan better than a woman and Jesus spent a hell of a lot of time cuddling with Peter. Yes, Reverend, I have read the Bible, several times in fact. It is far from an abstract subject for me.

"I will teach my children of the world, since this is the world they live in, and I will teach them to accept all faiths as valid until proven otherwise. I will touch every square inch of them in order to find one hair out of place. My children trust me to do so and I will not abuse that trust by turning them away when they come to me for help.

"And I will most certainly continue to kiss them unless they ask me not to, and I hope to God that they NEVER DO!" His shout rumbled off the walls and shook the glassware. Johnson paled under the power of the man that could send seasoned FBI agents running for cover. No one in town had seen Assistant Director Skinner commanding an office that contained a thousand testosterone poisoned men, only their easy-going Sheriff who let three boys and two men run all over him without making a fuss about it. Johnson has just met the AD on a very bad day.

"That's IT! Enough of this BULLSHIT! My patience with you is OVER! I have never in my LIFE met a more bigoted, ignorant person and I hope I never do AGAIN!!" Skinner quickly scribbled a phone number on a notepad and tore it off, thrusting it at Johnson. "HERE! That's the private home phone number of the Attorney General of The UNITED STATES!! Call her! Have a nice long CHAT with her! Tell her I said HI and I'm marrying my BOYFRIEND this SATURDAY and to BRING A POT-LUCK!!! GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!!!!!"

Skinner was literally seeing red by the time Johnson crawled out of the house. Marco hesitantly came in, having stayed out of firing range when the shouting started. There was shouting, and then there was shouting; he knew the difference. He stared wide-eyed as he carried his guitar past the men.

Skinner slowly became aware of Carlo and Dominic fussing gently over him. Carlo slowly lowered his hands onto Skinner's shoulders.

"Walter? It's alright now, you did what you had to do. He's gone." Carlo eased Skinner down to a chair while Dominic poured a glass of wine.

Skinner took a deep shuddering breath and accepted the glass with shaking hands. He took a gulp, feeling the warmth hit his stomach and start to ease the knots.

"I haven't lost my temper like that in years," he said conversationally, his voice slightly husky from the shouting. "In fact, I think it was one of Mulder and Scully's capers that set me off last time. Something about a flying cow destroying another laptop. As though I was expected to believe that one. Sentient cockroaches and dueling alien worms are one thing, flying cows are an entirely different matter." Absolutely, even he could tell the difference, it was obvious.

The DeLucas looked at each other. They decided against asking.

"Walter?" Dom seemed uncomfortable to mention it. "Do you know what you told him about this Saturday?"

Skinner thought about it.

"No. What'd I say?"

"That you were getting married this Saturday."

Skinner thought about it.

"Oh. Ok. Dom? I really don't want this to turn into a circus, I'm a quiet sort of person, you know?"

Dominic patted his knee.

Scully stormed into the house and cornered Skinner in his chair. Carlo, Marco and Dom paused in their dinner at the sight of the red-headed tornado.

"Hi, Aunt Dana!" the boys shouted in their excitement to see her.

"Hey, Scul," Mulder acknowledged her. Krycek ignored her.

"You were a choir-boy?!" she poked Skinner in the chest in disbelief.

"Fox!"

Mulder raised his hands in innocence.

"She dragged it out of me, Walter, you know how she gets."

Carlo snapped his fingers.

"I remember that!" Scully pounced. "Oh, he had a real pretty voice. Until the day it cracked. I think Father Anthony actually cried when he heard about it."

"Uncle Walter can sing Puff," Pavel informed them. "Almost as good as Marc, but Alex can't sing good. We like you to sing it to us, anyway, Alex," Pavel went on to quickly reassure Krycek.

"I don't sing!" Skinner and Krycek shouted at the same time.

"Broken record, Walter," Mulder said. Skinner stood up abruptly, shoving his chair back with a screech. He quickly left the house. After a moment of silence, Mulder excused himself.

"Eat, Scully," he invited her on his way out.

Skinner stormed down the street for several blocks until he came to the schoolyard. He took a deep breath of the cool night air and sat on a swing. In a moment, Mulder sat next to him.

"I'm sorry, Walter, we were only teasing," he said regretfully.

Skinner turned his face toward the dark sky and stared at the stars.

"I know, Fox." He kicked at the dirt under the swing. "My mother used to tell me that I was born screaming in A and that I was carrying notes before I could talk. Of course, I was put into the Church choir as soon as I was old enough. After I learned to read music, I was at Mass on Wednesday's, Friday's and Sunday's. Three times on Sunday. Voice lessons every day, choir practice four times a week for two to three hours a day. If anyone requested High Mass for some occasion, the choir was there, so of course I was, too. I wasn't allowed out to play much, my parents were afraid I'd catch a cold. I didn't touch a football until the day my voice cracked. I honestly think my father blamed me for puberty. My singing was one of the few things that he approved of. Only liturgical songs and classical, I didn't hear any Top 40 unless I was visiting in New York. And then I was the guest soprano at Church there. That was also the only time I was allowed outside to play with any regularity. My relatives ganged up on my father about that. I was so glad that my voice dropped as far as it did. Baritones are not as well received as tenors and sopranos.

"Yes, Fox, I can sing."

"You got burned out," Mulder summarized. Skinner nodded. Mulder touched his back. "It's alright, you don't have to sing a note. I won't tease you anymore about it."

Skinner felt his eyes over-flowing again at the touch and began to panic; he was unable to control his emotions. Mulder turned fully toward him, concern covering his face.

"Walter, what....?"

"I... I don't feel right, Fox, I don't feel like me anymore," he confessed. "I know I've been whining a lot lately, but I can't seem to help it." He choked back a sob as his world came crashing in. Mulder crouched in front of him.

"Tell me what you're feeling, describe it," he insisted. Skinner wiped at his face.

"Uh... on edge. As though I was about to shatter into millions of pieces. It's been getting worse all day. My emotions are jumping all over the board, I can't seem to get a hold of them."

"You're been whiny and moody for about a week now," Mulder observed. "Whatever it is, I think it's been building and this is the boiling point. Come on," he pulled Skinner to his feet. Mulder's bells were starting to ring.

He pushed Skinner in through the front door. Skinner let him, he had no more willpower of his own left. He barely registered the people in the livingroom as his mind grew muzzier by the second.

"Scully! You got your kit with you?" Mulder ignored the group waiting for them.

"Yeah, sure." She rushed out to her car.

"Everyone downstairs, except for Alex. Where are the boys?"

"Marco took them for a walk," Carlo said, watching Skinner with great concern.

"Alex, get them back here and send them downstairs. No one drinks or eats anything! Then start a search in the kitchen!"

Mulder herded Skinner up to their room, stripped him, and got him into bed just as Scully rushed into the room with her bag. Mulder gave her a rundown of Skinner's current state of mind. Scully flashed a pen-light in Skinner's eyes.

"His pupils are dilated," she announced. "I need a blood sample. I'll need lab tubes." She began a full physical.

Mulder picked up the phone.

"Kyle, Mulder. Go over to Doc Wilkins and get a blood kit from him, bring it back here. Just come in, bring it upstairs. Don't bring Wilkins, tell him Scully will call him later, she'll replace it. Yesterday, Kyle!"

Alex was back in five minutes.

"Everyone's secured," he announced.

"I think he's been poisoned," Scully said. "Alex..."

"I didn't do it!"

"Alex, I'm going to draw some blood. We'll start the search, I want you to rush it to the forensics lab, hand it to Danny only. Do you remember him? Good. Only him." She

picked up the phone and dialed and barked into it. "Danny! Get over to the lab and wait for a courier with lab tubes from me. I want a full tox screen run as soon as you get them. Only you, Danny, no one else touches this! It's for Skinner!"

Kyle ran into the room and thrust the blood kit at Scully. She immediately tied a rubber tube around Skinner's bicep, swabbed a vein, and filled the lab tubes with dark burgundy blood.

"Mulder, I want you and Kyle to start searching for any possible leads."

Skinner felt Mulder try and pull his hand away, and tightened his grip in objection. He felt as though he were drowning and Mulder was his anchor, so he clung to the only stable thing in his rapidly rotating world.

"Alex, get Dom up here," he heard Mulder say from far away. After an eternity, Skinner felt his hand being pried open. He whimpered a protest but his hand was quickly taken again. He clung hard. It wasn't Mulder's hand, but it was strong and sure. Scully thrust the tubes at Krycek and he was off in a flash.

"Listen, Father," Scully warned him. "If he says anything while we are gone, you repeat it word for word to me, Mulder and Krycek ONLY! You consider anything you hear within the presence of the four of us to be of national security and bound by confessional rules, got it? If we need to speak openly, we may not have time to play word games just to keep you in the dark. You break your word, and we will all deny whatever you say." And God help him if Alex finds out. "That goes for you, too, Kyle."

"Yes, Ma'am," Kyle responded immediately.

Skinner tried listening to them, but it was like trying to listen underwater. He faded out briefly only to find that someone was stoking a finger over the top of his head and whispering to him. Only one person was allowed to stroke his head.

"Come on, Walter, wake up," Mulder gently encouraged him. Skinner was confused, he thought Mulder and Scully were leaving. His brief rest seemed to help a little, his mind wasn't as mushy as it was.

"Fo.." he croaked.

"Yes, not exactly bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, but it's Fox. Can you sit up a little for some water? It's been about 15 hours since you last had some."

What? "Fif..."

"You slept for about fifteen hours. Come on.." Mulder helped him sit up a little and pushed a pillow behind him to prop him up. Skinner's head spun.

"Here." Mulder held a glass to his mouth and he took a sip. The cool liquid seemed to soak right into his cheeks and tongue.

"Wh..." he cleared his throat. "What happened?"

"You were poisoned. Someone spiked the water cooler in your office. The little one on your desk. You had an allergic reaction to Paxil."

Skinner had to think hard, but his mind was clearer.

"Isn't that an antidepressant?"

Mulder snorted, "Yeah, I guess someone thought you were depressed and was trying to help. We had to practically restrain Alex from dragging everyone in town out of bed and questioning them. He's allowed to torture you, no one else. Can you think of anyone who had access to your water?"

Skinner tried. He shook his head.

"I can't think that hard right now," he said. Mulder patted him.

"It's alright, I'm pushing too soon. Here, Natti heated up some soup, try a little and then go back to sleep. Scully says the best thing to do, is to just let it clear your system." He managed a few sips of the broth before refusing anymore. Mulder took the extra pillow away, and Skinner laid down, falling asleep instantly.

The next time he awoke, it was to find Zia Ginny knitting quietly in the chair.

"Zia?" he croaked. His head felt better, clearer, he was able to think again. When did she get there, how long could he have been asleep? She looked up and beamed her pleasure.

"Sleepy-head," she accused. She got up and brought him a glass of water. "Anything to get out of making Fox an honest man, eh?" She sat on the edge of the bed and stroked his cheek.

"We've all been very worried about you. That little fire-ball boss of Fox's was already to send for an ambulance for you."

Skinner could see it; they had no idea how stubborn Scully could get.

"He lets you call him Fox?" That was something new. Zia Ginny waved her hand.

"He say Zia's can call him Fox and priests can call him anything they damned well please for the sake of public relations in the after-life," she told him dryly. Skinner gave a weak

chuckle, picturing Mulder debating with Saint Peter at the Gates as to whether or not God is allowed to call him Fox. Skinner felt that Mulder would win.

Zia Ginny leaned over him a little.

"That little dottorre of yours, she very pretty. Why you not with her, eh?"

"She scares me." Not that the thought of Scully hadn't crossed his mind a time or two...or three..

She burst into laughter again and slapped her knee. She pinched his cheek affectionately. The sound of her laughter brought a stampede of little running feet. The boys stopped short in the doorway.

"Well, come on," Skinner said, patting the bed. Pavel and Ivan ran and jumped up, cuddling on either side of him, burrowing into his chest. He could feel them shaking, he had scared them. Their warmth and weight felt good against him. He held them close, murmuring soothing nonsense as he rubbed their backs. Adam ran down the stairs yelling for his father. A moment later, Mulder ran into the room. He stopped to take stock. Adam ran and jumped up onto the bed, curling up against Pavel's back and reaching around the boy to rest his arm against Skinner's stomach. Skinner included him in the reassuring caresses.

Mulder came in and looked down at him, blanketed by little boys. "I'm fine, Fox," Skinner assured him.

"Don't you ever do that to me again," Mulder ordered him in a trembling voice. Skinner took his hand.

The sky was cloudless and blue, the sun shone brightly. Insects droned pleasantly and the horses munched sweet-smelling alfalfa as they watched the humans curiously over the paddock gate. They had decided to take their hand-fasting ceremony out to Emilia's Summerland Ranch for the sake of privacy. Dominic had obeyed Skinner's request and kept the party small.

In a circle around the men, Margaret Scully stood with Zia Ginny and Natti next to the Gunmen and Kyle. Langly had a video camera attached to his eye. His t-shirt had a print of a tuxedo on the front. Skinner had to look twice at Frohike who had on a prom tux. At least he tried. Byers was his usual dapper self. Kyle wore a western style shirt with a thin corded bolo tie. Skinner couldn't picture Scully dating anyone that was so 'country'. The women were beautiful in their dresses as was Scully, who stood at Mulder's right in a pale peach sun-dress. Krycek stood at Mulder's left, standing tall and straight in a red Russian folk wedding tunic with wheat colored medieval leggings and black riding boots. His little shadows wore identical tunics along with an emerald dangling from an ear band,

much to the delight of the twins. Skinner could find no problem with that since there were no actual holes placed in their earlobes. Krycek had spent the morning with a jeweler's eye-piece attached to his eye as he instructed the boys on how to tell a fake emerald from a real one.

At Skinner's right was Carlo in his Sunday best, a navy blue three piece suit and tie. At his left was Dominic, also in a suit, but with a black tie instead of his collar.

Pavel stood by Scully and Ivan stood by Dominic, both boys carrying small silk pillows upon which a ring sat in the center. Adam stood between the boys, opposite Emilia who was wearing a white robe with a large lapis necklace. Adam was carrying a length of a white silk sash. Adam's suit was of white Egyptian linen, identical to Mulder and Skinner's. Krycek had left that little surprise up his sleeve until the last minute. Marco sat on a stool behind Emilia, softly playing his guitar in a light classical style. He had opted for the medieval troubadour look, completely unaware of Krycek's choice of wedding attire. A brood of barn cats sat on the over-hang above Marco, watching the proceedings curiously, with smirks of self-satisfaction.

Skinner and Mulder wore their new suits. Mulder had been right; the white made Skinner's olive skin glow. They stood facing each other in the center of the circle.

"Love is the Law," Emilia said. "It is so hard to find love in this world of hate and strife, that when two people do manage it, we should encourage them, nurture them, and welcome them with open arms."

She gave a light airy chuckle. "We use the term 'through hell and high waters' very lightly, without thinking about the meaning of the words, but Walter and Fox have literally been 'through hell and high waters'. Most of us would have folded under such pressure and been torn apart, but they have grown stronger and closer for it. After twelve years, they have something to say to each other today. You are their witnesses to their oaths, you are charged with the duty to speak honestly of what you witness here today should you be questioned as to the authenticity of their union." She nodded at the men.

"I'm still not sure what I want to say," Mulder began. Uncharacteristically, he was nervous. "I thought about it for a long time. I tried writing poems but they didn't say what I wanted to express. I know I can't sing or dance, so I didn't even attempt it." Those who had ever been subject to his crooning, chuckled with thanks at his consideration. "All I can say is that I'm thankful for the day I met you. Not an auspicious occasion in itself, but one look at your eyes and one note of your voice and I was hooked. I think I deliberately made more of a nuisance of myself than I would normally have just because I knew that sooner or later I'd be called up to your office and I could see you again.

"I promise you with all of my heart, my body and my soul that I will honor you and love you, support you and stand at your side for as long as you will have me. Will you accept my oath?"

Mulder took the ring from Pavel's pillow and held it up. Skinner took it, his fingers surprisingly steady.

"I will," he said, and slid the ring onto Mulder's finger. He kept hold of Mulder's hands and looked down at them as he gathered his thoughts.

"I've tried also to find a way to express what I wanted to say. Men aren't taught in our society to express their feelings verbally, especially to another man, so I've been working pretty hard at it.

"I know that I love you. You are my Truth, my guiding light. Yes, we have been through some rough times, but I always knew you'd be the one to stand by me in the end. You believed in me even when I couldn't believe in myself. If I talked for the rest of my life, I would never be able to find all the words to express what your support in me has meant to me.

"I can promise you my love, support, and trust. I will stand with honor by your side for the world to see. Will you accept my oath?"

He took the ring from Ivan's pillow and held it up. Mulder took it.

"I will." He slid the ring onto Skinner's finger.

Emilia took the sash from Adam. She joined Skinner and Mulder's left hands and wrapped the sash around them, not actually knotting it but simply wrapping it over their joined hands, around their wrists and forearms, wrapping until only the ends were left, which she draped over their hands. Scully and Krycek took Mulder's wrist, Carlo and Dom took Skinner's. At a count of three from Emilia, they pulled, once, twice, three times. The men remained joined.

"Witnessed, heard and now blessed! Walter and Fox are One!" Emilia declared. The men kissed amidst the cheers of their family and friends. They came up for air and Mulder pulled a step back. Skinner stopped him.

"We're not done, Fox," he said in his usual quiet voice. People quieted at the unexpected change in plans. Skinner pulled Mulder back to him.

"Langly, turn that thing off," Skinner ordered the man. The video camera was shut off.

"Marco?" he nodded at his young cousin. The day before, Marco had shared with Skinner a new song that he had written, having found inspiration while visiting their town. Skinner was moved by the song, even more so that Marco had offered it to him as a gift in the manner of a true bard. With Marco's permission, Skinner knew of only one place for its debut. He sang it to Mulder, breaking his 35 year musical silence for just this one time.

They drove back to their home for dinner. Skinner stopped the car at the corner. Their street was blocked off in front of their house. He turned to look at Mulder who said innocently,

"But, honey, you said you wanted a small ceremony, you said nothing about the reception!"

Chapter 11: The Big Bad Wolf and Three Little Piglets

Note: The Star Wars characters and ship belong to Mr. Lucas, not Mr. Carter.

"Excuse me?"

Skinner frowned at him.

"There's no choice, Alex. Scully is busy, we need to leave and Natti isn't well. You're the only one left; you have to watch the boys." Skinner could see Krycek begin to panic and did his best not to let the man see his glee. "I don't understand what the problem is, you took care of them before you brought them to us."

"That was only a couple of days, not two weeks!" Krycek began to hyperventilate. Skinner barked a laugh.

"Alex, Natti only has a cold, she'll be fine in a few days."

"What if it turns into pneumonia? She could die!"

"It takes months for that process to happen. Get a grip, Krycek. Is the big bad Alex Krycek afraid of three little boys?" Skinner taunted him. Krycek got a grip and glared at Skinner. Mulder hauled his suitcase down the stairs and set it by the door.

"You two knock it off," he ordered them. "It smells like a jock room in here. Alex, it's only a two week cruise, you'll be fine. You've got Natti here, and Scully is only a phone call away."

As a surprise hand-fasting gift, the Gunmen gave Skinner and Mulder a two week cruise on a same-gender couples only trip. The day before they were due to leave, Skinner had a little talk with Natti and Mulder had a chat with Scully. Suddenly, Natti had a bad cold and confined herself to bed, and Scully was up to her ears in new recruits and a stack of cases that required her attention. The men sat back and watched Alex freak out. He high-tailed it out of the house, heading for Emilia's, where he had been spending an inordinate

amount of time. Skinner called Em and half an hour later, Krycek was stalking back through the door muttering about women and their hormones ruining his life. The men then informed the boys that Alex would be watching them. They cheered and rushed Krycek, knocking him down in their excitement. Pavel planted himself on Krycek's chest and informed Alex of their plans for the coming two weeks, which included at least one rousing round of 'Puff', a reading from 'Charlotte's Web' at bedtime and one showing of 'Free Willie'. Krycek glared daggers at the men from his prone position.

Early the next morning, Skinner and Mulder put their suitcases in the car, kissed the boys goodbye and handed Krycek The Manual. After the men left, Krycek tossed The Manual behind the couch.

Immediately upon boarding, they checked in with security to inform them of their presence and of the guns they carried. As law enforcement officials, they were required to be armed at all times. The ship was gaily decorated, no pun intended, with colorful streamers and balloons. People stood at the railing, waving to family and friends. Skinner commented to Mulder that he felt like he was a wild rerun of The Love Boat. He jumped and turned quickly but was unable to find who had just tweaked his ass. It couldn't have been Mulder, his hands were full.

"I'm so glad you could make it," the man said, waving a wrist. They finally found their way to Security. "The Captain would like you to join him at his table for dinner tonight. Dinners are formal, so I hope you brought the appropriate attire. Maybe a nice soft cream leisure suit in..." he walked around Skinner, inspecting the package.

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Elliot!" a woman said irritably as she entered the room. She extended her hand toward Skinner and Mulder. "Chief of Security, Tanya Tucker –no commentary," she warned them.

Skinner wouldn't dream of it.

"No, Ma'am," they promised.

"I'll show you to your quarters. Elliot! Secure... I don't know –the galley."

Elliot rolled his eyes, clicked his teeth, gave a half-hearted salute, and flounced out.

"You'll have to excuse Elliot," Tucker said as she led them down the hall. "It's his first voyage out. Drama queens," she sighed.

"You raang?" a man wearing a feather boa and little else draped himself across a doorway. Tucker jumped, her hand to her chest.

"Christ, Malcolm! If you don't knock it off, I'll toss you overboard! And put some clothes on outside your quarters!" she ordered him. "Some of us are not interested in anything you have to offer."

Malcolm tossed his nose in the air and went back into his room.

"Sorry," she said. "Malcolm is a regular. He gets a little carried away."

Skinner leaned over toward Mulder.

"Remind me to kill those friends of yours."

"Stand in line."

They stopped in front of the cabin with their room number on the door.

"Now, guys, don't let Malcolm scare you off," Tucker insisted. The door across the hall opened and two men stepped out. They stopped, hearing the name.

"Tucker, you didn't!" one man said in horror. "Tell me Malcolm isn't on this deck much less this hall!"

"Do I look like the purser to you? I didn't book his room," she frowned at them. Tucker turned back to Skinner and Mulder. "Dinner is at 8 sharp, main dining room." The men thanked her politely and saw that they still had an audience.

"First time?" the first man asked.

"Excuse me?" Skinner asked.

"Cruise. Is this your first cruise? You're both looking a little shell-shocked. Having met Malcolm, I can understand that. Listen, don't let queens like Malcolm worry you. He's the exception, not the rule. He likes attention, don't give it to him and he'll go away. I'm Ed, this is Jerry. We're regulars, so just give a yell if you need anything."

Mulder introduced them with a warning look at Skinner; he was giving his constipated look.

"I'm Fox, this is Walter."

"Fox?! No one can make up a name like that and say it with a straight face; it must really be yours," Ed laughed easily and shook their hands.

"You guys hurry and get settled; you'll miss the party!" Jerry warned them as he and Ed turned to leave. Skinner shut the door and let out a sigh of relief.

"Fox...."

"Come on, Walter, first appearances. Ed and Jerry seem nice, and I like Tucker, she reminds me of Scully." Mulder reached behind Skinner and locked the door.

"What say we skip the party?" Mulder suggested, lifting Skinner's shirt. Skinner could find no argument with that idea.

Krycek walked into the livingroom to find sheets and blankets tented in a semi-circular pattern in the middle of the room.

"What....?"

"Stand and be recnized!" Pavel demanded, jumping out at him, holding a wooden spoon in gun position.

"Pavel, what are you...?" Krycek gestured toward the tent and got his hand rapped smartly with the spoon. "Hey!" he drew his hand back in disbelief.

"No sudden moves, worm! Han! Chewie! I caught a Storm Trooper!"

Adam and Ivan emerged from the tent.

"That's my jacket!" Krycek cried out, seeing the familiar leather jacket hanging off Adam. Krycek took a closer look at Ivan who had suddenly sprouted a furry face.

"What the...?" the fur had a color he knew. He looked around and spotted the cats on the top of the bookshelf, far out of the reach of little boys. One of them had been shaved. "You didn't!" Krycek drew a breath in shock. There was no way he could hide that from the guys.

"Ooof!" He fell, knocked to his knees from behind. Before he could regain his balance, he discovered that he had been hog-tied. Since he was the one who taught them how to tie knots, he could only blame himself. He felt a touch of pride, however. Ah, his boys! Adam paced in front of him, almost tripping himself on the jacket which hung to his knees.

"Now, Imperial scum, what have you done with Princess Leia? We demand her return!" Adam/Han crouched and shook a finger in Krycek's face. Ivan/Chewie growled and kicked him in the foot. Krycek almost laughed at the cat hair sticking all over Ivan's face. Oh, well, he had nothing better to do...

"You're too late, Vader has her!" he snarled at them. All three boys pounced, pummeling him. Damn, those small fists smarted!

"Wait!" Pavel/Luke poked his head up from the melee. "Ben?" He cocked his head in an exaggerated listening pose. The other two paused. "Come on! Ben says she's in the Itchy-Wachoo system!" The boys jumped up and dove into their tent, presumably the Millennium Falcon. Sounds that Krycek assumed were supposed to simulate space travel emerged. Then there was a sudden silence and the boys jumped out again. They pretended to be surprised to find Krycek still on the floor, bound up with rope.

"Leia!" they cried out. "We found you!" They cheered, Ivan howled like a wolf. They pounced again, this time covering 'Leia' with kisses. Krycek sputtered.

Natti opened her door to see what the commotion was about. The boys paused.

"It's Vader! Get him!" Pavel yelled. Natti's eyes opened wide in alarm and she quickly locked the door.

"You think Alex is ready to surrender yet?" Mulder asked. Skinner took Mulder's arms and pinned them above his head.

"Who cares?" he said, and dove for a nipple.

It was too quiet.

Krycek lifted his head from the newspaper and looked around.

"YEAHHHHH!!!!" came a scream from behind him. Krycek was suddenly knocked out of his chair and tackled by three bodies dressed in Halloween costumes. He found himself being choked, stomach butted, his arms twisted behind his back and jumped on.

Someone yelled, "Ding ding ding!" and all three jumped back off.

"And the winner is –The Terrible Trio! For the mmmmbbblll year in a row!!!" Adam yelled into an empty cardboard tube from the paper towel holder. The three did a victory dance, arms high in the air and high-fived each other. They ran off, capes flying behind them.

Krycek rolled on the floor, trying to catch his breath.

"What the HELL was that??!" he yelled in disbelief at the empty room. Maybe he shouldn't have let them watch wrestling on TV. When he could breathe again, he decided to take his newspaper out onto the porch, at least he'd be able to hear the door opening.

An hour later, he discovered that he was getting hungry. Since the kitchen was stocked with leftover Italian goodies, that was probably a good place to start picking through. He walked into a disaster area. There were six plates in the sink, five spoons, seven forks, eight knives including one butcher knife, a cheese grater, milk on the floor and counter, peanut butter and jelly dripping off the cupboards, and three milk stained glasses sitting next to the kitten's bowls. Everything was coated with the peanut butter and jelly.

"BOYS!" he bellowed, lifting his head toward the ceiling where he discovered more PB&J. Now how the hell did they...?

"Yes, Alex?" they gathered around the entrance to the kitchen looking innocent, however their t-shirts and faces spoke the tale for them.

Krycek couldn't speak but gestured at the kitchen.

"We were hungry so we made samitches," Pavel informed him. Krycek took a deep breath and reminded himself that they were children.

"Next time you want something, ask me first, alright?" he finally said with forced patience. The boys nodded agreeably. He sent them away, knowing that the kitchen had better be cleaned before Natti saw it. Oh, God, -Natti!

He went to her door and softly knocked.

"Natti? How you doing?" he called out. He entered at her request. She was buried in her covers up to her chin, holding a tissue to her reddened nose. "Can I get you anything? Soup?" he asked solicitously. He was disappointed that she obviously wasn't ready to resume her duties.

"Do tak you, meely, buh maybe some joose?" she asked nasally. She sneezed and blew her nose loudly.

"Sure, orange, apple?"

She waved a hand weakly. "Whah eber."

Krycek went and fetched her a glass of orange juice, trying to avoid the sticky mess. He would swear he smelled apple pie in her room.

Skinner was in the midst of a culture shock. Never in his life had he seen such a variety of people. Most couples were dressed casually preppy, pretentious yachters, but a few of the fringe element he had to stop himself from staring at. Some were cross-dressed to the point that he couldn't tell what gender they actually were. Which was the point, he supposed. Most of the men seemed to favor thong bikinis whether or not they had the

body to bring the look off; most did not. He did, however, decide that he was afraid of the women. Some looked stronger than him.

"Fox," he whispered. "If I even begin to contemplate buying a pair of loafers, shoot me."

"Actually, I was picturing you in one of those thongs."

"I don't think so. Just the thought makes my butt itch."

Mulder reached behind him and gave the itchy butt a rub. "You're just spoiled because you can sunbathe nude in the back yard," he accused Skinner, squeezing a tight cheek.

"Is that a complaint?" Skinner couldn't see the glint behind the dark glasses, but he knew it was there.

"Yes. You won't let me take pictures."

Skinner whispered an invitation for a close-up look at a certain part of his anatomy. Mulder grabbed his hand and dragged him back to their cabin.

The toilet flushed and Krycek heard cries of "good-bye!". He bolted out of his chair and raced upstairs. He skidded to a stop outside the bathroom and opened the door. The twins stood around the toilet watching the water.

"What are you doing?" he asked in a panic.

"We set the fishies free!" Pavel announced firmly. Ivan nodded in agreement, proud of their act of liberation.

"You did what?" Krycek swore he was going to burn that damned 'Free Willie' tape.

Pavel pointed at the bowl.

"We sent them back to the ocean. Uncle Fox was talking about the crap in the oceans, so we sent the fishies to swim with the other fishies. They were lonely."

That sounded reasonable to Ivan.

Krycek slid to the floor and banged his head against the wall.

"What's wrong, Alex?" Ivan asked in concern, crouching down in front of him. Krycek was sure that the entire morning was worse than playing 'Cat and Mouse' with the Consortium.

"Uncle Fox was talking about pollution, not that kind of crap," he pointed at the toilet. "Do you remember what Uncle Walter told you about the big truck and the hole in the back yard that you are never to play around?"

Two minutes later, the twins were in tears and Krycek was promising to take them into town for more fish. He put clean clothes and shoes on them, washed the PB&J off their faces, hands and arms, and went to round up Adam -who was in the front yard with a shovel, digging neatly spaced holes between rows of rope.

Once more, Krycek had to ask,

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for dinosaur bones," Adam said. The twins were impressed; with all the holes, Adam must be doing a really good job of looking.

Unable to speak, Krycek motioned for him to drop the shovel and get into the car. He was going to trash the 'Jurassic Park' tape, also.

Mulder looked at his cell phone.

"No, Fox."

"I just get this feeling that I should call," he said worriedly. Skinner took a bite out of his apple and leaned back in his chair, looking over the railing at the water.

"If there's an emergency, Natti will call. He needs the full experience and he won't get it if you call him."

Mulder nodded and took the apple.

"Hey, guys," a friendly voice hailed them. Ed waved and strolled over. "You two look spooked in this crowd," he said, jerking a thumb at the sun-worshippers. "If you're interested in something a little less 'Mary', a bunch of us are going to the Lido deck for some good old fashioned poker and beer. You're welcome to join us, no big stakes, just penny-antes."

The men agreed and soon found themselves in a mixed group of men and women gathered around poker tables. Skinner began to relax; no one was flouncing or trying to feel him up. Except Mulder. And none of the women were trying to out-testosterone the men. Skinner had thought himself open-minded until he came on board this ship. He would apologize to no one for feeling the need to tell the men from the women. He was created as-is and he felt no need to dress himself in feathers and lace or to paint his nails and wear make-up. He resisted the urge to grunt and beat his chest with his fists.

They grabbed beers, traded cash for rolls of pennies, and sat down for the opening hand. Ed sat next to Jerry and introduced their table mates; Richard, Keith, Clair and Stacy.

"It's about time you two took a breather," Jerry teased.

"You try getting private time with 3 boys under 10," Mulder informed him. Everyone winced in sympathy.

"Ouch!" Richard said with a laugh, shaking his head. He cut the deck and dealt the cards. "I understand. I have girls, 13 and 10. You think you have a problem now, wait until puberty hits."

Between bets, they were off and running with the domestic crisis of the week. Skinner found it to be a strange sort of Parents Anonymous meeting. He didn't realize that so many gay couples had children. Most of the kids were adopted, but they all had the same fears and concerns that parents did world-wide. Pictures were eventually passed around the room, with a lot of commentary on the twins' unusual coloring. The women groaned, declaring it unfair that boys should have such thick dark lashes.

"How can you tell them apart?" Stacy asked, looking at Pavel and Ivan.

Skinner adjusted the cards in his hand. "Pavel's eyes are a little wider apart, his nose more pointed. Ivan's lips are fuller, his jaw a little deeper set," he responded absently as he studied his hand. He realized what he said and dropped his cards in shock. Mulder was staring at him.

"Oh, my God, Fox! I can tell them apart!" His shock was so heart-felt that he didn't even mind the kiss Mulder planted on him amidst congratulations from their amused fellow card-sharks. Skinner took out his wallet and looked at his own picture of the twins. He could clearly see the differences in them. It was as though his eyes were suddenly opened.

"You know that this is going to disappoint them," Mulder warned him. After a moment, Skinner chuckled and agreed.

"Why?" Jerry asked.

"They won't be able to change identities on us anymore," Skinner told them. Michael raised his glass in salute from the next table; his twin boys were fifteen going on thirty-five.

Pavel and Ivan had begun throwing temper tantrums. Krycek was ready to throw one of his own and take a hand to their butts. He had gotten their stupid goldfish, Happy Meals and plastic light sabers, what more did they want??

"What?!" he yelled in exasperation when Ivan whined and slumped in his seat. They were such fun to be with earlier in the morning, and usually when he was visiting.

"Uncle Alex."

Krycek glared at Adam.

"It's after 4," Adam said. The information meant nothing to Krycek.

"And?!" Krycek spread his hands out, waiting for clarity.

"Their nap was supposed to be at 1."

Fortunately, they were just entering the driveway. The twins slid out of the car and onto the grass, refusing to get up.

"God dammit!" He had finally had it.

"Whoa!" Kyle jogged over from the station, seeing the commotion. As an experienced father, he could see what the boys' problem was. He held out a calming hand toward Krycek. "Just take a deep breath, buddy. They're tired, that's all, they're not doing this to deliberately annoy you."

"If they're tired, why didn't they say so!" Krycek yelled.

"They're babies," Kyle said calmly. "They don't know how to deal with their emotions yet. It's part of a parent's job to teach them that, and swearing and yelling isn't going to do it. They may be brilliant intellectually, but emotionally, they're still only 5. This is normal behavior for tired little boys. Just put them to bed for about an hour, wake them up gently, give them dinner, wear them out with play time until about 9, start to quiet them down with a bath, PJ's and a story, bed by 10. They'll sleep the rest of the night."

Krycek took a deep breath and paced the driveway.

"Come on," Kyle said. He bent and picked up Ivan, gently cradling the boy against his shoulder. Ivan was limp and hot as he sobbed quietly. Krycek picked up Pavel, following Kyle's lead.

They tucked the twins into bed and turned the light off. Krycek scrubbed his face and let out a gusty breath. He couldn't believe how close he came to beating the shit out of them!

"It hasn't even been 24 hours," he said. "Skinner's been doing this for a year 24/7?"

Kyle risked a pat on a shoulder as they walked back downstairs.

"He had to learn, too," he said. "You just weren't here, usually, to see the process. He's also a little more patient."

"Yeah, St. Walter," Krycek snorted. He collapsed on the couch.

"Where's that Manual of his?" Kyle asked. Krycek thought for a moment and then reached behind the couch.

"First, go downstairs and hug Adam. Let him know that you're just tired, too, and that everything's alright. If he hasn't done any learning today, ask him to do something. Too much TV isn't good for him."

When Krycek returned, Kyle sat him down and opened the Manual.

"This isn't notes on taking away their civil liberties," Kyle said, poking the pages with a finger. "It's the culmination of trial and error in raising them on a day to day basis. Look at this, 'Keep them away from the flour'. That isn't to take fun away from them. First of all, they could inhale the stuff and choke themselves to death. Secondly, flour is actually combustible. A room full of flying flour, one spark from a weak outlet or electrical cord, and the entire place is blown to bits. Besides it being a bitch to clean up." Starting on page 1, he began to explain each entry and why it was important. It took the better part of the evening, breaking only to wake up the boys, who were completely different people than an hour earlier. Left-overs were heated for dinner, and at Kyle's hint, the boys were encouraged to get their books out for some learning time. They were then allowed to play in the back yard until bedtime. Natti came out once, shuffling in her robe and slippers. She kissed Krycek on the cheek and went back to her room. Krycek stared after her suspiciously.

Just before bath time, Kyle showed Krycek the self-help section of the book shelf. Krycek had always avoided that section.

"This doctor has excellent child-rearing advice and Walter has several of his videos geared toward twins and special ed children. Make use of them. And please, don't hesitate to ask someone for help when you start feeling over-whelmed and angry. Call someone. My number is in the book, you know Dana's, and Natti is here. You're not alone. Parenting is not instinctive, Krycek, it's a learned behavior. A lot of parents haven't learned very well, but it doesn't have to remain that way." Kyle bent down to whisper to the twins just before he showed himself out.

The boys had been subdued since waking up from their late nap. Krycek was beginning to feel guilty for causing their unhappiness; their hero had proven to have feet of clay. As Kyle left, the boys put down their pencils and went over to Krycek who was slumped on the couch. They huddled next to him on either side and rested their heads against his

chest. He put his arms around them and silently vowed not to become his father –either of his fathers.

"It's alright, Alex, being aware of it is the halfway home part," Mulder said into his cell phone. Skinner went back to his book, letting Mulder deal with Krycek's current crisis. Whatever it was, it sounded serious. Mulder had stretched out on the bed beside him, turned away to listen, making non-committal noises once in a while. Skinner looked at the clock, Krycek spoke for almost half an hour before Mulder began to give some input.

"Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Just spend time with them tomorrow. Be honest with them, tell them how you feel and why, they'll be fine. How's Adam? Yeah, sure." Mulder waited. "Hey. We sat on the deck and looked at the water, we walked around and met people, we had a really good lobster for dinner. How was your day? Alex said he got a little upset." He listened for a while.

"Will you do me a really big favor?" he asked. "Help Uncle Alex. He doesn't know how to watch kids for a long time, so just remind him if he forgets something, will you do that for us? Thank you. Hmmm? In the front yard? Did you find any? That's too bad. Fill in all the holes really good in the morning, please. Someone could fall and hurt themselves, break a bone. Thank you. Love you. Hug Uncle Alex, he sounds like he needs it. Good night." Mulder turned the phone off and tried to smother himself under a pillow.

"Is everyone still alive?" Skinner asked. What holes in the yard, he wanted to ask.

"Just barely," Mulder said, his voice muffled. "Alex came within a hair of beating the crap out of the twins. He forgot their nap." Mulder took the pillow away and told him the story.

Skinner put his book down and turned to face Mulder. "Remember, Fox, we can't protect them from everything. They're fine, just a little more wary and aware of how their behavior affects other people. They adore Alex, God knows why. They'll be back to normal in the morning."

Mulder nodded, still troubled. Skinner shut the light off and pulled the sheet over them.

"Make love to me?" Mulder asked.

Skinner understood; Mulder needed the closeness, to feel fully loved, not just sex-play. It had taken Skinner a while to understand the true meaning of the simply spoken request. Usually, Mulder burned up the sheets with him and Skinner had no complaints; Mulder was a very active and imaginative lover, very generous with his attentions. Skinner didn't mind that Mulder was almost always the initiator of their time together. That had become a habit due to Mulder coming home exhausted after running down bad-guys all day, so Skinner began to let Mulder set the pace. Mulder wasn't selfish about it, either, Skinner

got plenty of workout. His nipples had become highly sensitized since taking his shirt off was dangerous due to Mulder-attacks, to say nothing of his ass. Sharon had liked to play with a finger there once in a while, but since he'd started having sex with Mulder, he had become highly sensitized there, too. Mulder's excuse was that he liked to watch Skinner orgasm. It pleased Skinner that Mulder found him attractive and was turned on by him. He stood taller in Mulder's light. He was only 6 foot, same height as Mulder, but for some reason people thought he towered. Krycek was actually an inch taller, but he seemed shorter because he was so compact.

He had never known Bill Mulder, but from what little Mulder had said, the man wasn't exactly a hands-on father. Mulder had grown up desperate for love and affection, pushing himself to bend over backwards for his parents attention. The incident with Krycek tonight and the twins, brought out that insecure little boy in need of affection. Skinner would rather spend half the night touching and tasting every inch of Mulder's body, than having him running all over the country chasing shadows and rumors. Besides, Skinner enjoyed the tasting tour of Fox country. The point of their 'make love to me' sessions wasn't a mind-blowing orgasm, an erection wasn't even necessary; their time together was to bring them closer together emotionally, to reassure themselves of each other's continued presence.

So, Skinner held him close, kissing him, stroking him, murmuring his pleasure in words that only lovers use in the privacy of their bed. Mulder took Skinner's hand and restlessly pushed it lower. Skinner stroked him firmly, gently and whispered to him, kissing him, caressing the inside of Mulder's mouth with his tongue in easy flickering strokes, until Mulder came with a soft sigh.

"More?" Skinner asked. Mulder shook his head. Skinner cleaned him up with a tissue before enfolding Mulder in his arms and going to sleep.

The boys woke up and Krycek rushed for the Manual. He refused to have another day like the day before. They shuffled into the kitchen, hair tousled, faces puffy from sleep. They stopped, seeing him at the table. He motioned them over and self-consciously gathered them close.

"I'm sorry," he whispered as he buried his face in their necks and hair. Why did his throat hurt? They put their arms around him, forgiving him.

After an uneventful, carefully planned week, Krycek had begun to relax when he had three more surprises. The first one wasn't so bad, just Carlo and Marc arriving unexpectedly. Carlo had some business in the area and Marc came along to keep him company. Krycek shrugged and offered them use of the sofa-beds.

Then, while the men went in to make themselves comfortable, another car pulled up to the curb. Krycek stiffened, smelling 'government' all over it. A fussy middle-aged woman stepped out carrying a briefcase.

"Alex, where..." Carlo began, stepping back out onto the porch. Krycek held up a commanding hand to stop him.

"Mr. Skinner? Mr. Mulder?" the woman asked, walking up to the porch. Her no-nonsense approach and no-nonsense suit demanded a no-nonsense answer.

"No," Krycek said in a soft voice, his eyes narrowing. Carlo stared at him, sensing the menacing air.

The woman pursed her lips in vexation. "I'm Mrs. Glasco from Child Protective Services. I understand that there are three children living at this address with a Mr. Skinner and Mr. Mulder. Is this not the correct address?"

"Yes."

"If the men are not here, are the children here?"

"Yes."

"And who is supervising them?"

"I am."

The woman clenched her teeth at the frustrating lack of information. She took out a small notebook and pen.

"And who are you?"

Krycek was silent, never having responded well to being interrogated. Carlo spoke softly behind him in Italian, advising him. The woman was not pleased, unable to understand them.

"Krycek. Alex Krycek," he finally said at Carlo's urging. The woman insisted that he spell his name and he did so.

"And you are?" she asked of Carlo.

"Carlo DeLuca, Mr. Skinner's uncle." He spelled out his name, also.

"What is your relationship to this household?" she asked Krycek.

"Mr. Mulder's brother. My ..sons live here."

She still didn't look pleased.

"Do you have proof that the boys are yours? Who has custody? Why do the children not live with you?"

"May I see some ID?" Krycek asked instead. Disgruntled but knowing she was legally bound to do so, she showed her ID. Krycek yanked it out of her hand and picked up the phone extension. Carlo took a step away from the radiating man. While Mrs. Glasco protested and demanded the return of her ID, Krycek dialed a number. When the line was answered, he spoke quietly in German, obviously giving an order. He looked at the ID and read off the name and office location. He hung up and handed the ID back to her.

"Who filed the complaint?" he asked.

"I don't need to..." she protested.

"Yes, you do," Carlo spoke up. "You are legally required to supply that information. The accused is allowed to know their accuser, also it falls under the freedom of information act."

She gave the name of a certain preacher. Both men swore in their own languages.

"What's the charge?" Krycek asked.

"Abuse. Mr. Skinner has been seen kissing three boys and 'handling' one twin. Mr. Mulder has been seen kissing three boys."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" Carlo said in exasperation. "Marcus!" he yelled. In a moment, his son was on the porch.

"Yes, Pappa?"

Carlo took his chin and kissed him with a loud smack, and a cheek pinch for good measure.

"This is my son," Carlo informed the woman. "I've been kissing him since the day he was born, 22 years now. Go ahead, arrest me," he challenged her in thick New York bravado. "It's Sheriff Skinner, former Assistant Director FBI and Acting Section Agent in Charge Mulder, FBI, whose best friend is Assistant Director Scully," Krycek informed her and then whistled loudly. The woman quickly riffled through her paperwork, panicked at the new, and important, information. The boys were suddenly on the porch. Krycek had been watching them play next door. Mrs. Glasco stepped back in surprise at the sudden crowding. She clutched her bag and paperwork away from grubby little hands.

"Hi, Marc!" the boys said loudly, noticing their new friend. Marc waved at them. Krycek squatted down in front of them.

"How does Uncle Walter and Uncle Fox kiss you?" he asked. The boys were confused at the strange question. Ivan leaned forward and pecked Krycek sweetly on the mouth.

"Like that," he said. The other two nodded in agreement. Ivan suddenly pecked each cheek and his forehead. "And that, and that, and that." The boys giggled.

"Would you rather they were taught not to show affection at all?" Carlo asked Mrs. Glasco. "Be a man! Real men don't cry, real men don't kiss their sons. Listen, lady..."

"Carlo." Krycek stopped the opening of a tirade. "Pavel," he said, regaining their attention. "Tell this lady why Uncle Walter was touching your privates the other week."

"I fell on a rock," Pavel immediately informed her. "It hurt my penis really bad and I cried and Uncle Walter carried me I have aowie wanna see?" he turned out his leg, lifting the cuff of his shorts to display the colorful bruise on his thigh to everyone. "Uncle Walter made me wear ice it was really cold and Marc he's our new cousin he sang Puff with us and Itsy Bitsy Spider and about the dog that swallowed the cat that swallowed the spider and the cow blew up! and the inch worm song but that one was easy because Uncle Walter helps us learn math and Uncle Fox helps us learn sentences but I still don't understand about periods and stuff..."

Only the ringing of a cell phone saved the over-whelmed Mrs. Glasco from further discourse.

"You know," Carlo said to Krycek. "Maybe his problem is that he's afraid he won't be able to say all he needs to say before someone stops him or there isn't enough time. So he rambles on as fast as he can to say as much as he can, before someone stops him. Maybe he should start keeping a diary? That way he's able to say everything he needs to and learns punctuation and spelling at the same time."

Krycek thought about it.

"That's a good idea."

"One of my students is good on the computer; she actually makes a family newsletter each month. Family members send her letters with updates on whatever and she puts it all into an interesting magazine type format which she then sends back to everyone on her subscription list."

Krycek had never heard of such a thing. He kinda liked it...

"WHAT?" Mrs. Glasco's eyes were wide with indignation as she yelled into her phone. "...but...but.. you can't.. they..." She slammed her phone shut and marched back to her car without another word.

"Who the hell did you call?" Carlo asked as he watched the woman leave. Krycek shoed the boys back to play.

"If I told you, I'd have to kill you."

Carlo didn't feel that the response was rhetorical. Walter and Fox hadn't come right out and said it, but they had been dropping hints that Alex was NSA; who knew what contacts Alex might have. Carlo decided not to press the issue, he knew a wise-guy when he met one.

"Natti, I have an errand to run," Krycek informed her as he went in to get his car keys. She looked disapproving but said nothing. Carlo winked at her and she blushed.

Skinner rubbed sun screen on Mulder's back.

"You're purring!" he accused, hearing the low rumble. Their neighbors laughed.

"I'd purr, too, if you were rubbing my back," Jerry said.

"No shit," Ed chimed in, holding a tanning mirror under his chin.

"Look all you want, guys, but don't touch," Mulder informed them. The day was hot and Skinner and Mulder had decided to get some sun with their new friends after a game of water-volleyball. The others hadn't counted on Skinner and Mulder's competitive streak and were creamed in the bargain. Malcolm and Elliot had stood on the side-lines and swooned all over each other at the sight of the big he-men all tanned and dripping wet.

"You lied to us!" Richard announced on a sudden approach. Skinner stopped rubbing.

"Excuse me?"

Richard kicked Jerry in the foot. "Hey, queer bait, how often have you heard the name 'Fox' in the past three years? How common do you think that name is?"

Ed dropped his mirror in shock.

"Holy shit!" his eyes nearly popped out of his head. Jerry gasped.

"Oh, my God! I cannot believe we have been here a week and haven't put the names together! Take away our fairy wands!"

Skinner resumed spreading the goop on Mulder's back and shoulders. He was done but he was enjoying himself; maybe they should take a message class. Mulder swore softly, only Skinner heard him.

"Pay up!" Jerry demanded of Ed, holding out his hand. "I knew it, you owe me \$50 bucks."

"What was the bet?" Skinner asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

"Ed said that Fox was with that red-head, obviously a dye job, and I said that anyone with a mouth like his is filling it with more than a tit, thank you."

The others laughed as Mulder pulled a towel over his head.

"Walter, remind me to call Harry and get my name changed," Mulder said from under the towel. Ed knocked Jerry on the arm.

"What?"

Ed pointed at Skinner.

"Put a suit and tie on him and you get Big Daddy to complete the trio."

Mulder burst out laughing.

"Big Daddy!"

"Forget it, Fox, not a word. Alex and Scully get hold of that and I'll never hear the end of it." He wiped his hands on his chest to get rid of the excess sun screen, unaware of his appreciative audience.

The house was dark by the time Krycek returned. He needed to find a contact to get a project rolling. The kitchen light was on so he went to investigate. Marcus was sitting at the table with sheet music and coffee. Krycek noted the flush cross the young man's cheeks at his entrance and was amused by it. It had not escaped Krycek's attention that the young man had a crush on him. He was flattered, actually, attracting someone half his age. Ouch! He wondered how far Marc was willing to take it. It had been a while, but Krycek was smelling 'virgin'. The scent excited him.

Krycek poured a cup of coffee and sat down, pulling the chair closer to Marc's. Marc dropped his pencil and stammered something as he bent to retrieve it. Krycek's eyes sparkled. May as well throw the door wide open and see what falls out, he thought.

"I'll be in the master bedroom, if you'd like to do something about that virginity problem," he finally said. The pencil lead snapped on the paper.

Krycek finished his coffee and left the room. The boys were all fast asleep as he straightened their sheets. The cats acknowledged him with sleepy murps and purrs as he gave their heads a scratch. He went in and took a hot shower, giving himself a few strokes, hoping that Marc would find the courage to join him for the evening. He had been having fun with Emilia, who was a very good top and reddened his butt well, but he liked something a little more masculine once in a while.

He was drying off when he heard the soft knock.

"Come in." He didn't bother to cover himself. Let Marc get the full picture right away, scars and all. Marc entered slowly, averting his eyes from Krycek's nudity.

"I.. uh.. I don't want to be hurt," Marc whispered.

"That's a coward's way out," Krycek said. "Life is full of pain in all forms." He tossed the towel into the bathroom and went up to Marc. "The best musicians, writers, artists, create from experience, from their emotions, good and bad. You will never achieve that level of greatness if you don't experience life to it's fullest." He stroked a finger over an unlined cheekbone and turned Marc's face to meet his eyes. The young man was scared.

"The only part of you that I will hurt, will be your heart. This isn't an invitation to happily ever-after, it's a training session. Sex only hurts when it isn't done properly; by the time I'm done with you, you will be begging me for it. If you are not absolutely sure that you want this, I'm not going to touch you. I've never raped anyone and I never will." Krycek waited for him to decide. Marc swallowed hard and touched Krycek's broad, corded shoulders with shaking fingers.

Tucker led a mutiny and kicked the band off the stage. She declared it story-time and a couple of big beefy weight-lifters carried Mulder up to the stage by his arms. Everyone yelled and pounded on the tables, insisting that he start at the beginning. Skinner stayed in a dark corner, enjoying the proprietary pride sweeping though him. Maybe he should suggest that Mulder write down his stories into book form, fictionalize them; he was a natural story teller. Skinner knew that years ago, just reading some of Mulder's reports. Definitely fiction.

"Once upon a time, there was a stubborn red-head named Dana and a vegetable named Billy..."

Although his voice was dry and monotone, Mulder kept his audience enthralled until 2am when he called it quits for the evening after running through a bee farm with a Bounty Hunter at his back. Skinner was thankful that Mulder had the forethought to edit his

stories, leaving out highly classified material. The last one sounded like a remake of the Terminator. He didn't tell them what the bee farm was for.

"No, wait," someone yelled out. "How'd you get together with big, bald and beautiful?" Mulder gave a private smile.

"Let's just say my little brother set us up." To the very vocal disappointment of everyone, Mulder refused to explain further for which Skinner was exceedingly grateful.

"You know, we never did thank Alex properly," Mulder mused as they entered their cabin.

"Did you have something in mind?" he asked.

"I think so, but we'll need to call the contractors again."

Skinner looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Fox, I realize that we aren't exactly hurting for cash, but our inheritances do have a limit," he reminded Mulder. They both had substantial inheritances from their parents, and both had a knack with stocks and investments.

"I know. We could probably do most of it ourselves, but I just want John to take a look at something first."

They were exhausted so they simply striped and fell into bed, falling asleep right away. In the morning, very late morning, Skinner dialed his voice mail to check messages and to make sure that everyone was still alive at home. There were three messages waiting for him. First was his good morning call from the boys which made him smile, then Krycek informing him that he was on to their little game of Sick Nanny, and the last was from Marcus thanking him for their talk and that everything worked out well. Skinner gave Mulder the messages.

"I wonder what Marc meant? Do you think he found someone?" Mulder asked. Skinner shrugged.

"Don't know, but he sounds happy about it."

The day after the hand-fasting, Marc has cornered Skinner and asked to speak privately with him on a delicate matter. Skinner agreed and took Marc over to the station's conference room, where they could shut the door and no one would bother them. Marc was nervous and twitchy, forcing Skinner to practically drag it out of him. The subject matter surprised him. Marc wanted to know about male to male sex. It wasn't exactly a subject that he could go to his father about. Skinner understood. Marc had been surprised that Skinner had already guessed his orientation and so cut Marc off in mid stuttering explanation. He was open and honest with his young cousin, responding to all his questions with direct answers. It seemed that his cousin had never even kissed another man, afraid that it would get back to his family and hurt his father and Zia Ginny, not to

mention not being able to look Dominic or Fr. Joseph in the face. Skinner thought privately that Marc was much too young to be carrying his family's guilt trips on his shoulders.

"Did he sound like he got lucky?" Mulder asked.

"I think so. I hope he's alright."

By mid-morning, it had occurred to Krycek that Carlo was glaring at him. He hoped that this wasn't a pre-cursor to the 'what are you're intentions' speech. Since Marcus had taken the boys to the park with Natti, Krycek decided to take the bull by the horns.

"Out with it, DeLuca," he said, working at his computer. He knew Carlo was also curious, having walked behind him several times, but Krycek had a Cyrillic keyboard for his Russian software. It amused Krycek that it also drove Mulder crazy.

"I don't want my son hurt," Carlo finally said.

"No man wants his son hurt, but I have news for you; your son is an adult and this world can be very cruel. He's very pretty, gay and single. The unfortunate statistics are is that he will be hurt, probably before he's thirty. He now has a wonderful memory to fall back on when he is hurt. It's a hell of a lot more than what I had.

"Don't coddle him, DeLuca. He needs to grow up and he won't if you don't cut the umbilical cord. You'll be the one to end up hurting him, by not allowing him to experience all sides of life. Quit holding his hand."

The phone rang.

"What?" Krycek answered it with an irritated crease between his eyes. "Uh-huh. And Scully actually recommended that you call me? Alright, where?" he hung up and redialed.

"Dementia has struck early," he muttered as the line rang. "Did you actually advise Hoskins to call me for this? Scully, no phone number is safe from me, no matter how unlisted it is. Did you or didn't you? Fine! Chill out! I'll just look, no bodies, I promise. No, I'm not taking him with me. Jeeze, woman," he swore after hanging up. "I swear, Hoskins isn't doing his job properly, she's still uptight. Worse than Skinner," he muttered, turning his computer off. He took his jacket from the coat rack and unlocked a metal cabinet. To Carlo's great concern, Krycek took out a gun, an expensive looking one, and stuck it under his belt behind his jacket. He dialed the phone again.

"Hoskins. Watch the house. The twins are your number one priority at all times." He hung up.

"DeLuca, stay put. Call Hoskins if there's a problem, his number is on the speed dial on the main phone. Do not let anyone in the house, I don't care if they say they're the Holy Trinity."

"Is this going to be a regular thing when we visit?" Carlo asked, trying to ignore the gun and the word 'bodies'. And what was the deal with the twins? Wasn't Adam equally important?

"It better not be, or I'll be investigating you next. Let me give you a clue, DeLuca; all those stories of your nephew and his little buddy are only the tip of the iceberg. You don't know the half of it and you never will. You'll live longer and healthier if you leave now and send a card once a year." Krycek wasn't one to mince his words and he didn't care; he had too much at stake to worry about someone's feelings.

He swung by the park and herded everyone in the car, dropping them off at the house with orders to stay indoors and obey Hoskins. He drove out of town, making sure that he was visible to whoever was watching. He took the long way, through the mountains, shutting down everything except his hunter instincts. Hoskins had spotted an MIB. Feeling spooked and out of his depth, he called Scully for advice. Krycek had to give the man points for knowing when not to play hero; it ensured Hoskins a long life.

A few more miles and he spotted a tail. Good, they were watching him, not the boys. Using an elementary trick, he reached under the seat for a small box he kept there. After the next blind curve, he leaned out the window and shook the box of tire shredders all over the road, pulled off into a thicket of trees and waited. A few minutes later, he heard a car and the sound of a sudden explosion as the tires blew out. The car screeched to a halt. He crept through the trees, getting as close as he dared to get a look at the driver. He froze and silently swore. He put the gun away, it would be of no use to him, and reached into his jacket pocket for the tool that he routinely kept there as a part of his everyday equipment. Well, he did tell Scully that there would be no bodies.

The Hunter bent down to examine the road and the strange shapes scattered all over it. He picked one up, never having encountered such a thing before. Krycek crept up behind him and the Hunter turned, hearing a stone crunch. He didn't seem surprised to find Krycek.

"You've been a very bad boy, Alex," the Hunter rumbled. "You should have surrendered when you had the chance."

"Fuck you, you piece of shit," Krycek snarled. "This is my planet and my people. I don't recall anyone inviting you to our little party."

"We were here first."

"Squatter's rights." Krycek feinted to the left at the same time a train blew its whistle in the distance. The Hunter turned toward the new menace and Krycek jumped him,

knocking him to the ground. A river of green bubbled from a scraped forehead. The gas had no effect on Krycek, having been exposed to the Vaccine in it's various stages of development. He grabbed the Hunter by the back of the hair and twisted his head around, burying the pick in the back of the Hunter's neck. He jumped off and watched the disintegration process with great satisfaction. That made 0 for 27. He took his knife and scored another notch on the side of the pick before pocketing it again.

How the hell did the Hunter find him? Only one person knew where he currently was. He went back to his car and continued to head out of town.

The day before they were due back home, Mulder passed the FaxNews to Skinner over breakfast. The ship subscribed to a fax news service which faxed an abridged version of the home port daily news. Skinner read the top story and frowned.

"General Schroder? Why would anyone want to assassinate him? Granted, he's an asshole, but other than his wife wanting to take a butcher knife to his dick..." Skinner put the paper down and dialed his cell phone. Their entourage winced at the mental image of minced dick. Jerry put down his sausage link.

"Hi, Natti, is Alex home? Thanks... Where were you yesterday? At the park. Really. All day? A drive where? ... What?!"

Mulder sat up, suddenly paying attention. Jerry, Ed, Richard and Keith were also paying attention. Skinner held up a hand to tell him to wait.

"Alright, thanks, Alex. Tell Fox." He handed the phone to Mulder.

"Hey," Mulder said. He turned pale as he listened. "Are the boys alright?" he finally asked. "Good. We'll be home late tomorrow night, stick around." He handed the phone back to Skinner and snapped his fingers for the waiter. "Whisky, straight." The waiter raised an eyebrow and glanced at his watch which said 8:15am. "Now," Mulder ordered.

"What's going on?" Ed asked. Skinner tossed the paper onto the next table.

"Nothing. Boys will be boys." And Alex will be Alex....

Chapter 12: Eight Days A Week

Monday

"You boys be good for Natti," Uncle Walter said, ruffling hair and flickering at cheeks as he left for work.

"Yes, Uncle Walter," the boys chorused.

The sound of the door closing was still in the air when the boys raced upstairs to get dressed. After begging permission to go outside and play, with a promise to do some learning after their nap, the boys were out the door in a flash. It was 8am and daylight was wasting!

There was a moving van down the street, so the boys went to investigate. One lone child, a girl, stood off to the side as the movers carried furniture into the house.

"Hi," Adam announced them. The girl turned, startled. She was about his own age.

"Hello," she said shyly. Her mother came over to check on her daughter.

"Well, aren't you three a cute welcoming committee," the lady said, smiling pleasantly at the boys. "What are your names?"

"I'm Adam, these are my brothers, sort of; Pavel and Ivan," Adam said.

"Sort of? What do you mean?"

"We live together with my dad and Uncle. Their father and my father are brothers," Adam tried to explain. The lady nodded with a funny kind of smile.

"I see. But doesn't that mean Pavel and Ivan are your cousins?"

That was such a revelation to the boys that they could only stare at the lady in shock. The lady laughed and patted Adam on the head.

"I'm Mrs. White, this is my daughter, Jennifer."

The children shyly said hi to each other.

"That's funny," Pavel said with a giggle. "Your name is White but you're black." Mrs. White laughed and flicked his cheek with a finger.

"Where do you boys live?" Mrs. White asked. They pointed to their house down the street.

"Isn't that the sheriff's house?" she asked. The boys nodded.

"Uncle Walter is the sheriff," Adam said.

"I see. Is Uncle Walter your father?" she asked the twins. They shook their heads.

"Uncle Walter is Uncle Walter, Alex is our father," Pavel said. The lady looked confused.

"Then.. who is your father's brother?" she asked Adam.

"Uncle Alex is."

"Who is Uncle Walter, then?"

"My dad's boyfriend."

"But they got married, didn't they?" Ivan asked.

"Yeah, but Uncle Walter can't be a wife, he isn't a girl," Adam argued.

"So what is he?" Pavel asked. Adam thought about it and shrugged.

"I don't know, just a boyfriend, I guess. I don't think they can both be husbands."

The lady gave up trying to understand.

"Can your little girl come and play with us?" Adam asked. Mrs. White turned to her daughter.

"Would you like to go and play with these boys?" she asked. Jennifer nodded shyly.

"Don't go far," Mrs. White warned them.

"We won't. Uncle Walter makes us stay in the neighborhood," Adam informed her.

The boys turned back toward their house with Jennifer in tow.

"Let's go tell Uncle Walter about being cousins," he suggested to the twins. They agreed. They ran to the station and crowded through the door.

"Hi, Becky!" they yelled, waving to her. She smiled at them and waved back. The boys liked Becky, she was nice. She always gave them pieces of candy that she kept on her desk. The boys had bigger fish to fry at the moment, though, so they ran to Uncle Walter's office, making a lot of noise on the floor.

"Uncle Walter!" they yelled.

"What are you boys up to?" Uncle Walter asked. The boys liked Uncle Walter, he hardly ever yelled at them whenever they did something wrong and he always took time to answer questions.

"Guess what? This is Jennifer and her mother said that me and Pavel and Ivan aren't brothers, we're cousins!" Adam announced excitedly. Uncle Walter's mouth hung open for a moment. The boys were happy that they were able to surprise him.

"That never occurred to me," he said, flabbergasted.

Uncle Walter said hello to Jennifer and the boys ran back out, calling to their new friend to follow them.

The boys and Jennifer went around the neighborhood to see if there were any treasures in the dumpster piles before the truck came the next day and took everything away. People threw away the best stuff! The truck struck a gold mine at the Carlisle's. The Carlisle's put in a new rug recently and the boys were ecstatic to find a length of discarded brand new rug. They dragged it back to their house.

At the end of the porch was a panel that covered the underside of it. Adam pulled it off and crawled in, dragging the rug in with him. The other children hurried in and began to move their treasures out of the way so that Adam could set the rug into place. The underside of the porch was cool and musty smelling, with a few cobwebs hanging in the corners.

The rug was slightly too long and hung out the small entrance.

"Go get me something to cut it with," he told the twins. After some pushing and shoving, Ivan was sent to get something. He ran back in moments later with a large butcher knife. Adam took it happily and began sawing away at the end of the rug.

"Who's that?" Jennifer asked, looking at the pictures and posters decorating the roof and walls. Pavel took a tin out of a box of treasures and distributed cookies.

"That's our Aunt Dana," he said, looking to where she was pointing. "Isn't she pretty? She's Uncle Fox's friend and his boss. She's really smart, she's a doctor."

Jennifer was impressed and made the appropriate noises. "Are any of these pictures of your parents?" she asked. Pavel looked around and pointed to one, while Ivan rooted around in the box.

"That's our father, Alex. He likes us to call him Alex, not Daddy. He's a secret agent. Shhhh! Don't tell," he warned her. Jennifer nodded, wide-eyed in awe. "And that one over there is Uncle Fox, he's Adam's Dad."

Ivan pulled out a small binder and opened it.

"Here, this is what our mother looked like. She died a long time ago all the way across the world in Russia." Ivan turned the book for her to see.

"Wow, that's really far away," Jennifer commented. "I went to visit my grandmother in South Carolina, that's far away, too."

"Done!" Adam said triumphantly. He tossed the knife out the door and onto the grass. The edge of the rug was a little crooked but he was happy with it. Ivan put the book away and they got down to business.

"Where do we want to look today?" Adam asked the boys.

"Look for what?" Jennifer asked.

"For ghosts. We're ghost hunters," he said importantly. The twins nodded in agreement.

"Oh," Jennifer said with rounded eyes. "But it's daytime. How can you see ghosts in the day time?" she asked.

"My dad has seen ghosts during the day," Adam said nonchalantly. Jennifer's eyes became wider. "He's a ghost hunter, too, at the FBI."

"How about Mr. Jenkins' barn?" Ivan suggested.

"Or behind the grocery store?" Pavel put in.

"How about the cemetery?" Jennifer said. The boys stopped their debate and stared at her in awe.

The children were off to the cemetery. They used the back alleys behind the houses to sneak up on any unsuspecting ghosts and spirits that may be lurking in the graveyard behind Reverend Johnson's church. Adam carried a salt shaker, Pavel a cross and Ivan an empty jar with a lid to hold the menace. They didn't let Jennifer carry anything because she was a girl. Girls must be weak because Uncle Walter always helps Natti carry in the groceries. Jennifer informed them that that was a stupid reason. It's just polite to help, and she should know, since she's 8 years old and older than them. The boys conceded to her reasoning but they still had nothing for her to carry. Adam felt guilty so he let her carry his salt shaker.

The cemetery was quiet with a strange feeling in it. The children stopped at the edge, suddenly unsure of their mission. The boys were positive that they would step on someone and have a ghost visit them at night. Everyone knew that night-time ghosts were worse than day-time ghosts.

"Oh, come on," Jennifer said impatiently and stepped into the yard. Suddenly a door opened at the house next door and a white shape appeared! It was pale white with wild hair and a large pot belly! Funny straps held white socks to its knees. It wore white boxers! It belched and farted loudly and hacked up a goober, spitting into the grass. The

children ran from the yard, away from the scariest sight they had ever seen -the Reverend in his boxers.

Tuesday

"What do you think caused Ivan's nightmare?" Mulder asked over the morning newspaper. Skinner rinsed his cup in the sink.

"I don't know. It was strange, though; while you were in the shower, he asked if we would get rid of all the white underwear in the house and buy different colors, like Alex's."

Mulder tried to decipher that but decided that he just didn't have enough information. He shook his head and went back to his paper. In the middle of the night, Ivan knocked on their door. He was shaking as he held out his arms. Skinner picked him up and carried him to their bed where Ivan snuggled down happily between his uncles and fell asleep.

"That's it," Mulder snapped his fingers. "Those tighty-whities of yours scared him." The dishcloth sailed over the paper and smacked Mulder in the face.

Wednesday

Another moving van arrived into town. Skinner resisted the urge to call Emilia and ask her if she took an ad out in the NY Times. He followed the van, curious. It stopped across town at an older home that had been vacant for quite a few years. The driver got out.

"Dominic?!" Skinner was shocked to see his cousin emerge. Dom raised a hand in greeting.

"Afternoon, Walter." Dom shook Skinner's hand with one hand and shook his shoulder with the other.

"What are you doing?"

"Walter, get your glasses checked; I'm moving in."

Skinner looked from the truck to the old house, almost Victorian by local standards. It was a dinosaur next to the neighbors' houses, with three stories, pointed steeples at the very top. One of those houses that every neighborhood seemed to have, the one with rumors and stories, ghosts.

"I.. why didn't you tell me? This old place? Isn't it a little big for just you?" Skinner asked.

"For just me, yes. I'm going to fix it up. I'll only live on the top two floors. The Church bought it. I got permission to fix it up and round up the Flock in the area. Of course, my

telling them that the town was filled with sinning homosexuals and heathens all bent on subverting the few remaining sons and daughters loyal to the Church may have helped make their decision." Dom grinned evilly. "The bottom of the house will be the chapel, rectory and classrooms for Catechism."

Skinner laughed and clapped Dom on the shoulder. "I knew there was a devil behind that collar," he said.

"Come on inside," Dom invited him. Curious to see it, Skinner nodded.

The prerequisite dust and sheets covered everything, cobwebs decorated the corners. The door creaked open, the daylight blasting insistently into the old gloom.

"It needs some repairs, no doubt about that, but look at this." Dom took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped dust from the railing of the winding staircase. Deep, rich, cherry wood suddenly shone through.

"It's all cherry wood, Walter," Dom said in awe. "Someone went to a lot of trouble with this place. This must have been a mansion in its time. The realtor had no history on it, just that the last owners died and no descendants were found. For one reason or another, no one who bought it ever stayed long.

"There are some roof leaks, the pipes and wiring need to be replaced. It needs a good scrubbing. Get in furniture, have the altar and paraphernalia brought in, get the building sanctified, and we're in business." Dom rubbed his hands in glee.

"That's just a little too commercialized for me, Dom," Skinner said. Dominic waved his hand.

"Just a figure of speech. Look." He drew a few sheets away from furniture. A love seat and couch with turn of the century patterns. "This quality isn't made anymore. When people build furniture, it used to last for centuries; not anymore. This is going upstairs. No rug-rats will be climbing all over it. Except yours."

"Thanks," Skinner said wryly. Dom sat on the couch, running his hand lovingly over the fabric and tooled backing.

"So, Walter. Will you be joining us for Worship and Communion?" Dom suddenly asked in his gently curious 'Priest' voice. Skinner knew his time had run out. "Come on, sit down. Consider this my first official Confession for the new parish." Dom patted the couch in invitation. Skinner reluctantly dropped onto the opposite side of the couch. He found that he couldn't look at Dominic so he took an interest in the fabric.

"I... I can't, Dom."

"Of course you can, say what you mean –you won't. Will you tell me why?"

He took his time formulating a response. It had been a long time, he had gone through so many changes after so many things that happened to him.

"I no longer believe in the God of my childhood," he said. Dom sighed and lowered his head for a moment.

"Is this due to recent events?" Dom asked.

"Are you speaking of the alien stuff?" Dom nodded. "No, not completely. I think it was Viet Nam that started it. I died, Dom, and it was no heavenly visitor that brought me back, I saw no white light."

Skinner told Dominic of his Visitation, of being exposed to other religions of the world for the first time and learning that the universe did not revolve around the Catholic Church and that there were millions of people all over the world that could care less if the Pope had a sniffle. People lived and died for thousands of years without ever having heard about Jesus, except as a curiosity of the big-eyed Westerners. He had seen the belief that people had in Buddha, Kwan Yen, Krishna, Kali Ma, the entire Hindu pantheon. People believed just as strongly in their own culture's gods as the Westerners did in the Christian God, and for a longer period of time. He had seen missionaries decimate entire cultures, thousands and thousands of years of history, gone within a few short years. People killed outright for not bowing to the God of peace and love. He had seen far too much to return to his childhood.

He had seen the old lady, she was real.

"I have seen too many things, Dom, too many so-called miracles, explained away with science, too many things that are supposed to be impossible that are actually real. You laughed at Mulder's story about Tooms, the guy who could elongate himself? My first case with Mulder and Scully? Mulder wasn't telling a whopper, Dom, he told it like it happened. Werewolves, vampires, haunted houses, ghosts, a hill that eats hikers, sentient trees, all real. 99 percent of what Mulder and Scully have been through, I can't tell you about. Scully clings to the last shred of her faith, more out of habit, I think, but she no longer discounts others. I don't think Mulder ever actually believed in anything." He wasn't even going to mention any of the more sensitive issues, the grays and rebels, clones bleeding green acid, hybrids, genetic engineering...

"But, Walter, don't you see? That's what faith is all about. We have the faith to believe that God has chosen not to inform His children of all His little side projects. It isn't our business, so He didn't tell us. There is no reason that God could not have engineered all those things."

Skinner had heard that argument before.

"It comes down to one simple fact, Dom; I don't believe. I won't be pushed on this issue, Dom," Skinner warned him. "Believe me, I'm more comfortable with what Emilia has to say, than anything you can preach at me. Me, as I am, or not at all. And that goes for the rest of the family, too. I don't want to lose everyone again, but I will if I have to. I don't need anyone's permission to live my life."

Dom bowed his head, thinking. Skinner knew that Dominic was disappointed, but he spoke his heart, his own truth.

"I'll be honest, Walter, there are a few of the family that are very vocal in their disapproval, no matter what Mamma says. Most of them are old-timers, traditional. A few of the younger conservative ones. Marc told me about his 'experience' recently; I knew he was gay, I've discussed it with him, the Church's point of view on the subject, tried to council him. He's set in his 'ways'. The family now knows about him. He's been pretty much ostracized from most family get-togethers. Some started to blame you for it, but Marc, Carlo, Mamma and me, a few others, have been quite vocal in your defense. The family is pretty split on the whole subject.

"The fact that you no longer consider yourself Catholic, much less a Christian, isn't going to help. Now, most of the cousins haven't met you, it's easy to dismiss a stranger. Those of us that have met you, will stand by you, whether we approve or not." Dom chuckled, "Even Mario threw a punch at Angelo in your defense. You're right, my brothers are bullies, but we love you, Walter."

Dom took Skinner's hand between both of his.

"I can't stop being a Priest, Walter, it's who I am. I love God, He's a part of me. I won't preach to you, but I won't stop praying for you and your return to God and the Church. I'll also be here for you whenever you need to talk. About anything -cousin, buddy, Priest. Is that fair?"

Skinner nodded, feeling a weight lifting from his shoulders and his chest. Dom released his hand and took his face, giving his cheek a kiss.

"Go back to work, Walter. God be with you."

"And also with you," Skinner automatically gave the response. "Will you come to dinner?"

Dom gave a nod. "Yes, thank you."

Thursday

Reminder list:

- Make sure the door is locked, set alarm early, and jump Mulder.

- Interrogate the children and find out what needs to be fixed from their being let loose on the world day before.
- Check over school work.
- Go to work.
- Find out more about that new little girl that Adam's been making goo-goo eyes at. Make sure that's all Adam's been doing. Kids are starting out earlier now-days, thanks to proper nutrition and hormones in the milk and food. He's going to be 8 soon. You kissed a girl at 8, Skinner, remember that?
- Buy more underwear. Colors, this time. Ivan's refusing to wear his whites and the other two are on a solidarity strike.
- Go back to work.
- Find out why there is a rug sticking out from under the porch.
- Take the cats to the vet and make Pavel understand why no balls is a good thing.
- Have lunch.
- Go back to work.

Friday

It rained, so the boys spent the day inside, tormenting Natti with 'movie' day. They insisted on popcorn and all the lights turned off and movies on the big TV in lieu of a proper theatre.

John, the contractor stopped by at Mulder's request and took a look at the attic. He wrote out a list of 'to do's' and an estimate. Skinner was surprised, it wasn't nearly as bad as he thought it was going to be. John shrugged, he was going to do it on the side, give his two oldest kids some experience. Skinner agreed.

Saturday

It was Ruvín's turn for weekend duty, and Mulder was doing overtime at work on a tough case, so Skinner took the boys into town for school clothes. He was finding himself grateful that school started in two weeks. It wouldn't have occurred to him that they needed clothes until Natti held up a pair of jeans to Adam and announced that a clothes buying trip was in order for the near future.

"But those are new jeans!" Skinner protested, looking at the space between the cuff and Adam's ankle. Natti gave a knowing chuckle.

"Here's a secret; children grow very fast. I'd say box up the jeans that are still good and save them for Pavel and Ivan, but Adam has his father's lanky build. The twins have Alex's compact structure so the jeans probably won't fit. Too narrow. I'll cut them down into shorts." She found a scrap piece of paper and began to make a list, and then handed it to Skinner.

"This is what they need. Go to this store to get everything." Skinner noted that she wrote down a store name and cross streets.

"And Walter? There's a word that you should remember and try to use almost every day." Skinner looked at her expectantly. "It's very easy, it goes like this... no."

Skinner waved her off, he had plenty of willpower against the boys.

Five hours later, with a van full of clothes and several toys that they couldn't do without, Skinner took the boys to see Uncle Fox at work. He called first to make sure Mulder could see them. Mulder ok'd the field trip to the JEH on the condition that Skinner bring an entry fee of 18 whoppers for his hungry agents.

The guard smiled indulgently at the thrilled boys as he pinned visitor's badges to their shirts. He shook Skinner's hand, welcoming him back into the building. The boys cranked their heads almost complete 360s, trying to take in the entrance hall. Skinner knew the way, so he herded the boys into the elevator to go upstairs.

"There's Uncle Fox!" Pavel yelled, seeing Mulder through the glass partition just a couple of yards past the elevators. Skinner shushed Pavel.

"Think of this as a library, Pavel; we don't yell here."

Several over-worked assistants smiled at the boys and their exuberance. A few that Skinner remembered greeted him; fondly, he was pleased to note. Unless Mulder's been telling stories, he suddenly thought with a flush.

The boys rushed into the bull pen where Mulder and six others were holding court around a stack of papers and a working board covered in photos. He was introducing the boys to the others when Skinner got into the room, loaded down with fragrant bags. The men reached eagerly for the bags, thanking Skinner. They were convinced that their lord and master wasn't going to let them eat until they solved the case. Mulder hmphed with his nose in the air.

The boys wandered around the office, absently acknowledging Skinner's "Don't touch anything!".

"Hey, look who got haircuts!"

"Hi, Aunt Dana!" the boys shouted as they rushed her. Mulder shot Skinner an apologetic look, not noticing the haircuts.

The boys settled down and continued their exploring while Skinner looked over the gathered information, listening to the agents talk. He missed it, he admitted it, but he also knew that his stomach stopped hurting, his headaches almost completely disappeared, and he no longer dreaded coming in to work in the mornings. The current problem involved a serial murderer in the Cleveland area.

"Adam, come away from there," Mulder said. Adam had wandered over to the board, looking at the pictures. Skinner took a rapid look over them; they were all close-ups of cuts on the backs of the victims, nothing overly graphic. There were no full body shots or blood splatters, just cleaned up morgue pictures. They've seen worse on TV.

"Are they puzzles?"

"Uh, yeah, come over here."

"This one looks like a deh."

Skinner wasn't the only one to look at Adam with a wrinkled nose.

"A what?" Mulder asked. Pavel went to Adam's side and looked. He nodded.

"It does look like a deh," the boy said in agreement. Everyone walked over to the board. "Upside down, though."

"What are you two talking about?" Skinner asked them. "What is a deh?"

"It's a letter in Russian," Adam said. He had been taking language lessons along with the twins. Mulder found a dry-erase marker and handed it to Adam.

"Draw me a deh," he asked his son. Adam drew a square on the board, the bottom slightly broader than the top, and attached an extra leg on the two bottom corners. Skinner thought it looked like a strange bell. They all compared it to the cuts on one of the pictures. Mulder untapped the photo and reversed it to match Adam's letter.

"A little impressionistic, but, ok. What about these others? Do you see any other letters in them?" he asked the two boys. Skinner looked around, Ivan was falling asleep in a chair.

"He's fine," Scully assured Skinner.

"That one," Pavel pointed to the top of the board. "It looks like a ell."

"You mean like this 'L'?" Mulder asked, pointing to a letter in a word. Pavel and Adam shook their heads.

"No, a ell," Pavel insisted. He took the marker and drew on the board. Almost a square, but missing the bottom connecting line, the end of the left side was kicked out almost like a 'J'. Mulder took the picture down and re-tapped it to match Pavel's letter.

One by one, the boys identified all six pictures with a Russian letter mixed in among the cut marks. Skinner could see the excitement in Mulder's face and knew that his bells were ringing. Mulder pointed to the series of letters that the boys had written.

"Is this a word that you know?" The boys shook their heads.

"Scully, any Russian speakers in today?" he asked. Scully thought for a moment.

"Not that I'm aware of."

Mulder took out his cell phone and dialed. Skinner knew the tones without having to look at the numbers.

"Hey. Russian letters. Deh, ell, myarkhi znark, ... stop laughing at my pronunciation... shah, or, ah. Word, acronym?" Mulder took the marker and wrote numbers under the letters. "Lorshut? Which means...? Shit! Thanks." He closed the phone. He rearranged the photos according to the numbers.

"What's it say, Daddy?" Adam asked. Mulder looked at Skinner.

"It just says 'horse'." Mulder knelt down and hugged the boys tightly. "But you know what? You both were a very big help. We can catch a very bad man because you helped us. Uncle Walter, hot fudge sundaes for dinner."

The boys cheered, their faces pinked from pride. Skinner picked up Ivan and got the other two rounded up to go home. He knew about The Horse. A man they've spent years searching for. At every crime scene, his name could be found, spelled out in one language or another. Painted on the walls, business cards, children's alphabet cards, one letter per victim, as many as needed to spell 'horse' in that particular language. No one knew why the man used that name, some have suggested that he's a drug dealer, others more crudely suggest that it's a nickname referring to the size of his penis.

If this was any indication, Mulder might not be home for those sundaes.

Sunday

"Boys, please! Even God rested for a day!"

Monday

"I don't know, Uncle Walter hasn't let us do anything all week," Pavel complained. They sat in their club-house, thinking up something to do until lunch.

"How about surveillance?" Ivan suggested. Pavel and Adam thought that was a good idea and rummaged around for their binoculars.

"Since we can't play on the roof, how about the tree?" Pavel asked them. It was agreed, the big oak tree out front was perfect.

Chapter 13: The Walls Come Down

The pounding and stomping in the attic was driving everyone crazy, so Natti took the boys to the park to play. Mulder was out of town on a case, his 'Horse' had just shown up in Cincinnati, and so he and his best agents were out trying to catch the bastard. Which left Skinner to deal with the problem of trying to find a new deputy and breaking in Ruvin as his assistant. A new session was about to start at Quantico and Kyle was moving closer to the Academy. Skinner walked into the station just in time to see Becky frowning in confusion over a piece of paper.

"What's that?" Skinner asked. Becky waved the paper.

"New applicant. Listen to this, name: K.C. Moynahan, age: over 21, male/female: yes, place of birth: Earth, race: Human."

Skinner took the paper and looked it over. She wasn't kidding, the applicant actually wrote in those answers.

"Should I trash it, Sir?" she asked.

"No, call and set up an appointment. This person either has balls of brass, or is a candidate for natural selection," he said. Becky giggled.

"Yes, Sir."

Mulder was always telling him to follow his instincts, so Skinner would give it a try. Something was telling him to meet this person. The phone rang and Becky answered it.

"Sheriff's office. Hello, Mrs. Plotsky." Skinner tried to sneak out the door but Becky snapped her fingers. "I'll tell him, yes, Ma'am."

Barking dog, can needs to be opened, cat in the tree, couch needs to be moved...

"Cat in the tree," Becky announced. Skinner groaned.

"Is Ruvin and Joe still out on rounds?"

"At lunch."

He turned to leave, resigned. It was a small town, only a few deputies could be supported, so the sheriff often found himself doing odd jobs. Like getting Mrs. Plotsky's cat out of the tree approximately once a week. The cat was a small domestic short hair which looked about 6 months old but Skinner was positive that it was living all nine lives consecutively. He walked out the door and immediately bumped into someone. A short someone.

"Pardon me," he said, steadying himself. A pair of brown eyes twinkled up at him.

"Sorry," the woman said. "Are you Sheriff Skinner?"

Skinner nodded.

"Yes, Ma'am, can I help you?"

"KC Moynahan, Sir. I sent you an application, thought I'd follow up on it with me." She shook his hand, her grip was firm, confident. Skinner quickly looked over the slip of a woman.

"It just came in the mail about an hour ago," he said. "I haven't actually read it yet. Take a ride with me and we can talk."

KC shrugged agreeably.

"Sure."

Skinner showed her to the car and buckled himself in, waiting for her. She finished at the same time he did, quick and efficient. He began the drive to Mrs. Plotsky's.

"Tell me, why did you fill in the statistics the way you did?" he asked, his curiosity brimming.

"Because I didn't feel that the information was pertinent as to my qualifications for the job," came the immediate answer. Skinner couldn't argue with that one.

"I'll be honest, Ms. Moynahan, this is a cowboy town. Most of these men are still living in the middle ages and won't take a female deputy seriously."

"And yet they'll accept a gay sheriff?" she countered.

"Point. But I had established myself before all that happened. What experience do you have in law enforcement?" he asked.

"United States Army, Fort Bragg, Sargent. I've done a tour in Kosovo, Sir," was all she said. It was all she needed to say. Skinner had taken her for very young, about 22 or so. He looked closer and saw some strands of gray, a few lines around her eyes and mouth. She kept her age well.

"Why would you want to move to a small town? We're an hour's drive from the city," he asked.

"Why did you?" she countered. "I want a little peace and quiet, I think I've earned it," she said. Skinner could understand. He had seen enough agents and vets with that 'I've had it' look, to see it on her face.

They stopped at the curb of a house where an elderly woman was staring up into a tree and wringing her hands.

"I'll tell you what, Moynahan, you get that demon-spawn out of that tree, and I'll give you a fair trial. Three months." Skinner pointed to the tree. KC quirked an eyebrow and gave his hand a shake. She may be short and slight, but Skinner was no fool; an experienced Army sargent deserved a chance. He didn't want to discriminate based on her gender, but he needed a deputy that would be of use to him. If the local ya-hoos were going to run all over her, she would not be of use.

Mrs. Plotsky was one of those old-fashioned women who didn't make a move without asking her husband about it first. Unfortunately, her husband had been dead for years, so Skinner could count on her to call his office about once a week for something.

"Oh, Sheriff, thank you for coming. My baby is stuck in the tree again," she said in a trembly voice. Skinner had tried to tell her that if a cat can climb up the tree, it can climb down. She chose not to hear him. Like a lot of elderly people, Mrs. Plotsky had selective hearing.

He looked up and could see the little monster glaring down at him balefully, daring him to come up. The last time Skinner went after it, it growled, hissed and scratched the hell out of his arm. He had to go to Doc Wilkins to have the scratches cleaned out. Mrs. Plotsky apologized and said that Baby was just high-strung and scared. Skinner was sure the cat was possessed. Maybe he should call Dom over.

KC stood under the tree and looked up at it.

"You! Down!" she snapped in a sargent's voice that was completely out of place in the small feminine body, pointing at the cat and then at the ground. The cat's ears went up in astonishment at the daring of this human. "Move it, Misteerrr!"

The cat gave it some thought and decided to climb down. It jumped to the ground and walked calmly back to it's home, tail high in the air. Mrs. Plotsky clapped her hands once and followed Baby into the house.

Skinner held out his hand.

"You're hired."

KC went back to her home to collect her things after making a deal with Kyle to rent his house. Skinner had suggested to Kyle that renting his house out, instead of selling it, would be the wiser choice. If nothing else, it would pay for his alimony and child support, and was a good tax write-off.

While Ruvin broke in the new trainee, Mulder came home a few days later. The Horse was gone again. John and his two kids were done with the attic, having rewired it, put in plumbing, insulation, reinforced the floor and roof. New gypsum boards were quickly made into walls after the inspector was out to give his blessing.

School had just started and the house was quiet. Skinner decided to celebrate by giving Natti the day off and sending her into the city for whatever she wanted to do, and he then spent the rest of the morning demonstrating to Mulder how much he was missed. Skinner rested on top of Mulder, catching his breath. He eased some of his weight off by propping up on his elbows. Skinner stroked a finger over Mulder's face, finding a new line forming at the corner of an eye. Mulder's face was fuller than it was ten years ago. He ran his hands through Mulder's soft hair, seeing white strands beginning to invade the browns.

"You're getting your mother's white hair," he commented. He pushed the front of the hair back. "No signs of a retreat, though."

Mulder ran his hands over Skinner's back and buttock.

"Jealous?" He snapped lightly at Skinner's bottom lip. Skinner ground their groins together.

"Not in the least. I don't have to worry about shampoo or split ends, or use that crap that Alex uses." He kissed Mulder lightly, flicking his tongue out and kissing gently at Mulder's lips, first the top and then the bottom. He enjoyed just kissing Mulder, his lover didn't hold back, no matter what they did. Mulder surged up and wrapped his legs around Skinner's waist, opening his mouth for a deeper kiss. It was an incredibly erotic feeling, their genitals pressed against each other. Skinner could feel another round begin to tingle in his groin.

"God, Walter, maybe I should go on away cases more often," Mulder murmured as Skinner rocked gently against him.

"You turn me on, Fox, every part of you," Skinner admitted before dipping his tongue into Mulder's mouth. Mulder held Skinner in place, one hand on the back of Skinner's head. Mulder ran the other hand down Skinner's ass, finding the familiar play area and rubbing it. Skinner moaned into Mulder's mouth and spread his knees further apart as Mulder inserted a finger, gently moving it in and out.

"My turn," Mulder whispered. Skinner had no argument with that.

The boys were restless after their first day back to school, so Mulder decided he needed quality time with them after being gone on his case so often recently. He took them into the city for a movie and a round of miniature golf. Skinner took the time to finish the painting on the attic. The cats had followed him up but took one whiff of the paint fumes and quickly left with disgusted looks on their faces. The men had let the boys help, but Skinner wasn't sure if they got more paint on the walls or themselves. He was humming a few words under his breath along with the radio when a knock came at the door.

"Hey."

"Scully, come on in."

Scully walked in and took a look around, poking into the bathroom and kitchen.

"This is great! I wish my parents had a flat that I could have used when I was a teenager."

"They would have trusted a teenager with a flat of his or her own?" Skinner asked teasingly. Scully laughed.

"No, probably not. And don't tease, you're going to have a teenager in five years, and three of them in eight. I'll have to remember to send a sympathy card—a moody Mulder and two teenage Kryceks in the house."

Skinner winced. "That's cruel, Scully. Besides, Fox and I have already decided to turn the basement into a cage during ages 13 to 21. We'll toss them raw meat and let them fight over it." Scully laughed again.

"Where is Mulder?" she asked.

"He took the cubs into the city for some quality time. What's on your mind, Scully?"
"Do I need a reason to come out here?" she asked with an arched brow.

"Not at all, you're welcome to hang out anytime. But I also know how to spot an agent with a problem." Skinner set his brush down and climbed off the ladder. He wiped his hands on a cloth as he looked at Scully.

"I'm a good listener, Scully," he said gently. "I'd like to think of us as friends."

Scully walked around slowly, looking out the door and the windows.

"We are friends. It's just.. I'm having a bit of a personal problem, guy problems. I'm used to talking things over with Mulder, that's all."

Skinner unfolded a clean drop cloth and spread it out on the floor, sitting down on it.

"Well, first of all, I'm a guy. Second, I'm in a relationship with a guy, both of which qualify me to expound on 'guy' issues; and third, I'm fully aware that Fox has been telling tales outside the bedroom into your ears and just to be fair, he's been telling tales into my ears, too."

Scully blushed and crossed her arms over her stomach, looking at the floor.

"Since we both know far more about each other than most friends know, telling me about your problem with Kyle can't be as bad as Fox's X-rated bedtime stories. Come on, sit, Dr. Ruth is in." He patted the space in front of him. After a moment, Scully sat.

"So. What has Kyle done? Or didn't do?" he asked. He had never seen Scully so flustered before, she was usually direct and to the point.

"I, uh.. he.. I asked.." Scully took a deep breath and blew it out. "Alright, I'll just say it. I asked.. for something.. and he refused. Which is his prerogative, I don't argue that, but.. well, if Mulder's been telling stories, then you know that I like to.. play.. sometimes. Kyle doesn't like to.. play," she gestured with a delicate wrist. Skinner understood; according to Mulder, Scully could burn up the sheets with him. Skinner had given a brief thought to asking Mulder to invite Scully to join them, but decided that it would be too awkward with the children in the house.

"And you're getting bored," he surmised. Scully nodded, her face still flushed.

"When ever we're together, it has to be on his terms. His idea of an interesting compromise is either on the floor or the couch. Me on top is a wild night for him," she complained. It had never occurred to Skinner that Kyle was that conservative. Now that he thought about it, Kyle did avoid the normal 'guy' banter with Ruvin and Joe. Although he didn't seek it out, Skinner had no objection to that kind of male bonding and could tell his own stories without a problem when he found himself in that type of situation.

"Was this something you asked for far left field?" he asked, trying to find a non-invasive phrasing. Scully shrugged.

"I don't think so, it wasn't anything really outrageous. I just didn't feel like being all proper with the lights out and under the covers, I just wanted to be..." Scully remembered who she was talking to and buried her head in her hands. Skinner held in a laugh.

"Are you avoiding the 'F' word?" he asked. Scully nodded. Skinner took her hands away. "Listen, I see no problem with that. Making love is nice, it can be a wonderful experience, but sometimes a person just needs to give in to hormones and get fucked stupid," he said bluntly. Considering the fact that he and Mulder spent the morning in bed, he understood perfectly.

"Really?" Scully asked, relieved that he understood. "Mulder would jump at whatever I asked for.. um.."

Skinner laughed.

"I know and he still does, go on," he encouraged her.

"I was beginning to think that maybe he and I were the unusual ones and that Kyle was normal and that there must be something wrong with me."

"Scully, if there's one thing I've learned in the past couple of years, it's that there's no such thing as 'normal'. Your needs are just as valid as the next person's. Has Kyle explained why he isn't comfortable with anything rougher?"

"He said that we're civilized people, not animals."

"Give him 6 months on active duty, he'll get over that notion real fast," he said dryly. Scully smiled and nodded in agreement. "Ask yourself one thing, Dana," Skinner said, taking her hand again. "Do you love him?"

Scully had to think about her answer, which spoke volumes to Skinner.

"I think that I was in lust with him," she said with a twinge of regret.

"Then be honest with him. He's just over a very nasty divorce, so don't wait until you hate each other. If you can't make it work, cut it off. Blame it on regulations, if you want to. Superior officer and agent."

Scully nodded and wiped her cheek.

"Are we past the Skinner and Scully thing now?" he asked. Scully laughed and sniffed.

"What?" Skinner asked.

"When Mulder and Krycek had the chicken pox, Krycek lectured me about names. He said that after so many years, I should be able to say 'Walter' and 'Fox'. Force of habit, I guess."

Skinner stuck out his hand. "Walter," he introduced himself. Scully smiled and shook his hand.

"Dana."

Skinner leaned in closer.

"So tell me, Dana, what kinds of games will make Fox scream his head off? I need ammo, spill the beans."

Feeling mischievous, Scully leaned in and gave Skinner the low-down on Fox Mulder's more wild schemes to get off. Skinner could see that he was going to have to go shopping.

"Knock knock," came a voice at the open door.

"Em! Hi," Skinner said, he and Scully both jumping in surprise.

"Sorry to interrupt your pow-wow. I have a space rug that Alex likes, so I thought I'd donate it to the Cause. I brought it over," she pointed a thumb downstairs.

"That's great, Em, you didn't need to do that," Skinner said, touched by the woman's generosity.

"I know that, but I wanted to; besides, Alex likes it, I don't," she said primly. Skinner chuckled.

"Why don't we leave it downstairs for now, so that we don't get paint on it?" he suggested. Emilia agreed and turned to go back down the stairs.

"Is she and Krycek..???" Scully whispered in disbelief.

"They're both highly sexual creatures and they fulfill each other's needs," was all Skinner would say. "I told you, Dana, beneath Alex's Beast Raban exterior, is an actual person. You really should try and get to know him." Privately, he thought that it was too bad that Scully and Alex hated each other, because Alex would have no problem giving Scully what she wanted.

They finished the painting that evening and in the morning, they set Emilia's rug and took Krycek's favorite couch from the family room upstairs. The cats dared to enter again, and finding no offending smells, the inspected the place. Skinner thought that they did a better job of inspecting than the inspector did. They then took over the couch and surveyed their new territory with smug approval. After Skinner's family meeting, they decided to keep the furniture from the rental store. Skinner had mailed the store a check for the first month's rent on the things only to have the check mailed back with a note 'paid in full'. Confused, Skinner called the store and discovered that all the rented furniture had indeed been bought outright. Mulder didn't pay for it, so he then called Scully, but she didn't know anything about it either. Skinner was sure it was some kind of clerical error, but he wasn't going to argue with it, so he dropped it. Just on an off-chance, he asked Krycek, who denied knowledge of the incident. Skinner didn't know whether or not to believe him. They decided to leave the rest of the flat unfurnished. Krycek could do it himself to suit his own tastes.

When they were done, the men went back downstairs and around the front at the sound of the twins laughing. They had another hour before they had to go to kindergarten. Having had only six weeks of it in the spring, the guys decided to keep them with their age group and have them officially begin with the rest of the five year olds. When they got home at noon, they would have lunch, take a nap, and work in their work books for a couple of hours. Skinner found his new deputy kicking the soccer ball around with the boys. Skinner was beginning to think that football was a lost cause in their house.

"Good morning, Sir," KC greeted him. Skinner introduced Mulder.

"Dom!" the boys yelled and ran down the sidewalk. They jumped at Dominic who caught them and groaned under their weight. The boys giggled at his antics. Ivan climbed around to Dominic's back while Pavel clung to his leg.

"Walter! Are you sure Alex is their father and not a monkey?" Dom asked.

"Well, Alex has been called a lot of things, but I don't think he's ever been called a monkey," Skinner said.

"Rat, asshole, bastard, fu..." Mulder began to mutter under his breath.

"Not Alex is a monkey, is their father a monkey?" Dom stopped and stared. "Katie?!"

"Aw, Dom, don't call me that, you know I hate that name," KC whined. Skinner looked from one to the other.

"You know each other?" he asked.

"You didn't tell him?" Dom asked, gesturing toward Skinner. KC shook her head.

"Tell me what?" Skinner warned.

"Walter, this is Katherine Calina, your cousin on your grandmother's side," Dominic introduced them.

"KC!" KC insisted, stomping her foot like a child.

"Wait a minute." Skinner held up his hands. "I have Irish cousins?"

Mulder burst out laughing. "Wait until Scully hears this one!"

"Not by blood, no," Dom said. "Kat... KC's mother is your grandmother's sister's daughter, your great-aunt Mabel. Aunt Mabel was the rebel of the bunch, she married an Irishman. Caused more controversy in the family than you did."

Skinner had long since given up on getting his family tree straightened out.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked KC.

"Because, I wanted you to hire me for me, not out of familial obligation."

"See? A rebel, just like your mother," Dom pointed out good-naturedly.

The boys excitedly called Alex to come home. He arrived two days later, just after dinner, walking in the front door with a suspicious look on his face.

"I don't like surprises," was the first thing he said.

"Shut up, Alex," Mulder said. He knew that Krycek was going to be difficult, so he convinced the others to let him deal with his little brother. "Go out the kitchen door and go up the stairs."

Krycek looked across the room and out the kitchen.

"What stairs?" he asked.

"The new stairs. Go." Mulder pointed. The carpenter had to build a new set of stairs to reach the attic, since the small escape hatch in the ceiling of the upstairs hallway really wasn't workable on a regular bases. Skinner had taken one look at the new stairs and laughed.

"Fonzie," he had said. It took Mulder a moment but he had laughed, too. They attached a hand-made sign to the side of the house, next to the new door, which said 'Krycek'.

Krycek hesitantly walked out the back, suspicion in every step. After waiting for half an hour, the men decided to get the boys ready for bed and dumped them into a bath. Forty-five minutes later, Krycek still wasn't back down. Natti shook her head; he didn't come down the stairs. She had been sitting in the kitchen, waiting. Krycek was up there for three hours before he showed up in the livingroom. The men had let the boys stay up past their bedtime so that they could give Krycek the present that they had made for him.

"Why," he asked hoarsely, his face white. Mulder stood up and went over to him.

"Because. You gave me Walter, my nephews, you're my son's uncle, you're my brother, my friend. Pick a reason." Mulder put his arms around Krycek, holding him tightly. Skinner could see a tremble run across Krycek's shoulders.

"Alex?" Pavel patted Krycek on his hip for attention. Skinner thought he saw Krycek rub his eyes on Mulder's shoulder before lifting his head.

"We made this for you," Pavel said. Ivan and Adam held up a gold wrapped square. Krycek slowly took it, looking at it as though he'd never seen a present before. Skinner thought about it; Krycek had been absent during Christmas, or Midwinter, as Mulder insisted on calling it. He wondered how long it had been since anyone had given Krycek a present.

Krycek hesitantly unwrapped it, being neat about it and peeling the tape carefully. He drew out a picture frame and stared at it. It was taken during the twins' birthday party. Mulder sat with Adam on his lap, Skinner with Ivan, and Pavel standing between their chairs. They had yelled at Krycek to come over until Natti ordered him to get behind Pavel. Krycek squatted down behind the boy and Pavel leaned back against him, Krycek's hand resting on the boy's stomach. Natti snapped their picture. Skinner had the picture blown up recently and helped the boys make a paper frame for it. The boys decorated it, making a mess of Natti's kitchen with glue, glitter and confetti, writing their names around the border. Skinner added his name at their insistence and Mulder his own, along with the date at the bottom. Skinner then had the entire project sealed into a glass frame and wrapped.

The picture was thrust into Mulder's hands and Krycek quickly left out the back. Natti stopped Mulder from following him.

"I've held him since the day he was born, let me handle this."

Mulder acquiesced and Natti followed Krycek's path out the door.

"Didn't he like it?" Pavel asked, his eyes moist. Mulder put the frame down on the couch and picked Pavel up.

"He liked it very much, Pavie, so much that his heart hurts. It's the best present anyone ever gave him. He'll be back, don't worry." Mulder hugged him and put little kisses on Pavel's chubby cheek. Skinner had picked up Ivan and rested him on one hip, while wrapping an arm around Adam's shoulders.

They got the boys calmed down and waited in the livingroom. Natti came back a little while later.

"You boys go on up and see Alex," she told them. The boys hurried out the back door.

"What's going on, Natti?" Skinner asked. She poured a cup of coffee and sat down.

"Sharon was the only one to even try and give him something that came from the heart. The only person before that was his mother at his fifth birthday. He met his biological father on his fifth birthday and all the hugs, kisses and laughter stopped. At five years old. He was deliberately raised to be the person that he has been. He was a very kind and wonderful little boy, Ivan has his personality at that age. He couldn't understand why his father didn't love him anymore and why his mother was always crying and pushing him

away. He was forced into hiding his natural feelings until it became second nature to him."

"And we just blew the hell out of a titanium wall," Mulder pieced together. Natti nodded.

"That's why he rescued them," Skinner said. "And why their fifth birthday was so important to him."

"Natti, when is Alex's birthday? He refuses to tell me," Mulder asked. Skinner nodded.

"He even forbade Sharon to tell me," Skinner said.

Natti smiled as a mother who was feeling her child's pain, and pointed at the photo still on the couch.

"Oh, my God," the men breathed together.

Mulder took out two sleeping bags and spent the night upstairs. Skinner understood. In the morning, after the boys were at school, Mulder came in to take a shower and get ready for work. He'd get there late for the second day in a row, but ASAC's have a little bit more freedom than the grunt agents. He could work at home, if he needed to. He walked into their bedroom with just a towel around his waist which he removed after shutting the door. He'd rather not give Natti an eye-full so early in the day. Skinner rummaged around in the closet until he found what he was looking for. He came up behind Mulder and took the suit out of his hands.

"Hey!" he protested. Skinner took his hand and dragged him over to the bed. "Walter, I have to go to work! I didn't get there until noon yesterday."

Skinner didn't say a word as he gently pushed Mulder down onto the bed and flattened him out on his back.

"Walter..."

Skinner took Mulder's hands and tied a silk tie around them, attaching them to the headboard.

"Walter..?"

Another set of ties were looped around Mulder's ankles. Skinner tied each leg to the bottom of the bed where he had attached two pieces of rope, also the day before.

"Walter..??"

He then took a black bandana that he had bought the day before and tied it around Mulder's head, covering his eyes.

"Walter..!!"

Skinner called Scully and told her that Mulder was all tied up and couldn't make it into work, he'll make up the time on the weekend. Scully laughed and ok'd him. Skinner opened his side drawer and took out a feather.

".....WALTER!!!!"

Chapter 14: Dancing With Alex

Everyone was busy dusting and polishing when a cell phone rang.

"Mine," Skinner said as four adults reached for their pockets. "Skinner," he said, wiping a window down with one hand. He stopped, listening to Natti. Mulder noticed and stopped, too. He walked over to Skinner and put out a hand, resting it on Skinner's waist. "Send him over here, please. Thanks." He disconnected the cell and put it back in his pocket.

"Marty has a registered letter for me. I have to sign for it." Marty was their postman.

"Registered? From who?" Mulder asked. Skinner lifted a hand.

"I don't know, we'll find out in a few minutes."

They had been at Dominic's for most of the day, helping to get the place cleaned out and up. Most of the furniture was too gothic for Dom's taste, so he called an auction house to come and get it. The proceeds would come back to his new parish. Marc had come out from the city to help, but Skinner suspected that his young cousin simply needed time with people who understood him better than his older cousins, aunts and uncles, most of whom were either not speaking to him or hurled taunts and epitaphs every time he walked into the room. Luckily, Marc had the support of his sisters and his father. Zia Ginny had declared that she was on her death bed and closed herself off in her room, permitting no one except her priest to enter. Dominic told Skinner not to worry about it, she'd be out when the soaps started again on Monday. Everyone just needed time to adjust; theirs was the poster family for bi-polar disorders. Mulder had nudged Skinner and said,

"You see? You're not the only bi in the family."

Marcus took Skinner up on the offer to use the family room for the time being. He didn't want to stay with Dom, who had imposed a celibacy rule for the house. Marc had no

intentions of bed-hopping through town, but neither did he appreciate the 11th Commandment, 'thou shalt obey cousin Dominic'.

Krycek was out of town, so Skinner didn't have to worry about...

"What's going on?"

...Krycek was back in town.

"You need glasses, Alex, I swear you do," Mulder told him, waving a rag and a bottle of Murphy's Oil Soap. Mulder suddenly tossed the rag and bottle down and ran to the door, putting his arms out and holding onto the frame. Everyone stopped and looked at him.

"What are you doing?" Krycek asked, looking at Mulder with a wrinkle of confusion between his eyes.

"Making sure the building doesn't collapse," Mulder said. Skinner burst out laughing. Krycek looked from one to the other before his eyes rested on a large Crucifix on the wall.

"Oh, ha ha, very funny," Krycek said. Dom and Marc finally got it; Krycek, the Devil, in a Church. "Just for that, I don't think I should give you the present I found for you at an estate sale in London. Large estate. Old money estate. An entire library of musty, smelly, extremely obscure, old books." Krycek took a step closer to Mulder with each adjective, waving a wrapped square package he had pulled from the back of his jacket, in the air. Mulder released the door frame and came slowly closer, his nose practically sniffing the air. Krycek fainted and ran past him out the door. Mulder swore and ran after him. Skinner chuckled.

"Fox has a thing for strange books," he told his cousins. He noticed that Dom had a cold look on his face. "What?" Skinner asked. Dom shook his head and shot Marc a look that Skinner could only interpret as a severe warning. Marc flushed and threw his cleaning rag down, stalking out of the house.

"Boys, go outside and play for a while," Skinner asked them.

"Yes, Sir," they said, knowing when it was not a good time to listen to the adults. They ran outside to look for Alex and Uncle Fox.

"What was that all about?" Skinner asked Dominic in his AD voice.

"It doesn't bother you that Alex was Marc's..?" Dom asked with a look of disbelief as he waved his hand.

Skinner's mind blanked out to be followed by a flash of images that scared the shit out of him. He turned and followed everyone else out the door.

"Stay here," he said to the boys, pointing at the house. He kept his voice calm, not wanting to scare them. They were too busy tumbling down the high rise of the lawn to notice Skinner's altered mood.

Skinner strode past Marty, who frantically turned his jeep around and called out to Skinner to stop. Skinner stopped, but jumped into the passenger side of the jeep.

"Drive, Marty," he growled. Instead of lecturing Skinner that no one was allowed in a US Postal jeep except a US Postal employee, Marty drove. He asked very nicely if Skinner would sign the letter. Skinner signed for it and stuffed it into his back pocket. Minutes later, he was home and storming through the front door. Mulder and Krycek were sitting on the couch looking at the old book that Mulder was delicately paging through. They looked up at Skinner's entrance and before they could say anything, Skinner had his hands on Krycek's shirt, hauling him up off the couch, his feet barely touching the floor.

"Did you hurt him?" Skinner growled.

"Walter!" Mulder jumped to his feet, his eyes open in astonishment.

"What the hell is your problem?" Krycek yelled. Natti came running out of her room where she was watching a movie.

"Marcus! Did you hurt him!" Skinner gave Krycek a shake.

"No, Walter, he didn't," came a voice at the door. Skinner dropped Krycek, who fell back onto the couch. Skinner strode over to Marc.

"Tell me the truth, Marc, I won't let him touch you," Skinner promised his young cousin, putting his hands on Marc's slim shoulders, looking into Marc's brown eyes, looking for abuse.

"He didn't hurt me, Walter, really," Marc insisted. "I told you, it was wonderful. He took his time, he was patient. It hurt a little at first, but after that it was the greatest feeling that I have ever felt. I have no one to compare him to, but I'd say he's a very good lover. Really." Marc smoothed Skinner's tensed shoulders. "Don't be mad at him, he made the initial offer and gave me the choice and the time to take it. I wanted him, Walter, please. Don't be mad, everyone is mad at me, not you, too," Marc pleaded softly, his eyes sad.

"Walter," Mulder said calmly behind him. He put his hands on Skinner's back, rubbing them gently over the tight muscles. "Come on, babe, I believe him. I also believe that Alex wouldn't rape anyone."

Skinner shut his eyes, trying to calm himself. He loosened his grip on Marc's shoulders and drew him in.

"I'm not mad at you, Marc," Skinner said. "I'm only worried for you. I wanted your first time to be good, that's all."

Marc pulled off of Skinner's shoulder and smiled a little.

"It was good," he insisted. "better than my dreams. I thought sex was going to be mechanical, but he made me feel alive. Come here, Alex," Marc held out a hand to Krycek, who was still on the couch, looking like a whipped dog that was ready to bite back. "Alex," Marc insisted. Mulder added his own weight to the invitation and motioned Krycek up.

Krycek stood resentfully, glaring at Skinner with the cold-blooded eyes of a killer. Marc stepped away from Skinner and put his mouth to Krycek's. Surprised for a second, Krycek then responded, taking Marc's breath away. He put his hands on the younger man's waist and rubbed gently as they touched tongues.

Skinner had never imagined what Krycek kissing would look like, but it wouldn't have been something that looked so good.

Marc took his time ending the kiss, giving Krycek's cheek a stroke before turning back to Skinner and Mulder.

"He didn't hurt me," Marc said, a new maturity in his voice as he squeezed Skinner's arm.

Skinner pulled the reign on his anger, telling himself that Marc was an adult and that Alex knew what would happen if he hurt Marc. Skinner felt like an idiot for not thinking before he acted.

"Alex, I..."

Krycek took a step forward, fist raised and ready to fly. Mulder and Marc yelled, trying to keep the two men separate. Natti ran across the room to try and calm Krycek.

"Peace, please," Dom begged from the doorway. "I'm sorry. This is my fault."

Mulder kept his hands on Skinner, holding him back, while Marc and Natti attempted to hold Krycek back. Dom came forward, standing between them.

"Alex. Marky. I thought he knew," Dom explained. "I would never have blurted it out if I thought that he didn't know. I even said it badly, Alex, his anger is my fault. Please."

Krycek shook Marc and Natti off. He stormed out the back door, stomping up the stairs. The door slammed shut.

"I'll go and talk..." Mulder began.

"No, Fox, it's my turn," Skinner said, turning to follow Krycek. He turned back, brushed Mulder's mouth, and went out the back door.

He needed to put this right, there was too much conflict in their home. In a home of seven people, honesty was needed, boundaries drawn and respected; if not for the sake of the adults, then for the sake of three boys pulled in the middle. It was past due for Skinner to bury the hatchet, and not in Krycek's back. The man had been trying but Skinner hadn't given him a chance. He climbed the stairs and reached for the doorknob; he stopped. Waiting behind the first boundary line, he knocked.

"May I come in?" he asked politely when there was no response. "I'd like to talk, Alex."

He waited several minutes and slowly turned, his heart heavy. He was half way down the stairs when he heard the lock click. He climbed back up, pausing before turning the knob.

"May I come in?" he asked again, opening the door just a crack.

"Come," he heard reluctantly spoken. He stepped in and quietly shut the door behind him. Krycek was sitting in the corner of his couch, arms crossed defensively. Skinner looked around. Krycek had slowly begun to decorate his flat with his own choice of furnishings. An entertainment center had been added and a desk for his computer, a small bookshelf with a few books. He was even surprised to see curtains blowing in an open window. Everything was neat and tidy, another trait that Skinner had not expected from Krycek.

"I'm sorry, Alex," Skinner said with all sincerity. "I should have asked you about it first." He gestured toward the chair at the desk. Krycek shrugged, not looking at him. Skinner pulled the chair out and turned it around, facing Krycek.

"All I could think about was our history together, can you understand that?" he asked gently. After a moment, Krycek gave a single nod. "We've both seen the worst that Humanity has to offer, we've seen nightmares that no sane person should ever have to witness. We've seen innocent people, children, destroyed in the name of whatever someone's current cause is. Marc is an innocent. He's a gentle, bewildered soul who has found himself right smack in the middle of a loud boisterous family in the middle of a loud dangerous city. In my own selfish way, I wanted him to have what I had; someone to show him the joy of life, not a quick, painful fuck in the back seat." Skinner could see that Krycek was paying attention, even if he was staring at the floor.

"First times are almost always completely forgettable experiences. Mine wasn't. Fox is a wonderful lover, he made it perfect for me. I think that I saw myself in Marc and I wanted it to be wonderful for him, too. He's too pretty, Alex, too trusting. You know as well as I do what kind of scum would have lured him in and turned him out."

Krycek nodded. He usually killed scum like that.

"When Dom said that you... I saw that palm pilot again, like a bad dream. I saw guns, blood, hospitals, Fox and Dana both being taken.. you killed a Hunter not too long ago. I saw Marc being grabbed. I don't want him involved in the life that we have led, he'd never survive it."

Skinner stood up and sat at the end of the couch, facing Krycek.

"He says you were patient and caring with him. I'm sorry for doubting that you knew those qualities. If I doubt again, I promise to at least try and remember to ask you first, instead of accusing." Skinner held out his hand and waited.

"You had good reason to doubt," Krycek quietly admitted as he slowly put his hand in Skinner's.

"Contrary to popular belief, I don't get my thrills hurting innocent people," Krycek said, almost too low for Skinner to hear. "I don't deny killing bastards who've deserved it, I'd do it again, but when I've had to hurt innocent people, like you, Scully.. I was under surveillance. Bad excuse, but it's the truth.

"I would never have hurt Marc. He isn't the first person that I've 'initiated' and I'm sure he won't be the last. My own initiation was a gang rape, I didn't want that for him. You're right, Marc is too pretty. I hope it won't happen, but if it does, I've given him good memories to fall back on. I made love to him, Skinner, I didn't fuck him. I do know what making love is, and I enjoy it very much," he said in defense.

"I'm sorry, Alex, my view of you is a biased one, I admit it," Skinner said, leaning forward. "I'm trying very hard to get over that, and for the most part, I thought I did. The 'nice' side of you that I've seen has been you with the boys and getting to know Fox. Any time you spent with Sharon, was only with her. I guess we're still strangers, after.. what? 25 years? About? Will you let me get to know you better?"

Krycek crossed his legs, leaning his elbows on them as he looked at the cushion. He whispered something, but Skinner didn't hear him.

"I said, do you miss her?"

Skinner didn't need to ask who. "I miss her very much. I was a lousy husband to her, I shut her out when I should have been letting her love me. She wanted the divorce, I didn't. I wouldn't sign the papers because I couldn't stand the thought of her not being there when I woke up in the mornings. I thought that if I didn't sign, there wouldn't be a divorce, and I could win her back."

Krycek picked a stray thread and balled it up.

"I came to the funeral," he mumbled. Skinner was stunned.

"I didn't see you," was all he could say. Krycek lifted a shoulder.

"You were too busy arguing with the Old Man. I'm just surprised that Fox or Scully didn't shoot the bastard and toss him into the open grave for an easy burial," Krycek snorted wryly.

"What? They weren't there," Skinner said. For the first time, Krycek looked up.

"Sure they were, right behind you, by the big oak tree. I figured they were avoiding him."

"I think I'm going to have to have a long talk with Fox," Skinner said. He knew, though, why his agents had been there and didn't tell him; they were showing their support for him, knowing that he would never have accepted it.

"Let me know when so I can leave town."

Skinner looked at Krycek sitting in the corner of the couch, dejected. He hadn't realized how much the younger man had changed over the past few years. The old Krycek would have punched Skinner in the face and left with a loud 'fuck you!'; this Krycek actually seemed to care about Skinner's opinion. Krycek had a slight pout which he was trying not to show. Skinner's vision was suddenly juxtaposed with two little boys and he gave a chuckle.

"What?" Krycek asked.

"The twins. I just saw them as adults. In about 15 years, there's going to be three of you running around."

"Heaven help the world?" Krycek suggested.

"Something like that," Skinner said, remembering his conversation with Mulder the night that Krycek had brought the boys to them. "I love them very much, Alex. I never thought I would love a child like this, not even one of my own. I know that I'm their uncle, but I feel like their father."

"Did you want children of your own?" Krycek asked, curious.

"At times. Probably a hormonal flux. Sometimes I felt real pain at wanting a child, sometimes I was convinced that I'd be as lousy a father as I was a husband. Since a bullet took away that choice, I just tried to put it out of my mind."

"It would have been dangerous for you to have a child," Krycek reminded him. Skinner nodded.

"Just one more bargaining chip," he said. "Besides, I was too selfish at the time."

Krycek stood and went to the refrigerator. He took out two beers and handed one to Skinner, sitting down again as he twisted the top off.

"So, did you want a girl or boy?"

Skinner chuckled.

"I could be politically correct and say anything as long as it was healthy, but then footballs come to mind. Having experienced a house full of sons, though, I think I'm ready for something sweet and pretty." He could see the wheels turning. "Don't, Alex," he warned the man. "We have a full house already, no more children. Especially not a girl; that would kill Fox and destroy whatever's left of Scully's sanity."

Krycek nodded. "I forgot about that," he admitted.

The one subject that Mulder refused to discuss; the daughter that he and Scully had together. She had died within days of her birth in cardiac arrest due to a heart defect. She had been with them long enough for Mulder and Scully to fall in love with her.

"If I need a little girl running around for a while, I have cousins to borrow from," Skinner said.

"If you freak out over a cousin you hardly know losing his virginity, what are you going to do when the boys become sexually active?" Krycek asked in amusement. Skinner groaned, not wanting to think that far ahead.

"Probably go on a bender to forget that I'm getting old," he said. "How did you lose yours? With a woman, I mean?" he asked, suddenly curious.

"That was about the only thing that I can honestly thank the old man for," he said, lifting his beer in salute. "He sent me to a very expensive, very high-class call-girl for my 16th birthday. She 'serviced' only the very elite of society. I spent two days and two night under her tender ministrations. It cost him a fortune."

"How considerate of him," Skinner said dryly. "Promise me that you'll wait until the boys are 18 before you send them for 'servicing'."

Krycek lifted his bottle again, "Hail the great god Priapas," he intoned solemnly.

"Blasphemy, and with a Priest in the house," Skinner reprimanded him, though amused. Krycek snorted, unimpressed. "What about with a man? Not counting your 'initiation'." "Same two days. She wanted a complete accounting for any past teenage groping so I told her about my history. She immediately sent for a friend of hers to join us. She believed in getting back onto a horse after falling off. Lucky for me, the guy was a decent size but he wasn't a horse."

Skinner frowned; the numbers weren't adding up right.

"But you were 16. How old were you when the other.. happened?"

"Rape, Walter, you can say it. I was 14. Man was pissed at Pop for some reason so he and a couple of his buddies cornered the old man's kid with the pretty girl eyes." Krycek inspected the remainder of his beer and gulped it. Skinner was justifiably shocked.

"Did you tell anyone?" he asked.

"Yes. Spender. Right after I made my first three kills," he said dispassionately. Skinner ran his mind over the time period. He had been married to Sharon for about a year and a half when Alex was about 14. He suddenly recalled Sharon buying a birthday present in the spring. He was never even able to remember the time of year for Krycek's birthday until this moment.

"I remember you being in the hospital for a while. Sharon was worried. I thought it was appendicitis."

Krycek nodded. "Actually, those bastards perforated my bowel. I needed surgery. Old man told everyone that it was my appendix. He actually had his doctors remove it at the same time they fixed the tear."

Skinner swallowed the rest of his beer. "Another thing to apologize for; I should have been there for you. My own wife's little brother and I never even tried. I should have been a better brother-in-law."

Krycek inclined his head toward Skinner's hand.

"You still are my brother-in-law," he reminded Skinner. Skinner looked down at his left hand, the gold band shining on his finger. "We all have things in our past that we would change if we could, but we can't. Use my philosophy, Walter," Krycek leaned forward, about to impart great wisdom.

"If you can't do anything about it, just say 'fuck it!' and move on."

He found everyone sitting in the kitchen when he went back down, so he sat himself at the table.

"Did you yell at Alex?" Ivan asked. Skinner lifted him onto his lap.

"Yes, I did," he admitted.

"Did you say sorry?"

"Yes, I did."

Ivan kissed his cheek and hopped down to go and play. Mulder pushed his coffee over for Skinner to share.

"Is it alright if I go up?" Marc asked. Skinner nodded.

"Knock first, and respect his wishes if he wants to be alone."

Skinner slouched in the chair, his head thrown back.

"Is he alright?" Mulder asked quietly.

"I think so. We had a good talk. I even learned a few things about him that I never knew. Dom, why are you being so hard on Marc?" Skinner switched to the other person without a pause or lifting his head. Dom contemplated his coffee.

"Religious reasons aside, I changed his diapers. Watching a baby grow into a man, and having all your hopes and dreams for him thrown out the window in a single instant, is a shattering experience. What would you do if one of your boys moved onto a path that you knew deep in your heart was wrong?"

Skinner straightened up and looked Dom in the eyes.

"I think your reason is an incredibly self-centered one and has more to do with what you want than what he wants. I hope that I love and trust my boys enough that they will make the decisions for their lives that they have to make, and that I will respect their choices. And no matter what they do, I hope that they love and trust me enough to know that I will always be here for them."

"Very correct," Dom responded.

"Also very true," Skinner said. "Fox, I need to go into the city for a while."

Mulder inclined his head, accepting Skinner's need without asking for an explanation. Skinner took his car keys from the keyrack on the wall. He bent down and kissed Mulder, pouring his passion for the younger man into the act, before backing away and going up to his room for his wallet.

Just after Skinner left, Mulder noticed the registered envelope sitting on the table and picked it up, turning it curiously. It was from a lawyer's office in Seattle.

Ninety minutes later, Skinner was jabbing a fist hard at a bag hanging from the ceiling. Sweat poured off of him as he punched right and then left, grunting with the effort. None of the other men offered to spar with him; they could see the bad head-space that he was

in. He pictured a face and swung at it, feeling the adrenaline rush through his muscles and his body. Face after face was punched at until his arms began to grow weary.

He stood under the shower, hands on the wall in front of his as he let the hot stream cascade down his back. He was so sick and tired of all the crap, of having to explain himself to various clergy, to his new family, of being on guard. It was no one's fucking business what went on in his house!

A couple other men came in, quickly showered off, and left. He wondered if they would have used the shower if they knew that he showered quite often with another man. Skinner noticed nothing more until a hand reached around and shut off the water. He turned to bark at the intruder. Krycek.

"What are you doing here?" Skinner asked. Krycek handed him a towel.

"Helping you find trouble. I figured it was my specialty so I left Fox to watch his kids."

Skinner frowned and dried his face and head.

"I don't need help finding trouble."

Krycek turned to walk out of the shower. "I could go a long way with that statement," he said over his shoulder, his boots echoing on the tile. Skinner must have really been out of it not to have heard Krycek enter.

Half an hour later, Skinner was attempting to corner the 8 ball. He missed.

"Ha!" Krycek raised a triumphant fist. Skinner handed over five dollars. He never claimed pool as one of his accomplishments, so he bet double or nothing on the darts. He was always a better shot than Krycek.

"I made a discovery today," Skinner said. Krycek's dart landed at the edge of the outer circle.

"And what would that be?" he asked. Skinner's dart was centered.

"I discovered that my family is human."

Krycek stopped his aim to look briefly at Skinner.

"Welcome to Earth," he said, sending his dart flying. "Let's see if you were paying attention to the Gospel of Alex; what's my first Commandment?"

Skinner paused in taking a gulp from his beer bottle.

"Fuck it?" he said after a moment. Krycek patted him on the head.

"Very good! What's my second Commandment?"

Skinner had no idea so he shrugged.

"How would you know, I haven't told you," Krycek said. "Alex's second Commandment is –confession is good for the soul. So confess; have you ever done Scully?"

Skinner choked on his beer.

"No, why?" he asked between coughs. Krycek smacked helpfully between the shoulder blades. Skinner was sure his teeth were going to fly out.

"Better question is why not? She's hot, Walter."

Skinner's darts all crowded the center of the board.

"I'm aware of her temperature," he said. "Honestly? I've never asked her because of timing. She was with Fox, I was AD; I was with Fox, she's AD. We have children in the house, delicate job positions to consider..."

Krycek held up a hand.

"Let me get this straight, excuse the term. If there were no kids and no sensitive jobs, you'd ask her?" Krycek didn't believe it.

"Sure." Skinner waited for Krycek to shoot.

"With or without Fox?"

"Both."

Krycek's dart hit the wall. "You? A threesome?!"

"If they both agreed, yes. I'm a little anal retentive, Alex, I'm not a prude."

"Can you picture Scully's face as she watches you and Fox fucking?" Krycek laughed, bending over to slap his thigh in his glee. "I'm sorry I ruined your orgy plans," he said between chuckles. Skinner had a vision of the twins in 35 years time. He hoped he was still around to see them. "Let me know when you need the space for a party, I know people with the proper settings that you can borrow. I'll expect an invite, though, that's one show I don't want to miss." It was Skinner's turn to hit the hall.

"Have you...?" he asked. Krycek shrugged and tossed a dart.

"Sure, I've been to some really great parties. This is what happens when old fogies settle down and start a family, Walter," he wagged a finger at Skinner. "They miss out on the best parties."

"And what do you think you'd do at an orgy with me and Fox? Assuming that Scully would even let you through the door." Skinner asked. Krycek slinked over to him and put an arm around his shoulder.

"What do you think I'd do with you naked at my feet?" he asked teasingly. "You in that gym shower is going to supply a hell of a lot of fantasy material." He nipped at Skinner's ear.

Skinner flushed and shoved Krycek off him.

"Hey! This ain't no fag bar!" came a yell from the tables.

Since Krycek had chosen the worst bar in the worst part of town to swish into, Skinner knew it was only a matter of time before one of the greasy leather clad porkers took exception to Krycek's wiggling butt. It took an entire forty minutes.

"It isn't?" Krycek asked in amazement. "Sorry, sweet cheeks, I took one look at you and thought I was in fag heaven!"

And the fight was on.

The loud mouthed biker came at Krycek with a bottle and a roar as others grabbed cue sticks, chairs, knives and chains. Considering Krycek's hand to hand combat was almost as bad as Mulder's, Skinner knew that this was a bad idea. A table flew past his head and smashed into the mirror behind the bar. The smell of alcohol immediately filled the air. Krycek tossed a cue stick to Skinner and they both blocked and swung at their attackers. Skinner's stick broke in half over a head, so he swung out his fist. The man went down. Skinner shook his head in disappointment; glass jaw. Unfortunately, their fun was put to a halt by the police very quickly.

"Officer, we were minding our own business, just playing darts, a couple of beers, buddies talking, when that man decided he liked my ass," Krycek said indignantly, pointing at the greasy biker lying semi-conscious on the floor. "He wouldn't take no for an answer and he touched me. What was I supposed to do? I clocked him like any real man would."

Skinner verified Krycek's story.

"That's a fucking lie!" one of the women spat out. Krycek gave the officer Ivan's innocent dimples and glittering eyes.

"I should let you both stew in here until morning and hand you over to Mulder!"

The officer had run their ID's. They found nothing on Krycek, big surprise, but they took one look at Skinner's return, straightened fast enough for spines to crack, and called Assistant Director Scully of the FBI who now glared at them from the other side of the bars.

The bikers were in another cell, for which Skinner was exceedingly grateful, since Krycek insisted on cuddling close and blowing kisses to the other men. Skinner had to slap his hand a couple of times from wandering but that didn't slow Krycek down from playing with fire.

"It was a simple misunderstanding," Skinner told Scully. She put her hands on her hips and shifted to the other foot.

"You and him, in a biker bar, is no misunderstanding," she quickly threw back.

"Don't I get a lawyer?" Krycek complained. Scully turned her glare on to him.

"And which charge over the past forty years would you like to plea bargain for first?" she asked with saccharin politeness.

"Never mind," Krycek sank back onto the bench next to Skinner. They looked up at Scully like two little boys brought before the school principal. She shook her head in disbelief.

"Most men at least have enough sanity to take their mid-life crisis out on an affair with a twenty year old bimbo, not pick fights at a biker bar. Go home," she ordered them. She turned and stalked out of the holding pen, gesturing to the guard to release them.

"Were we just told to leave town or else?" Krycek asked Skinner.

"Home, Alex!" Skinner said forcefully.

The burger joint was in full swing as kids 18-25 danced to the juke box, ate burgers and downed cokes and beers. The music was loud, the waitresses rude and the burgers the best greasy burgers Skinner had ever had. Skinner wasn't sure if felt more out of place at the biker bar or here with the kids. Krycek had watched the young adults dancing for a while before beginning to compare dancing styles throughout the decades and in different countries.

"You don't dance!" Skinner said in disbelief.

"Of course I do," Krycek assured him. "I got dragged around to state functions most of my life by Smokey. He didn't want me to embarrass him so he sent me to finishing school when I was 17. I've danced with queens, and I don't mean Fox."

Skinner threw a fry at him.

"There's something to be said for formal dancing," Krycek waxed with a waving of his wrist. "Not like this," he gestured toward the bodies jerking and jumping in time with the rock music. "This is fun, yes, but nations have negotiated contracts over a perfectly timed waltz. These kids wouldn't know what to do with a 3-4 beat if it hit them in the face."

As if cued, the next song came on the juke box. A few hearty souls tried to dance but soon sat down.

"See?" Krycek crowed. He stood up just as the door opened. "Not only do schools nowadays not even teach the basics," he said loudly, drawing attention. "They don't even teach civilized behavior." Some of his audience began to hoot and cheer him on. Krycek turned to his admirers as Scully watched in disbelief.

"This, boys and girls, is a 3-4 beat," he pointed over his shoulder to the juke box. "1,2,3,1,2,3, get it? It's a waltz. You don't drag your partner over the floor, you ask her politely for a dance. May I have this dance?" he asked with a small bow, holding out his hand to Scully. Scully looked askance at Skinner who shrugged helpfully. Dubious, she placed her hand in Krycek's. Several of the young men whistled and cat-called.

"You take her GENTLY into your arms," he instructed them. "Do NOT grab her, nor do you paw her and hump her like the dogs you are." The boys boo-ed and the girls shrieked, yelling their agreements.

"You're drunk," Scully accused.

"Slightly buzzed," Krycek conceded. "Your left hand gently holds her right," he continued as Scully placed her hand in his palm. "Do not mangle her delicate fingers, allow them to simply rest in your palm. Your right hand rests on her waist, NOT her butt," he glared at the young men who howled in protest.

"Yeah!" a young lady yelled and knocked her boyfriend's shoulder.

Scully's left hand rested on Krycek's right shoulder. She was suddenly conscious of the fettered strength in him, his corded muscles ready to spring at any given moment. Her face flushed as a heat raced through her. Krycek took a step forward and she automatically followed. Scully was shocked to discover that he actually could dance, and gracefully at that. She and her sister and brothers had learned as children; Navy bases had formal cotillions quite often.

He glided her across the floor, counting out loud for his rowdy audience.

"1,2,3,1,2,3, see? It may be a new and popular song, but the beats haven't changed since the first heart began to beat." He focused his attention on their feet, exaggerating the steps for the young people to follow.

One of the girls jumped to her feet and dragged her boyfriend out onto the floor. She thumped him into straightening his back and getting their hands in the proper positions. They faltered on the first step as she stepped forward instead of back and got her toes squished. She stopped and took a close look at Krycek and Scully. Krycek obligingly stopped and started over again so that the young lady could see.

Several other couples reluctantly stood up, the young men figuring that if this dark and dangerous dude in the leather jacket could do a hokey dance with the first beautiful woman that walks in the door, they could do it, too. One girl insisted that her boyfriend ask her properly for a dance. He reddened as his friends shouted and laughed, but eventually held out his hand with a mumbled plea.

The waitresses and the cook watched in disbelief and began to wonder about possible food poisoning behind the behavior of the Stepford Children.

Skinner watched from their table with amusement. He knew that Krycek had a few beers in him, or he would never be attempting to give a dancing lesson nor would he be waltzing Scully around the floor. In public. Skinner had blackmail material. Too bad he didn't have a camera, Mulder would never believe it. The song ended and he noticed that Scully was a bit flustered as she stepped away. He really couldn't blame her, Krycek was a sight to behold when he was being charming. He wondered if Scully would ever overcome her hatred for Krycek; with all the sparks they generate, the bed would probably ignite.

She sat next to Skinner and took his iced tea, gulping it.

"How'd you know we were here, Dana?" Skinner asked.

"I didn't actually think that you'd go home right away, so I had you tailed," she admitted. "Your shadow thought that your being in here was strange enough to tell me about it."

Krycek sat down and lowered his head onto the table with a groan. Scully reached into her purse and took out a small bottle, deliberately slamming it onto the table.

"Ow!" Krycek winced and grabbed his head in pain. "You're a cruel woman, Scully," he informed her as he delicately opened the bottle and shook out a couple of aspirin.

"What are you doing, Walter?" she asked him. Skinner signaled for another glass of tea.

"I needed some down time. Alex thought he'd be able to help me find trouble."

"You don't need help," she said. Both men chuckled.

"That's what he said," Krycek told her.

"Un-huh. And what does Mulder think about this?" she waved a finger between the men.

"It was either this or kill Dominic and Alex."

Skinner told her about their run-in earlier in the day. When he was done, Scully was frowning in confusion.

"I thought you were with Emilia?" she asked Krycek. He took a sip of iced tea and made a face.

"I have fun with Emilia," he said. "I'm not 'with' anyone. Can you really picture me going steady?"

She honestly couldn't. "And she doesn't mind that you see other people?"

Krycek looked at her steadily. "Not that I need to answer to you, but Emilia doesn't need an excuse to enjoy her body or anyone else's body, and neither do I. If you really want to know what she thinks about it, you should ask her, not me. I like sex, so does she. Neither of us have a problem asking for what we want, or even setting up a fantasy scene. It's fun." His expression dared her to ask another personal question. She didn't.

"My turn," he said. "Have you ever had sex with more than one person at a time?"

Scully flushed and avoided looking at Skinner. She shook her head.

"You should try it," Krycek advised her. "A lot less performance pressure, more possibilities, no one dreaming of white weddings, just a night of mindless orgasms induced by the man or woman of your choice."

Skinner could feel Scully tensing beside him as she studied her glass. Krycek was deliberately baiting her.

"Alex," he warned.

"What? I'd like to see her get off that pedestal for once and join the living."

Scully abruptly pushed back and jumped up, racing out of the diner. The other customers watched her and then looked back at the men before going about their business.

"That was incredibly cruel, Alex," Skinner informed him. "You might as well have hauled off and put a knife in her gut, it would have hurt her less."

"Bullshit, Walter, I'm tired of her constantly judging me! She's waiting with baited breath for me to fuck up, she practically has an orgasm just thinking about arresting me. She's always been a bitch with me, has been from day one, and nothing I do pleases her!" he smacked the table, rattling the glasses.

"Why should pleasing Scully concern you?" Skinner asked quietly. Krycek waited for a moment before stomping out of the diner. Skinner puffed out a breath. Maybe he should just go home before a leg followed both the feet he had already shoved into his own mouth during the course of the day.

"...and then he left. I don't know where he went to. I tried to call Scully, but she isn't answering her phone, and she didn't answer her door when I went over." Skinner looked into the water, flicking his finger at his reflection. Mulder put his arms around him, pulling Skinner back against his chest. He cupped some of the warm water and poured it over Skinner's chest.

"I'll call her tomorrow," he said, pressing his mouth to Skinner's shoulder. "Let Alex cool down. I don't think that you said anything wrong, he gets a little one-tracked and sometimes needs a fact shoved into his face before he takes notice."

"Must be genetic," Skinner muttered. Mulder splashed him and reached down to grab Skinner between the legs.

"Apologize!" Mulder insisted as he squeezed. Water sloshed over the side of the tub as the men wrestled.

"Make me," Skinner murmured, staring into Mulder's hazel eyes. Mulder reached between Skinner's legs again as Skinner eased back against his chest.

Just after midnight, Skinner put his glasses on to read the letter he had forgotten about. He frowned, a little confused.

"What?" Mulder asked sleepily. He curled around Skinner's hip and snuggled his face against Skinner's warm waist.

"I call Washington tomorrow. Washington State. I have something waiting at my father's old lawyer's office for me. From an uncle in Hungary. I'll have them send it down here to Harry's office."

"I didn't know you had relatives in Hungary," Mulder murmured.

"Neither did I. Although whether or not you could say he was still in Hungary is semantics. He's dead."

Chapter 15: Just Have Fun!

Note: special thanks to Kosh in Italy for the language lessons. There are just some words that can't be found in a dictionary. Gratzì, cara.

The day was damp and rainy and everyone was bored. The boys had spent the morning working in their books and were now prepared for a movie in the family room with Natti. They were in a mood for reality, so Natti popped in a brand new NOVA tape on the Clones. The men thought that it was a good start, getting the boys used to the idea and to see the Clones in a positive light. It would be helpful for the future discussion they knew had to happen when the boys were old enough. Krycek had taken the easy way out of the rain; after receiving a phone call and spending just a few minutes speaking Arabic to someone, he left town.

"We need one of those Star Trek universal translators," Mulder had grumbled. Skinner and Mulder spent some time working quietly together on their computers, sitting opposite each other at the work table. Once in a while, Skinner would glance up, amused at the sight of Mulder's glasses perched on the end of his nose.

"Daddy?" Adam came in and leaned against Mulder's back, his chin on his father's shoulder.

"Hmmm?" Mulder continued to type on the report that he was reading over.

"You know that girl Jessica? She's older, 13."

"Who? No, honey, I don't know Jessica. What about her?"

Adam sighed. "Nothing. She's strange."

"Everyone has something eccentric in their nature. What do you find strange about her?" Mulder took his glasses off and pulled Adam around and onto his lap. Adam had begun to enter the 'I'm a big boy now and hugs and kisses are for babies' stage that boys get into. Since Adam had been clingy all day, Mulder was taking advantage of the time and getting in his hugs and kisses while he could.

"She feels weird. Like something is going to happen when she's around," Adam confessed.

"That feeling is called anticipation, the verb is 'to anticipate'. Is this happening a good feeling or a bad feeling?" Mulder asked.

"A bad feeling." Adam leaned his head against his father's chest and snuggled in.

"Has she hurt anyone? Or tried to hurt anyone?" Mulder asked. Skinner glanced up.

"No," Adam admitted. "She's nice. I don't mean that she's going to hurt someone, just that something bad is going to happen."

Skinner had begun to wonder if Adam had inherited more from his father than simply the hair, the lower lip and the smarts. Every once in a while, Adam would appear just before they called him, or stare at the phone just before it rang and his guesses were just a little more correct than the average. Skinner wondered what sort of fireworks puberty would bring.

"Well, there isn't really anything we can do unless something does happen," Mulder was saying. "We'll watch out, though, alright?"

Adam nodded, content that his father would take care of the problem. Mulder set Adam upright and looked at him with a mock-stern expression.

"Tell me you love me," he demanded. Adam sucked in his lips and zipped them shut, shaking his head. Mulder tipped him backwards until Adam's hair was brushing the floor. He took a slim ankle and yanked the sock off.

"You better tell me," he warned.

"No," Adam giggled, shaking his head. Mulder took the foot and bit the trim arch. Adam screeched with laughter. Skinner smiled at them.

"Alright!" Adam yelled. "ILOVEYOUILOVEYOU!"

Mulder pulled him upright. Adam's face was flushed from the blood rush. Mulder kissed him and hugged him tightly, burying his face in his son's hair and neck, breathing deeply of Adam's unique scent. Making a memory, Skinner remembered a line from a movie. He understood the act; he was positive that he could tell the twins apart in the dark by smell alone.

A knock came to the door and Skinner got up to answer it while Mulder loved his son.

"Can I help you?" he asked the rain dampened stranger on his porch.

"Hope so. Is this Fox Mulder's residence?" the man asked, shaking his jacket.

"Ali?!" Mulder came to the door, hearing the voice. He was carrying Adam on his back. The men bear hugged, Adam sliding off his father's back to avoid the clasping hands. Skinner sent Adam to fetch a clean towel for the man to dry off with.

"Walter, this is Alistair Katowsky. We went to college together."

Oxford; that explained the man's accent, Skinner thought. Adam came running back in and handed Alistair a towel.

"Thank you, lad. That mouth; has to be yours, Fox," the man commented.

"Yes, this is my son Adam. And this is my partner, Walter Skinner."

Skinner shook hands with the man. Extremely few people called Mulder Fox. The twins came wandering in, having heard the door and the commotion. Their guest stopped drying his hair and stared.

"I must have hit my head, I'm seeing double," he declared. The boys giggled. Mulder introduced them.

There was something about their guest that Skinner found familiar but he couldn't place it. The melodic tenor voice, light brown hair touching his shoulders, facial features unusually chiseled for a Brit.

Mulder led them all back into the livingroom and gathered on the couch and chairs.

"You look like Ali Kat," Pavel declared. The man looked amazed.

"I do? Well, fancy that!" Alistair finger-combed his hair into some semblance of order. Skinner stared at the man.

"You are Ali Kat!" he said in astonishment.

"Guilty!" Ali grinned, not at all looking guilty. Skinner was trying not to go all goose-girl, after all, he had met presidents and royalty. But he had never met a world famous rock legend. Sitting in his livingroom?

"Why didn't you tell me you went to school with Ali Kat?" he confronted Mulder. Mulder shrugged.

"You never asked. Besides, he was just plain old Alistair Katowsky back then, rogue and all around trouble-maker."

"Me? A rogue?" Ali protested. "I seem to recall a certain bookworm who led the no-nukes demonstration on campus. And was almost expelled for it."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," Mulder said with quiet indignation.

Natti brought out a tray with coffee for the men and milk and cookies for the children. Mulder introduced her.

"The only woman in a house of five males?" Ali asked incredulously. "You're for sainthood, luv."

Natti waved a hand at him. "Six males, actually, one isn't here at the moment. As for sainthood, the Pope isn't returning my calls. I think he has some sort of strange prejudice against Russian Pagans. Or is it females in general? I forget."

Ali barked out a surprised laugh. He took her hand and placed a loud smack on it.

"Come and work for me! I have six children and I can pay you a hell of a lot more than this poor bastard can," he declared, pointing at Mulder.

"I'll remember that when it comes time to ask for a raise," she said, with a teasing glance at Mulder and Skinner. She went into the kitchen to take an inventory; it was shopping day.

"Six kids?" Mulder asked. "I think you're taking the command to repopulate the earth a little too seriously."

"Only three are mine, the others are adopted," Ali explained. "I love them all, though, sometimes I even forget they're adopted. You want to talk about over-population, give a call to Sting, I think he and Trudy are running their own little tribe."

The boys were busy dunking their cookies in the milk. Ivan generously held out a sodden piece to Ali. Without a second thought, the man opened up and let Ivan pop it in. Skinner was convinced; Ali wasn't just a father, he was a Dad.

He did find it disconcerting, however, that this person in his livingroom could pick up the phone and call Sting.

"Walter, I sent Ali a copy of Marc's demo tape and our handfasting video, so that he could see Marc on a stage," Mulder said. "I didn't tell you because I didn't want to get your hopes up; Ali's a busy guy and I already felt bad about taking advantage of our friendship."

"Not at all, Fox," Ali assured him.

"So, since you're here, does that count for interest in Marc?" Skinner asked. Ali nodded.

"Yes, very much so. I'd like to meet him, give him a listen some more. Do you know if he reads music?"

Both men nodded. "Yes, and he writes," Skinner said.

"Marc is our cousin," Pavel informed Ali. "He's really nice and he sings Puff and Spider with us."

Ali looked for clarification which Mulder provided.

"Oh, yes! I know Puff and Spider, my kids like them, too," he told the boys.

"Really?" Pavel asked in amazement. "How come you don't sing them on your CDs?"

Ali opened his mouth but shut it again. He thought about it.

"You know? That's a good idea. I can make a CD just for kids and I can sing Puff and Spider on it. Which one are you?"

"Pavel," Pavel answered, wiggling with an attack of the shys.

"Well then, Pavel, if I make a CD just for kids, would you and your brother and Adam come and sing Puff and Spider with me?"

The boys surged up and rushed Skinner and Mulder, jumping and dancing in their excitement.

"Can we can we can we?????!!!!!" they yelled. Seeing no reason why not, the men agreed and were rewarded with exuberant hugs. They then rushed off into the kitchen to tell Natti.

"That was nice of you, Ali," Skinner said, thanking him.

"Not at all," Ali waved him off. "It really is a good idea, don't know why I didn't think of it myself."

The boys raced back through the livingroom and up the stairs.

"Walk!" both Mulder and Skinner said loudly, but without any hopes of actually getting the boys to slow down. Ali chuckled.

"I'm going into town for groceries," Natti informed them as she came into the room. "I'll take the boys with me, get them out of your hair for a while. So to speak." She looked at Skinner's dome but didn't elaborate.

"You're a riot, Natti," Skinner said dryly.

Promised with Chucky Cheese, the boys tore their rooms apart looking for sneakers, galoshes and raincoats. Within 5 minutes, they were waddling like little yellow ducklings out into the rain behind Natti.

Another five minutes and Marc stood at the door, guitar case in hand. When he saw their guest, the guitar case dropped to the floor with a protesting twang.

"Careful there, lad, that's your future," Ali teased. Marc flushed and picked the case up. Skinner introduced them.

"Why don't you take Ali downstairs and show off a little?" Skinner suggested. Marc looked like a deer caught in the headlights, but he nervously did as his older cousin suggested.

Skinner waited until they were gone before turning to Mulder.

"Thank you for giving him this chance and why does Ali call you Fox?"

Mulder chuckled and took Skinner's face between his hands, planting a kiss on him.

"You're welcome and he was my first guy."

Skinner knew he looked like a fish. "But he's married!" he protested.

"So were you, what's your point?" Mulder responded. Skinner flushed and shook his head.

"Nothing. Sorry." He scrubbed at his face.

"You know that thing you like me to do with my tongue?" Mulder asked, leaning in close. Skinner nodded. "Thank Ali," he whispered, taking a nibble out of Skinner's bottom lip.

They got back to work on their various reports, listening to the music floating up from the family room. Marc sang parts of various songs, slow, fast, some of Ali's, some of his own. Sometimes he would stop, obviously receiving instruction from Ali before starting again. After a couple of hours, Marc hustled back up the stairs.

"I... I'm going with Ali to his home! He has a brownstone across from Central Park! Fox, I...!" At a loss for words, Marc swooped, tipping Mulder backward in his chair and planting a loud kiss on his mouth. "Whatever happens, thank you!"

Mulder licked his lips and pursed them. "You know? That was pretty good." Skinner shot a balled up piece of paper at him.

After Marc and Ali left, Skinner and Mulder decided on a movie since they had the TV to themselves for a couple more hours.

"Take care of my cousin," Skinner had instructed Ali, shaking his hand.

"Promise. My wife is going to take one look at him and adopt him. Fox has my home phone, you're welcome to call and talk with him anytime," Ali invited him. "I'm going to see how he does with my band. I think he has the magic, but the question is does he have the stamina. I'll get him toughened up, teach him some business savvy and slowly turn him loose."

That sounded like a good idea to Skinner; ease Marc into the music world instead of simply tossing him to the sharks to sink or swim on his own. Too many good musicians had been one-hit wonders, fallen to band in-fighting, bad management, the sophomore curse, and flying too high too fast and falling to a crash and burn.

Ali turned and hugged Mulder. "I'd kiss you if I wasn't sure that I wanted to be in one piece for my next concert." He gave a scared look in Skinner's direction.

"Grrrr," Skinner said half-heartedly. Mulder chuckled and brushed Ali's mouth anyway before sending him on his way. Skinner wasn't sure how he felt about that. He trusted Mulder but felt his gut slammed.

In the family room, Skinner laid on the couch while Mulder set up the DVD.

"Push over," Mulder said, laying in front of him. Skinner pressed back as far as he could while Mulder made himself comfortable in front. They spooned snugly as Mulder pressed the play button. Skinner held him tight, his right hand laced with Mulder's over Mulder's stomach, his left hand carding Mulder's soft, dark hair. Skinner nuzzled the hair and could feel Mulder smile and squeeze his fingers. Suddenly the movie had lost its appeal. Skinner found his way to Mulder's ear and took a nip out of the tip and around the rim. Mulder tilted his head, inviting a more thorough exploration so Skinner kissed his way down the side of Mulder's neck until he found a particularly velvety spot. He took a gentle bite and sucked at it, nibbling and licking until Mulder gave a small whimper. Skinner looked at the purple mark and gave it a final lick of approval before turning Mulder's head sideways and capturing his mouth. Mulder tried to turn but Skinner held him fast, pinning him with a leg over Mulder's. He released Mulder's hand and slid his own into the front of Mulder's sweats, through the crinkly hair, wrapping around the warm genitals. Mulder moaned into Skinner's mouth and clutched at his forearm. Skinner rolled the soft penis and balls in his hand, knowing just how to get Mulder hard. He felt an odd sense of accomplishment when Mulder's penis began to grow and harden in his palm. He shifted his hips a little and rubbed his own growing erection against Mulder's ass as he stroked the man's cock.

He caressed Mulder's tongue with his own as he enjoyed the weight and feel of the hard organ in his hand. He moaned and plunged his tongue deeper into Mulder's mouth. He vaguely registered the TV being shut off and the remote dropping to the floor. Part of Skinner was aware that he was behaving like an aggressive alpha, a barbarian in a far

corner of his mind was shouting 'mine!' in a challenging bellow. Mulder tried to move, to participate, but Skinner held him in a vice grip, almost growling as he continued to rub himself against Mulder and stroke the cock that he felt tightening up for release. Skinner squeezed firmly, stroking insistently until Mulder cried out into his mouth. Skinner felt a hot burst of liquid against his hand. When he had rung the last of the semen from Mulder, he withdrew his hand and brought it to his mouth, licking the salty cream while they both breathed hard, catching their breath. Mulder grabbed the hand and drew his tongue across Skinner's palm. Mulder's cheeks were wet and Skinner wiped at them with his free hand. Skinner lifted his leg and allowed Mulder to fall to the floor. Mulder got to his knees and tugged at Skinner's sweats, pulling them down in the front just enough to bare a thick patch of dark hair and his erection. Skinner turned onto his back and watched Mulder take him into his mouth. He caught his breath as he felt himself enveloped in the moist heat. He put a hand on the back of Mulder's neck, stroking his thumb over the small purple mark of possession as Mulder sucked at him, a calf eagerly pulling for the good stuff he knows is in there. Already at the edge from rubbing against Mulder, Skinner didn't hold back, going with the tidal wave that was surging through him and crashing into Mulder's mouth. Mulder drank greedily, refusing to allow a drop to escape, releasing Skinner only when his organ began to soften.

Mulder licked him clean and tucked him back into the sweats. He lay down, half draped over Skinner, resting his head on Skinner's chest as they comforted each other. "I love you," Mulder whispered huskily against Skinner's chest, snuggling in. Skinner held him close, unprotesting of the man's weight. He took Mulder's left hand in his right, touching the gold band, falling asleep with whispers of 'mine' echoing in his head.

They awoke hours later to find that it was dark and someone had thrown a blanket over them. Without saying a word, Mulder reached down and into Skinner's sweats, stroking Skinner's penis until he was hard. Mulder pushed the blanket aside and slid to the floor again. He turned his back to Skinner and pulled at his sweats to bare his ass before lowering his face to the floor and waiting patiently. Skinner knelt behind him, accepting the offering, baring only his cock and entering Mulder slowly, mindful of the fact that Mulder was not lubed. He hissed at the tightness and waited for Mulder's quivering muscles to relax before riding to completion and filling Mulder with his seed.

Twice more they made love before morning; once when they returned to their room and once in the shower. Before he left for work, Mulder kissed Skinner and said,

"I would never cheat on you."

Skinner nodded. "I know, Fox. I love you. I trust you."

The boys had watched curiously as they ate their oatmeal and blueberries. They knew something was up, but it was one of those strange grown-up somethings. Mulder gave

them their good-byes and left with an admonishment to behave for Uncle Walter and Natti.

"Walter, you're corrupting my son!"

Skinner smirked at Carlo's mock-indignant tone. "I would think that living in New York City with overly Italian Italians was corrupt enough," he responded.

"Oh, yeah, strike at the heart why don't you? Fottiti. Listen, I actually called to tell you that I finally got an answer from the Board of Ed about the Charter idea. Being in Virginia, you have a major problem with it; according to Virginia law, you can only start a Charter school with the blessings of the local School Board. Which means, you have to convince them to allow you to take business away from them. Virginia is the 3rd worst state in the union for Charters. Sorry, caro. All I can suggest is that you urge the local board to hire better teachers for your public school and to toughen up the curriculum and standards. Most schools use the basic national standards and don't try any harder. Like a lazy student saying 'I got a C, average is fine'." Carlo snorted his displeasure at the image. "I tell you, if one of my kids settled for..."

"Carlo!" Skinner interrupted the oncoming rant.

"Si?"

"I have a problem. I made a small fuck-up. Actually more of a semi-big fuck-up. How do I apologize to Fox without it seeming trite?"

"Well, if he was a girl, I'd say send flowers, but you can't..."

"Perfect!" Skinner interrupted him. "Thanks, Carlo, let me call you back." Flowers –why didn't he think of that? He dug out the phone book and called a florist close to the Hoover.

After walking the boys to school, and being joined halfway by Adam's little friend Jennifer, (and watching them make calf eyes at each other the entire way), Skinner checked in with his office. There was nothing new going on and his paperwork was done, so he sat on the porch, chatting with passersby. KC was doing well, according to Ruvin. She was taking turns riding with him and John, learning about the town and meeting the people. According to Ruvin, a few of the more macho he-men were not very impressed, but so far none had tried to push any of her buttons.

Upon discovering that cousin KC had moved into town, Marc had promptly taken up residence in the second bedroom of Kyle's house that KC was renting. Tensions eased between Marc and Dom, allowing them to talk peacefully with each other. When KC

wasn't working, she and Marc could be found hanging out together doing whatever it is that friends do together.

"Gay men make the best girlfriends," she had remarked to Skinner. "You don't have to worry that they're going to try and cop a feel, they're not going to making a play for your friends, they have better taste in fashion and can be counted on to be sympathetic toward 'men are pigs' days."

Skinner had chuckled at the time, but he could see her point; he was a pig last night. He wouldn't be surprised if Mulder handed him his pillow and sent him to the couch. He wasn't normally a jealous person, he didn't know what got into him.

"Walter."

He hadn't noticed Harry ambling up the street toward him.

"Morning, Harry," Skinner greeted him. They shook hands and Harry sat at Skinner's invitation. Harry put a box on the table and a stack of papers on top of the box.

"Sign these and you can have this," he said. Skinner took the proffered pen.

"What am I signing?" Skinner asked.

"Papers verifying that you're you."

Skinner signed them, quickly glancing over them. They were simple identification forms for receiving a battered, old box.

A car door shut and he looked up to see John and KC walking toward the building with Manuel Garcia in tow.

"Put a!" Manuel shouted. KC yanked on his cuffed arms.

"None-a that, you," she ordered.

They greeted him and John went in to begin the report.

"Phew!" Harry waved at the air as the men walked past. "You could start a fire on those fumes."

"What's with Manuel?" Skinner asked KC.

"Besides being drunk as a skunk? Seems he got into a fight with the Mizzez, which John says is normal, but this time he took a swing at her. Right on the front lawn. Neighbors called it in."

Harry decided he didn't hear nothing nor see nothing –until Manuel woke up sober. He took the papers and left the police to their policing.

KC pulled up a chair and sat next to Skinner.

"Alright, tell Auntie K all about it," she said.

"About what?"

"Whatever it is that you did. You look like a man that fucked up, knows he fucked up, and is waiting for the shoe to drop."

How do they do that? he thought. His wife used to be able to do that, too, know when he did something. He stretched out his long legs and plucked at the denim.

"An old friend of Fox's came for a visit yesterday," he admitted.

"I know, Marc told me about it. And?"

"I got jealous." He kicked his heel on the wooden deck.

"And?"

"And what?"

"And.. what did you do?" she looked at him as though he were a slow child.

"I.. well, to use a current phrase.. I topped him. I think that's the correct usage." He had half listened to Mulder and Krycek speaking in 'dungeon' language one day. He was afraid to ask some of the terms; he was even afraid to ask how Mulder knew them.

"That's the correct usage," she confirmed. KC took off her hat and popped him in the chest with it. He crossed his arms in protection and looked at her in shock. "If you were mine, you'd be in the doghouse for a hell of a long time. How was he behaving this morning before leaving for work?"

"He said he was fine and that he loved me," Skinner admitted.

"So you didn't actually hurt him physically," she asked. Skinner shook his head.

"No, I just.. took him." He couldn't look at her. First Emilia, then Scully, and now KC; what was it with these women?

"Did he fight you?"

"No! I would have stopped, I would never rape anyone!" he insisted, shocked that she would even consider it.

"Then maybe it'll be alright," she said. "Maybe he likes to be topped once in a while and he couldn't tell you?" she suggested.

"I don't play those games. I'm a boring lover, really, ask my wife." He ignored the little voice in him that said he did enjoy tying Mulder up and using the feather on him.

"Somehow, I highly doubt that 'boring' is a word that can be applied to you," she said with a twist of her mouth. "The first thing you need to do is to ask yourself what exactly made you jealous of this friend and do something about it. Jealousy is usually caused by a feeling of insecurity. What made you feel insecure around this man? Second, you need to have a long talk with Mulder. He may be hiding some needs out of respect for your personal choices. If he is, that isn't fair to either of you and not healthy for your relationship in the long run."

Skinner turned in his chair to look fully at her. She saw the look and shrugged.

"Who needs a Psych degree when you've got Cosmo magazine?"

He leaned his head backwards and spoke to the overhang.

"First of all, I'm aware of my problem with this man; he's very handsome, sexy, talented, is richer than Midas, and he was Fox's first man. There's nothing I can do to change any of that, I'm aware of that so I'll just have to learn to deal with it. Fox hasn't seen him in a long time, so I guess that should tell me something.

"Second, even if Fox did want to play games in the bedroom, there's only so much we can do with a house full of kids." He had an image of the boys walking into their room to find Mulder tied to the bed.

"Bullshit," KC informed him.

"Excuse me?"

"Bull... shit," she announced. "A) if you're worried about noise, change their rooms around. Mulder has his own little office downstairs across from Natti's room, right? Switch the rooms. Put the twins in the office and move the office upstairs. Put some extra carpeting on the floor, a few decorative throw-rugs soak up a lot of sound. B) couples play games all the time with kids in the house. Don't be inhibited by kids, all it will do is tell them that you're doing something wrong and they will grow up thinking that sex is something secretive, if not wrong all together."

"We're open with the boys," he protested. "We talk to them all the time about it, we kiss in front of them, we don't hide our bodies from them..."

KC shook her head. "I'm not talking about love, Walter, I'm talking about Sex. Now, I'm not suggesting that you actually do anything in front of them, of course not; but they can sense when something isn't as it should be. They watch TV, practically every show is inundated with sex. Just turn on a soap. Some day soon, they will begin to notice that there is a difference and wonder why you don't behave like those other people do. They love you, they look to you for guidance. If they see that you don't do something, then those other people must be wrong. You can't let them grow up thinking sex is wrong. Sex is fun, it doesn't have to get all lovey-dovey and it's alright for them to know that." She patted his hand.

"Listen, I know what I'm talking about," she said. "My mother is 58 and Dad is 62, they still think they're 20. I learned to pull a pillow over my head at night when things got loud and to tease them about waking the dead when we got up for breakfast in the morning. They'd laugh, turn a little red, and kiss each other hot enough to sizzle the bacon. I have 5 brothers and 2 sisters; believe me, they had a grand ol' time 'practicing' for the perfect conception. Bobby is the favorite, Mom said she had the best orgasm conceiving him."

Skinner laughed and KC stood up, pleased with herself. She leaned over and planted a kiss on the top of his head.

"Have fun, Walter," she advised him and went into the station.

After verifying with Scully that Mulder would be home on time, Skinner kicked out Natti and the boys for the evening, sending them on a pizza, ice cream and movie sleep-over party at KC's. The boys raced to dig out their sleeping bags, pillows and fresh jammies. Skinner had started to set the table for two and Natti swatted his hand, taking the plates away from him.

"Not those," she said, putting them back in the cabinet. She handed him another set of plates. "Use these."

He saw that they were her 'good china special occasion' plates.

"Spasiba," he said. She smiled and patted his cheek. She hadn't asked, but like all the women in his life, she seemed to know that something was going on. He was beginning to believe that all women were psychic and that it was the biggest secret kept from men throughout the history of the world.

He checked the oven, noting that the lamb chops were almost perfect and checked the time. A little after 6. He had time for a quick shower and to change his clothes.

Coming back down stairs, he tucked his dress shirt into his slacks, leaving the top three buttons undone. Mulder liked his fur. The slacks were a little tight. Mulder liked his butt. And he left his shoes off. Mulder liked his feet. Which he still hadn't been able to fathom. He had just finished setting the serving dishes on the table and lighting the candles when the door opened.

"What's this?" Mulder asked, putting his briefcase on the couch. "Smells good, candles, no sounds of little feet running to knock me down," he kissed Skinner lightly and set his flower basket on the table, keeping hold of his teddy bear. "Is this a seduction? Because if so, you'll need to get permission from my husband."

"Already been granted," Skinner said. He searched those hazel eyes but could only find bemusement, love and acceptance. He put his arms around Mulder's waist and buried his face in Mulder's neck.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice cracking with pent-up guilt. Mulder put his arms around Skinner's neck, shushing him, holding him for several minutes until Skinner calmed down. Mulder took him by the ears and pulled his head up.

"I told you, you didn't hurt me. I could have stopped you if I wanted to." Skinner found himself being thoroughly kissed. Mulder tore his mouth away when they both needed air. "Let's eat, we can discuss this later."

Skinner nodded and wiped at his face. He sniffed and looked around. He forgot napkins so he turned and headed into the laundry room. It was dark, almost impossible to see, but he knew his way around so he left the light off. The linen napkins were already folded, sitting on top of the dryer. Before he could exit the room, he was shoved up against the washer from behind, the rim of the machine digging into his stomach as he was bent forward.

"What....?"

One arm was yanked backwards and held in a steel grip. He began to struggle until he felt the unmistakable bulge of a groin against his ass. He stopped, trying to catch his breath. A hand reached around to the front and unfastened his pants. They were pulled down roughly, he could hear a seam ripping. He was pushed down further, his face mashed against the cold metal of the machine, his arm still held in the vice grip.

A hand moved behind him and he heard a zipper being lowered. The sound of rapid masturbation was heard. He shut his eyes and tried to calm his breathing. A hand parted one cheek and a thickness pushed at his entrance. He winced at the pain but it subsided as he was pumped into with fast, hard motions. The grunts behind him were loud in his ears. Skinner spread his legs for better balance and his penis pressed up against the washer, the cold of the metal doing nothing to diminish its swelling nor the familiar heat that started to build in his groin. He held on to the edge of the washer with his free hand and pushed

his ass out eagerly to meet the harsh thrusts. The hard cock within him brushed his prostate and he moaned out loud. He wanted more.

His pubes were caught in a gripping fist and he cried out, once, as he was pulled back to meet a slamming thrust. The washer threatened to tip over with the force of their combined weight. The fist released his hair and his penis was encircled and fisted quickly, pulled on with a strength that threatened to pull it off completely. The cock inside of him rammed deep as an orgasm hit, sending a hot blast into his body. He yelled as his own orgasm erupted, coating the side of the washing machine.

Skinner's arm was released and he stretched it slowly, wincing at the kinks and the protesting muscles. A forehead rested against his back, both of them breathing hard, neither of them moving until Skinner felt the softening penis slip out of him. he could feel a warm river on his thighs. The light was turned on and he shut his eyes from the sudden glare. A clean towel was used to wipe him down. He kicked off his torn slacks.

"Why didn't you free yourself?" a soft voice asked behind him.

"I knew it was you," he said. "I know your hands, your scent.. the feel of your penis. I trust you not to...." Skinner spun around and faced Mulder, realization striking as his heart threatened to jump out of his chest. "I.. trust you.. not to hurt me."

Mulder stroked his cheek with a gentle hand.

"Now do you understand?"

They lay in bed, stomachs full, hearts sated. Skinner's cheek rested on Mulder's belly, the fingers of one hand slowly twirling through the sparse chest hair as he opened a small, very old diary from the box. He set the book aside; it was in Hungarian. He picked up an envelope that looked fairly new.

"Walter," Mulder broke the comfortable silence. He set his own book aside. "Why did Ali make you jealous? I've flirted with both Scully and Alex in front of you and it's never bothered you. Granted, I wouldn't do anything with Alex, but I have slept with Scully." Skinner set the envelope down. He turned his head and kissed Mulder's stomach before settling his cheek in again. "I'm not quite sure, Fox," he responded. "Maybe because I realized that he's everything I'm not. He's younger, better looking, rich, and I had a sudden image of you running to him with just the crook of a finger. I know I'm too old to be feeling like that..."

Mulder brushed his mouth with a hand, stopping Skinner's speech.

"Let's forget the fact that Ali is happily in love with his wife," he said. "I love you, Walter, try and get that through your thick head." Mulder knocked at Skinner's dome.

"Yes, he's younger, he will always be younger. When he's 53, he will still be younger than you. And he isn't all that perfect, physically. He's got those skinny British chicken legs under those perfectly designed jeans and leather pants, practically no body hair to speak of, and although he knows how to use it, his penis is only 5 inches and about two fingers around. As for being rich, what more do I need? Do I look like a clothes horse to you? Do I beg for jewels or expensive do-hickies? Do I collect cars? Going on a picnic in the woods or the park with you and the boys is the highlight of my life, and I wouldn't give it up for anything in the world. I married you, you idiot."

Skinner pulled himself up and kissed Mulder, turning them so that Mulder was resting on Skinner's torso. Mulder lowered his hips, their genitals touching, as he entered Skinner's mouth with his tongue. Skinner lay still, running his finger tips across Mulder's butt. Mulder wiggled in pleasure and Skinner felt the old man awakening down there. Skinner broke the kiss.

"I want to ask you something. And I want you to answer me honestly, no holding back out of some sense of consideration or anything like that," he said. Mulder nodded his agreement, propping himself up on his elbows at either side of Skinner's head.

"Are there times when you want something a little different but you don't want to ask me for it?"

He waited as Mulder formulated his answer.

"Yes, sometimes," Mulder finally said. Skinner swallowed and wet his suddenly dry lips.

"Why don't you ask me?" his cleared his throat when it turned husky.

"Because, it isn't important enough for me to mess with your personal wishes."

Skinner slid his hands up to Mulder's back and pulled him down, holding him tight.

"My personal wishes, Fox, are for you to be honest with me at all times, in all matters. Let me be the one to decide what I will do and what I won't do. There is very little that I would refuse you. I'm not an innocent, Fox, I've seen my share of adult materials and working in our business, I've certainly seen my share of just about every walk of life." He lifted Mulder's head to look into his lover's eyes.

"Let's make a new rule: we are honest with each other in our needs. Give each other the choice to refuse or agree."

Mulder nodded.

"What I will refuse outright is this: humiliation games, anything involving anything other than semen, pain—hard pain, animals or anyone underage."

Mulder propped himself up again, speculation overtaking his previous doubts.

"That leaves a hell of a lot of territory, Walter," he commented. Skinner stroked his fingers through Mulder's hair.

"I'm not a prude, tesoro, I freely admit that I enjoy sex. I think that we got caught up in discovering each other and forgot that we can laugh when we love each other, we can have fun. Someone told me recently to have fun. Fox, can I have fun with you?"

Mulder smiled slowly.

"Absolutely, Walter."

The stadium hummed with the energy of 100,000 fans waiting for their hero. The security guard walked rapidly through the milling stage hands who were rushing for last minute changes and making sure that everything was perfect. The guard pointed a finger at a closed door where several more guards were standing, well, standing guard. They examined the passes suspiciously but allowed the men through. Mulder knocked but with all the noise of the people outside, he couldn't hear anything. He knocked again. Minutes later, the door was opened.

"Uncle Fox!" a teenage boy flung his thin arms around Mulder.

"God, Ian, look at you!" Mulder exclaimed, holding the boy out to check him over. "You're going to be taller than your father," he predicted.

"Already six foot," a woman's voice said with the weary tones of a mother. "Hello, luv, give us a hug." She held out her arms and Mulder stepped into them without a moment's hesitation. He squeezed hard, lifting her off the floor for a moment and setting her back down with a smack on her rounded apple cheek. Skinner watched them, waiting politely in the back ground. The woman's face shone with the glow of an English rose in her cheeks. She had curves that a Renaissance master would swoon over, but Ali didn't seem to mind as he came up behind her and put his arms around her waist. Skinner looked around at the six children in the room and assumed that she earned her curves on the battle field. Ali smacked a kiss on the back of her neck, making her giggle.

"My luv, this is Walter Skinner, Fox's partner," Ali introduced them. "Walter, this is my mistress, my owner, my slave-driver, Sylvia. My wife, my lover, my best friend." Skinner shook her hand and was then introduced to the children, four of whom Mulder hadn't met yet.

"Five minutes!" someone shouted as they pounded on the door. Ali released his wife and rushed for his jacket.

"Da!" Megan held out a flashy blue piece of material. Ali gratefully took it and slipped it on.

Mulder and Skinner rushed themselves back to their seats. The mob was pounding their feet, demanding that the show begin. A special V.I.P. box seat was reserved for whomever the star of the show desired to give it to and at the moment, it was filled with Carlo, Dom, KC, and Scully. Krycek had arrived home just that morning with no excuse as to his whereabouts except to hand Skinner a jar of fresh dates straight from Egypt; with no customs stamp, Skinner had noted. Krycek and Scully were sitting at opposite ends of the box, pointedly ignoring each other. Skinner hoped that they didn't bring guns. He was a little concerned, though, that Krycek seemed to know how to handle the video camera like a pro. By special permission, they had received authorization to record the concert. The rest of the box was filled with thirty cousins who assumed that they were on a 'getting to know you' outing with Skinner. He knew Carlo's daughters, Christiana and Anna Maria, and Mario and Dolores, the rest were mostly 20-somethings, Marc's peers. Carlo, Dom, KC and the girls were sworn to secrecy and from what Skinner could see, they kept the secret well. Skinner had instructed them to bring mostly Marc's detractors. Keep your enemies closer....

The lights went down and the audience erupted. Skinner slid his hand between Mulder's thighs to rest possessively as Mulder whistled and yelled his share of the noise along with the younger cousins. He couldn't hear what the announcer was saying, but the opening beat of a drum was unmistakable. The colored gels came up and the band took their place. Only those in the Know spotted Marc on the base, the others were too excited waiting for Ali to appear. Skinner heard one of the girls squeak behind him and get shushed by her sister. Ali ran out and immediately broke into the opening song without a greeting to the crowd.

After three songs, Skinner had to admit that the man knew how to work a crowd. Ali had calmed the hysterical frenzy into semi-civilized fans who clapped and sang along with him, a few dancing in the isles.

At the end of the third song, Ali stopped for a breath. He laughed at something a fan in the front said.

"Make an appointment with my wife," he said into the microphone. The crowd erupted. He allowed them to go on for a minute before waving his hands at them.

"Alright, you lot, pipe down," he ordered. The crowd cheered and hooted at him. He tried several times to say something, but someone toward the front kept screeching. He walked off to the side and picked up something bright orange from a stool. He pumped it a few times and released a stream of water in the direction of the screamer. "Done?" he asked. The screamer was silent but the rest roared with laughter.

"Now, as I was saying," Ali said into the mic. He raised the super soaker but no one peeped. He nodded approvingly. "Some of you more observant types may have noted my

new base player. This is his first concert, so be nice to him. Come here, Marky," he held out an arm.

The box went silent as the cousins lost their voices, staring in disbelief. Skinner squeezed Mulder's leg. It worked!

"Name, boy," Ali demanded. Marc bent his head to the mic.

"Marco DeLuca, your lordship," he said. The crowd erupted once more.

"Age?"

"22"

"Married?"

"Someone got to you first."

Ali dropped his arm from Marc's shoulders as he turned away in laughter. The crowd sent their approval as the stadium thundered. Ali turned back, wiping tears of laughter from his face.

"Alright!" he waved the audience to quiet down. "Where you from?"

"SOUTHSIDE!" Marc raised his arms in salute of his home town. As the crowd cheered, the band broke into a rousing round of 'New York, New York' which the audience joined in on with cheerful abandon.

"Now, Marc," Ali raised the super soaker and the crowd behaved.

"Marky!" came a shout from behind Skinner. Ali raised the soaker up to the box but Marc lowered it.

"No, Ali, that's just my sister, Chrissy," he said. Ali perked up.

"Sister? Is she pretty?" he asked.

"Why, you need a date?" Marc asked in return. Movement on the side of the stage brought round of laughter from the audience. Sylvia stood on the stage with another soaker, this one aimed at Ali.

"AHH!" Ali yelped and jumped behind Marc, holding him out as a shield. "Hullo, pookie," he smiled and batted his eyelashes at his wife.

Sylvia stepped up to the mic at the keyboard.

"Just sing, darling," she advised.

"May Marc sing first?" he asked timidly.

"Yes, he may," she granted him and turned to leave the stage, the soaker held at her shoulder, a rifle at rest.

The lights went down and the crowd quieted. The opening guitar was familiar to Skinner, and Mulder took his hand, threading their fingers together in a weave that would never be broken.

Marc sat on the edge of a stool with his old battered guitar and sang the song he wrote for his older cousin. Skinner lifted their hands and brought Mulder's gold band to his mouth for a moment.

Skinner could feel the raw power pour out of the sound equipment as the shy boy he knew began to transform into the man that would turn the music industry on its collective ear. Ali didn't know it yet, but the King was dead –long live the King!

Marc stopped to chat with his family in the parking lot until a limo pulled up and Ali stepped out. He shook hands with Carlo and the girls, waved at Mulder and Skinner, and hustled Marc into the car.

"Holy shit," one of the cousins breathed. Krycek handed the video tape to Carlo.

"That's an invaluable collector's item," he said. "Get it burned onto a disc. If you sell it, just remember that I get dibs on 70 percent of the royalties."

The haggling started with a loud protest from Carlo.

"70?! Are you crazy??"

Skinner drew Mulder away. Mulder suddenly jumped as a hand connected with his butt.

"Hey!" he yelped, rubbing the effected area. Scully kissed his cheek and handed him a wrapped package.

"Happy birthday, Mulder," she said, giving a wave as she walked to her car. "That was one, Walter, he gets 41 more!" she called over her shoulder. Mulder saw the gleam in Skinner's eyes and ran in the opposite direction amidst encouraging cheers from the cousins. Unfortunately for Mulder, it was Skinner they were encouraging.

They lay in bed, filled with cake and ice cream that Natti had surprised Mulder with. He had insisted on not having a party, but the boys over-ruled him. Hand made birthday cards and other assorted drawings decorated their bedroom, along with the Looney Toons PJ's that Mulder had on the lower half of his body. Bug's carrot was held in an interesting spot over Mulder's groin.

Skinner re-read a paragraph of the letter that he had taken from the old box. The letter was one of the few things in the box that was in English. He burst out laughing.

"What?" Mulder asked. Skinner held the letter out to him.

"It seems that not only was my father born out of wedlock, he converted! And lied about it! His parents, my grandparents, were not German Catholics, they were Hungarian Jews!"

Skinner roared with laughter.

Chapter 16: Mayhem at Micky's Place

Note: this chapter contains a forced Sk/Sc caused by drugs and a madman with a gun. Please, I beg anyone who uses drugs –stop. Now. This minute. I love to read just about anything, but I'd rather not read your obituary.

The day was fairly quiet once the twins were off to their kindergarten class for half the day. Skinner had lunch and left Natti to watch her soaps. He wasn't in his office for long when the school nurse called asking him to come and get Adam.

"What's wrong with him?" he asked, already reaching for his jacket.

"He doesn't seem to be sick, but he won't stop crying. He's asking for his father," she said, sounding exasperated. "I tried Mr. Mulder's cell phone but he isn't answering and his office said that he is in the field. Whatever that means."

"I'll be right there." Skinner hung up and rushed out the door. Idiots should have transferred her call to Scully, he thought.

He arrived at the school five minutes later, leaving his car in the unloading zone at the front door. The halls were empty except for the faint muted sounds of talking coming from classes as he walked quickly to the nurse's office.

Skinner could hear Adam before he got to the door.

"Adam?" Skinner called to him as he opened the door. Adam ran to him, jumping and clinging to Skinner's torso. Skinner held him tightly, stroking the boy's hair and back, soothing him.

"What is it? Are you hurt?" he asked. Adam shook his head, sniffing and choking on his tears.

"Daddy!" he yelled. Skinner realized that this was a scared, hysterical crying, not one of pain. The nurse sat at her desk, writing up the report as Adam continued to cry. Skinner was not impressed with her lack of concern as he paced the floor with Adam, trying to calm him down. When Adam began to choke, Skinner could tell that the boy was caught in a loop. He gave Adam a single sharp tap on his rear. More shocked than hurt, Adam immediately stopped crying.

"You need to tell me what the problem is," Skinner said gently in Adam's ear. Adam sniffled, his face buried on Skinner's shoulder.

"Daddy's hurt," Adam whispered. Skinner kept one arm under Adam and reached for his cell phone with the other. He dialed Mulder's cell only to get an operator recording. He dialed Scully.

"Have you heard from Fox lately?" he asked when she answered.

"No, why?" she asked, immediately suspicious. He told her about Adam. "Hang on a minute," she said, putting him on hold. Skinner waited almost five minutes. "He's been shot. He's at Miami General."

Skinner signed Adam out of school and drove home, coming up to the house just as Krycek was getting in. Seeing that something was up, Krycek followed Skinner in. Skinner put Adam to bed with a glass of water and an aspirin and a promise to find his father and to make sure that Mulder was alright. Skinner wasn't going to say anything to the boy until he could get to Florida and check on Mulder himself.

In the living room, Skinner told Krycek and Natti the problem. Krycek made a phone call as Skinner changed his clothes. They were out the door in just a few minutes. He called Scully and would have her meet them at a private airfield. Krycek had a private plane on standby. Skinner had wondered how Krycek came and went so quickly.

The agents stood as Scully, Skinner and Krycek strode into the waiting room. An entire corner was filled with FBI agents. The other people in the OR waiting room were giving them curious looks but keeping a respectable distance. Krycek stopped at the agents waiting and quietly asked a question. None hesitated in answering him.

"Where's Mulder?" Scully and Skinner demanded. A doctor lifted his head.

"Are you Mrs. Mulder?" he asked Scully.

"No, I'm his boss. Assistant Director Dana Scully," she said, showing her badge.

"I'm Mr. Mulder's partner, Walter Skinner," Skinner said. He handed the doctor an envelope. "I have his power of attorney." The doctor gave the papers a brief scan.

"The bullet clipped the descending colon on his left side just above his pelvic bone," the doctor said. "His bowel was not perforated, we only removed about 2 inches of colon. He needs to be here for about 5 days and then he can go home." They all breathed a sigh of relief, Mulder's team clapping each other on the backs. "He is still in post-op, waiting on a room. No one can see him before then due to transmission of infections to the other patients waiting."

"I believe the admitting nurse has forms to be filled out," the doctor said, indicating a woman with a clipboard. Skinner knew his life of paper pushing wasn't over. Scully turned to the waiting officers.

"People, there is an UNSUB that needs to be caught," she announced. "I want a report first, though," she said. Scully motioned everyone into a quiet room that wasn't in use and shut the door, cutting off the quiet murmuring from the waiting room. Scully and Skinner sat as one man stepped forward.

"McKnulty?" Scully acknowledged him.

"Ma'am. I was close by ASAC Mulder at the time. The UNSUB was surprised as he came out of his boat. We all were. The UNSUB didn't even try to play dumb, he just pulled his gun and began shooting. Mulder was in the range of fire. Jacobs jumped to push him out of the way. They were both hit. Jacobs in the chest."

The report was incomplete, but they weren't in a place for a full report. That would wait until they returned to DC. The agents were all stunned by the death of Jacobs. Scully leaned forward for a moment, her eyes shut.

"Has anyone called his wife?" she asked. The agents all shook their heads. "Two of you stay here. I want Mulder under guard just in case this nut decides that he doesn't like witnesses. The rest of you –I want that bastard's ass on a silver platter," she growled. The agents cleared out quickly with determined looks. Scully went to find a private room to make the call to Jacobs' wife. Skinner remembered Jacobs, an older agent who had spent his entire life at the FBI, who was kind to the boys when Adam was kidnapped, a man who took pride in his work.

"Where did Krycek go?" Skinner asked. No one knew.

The dock was off limits as the police inspected every inch of the suspect's boat. People gathered in crowds, curious watchers debating what was happening. While the crowd watched the police, Krycek watched the crowd. The Horse wanted attention; if Krycek were in that man's place, he'd be enjoying the bruhaha. Krycek was counting on the Horse to make the mistake of returning to the scene of the crime.

Krycek sat on the grassy hillside above the marina munching a burrito and chugging a soda. The sun was hot on his black leather but he ignored it, unwilling to draw added attention by taking his jacket off and allowing the people to notice his gun.

Children ran after each other, yelling in a mix of Cuban and Puerto Rican accents. Their families were grouped in clusters separated by gender, as were most of the Asian and Black mixes. Since most serial killers were Caucasian males under 50, Krycek appreciated the cultural nuances of the locals. It enabled him to focus on the paler faces in the crowd. He ignored the buddy groups, the Horse would be a loner. That left about 5 percent of the people present.

"Mijo!" he called out to a boy near him. Krycek handed the boy a couple of dollars. "Uno agua, por favor," he asked. The boy ran to a vendor and was back a moment later with a bottle of water. Krycek didn't ask for his change, believing that free enterprise extended to kids. Especially kids from poor families. As Krycek cleared the burrito from his mouth, his eyes passed over a man lounging on the grass. The man wasn't doing anything in particular but Krycek felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. The man matched the description given by the agents while Skinner and Scully were talking with the doctor.

The man turned his head and caught Krycek's eyes. He raised his water in salute, one killer acknowledging another. Krycek jerked his head toward the parking lot. The man nodded. Krycek stood and walked through the crowds, past the concession stands and down the stairs to the cars and the park which was empty of kids playing on swings. Everyone was over the hill at the marina. Krycek sat on a picnic table and waited for the man who followed a hundred yards behind him.

The man took out a cigarette and offered one to Krycek who refused.

"Krycek, Alex Krycek," he said, introducing himself. The man's eyes flickered; he'd heard the name before.

"Rafael Equinus," the man said. Krycek kept his derision to himself. "I've heard of you, Mr. Krycek, it's a pleasure to meet you." Equinus held out his hand. Krycek ignored it.

"You won't think so in a moment," Krycek said. The man cocked his head in confusion.

"You know those cops you shot today?" The man nodded. "One is dead, but the other one is my brother."

Equinus paled and gulped. "He had no right trespassing on my boat," he sputtered. Krycek spit on the ground, declaring his opinion.

"Bullshit, Horse. You have got to be one of the stupidest killers I've ever heard of. You don't even have a cause, you're doing it for shits and giggles, just to get attention. Well, you've gotten attention. My attention. But never let it be said that Alex Krycek isn't a fair man; you have one hour before the next hunt begins. Guess which role you're playing." Equinus backed away, fear etched on his face.

"And, Horse?" Krycek said. "You'd better pray that my brother lives. If he dies, I'll be sure to prolong your pain before I'm done with you. RUN!"

The man turned and ran. Krycek looked at his watch and dug out an electronic game from an inner pocket. He was a man of his word, after all.

It was two hours before a nurse announced that Mulder was being taken up to a room.

"It's about damned time," Skinner muttered.

"No shit," Scully echoed. One of the agents that remained behind on guard called the search team with the good news as Skinner and Scully followed the gurney up to the room. They waited in the hall while the nurses prepared Mulder. The two guards took their position outside while Skinner sat next to Mulder and held his hand. Mulder was still too groggy to take notice so Skinner called home to let the boys and Natti know that Mulder was alright. Scully took the side table to study Mulder's chart and to begin reading the reports from the agents. Skinner smoothed Mulder's hair back and waited.

Mulder -

- on his hands and knees on the livingroom floor giving horsy rides to the twins.
- teaching the boys to swim at the swimming hole in the mountains.
- looking pathetic with the chicken pox.
- kissed silly at the Hoover.
- miffed at Krycek who beat him at chess.
- awestruck while watching Adam sleep.
- video in hand as Adam appeared in his first school play.
- wearing his baseball uniform to bed, asking Skinner if he wanted to play with his bat and balls.
- the look of fascination on his face as he and Skinner made love for the first time.

Scully looked up from the file and smiled at the two men.

Krycek showed up later that evening munching on a chili dog. Scully gave him a suspicious look.

"Wha?" he said with a full mouth. He held out his dog. "Wanna bi..?" Scully rolled her eyes.

"Stop tormenting Scully," Mulder muttered, still a little woozy.

"Well, I'd offer you a bite, but you're on liquids for a couple of days," Krycek commented.

"Where have you been?" Skinner asked. Krycek gave his innocent Ivan look.

"We're in Miami and you expect me to forgo the luscious sites of all these beautiful Latin beauties?" Clearly Krycek thought that Skinner was out of his mind. Everyone gave up; Krycek was in one of his moods. "So, Fox, haven't you learned yet that getting shot isn't fun?" he asked.

"Remind me to give you the finger when I can move again," Mulder said.

"Fox, the boys need to be reassured," Skinner said, steering the conversation. "Can you talk to them for a couple of minutes?"

Mulder didn't hesitate to agree. It was their bedtime at home, but they'd be waiting for a call. Adam answered on the first ring. Aware that Adam had been hysterical earlier that morning, Mulder made the extra effort to sound as though nothing was wrong, just a small scratch. It took a while to reassure the boy, but eventually Adam allowed Pavel and Ivan to talk to their uncle.

Mulder spent the following day swearing at the nurse who insisted that he get off his butt and start working on his stomach muscles by walking. He also had to blow into a tube to get his lungs working correctly so that pneumonia didn't settle. Krycek had stopped by for a few minutes on a lunch break from his vigorous romping around the town. Extremely vigorous, if his exhausted expression was any indication. He wasn't much help on his visitations.

"Come on, Fox, from the sounds I hear, I know you can blow better than that. Pretend it's Walter and blow him, baby."

The nurse turned red and fled the room. Skinner wished he had the same option. The guards at the door were doing their best not to snicker.

Four days later, Skinner was helping Mulder into their hotel room. The doctor had forbidden Mulder to go home for another few days. With the help of pain pills, Mulder as able to sit in on the party that his agents threw in one of the hotel's private conference rooms. Krycek sat at the head table, talking with a few agents who braved to speak two words to him. They seemed to be surprised to find a pleasant man who was as smart and as interesting as Mulder. Skinner hovered like a mother hen, snapping at anyone who

seemed to forget that Mulder was still delicate. The women thought it was sweet, the men were positive that it was just weird and stayed at the back of the crowd of the law enforcement officials who had come to celebrate the life of Agent Jacobs. Scully and the rest of the agents would be going home the next day; they had lost the Horse and there was a funeral to attend. Skinner would go with them, representing their family and return the following day.

As Skinner was telling a Mulder and Scully story, the door opened and the sound of small running feet were heard. Adam stopped short of Mulder, his mouth quivering. Mulder held out his arms and Adam fell into them. The twins were satisfied for a one armed hug since Adam refused to let go of his father's right arm. Ivan jumped, holding his arms out until Skinner picked him up as Pavel dove for Mulder's shirt.

"Can I see your owie?" he asked, pulling at Mulder's shirt.

"Ow, wait, Pav, ok, alright," Mulder held the boy off and lifted his shirt. The crowd chuckled at Pavel's look of disappointment at the sight of the bandage and the strip of clear tape running down the center of Mulder's stomach, covering the surgical site which was glued together instead of stitched or stapled. Krycek leaned over and hooked an arm around Pavel's waist, swinging the boy up to his lap.

"Mama's upset with you," a voice said at Skinner's side. Expecting to see that Natti had brought the boys, Skinner was surprised to find Dominic.

"What are you doing here? Why is Zia Ginny upset with me?" he asked.

"I'm here for emotional support and Mama's upset with you because you didn't call her immediately when this happened," Dom said, pointing at Mulder.

"You know, Dom, for a priest, you have a big mouth," Skinner informed him as he took his cell phone out.

"I know," Dom sympathized. "It's you, Walt, you bring out the devil in me."

"Mario, it's Walter, is Zia available?" Skinner asked into the phone. "Don't start with me, Mario, just put your mother on the phone." Experienced agents winced. Most of the agents were new enough not to have experienced 'A.D. Skinner'.

"Hi, Zia, I.... yes, ma'am. Yes, ma'am. No, ma'am. Yes, ma'am." He handed the phone to Dom.

"Hi, Mama," Dom said. "Alright." He turned and smacked Skinner on the back of his head before handing the phone back.

"Hey!" Skinner yelled, grabbing his phone. The boys giggled and Mulder was trying not to laugh. Krycek snickered. "That wasn't nice, Zia. He's fine, I can take him home in

another couple of days. I'm sorry, I'll call next time. The boys are fine, Adam is getting a little extra emotional support. Yes, love, Zia, he's getting lots of love. Sure." He handed the phone to Adam.

"Hi, Zia Ginny," Adam said, one ear on Mulder's shoulder. "Yes. Yes. Daddy's having a party 'cause the bad man was caught. Aunt Dana said the bad man won't hurt anyone anymore 'cause the agents took him away to someplace he won't ever come back." That was the closest thing they could think of to tell the boys without scaring them further. It seemed to work because the boys were all satisfied.

Adam handed the phone to Mulder.

"Hello, Zia Ginny," he said. "No, I'm doing much better. A little pain, nothing that a pill won't take care of. Walter is taking very good care of me. Yes. Sure, thank you, I can use all the candle lighting that I can get." He handed the phone back to Skinner.

"The Sunrise Hotel," he said, telling Zia Ginny where they were. "I'll call you as soon as we get home," he promised. He hung up his cell phone after giving the twins each time to talk with Zia Ginny. They demonstrated the few words of Italian that they had learned and glowed from the praise that they received. Skinner noticed some of the looks that Krycek was acquiring and hoped that he wouldn't have to put out any fires that evening. At least no one would pick a fight with Krycek while he had one of the twins clinging to him and Krycek seemed to be behaving himself.

"Alex, I want to go to the Micky Mouse place," Pavel announced, banging the back of his head against Krycek's chest. Krycek glared at his family.

"Someone's been letting them watch the Disney Channel again?" he questioned. Skinner and Mulder denied knowledge of the incident.

"I want Micky ears!" Ivan yelled, leaning out to Krycek. Skinner released the boy and Ivan took over the other knee. Krycek had both boys pulling at him until he gave in. The boys cheered and the locals laughed.

"Me, too, Uncle Alex?" Adam asked from Mulder's side. More than a few eyebrows arose at Adam's use of the title.

"Of course," Krycek said. "I need someone to help me keep an eye on these two. Your father and Uncle are no help, the boys have them wrapped around their fingers." Krycek put the twins on the floor and handed them each a cookie from the table. They ran to Scully for belated hugs.

"If you can wait two more weeks, we can spend Adam's birthday there," Mulder suggested. The men assumed that the vocal demonstration was a unanimous agreement. Once the boys were assured of Mulder's health and they were fed, they began to fall asleep, Adam against Mulder's side, Ivan on Skinner's lap and Pavel on Krycek's lap.

Skinner took Adam while Krycek and Scully lifted the twins, carrying them upstairs where they undressed the boys and put them down to sleep in the second room in their suite. Skinner sent Krycek and Scully back to the dining room and sat on the couch, his ears protesting the loudness of the sudden quiet. He didn't hear the door open a short while later but knew the scent and stride of his lover.

"Come to bed, Walter."

In the dark, Mulder winced as he turned onto his side, resting on Skinner's chest. Skinner twisted strands of dark hair between his fingers, listening to the sound of Mulder breathing.

"If I ask you to stay behind a desk more often, will you get angry at me?" Skinner asked.

"No, I won't get angry," Mulder said, smoothing Skinner's fur. "I can't promise, but I'll try not to get in the way of bullets anymore." Mulder tilted his head up and accepted a few light kisses. "I knew it was a mistake to go out there," he said. "I could feel it. Jacobs saved my life, he took that bullet for me. I'm able to return home to you, the twins, my son...."

Skinner held Mulder as the shock was released. Mulder had realized that if he died, Adam would be orphaned, Skinner and the twins emotionally scarred. Mulder had more to live for than simply himself. After a while, Mulder relaxed, content with mapping out Skinner's torso with the tips of his fingers, tracing bones and muscle contours.

"Have you been working out?" Mulder asked, finding new mass. Skinner was pleased that Mulder noticed.

"Yes, just a little." After Mulder left for work in the mornings and the boys were off to school, Skinner had begun jogging before going into work and working out with a punching bag at the office. He was pleased when he pulled his belt in a notch and his shirts had begun to tighten across his chest again. Natti didn't say anything but gave him salads and fish for lunch. He had lost two inches on his waist, maybe a third during the past couple of weeks due to lack of eating from worry.

"Hmmm," Mulder hummed in appreciation. "Remind me to do a closer inspection when I'm back to normal."

Two weeks later, the crowd at the theme park was heavy for an autumn day, kids running and laughing, happy to be out of school for a few days. The three men each took charge of one boy just in case they became separated. All three boys had ID on them with cell phone numbers and the hotel information where they were staying. The boys were positive that their uncles were going overboard in the 'just in case' department. Adam kept hold of his father's hand while Skinner had Ivan and Krycek took Pavel. It was

Adam's birthday and the boys were excited. Skinner thought that he even saw a glimmer of joy on Krycek's face but he wouldn't swear to it.

"Admit it, Alex," Skinner said, testing the waters. "You're enjoying yourself." Krycek snorted, refusing to comment.

The men didn't ask Krycek how he got a family suite inside the Magic Kingdom. Normally reservations were about a year in advance; Krycek got it within a couple of weeks with just a phone call. Skinner offered to pay for it but Krycek refused the money saying that he was calling in a favor. Natti had declined to join them, she wanted to stay home and enjoy the peace and quiet. Skinner had a feeling that Carlo would be making a visit while they were gone. Another piece of information leaked from Dominic. Skinner thought about it, the unusual pairing, and decided that he was fine with it, Carlo and Natti could be good for each other. Scully would meet with them on the second day, she needed to finish some paperwork. Adam's godfathers, the Gunmen, were unreachable. Skinner assumed that they were on stake-out somewhere gathering information. So it was just the six of them for a few days of fun in the Florida sun.

To the great disappointment of the boys, they were unable to ride Space Mountain. There was a height limit and they were under it. None of the men went on it either; after what they've been through during the past ten years or so, Space Mountain was a wuss ride. To Krycek's eternal disgust, the twins took one look at Micky Mouse and ran for hugs which Micky was happy to provide.

"This is our cousin Adam, he's also sort of our brother," Pavel told Micky. "It's his birthday tomorrow. He's eight." Micky shook Adam's hand and gave him a hug also. He took three huge lolly pops out of his bag and gave one to each of the boys. Mulder pouted and received one, too.

"Picture," Skinner said, lifting his camera. The boys gathered in front of Micky. Mulder jumped in, putting a chummy arm around Micky's shoulder. Skinner could tell that he had four boys on his hands instead of three. Four boys and one teenager with an attitude, he thought, feeling Krycek radiating surliness behind him.

Krycek was barely containing his patience for the sake of the boys. That bastard got away from him in Miami. At least there hadn't been any new murders; The Horse was probably underground. No one gets away from Alex Krycek, he growled silently. He underestimated the crazy asshole.

"Who's for Pirates?!" Mulder yelled. The boys jumped excitedly. They were off to rampage through the Caribbean.

"I refuse to do It's a Small World," Krycek warned Skinner as they followed close behind the boys.

"And how do you know the names of the rides and what they're about?" Skinner countered.

Krycek glared. "Remind me to swear at you later," he said.

Mulder grabbed Skinner's hand to pull him along. "Alex, quit picking on Walter and come on."

The lines were atrocious, at least an hour wait at each of the more popular rides. The men kept the boys occupied by having them give oral reports on various subjects, much to the astonishment of the other people in line. Krycek grilled them in languages, Skinner in math and Mulder in science. When the boys started to become irritable, Skinner leaned into Mulder's ear.

"Last ride for the night."

Mulder agreed. They had checked into the hotel after noon time and it was almost 4pm by the time they got into the park since the boys didn't want to wait until the morning to begin their adventure. Skinner wanted to give that huge bathroom a try; the tub and shower were big enough for two to play in. He knew that Mulder's backend wasn't ready to be played with but there were other things they could do. He had seen the spark in Mulder's eyes when he saw the large room and knew that his advances would be welcome. The boys had their own bathroom connecting with Krycek's room. The guys wouldn't be bothered.

Skinner felt a pair of arms encircle his waist and a head lean against the back of his shoulder.

"Are you alright? We can go back now," he asked in concern.

"I'm alright," Mulder said. "Just a little tired. Maybe we should have held the boys off until spring and just have had a small party at home. Look, our group should be next."

"How's your stitches?" Skinner asked. Mulder lifted the edge of his shirt and looked.

"No tearing," he announced. Skinner took a look. No tearing.

"The skin is a little red, though, have you been taking your antibiotics?" he asked.

"Yes, I have and it doesn't hurt, really," Mulder insisted. Skinner didn't like it.

"I want the hotel doctor to check you when we get back, or I'll call Scully."

Mulder gave in. Skinner pulled him in front and rubbed his shoulders and back.

"Does your owie hurt, Uncle Fox?" Ivan asked.

Mulder ruffled Ivan's hair. "No, I'm just tired. I was in the hospital for a long time and I'm a little out of shape. Sometimes adults need naps, too."

"Really?" Ivan asked in amazement. Adam lifted Mulder's right arm and snuggled in under it to give comfort. Although he was happy to be at Disney World, Adam had been quiet and moody for a few days. Skinner thought that Adam may be reacting to his father's recent hospital stay.

The twins had to be held down while on the ride; they were so enthused about seeing everything that they tried to stand up despite their seatbelts. People sitting nearby had begun to include the twins on their 'need to see' list as they squealed at each tableau of pirates in various poses, drinking from tankards and pillaging villages. By the time they were ready to go back to the hotel, the twins were ready to be carried.

Upon returning to the hotel, Skinner did as promised and sent for the hotel doctor to check Mulder's wound site while Krycek dumped the boys into a bath and sent for room service. The doctor declared Mulder fine but to take it easy and get some rest.

Skinner woke up in the middle of the night to find himself alone in bed. Hearing nothing from the bathroom, he began to panic. He checked the bathroom, relieved that Mulder wasn't unconscious in there. He went out into the main room of their suite and stopped, seeing that the couch was occupied.

"What..?" he began. Mulder put a finger to his mouth and stroked Adam's hair.

"He was crying," Mulder whispered.

Skinner squatted down next to them. "What for?" he asked.

"It's his first birthday without his mother."

Skinner put a hand to Adam's head. He should have thought of that himself.

"Why don't you bring him to our room?" Skinner suggested. "I'll sleep in his bed with the twins. You take some private time with him." Mulder agreed and waited as Skinner gently lifted Adam so that he could get up. Skinner tucked his guys into bed and turned out the light after giving both pecks on their cheeks.

With the twins curled up together on one bed, Skinner tucked himself into the second bed in the room after checking on the boys. It should have occurred to him that Adam would be feeling out of sorts without his mother around for his birthday. He himself was an adult when his mother died and he spent some time on his own birthday crying for her. He couldn't imagine the pain that a child felt for a lost parent, especially a mother.

Skinner wondered from time to time if the boys were alright, being raised by two men – three? instead of a mother and a father. The twins didn't know any different, never having experienced a mother, but they seemed to know that women nurtured differently than men did and they responded to the women in their lives with a definite hunger that could only be quenched from a woman's arms. They had a great deal of women in their lives, from the women around town, Mrs. Chavez next door, Natti, Scully, to Zia Ginny; plenty of female influences. If they had multiple fathers, why not multiple mothers? He thought about it; neither Pavel nor Ivan were moody, neither had behavioral problems, -well- beyond the usual five year old things; both seemed happy and content. No matter what they did, Adam seemed destined to grow up with at least some of his father's angst. He didn't lose a sister but he did lose a mother. Not as dramatically, but still.....

He wasn't sure what woke him up in the morning. It could have been the fact that he couldn't move because the twins had discovered his presence and snuggled one on each side of him, corralling him in the center before they fell back asleep. Voices talking quietly. Scully was there, talking with someone in the livingroom. Krycek. Skinner raised an eyebrow; will wonders never cease they were talking peacefully with each other. He'd have to check the forecast, but it was possible that hell was freezing over.

Skinner extracted himself from his cubs.

"Morning," he said upon entering the outer room. Scully and Krycek sat at the table with coffee and muffins.

"Good morning," Scully greeted him.

"Hey," Krycek said. "Did you have a fight with Fox?"

Skinner sat and helped himself. "No," he said, shaking his head. "Adam was missing his mother. I thought that they could use some time alone."

"Poor baby," Scully mourned. "I didn't even think about it; his birthday without his mother."

Skinner nodded. "It didn't occur to me, either," he said, breaking open an almond croissant. "Maybe we should have had his birthday at home and saved this trip for next year," he suggested.

"Maybe," Scully said. "but then again, maybe being in a large crowd will help him get through it. Take his mind off of her."

Skinner shrugged. "Could be. When Fox is upset, a crowd or working distracts him." Scully nodded her agreement. Father and son were very much alike.

"If you'd like, I'll take Pavel and Ivan around the park while you and Fox get Adam's spirits up," came the surprisingly considerate offer from Krycek.

"We can ask Fox about it," Skinner nodded. "I don't mind either way." He looked at the clock; 9:37. He got up and went into the bedroom to check on them. The twins were sleeping late, too, having had a busy day the day before. Mulder was awake, watching Adam sleep. Skinner sat on the bed next to Mulder.

"How is he?" Skinner whispered. Mulder reached around and took Skinner's hand, linking their fingers.

"He was a little restless for a while but he eventually fell asleep," Mulder whispered back.

"Scully's here," Skinner said. "And Alex actually offered to take the twins around the park if we want to take Adam separately."

Mulder shrugged. "We'll see," he said. "He just might feel better with the boys. They're his brothers more than anything else. See what kind of a mood he's in after breakfast."

"It's about quarter to 10, do you want to start waking him up?" Skinner asked. Mulder turned his head to look up.

"That late already?" he said. He stroked a finger down Adam's cheek. "Adam, wake up," he said softly. He smoothed the boy's hair and put a light peck on his forehead and ran his hand down Adam's shoulder and arm and over to his chest, waking him with gentle action. Soon, Adam's breathing began to pick up and his eyes fluttered open. Adam yawned and pushed his head under Mulder's chin.

Mulder chuckled and rubbed Adam's back. "No, don't go back to sleep," he said. "It's almost 10, day's a-wastin'. Are you going to make Aunt Dana walk around Disney World by herself?"

"Aunt Dana is here?" Adam murmured in sleepy interest.

"Yep," Mulder said. "She's in the livingroom with Uncle Alex."

Adam opened one eye. "Are they arguing?" he asked with a dire tone.

Both men held in snickers. "No, actually they're behaving themselves," Skinner said. "They're having coffee and muffins."

"Is hell freezing over?" Adam asked. Skinner and Mulder looked at each other.

"Why did you use that phrase?" Mulder asked, keeping his voice neutral. Adam sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"What phrase?" he asked. Mulder repeated the phrase back to him. Adam looked at him in shock. "Daddy, I wouldn't swear!"

"Then what did you say?" Mulder asked.

"I asked if they were arguing," Adam said with a look of confusion. Mulder ruffled his hair.

"Alright, I guess I misheard you, I'm sorry," he said. "Go wash up and get dressed, get some breakfast." Mulder sat up and hugged Adam. "Happy birthday, son."

Adam smiled and hopped off the bed and over to Skinner who held out his arms for a hug and then ran out of the room.

"What the hell was that?" Mulder asked.

"Fox, I was thinking that just before I got out of bed this morning," Skinner admitted.

Mulder scrubbed at his face. "I'll test him as soon as we get home," he said. "Scully!" he yelled in Skinner's ear. "Sorry," he said and kissed Skinner's cheek. Scully appeared at the door. "Are the twins up yet?" he asked.

Scully nodded. "They're eating breakfast," she said.

"Would you get Alex in here, please?" he asked. Scully stuck her head out the door and called to Krycek who appeared a second later. Mulder motioned them in.

"Fact," Mulder began. "The Black Oil turned on certain functions in me and a few other abductees. The medication turned them back off, but they're still there. The Vaccine is made from the Black Oil. Theory: what if the agent that causes the functions to turn on is in the antigen, not the virus?"

Scully sat on the edge of the bed while Krycek paced out his thoughts.

"Wow, Mulder," Scully murmured. "What brought this on?" Skinner gave them a rundown of Adam's recent verbal surprises.

"A child wouldn't need as much impetus as an adult," Krycek said. "Their brains are still forming."

Scully slowly nodded. "It's possible," she admitted. "I don't think we discovered what the activating agent was, the science community in general just assumed that the agent was in the dead virus."

Krycek held up a finger. "Quick spot test," he said. He closed his eyes for a moment while the others watched him in silence, wondering what he was doing. In a few seconds, Adam appeared at the door.

"Yes, Uncle Alex?" he asked.

Krycek shook his head. "We were just wondering if you were eating your breakfast," he said and shooed Adam back to the table. "Well, Fox, you won't have to kill your vocal cords calling him for dinner. Gods help you when puberty hits. I think I'll move back to Russia."

"Would the medication that stopped my functions work on him?" Mulder asked.

"I wouldn't dare try it," Scully said. "Like Krycek said, his brain is still forming. We don't know what kind of reaction it would have. It could very well do the opposite of the desired response."

Skinner had a sudden image and began to laugh. The others looked at him.

"Can you picture Reverend Johnson's reaction to this development?"

Mulder sent everyone on ahead of him; he wanted to call the Kurts. It was time to bring in the Big Boys. If Adam's newly emerging talent was the result of the Vaccine, the world was about to undergo another shock as an entire generation jumped ahead on the evolutionary scale. The twins would have to be introduced, also. They would need to be told about their origins sooner than expected. Far sooner.

As Skinner suspected, Adam clung to Scully's hand, basking in her maternal attentions. Adam proudly wore his birthday present from her, a t-shirt with the words 'Future Director FBI' and an official FBI baseball cap. The rest of his presents he could open at his party later in the evening.

Skinner looked around at the other children in the park. Most seemed normal, excited to be at Disney World with their families. A few kids over 7 seemed preoccupied, as though listening to something.

"The times, they are a-changin'," Skinner sung in a low whisper to Scully with a nod toward the children. Scully looked and nodded. Skinner felt a shiver wash through him.

"The Tea Cup ride!" Ivan yelled, pulling at Krycek's hand. Adam ran on ahead to secure their place in line while the twins coaxed their adult counter part to hurry.

"Give it up, Alex," Skinner advised him. "You're having fun so quit being stubborn about it. You're a cool, macho, big he-man, we admit it, so relax and enjoy yourself."

The look Krycek gave Skinner said volumes.

They got off the ride 45 minutes later and headed to the restrooms where they waited again. Thankfully, there were understanding adults who let the children go first before wet pants became a problem. Skinner took the stall at the end of the room, next to the exit. He washed his hands and left. The sound of a kitten behind the garbage can drew his attention. What was a kitten doing in the middle of the park? he thought. He made kitty noises as he carefully maneuvered to the back of the building. A large form obscured his view and before he could excuse himself, he was struck on his head, blacking out.

A slap on his face brought him to consciousness.

"Wake up," a man snarled. Skinner groaned and blinked. His focus remained fuzzy; he was missing his glasses. And his head was killing him. What the hell happened?

"Where's that fag boyfriend of yours?" the man demanded. "Answer me!" he yelled, slapping Skinner again. Mulder? NO!

Skinner remained silent. "No one sees me and lives!" the man spat. "Krycek! Where is he?! Unbelievable. The idol of all killers and assassins, and he's a fag! Where is he!" Another slap and Skinner felt blood touch his tongue.

Krycek? he thought. He thinks Krycek is my lover? The man must have been trailing us through the park. Fox hasn't caught up with us yet. But who is this nut? How did he meet Krycek?

Skinner looked around. They were in a storage room. He couldn't hear any people so presumably they were either underground or deep behind the scenes of the park.

"Hey, fag, pay attention!" the man yelled. "Why Krycek would want to fuck a bald, old man like you.... I hope he comes after you soon because he's dead the minute I see him." The man walked away, disappearing behind a stack of boxes. He heard a door open and close.

Skinner tested his arms. They were bound at the wrists as were his ankles. The wrist bonds were low, resting at the edge of his palms. He sat up, pausing for a moment to stop his head from spinning. He drew his knees up and bent forward, grunting as he slid his hands under his butt. His arms protested being pulled almost out of their shoulder sockets but he managed to slide them over the backs of his thighs. He breathed in relief and pulled one leg through at a time until he was able to hold his wrists to his face and use his teeth on the knot. Skinner tossed the rope aside and worked quickly at his ankles. He barely registered the door when a body was thrown to the floor next to him and a gun shoved into his face.

"Very bad boy," the man said. The gun was waved to the side. "Move. And pick her up." Skinner looked next to him. To his shock, Scully lay on the floor. The man waved his gun again, becoming impatient. Skinner stood, wobbling a little as the circulation was restored to his feet. He made a quick check of Scully as he bent to pick her up. Her head rested against his shoulder as he followed the man's directions through the warehouse. The man opened a door and motioned Skinner inside. The door was shut behind them and locked.

He placed Scully on a pile of material that looked to be old, worn out costumes.

"Dana," he said, touching her shoulder. He gave her a small shake. "Dana, wake up." He opened her eyelids. Her pupils seemed normal. She moaned. "Come on, Scully, snap out of it," he said urgently.

"Wha..." she croaked and blinked. "Ow," she winced and put a hand to her head. Skinner felt through her hair, finding a good sized knot on her skull.

"Take it slow, Dana," he said. "We've been kidnapped."

Scully forced herself to lift her head and look at him. "By who?" she asked in disbelief.

"By someone with a grudge against Krycek."

"That figures," she muttered.

"He thinks Krycek is my lover," Skinner admitted. Scully avoided his gaze which he found interesting.

"Not too observant, this kidnapper, is he?" she asked. She plucked at her t-shirt. "Hot in here. Where are we, do you know?"

Skinner looked around their new home. "I'm not sure, I was knocked out, too. I think it's a storage room. I couldn't hear any people, so we're probably out of the way of traffic, and everything is dusty, unused and untouched for a long time." He wiped the sweat from his forehead. There was very little fresh air getting into the room.

The door opened again and the man reappeared, this time carrying a video camera, a water bottle and a small box in one hand and his gun in the other.

"What are you planning on doing with us?" Skinner asked. "You should be warned, both of us are law enforcement, I'm a sheriff and the lady is with the FBI. She's an Assistant Director. Once her disappearance is noticed, you're going to have the entire FBI force looking for you," he warned the man.

"I could give a shit," the man said, putting his items down. He tossed the small box to them and then the water bottle. "One for each of you," he said, nodding toward the box. "Now."

Skinner and Scully looked at the box and each other. Skinner opened the box. There were two round, flat pills. Big pills, about the width of quarters. Scully leaned down and sniffed at them.

"Smells like Ecstasy," she said. Skinner backed up in alarm. The man nodded.

"Very good," he said. "That's exactly what they are. Alex Krycek humiliated me so before I kill you both, I'm going to humiliate him. His fag lover and his brother's mistress are going to have sex and I'm going to video tape it."

Skinner debated correcting the man who was obviously out of his mind. Somehow, the man had gotten their roles confused.

The man waved the gun. "Down the hatch," he insisted, cocking the gun. Scully took one of the pills while glaring at the man and Skinner took the other. Seeing no choice, they swallowed the large pills down with the water.

"Very good," the man said. He kept the gun on them while he set up his camera with the other hand. He pulled a crate over and sat down. He looked at his watch. "You should be feeling really good in about 15 minutes."

"Dana..." Skinner said in a low voice. Scully touched his hand.

"Either way, he's going to kill us," she said. "Just do it, Walter." A thought came to her and she looked at him with a worried expression. "Can you still... with a woman?"

Skinner gave a nod. "Not a problem. Come here, Dana, I want to say something to you." He could feel his heart pounding at the confession that he was about to share with her. Scully moved the inches next to him. He picked up her hand.

"Fox knows this, we've talked about it. Either I was still married, you were with Fox or I was your boss. So close I came to asking you out at various times over those years." He flicked a red lock from her stunned eyes.

"Walter??" she questioned, her mouth threatening to drop to the floor.

Skinner gave her a small smile. "It's the truth, Dana. You're so beautiful. You're a warm, generous person, smart, a cutting sense of humor... I need you to know that." He felt a rush move through him. Not that it would be difficult for him to work up a lust for her, but under the pressure of a stranger with a gun, a video camera and an attitude, he knew that it had to be the drugs beginning to hit his system. Ecstasy made a person feel love for

everyone before crashing them into a depression which got lower and lower with each dose until death occurred. Sometimes death came with the first dose.

"I have no problem with the thought of making love with you, but this wasn't the way I imagined it," he said. "We're being forced into this."

Scully tightened her hand in his. "It's only forced if we allow it to be." She put a hesitant hand on his cheek. "We can fight it, or we can ignore that asshole and do this on our terms."

His mind was becoming clouded but he understood what she was saying; she was agreeing to make love with him. He bent his head and put his mouth on hers. Her mouth was soft and warm as she kissed him in return. Skinner felt an uncontrollable moan escape him and he lowered her to the pile of material. Scully put her arms around him to caress his back. He felt himself growing hard already and thrust a leg between hers. Scully accepted him and opened her mouth.

Krycek stopped at the look on Adam's face. They had been looking for Skinner and Scully for a couple of hours. Neither was answering their cell phones. Krycek finally reached Mulder and they decided that the two were simply lost. They'd catch up at the hotel room. Adam flushed for no apparent reason.

"What's your problem?" Krycek asked him. Adam looked away.

"Nothing," he said. He took his father's hand. Mulder had caught up with them at the candy store. They all found a restaurant and sat down for a late lunch before heading off to Frontier Town.

"Did you hear Uncle Walter or Aunt Dana say where they were going?" Mulder asked him. Adam gave a quick shake of his head. Mulder had a suspicion. He knelt down to eye level with the boy.

"Listen, Adam, I need you to do something for me," he said. "If you have any strange pictures in your mind or if you hear strange words in your mind, I need you to tell me. Nothing you say will make me upset or get you into trouble. It's very important. Understand?"

Adam nodded, his eyes wide. Krycek kept an eye on the twins who had run to meet one of the Dwarves.

"Did you see a picture of them?" Mulder asked, touching Adam's head. Adam was still for a moment before nodding. "Tell me what you saw."

"I... I saw lots of different pictures," Adam admitted. "Like a photo album."

"Tell me everything you saw," Mulder encouraged him. "It's ok, no matter what it is, just say it."

"I saw them kiss," Adam said, wrinkling his nose. "And a man with a gun. A room with lots of old stuff in it. First Uncle Walter's hands were tied with a rope and in another picture they weren't. Aunt Dana had her hand on her head like it hurted."

Mulder looked up at Krycek. He gave Adam a hug. "That was very good," he said. Adam relaxed, realizing that he wasn't in trouble.

"Do you know what that man looked like?" Mulder asked. Adam nodded and shut his eyes.

"He's got brown hair and freckles on his face. He's skinny but not like Ringo. He has clothes like a janitor."

Krycek handed the twins over to Mulder.

"I need to go find a bathroom, Fox, keep an eye on the boys for me," he asked. Mulder had seen a brown haired man with freckles in the recent past –the Horse. Krycek would begin a search while Mulder made a gradual route back to the hotel. After almost dying just a few weeks ago, Mulder understood that he needed to be with the boys for this hunt. Especially for Adam's sake. The best hunter for the job was Krycek. Mulder remembered a meditation class and made a clumsy attempt at erecting a mental shield. Whether he liked it or not, he just might have to work on using a few of his own dormant talents.

"Power to the perimeter fence, Mechanic," Mulder said, looking at Krycek's head. Krycek understood and gave a nod.

"Already working on it."

Skinner cupped Scully's breast and licked the nipple. She gasped, touching him wherever she could reach as he moved his hand from her breast and wiggling it into her jeans with the impatience of a teenager.

"Oh, yeah," Scully groaned, helping him by struggling with the zipper and pushing her jeans down past her hips. She tossed her shirt and bra aside and pulled at Skinner's shirt. He reluctantly pulled his hand from her pants in order to throw the shirt aside. He was vaguely aware of the man with the gun and camera but he felt like a horny teenager in the back seat of Dad's car with the hottest girl on campus. A muffled voice in the back of his mind yelled to stop but his souped up hormones ignored it.

He pulled her jeans off of her and yanked his own down. He moved between her legs and thrust into her. Scully cried out and wrapped her legs around his waist, thrusting up to meet him. The term 'fucking like rabbits' came to Skinner's mind but he couldn't stop, couldn't slow down and make it good for her. Both of them were reacting because of the drugs not from true passion. Both of them were beyond caring and wouldn't care until the drugs left their systems.

Starting at the restrooms where he last saw Skinner, Krycek studied the ground all around the building. Not that he could see much with the concrete. A sparkle of light caught his attention and he reached behind the garbage can. He pulled out a pair of glasses. They belonged to Skinner. Krycek snarled. The Horse would not leave the park alive.

A gardener was nearby working on a flower bed. Krycek went over and asked the woman if she had seen a man, possibly in a janitor's jumper, with a large cart around the restrooms within the past few hours. The woman nodded and pointed in the direction that he went. Krycek's nose was twitching as he stalked his prey. Whenever the trail veered off in more than one walkway, Krycek stopped and questioned more park employees. Eventually, he came to a gate that read for employees only. It wasn't locked so Krycek went in. It was far off the beaten path, away from the tourist exhibits. Inside the gate were old storage buildings.

Krycek began with the first one, trying the door and looking at the locks. One after the other, he went through the yard. At the far side of the yard, he found a new lock on a ramshackle, barn-like building. He dug out his lock-pick and silently worked at the padlock. It took him less than 30 seconds to snap it open and step inside. He pulled his gun from the back of his jeans, holding it up and ready as he quietly investigated the building.

The room was filled with crates and old cars from different rides, costumes and broken toys. At the far end of the building were smaller storage units and what looked to be offices. As he got closer, he heard the unmistakable sound of a woman in orgasm. He had heard that cry in his own ears on more than one occasion. Scully. And it had better be Skinner that was making her come, because God help the Horse if he touched her. Krycek stepped up to the door on silent heels. He heard someone clapping.

"Bravo!" he heard. The voice belonged to the Horse. Krycek slowly readied his gun. There was no way Skinner and Scully could condemn him for this. "Can you picture the faces of your lovers when they receive copies of this on the day of your funerals? HA!"

"Do you really think that our lovers will allow you to live after this?" he heard Skinner counter in a breathless voice. Krycek wrinkled his nose. What were they talking about? Lovers? Did Skinner find out about him and Scully?

"Oh, please," Equinus snorted. "Do you really think that Krycek has the temper to put aside the fact that his faggot lover just fucked his brother's mistress?"

Krycek lifted his brows. So this was personal, was it? No wonder Horse altered his MO, he thought. And trust this asshole to get the information mixed up.

He found a spot in the wall and put his eye to it. He could see Skinner and Scully, mostly naked, on a pile of some sort of clothing. To his eternal gratitude, the Horse had his back to the door -stupid, stupid, stupid.... And directly in front of the spy hole. Krycek pulled away and put his gun in the hole. He pulled the trigger and heard Scully scream. Krycek yanked the gun from the hole and stormed through the door.

"Oh my God, Alex, it's you." Skinner put his hands to his chest and fell back in relief next to Scully. Krycek kicked at Equinus's side, turning him over with the toe of his boot. He kicked the gun away. The Horse's eyes fluttered, blood speckled the corners of his mouth, his chest scarlet from the hole in the center of it.

"You can't even get information right, asshole," Krycek informed him. "Just so you can contemplate this for all eternity, he is my brother's lover, not her. She's my mistress and I can tell you she cracks a good spanking for bad boys. Not that the four of us care one way or the other, mind you. Believe me, no one is going to be shocked, you wasted this game. We're a kinky bunch and this was all a bit on the boring side."

"Alex, he drugged us. Ecstasy," Skinner struggled to say. Krycek hauled off and kicked the Horse hard enough to crack ribs and puncture the other lung. Equinus died instantly. Krycek knelt next to Skinner and pulled his eyelids wide open, checking his pupils.

"How much did he give you?" he asked. Skinner moved his head from side to side.

"It looked like average street dosage," Scully said. "I'm not sure, I can't think clearly."

Krycek felt a hand try to creep into his jacket and caress his chest. He took Skinner's wrist and put it down. "No, Walter," he said firmly. "Can you walk?" The two attempted to sit up with little luck.

"Alright," Krycek said. "I saw a golf cart just a hundred yards back. I'll go and get it, you two get dressed."

"Alex," Scully said. Krycek looked at her and saw guilt in her clouded eyes.

"It's alright, Dana, it wasn't your fault and we don't have a permanent arrangement, remember?" he said. "We can talk about it later." He stood up and left the room, taking out his cell phone to call Mulder.

Telling the boys that Uncle Walter and Aunt Dana ate something that made them sick, they left early and headed home. Mulder praised Adam for knowing that something was wrong even if it wasn't like the pictures that he saw in his head. Adam looked to Skinner's reddened wrists, to the twins and back to his father.

"I understand, Daddy," he said in a voice too mature for his age. Mulder picked him up and hugged him tight.

They left, leaving the body of the Horse in the building that mysteriously caught fire. All that dried timber and old stuff went up fast and hot, leaving nothing but ashes for the fire department to hose down. Krycek had taken the video and used the tape to kindle the fire. None of them said a word to Krycek about killing the man.

After fighting the depression from the drugs leaving his body, Skinner and Mulder talked about what happened.

"We can't leave Scully like this, Walter," Mulder said.

"I know," Skinner said. "I don't know what to do, though." He wiped his eyes, still feeling a small degree of the side effects along with a great degree of guilt.

Mulder took his face and kissed him. "Yes, you do. She's a part of us, she always has been. Kids or not, job or not, to hell with the rest of the world."

They arrived on Scully's doorstep together and rang the bell. Scully answered and invited them in without a word. She had been expecting a call requesting her presence at a summit meeting at their house. Skinner could barely force himself to meet her eyes.

"Enough dancing, Dana," Mulder said. He took her hands and gently pulled her toward them. He took one of her hands and put it into Skinner's.

Chapter 17: Winter Solstice

"I can't do it, Fox."

Skinner sat on the edge of the couch with his hands clasped between his knees, staring at the floor. He felt Mulder put a hand on his back.

"Can't do what?" Mulder asked.

"I raped her!" he shouted hoarsely.

"No, you didn't," both Mulder and Scully insisted. Scully reached over and shook his arm.

"If I don't consider it rape, then neither should you," she said.

He knew that they had come over to seduce Scully into an evening of fun, but he just couldn't bring himself to even look at her much less think about sex with her. She should hate the sight of him. She should shoot him. She should shoot his balls off. One at a time. He wouldn't blame her, he'd even load the gun for her. He had never, in his entire life, touched a woman in anger much less had sex with one who was unwilling. Skinner's cell phone rang, causing them all to jump.

"Skinner," he answered. He wrinkled his brow and shot a look at Scully. She raised an eyebrow in question. "Alright, I'll be there." He disconnected the signal. Skinner stood up and went over to the coat rack, fishing in his jacket pocket. He held up his gun and pointed it at Mulder.

"Hey!" Mulder screeched, putting his hands in the air.

"Walter!" Scully exclaimed in disbelief as she jumped to her feet.

"Stay where you are!" Skinner yelled. "Don't move!" He reached into his pocket and took out his key ring which had a small Swiss Knife attached to it. "Hold out your hand," he ordered and tossed the knife to Scully.

"Prick the back of his hand," he ordered her. "I don't care, any place with skin."

"This isn't necessary, Walter," Mulder said, trying to be reasonable. Skinner cocked his own gun as he flicked the blade open. Seeing no choice, Scully pressed the tip into Mulder's hand. A green bubble appeared, quickly healing over. She jumped away, stumbling for her gun. The Hunter morphed into his normal neanderthal image.

"Why?" Skinner demanded. The Hunter jumped, tackling Skinner and knocking the gun from his hand. Skinner threw a punch at the alien's chin but it simply bounced off, a gnat on the skin of an elephant. Scully circled them, waiting for her chance, but she couldn't shoot until Skinner was out of the way of oozing green acid. The Hunter heaved up and Skinner kicked up, connecting with the Hunter's crotch and sending him flying over head. The Hunter snarled as he got to his feet. A shot rang out and the Hunter stopped, poleaxed. Skinner scrambled out of the way as the Hunter turned to stare at Scully. Green blood bubbled from the back of the Hunter's neck. He melted to the floor, burning a circle into Scully's rug.

"I thought only one of those ice picks could do that," Skinner said. Scully put her gun down and held out a hand to him. Skinner took it and surged to his feet.

"No, any metal to that spot," she said. "Krycek is a little anal about it."

"Oh. I think that I owe you a rug," Skinner said. God, he hated those things! he thought, watching the green bubble and fizzle.

"How did you know?" Scully asked, gesturing toward the hole in her rug.

"That was Natti on the phone. She said Fox just stumbled into the house, he has cuts and scrapes. He's insisting that I return home immediately."

Skinner ran into the house with Scully close behind him as he took the stairs three at a time. He found Mulder in bed with a wet cloth on his forehead. Scully pulled the sheet away to check him over.

"I'm fine," Mulder insisted. "I'm just a little sore."

"What happened?" Skinner asked, sitting on the side of the bed and taking Mulder's hand. "I didn't even know you weren't you. When did it happen?"

Mulder tried to sit up, wincing and holding his side. Skinner held him up while Scully put an extra pillow behind him.

"When I went for a walk this morning," Mulder said. "He caught me and put me into an old shack just outside of town. I spent the last few hours working myself free. I don't know why he didn't just kill me."

"Probably trying to separate us again," Scully said. Mulder nodded.

"They've been trying that for years. For beings supposedly of a higher intelligence, you'd think they'd get a clue," he said.

Skinner fell forward, putting his head onto the bed. He felt Mulder put a hand on his head.

"What?" Mulder asked. Skinner sat up.

"That wasn't us having that conversation this morning?" Skinner asked.

"What conversation?" Mulder replied.

Skinner stood up, twisting the knot out of his neck, trying to keep the headache from forming.

"Fox, this morning you and I -I thought it was you- we discussed my guilt about what happened in Florida, how that was going to effect our relationship with Dana, and... we went over to her house today to ask her... if she wanted to... join us for.. you know...." Skinner wiped the nervous sweat from his forehead.

"We did, huh?" Mulder said. "I can see the headlines now- 'Sex Alien Style', 'I Was An Alien Sex Slave', 'Alien Shape-Shifters -The Possibilities', 'Fully functional, Sir'....."

"Fox!" Skinner reprimanded him. Scully hid a chuckle.

Mulder tossed the wet cloth to the floor. "Well, really, Walter, it isn't like we haven't discussed the subject of the three of us before? Do you think that he can change just the shape of his penis? Make it longer and thicker at will? Or change into a celebrity? Or a historical figure? What if he was in female form? Could he -she- tighten her vagina or - ooooh, make it vibrate?"

Skinner glared at him. Scully laughing wasn't much help. Mulder patted the bed. "Come here." Skinner sat, fuming that Mulder wasn't taking this seriously. Mulder put his arms around Skinner's neck and kissed him. After a moment, Skinner relaxed and returned the kiss while Scully smiled indulgently at them.

"Let's ignore the Hunter and my abduction for the moment," Mulder said, pulling his mouth away. "Obviously they were just trying to pull us apart, like Scully says. It's been a while since they've tried it, maybe they thought trying to put Scully between us would do it. Little do they know. As for going to Scully's house to play, we've all discussed it before, just not together. Let's get it out into the open. Although it would be fun, deep down we really aren't comfortable with this, are we?" Mulder asked. Both Skinner and Scully shook their heads, breathing a sigh of relief. Mulder nodded. "I think that we all love each other and it might have worked if we started before the boys came and before this current friendship was established, but we didn't and we've begun to settle into our lives.

"At one time, there was a chemistry between the two of you," Mulder pointed a finger at them. "And I know that you are both interested and find each other attractive, but things have settled into this friendship that is slowly growing stronger. If that chemistry rekindles, then I think we should discuss this again. Walter, I'm going to say this in front of Scully so that we are all clear on the subject: if you and she begin to spark, you have my permission to court her. If you wish it, Scully. Only her, Walter."

Skinner leaned back to look at Mulder. He put a finger to one of Mulder's cuts and scraped off the new scab. A red bead formed.

"What was that for?" Mulder demanded, holding a tissue to the opened wound.

"Just checking," Skinner said. "I have your permission to court her? Court?? Have you been reading historical romances? Isn't that taking this whole 'gay' or 'bisexual' thing a little too far?"

Scully snickered, earning a shove from Mulder. "No, I have not been reading romances," Mulder hissed. "And 'court' is the correct word. I dated her, you didn't. I think that the two of you need to experience that before we all sleep together."

"Whoa! Time out," Scully called out, making a T with her hands. "Enough of this 'we da men' crap. Walter, I would be more than happy to go out on a date with you anytime, and not necessarily with romance on the brain. Friends go out on casual dates all the time. That's what friends do. And I don't recall being asked for a date from you, Mulder," she pointed an accusing finger at him and poked him in his chest. "I recall pizza at your place, oriental take-out at your place, porno or Mystery Science Theatre for kicks and then a tumble into bed. I have no complaints about the sex, but hearing 'Scully, would you go out with me tonight' would have been a nice change.

"Has he ever asked you for a date?" Scully turned to Skinner. Skinner thought about it.

"No, come to think about it, he hasn't," he said, turning to Mulder. "He just showed up one day and kissed me. Scared the shit out of me."

Scully rapped Mulder on the shoulder. Mulder put his arms up in defense.

"Well?" Scully asked him. Mulder turned to Skinner but found no comfort there.

"Welllll.... I guess I should be asking for a date?" he suggested. The room was below zero. "Uh... Ok, I should be asking for a date. Who?" Icicles began to form on the window. "Uh.... flowers for Scully and ask Walter?" Spring thaw began. "Walter, would you go out with me?" Summer arrived.

"Yes, Fox, I would love to go out with you," Skinner responded formally. "I do have children, though, so I'll need time to arrange a sitter. You do like children, don't you?" Mulder reached up and grabbed an ear, pulling Skinner down to him and kissed him soundly.

"Wise ass," Mulder informed him. "Maybe my little brother can watch them?" Scully drew back in horror. "Speaking of... where is Alex?" Mulder asked. Skinner shrugged. "If he isn't upstairs, I have no idea where he took off to," he said. "Scully?" She flushed, still uncomfortable with them knowing about her and Krycek.

"He didn't say anything to me," she said.

Mulder took her hand. "Are you alright with him?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said. "He treats me very well, he's very open. I admit that he can be fun and I can get my ya-ya's out, but I don't think that I'll ever fall in love with him; too much history that I can't reconcile. I know his side of it all, but still..."

Mulder nodded and put a kiss on her knuckles. "I understand," he said. "I have a few issues with him myself."

"And yet you trust him in the bedroom," Skinner pointed out to Scully.

"I know, it's strange," she admitted. "There's just something about him when he turns on the charm. I know that he wouldn't hurt me in an.. intimate.. moment, in fact, he goes to great lengths to make sure that I'm.. satisfied. If I stood between him and business, I'd have to think twice about being in his way. He's like two different people." Scully gave a wry smile. "He's Pavel one minute and Ivan the next."

Skinner leaned back against the head board, pushing a pillow behind him. "You are welcome into our bed, Dana, not Alex," he said. "Will that be a problem?"

"No problem at all," she said. "Alex is fun and games. I think that if and when I enter this room, it will be a relationship. Nothing about either of you is casual."

The patter of little feet on the stairs halted the current topic of conversation.

"Maybe now would be a good time to mention the problem of frequent interruptions in the middle of sensitive conversations and other delicate matters?" Skinner offered. Since the door was open, none of the boys bothered to knock. The twins climbed onto the bed, giving sloppy kisses to Scully and making themselves comfortable. Adam stood at Mulder's side and looked accusingly at his new scrapes.

"I tripped while I was jogging," Mulder told him.

"Not having a good month are you, Dad?" Adam responded.

Emilia came over just after dinner to give Adam his lesson in mind control. Learning to control his own mind, that is. Upon returning from Florida, Mulder immediately called Emilia and told her what had been happening with the boy. She came over and began Adam on meditation techniques in self-control. 'Playing Star Trek shields', she called it. 'Shields up, Captain. Shields down, Captain,' with Adam being the Captain and his mind the main computer that controls the protecting shields. Skinner wasn't sure about it, but Mulder talked until Skinner promised to let him call Emilia in on it. It was only a week, but he could see that Adam was a little calmer and he only had a couple of pictures appear in his head. Fortunately, they were innocent pictures. Both impressed and

frightened of the implications, Emilia called everyone she knew and, without telling them her source, gave instructions to begin teaching the shielding technique to all the children in their circles.

The twins lost another tooth, which prompted Scully and Natti both to question, "Aren't they a little too young to be losing teeth?"

"Who knows what they were engineered for?" Mulder responded. "For all we know, they could have been designed to grow at a faster rate. The rest of the clones were."

"Oh God, eight year old adolescents?" Skinner asked in a panic. He received a finger for it.

After the third week of no Krycek, neither his physical presence or by phone, Skinner went to the last resort. He dialed Krycek's voice mail, opened the phone up to the speaker, and had the boys sniffle and ask pitiously, "Did we do something wrong? Don't you love us anymore? Please come home for Christmas. We love you."

"That was a low blow, Walter, truly nasty. I'm proud of you," Mulder said when the line was disconnected.

Later in the evening, Skinner climbed into bed. "Fox, we need to consider something that I find myself really not wanting to consider."

"What if he's dead?" Mulder asked. Skinner nodded. "I consider it ever time he disappears. I thought about asking Adam to be on the lookout for 'pictures' about Alex, but I'd rather not have Adam picking up on any of Alex's habits. At least, not yet." Catching Alex in the middle of an assassination or God knows what, would not be something that Adam should be exposed to. Skinner agreed with Mulder.

"He's probably on some kind of mission," Skinner suggested. "He'll come home when he's ready."

Mulder made a non-committal sound. Skinner turned and draped an arm across Mulder's chest and nuzzled into Mulder's temple.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Skinner asked. Mulder turned onto his side, spooning his back into Skinner's chest and pulling Skinner's arm down across his waist.

"Just a little sore. I'll be fine," Mulder said.

The morning awakened them to the smell of baking cookies. The men followed their noses down to the kitchen to find the room covered with baking preparations and the boys eating their breakfast while eyeing a tray of cooling cookies.

"What's all this?" Skinner asked.

"Christmas baking," Natti explained. "I send tins of baked goods to close friends and family every year."

"Yeah, and we're going to paint them with frosting after school," Adam said. The twins agreed, their mouths too full to speak.

"Are any of those tins going to be staying here?" Mulder asked in anticipation.

"Maybe," Natti said and raised a wooden spoon at him. "If you make a good attempt at not breaking anything before Christmas."

"I'll try," Mulder said and snatched a cookie. He barely escaped to the other side of the room as the spoon aimed for his hand. Skinner helped himself to a plate of eggs and bacon and a cup of juice before sitting down with the boys.

"So what did you boys do yesterday?" he asked.

"We made eskimo homes," Adam said.

"You mean igloos?" Mulder asked. Adam nodded.

"And one caved in on Bobby," Pavel giggled.

"We builded a snowman, too, Uncle Walter," Ivan said.

"You did? Are you going to show us?" Skinner asked him.

"Yeah, it's just out in the back." Ivan grabbed Skinner's hand and pulled at him. Skinner stood up and went with Ivan to the back door. It had snowed for the first time that year only a few days earlier much to the boys pleasure. Changing weather patterns were bringing the seasons later and later in the year. Skinner opened the door, letting in the cold morning air into the oven heated kitchen. The morning sun sparkled off the white snow and off the lopsided snowman in the middle of the yard. Mulder looked over Skinner's shoulder.

"Hey, is that my scarf?" he asked. Pavel nodded proudly.

"He was cold and your scarf was the warmest," he explained.

"And Alex's sunglasses," Skinner saw. "A cigar? My baseball hat?"

"My broom," Natti chipped in.

"Where did you get a cigar?" Skinner asked.

Adam pointed next door. "From Mr. Chavez. He was watching us build Frosty and he was smoking a cigar so we asked if we could use one for his nose."

"Well, in any case, you boys did a very nice job," Skinner said. Their cubs beamed. They were ushered back to the table to finish their breakfast.

"When will Alex be home? Why doesn't he call?" Ivan asked.

Skinner touched Ivan's soft cheek. "I don't know."

Ivan got down from his chair and climbed up onto Skinner's lap, turning to rest his cheek on Skinner's chest. "Is Alex mad at us?" he asked. Skinner hugged him and kissed the top of Ivan's head.

"No, Alex isn't mad at you, he's probably just very busy and can't get to his phone," Skinner said. He looked over at Mulder who nodded once. Mulder would make a few calls when he got to work.

"How are you doing, Adam?" Mulder asked. "Is your head feeling better?"

Adam nodded and swallowed his toast. "Lots better," he said. "What Miss Emilia tells me to do is weird but I think it's helping. My head isn't fuzzy anymore."

Mulder frowned. "Fuzzy how?"

Adam looked around trying to find a word. "Liiiiiiike.... like the fuzzy on the TV when it isn't working."

"Do you mean the static?" Mulder asked. "The black and white spots with a lot of noise?" Adam nodded. "And how is school? Are you able to work better?"

Adam nodded again. "Yes and I even did good on a math test on Friday. I only got 4 wrong."

"Alright!" Mulder shouted. The two high-fived.

Ivan slid off Skinner's lap and took his plate to the sink, Pavel following him. Pavel had been quieter than usual lately and Skinner knew the cause: he was missing Alex. The men tried not to play favorites but like every other relationship in life, chemistry played a major part. While Mulder had Adam to focus on, Skinner had Ivan and Pavel gravitated toward Alex. Skinner loved all three boys and would never be able to choose between

them but he reluctantly admitted to himself that as Pavel and Ivan grew up, they were also beginning to separate and individualize. Ivan remained focused on Skinner but Pavel was turning to Alex for his needs.

On Pavel's way around the table to the livingroom, Skinner grabbed him by the waist and pulled him back and up onto his lap. He held Pavel's head to his chest, gently stroking the boy's back. He could feel the tension in Pavel's body. Giving Mulder a glance, he stood up and carried Pavel out of the room and upstairs. Ivan raced up ahead of them to brush his teeth and get dressed. Skinner took Pavel into the master bedroom and sat in the chair with him. He put his mouth to the silky, dark brown hair. Pavel turned and buried his face in Skinner's chest.

"I want Alex," Skinner heard a whisper. He felt a dampness creep down his chest.

"I know you do, son," he said. "Uncle Fox and I, and Aunt Dana, will do our very best to find him for you. I promise. Just remember; we all love you very much. I love you very much. I know Alex does, too." He hummed softly as he cradled Pavel who shed silent tears. Skinner wondered at genetics for the millionth time; just like Krycek, Pavel hid and cried silently when he was hurting inside. Just like Krycek.....

Mulder came in quietly and began to dress for work. He had received his doctor's ok to return to the office. Skinner watched him as he continued to rock Pavel. Mulder mouthed Krycek's name with a question and Skinner gave a nod. Ivan came in, a spot of toothpaste on his cheek. He came over to the chair and watched his brother for a moment with a frown. He leaned forward and gave Pavel an awkward hug before turning to leave.

"See that?" Skinner whispered to Pavel. "Even Ivan loves you." The small arms tightened around his waist.

Mulder quickly finished with his tie and slid his dress shoes on. He bent to kiss Skinner and placed a kiss on Pavel's head before leaving for work. He made a motion that he would call later.

Skinner didn't move until he felt the tension leave Pavel's body and the grip loosen around his waist. He carefully stood up and placed Pavel in the bed, covering him with the blanket. He looked at the clock; Adam would have left for school already and it was almost time for Ivan to go for their kindergarten session which was only three hours. He'd leave Pavel home for the day, let him help Natti or go to the office with him. Skinner had a talk with Natti and dressed to take Ivan to school, driving him in and stopping in the class to let their teacher know that Pavel was home. It seemed strange to see Ivan going off by himself, he and Pavel had never done anything apart since they arrived there just over a year ago. The twins had been with them for a year in November. They had pizza and ice cream to celebrate. The boys kept going to the window, each time returning sadder.

The week before, on their return from Florida, Skinner had called Natti and when they arrived home, Adam had a surprise birthday party waiting for him, complete with friends, cake and presents. Not having had much of a birthday, everyone felt it was important to distract Adam from recent events.

Skinner sat in his office and called Mulder.

"Hi, I didn't want to say anything in front of the boys. It occurred to me that Alex may be hiding out. You know how Pavel goes into hermit mode when he's hurting inside; Alex does the same thing."

"What could he be hurting over?" Mulder asked.

Skinner ran a hand over his head and took his glasses off, setting them on the desk. "I don't know. You know getting personal information out of him is harder than melting a diamond."

"Morning," he heard. He turned to see KC coming in his door.

"Good morning, KC," he said. "I'll be with you in a moment." KC sat and waited for him. It was Skinner's turn to partner her for the week. "I don't know, Fox, it just struck me that he was quieter than usual just before he disappeared."

"Alright," Mulder said. "I'll think about it but I don't know what his problem could be. I've already put out a few calls, I'm waiting for replies. I'll let you know if I find anything. Or him."

They said good-bye and hung up. Skinner redialed. Hearing the tone on the phone, he spoke.

"Alex, I don't know that the problem is but please come home and talk with us about it. The boys don't understand. Pavel was crying this morning, he thinks you don't love him anymore. Come home, Alex, whatever it is, we can work it out."

Krycek had disappeared on them before but he never failed to call at the first chance. At one time, Skinner would have hoped and prayed that Krycek would never come back; now he could only hope that Krycek returned with at least some of his limbs in tact.

"What's up?" KC asked. Skinner shook his head.

"Just Alex. It could be anything from a perceived insult to he's dead," he said.

"And you have no other way of contacting him?" she asked.

"No. His cell phone, but he isn't answering it. Just his voice mail."

KC frowned as she thought. "What does he do?"

"That is a loaded question," Skinner warned her. "I honestly can't tell you."

"Let's see, considering yours and Mulder's background, you can't tell me...NSA? CIA?" she guessed.

Skinner gathered up his gun and car keys and walked out of the building with her. "Even if you guessed right, do you really think I could tell you?" The NSA story worked on the rest of his family....

KC nodded knowingly. NSA it was.

"Did you know that an FBI agent moved in?" KC asked when they were a few blocks from the station.

"What? Since when?" Skinner asked. Pagans, various members of the alternative community, family and now FBI agents. Skinner knew he was missing a clue and it was seriously annoying him.

"When you all were in Florida," she answered. "Agent Giuliani. Complete with five kids," she said, impressed. "If I'm not mistaken, his wife was beginning to bust her seams again."

Skinner nodded. "I've met him. The twins hood-winked him once. At least it isn't Erikson -Alex would kill him."

KC looked at him. "You're not being facetious, are you?"

"Absolutely not," Skinner said. "Even the twins were ready to kill the asshole." To pass the time, Skinner told her about Adam's kidnapping.

"....so we took the fruitcake down, I cuffed him and called in the others."

His young cousin and deputy was shaking her head in disbelief. "Wow," she said. "And here I thought you guys were being a little paranoid about protecting the kids."

Skinner slowed the car and took a closer look at the snow covered houses. Something looked off.

"What?" KC asked, looking around.

Sidewalks shoveled, driveways plowed...

"Mr. Peterson," Skinner said, pointing at a house. "Everyone is shoveled, neat and tidy, except him. His neighbors have fireplaces going. He doesn't."

"Neither do you," KC pointed out. Skinner nodded in agreement.

"We don't have a fireplace," he said. "Mr. Peterson does. I brought in a cord of wood for him last year. He's ancient." Skinner parked the car in front of Mr. Peterson's home. He zipped up his parka and walked with KC up to the door.

"Mr. Peterson?" he called out. "It's Sheriff!" He waited for a response to his knock. The car was in the driveway so the elderly man should be home. Skinner tried the doorknob but it was locked. "Walk around, see if you can see anything," he said to KC. She nodded and went around the side of the house while he knocked again. Skinner didn't often have those 'feelings' that a lot of law officials get, but his bells were ringing on this one. He stepped to the side and tried to see into the livingroom. Curtains blocked most of his view but he didn't see anything through the slit. He heard his radio click.

"Back door is unlocked," he heard.

"Roger." Skinner made his way around to the back. KC knocked as he approached. She shook her head.

"No answer," she said.

Skinner turned the knob and stepped inside.

"Mr. Peterson?" he called out. There was no answer. Skinner walked through the kitchen and into the livingroom, going up the stairs, KC following close behind. He took a deep breath and opened the bedroom door when there was no response to his knock.

"Call Doc," he said, looking in. Mr. Peterson lay motionless on the bed. The room was ice cold. Skinner checked for a pulse and breath sounds and found none. KC dialed Dr. Wilkins from her cell phone.

"It's freezing in here," he said. He went back downstairs and found the basement. He approached the furnace and saw the problem at once; the pilot light was out. He shook his head. Poor old bastard froze to death.

It took the rest of the morning and into the afternoon to clear up the mess, during which time Skinner sent Ruvin and John out to finish the rounds. Skinner contacted Mr. Peterson's children who were understandably shocked. They would make the arrangements.

The coroner's van left just before school let out, but not before the morning kindergarten session let out. Pavel and Ivan stood on the sidewalk bundled up in their snow suits, watching the action. They had learned to stay back when Uncle Walter was being Sheriff.

"Does Natti know where you boys are?" Skinner asked them. They nodded.

"We said we was going to watch you," Pavel said. "What happened to Mr. Peterson?" he asked.

Skinner knelt down in front of them. "The fire in Mr. Peterson's heater went out and he died because it was too cold." The boys thought about it.

"Did it hurt him?" Ivan asked. Skinner shook his head.

"No. He went to sleep and he didn't wake up. Remember how Adam's mommy went to sleep and didn't wake up?" They nodded. "When it gets cold, the blood slows down. Blood heats our body and helps to keep us alive. When the blood slows down, the body gets too cold to live. That's what happened to Mr. Peterson."

The boys thought some more. "Is our house too cold?" Pavel asked.

Skinner brushed a snow flake from Pavel's nose. "No, we're fine," he said. "After dinner, I'll show you how the heater works and you can see for yourselves." The boys were satisfied.

"Sheriff?"

Skinner turned to see KC waving him over. "Have you two done work in your books today?" he asked the boys. They shook their heads with a guilty pout. He gave them pats on their backsides and sent them off home. Skinner went over to KC who was talking with George, the oil delivery man. Skinner shook his hand.

"Tell him, George," KC said.

The round man shifted in the snow. "Sheriff, I was just checking Mr. Peterson's heater, seeing if it was a mechanical malfunction or just a gust of wind, and something strange, Sir," the man said.

"Strange how?" Skinner asked.

"Well, Sir, the tank was empty. I know I filled it not two days ago. Fifty-five gallons. I have it in my records. I did most of this street that day."

"Fifty-five gallons?" Skinner asked, wrinkling his nose. "That should have lasted into February for a house this size."

"Yes, Sir," George nodded his agreement.

"Did you notice anything else strange?" Skinner asked. George scratched his beard.

"Nope, nothin' stands out," he said after a minute.

"Sheriff?" Skinner's radio crackled to life. He took it out of its case.

"Skinner," he said.

"I think you'd better get on out to the old Mathau place, Sheriff," Ruvin said.

"What's up, Ruvin?" Skinner asked.

"901 David Baker, Sir," Ruvin said. Skinner looked over at KC. There was another dead body.

By the end of the day, they had discovered three elderly bodies frozen stiff in their own homes. In the last house, a whimper grabbed Skinner's attention. He pulled his gun and crouched beside the bed. He pulled the blankets aside and was licked on the nose. He jumped back and sputtered, wiping his face. A wiggly little body shuffled out from under the bed and whimpered again with a brief wag of a tan tail. The puppy shivered from the cold and looked up at Skinner with bottomless, liquid brown eyes.

With no disconcerting cause other than freshly filled oil tanks suddenly empty, Skinner went home tired and frustrated. His family was halfway through dinner when he sat down. Natti took his warmed plate out of the oven. Mulder had stopped by a scene when he returned home to find all the excitement but Skinner sent him home; there was nothing Mulder could do and as an FBI agent, Mulder was out of his jurisdiction.

"Everyone else ok?" Mulder asked after Skinner took a bit of his meatloaf. He nodded and swallowed.

"All present and accounted for," he said. In a town of 1013, it was easy to keep track of who was where. "I had Becky call around, starting with the oldest, and had them check their tanks." Mulder accepted the statement without further questions; Skinner would fill him in later. Out of the hearing of little ears. Ivan screeched and jumped out of his chair. Everyone stopped eating and stared at him as he stuck his head under the table.

"A puppy!" he yelled. The other boys dove under the table.

"Walter, you didn't," Mulder accused. He stuck his head under the table and looked for himself. "You did."

"She was cold and alone," Skinner explained. "What was I supposed to do with her?"

Natti cut up a small piece of meat and a few vegetables and put the plate on the floor along with a bowl of water. "Is she paper trained yet?" Natti asked Skinner. He highly doubted it. "You know who's training her, right?" she asked.

"Yes, Ma'am," he said. Yes, he knew.

A dull thud sounded on the ceiling and everyone stopped to stare upward.

"Stay!" Skinner pointed at the boys who were ready to jump up. He and Mulder bolted out the back door and up the stairs. They skid to a stop in the doorway, bumping into each other.

"Come in, don't let the heat out," Krycek said, sounding world weary. A large duffle bag sat in the middle of the floor.

"Where have you been?!" both men yelled at him. Krycek was laying on his couch. He opened one blurry eye.

"Don't start on me," he said softly. The men made a concerted effort to calm and center themselves. One wrong word and Krycek would disappear again, maybe for good. The men would be able to deal with it, but the boys wouldn't understand.

"We're just worried, Alex," Mulder said with a neutral voice. "We realise that you need to go off at times, but how are we to know if you're dead or alive?"

"Yes, well, thanks to you two, I have a legitimate job," Krycek said. "I've never had a real paycheck before. Can you believe that I actually have to show up for work in the morning?"

"What are you talking about?" they asked.

Krycek pulled a small black wallet out of his jacket and tossed it at them. Mulder caught it and opened it with Skinner looked over his shoulder. They stared at the ID for a moment before they began to laugh.

"You got recruited into the NSA?!" they barked in disbelief. Krycek snorted.

"Thanks to Hoskins and your cop cousins poking their noses into government business, you two were tailed until you led Them to me," Krycek said. "I got shanghied in a bar in Altoona of all places."

"What were you doing in Altoona?" Skinner asked. Krycek turned his face away and ignored them. Skinner looked at Mulder.

"Alex, I thought we were going talk out problems and miscommunications," Skinner reminded him. Mulder sat on the floor next to the couch.

"Remember our talk about families?" Mulder asked Krycek. "Talking about things that bother us, that hurt us, makes us stronger on the inside. You don't have to look at us, but at least tell us what's been bothering you. Did one of us do or say something wrong?" Skinner thought that Mulder talking to Krycek as though he were one of the boys would have irritated the man but Krycek plucked at the couch looking for all the world like Pavel.

"It was my fault that the Horse went after you," he mumbled.

"What?" the men asked in confusion. Krycek huffed with impatience and got up.

"It was my fault," he reiterated as he paced. "I caught him at the marina. Instead of killing him there or turning him over to the cops, I toyed with him. I gave him a head start before I hunted him. I underestimated him and he got away. I told him that he shot my brother and he had to pay the price."

While Skinner stared in shock, Mulder nodded. "Yes, that was a bone-head thing to do," Mulder agreed with Krycek. "Is this something you plan on doing again?" he asked. Krycek shook his head. "Good. We are all alive and well so you can dump the guilt. Thank you for sticking up for me. No more toying with the bad guys, either kill them or arrest them right there and then, got it?" Krycek nodded with a hang-dog look.

It wasn't how Skinner would have handled it but he could see that what Mulder said was sinking into Krycek's head. "Communication begins with learning the language," Mulder had said to him once after an argument with Krycek. "Alex speaks thug. If you can't get an idea into his head by using civilized speech, then speak thug. Pretend he's one of your cousins." Skinner wasn't amused but he understood what Mulder was saying.

"Good," Mulder said. "Now get your ass downstairs and apologize to the boys for not calling them. Make sure that Pavel gets a good hug and kiss. If you can, if you're ready, tell him that you love him. Ivan is able to understand by action but Pavel needs to hear the words before he is able to comprehend."

Krycek took his hang-dog face out the door and down the stairs with the men following. Ivan and Adam jumped at Krycek and received hugs. Pavel hung back until Krycek squatted on the floor and held out his arms. He carried Pavel out into the livingroom.

"Come on," Skinner told the other boys. "Finish your dinner. Alex and the puppy can wait." The cats sat on top of the refrigerator, staring down at the Thing in disbelief.

After the boys were put to bed, Krycek and Mulder sat on the couch and listened to Skinner describe the day's events. The puppy, worn out from tumbling with three active little boys, was sound asleep on an old blanket.

"Empty oil tanks?" Krycek asked, wrinkling his nose. "That's it?" He leaned back and communed with the ceiling with a look that Skinner was becoming familiar with; Krycek was scanning the data banks. Anyone who thought that Krycek was just a hitman without the intelligence to do much more was sorely mistaken. Krycek did Mensa puzzles as easily as Mulder did.

"Any rumors in the stratosphere?" Mulder asked him. Krycek scratched at his chest as he contemplated.

"Mmmm... maybe," he said. "I know of a couple of labs that are working on pollution control. They're very anti- fossil fuel. They make Greenpeace look like Tibetan monks. I don't see that they'd want to kill a few old people out in the middle of nowhere, though."

"Walter, did the victims have anything in common other than their age?" Mulder asked. "Anything in their past?"

Skinner thought about the three people, Mr. Peterson, Mrs. Mathau and Mr. Berg. He took the puppy from Mr. Berg's home.

"Mr. Peterson has two children, son and daughter. Both live out of state," he thought out loud. "I think I remember Mr. Peterson mentioning that his son is an engineer but he didn't say where. Daughter is a housewife. Mr. Peterson is retired from the railroad. Mrs. Mathau is childless. She used to teach piano before her arthritis became too bad. Her husband was a coalminer here in this area. Mr. Berg had one child, a son who died in 'Nam. Wife died a few years ago of a heart attack. Mr. Berg is retired from the Army, he was a Staff Sargent. KC was enjoying trading stories with him."

Mulder scratched down a few notes as Skinner spoke.

"Why is there a puppy sleeping on the floor?" Krycek asked, only just realizing that there was a new body in the house.

"I found her at Mr. Berg's house," Skinner said. "She was hiding under the bed."

"How old was he?" Krycek asked.

"About 87, I think."

Krycek frowned. "What's an old man doing with a puppy? Did he have that kind of energy? Did he realise that she would outlive him?" Mulder looked up, the wheels turning.

"I don't know anything about it," Skinner said. "I didn't even know that he had a dog."

"I want to see his place," Krycek announced abruptly. He stood up and reached for a jacket. Seeing that the men were determined, Skinner let Natti know that they'd be out for a few minutes and got his own jacket.

"Grab the dog, Walter," Mulder said and waved him to hurry. Skinner lifted the puppy, blanket and all and received a slobbery kiss for it. He sputtered and wiped his face.

"No kiss..," he started and was slobbered on again. Mulder chuckled and even Krycek tried to hold in a snicker.

"There's her name, Walter," Krycek said. "Creatures should be named for their nature. Her name is Kisa." The puppy yapped in agreement.

Skinner set Kisa on the ground and attached her leash. Actually a cat leash that was stolen and hidden not minutes after it was brought into the house. The cats had turned their smug noses up at Skinner's demand for it's return. Natti had discovered it behind the washer. Kisa pranced in the snow, her ears twitching with excitement and her tail nearly wagging her over. She squatted and Skinner praised her when she finished. She wasn't sure what she did but she was happy to be coo-ed over. He got into the car and handed the bundled puppy over to Mulder who was immediately licked.

"What kind of a name is Kisa?" Skinner asked.

"A Russian name," Krycek said.

"I gathered that," Skinner said. "How about some detail?"

Kisa yapped. "It means kitten," Krycek said.

"This is a dog, Alex," Skinner said.

"I know that but she's cute and cuddly and fuzzy."

Both Skinner and Mulder turned around to look at Krycek.

"What?" Krycek held up his hands.

Kisa looked over Mulder's shoulder and yapped at Krycek.

The ride to Mr. Berg's house took just minutes. The streets were dark and still, the snow insulating against sound as it fell with a faint whisper. The evening was getting stranger by the moment, Skinner thought. Krycek disappears for weeks only to return as a new employee of the NSA and names the new puppy 'kitten'. He's deflecting, Skinner would swear he heard Mulder murmur. Deflecting from what? Skinner thought. From the real

reason he left in the first place. His inner-Mulder was right, Krycek told them what happened after, not why he left. Skinner would wait; pushing Krycek too soon would only cause him to run again.

They reached the house and Krycek took the puppy from Mulder when they got out of the car. Skinner unlocked the front door and let them in. Krycek put the puppy on the floor and followed patiently as Kisa toddled around.

"Alex, she doesn't have the memory of an older dog," Skinner informed him.

"Maybe not details but if she experienced something traumatic, she'll remember," Krycek said.

The house was freezing, reminding Skinner of the inside of an icebox. There was the musty smell of 'old' in the air and a sparseness of someone who didn't seem to enjoy life. Not even family pictures on the mantle. An old linoleum table, an EZ chair, a couch and a TV stand. Skinner didn't notice earlier in the evening but Mr. Berg was a sad way to end a life of over 80 years. Skinner felt a chill race down his spine; if it hadn't been for Mulder, he would have become Mr. Berg.

"Hey," Krycek said and thrust a frame under Skinner's nose. "This was next to the old man's bed. Is that him?" Skinner looked at the face under Krycek's finger and nodded.

"Yes, I'd say about 40-50 years earlier." It was Mr. Berg's wedding photo, an old acetate picture.

Krycek tossed the frame onto the chair. "Your Mr. Berg was Consortium. I've seen that face in old photos. He was DOD before he retired. Let's see the other houses, show me pictures."

Reeling, Skinner drove them to Mr. Peterson's and Mrs. Mathau's homes after Krycek scraped a sample of the oil from the tank. Krycek went straight for any pictures. "Mr. Peterson -engineer on one of the surgical trains. Mrs. Mathau -espionage."

"Espionage?!" Skinner echoed in disbelief. "She was a sweet little old lady."

"So was Mata Hari," Krycek said. "Believe it, Walter, I've seen them in group photos. I've memorized all the faces."

Mulder drew a breath.

"What?" the men asked. Mulder pointed at Skinner and snapped his fingers.

"The poisoning," Mulder said. "Whoever did this, knows that you were Consortium at one time. You were the first victim. Alex's presence must have scared whoever it was off your trail."

Krycek nodded thoughtfully. "That's a good possibility," he said to Mulder. "I need to do some checking. Very few people would know who past 'employees' were. Especially past employees who have escaped the Tribunals. It was sloppy work, none the less. Freezing old people to death." Krycek snorted his opinion. "Poisoning bottled water. Very sloppy. Obviously an amateur who has read too many mystery books."

"What's wrong, Alex," Mulder said. "Afraid of a little competition for the heads of the remaining bad guys?"

"Of course n...." Krycek began. "I don't know what you're talking about," he finished. Skinner laughed. "Alex, you're a snob on the subject of killing styles."

"Executions, please, and I still don't know what you're talking about," Krycek corrected him. He handed

Skinner the leash and took a plastic bag out of a pocket inside his jacket. He went down to the basement and took his sample. Skinner tucked the shivering puppy inside his jacket and scratched her head as he walked outside. He stared up at the gray sky filled with snow clouds. A pair of arms encircled his waist from behind and lips touched his neck.

"It's the 21st," Mulder said. "It's the Winter Solstice. Tomorrow, the days begin to get longer again. The sun is reborn. Would you like me to warm you up tonight?"

"Yes, I would," Skinner said.

Krycek came out of the house and Skinner locked up.

"Let's get out of here, I'm freezing my ass off," Krycek said. The men agreed and drove home.

In the middle of the night, Skinner woke up to use the bathroom. He heard a noise in the kitchen and went downstairs to find Krycek making a cup of hot chocolate.

"Something wrong with your stove?" Skinner asked. He stepped over the babygate that was across the doorway, holding the puppy in the kitchen with her papers until she was house-trained. She was snuggled in her blanket, chewing happily on a rubber toy. She wagged her tail at his entrance and yapped before attacking her toy with a tiny growl.

Krycek shook his head. "No hot coco." He handed Skinner a steaming mug. Skinner sat at the table and blew on his coco before taking a sip. He studied Krycek as the man fixed another mug.

"Alex, tell me something; did my having sex with Scully upset you?" Skinner asked.

Krycek stopped what he was doing and frowned.

"Why on earth would that upset me?" he asked. Skinner shrugged.

"Because you've been with her," Skinner said.

Krycek sat at the table. "I've been with a few people, so what? I have no formal arrangements with her, she can sleep with whom ever she wants to. But you didn't sleep with her willingly, you should be the one upset. Hell, she should be on the warpath."

"The Horse is dead," Skinner said. "Who would she go after?"

Krycek opened his mouth to say something but took a sip of coco instead. Skinner could read the word that was forming.

"You were going to say 'me'. Why should Scully be after you?" he asked.

Krycek stared down at the dark liquid and turned his cup around.

"It was my fault the asshole went after you guys, doesn't that make you feel anything?" Krycek asked. Skinner felt the pieces click together.

"Alex, you did not force me and Scully together, he did," Skinner said. "I'm angry with him, not you. Dana and I have discussed it and we're fine. We're getting to fine. Fox has a problem with the way it happened but not the fact that I had sex with her. You know that I would have no problem with Dana in our bed and the three of us have discussed that, too, and we agreed that we're not ready for it. If you have a problem with Dana in my bed, then you need to speak up and set a boundary."

"I'm not territorial," Krycek said. "She's a fun partner but I'm not in love with her. You do what you want."

Skinner nodded and took a sip of coco. "If and when this happens, we can't have her jumping between beds," he warned Krycek.

"Of course not," Krycek agreed. "That's one of the few rules we established; if one of us goes outside the play area, the game stops. Our immune systems have been greatly improved but we're still susceptible. Not that I'm insinuating anything." Skinner waved him off.

"I understand. It's a good rule." A thought occurred to him. "I thought you were still playing with Em?"

"I am," Krycek said with a lift of an eyebrow. "I didn't say where the boundaries on our play area were."

Skinner could see that Krycek wasn't going to elaborate and that was fine, it was none of his business. He wondered how far Scully took her experiment.

"Have you spoken with her about your concerns?" Skinner asked. Krycek shook his head. "You need to, Alex, she's been worried about you, too."

Krycek clearly didn't believe him. "She isn't cold-blooded, Alex, she's been having sex with you; that tends to make people care about each other. Give her a call tomorrow and make a date to go and talk with her."

"Ten years ago you would never have said something like that," Krycek observed.

Skinner gathered his cup and stood. "Yes, well, some boys take longer to mature than others."

"Was that a crack, Skinner?" he heard as he walked through the livingroom. Skinner gave a silent chuckle. He put his mug down on the stairs and went in to check on the children. Petunia was curled up at the foot of Adam's bed and gave him a reproachful look. He chucked her under her chin and ears with a whispered apology for bringing the enemy into their home. He tucked the blanket around Adam and smoothed his hair with a kiss at the boy's temple. The twins, having recently been relocated to a downstairs bedroom, were both sound asleep. Pavel was snoring softly. He turned in his sleep as Skinner straightened his blanket and stroked his cheek. The snoring stopped when Pavel turned onto his belly. Aries ignored him. Ivan was curled up with his pillow, his cat Joxer curled up in the crook of his legs. The cat opened one eye and went back to sleep, assured that this human belonged. Skinner put a light kiss on Ivan's cheek and held still when the boy shifted and murmured in his sleep.

"Daddy."

His chest so tight that it hurt, Skinner withdrew from the room and bumped into Krycek in the hall. He had heard.

"I can't think of anyone better to call Daddy," Krycek said. "If the boys want to, it's alright with me. I'd rather be their big brother than their father."

The following evening they had a full house for dinner. Emilia had come over and declared the kitchen off limits to the men while she and Natti cooked up a Solstice feast. The children were kept occupied with presents and soon had the livingroom floor covered

in torn paper and ribbons which the puppy was sure was a present for her. Even the cats managed to tear into the paper with ferocious leaps and bounds all the while remaining regal.

"Walter," Dom leaned over towards him. "I'm not trying to start an argument, really, but do the boys know the story of Jesus' birth?"

Skinner nodded. "Yes, they do. They also know the story of Osiris, Apollo, Buddha, Merlin, Lugh, Marduk, Mohammed..."

Dom stopped him. "Alright, I get it. I was just asking. Will you at least be coming to Mama's Christmas party on the 25th?"

"Yes, of course, Dom," Skinner assured him.

The front door opened and Scully announced herself. "Hello."

The boys jumped up and ran to her. She gave them the bags she was carrying and told them to find the presents with their own names. The boys eagerly complied. She kept one bag and passed out a present to each of the men, including Dominic who blushed when she kissed his cheek.

"Mom says Merry Christmas," she said to Mulder. She kissed his cheek, too. "That's from her."

"She couldn't come?" he asked. Scully shook her head.

"She was a little uncomfortable with a non-Christian holiday. But she says everyone is welcome to come to dinner on Monday."

"We're going to New York for dinner," Mulder said. "Zia Ginny is bound and determined to draw Walter back into the fold, me converted and our little heathens saved."

The men chuckled as Scully swatted at Mulder.

"Can we talk?" Krycek asked her, indicating upstairs. Scully nodded with a lift of an eyebrow. He took a deep breath and shot a look at Skinner before leading Scully out of the room.

Ivan rushed over to Skinner and climbed up onto his lap.

"Look! A eBook!" He showed Skinner the box. "And stories! Hans Christian Andersen!"

Skinner took the box. "You're right, that's what it says," he said. "You read that very well." Ivan smiled, one front tooth half grown next to an empty space.

Pavel ran over and took Skinner's other knee. "And I got a eBook with stories, too! Fairy Tales and Mfths!" he lisped.

Adam ran over. "Me, too! Just So Stories!"

Dominic handed the boys presents that he had hidden behind the couch.

"You'll forgive me if I think children should play once in a while," he said to the men. The boys opened the boxes and screamed over the three soccer balls. Skinner groaned, his secret hopes for at least one football star circling down the drain. Mulder patted his knee in sympathy.

"Fox, she just spent about five hundred dollars on the boys," Skinner said.

"I know," Mulder said. "Let her have her fun. It isn't like she has children of her own to splurg on."

After dinner, everyone retired to the family room with wine and eggnog, stuffed to the gills. Krycek took the twins out of the room while the adults collapsed onto the couches and Adam lounged in a chair with his eBook. Skinner made no effort to hide unbuttoning the clasp on his jeans to give his stomach room to digest. Mulder relaxed next to him with one hand on Skinner's thigh while Scully sat on Skinner's other side. Skinner didn't know what Krycek said to her but when they returned from their talk, she flushed when she looked at Skinner.

Krycek and the twins came back down, followed by Madison Howard.

"Hey, Harry," Skinner and Mulder greeted him. The older man waved at them and said hello to the ladies. Krycek gave a small tap on the twins. They walked up to Skinner and Ivan handed him an envelope.

"What's this?" Skinner asked them. The boys figgited.

"Uncle Walter?" Ivan asked. "Would you 'dopt us and be our daddy?"

Shocked, Skinner dropped the envelope and pulled the boys to him, squeezing them tightly. Standing in back of them, Krycek gave Skinner a nod of acceptance.

Chapter 18: Fathers and Sons

"She's a daaaay tripper, sunday driver, yeah, it took me sooo long to find out what I found out..."

The music was loud enough to rattle the walls but seeing Mulder dancing in the middle of the livingroom with the boys and a barking puppy was a sight Skinner wished he had the video camera for. None of them had an ounce of rhythm but they made up for it with enthusiasm.

"Lady Madonna, children at your feet....."

Skinner jumped in much to the delight of the boys. No one heard the knock at the door.

"Hey, Jude....." Skinner sang along with the CD as he lifted Adam and danced around with him.

A throat clearing abruptly halted everyone. Mulder took the remote control out of his pocket and hit the mute button. Kisa halted in confusion as the sounds abruptly stopped.

"Giuliani," Mulder greeted the agent breathlessly. Agent Giuliani shifted nervously.

"Sir," he said. "Sorry to barg in but no one heard me knocking. You said you wanted me to partner you to the site today? It's 9am."

Mulder hit his forehead. "God! I lost track of time. Sorry to keep you waiting, give me two minutes." Mulder ran up the stairs to grab his ID and gun.

"So how was Christmas in your new home?" Skinner asked politely. The boys lay on the floor trying to catch their breath. Ivan wasn't having much luck since Kisa decided that this was a new game. Ivan giggled and tried to push her away.

"Very nice, Sir, thank you," Giuliani responded with a smile at Ivan. "We haven't unpacked everything yet, but Carla decorated real nice and the children were happy. How was your Christmas, Sir?"

"We went to New York to visit with my family," Skinner said. "The children stuffed themselves on Italian cooking and came home loaded with more presents than any child has a right to."

Giuliani smiled in appreciation. Skinner recognised the agent's nervous shifting; most agents did that in his presence, only his personal guards relaxed with him when he was AD.

"Boys," Skinner called for their attention. "Agent Giuliani's children will be going to school with you. Boys, girls?" he asked the agent.

"Sir? Oh, all girls, Sir," Giuliani said. "Angela is 10, Belinda 8, Christen 7, Danielle 5 and Erica is almost 2."

"You alphabetized them?" Skinner asked.

Giuliani ducked his head with a chuckle. "It seemed easiest, Sir, we planned on a large family. Carla is due with number six at the end of March. Felicia or Francesco."

"Congratulations," Skinner said.

"Thank you, Sir."

Skinner wondered how Carla felt about popping them out every year or so until her body was worn. Mulder hurried down the stairs and grabbed his parka out of the closet. He grabbed little ears for a quick peck and buzzed Skinner before hurrying out the door, pulling Giuliani out with him. Skinner looked at the waiting boys and pressed the mute button on the remote.

"You say you want a rev-o-lutuuun, weelll you knooow...."

The boys cheered, wiggled their hips and waved their arms.

With Natti gone for two weeks on vacation, Skinner had complete charge of the boys again during the day. Krycek was at work, a concept Skinner found almost laughable, so he bundled the boys up, dug out the sleds, and took them out to the edge of town where the snow banks were high enough to be fun. The greatest gift he had received that Christmas was hearing the twins calling him Daddy. He had no idea that the boys looked to him as their parent. With Krycek's blessing, and instigation, Skinner was in mid-process of becoming their legal parent, adopting the twins as his own sons. It had even caught Mulder by surprise. Krycek must have had poor Harry working on the paperwork double-time in order to have it ready for dinner.

Skinner wasn't the only one with the idea to wear out the children with fun in the snow; there had to be a dozen kids at the banks with one or both parents. It was winter vacation so parents were scrambling to find something to entertain their kids with. After the initial surprise at hearing Skinner's change of address, he was congratulated on his new parental status when he explained what was happening. To his own surprise, he was informed that a new principal would be in charge of the school when the children returned after the New Year. No one had the name of the new principal, they only knew what was coming down from the grapevine.

"What happened with Mr. Edwards?" he asked. The school board fired him for consistantly low academic scores on the state level. If it was only one or two teachers, then the teacher would be blamed, but the entire school? The blame fell to the leader.

"Sheriff Skinner?" He turned to the woman who had come up to him. She held a bundled toddler close, keeping the baby warm.

"Yes?" he said.

"I'm Carla Giuliani," she held out her mittened hand and Skinner shook it.

"Agent Giuliani's wife," he recognized. "How are you enjoying our little town?"

She smiled, her cheeks red from the cold. "So far, so good," she said. "A little too quiet for me, I'm used to the lullaby of cars and sirens. Eddie wanted to get the girls away from the drugs and violence of the city, though, so here we are."

Skinner wondered how long it would take for the lady to go stir-crazy. "I know what you mean. It took me a while to get used to the quiet and now I find the city too loud. But the city isn't too far away, only an hour drive and it's a nice drive. We have good people here, friendly and always willing to lend a hand when you need it. You won't lack for sitters if you want to take some time to yourself. I can give you a few names of girls that we've used for the boys," he offered. Ivan ran up and begged for coco. Skinner twisted off the top of the thermos and watched as Ivan took a careful sip of the hot liquid. He warmed his insides and was off again.

"He's adorable," Carla said. "Eddie said you have twins?"

Skinner nodded. "That was Ivan, his brother is Pavel. They're 5. We also have my partner's son, Adam who is 8." He pointed Adam and Pavel out to her. He saw her delicately avoid the subject of 'partner' and hoped that she didn't have a problem with alternative lifestyles, considering the population that had been moving into town over the past year.

"How can you tell them apart?" she asked in amazement as Pavel and Ivan tumbled down a bank, their round cheeks and bow mouths rosey, dark brown hair spiked as their hats fell off.

"Usually they're color coded," he said. "Which everyone finds helpful. It's alright to ask them which is which and just about anyone can tell you who they are by what color they're wearing. I've learned to tell them apart but most can't. You wash a child's body often enough and you get to know them better than yourself."

Carla nodded knowingly. "That's the truth," she agreed with a mother's exhausted huff. She patted the toddler who Skinner assumed was Erica.

"You live on McGill, don't you?" he asked. Carla nodded. "Just on the corner, at 803, is a sixteen year old girl named Sarah. She's great with our boys and only charges ten dollars an hour. You should treat yourself to time off, let her bring your kids out here while you relax. She even knows how to watch babies. Tell her I recommended her."

"...you should have seen his face!" Mulder laughed. "The guys let him go on about gays for most of the day before anyone informed him that his idol, ME, was one of those 'pansies'!" Mulder howled, clutching his stomach as he rolled on the bed. "I thought he was going to have an aneurism!"

Skinner chuckled. "And I suppose that you did nothing to discourage the poor guy while he stuck his foot deeper into his mouth."

"Hell, no!" Mulder said loudly. "I was agreeing with him and dredging up all the queer jokes that I could remember! He thought the guys were laughing with him not at him. I almost called you to beg you to come up and make out in front of him with me."

"Walter!" Mulder stopped laughing and turned over, crawling across to bed to Skinner. "Let's go to the drive-in!" He straddled Skinner's thighs, pinning him down.

"Alright, when?"

"Tonight! The midnight show!" Mulder begged.

Skinner took his glasses off. "Tonight? Why?"

"Because I want to make out with you there. I've never made out at a drive-in and I've always wanted to. Come on, we can wake up Alex and have him sleep in the living room. Pleeeeeeaze?" he wheedled.

Skinner put on his serious face and pretended to consider the request.

"I want a date," he said. "Tomorrow night. Dinner. At a nice restaurant. You pay. We dress up. If you're nice, I will consider the drive-in."

Mulder dove and planted kisses all around Skinner's neck.

A car stopped in front of their house as Skinner watched from his office. He waited as the bundled person walked to his door and knocked. If it was someone that knew him, they'd know to come to the office if there was no answer. The person waited and turned to descend the steps. He crossed the street.

"Marco!" Skinner called out when he was close enough to recognize. Marco raised a hand and hopped up the steps.

"Walter. Merry Christmas," Marc said. Skinner let him into the office and shut the door, keeping in the heat. He gave his young cousin a hug.

"You look rich," Skinner commented. "Touring agreeing with you?"

Marco took off his coat and scarf, hanging them on the coat stand. "Are you kidding? I just sang in front of the Queen of England."

"You didn't get home for Christmas. Zia Ginny was disappointed," Skinner said. Marc made a face.

"Tell me about it," he said. "I called and got the official Guilt Trip rammed into me. I tried to get home, but we ran into a nasty snow storm in London. Closed the airport. I stayed warm with the drummer. He keeps a good beat." Marc grinned mischievously. Skinner smiled and shook his head.

"Do I need to discuss condoms with you?" he asked. Marc glanced at Becky and reddened.

"No, Dad, I'm playing safe," the young man said. "What are you grinning like an ape for?"

Skinner led Marc into his office. "Just a glimpse of the future," he said. "I'm adopting the twins. They've started calling me Daddy. Knowing Alex, I shudder to think of what's going to happen when they hit puberty."

KC walked through the door and broke into a wide smile at the sight of Marc. She hugged him tightly and sat down with them.

Marc plopped himself into a chair. "Walter, that's great! Alex is alright with it?"

"Alex is practically insisting on it. He surprised me with the adoption papers at dinner a few nights ago. Did you come all the way out here just to gossip?"

"Nope," Marc stated. "I'm waiting for Dad."

Skinner frowned. "Is Carlo on his way down?"

"Yep."

"Why?" Skinner asked. "Visiting?"

"Nope."

"Marco, I'll hand you over to the twins and let them torture you if you don't spill it," Skinner warned.

"And I'll help him," KC promised.

Marc grinned and popped his gum. "He moving into his new house today."

"What new house?" Skinner asked.

"Over on Main Street," Marc said.

"Here?!" Skinner squeaked. KC echoed him in disbelief.

"Of course," Marc said. "You don't expect your new principal to commute from New York, do you?"

"Carlo is the new principal??" Skinner almost fell out of his chair. Marco stood up.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go check out the new place."

Skinner grabbed his parka and car keys. "Come on, Kisa," he called to the puppy. She yapped and toddled after him. On their way out to the car, they almost ran into Reverend Johnson.

"Morning, Reverend," Skinner greeted him politely. Johnson mumbled something and hurried along.

"Weird," Marc commented.

"No kidding," Skinner said. "He's been like that for months. I have no idea what his current problem is but he's been actively avoiding us like we have the plague or something. Since just after I went off on him at the house."

"Maybe he did call the Attorney General," Marc suggested. Skinner unlocked the car door and let Marco into the back while KC took the passenger seat and hoisted the puppy up onto the seat between them.

"I don't know," Skinner said, shutting his own door. "She didn't call and say anything to me about it."

"So, where are the boys?" Marc asked as they headed out.

"With Dom," Skinner said. "Natti is on vacation so Dom said he'd play babysitter."

Marco gave him a look. Skinner raised a surrender hand. "I know, I know, but he promised to behave himself and follow the Manual. I trust the boys to speak up and call me if they need to. Dom's a good person, all in all, you have to admit that."

Marco gave a reluctant nod. "I know he is, and I love him, he just doesn't know when to leave well enough alone."

The roads were recently plowed so they got to the house fairly soon. Main street was close by the school, just a couple of blocks away from Carlo's new home. A truck pulled up behind them and one door opened and slammed shut.

"I still say you're nuts!"

Skinner turned to see Mario ragging on Carlo who was in the driver's seat.

"Walter!" Mario called out. "Tell him how crazy he is!" Mario pointed at Carlo. "He's giving up New York City for this!" He spread out his arms, indicating the town. Skinner waved at Carlo.

"Good decision, Carlo!" Skinner called out with a thumbs-up.

"Bahhhhh!" Mario waved his hands, dismissing Skinner in disgust. Mario buzzed KC's cheek with a flirtatious glint.

"Marky, get over here!" Carlo yelled as he got out of the truck. Marco stepped over a snow bank and into the street.

"Hey, Pop," he said. Carlo gave him a bone crunching hug. Skinner assumed that Marc came straight into town instead of stopping at home first. Squeals came from a second truck that pulled up behind them and Marc's sisters jumped out and rushed him.

"Leave him be, Mario," Skinner said. "He's doing what he feels he needs to do with his life and it is his life, not yours. Now, turn the truck around and bring it up close to the porch. Avoid as much snow as possible. The only crazy thing I see is trying to move a house in the middle of winter." While Mario grumbled as he got into the truck, Skinner used his radio to call the station and let them know where he was in case they needed him.

"Are you kidding, Sheriff?" Becky came back. "Most of our trouble makers are out on the farms. They're all snow-locked at the moment. We have peace until the plows get out there or until spring thaw. I'm counting on spring thaw."

Skinner gave a laugh. "10-4, Becky." He put the radio back on his belt. Their town bad-boys really weren't all that bad, they were just bored farmers who had nothing better to do until they could get to their land again. They had a few guys with attitude that lived in town and hung out at the bar but they weren't much trouble.

"What's that?" Mario asked, pointing down at Kisa who was sniffing Mario's shoes.

"It's a dog, Mario," Skinner informed him.

"I can see that, smart ass, I taught you people was cat people."

Skinner stared at his older cousin. "What kind of people is that? Tall people? Bald people? People with deep voices? People who wear glasses? People who have better taste in clothes than you? What?"

Mario raised his hands in surrender. "I didn't mean nutin', Walt, I just meant you gots three cats so I taught you was a cat type a people."

"Where did you learn to speak English? I think my spell-check just fried the motherboard," Skinner said.

Mario frowned. "Your what fried a what?"

Skinner gave up as Marc and Carlo snickered at Mario. Mario realised that he was being had and waved them off with a grumble.

KC and the girls had already unlocked the house and were giving themselves the grand tour while the men positioned the first truck. Skinner tied Kisa at the end of the porch and out of the way of big feet treading on her little paws. She sat on her blanket and watched the action, directing with a bark here and a yap there.

Bored neighbors came out to help and Dom dropped by with the boys at lunch with hot soup and sandwiches, and hot coffee and coco. Pavel sat on Carlo's lap and told him all about one of the myths on his new eBook; all in one rapid, twenty minute sentence without even missing a beat when Ivan broke in with points that Pavel left out. Carlo continued to nod and make sounds of interest.

"Politicians, Walter," Mario winked with a knowing nod at the boys. "They don't shut up and take a breath until everyone agrees with them."

"Believe me, of some of the politicians that I've met, the twins would do a better job," Skinner said.

When the trucks were emptied, Carlo headed back to New York with his kids and Mario for a final load and would be back the next day. Skinner hurried home to shower and dress. He had a date. He showered and dressed in a black jacket and slacks with an ivory shirt and a black silk tie. Krycek watched from the couch, amusement clearly written on his face as Skinner stood in front of him. Krycek wiggled a finger.

"What?" Skinner asked. He looked down, "Oh," and zipped up his fly. The boys ran in and handed him his shoes which they had been polishing. Skinner slipped them on and the boys cheered as Kisa barked her approval. The cats sat on the bookcase and stared down, studying Skinner before deigning to give their ok by arching their whiskers and going back to contemplating the insides of their eyelids.

Ivan crooked his finger and Skinner knelt down and looked into Ivan's green eyes and face round with baby fat as he studiously straightened Skinner's tie and brushed his shoulders, the very tip of Ivan's tongue poking through his red, bow lip as he concentrated. Behind him, Pavel attempted to straighten the few hairs that Skinner had left. He loved the boys so much he couldn't believe that they would want him as their father.

"Have a nice dinner, Daddy, and be home by midnight," Ivan said and patted Skinner's shoulder.

"Yeah, and no hanka-panky on the porch, you go straight to bed," Pavel ordered him. Krycek fell over and buried his face in the cushions. Skinner ignored him and gave the twins a hug. The front door opened and Mulder came in. He put something down when he saw the fashion show and made approving noises over Skinner.

"Uncle Fox!" Ivan stomped his foot and demanded attention. Mulder looked at him.

"Yes, Ivan?" he said.

Ivan shook his finger at Mulder. "Where's flowers? Dates have flowers, people say so on TV. And candy boxes. And balloons and teddy bears and...."

"Whoa!" Mulder halted him. He walked back into the alcove and bent down, coming back up with a small bouquet of wild flowers. He handed them to Skinner with a kiss. The boys clapped as Krycek made gagging noises. Ivan rapped him on the knee and shook his finger in warning. Mulder gave his own finger a shake and looked at Skinner who indicated that he had no idea where Ivan was getting it from.

"I'll be right back down, I want to change," Mulder said.

"Can I help you?" Adam asked.

"Of course you can," Mulder said. Adam rushed up the stairs ahead of him.

Before Mulder could reach the stairs, a rapid knock came to the door.

"Sheriff!" they heard along with more knocking which quickly turned to pounding. Being closer, Mulder reached the door first. He opened it and a child fell through and into Mulder's arms.

"What's wrong?" Skinner asked as he rushed into the alcove. He recognised the child as a local but didn't know her name. "Are you hurt?" He looked her over but didn't see anything wrong with her.

"My... my sister! Jessica!" the girl sobbed. "She... she started to cry and... sniff.. and scream and everything started to move!"

Skinner hit the speed dial on the phone. "KC! Get over to my house NOW!" he slammed the phone down. He took the child from Mulder and carried her down to the family room with the boys close behind.

"Where's your house, honey?" Skinner asked her as he set her on the couch. She told him in a stumbling stutter. "Alright, I'm going to go over there and see what's going on. You stay here with my sons. You can watch videos if you'd like. Deputy KC will be over to take care of you until your parents come and get you." She sobbed, all sorts of dampness running down her face.

"You boys stay in the house and keep -what's your name? Sarah- keep Sarah company. Be nice. KC will be over to watch you." The boys nodded solemnly. Skinner ran up the stairs and pulled his jacket and boots on just as KC burst through the door, her gun drawn.

"Children! Stay!" he ordered, pointing at the family room. Mulder was crouched before Adam, holding the boy's waist.

"Do you know what the problem is?" he asked Adam who was white around the gills.

"I... I think... she's starting to hear voices. She thinks they're demons," Adam said. "No, her parents thinks they're demons and she's afraid." Mulder hugged him tight and sent him down stairs with KC.

"Daddy?" Mulder stopped and turned. "Will you tell Jessica about the shields? Maybe she won't be afraid anymore."

"I promise," Mulder said. That was exactly what he was going to do anyway. And he was going to have to call the Kurts and find out where they were with their own investigations.

"Great," Mulder muttered as Skinner skied the Sheriff's 4x4 down the snowy streets. "Not only do we have to deal with children who are becoming telepathic thanks to the Vaccine, but a prepubescent teenage girl who's hormones are playing Carrie on us."

Krycek knocked him on the shoulder. "Look at it this way, Fox, there are no prepubescent teenage girls in our home."

"No, just a bunch of boys who are going to try out X-ray vision as soon as they're old enough to be interested," Skinner responded dryly. Mulder laughed.

It wasn't difficult to spot the house, it was the one giving off the light show. A few neighbors braved the cold to creep up to the sidewalk in front of the house, the rest were peering through the windows of their own homes. Upon entering the house, a chair whizzed by them in the air. The men ducked and it smashed against the wall.

"...I cast ye devils out in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!" they heard a pure Southern Baptist voice screech. All three men moaned.

"Alex, please deal with him while Mulder gets that girl calmed down," Skinner begged. Krycek grinned with a feral look in his eyes.

"My pleasure," he growled.

"Alex," Skinner called to him. "Just keep him out of the way, don't hurt him." Krycek grimaced in disappointment. "Why don't you call Dominic and have him come over and talk with Johnson," he suggested. Krycek gave a huff which Skinner assumed was an assent to his suggestion. Mulder and Skinner had already discussed the upcoming problem with Dominc. Luckily, Dom was not only a priest, but a man who was a fan of science and understood the potential of the human mind.

In a moment, Johnson yelled. "NO! You cannot do this! I must cast out the demons from this child of God!" Krycek reappeared, dragging Johnson behind him by the wrist. "Skinner! Tell this.. this.. person to leave me to my work! He cannot manhandle me like this! The king of Evil is at work here! You are Satan himself!" he accused Krycek.

"No, that was my father. I'm just a little devil," Krycek responded as he dragged Johnson out of the room.

The girl, Jessica, had cornered herself, curled up on a ball on the floor of her bedroom. Skinner watched as Mulder slowly entered the room, his hands out on the universal gesture of 'no harm'. Movement attracted Skinner and he saw two heads poke up from behind the over-turned couch.

"Mr. Dover?" Skinner said quietly. He turned the couch right-side up and sat down.

"Come and sit," he as calmly as he could. "Let Agent Mulder talk with your daughter and this will all be over soon." He could see into the girl's bedroom from the position of the couch and saw Mulder sit on the floor in front of Jessica. He couldn't hear what Mulder was saying, only the murmur of his soothing voice.

The parents cautiously came out from behind the couch and sat down. Mrs. Dover looked like Mary Kay cosmetics blew up in her face. Another tear ran down her cheek, spreading the make-up more.

"Wh... what's he doing?" she whispered.

"He's just going to talk with her, that's all," Skinner said.

"But... she's got a demon in her," Mr. Dover said. "We need the Reverend in here."

Skinner turned to face them. "Listen. You know what I did before I came here to be the Sheriff, right?" They nodded. "Do you believe the stories of what Mulder and Scully uncovered?" They nodded with a shrug. "Then you need to trust that Mulder can fix this. It isn't a demon, it's just Jessica's mind waking up. Things are flying around because she's scared. You scared her with stories of demon possession. Our minds are capable of so much more than what we are taught. Did you know that we only use less than 10 percent of our entire brain?" They shook their heads. "So what's that other 90 percent doing? Taking up space?" He was losing them.

"Think about it like this," he said. "Do you think that God would create this wonderful brain that we are born with and only let us use a tiny portion of it?"

"But the Reverend said..." Mrs. Dover began. Skinner cut her off.

"I know what the Reverend says and I'm not going to tell you what to believe and what not to believe," Skinner said. "Johnson is welcome to his beliefs just as you are but if Mulder has taught me one thing, it's that every once in a while, Life pulls a rabbit out of It's hat."

As they spoke, things gradually began to settle and quiet. Skinner noticed that with things being shot across the room, nothing had come close to hitting the Dovers.

"Why are you wearing a tux, may I ask?" Mrs. Dover asked. He had forgotten his tux.

"I had a date tonight," he said.

"Your boys need a mother," she said approvingly. Skinner didn't think it was the time to correct her. "Oh, my God, where's Sarah?!" Mrs. Dover suddenly remembered. Mr. Dover jumped to his feet. Skinner took her hands.

"Calm down, she's at my house with our sons and Deputy KC," he reassured her. The door opened and Dom came in. Skinner ushered him over and introduced everyone. He sat Dom down in his place and Dom began to explain the situation by using a slight religious bent that the shell-shocked couple would understand. Skinner made no apologies for the fact that he didn't have a head for science, but at the moment he was thankful that Dom did. Reverend Johnson sat at the end of the couch, his mouth zipped shut by Krycek's warning glare. If Skinner didn't know better, he'd swear that Krycek had something on the older man.

Jessica came hesitantly into the livingroom. Skinner had seen kids in 'Nam that looked less spooked. She bit back a sob and ran to her mother. Mulder came out and stretched, popping his spine.

"Dom," he said with a jerk of his head. Dom went over to him. "Do me a favor, write down that explanation you've been using," Skinner heard him ask. "I need to talk to a few people, there's going to have to be a press release very soon and I'd like to mix the science with the proper spiritual corollaries."

Dom nodded thoughtfully. "Would you like me to use several different religions?" Mulder clapped him on the arm. "Thank God for Comparative majors," he breathed thankfully. "Yes, absolutely. Judeo-Christian and Muslim would be great. I can do the non-religious view with scientific highlights from friends who shall remain nameless and I'll get Emilia to write the alternative view. I'm not going to worry about the Eastern sects, their beliefs already cover it. You can touch on them if you want to. I'd like to get the release out within a couple of days."

"Not a problem," Dom promised. "I'll get it to you tomorrow."

"Do you really expect us to believe all this horse pucky?"

Everyone turned to look at Johnson.

"I could give a shit what you believe," Mulder snapped. "If you continue to fill that girl's head with demonic nonsense, you will create a psychotic child. Just because you don't understand something, does not make it evil. Use the brain God gave you, and ask an intelligent question once in a while.

"Mr. and Mrs. Dover? You can listen to this fool if you want to, but if you want to keep your daughter sane, you'll encourage her to meditate with the instructions that I gave her. If she has a problem, the best person to help her is Emilia Clairmont. I'm just a beginner at this myself and I gave Jessica the beginner's steps.

"I've seen demons, Reverend, and this doesn't even come close. A real demon would have laughed it's head off at your attempt at an exorcism. The only person in this town that has the talent to do an exorcism is Emilia. You should research the history of demons; you will find that they could care less what god you worship."

Skinner needed to get Mulder home; only a very bad headache or a very bad day would make Mulder speak with such impunity.

"Come on, let's get home," Skinner said. He dialed home on his cell phone. "Everything is fine, please bring Sarah home. No, they'll be alright for a few minutes. We're on our way."

Johnson stormed out of the house, his face beet-red. In a moment, they heard his car speed away, the tires squealing on the icy road.

"Thanks, Dom," Skinner said as he led Mulder out of the house. They said good night to the Dovers and left them to clean their home. He trusted Dom to see to their questions of the spirit. He tossed the keys to Krycek and got into the back seat with Mulder.

"Are you alright, Fox?" Skinner asked.

Mulder leaned his head against the back seat and shut his eyes. "Head hurts," he said in a raspy voice.

"We'll put you to bed in a few minutes," Skinner said.

"No," Mulder said. "We're going out. I need to get away from things. I'll take some aspirin, you drive, and I'll be fine after I get some food in me. I think I still have a couple of pain pills left over. We missed our reservation, but you make some calls while I get changed and see if there are any last minute openings."

Krycek pulled into the driveway a minute later after passing KC on the street. The boys had their faces pressed up to the window waiting for the men to get home.

"Is Jessica ok?" Adam asked as soon as they walked in. Kisa danced around their feet, letting them know that they were gone too long for her liking.

"Yes, she's fine," Skinner said. "She just needed to know about the shields." Adam gave a relieved breath. "Who wants to help me walk Kisa?" he asked. All the boys shouted with excitement. That won't last long, Skinner thought. He saw Mulder wince and hunch his shoulders. The boys rushed to get their boots and jackets on while Mulder walked up the stairs.

"Alex," Skinner called to Krycek. "Give Fox a hand. If you will call the Kurts and fill them in on tonight's happenings, and let them know to get something written for immediate publication." He spoke quietly and Krycek nodded. The boys were ready so Skinner corraled the puppy and attached her leash. Beginning to recognize what the leash meant, she wiggled excitedly and barked. At the top of the stairs, one of the cats stuck a haughty nose in the air and turned to find a warm bed.

The street was dark; there were very few street lights in their town, but they knew their way and the snow gave off a glow from the moon light.

"Unc... Daddy?" one of the twins began. Skinner thought it was Pavel. "Will we hear things, too?"

"I don't know," Skinner said with all honesty.

"Does it hurt, Adam?" Pavel asked.

"No, not really," Adam said. "It's kinda scary at first, only because it's new. It hurts a little if the noises are too loud but doing those mind games Miss Emilia said to do helps." Skinner smiled in the dark at the voice of experience. He suddenly wondered what kind of future the human race would have if all the children grew up reading minds. Would there be peace or would they destroy each other? He recalled a science fiction book where frightened adults tried to kill the children who had come into a similar situation. The children were taken and put into a protective compound, raised in what amounted to an isolation camp until they were old enough to control themselves. They were returned to society but in a position of service to the government. Skinner wondered if that was a part of the Original Plan. He snarled mentally at the dead Cancer Man.

"Who's that, Uncle Walter?" Adam asked. Skinner looked around but didn't see anyone.

"Who's who?"

"The man in your head that you don't like," Adam said. Skinner looked down at the boy. "I'm sorry, Miss Emilia said it was rude to peek but I didn't mean to. You broadcast loud," he explained, using a new phrase.

Just as Skinner was getting use to computer speak, he could see that society was about to undergo another linguistic evolution. Be as honest as possible with them, he reminded himself.

"That was someone very bad. He's been dead for a long time, so you don't have to worry about him." He made a clumsy attempt at shutting out his mind just as Mulder told him to.

The boys took turns holding Kisa's leash. After she squatted, they praised her with hugs and kisses.

"You know what?" one of the twins said.

"What?" Skinner responded.

"Joey has a puppy, he looks just like Kisa, and Joey pokes him and hits him and pulls on his ears and tail and takes his food away and pushes his face into the water and....." It had to be Pavel. A puppy just like Kisa?

"What do you mean by a puppy like Kisa?" Skinner interrupted Pavel. It was rude, but interrupting Pavel was the only way to get a word in edgewise.

"He looks just like Kisa," Pavel said as though that explained it all.

"Same color? Same kind of puppy? Short hair, same color hair?" Skinner asked.

"Uh-huh," Pavel nodded.

Joey Fielding had a Lab puppy the same age and coloring as Kisa?

"Do you know where Joey got his puppy?" Skinner asked.

"His dad gave it to him for Christmas," Ivan said.

"Do you know where his dad got it?"

The boys shook their heads.

Skinner took them around the block and returned home. He sent the boys to get ready for bed and turned Kisa loose. She debated a drink or following the boys. She followed.

"Where's Fox?" he asked Krycek who pointed to the ceiling. Krycek had the phone to his ear with that 'perpetual hold' look. Skinner went upstairs and into their bedroom. Mulder was sound asleep on the bed wearing just his dress pants. Skinner gently turned him and tucked him in, shutting out the light on his way out the door. Their date would have to wait.

"He's asleep," he told Krycek and began to loosen his own cloths. "Alex, listen. you remember that boy, Joey, one of the boys that assaulted that young girl?" Krycek looked blank. "The day you came here in that expensive suit and car? We had that mock trial in my office?" Krycek nodded in recognition. Skinner told him about the puppy.

"It could be nothing," Skinner said. "It probably is nothing. But would you take a look around tomorrow and see if there's a new litter of Golden Labs around here?"

Krycek nodded. "What does Fielding do?"

Skinner thought for a moment. "I have no idea," he said. "I don't think I've ever heard anyone mention him. He's out of town quite often, I think." He went over to the table where Mulder had his laptop still set up from working the evening before. He logged onto the police's NCIC database. He typed and waited.

"Nothing," he said. Krycek walked over, the phone still stuck to his ear.

"That doesn't mean much if he's never been arrested," Krycek said. Skinner looked up at the phone.

"What are you doing?" he asked. Krycek slammed the phone down.

"Trying to order a pizza! Fuckers. Try driver's license," he suggested. Skinner punched it in. He didn't know Fieldings' first name, but he could use the last and the name of the city. He raised an eyebrow when it came back not found. Krycek pulled up a chair.

"Now this is getting interesting," he muttered. Skinner logged off the NCIC and entered the FBI database under Mulder's password. His own no longer worked.

"No such person?" Skinner read the response out loud in disbelief.

"Push over," Krycek said and turned the keyboard around, guarding his strokes from Skinner's sight. He logged off the FBI site and brought up a site that Skinner had never seen before.

"What's that, NSA?" Skinner asked.

"Nope," Krycek said without elaborating. "Tell me something. How did you find this job, in this town?"

Skinner shrugged. "Old friend. He was the Sheriff here. Roy McCombs. He was a sargent in Viet Nam. He's the one that pulled my ass out and got me to the nearest MASH unit when I was hit. We kept in touch and when all this went down a few years ago, he called, said he wanted to retire and offered me the job."

Krycek stopped typing. "Skinner, even you can't be that naive. You have enough knowledge of how our government works to teach a college level civics course and yet you don't know how a small town gets a sheriff? A town gets a sheriff one of two ways; first, the state can appoint a sheriff or an acting sheriff. Second, the town either votes in a sheriff or the mayor appoints one. The mayor also fires the sheriff if there is just cause. Your good buddy can't just call and say come on down. He petitions the mayor and the city council on your behalf and if they want to know more, they call you in for an interview and review your records, calling in character witnesses from the day you were born. Then, if you're lucky, they offer you the job until they either call for a no-confidence vote or until someone wants to take the job from you and runs against you during the next election."

The town had gone through one election since he had moved in and was due for another one soon. The job of Sheriff was never mentioned. Skinner shook his head.

"No, Alex, Roy couldn't be with Them," he insisted, feeling his heart jump into his throat. Krycek waved a hand and went back to typing.

"Chill, let me work on this," he said. "There are too many coincidences beginning to add up, something smells."

"We're READY!" came a yell from down the hall.

"You'd better see to them before they wake up Fox," Krycek said. Skinner nodded, feeling a headache of his own coming on. "And remember to shield!" Krycek called after him. "You're upset enough to knock Adam unconscious."

Krycek was right. Skinner took the time to center himself and practice his new meditation and build a wall around his mind. Down the hall, he found three naked little boys splashing around in the tub with the puppy. The floor held more water than the tub did.

"Everything washed?" Skinner asked. "With soap?"

"Yes!" they yelled out. Kisa yapped.

"Let's see the ears," he said. They held their heads up and turned from side to side. "Necks." They bent their heads to display their necks. "Feet." All three fell backwards into the water and held their feet up, toes pickled and pink. "Hair." Skinner looked close and saw soap bubbles. One at a time, he held them under the water and quickly rinsed their hair. "Alright, dry off, brush your teeth, get PJ's on and get into bed. And dry up this floor, please." He took a towel out of the hamper and lifted Kisa out, wrapping her in it. "And no more bathing with the puppy. I want you to smell like clean boys not wet dog." They giggled as they let the water out and dripped more water onto the floor.

Skinner took the dog out to the livingroom to check up on Krycek's progress. Krycek glanced at the bundled puppy and then glanced again.

"They didn't," he begged.

"They did," Skinner answered. He set Kisa on the floor and toweled her off. When she was set free, she shook herself and ran around, rolling and sliding on the floor.

"Alex, you do realise that by my adopting Pavel and Ivan, you will no longer have any control over them. Are you alright with that because once it's done, there's no going back." Skinner asked, worried that Krycek didn't fully understand the consequences of adoption. Krycek turned his attention from the computer to Skinner.

"I'm aware of that," he said. "More than likely, I will be killed doing whatever and you will die of old age. I don't want them to be worrying who is going to take care of them, nor do I want the state to have an excuse to come in and take them as orphans. Besides, they think of you as their father. You've been their father in everything except name. May as well make it official." He turned back to the computer, ending the discussion.

"Thank you, Alex," Skinner said and gave Krycek's shoulder a squeeze. Skinner went back to check on the boys' progress toward bed. Adam's room was first so Skinner went in and found the boy in bed and waiting to be tucked in. He sat on the edge of the bed and straightened the covers around Adam's chest. He smoothed the brown hair and kissed Adam's cheek.

"Anything you'd like to talk about?" he asked. Adam shook his head and shrugged.

"Things feel different," Adam said. Skinner leaned on one hand and studied the boy.

"Different in what way?" he asked.

Adam thought about it, trying to find the words. "Like... like things aren't fun anymore."

"More serious?" Skinner offered. Adam nodded. "You're right, things are more serious. It has to do with the Conspiracy that your father found years ago. Do you remember the stories of how your father found out about aliens? And how they almost took over the planet?"

Adam nodded. "Daddy saved the world, that's what my teachers say."

Skinner could imagine Mulder's reaction to that information. "Let's just say he helped in a big way. Not everything was bad, though. Scientists learned a lot from the aliens' technology. One of those things was the Vaccine. Some of the people that were helping to save the world invented the Vaccine so that we wouldn't die when the aliens let a disease loose on us. There is a side-effect that's starting to happen, though, something that no one realised would happen; some people are learning to hear each other's thoughts. It seems to be happening faster to kids and to adults that are able to do it naturally but never learned. Do you understand that?" Adam nodded.

"When people don't understand something, sometimes it scares them. When they get scared, they get angry or they think it's wrong. Some people say it's evil. It isn't. We all have that part of the brain that is able to read thoughts but it's asleep. The Vaccine is making that certain part of the brain wake up and work. We just need to learn how to use it and how to control it.

"That's why things are getting serious. Adults are afraid of this new thing that is happening."

Adam thought about it. "Are you afraid?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," he said honestly. "In a way, it's a good thing. If there are no secrets from each other, then people will learn to be nicer to each other because they will understand each other. On the other hand, without secrets we lose our privacy. Governments will collapse, religions will fall. People in power will no longer be in power. I won't know how I feel about it until I see which way people will go."

"Why would it hurt governments and religions?" Adam asked.

"Why don't you think about it and we can talk about it when you're ready?" Skinner suggested. "It's a matter of consequences. Action and reaction," he hinted.

"Who loves you?" Skinner asked. Adam grinned, looking so much like his father.

"You do," he said. "And Daddy and Mommy and Aunt Dana and Natti and... does Uncle Alex love me?" he asked.

"I think so," Skinner said. "Alex just has a hard time showing it. He has a hard time saying it. He spent his life with very few people to love him or for him to love, so he's learning."

Adam put out his arms and hugged Skinner tightly around the neck.

"I love you, good night," Skinner said.

"Love you, too, good night," Adam responded.

Skinner heard the twins scurry into bed at the sound of him in the hall. He couldn't count the number of times his father laid into him for reading by flashlight under the covers in the middle of the night. Skinner swore to himself that he'd never punish the children for wanting to learn. Playing, on the other hand....

"Alright, no monkeying around," he said upon entering the room. They looked at him innocently from their bunk-beds. Their wet hair was uncombed and would be poking up at all angles come morning. He straightened Ivan's covers on the bottom bunk and kissed him goodnight.

"I want to thank you boys for helping Sarah tonight," he said. "She was very scared and you were a big help in calming her down so that Uncle Fox and Alex and I could help Jessica and their parents.

"Do you need to talk about anything?" he asked. Both boys responded in the negative. He straighten Pavel's covers and buzzed his cheek.

"I love you boys very much and it makes me very happy to be your father. I hope I don't disappoint you, I've never been a father before." Fathers and sons had their share of arguments no matter how good their relationship and Skinner hoped that when the boys were older and they had a bad one that they wouldn't go running to Alex. No, he knew they would; he could only hope that Alex sent them right back and didn't try to interfere.

"You're doing good so far, Daddy," Ivan assured him. "We'll let you know if you're doing it wrong."

Skinner stifled a chuckle. "Thank you, I'd appreciate it," he said. He loved hearing that word out of them, directed at him. It sang to his soul. Daddy.

He returned to the livingroom to find Krycek glaring death daggers at the computer.

"What's your problem?" Skinner asked him. "Still can't find anything?"

Krycek shook his head. "No, I found something alright. See if you can wake up Fox."

Skinner hesitated. "Is it that bad?" Krycek pointed a finger at the stairs. Skinner went.

"Fox, wake up," he whispered at the bedside. He turned the light on and sat down, shaking Mulder's shoulders. "Fox!" Mulder grumbled and frowned. "Wake up, Alex needs to talk to us."

Mulder rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "This better be good," he warned. He rolled out of bed and stood up. He scratched his balls and realised that his pajamas felt different and looked down.

"Our date!" he remembered. "Walter, I'm sorry." Mulder looked stricken.

"It's alright," Skinner assured him. "We shouldn't have made weekday plans. We can go out on Saturday night." On their way downstairs, Skinner quickly filled Mulder in on Joey's puppy, Joey's father and Roy.

"He just called and asked you to be Sheriff?" Mulder stopped and looked at Skinner.

Skinner put up a hand. "I don't want to hear it, Alex already read me the riot act," he said.

"Is this Roy?" Krycek asked as they neared the table. He turned the monitor toward Skinner who saw a much younger version of his buddy. He nodded with a sick feeling in his stomach.

"Sargent Roy McCombs, USMC. His assignment was to scope you out and see if you could be of service to the Old Man. They had you tagged long before you met Sharon and married into the Family Business," Krycek informed him.

Skinner frowned. "How? Why? I was only 18."

"And I was 5, Samantha was 8, Fox and Jeff were both 12, what's your point?" Krycek returned. "You were a rah-rah patriot at 18 and you knew how to follow orders, that was their only concern."

"But why me?" Skinner insisted. "My family wasn't involved. Out of millions of teenagers in this country, why me?"

Krycek was blank for a moment. "I don't know," he said. He turned back to his computer and began typing again. "Let's skip you for the moment," he said. "This town seems to be crawling with retired and semi-inactive Consortium personnel. No coincidence. This place is one of the smaller 'safe' communities. I didn't know about it. All your recently

deceased were Consortium." He handed some printouts back to the men. Skinner looked at ID photos of Mrs. Mathau, Mr. Berg and Mr. Peterson.

"This is Mr. Fields," Krycek said handing back another photo printout. "He's security. I've worked with him, which is probably why he's been scarce here in town lately. Your buddy Roy is now stationed in Wyoming, Sheriff over another small retirement community."

"He told me he was retiring to Arizona," Skinner said. Krycek shrugged.

"Sun City is filled with Consortium retirees, bunch a Nazis, but he went to Wyoming," Krycek said.

"Why haven't you found out about this before?" Mulder asked him.

"Because it didn't occur to me to wonder what the old timers did when they left the fold," Krycek snapped. "I assumed they went fishing and hung out, spend some of the millions that they earned."

"Guys, this town needs to be cleaned out," he said. "I can do it, but I need you to trust my judgement and to let me do this my way. I promise no blood-baths. I'll keep it quiet, no one will notice." His computer pinged and he looked at the return.

"Walter... your father was tagged the same week he entered the country. I'm sorry. I can only assume that he wanted to be a good American. They probably used the patriotic bent with him, which he passed on to you. He was just a grunt watching over the Oregon coast, the marinas. If it makes you feel any better, he didn't do any of the nasty work."

Skinner fell into a chair and lowered his head between his knees, trying to stop the nausea. He felt Mulder's hand on the back of his head and then down to rub his back.

"And you never noticed that before, either?" Mulder asked sarcastically. Krycek glared at him.

"Hey, I didn't know that he was filed under his birth name instead of his American name," Krycek returned. "Lay off, Mulder, there are files that I have notread before. I wasn't the group historian or secretary, you know!"

"I thought you turned over all the files," Skinner croaked from his bent position.

"I turned over the files that I found in the Old Man's computer. His personal files. The working files. He didn't concern himself with inactives." Krycek took a zip-disk out of the harddrive and replaced it with a fresh one. "I'm downloading the information now," he said.

"How did you get in there?" Mulder asked. "Isn't there an alarm?"

"Yes, there is," Krycek said with a nod and a self-satisfied smirk. "I used the Old Man's backdoor pass. No one knew about it except the programmer who is dead."

"If he's dead, how do you know about it?" Mulder asked.

"Because he told me just before I killed him. He deserved to die; he liked little boys just a little too much."

His father. One of Them. He never did have a clear idea of what his father did for a living, only that he was some sort of dock foreman. Looking back, Skinner could see the differences between their family and other dock families; they had more money. Fine clothes, plenty of food on the table, trips to the Opera and plays were a regular occurrence. Skinner learned to speak as the upper-class did, without the flamboyant Italian accent of his mother or the harsh Hungarian accent of his father. All languages except English were forbidden in their house, so Skinner never learned the languages of his parents. He was taught how to blend in with the yuppies and preppies. He was being groomed for leadership in the Consortium.

Skinner found it ironic that he wasn't taught languages considering that they would have been as useful as everything else. Maybe his father was ashamed of where he came from. He knew of immigrants that refused to teach their children their language, wanting their children to be Americans. The only time he was allowed to speak another language was if it was required for a piece of music, and then he was only taught the correct pronunciation. Mass was still said in Latin, but his father didn't consider Church language to be heretical. Skinner still knew his prayers in Latin.

"Alex," Skinner said, picking his head up. "Just make a list of who's who, where they are and what they did. Evidence. And hand it over to the proper authorities. Arrest them and take them before the Tribunal. Nothing else, Alex."

Krycek turned to protest.

"No, Alex," Skinner insisted. "Think about it; what's going to happen if these people disappear? Someone is going to notice, a neighbor, family member, and report it. Everyone knows our history and most of the FBI know that you live here. If someone puts the pieces together, finds out that these people have a past in common, a past with the Consortium, guess who gets taken in for questioning?"

Krycek narrowed his eyes and curled his lip in a snarl of frustration.

"Be a good NSA agent and just turn the information in. Give it to Fox and he can say he received it anonymously," Skinner advised. It wouldn't be the first time. Mulder mumbled an agreement.

"Fine, whatever," Krycek grumbled and half-heartedly typed a command.

"Come on," Mulder said. "Let's go to bed, there's nothing we can do here."

Skinner said nothing but followed Mulder up the stairs. His mind was in turmoil, unable to believe. His entire life had been planned out by people other than himself, people who had expected him to simply comply, to kow-tow to their wishes as though he were a drone with no mind of his own.

"You're feeling angry, confused, lost, hurt and betrayed," Mulder said from the bed. He had taken his dress pants off and put his pajama bottoms on. Skinner said nothing as he removed his clothes and dressed for bed. "I know, Walter, I've been through it. My father helped to start the whole mess, remember? Should I thank Alex for killing him? Should I feel guilty for remembering good times with him? He wasn't a bad father, he just became more distant the guiltier he felt. Was your father a bad father or was he just a little too strict? Do you have any good memories of him? What did he teach you?" Skinner got into bed and pulled the covers up, turning onto his side.

Just before the alarm was due to go off, Skinner opened his eyes. He never really got to sleep. He watched Mulder slowly awaken and finally open his hazel eyes.

"He taught me to swim. I have a picture of him holding my hands as I began walking. He never missed one of my concerts. He taught me to shave when I was 14 and how to knot a tie. He insisted that I walk proud, with a straight back and shoulders when I grew faster than the other boys. He told me the Facts, straight out, the first time I woke up with messed sheets. I thought I peed in my sleep and I was so afraid he was going to beat me. He never beat me. I got my share of spankings but nothing that I would qualify as a beating, and most of them I deserved. I think he knew when I had my first crush and subsequently my first heart-break; he took me out for ice-cream that night. Didn't say anything about it, though. We just sat and ate chocolate hot fudge sundaes. I think he loved me in his own way but he never told me."

Skinner turned and Mulder caught him.

After a while, Mulder reached out with one hand and snagged the phone.

"Please come down and see to the boys," he requested softly. "Thanks."

Skinner lifted up and rubbed his eyes with a sniff. "I'll go..." he began.

"No, let Alex do it," Mulder insisted. "Where is your father buried?"

"In Oregon, why?"

Mulder dialed the phone again.

"I'm taking off today. It's important. Oregon. No, Scully, it isn't a case, it's just someplace I need to go. He's going, too. No, Alex is working... don't laugh... can you take them until tomorrow? They'll be fine in daycare. Thanks, we'll drop them off on our way to the airport. I don't know, I haven't called yet. I'll let you know. Thanks, Scully."

"I'm not going to Oregon, Fox," Skinner said when Mulder hung the phone up.

"Yes, you are," Mulder said. "You need to. I'll be there for you, but you need to do this."

"Fox, I can't...."

Mulder gripped his neck and stared into his eyes. "Yes, you can. You need to." He gave Skinner a shake. "I love you and you're going to Oregon if I have to toss you over my shoulder and drag you there."

Mulder called the airport and made reservations while telling Krycek where they were going. The boys were excited to be spending the day and night with Aunt Dana. Skinner took Kisa to Dom for the day, Alex would pick her up when he got home. Ruvin was left in charge of the town.

They dropped the boys off at the daycare center at the Hoover, stopped in to see Scully and were off to the airport. Scully gave Mulder a package to take with them, asking him to drop it off at the local FBI office in Portland with a reminder to keep receipts and to please check on a situation; if he was on business, he could take the plane, car rental, food and hotel out of expenses.

Skinner barely spoke on the plane, he stared out the window unable to read his book. He kept one hand on Mulder's thigh, sometimes holding Mulder's hand. The stewards left them alone except to discreetly offer them a beverage or lunch. They had a two hour hold-over in Chicago where they got a pizza and waited.

In Portland, the day was dreary, gray and wet. Typical North-West winter. They dropped the package off at the local FBI and was handed a written report of a local problem. Nothing that couldn't have been done via e-mail or Fed-Ex. They were greeted with a small amount of awe and a load of pride by the local agents.

Mulder stood back at the cemetery and watched as Skinner knelt before the graves of his parents.

Chapter 19: The Seal of the Covenant

While the town was being cleaned out, Skinner had a private meeting with the mayor and council. When he left, he had taken himself off duty, leaving Ruvin temporarily in charge.

Skinner didn't want a job that he didn't have a right to, so he convinced the council to hold a special election; if anyone else wanted the job as Sheriff, they'd have to run against him. Let the citizens decide who would be their sheriff. Skinner got home and realized that he had another problem -he had never run for an office before. Krycek found it funny.

Skinner walked through the halls of the JEH with the boys trailing behind him, their boots clomping on the linoleum floor. The boys had wanted cowboy boots but Krycek objected quite loudly and bought all three boys black, ankle boots, identical miniatures of his own. Mulder called them 'bad-boy' boots, and unfortunately the term stuck. The boys were very happy with their bad-boy boots but they were giving Skinner a headache. Why couldn't they have developed a thing for moccasins?

They stopped several times as Skinner was greeted by agents and a few execs. The boys fluttered their eyelashes and grinned, and secretaries dropped like flies. By the time they reached Mulder's office, the boys had been stuffed full of treats. Skinner stopped at Kim's desk and waited while she informed Scully that they were there. Skinner began to ask after her but Ivan climbed up onto the chair and latched onto Skinner's back, staring intently over his shoulder.

"What are you doing?" Skinner asked him, adjusting the heel that was digging into his side. Pavel looked for Ivan's subject and stiffened. Skinner was sure that they would have growled if they could. Ears perked, whiskers twitching, tails puffed. He looked around for what would have set them on the alert. Mulder opened the door to bring them in and stopped, seeing that something was up.

"Ivan, what are you looking at?" Skinner insisted.

"Bad man," Ivan said and pointed. Skinner and Mulder looked. Ivan had pointed at Agent Erickson.

"Boys, Agent Erickson works here," Skinner reminded them. "You don't bother him and he won't bother you."

"rest him, Popi!" Pavel ordered. Kim hid a smile behind her computer.

No matter how much he begged for the word 'Daddy', the boys had heard Carlo's granddaughter Elana call her father 'Popi' and decided that it worked for them.

"He hasn't done anything wrong," Skinner said. "Not liking kids isn't a crime." He carried Ivan into Scully's office and out of sight of the object of their ire, ushering Pavel and Adam in ahead of him.

"Hi, Aunt Dana!" they yelled and rushed for hugs and to show off their new boots.

"Hey, guess who's going to watch you while we talk?" Mulder asked the boys. They demanded to know who. Mulder pointed at the door opposite the one they came in and the boys ran over and opened it.

"Depty Kyle!" they shouted. Hoskins ruffled their hair, commenting on how big they've grown, and came in extending his hand toward Skinner.

"How are you, Sheriff?" he asked. Skinner shook his hand. He was pleased to see Kyle, glad that the man had made it through basic. He looks happy, Skinner thought.

"Mulder giving you the sh.. nasty jobs?" Skinner asked.

"You don't expect me to answer that with him present, do you?" Hoskins responded. Mulder made noises of denial.

"I partnered him with Lucas," Mulder said. Skinner nodded in approval; Lucas was partnered with Agent Jacobs who had died protecting Mulder. Skinner sent the boys off with Kyle, letting him know that they had snacks, juice boxes, toys and a book in their backpacks. Keeping the boys from getting bored was a 24/7 job.

"I remember the survival kit," Kyle said, ushering the boys out.

The three looked at each other.

"Let's do it," Scully said. The men agreed and the three of them headed out to the Senate. They spent most of the day making an official report. The senior members of the Tribunal questioned Skinner and Mulder throughout the day, trying to find a hole in their story of Consortium members living in their town and thereby giving them an excuse to bring the men before an official Tribunal once more. Skinner confessed his ignorance of procedure in accepting the job of Sheriff and informed them of his resignation and the upcoming election. Senator Alexander placed a call directly to Mayor Kelley, confirming Skinner's story.

Skinner had taken one look at Alexander's presence and felt his blood pressure rise in response to his anxiety. Thankfully, Adam looked too much like his father to be immediately linked to his grandfather. Skinner still hated the man.

"Mr. Skinner, it's no secret that you are an ex-Consortium member," Alexander stated. "And yet you can stand there and deny knowledge of these others of whom have only just now been uncovered? Let us take, for example, this phantom, Alexei Krycek. We know that he was actively Consortium for many years, he is living at your home now, and yet there is no evidence to convict him even on one single account. Why is that?" Skinner not only hated the man, he didn't care for the insinuation.

"Don't answer that, Skinner," came a voice from the back. The Senators and Tribunal rustled at the rude interruption. Skinner turned and saw Krycek entering the room with

three other men. All four screamed 'Government Agent'. A hammer pounded on a block of wood, calling order to the floor.

"What is this? Who are you?" demanded Alexander.

Krycek stopped next to Skinner and the other three stood in the background, clearly standing guard. Skinner never understood how Krycek developed a loyal following while in the most unusual places.

"I am your current subject, Senator," Krycek informed Alexander. "Alexei Krycek. Zdrarstvootyeh." Krycek made a formal bow from the waist, his hands locked behind his back. "If you have questions regarding me, you should ask me, not Mr. Skinner."

Skinner was dismissed, for the moment, and Krycek took the stand. Skinner sat next to Mulder, exchanging looks of 'what now?' and 'oh shit'.

"The explanation is an easy one, gentlemen," Krycek said. "I was undercover. I brought Skinner in to help me about 15 years ago." Krycek snapped his fingers and one of his goons stepped forward and handed the clerk a thick file, no doubt a complete work of fiction and expertly aged. Skinner and Mulder sat back and listened to Krycek spin a fairy tale better than The Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Anderson and Mother Goose ever thought of.

"That has got to be the biggest bunch of hog-wash I have ever heard," Alexander stated in disbelief. "I have listened to testimony from quite a few Consortium members, and they all ring soundingly with the name Alex Krycek. Although there is no evidence other than hearsay, unfortunately, I have statements speaking quite firmly of you behind the hired gun of the man they all call The Smoker, a.k.a. Cancerman, a.k.a. so many aliases that we still don't know his real name." Alexander waited pompously for Krycek to admit his guilt.

"Yeah, and?" Krycek asked. The Tribunal glanced around at each other in confusion. "While these good citizens were spilling their guts about me, and thus directing your attention away from them, did they mention exactly who I killed? No, I thought not. This is an old game, gentlemen, it's called Witch-hunt. This isn't the McCarthy Hearings and I won't play that game. I can name names, tell you who I passed in the halls of various offices and homes, but what's the point without proof? I can swear that I had lunch with you, Senator Alexander, quite often, we played racquetball and poker. We spoke of your missing daughter. The new addition to your home, that very interesting hot tub party several years ago. It's probably a good thing that some of those girls had ID, because I would never have guessed that they were legal. Prove that we didn't."

They waited while the Tribunal raised their voices in confusion. Skinner found it interesting that Alexander paled and remained silent. He wondered how Alex found out that piece of information. He couldn't help but reach under the table and give Mulder's

hand a brief squeeze; Krycek was playing his own game of misdirection and he was winning.

"Alright, Mr. Krycek," Senator Reynolds spoke over the others while the hammer called them to order. "Just tell us one thing, without making it a best selling spy novel, if you will." Krycek indicated his willingness to hear the question.

"Will you please clear up Mr. Skinner's involvement?"

Krycek put on his Ivan face. "All this time and it never came out? I was in a rush to find some inside help and he was easy pickings; not only was he in the right place -the FBI, not only was he a flag-toting patriot, but he was also close to home. He's my brother-in-law. He married my sister when I was 12."

That had to be the only truth Krycek told the entire day.

"....and we went swimming in a REALLY big pool," Pavel informed them. Most of the personnel had gone home by the time they got back from the hearing. Surprised to see Krycek with them, the boys descended on him to report on their own day of excitement. "But we didn't have our swim suits with us so we swam in our underwear and some lady gave us floaties for our arms 'cause the pool was deep way over our heads except for Adam he could stand right at the lowest end and we jumped off Deputy Kyle's shoulders and slashed all over the place and Miss Kim let us take a nap in Aunt Dana's office 'cause Uncle Fox's office is really messy and she was 'fraid we would catch who knows what in there Miss Kim is pretty and nice and let us type on her computer...."

Knowing that they wouldn't be able to shut Pavel up until he had said everything he needed to say, the adults continued to acknowledge him while packing up the boys and their own things.

"....and a man called us spoiled brats and said we should be spanked and I called him a glupy and"

"What? Who said that?" The adults immediately stopped what they were doing and interrupted Pavel's discourse while Krycek choked down a laugh and shot the boys a warning glance.

"Agent Colton, Sirs," Kyle said. "It appears he has a problem with children more intelligent than him."

"That isn't hard to come by," Mulder said.

"Colton?" Skinner asked. "I thought he transferred out years ago."

"He's baaaaack," Mulder informed him. "Alex, no," Mulder put a stop to the plans he could see forming on Krycek's face.

"Yeah," Skinner said. "I get first dibs."

Mulder and Scully had their heads together, whispering and shooting glances at him while he poked around in the freezer for ice-cream. The cats sat on top of the refrigerator, their heads upside down as they investigated the freezer along with Skinner. Kisa sat at his feet waiting for something to drop her way.

"What are you two plotting?" Skinner asked suspiciously.

"Nuttin', honey," Mulder responded and ducked his head again to whisper.

"Fox, you're making me nervous." Very nervous.

"Oh, relax, Walter, we're just admiring your legs," Mulder said, running his eyes down the objects of his desire.

"And cute butt," Scully interjected.

Skinner put the ice-cream down and turned to face them. He should have known better than to wear his ragged cut-off shorts that evening.

"What? We can't look at you?" Mulder asked. "You know those shorts turn me on."

Scully nodded. "You do have very nice legs," she informed him, two bright spots in her cheeks.

"I thought he was looking at my legs, you were looking at my butt," Skinner asked. Scully reddened even more and lowered her face to the table as Mulder laughed.

"Busted, Scul!" he patted her on the shoulder in sympathy. Skinner set their bowls in front of them and was nabbed by Mulder's hand on his thigh.

"Face it, Walter, very few men have nice legs," he said, running his hand over the silky brown hairs. "Not only are they a good mile long, but unlike most long legs, yours are proportioned well. Most long legs are thin, with very little muscle tone, but yours are well rounded, no unseemly bulges in your calves or thighs, knees aren't knobby, not too hairy, and you already know how I feel about those ankles and feet."

Skinner looked down at the appendages of their discussion.

"And shall we discuss that butt?" Mulder asked, snaking his wandering hand around to caress.

"Let's not," Skinner said and took his chair. Kisa put her paws on his leg and he gave her a taste of the ice-cream while the cats shot murderous looks at her. Mulder took his spoon and slowly licked the cream from it. "Fox!"

Scully laughed as Skinner took his turn to redder.

"I can see we won't be getting much sleep tonight," he said in resignation. "Should we kick Dana out now or do you think you can wait until she finishes her ice-cream?"

Mulder twirled his finger in his bowl and brought it up to his mouth. "Oh, I don't know, maybe she'd like to at least watch for a while."

It was time to teach Mulder a lesson.

Skinner bent Mulder back in his chair and lifted his shirt. He dipped his finger into the ice-cream and painted Mulder's nipple with it. Mulder hissed from the cold and then squeaked from the heat of Skinner's mouth. Skinner pulled at the tip with his teeth before giving it a hard suck. He released Mulder, grabbed his bowl and went downstairs to turn the news on. He heard Scully snicker.

"You'll pay for that, Skinner!" he heard echo down the stairs.

"Make sure you bring the whipped cream!" he yelled back up. Something fell to the floor up above and Skinner stopped swirling his ice-cream to look at the ceiling. He heard the refrigerator open and slam shut and feet race down the stairs. Mulder jumped down the last three steps, a can of whipped cream in his hand and a look of anticipation on his face. "Sorry, dear, I have a headache," Skinner informed him as he watched the scores of the football game with his puppy on the couch next to him. Skinner scratched her ears and made kissy noises at her. She yapped and wagged her tail as she turned onto her back for a belly rub.

"I'll make your head ache," Mulder promised him and pounced, sending the puppy to the floor unceremoniously.

The bowl disappeared from Skinner's hands and he found himself flat on his back with his shorts being tugged open. His penis was engulfed and Skinner laid back without further argument. He touched Mulder's hair, stroking where he could reach while watching the light show behind his eyelids.

"Guys, I'm going.... ooops, sorry." Scully slapped her hand over her eyes and turned around. Skinner thought he'd be too nervous with her in the room, but he felt comfortable enough not to stop Mulder. He surprised himself by holding out a hand to her.

"Come here, Dana, sit down," he invited her in a hoarse voice. Mulder never hesitated as he continued to suck on Skinner who watched through fogged eyes as Scully slowly advanced toward them. He motioned for her to sit on the floor next to them and she did, her eyes never leaving the action. He relaxed back onto the couch, lacing and unlacing his fingers with Mulder's as he continued his journey into the light show. A bolt of electricity shot through him as Mulder licked and sucked at him, concentrating on the exact spots that would give Skinner the most pleasure. Skinner arched his back with a groan and felt his penis contract. Mulder took him into his mouth again and Skinner released into him with a gasp.

Mulder slid up and lay on top of him, slowly kissing him as Skinner ran his hands down Mulder's back and over his butt. Skinner tasted his semen in Mulder's mouth, coating his tongue.

"I'm sorry," Mulder whispered, taking his mouth away. "I really didn't mean for it to go that far, not with Scully here, not without us talking about it first. I was selfish."

"I'd have stopped you if I wanted to," Skinner assured him, although silently agreeing with the last statement. He slid a hand down the back of Mulder's pants for a feel and cupped a soft cheek, drawing his thumb over it. "And Dana could have left if she wanted to."

Scully made a noise of agreement and the men looked at her. Scully was flushed, her eyes glazed over. Skinner felt something unexpected in the pit of his stomach; he wanted her to look that way at the touch of his own hand. Without the help of a drug. He needed to talk to Mulder.

"I... I better go," Scully said and moved to get up. Skinner caught her hand with his free one.

"Are you alright?" he asked. Scully nodded.

"I'm fine, it's just getting late and there's work tomorrow."

Skinner knew that 'avoiding' look.

"Dana, if you are less than 100%, I don't want you going anywhere. Fox," he motioned for Mulder to move. Skinner straightened himself and sat up.

"You're not alright," Mulder stated. "Did this shock you? Turn you off? Don't pretend with me, I know you too well."

Skinner sat back and waited to see what Mulder would drag from her.

Scully looked at the floor. "I wasn't turned off, Mulder, I thought it was... hot," she flushed at her choice of wording. "I'm just feeling like, I don't know, like I need to leave."

"Why?" Mulder asked.

"Because she's turned on and it's confusing her! Jeeze! And he has a psych degree..." Krycek muttered as he turned and went back up the stairs, stuffing his mouth with a ham sandwich. "And lock the door next time!" he called back down.

"Scully, you could have told us that," Mulder said.

"And what? Have an offering of a mercy fuck?!" Scully snarled. The men paused a moment, shocked at her words.

"Do you really think that badly of us?" Skinner asked, shame beginning to weld up in him. "We would do anything for you, Dana, not because we don't want you feeling left out, but because we love you. You can ask for one or both of us, at any time, for sex, love, or just to hold your hand and listen to whatever you have to say."

Scully began to cry and lowered her head to rest on her legs.

"No, no, no, come on up here," Mulder reached down and took her arms, pulling her up onto the couch between them. By force of habit, Scully turned and buried her face in Mulder's shoulder.

Skinner rubbed her back while Mulder soothed her. He could feel her shaking with tension.

"I'm sorry," she blubbered. "I didn't mean it."

Mulder looked at Skinner over Scully's head. Skinner saw the regret in his eyes, regret for not controlling himself while Scully was in the house, knowing that the link between them was in a vulnerable stage. Skinner put an arm around both of them.

"It was my fault, Dana," Mulder whispered to her. "I should have known better, I'm sorry for hurting you like this. I pushed this. I didn't realize it at the time, but I pushed it and I know that now. Please don't leave us because I was stupid. I'm sorry, I'm sorry...."

Skinner watched as they rocked each other, soaking each other with their tears. He didn't understand why she would be confused over being turned on. If it had been anyone else, she would have solved the problem with an invitation. Maybe it was him. Maybe she wanted Mulder but was unsure of the Skinner equation. He certainly didn't want a woman in his bed that didn't really want to be there. Although this thing with Mulder had come as a surprise to the formally straight Skinner, he still found women attractive, especially

Scully. She was the only woman to invade his dreams during his time with Mulder. He couldn't imagine them without her in their lives.

The two had quieted down.

"Dana, I want to ask you something," Skinner said. Scully sniffed and rubbed her face on Mulder's t-shirt as she nodded. "This may be a tough question but it's important that you answer it honestly. Do you have any attraction at all for me? Or is it just for Fox?" Skinner read the fear for the answer in Mulder's red eyes. Scully was silent for a long minute while Skinner's heart stopped beating.

"Do you have any idea how easy it would be for me to fall in love with you?" she asked, her face still in Mulder's shoulder. "Besides being physically attractive, you're honest, honorable, a gentleman. Even drugged, you found the will to make sure I was alright. You've always been the one to catch me even when I was a bitch to you and didn't trust you. I want you very much, that's the problem; I don't want my heart broken."

Skinner shut his eyes for a moment as he felt his heart start again. He put his hands on Scully's shoulders and gently pulled her away from Mulder and turned her around to face him. Her face was blotchy, pale in some places, red in others. Her eyes bloodshot, her nose runny. She was beautiful.

"I love Fox very much, Dana," he said. "More than I ever thought I could love anyone, including Sharon. I fully plan on spending the rest of my life with him, despite this damned fool stunt he pulled tonight. I would marry him all over again at any time. I would make love with him on the floor of the Oval Office in front of every television camera that could fit in there, if it would convince the lawmakers to make same-sex marriage legal. He turns me on even when I'm exceedingly pissed off at him and I'm fully aware that he takes advantage at times. I think that you know all that already, but what I'm sure that you are not aware of is that you have had the same rights to me as he has had, anytime you wanted them. I told you the truth in Florida, Dana, you turn me on and you have for a hell of a long time. I would never knowingly do anything to hurt you. If you wish it, it would make me very happy if you joined our little circle. Let us love you, Dana. Let yourself be loved. It's ok to fall, I'll catch you."

Stunned, Scully reached out to hesitantly touch his fingers, finding no resistance in his strong, capable hands.

"You... you have a padded palm," she whispered, trailing a finger over the flesh below his thumb. "Palm readers say a padded palm is the sign of a sensual lover, someone who loves with all their heart."

Skinner enclosed her smaller hand in his and lifted her chin with the other. He slowly lowered his head and kissed her, feeling her tremble as she opened her mouth to him. He wasn't going to count the Florida incident since they were drugged at the time, but he would count this as their first official kiss. Behind them, Mulder wiped his face.

Skinner lifted his head. "Whenever I got into a conversation with Emilia, somehow it always turned to the subject of loving more than one person at a time. I didn't understand what she meant at the time but I think I do now." He touched her face, his heart bursting from his chest. "I think that our earlier reticence was simply an anxiety attack. I think that we are now clear on where we all stand, emotionally. I'm ready to make love with you, Dana, but only if you are. No pushing. It won't happen until you want it to happen. Just one of us at a time or both of us, it's up to you, whatever you're comfortable with. But you need to speak up and let us know."

Scully touched his face with unsure fingers. Skinner's eyes never left her face as she explored, leaving a trail of fire across his skin. Only two other people had ever set fire to him; Mulder and Sharon. Scully hesitated at his shoulders of going lower. Skinner took her hand and placed it on his chest.

"Anywhere, Dana, anything you want," he assured her. "I'd never tell you no. Without a reason."

She gave him a watery smile. "Can I at least have one date first?" she asked plaintively. She spent the night on the fold-out couch in the family room. Alone. Skinner kissed her goodnight and watched Mulder kiss her. He found no jealousy inside of him and the last of his fences fell away. Now he had to deal with Mulder's underhandedness.

"Am I sleeping on the couch?" Mulder asked from the center of their bedroom, standing as one of the boys about to be punished. Skinner stripped off his shorts and put his pajamas on, letting Mulder stand there.

"I should say yes," Skinner said after a few minutes. "You broke a faith tonight, Fox, do you understand that? You could have destroyed us, our relationship with Dana, and in the snowball down the hill, you would have broken up the lives of the boys. You broke one of the rules of our Covenant."

"Walter, I'm sorry, please," Mulder begged, his voice strangled. "I didn't mean for anyone to be hurt."

"The only thing that keeps me from handing you your pillow is the fact that you broke that Covenant with me. Get into bed, Fox." Skinner slid into the sheets and turned his back.

Not having slept, Skinner was up early to walk Kisa. And not paying attention to his surroundings, he didn't notice a problem on the floor until it was too late. Something cracked on the floor in front of the door and his feet slid out from under him.

"What the hell....?" He looked around and found himself in the midst of what had to be every Lego in the house.

"Boys!" he bellowed. After a moment, they came out, shuffling their feet and wiping the sleep from their eyes. "What is this?" he asked, trying to remain calm.

"A boogler alarm," Pavel said as though it were obvious.

Skinner counted to ten. "Since when do we have need of a burglar alarm?" he asked.

Pavel rolled his eyes. "Not a burglar alarm, a boogler alarm," he said. "It's to catch ghosts." His two accomplices agreed with him.

Krycek poked his head through the doorway of the kitchen. He slapped his hand over his mouth and went back out.

Skinner carefully got to his feet and brushed a couple of Legos from his butt.

"I'm going to take Kisa out," he said. "Please pick up every single one of these things and put them away or I'll throw them away. Understand?"

The boys nodded. "Yes, Sir."

Skinner went out and shut the door. Kisa looked up at him.

"You're right," he said to her in defeat. He opened the door and stuck his head inside. "It was a very nice boogler alarm, very creative," he told the boys. They brightened up a little. Don't take your bad mood out on them, he told himself.

The breakfast table was quiet as the boys looked from one adult to the other. Scully had left at dawn, needing to go home for fresh clothes before she went into work. Mulder put his dishes in the sink and grabbed his coat and briefcase. He kissed the boys on their heads and hesitated with a look at Skinner. He risked a brush-off and bent to place a chaste kiss on Skinner's cheek.

"You boys be good," Mulder said and left for work.

"Uncle Walter?" Adam said after the door closed. "Did you and Daddy have a fight?"

The twins watched.

"Yes, we did," Skinner said honestly. "Don't worry about it, we just need some time to fix it."

"Did we do something wrong, Popi?" Ivan asked. Skinner put his coffee cup down.

"No, of course not," he rushed to assure them. "Sometimes people have arguments, that's all. It doesn't have anything to do with you, just me and Uncle Fox."

It was a snow day but Emilia managed to show up on his door by 10. The boys were in the family room with their workbooks. School didn't start again until the following day. Skinner had spent the morning staring at the wall and moving a red laser penlight on the floor and making the cats run after it. Kisa watched and barked at them, unsure of what the excitement was all about but wanting to be a part of it. Skinner's morning excitement consisted of cleaning up puppy mess in the kitchen. Luckily, he remembered to put newspapers down the night before.

"Did someone call you or is this one of your 'I need to be there's'?" he asked as she came in and hung up her coat.

"Oooh, sarcasm and it isn't even noon," she said cheerfully as she sat down. Skinner apologized and Emilia waved him off. "Don't worry, honey, I go into bitch mode once a month. Any chocolate in the house?" She greeted the masters of the house -the cats- and then cooed over Kisa and picked her up for cuddles and kisses.

There wasn't actually, so Skinner went up and raided Krycek's refrigerator of the chocolate torte he knew was hiding in there. To hell with his diet.

Now Skinner knew why women went on about chocolate. By the end of their second piece, he had filled Emilia in on the entire story and discarded their plates, digging right into the torte with their forks.

"I know that something like this is hard to see around," she said. "But think about this; were his intentions subversive?" Skinner had to admit that, no, they weren't. "He meant well, he just went about it in the wrong way?" Yes, he supposed so. "Unless you feel that this particular incident is unforgivable, don't throw away the baby with the bath water," she advised with a pat on his hand. "Let him know how angry you are, how much he hurt you, but forgive him. Dana belongs here with the two of you. I'm happy for all three of you, really I am. Just remember that sometimes good things come from bad situations and we suddenly find ourselves showered with unexpected blessings. 'The brightest path seems dark'."

Emilia and her homilies made Skinner look forwards to Mulder coming home from work so that they could talk.

"Now, let's change the subject, if you don't mind. Being your campaign manager, we need to go over some details." Em took a notebook out of her bag.

"Campaign manager?" Skinner asked.

"Of course," she said. "You don't think you can run for an Office without a campaign manager, do you?"

Yes, he thought he could. Obviously Emilia thought otherwise.

"Em, I've already been sheriff, how hard can this be? Who else would want the job?" he asked.

"Callum Hill," she said.

The name meant nothing to Skinner. "Is that a person or a place?" he asked.

"A person," she said primly. "First Deacon in guess who's church."

"Fuck."

Kisa yapped her agreement.

The boys came up to help Em ask Skinner questions for the flyer that was going to be sent out. Skinner didn't think that his shoe size was going to matter but the boys made Em write it down anyway, leaning over her shoulder just to make sure.

"Can we go out and play?" Adam asked. The twins were immediately distracted from the Q&A and voted for play time in the snow. Skinner agreed and they ran to get their snow suits and boots on. He begged time out and put the leash on Kisa who sensed something was up and danced excitedly while he put his own boots and jacket on.

The chill of the air felt good on his face, clearing the cobwebs from behind his eyes. The snow crunched under his boots as he walked slowly for Kisa who was enjoying her exploration of her new world. The boys had run on ahead to find someone to play with them starting with Adam's friend Jennifer. He had to smile at the twins who looked like the Pillsbury Dough Boy in their suits as they waddled after Adam.

Mulder forcing them into a sexual confrontation had hurt him more than he had ever been hurt before but Skinner couldn't let the entire blame fall on Mulder; he could have stopped Mulder, he could have let Scully go back up the stairs. He thought Mulder was simply teasing, he never expected him to come down stairs and jump him. That's no excuse, but there it was. He was being unfair in punishing just Mulder. It wasn't as though Mulder took a partner outside the house. Granted, Scully didn't live there, but Skinner considered her a part of the household anyway.

"Come on, girl," he said, tugging gently at Kisa's leash. She turned willingly and retraced her steps back home.

When he returned home, he saw Krycek's car in the driveway. It was a bit far for him to come home for lunch.

"Hey," he was greeted when he entered the house. Krycek lifted his legs away from Kisa's wet paws as they were set to plant themselves on his dress slacks. "Sit," he commanded. Kisa panted and smiled at him as she continued her happy dance around his chair.

"Come 'er, baby girl," Emilia cooed to the puppy. Kisa went to her and was happy to receive a pet down her back. Em applied a small amount of pressure at the base of her tail and Kisa sat. "Good girl! You sit so pretty!" Em praised her. Kisa wagged her tail in agreement.

"Doms," Krycek snorted. Emilia raised an eyebrow and patted his cheek. "You need to come into the city with me in the morning, Walter," Krycek said to Skinner.

"What for?" he asked. Krycek indicated a pile of papers on the table. Skinner looked at a couple and recognized them as a part of the Hungarian Box that was supposed to be in his closet.

"What are you doing with these?" Skinner asked with a frown as he sifted through them.

"You know what a curious fellow I am," Krycek said. "I wanted to know what they said so I had them interpreted."

Skinner was sure he had misheard the man. "You did what?"

"Interpreted. Here." Krycek handed Skinner the top paper. "The interpretation is attached to the original." Skinner saw that there was indeed a computer printout in English at the back of each set of papers.

"Now, I used one of my own contacts due to security reasons," Krycek said. "So I can guarantee you that this was done in complete privacy. Which was a good thing considering that this one would have made headlines." He handed Skinner an envelope from the inside of his jacket. "Before you open that, though, I want to tell you about one of the other translations." Krycek dug to the bottom of the pile and came up with several small notebooks that had been included in the box. "You can read it through later, but this is a best seller. Out of seven children, your father and your aunt Luiza were the only ones to survive WWII. Your father because he moved here just before the war started, Luiza out of sheer luck. Aunt Luiza wrote the diaries and according to her, your father urged the entire family to move out of Europe because he had a dream. He dreamed of a darkness spreading from the north-west, of a madman, another Atilla who sought to exterminate the Children of Abraham."

Skinner felt the blood leave his face. A chill swept through him, setting the small hairs at the back of his neck on end.

"He changed his name to a more Anglican one, Herman? and was baptized Catholic. I guess he never dreamed of Hitler's fascination with Catholics. His father, who was Jewish, disowned him and never spoke to him again. His name was removed from the family's vocabulary. Years after the war, when Luiza was the last one of the siblings left in Hungary, she eventually found work, and being canny with money, she was able to save a penny here and there. Her brother, your uncle Mika, lasted most of the war hiding out with her. He died of consumption of all things about three months before the war ended. Before he died he spoke the forbidden Name and told Luiza that their mother, your grandmother, had hidden a secret from their father; your father had sent them money every month soon after he got to the States. Your grandfather intercepted the first letter and used it for kindling. Your grandmother or uncle Mika managed to find a reason to get the mail from then on. Not knowing what to do with the money, which was in US dollars, someone gave them good advise; they opened a Swiss account and just deposited the money. They had no knowledge of the exchange rate, so they didn't realize that your father had made them rich. In that part of Europe, during that time, the US dollar wasn't high on the list of priorities.

"When Luiza found out what her brother and mother had been up to, she simply continued to deposit her own savings into the fund. The mail caught up with her after the war and she found that your father had continued to send money, so she dutifully followed her mother's lead and deposited it without question. Sometime after the war, she began to educate herself and she became savvy to exchange rates and when the US dollar began to skyrocket. She learned fast, she was a brain waiting to soak up knowledge that, as a woman in an old-world country, she didn't readily have access to. Wait til you read those diaries; look at the difference in syntax and writing from the first one and then in the last one.

"Anyway, someone gave her a stock tip and she splurged about \$100 US dollars on stock in a small company called Apple. She thought it was a waste of money. With the advent of the computer age for the average joe schmo on the street, at the ripe old age of 55, it occurred to Luiza to wonder if her brother was still alive. No money had come for a few years. She got on-line at the local University and made a simple search; she searched the US phone directory. She didn't find her brother but with a little more searching, she found a nephew. She made a few discrete inquiries to verify you as her nephew, and sent you this box, most of it is odds and ends that she managed to save during the war.

"What was most interesting, was a numbered password in a letter addressed to you directly that was stuffed in the diaries." Krycek pointed to the envelope he had given Skinner at the start, and Skinner saw that his name was clearly printed in a spidery, but strong, scrawl. "She turned the bank account over to you, saying that it was your father's money that started it and she had no children to leave it to herself. I checked it out, Walter. The password works. I paid a visit to someone I know at the DC branch of Banc Swiss and had the password changed and the new account put into your name. I know it's

illegal, don't jump on me about it. You need to go into the city with me tomorrow and sign papers. Bring Fox if you want him to have access to the account. He'll have to sign, too." He handed Skinner another piece of paper, containing nine numbers. "You are, of course, free to change the number again."

Skinner didn't know what to say as he stared at the envelope and the paper.

"How much is in it, Alex?" Emilia asked excitedly.

"Including the Apple stock, just over ten million US dollars."

Skinner needed a serious drink.

For some odd reason, Carlo had come over and asked permission to let the boys have a sleep-over. Skinner had no reason to deny the request, and the boys wanted to, so he agreed. When Mulder got home, Skinner understood what was going on; he was deliberately left alone with Mulder for the evening. Conniving little munchkins....

"Hi," Mulder said quietly when he came in the door. He was pale as he hung up his coat and set his briefcase down.

"Hi," Skinner responded. Mulder fidgeted, flitting in and out of the kitchen, up and down from a chair.

"Come here, Fox," Skinner said, patting the couch. Mulder sat stiffly. He jumped when Skinner picked up his hand. Mulder's hand was trembling. Skinner touched the gold ring.

"Please don't take that off," Mulder begged hoarsely.

"I'm not going to, Fox," Skinner said. "I want you to listen to me. And really hear me. You hurt me, Fox. Very badly. You used me to advance your own agenda. If I didn't love you so much, I'd beat the crap out of you and kick your ass out. But I must accept partial responsibility. I could have stopped everything right then and there but I was selfish, too; I was enjoying that blow-job and it turned me on that Dana was there. Promise me that you will never, ever, push again."

Mulder agreed in a soundless voice and turned. Skinner took him in his arms. The smell of Mulder's hair and the remnants of his morning shower, his touch, went straight to Skinner's head. If he didn't love the man, it wouldn't hurt so much.

"Fox, I love you, you idiot," Skinner said, flexing his fingers in Mulder's hair. "You have got to tell to me when you need something from me. God, I sound like Sharon. I'm

sorry I didn't understand, Sharon," he said in the direction of the ceiling. "Tell me why it's so important that Dana joins us. If you still love her, then for God's sake tell me that." It took a few more minutes with Mulder resting his head on Skinner's chest, taking comfort in the sound of Skinner's heartbeat.

"When I was laying in the hospital, do you know what was going through my mind?" Mulder whispered, clutching at Skinner's waist. "Who would take care of Adam. Who would take care of you. If you and Scully would lose touch with each other if I wasn't around."

Skinner held him tighter, pressing his mouth to the top of Mulder's head.

"Fox, I've taken care of myself for a hell of a long time and I will continue to do so. I would fight anyone for custody of Adam, and I've gone through hell for Dana already so why would I just toss that all aside? Make her Adam's guardian if you want, I could support that. You and she could finally share a child. I'll still be his uncle, and you know that Alex would watch over him no matter where Adam is. You didn't answer the last part of my question."

Mulder pressed in closer. "I love you," he said.

"I know, Fox, but according to Em, it's alright to love more than one person."

"I tried, Walter," he cried. "I tried not to, but she just... she's... I can't decide between the two of you and I don't want to," he cried out defiantly.

"And so you shouldn't," Skinner agreed with him. Mulder lifted his head and waited for the punch line. "Fox, all you had to do was to tell me this. We've discussed this almost since the beginning and I've always agreed with you. Why did you feel the need to put the three of us through this on a subject that we already agree on?"

"I... I...," Mulder floundered.

"You don't know," Skinner finished it for him. Mulder nodded reluctantly, lowering his eyes. Skinner shook Mulder's head. "There are times when I think I was safer in the Consortium," he said. He reached out with one hand and snagged the phone. "Ms. Scully, would you please do me the honor of accompanying me to dinner Friday night? I'll pick you up? Fine. Thank you." He hung up.

"And you, Mr. Mulder, I believe that you owe me a date."

"Have you thought about how the boys will feel about Dana being intimate with us?"

Skinner asked later in the evening as they lay in bed. "It might confuse them. They know too much to believe that she's just having a sleep over. And what if it causes trouble at work and puts yours and her job in jeopardy? Do you know how hard it is to get AD? There are only eleven in the entire country. And only two are women at the moment. That includes her, the first woman to be AD VC."

Mulder frowned and brushed at the sparse hair on his chest. "I know how many Assistant Directors there are," he said. "And I'm well aware that Scully, as AD Violent Crimes, also has 75 percent of the entire Agency under her and is two bosses short of the President of the United States. I know that and we have talked about it. She's willing to risk it. Besides, it isn't against the law. As for the boys, we'll talk with them. If they object, I'll respect that and we won't do anything. As for my job, if it comes into question, I'll just accept one of those offers to write a script. Every publishing house in this country and a few in England are prostrating themselves for a word from me."

"I know they are, Fox, and if you want to do that, I'll support your decision." Skinner leaned up on his elbow, looking down at him. "I just need to know that you've thought this through on the practical angles."

Mulder reached up and caressed Skinner's cheek. "Scully isn't the only one having an anxiety attack. Stop fighting fate; the three of us belong together."

Skinner leaned down for a kiss. "And we didn't do this two years ago because....?"

Mulder smiled up at him. "Our second anniversary is coming up, isn't it? Hmmm, two years -who'd-a thunk it? Well, besides the fact that I wanted you to myself, I guess I was in denial. I thought I was over Scully. It took a while for me to realize that the heat settled into the coals, waiting to be stoked once in a while. I was afraid that if I told you, you'd leave me. I thought I could handle it."

"I think that you're more stubborn than I am," Skinner told him. Mulder reared up and set Skinner on his back, straddling his thighs. Skinner put his hands on Mulder's thighs, caressing the muscles.

"You turn me on, Walter, never think that you don't," Mulder told him. "One look from you, and I'd do anything you wanted. I'd even sub for you, if you were into that, and I never sub for anyone. I'd have your baby, if I could. If you could. I love the way you taste, the way you look, your scent, the sound of your voice sends shivers up my spine. Look, and we're not even doing anything," he said, indicating his erection. He slowly stroked himself and Skinner couldn't take his eyes away. Mulder leaned down and filled Skinner's mouth with his tongue. Skinner licked at it and sucked on it, savoring the taste of Mulder. Mulder sat up and rocked back on Skinner's legs, continuing to stroke himself. Mulder shut his eyes and Skinner was sure he had tuned out.

"Do you know what I think of when I do this?" Mulder asked, breaking the silence. Skinner shook his head. "You. In me, me in you, mouths on each other, touching each

other. A few times, I had a hard time coming without imaging you inside of me or me moving inside of you." Mulder released himself and shifted to kneel between Skinner's legs. He licked and nibbled at the soft, delicate skin between Skinner's upper thighs. Skinner felt a shiver of pleasure as Mulder took his balls and caressed them as he began to prepare Skinner with his tongue and fingers. When Mulder pushed into him and held his gaze, Skinner had no doubt that he was the only one in Mulder's head.

After they both came, Mulder didn't move, staying inside of Skinner while he softened. "I love you, Walter. This is my home."

Chapter 20: The Dating Game

The men went to lunch after their morning at Banc Swiss. Krycek left to return to whatever shady job the NSA had him doing, and Skinner was positive that the Nasty Spies Agency was putting Krycek's considerable talents to good use. Krycek was happy therefore he was doing what he did best and was being appreciated for it. Skinner was in no rush to get home, Natti was back from her 'vacation', the boys were back in school, and Emilia was working on his campaign which he admitted that he didn't understand.

"Adam's first year anniversary is in two weeks," Mulder said, sipping his coffee. "We had a special dinner for the twins, but I'm not sure what to do about Adam."

Skinner nodded. "His first day with us also marks his mother's death. We'll need to think on that one." He was still feeling a little on edge with Mulder and he wasn't sure why. There was a 'politeness' in the air that didn't belong with two people who were both friends and lovers. Skinner didn't know how he'd feel if they broke up but he did know that it would hurt him for a hell of a long time after.

His new bank account still hadn't really sunk in despite the papers stating his ownership. Skinner had wanted to give Mulder part of the money but Mulder refused it. Krycek held his hand out and received a slap on it. Skinner made sure that Mulder had access to the account, thought. Just in case. He also opened three more accounts, transferring one hundred thousand dollars in each, one for each of the boys which they couldn't have until college. They could have tuition and supply money, but they had to wait until they graduated for the remainder of it. Mulder and Krycek both approved of the rule. Skinner then called a florist and sent two dozen roses to the Hoover attention Ms. Dana Scully. The other men approved that, also.

"Alex, are you sure this is alright with you?" Skinner asked before Krycek left. A jealous Krycek was not something he wanted to contemplate.

"What? You dating Scully?" Krycek asked. "Yeah, sure. I told you, we were only playing with each other, no emotions involved except pure, undiluted horniness. Oh, when you get around to it? She gets extremely antsy about two weeks before her period. Bend her over something and do her hard and fast. She will worship you for it. The week before? Forget it. Queen Bitch Supreme. Sometimes she likes it during, though."

Both Skinner and Mulder ordered him to shut up and leave. Mulder then looked at Skinner and shrugged.

"He's right," Mulder said apologetically.

Skinner had a vision of himself behind Scully -and felt concerned when his body didn't react. You've gotten off on fantasies about her before, he argued with himself. Himself just shrugged and turned away. Well, you'd better start reacting, Fox wants this. Hell, yes, alright, I want this. Please, God, let this be stress.

They were having lunch in a small restaurant that Mulder had found. It was a quiet little place with dim lighting and great food. It was in a part of town the locals called the Royal Stable.

"Why Royal Stable?" Skinner asked. Mulder popped a hush-puppy in his mouth.

"Queens, riding crops, guys riding each other..."

Skinner stopped him. "I get it," he said. He bit into his cat-fish and waited while it melted in his mouth. "Mmm. Fox, Senator Alexander is still focused on us."

Mulder nodded thoughtfully. "I know. But there's no reason for him to match me with Rhonda. I think Alex is working on something so I'm just going to let him deal with it for the moment."

Skinner reluctantly agreed; Alex had his ferret nose in the air lately and it was twitching directly at Alexander. The Senator likes hot-tub parties with young girls, does he? Skinner lifted his hand to lick off the juices and found it captured and brought to Mulder's mouth. Skinner watched Mulder's eyes darken as he cleaned one finger after another. He knew he wasn't dead, his body was defiantly reacting to that.

"Girls! Get a room," a waiter advised in passing. Skinner pulled his hand away with a flush, shooting a warning hiss at Mulder who chuckled. He signaled for the check. Just as they were about to leave, the waiter threw himself in front of them and thrust something at Mulder. A stuffed green alien and a pen. Skinner thought it was funny until the alien doll was pushed into his own hands.

"Just sign it, Walter," Mulder urged him.

They got into the car and Mulder looked over at him.

"What are you glowering about?" he asked. Skinner started the car and waited for traffic to give him a break.

"I cannot believe I just autographed a stuffed alien," he muttered. Mulder patted his knee.

"Babe, you wouldn't believe some of the stuff I've signed," he said. "I've seen more boobs than a plastic surgeon. Scully somehow manages to refuse and not get anyone mad at her."

"I thought people had gotten over all this?" Skinner grumbled as he pulled into traffic.

"All what?" Mulder asked. Skinner waved a hand.

"All.... this.... It's been years since all this went down and people are still interested?" When the Conspiracy broke, the head-hunters came out of the woodwork in droves, every one of them panting on the heels of Mulder, Scully and Skinner, the new gods of UFO clubs around the world. This wasn't the first time Skinner had been asked to sign something, but it had been a couple of years since the last time. He never did get used to it.

"If you came into the city more often, you'd see how interested people still are," Mulder said.

Skinner snorted. "No, thank you. I'm quite happy in my little town. Do you want to move back to the city?"

"Green Acres is the place to be, farm livin' is the life for me..." Mulder warbled. "No, actually I've gotten used to small town living. I can relax and hear myself think. I can go for a walk without getting mugged." He suddenly sneezed.

"Bless you," Skinner responded. "Don't go getting sick on me," he warned.

The next morning Mulder was buried under the covers.

"You did dis," Mulder croaked. He sneezed and pulled a tissue under the blanket. A honk emerged.

"Me?" Skinner touched his chest. "I haven't been sick." He hated it when Mulder was sick; the man turned into a big baby.

Skinner called Scully to let her know.

"Ohhhh," she bemoaned. "Do you think he'll be alright by Saturday?"

"I don't know, colds usually last a week, the worst of it should only take a day or two. Why?" Skinner asked.

"Because the AD's Dinner is this Saturday. I was going to ask if I could borrow him," she said.

"I forgot all about that," Skinner said. Once a year, on the first weekend after New Year's, the eleven Assistant Directors converged on DC for a Black and White Ball. The Director and Deputy Director are usually present, as well as the Deputy Assistant Directors and Special Agents in Charge. Although it was a dinner for the AD's, the other Offices were invited out of political correctness. Being a vital part of National Security, they had a Marine Honor Guard present, a dozen Secret Service agents, and undercover agents from several other agencies who usually remain anonymous. The President had been known to show up and shake a few hands, especially on an election year.

"Well, a-hem... I do happen to have a tux," Skinner said, examining his nails. "And I've been told that I look halfway decent in it. I haven't stepped on any toes during a Waltz in a while. I'm current on most of the world subjects. I haven't drooled my food in years. I know quite a few of the people who usually attend....."

"Alright, stop!" Scully laughed. "Would you please escort me to the prom?"

Skinner smiled at the phone. "Why, Mizz Scully, how forward you are," he drawled. "I'd be honored, Madam. We can discuss the particulars over dinner tomorrow night?" She agreed and he hung up. He found Mulder looking at him from under the covers.

"What?" he asked.

Mulder gave his head a shake. "Juss you. Flir'ing wi Scully. Is cu'." He sneezed and grabbed another tissue.

"Bless you," Skinner said. "And it's no chore to flirt with Dana. How come you always call her Scully?" he asked, curious.

"Force o' habit," Mulder responded.

"Did you call her Scully in bed?" Skinner could imagine it.

"No," Mulder said, trying to chuckle but choking instead. He blew his nose. "Scully is my friend and partner, Dana is my lover. Like Skinner is my friend and ex-boss, Walter is my lover."

"You call me Walter all the time," Skinner pointed out.

"Force o' habit," Mulder said.

Skinner gave him a pat on his rear and left the room with a chuckle. He went down to breakfast and found the boys happily eating oatmeal. Natti was home and they had a hot breakfast again. Skinner looked closely at Krycek.

"Tell me you're not sick," he said. Krycek swallowed his toast.

"I feel fine, why?" Krycek asked.

"Fox has a cold. Just making sure," Skinner said. "I'm escorting Dana to the AD's Black and White Saturday night, can you stick around the house for the boys? Help Natti?" Skinner said, digging into his oatmeal after thanking Natti.

"I'll be here," Krycek promised.

"What's 'scorting, Popi?" Pavel asked. Skinner had to think a moment. He still didn't get it.

"What's what?" he asked for clarification.

"'scorting," Pavel lisped. "You said you was 'scorting Aunt Dana."

That almost sounded obscene, Skinner thought. "ES-corting," he announced. "It means that I'm taking Aunt Dana to a party so that she won't have to go alone."

"Oh," the boys said. They returned to their breakfast.

"Is it like a date?" Adam asked.

Skinner nodded. "Sort of. It can be. Sometimes 'escort' is a polite word for going on a date, sometimes it's just a word for a man who accompanies a woman someplace."

Adam took another mouthful of his oatmeal, thinking. "Which one are you doing?" he finally asked.

"Both," Skinner said. "First, Aunt Dana knows me and trusts me to protect her at the party, and second because we like each other." He waited for Adam's reaction. If the boys objected....

"Are you going to kiss her?" Adam asked. The twins wrinkled their noses and giggled.

"Maybe," Skinner answered him. "Will it bother you if I did?"

Adam shrugged. "No," he said. "I like Aunt Dana. Are you going to kiss her like you kiss Daddy?"

"I don't know," Skinner said. "That depends on how we feel after the party. I'd like to kiss her like I kiss your father but if she doesn't want to, I won't."

He watched Adam think about it some more. Most eight year olds were only just beginning to contemplate such abstract thoughts, but most eight year olds weren't Adam Mulder.

"Two boys got into a fight at school because one boy was talking to the other boy's girlfriend," Adam informed them. "Are you and Daddy going to fight about Aunt Scully?"

Now there's a logical deduction, Skinner thought. "No, we talked about it and your father gave his permission." He wasn't about to tell Adam that they already had their fight. Then again, he might know.

"Did you do your meditation this morning?" he asked. Adam nodded. The twins weren't meditating yet, their brains weren't ready for that type of complex theory. They'd grow up with it, though, so by the time they were ready, it won't be so strange that they'd shy away from it.

The twins, bored with the discussion, asked to be excused. Skinner excused them and they ran off. There were still people at the table, so Kisa stayed, waiting for something to drop.

"Uncle Walter, did Daddy love my mother?" Adam asked, slowly stirring his oatmeal. Skinner reached out to stroke his hair.

"I don't know, son," he admitted. "But they made you, and I know that your father loves you and I know that your mother loved you very much, so I think that maybe he did love her."

Adam knew what the upcoming date was.

"Are we going to have a special dinner for me like Pavel and Ivan had?" Adam asked.

"If you'd like," Skinner said. "Your father and I were talking about that but we weren't sure. We thought it might upset you or confuse you. What do you think?"

Adam took a small taste of his hot cereal. "Do you believe in ghosts?" he asked Skinner.

Skinner didn't blink at the change of subject. "I believe in spirits," he admitted. He'd be in denial if he didn't. "I don't think that everyone who dies remains as a ghost or a spirit. I think that most souls go on to whatever afterlife there is, if there is one. A few remain, I don't know why. Maybe unfinished business."

"Do you think that Mommy is a ghost?" Adam asked. So that's where that came from. I'm defiantly slow this week...

"I don't know. I think that when she died, she was happy because she knew that you were alright and with your father, so I think that maybe she moved on to where ever she needed to go." Please don't say that she's been visiting....

"If we have a special dinner, can we put an extra plate out for her? Like what Miss Emilia does at Samhain?" Adam asked. Skinner breathed a sigh of relief and leaned over to hug the boy.

"Yes, of course we can," he assured Adam. "You just talk over the menu with Natti and we'll make sure that your mother gets a plate, too." He glanced up to see Natti give a nod.

"Why don't you get ready for school?" Skinner suggested. "Let your father sleep, and you can talk with him when you get home, alright?" Adam nodded and rushed off to his room.

"That was well done, Walter," Natti said softly as she took his bowl. Krycek gave him a clap on his shoulder and headed out to work. Skinner leaned back in his chair and shut his eyes.

"I feel shredded," he groaned.

Natti chuckled as she drizzled a little bacon grease on the dry cat food and then started the dishes. The cats hissed at a curious Kisa who jumped back with a wounded expression. Natti cooed at her and fed her a piece of bacon. "Just be happy you don't have a girl. Girls are very jealous of Daddy's attention. When Sharon first realized that her parents did what other married people do, you should have seen the sparks fly! It was disgusting, according to her, they were too old and parents shouldn't be doing that kind of thing! Hmph, they were in their thirties. She'd stomp around the house, snarling and yelling, insisting that her father take her somewhere or sit and talk with her, anything but spend time with her mother."

Skinner had never heard that before. "Was she a happy child?" he asked.

"Yes, she was," Natti said. "She got the best of everything. She was a very spoiled Daddy's Girl. I think that Filya missed Sasha. There was nothing he could do about it, though, so he bottled up those feelings and turned his attention to Sharia. It was a long time before Sasha understood that it wasn't his sister's fault that his father no longer played with him."

Skinner gave a small smile. "It's been a while since I heard you call him that," he said.

"He doesn't like it," Natti admitted. "He says it's a child's name and he isn't a child. He fought, kicking and screaming coming into this world, and he'll leave it the same way. Upryamy malchik."

Krycek stuck his head in the door. "Vy pravý," he said in agreement. Krycek planted a kiss on Natti's cheek and jumped out of the way when she swatted at him.

Skinner put Kisa on her leash and walked the boys to school. The twins chattered away about whatever thought came into their heads and shot snowballs at unsuspecting trees, cheering when they hit their target. They were joined about halfway by Adam's friend Jennifer whom Adam smiled shyly at. Skinner wondered if four blocks down the street was close enough to count her as 'the girl next door'. Girls were growing up way too fast lately, much faster than the boys. How would the gulf between the sexes change with this new talent emerging with the kids? Being able to get into each other's mind would certainly cut down on the misunderstandings between men and women.

After the children ran off to their classes, Skinner stopped in on Carlo.

"Hey," he said. Carlo's new office was still in its moving in phase.

"Buon giorno," Carlo greeted him from behind a stack of boxes. He set a box on the floor and smiled at Skinner. "So, did you and Mulder make up?"

Skinner closed the door and sat down.

"Uh-oh, you fucked up, didn't you?" Carlo guessed. Skinner told him what happened. "And you let him take the entire blame?" Carlo asked when Skinner was done. Carlo stepped over the boxes and rapped Skinner upside his head. "Idiota. You should be begging his forgiveness."

"What? I apologized," Skinner protested, rubbing his head. Carlo sat down on a box.

"Turn it around," he said. "How would you feel if it was you that went down on him and when you were done, they freaked out on you? How humiliated would you feel and would a simple apology make it right?"

Not being able to find a decent argument, Skinner slumped down in the chair and groaned. Carlo was right, he was an idiot.

"Thank you, Zio," Skinner mumbled and called Kisa who was inspecting the room. He's a man, he should have known how Mulder would have been feeling and yet he downplayed his own responsibility, pushing it off on Mulder. His sense of wrongness suddenly had a name; guilt. Skinner had no idea how to fix it.

He set Kisa loose in the house and took off his jacket and boots. Natti took one look at his face and went back her courtroom dramas. Mulder was awake when he entered the room; CNN was on the TV. Skinner took the remote and turned the TV off, sitting on the bed.

"What's wrong?" Mulder asked and sniffed. His nose was red and looked larger than usual.

Skinner looked at the man and felt shame sweep through his body.

"I think that the other night, it should have been me asking to sleep on the couch," he began. "I'm sorry, Fox, I broke our Covenant, too. By hurting you. I humiliated you and I didn't even realize it until this morning. I should be the one begging forgiveness and I am. Tell me how to make this right, Fox, because I don't know what to do."

For an eternity Skinner waited, his head bowed. He felt a touch on his back.

"Come here," Mulder said, pulling him down. Skinner stretched out and Mulder pulled his head down to his chest. Skinner listened to Mulder's heart beat and the raspy sounds of the cold virus in his lungs. "Just hold me, that's what you can do."

Mulder had fallen asleep when Skinner worked up the will to move. There was still things that needed to be worked out, but he could feel the bond between them once more. He went into the bathroom and threw water on his face, unable to look at himself in the mirror. He had behaved like a first class, self-righteous shit-head.

"What'd you do?" Natti asked as soon as he entered the kitchen.

"What?" he asked.

Natti gestured toward the upstairs with the carving knife.

"It's a long story," he said. "Let's just say I screwed up better than I ever did before."

"Uh-huh. Can I make a suggestion?" she asked.

Skinner nodded. As if he could stop her....

"You can start making up whatever this is by giving Fox space to call his own," she said with an arched eyebrow.

"I'm not sure I understand," Skinner said. "He has his office, there's the family room, the livingroom..." He trailed off when Natti shook her head.

"How long did he live alone until he moved in here? He's lived alone most of his life. He leaves his own apartment, his own life, and moves into your house where he's relegated to a small room to call his own? Alex, your old enemy, gets an entire apartment of his

own but not your lover?" She waved a hand. "Now, I'm not saying that he's complained, because he hasn't. At least not that I know about. But wouldn't you be going stir-crazy? Let's take that family room, for example; it's a wonderful room, warm and full of love. But why is it there? To give the children some place to play on bad-weather days? They have their rooms and the livingroom for that."

Skinner sat down and took an apple from the fruit bowl. An idea popped into his head. "I could turn it into a small apartment!" he said, excitement beginning to form. "Except for plumbing, of course. Put the door back on and Fox can use it for his own breathing space. I can use the upstairs room for my own office and we can get our computers and filing cabinets out of the livingroom."

Natti gave him an approving look as she chopped up a stalk of celery.

"Wait!" she called to him as he left the kitchen. Skinner turned back. "Don't just assume; talk it over with him first. He may not want that. It might make him feel as though he were being pushed away."

Skinner was well aware of that feeling lately. He went back upstairs, followed by a worshipful Kisa, grateful of Natti's warning.

"Fox," he whispered, sitting on the side of the bed. The cats were covering the foot of the bed, intent on curing him with their life-saving purrs. The Children of Bast saw the Daughter of Anubis and warned her away with a growl. The Guardian of the Gate would not get their human today.

"Hmmm?" Mulder murmured from within the covers.

Skinner pulled the covers down enough to see Mulder's face. "I need to talk to you for a minute, then you can go back to sleep." He waited until Mulder shifted enough to tell Skinner that he was awake. "Would you like your own space?"

Mulder was silent for a moment. "What? What do you mean?" He opened his eyes, paying attention as much as he could. Skinner cursed at himself for phrasing it so badly.

"I didn't mean it like that. I meant the family room. I can turn it into your own space, if you want. Put your desk and computer down there, the big TV comes up to the livingroom I'll be selfish about that, but you can have your own entertainment center down there, private phone line. A mini-apartment. For when you need quiet space."

Mulder sat up and leaned against the headboard.

"Why?" he asked.

Skinner stood up and paced next to the bed, giving the top of his head a rub. "I've never claimed to be perfect, Fox, and that has never been made clearer to me than it has this

week. Especially today. I've tried very hard not to make the same mistakes with us that I did with Sharon and I thought I was doing a good job of it. I haven't, though. When we got together, we should have bought a house together, something that was ours from the start, but we didn't. You moved into my house, squeezed in what you could and got rid of the rest. I didn't get rid of much to make room for you. I've been a selfish bastard. If it were me, I'd go nuts without someplace where I could listen to myself think. I have that now because I work here; with you at work in the city all day and the boys, for the most part, at school, I have plenty of space. You leave a full house and you come home to a full house. Can you honestly tell me that there aren't times when you'd like some privacy?" He sat on the bed again. Mulder was watching him with a strange expression.

"Yes, there are times," he admitted after a moment.

"Then let me do this for you," Skinner pleaded. A thought occurred to him. A rare act lately. "Or would you rather buy a larger house? I'll buy you any house you want."

Mulder shook his head. "I like this house," he said. "It's a little cramped for all of us, but I like it. I think I'd like to splurge on a spa after spring thaw, though. Maybe see if the bathroom can be enlarged a little. Put in a doorway from in here and seal off the hall entrance. I don't want you buying me anything, Walter, I don't need anything. And I don't want you turning the family room into Mulder Central. If you want to work out this guilt on something, I'd actually like a library. I've always wanted a library. Take all the books out of the livingroom, and from in here, and put them and our desks and computers down there."

"Done!" Skinner shouted at the sense of relief of being able to do something right for Mulder.

"Oh, and Walter?" Mulder stopped him on the way out the door. "Even through this cold, I'm smelling something from over there somewhere." He waved a hand in the general direction of the far corner and slid back down under the covers. Skinner went over, sniffing. Eau de puppy. He groaned and went to find the cleanser bottle and scrubber. Kisa watched curiously with a happy thumping of her tail on the floor.

While he scrubbed at the rug, Skinner wondered what they were going to do with the now spare room across the hall. He pictured the floor plans in his head and altered a few lines.

"Fox?" he said.

Mulder patiently removed the covers from his head again. "Yes?"

"What if we put a door at the top of the stairs? I mean, take out the hall walls and close off the upstairs with a door maybe about five feet or so from the top of the stairs. Any reason we can't make both this bedroom and the smaller one into one big room? There'd be more room to enlarge the bathroom, too. More closet space." He could see Mulder mulling it over.

"Not a bad idea," he finally said. "I don't see why not. Loft bedrooms can be a good thing." He pulled the covers up again. "I want a ceiling fan," Skinner heard from under the covers.

"Okay." He liked ceiling fans, he could live with it. He scrubbed at the spot some more. "That would be nice for the summer. Remind me not to spend too much money, I don't want to waste it all on frivolous shit. Not that I'm saying a fan is frivolous because it isn't, I think it's a good idea. I'd like to put some aside for donations. There are a few charities that I like to sponsor when I can. Educational things. Maybe I can donate a couple of computers to the school, they're a little behind in that department. Maybe a new set of encyclopedias Are you sure you don't want your own space?" Skinner asked in concern.

"Walter," came the muffled name.

"Yes?" Skinner sat up, ready to get Mulder whatever he needed.

"Get out."

Skinner did his best to stay out of the sickroom for the rest of the morning. Mulder threw a sneaker at him the last time he poked his head in. At noon, he went to pick up the twins. With a shopping list in his pocket from Natti, he drove into the city. The boys took their nap on the back seat and by the time they reached the city, they were awake and raring to go. They begged for the newest Disney movie in the theaters and, after making them promise not to tell Alex, Skinner took them.

After the movie, which he had to admit had catchy music, he returned a voice mail from Scully that was left on his cell phone during the show.

"That over-grown baby in your room said to bring home more Puffs," she informed him. Skinner could hear the dry smile she had on her face. "With the lotion and eucalyptus in them," she added.

"I'm beginning to think I preferred the chicken pox," Skinner grumped.

"Oh, and remember that he likes his orange juice with the pulp," she reminded him. "And vanilla ice cream, the real stuff, with the vanilla seeds in it." Scully was obviously quoting. "No fruit or nuts or other crap mixed in it, just the ice cream. And stop in at Trader Joe's for that natural decongestant to rub onto his chest. The stuff that smells like a sewer but works great."

"It works great because it smells like a sewer," Skinner said. "Do I have to, Dana?" he whined. He hated the smell of that stuff. He preferred Vicks. Mulder refused to use the eucalyptus in the Vicks, but he'd use it in the tissues?

"Yes, you do," she said. "You think life is hell while he's sick? Just wait until he's well again and see what happens if you don't do this," she promised.

"Is that Aunt Dana, Popi?" Pavel caught the magic name. "Let us talk to her!" Both boys grabbed for the phone and regaled her with the highlights of the movie and sang bits of the chorus of a song they remembered.

"Ok," Pavel said and handed the phone back to Skinner.

"I have a craving for a falafel sandwich," she told him. "Would you mind bringing me one? I can't find anyone who delivers and I don't have time to take the time to go out."

Skinner made the necessary traffic changes to go to his favorite Middle Eastern place. "Not a problem, I know the best place to go. Be there soon." He hung up and told the boys that Aunt Dana was hungry, so they were going to bring her lunch.

"But it isn't lunch time," Pavel objected.

"I know, but she's hungry," Skinner said. "Call it a late lunch or an early dinner. Are you boys hungry?" Silly question; they were boys, of course they're hungry.

At the restaurant, the boys looked suspiciously at the strange food and smells in the air. The cheerful man behind the counter gave them each a sample of gyro and the boys reluctantly pronounced it edible. The man gave Skinner a sampler's plate for them, refusing to charge him, saying that it was insurance toward future customers. The man also reprimanded Skinner for not bringing in the boys earlier. After years of patronage, Skinner never told him of his handsome sons. Skinner apologized, not bothering to explain the situation.

"Are we handsome?" Ivan asked when they got into the van.

"You're very handsome," Skinner assured him. God help the future women. And maybe men, if they have more than just Alex's features.

"This boy at school said we was ugly and funny looking because our chin keeps going away," Ivan said, pointing to his jaw. Skinner knew what he was talking about.

"Your jaw is just deep set, that's all," he said, reaching back and touching Ivan's jaw. "Alex's jaw is the same way but he holds his head up and no one notices." Not that anyone would actually say anything to him if they did notice. "You have nice green eyes, a nice mouth, a cute nose.." Skinner squeezed Ivan's nose and the boy laughed. It was one

of the negative sides of growing up; that children began to question the validity of their own bodies thanks to the help of other children.

Upon entering Scully's office, the boys immediately went for a second opinion. She took their faces and soundly kissed them.

"You two are so handsome, I'd marry you if you were adults," she informed them. She drew them in and loudly whispered. "Just be thankful that you have hair."

The boys giggled with a look at Skinner.

"Very funny," he said to her. It was highly unlikely that the boys would have to worry about their hairline when they got older. Although, Alex was sporting a distinguished streak of white at his temples and sides a full decade before Skinner. Adam wouldn't have to worry, either; hair loss was mostly hereditary on the maternal side and Adam's grandfather had a full head of hair at sixty. Skinner wasn't sure, but he guessed that the hereditary codes didn't apply to clones.

He set the boys up with forks and napkins before taking out his own sandwich. Scully bit into hers with a groan of sheer delight. Skinner watched her lick a drop of white tahini sauce from her lips and mentally slapped himself.

"Popi, the rice is cold," Ivan complained.

"It's supposed to be cold. Eat it," he said. Damn, he forgot what they were like with new foods.

After a moment, "The salad stuff has white stuff in it," Pavel said, poking at it suspiciously.

"That's feta cheese. You like cheese. Eat it."

Ivan poked his finger into another dish and sniffed at it. "Smells funny," he said.

Skinner swallowed a piece of falafel. "That's hummus. It's made with mashed garbanzo beans. You like garbanzo beans. Dunk the bread in it and eat it. Do this." He broke off a piece of the bread and scooped up some meat and hummus, holding it out to Ivan. Ivan took a bite, gnawing at it due to missing front teeth. Ivan took the rest and sat back with a contented expression. Pavel, assured that his brother wasn't about to fall over dead from poisoning, accepted another piece of filled bread from Skinner.

"Have you tried sushi on them yet?" Scully asked with a snicker. Skinner shot her a deadly glare.

"God, no, are you crazy?" he questioned her sanity in disbelief.

"What's shushi?" Mr. Big-Ears Pavel asked.

"Sushi," Scully annunciated. "It's raw fish."

Both boys looked at her in horror.

"Never mind," Skinner told them, and gestured for them to eat. "Thanks," he said to her.

"Any time," she returned brightly.

For the first time in a long time, Skinner didn't know what to talk about. This was Scully, he told himself. Since when do you need to search for a suitable topic?

"I don't like the rice stuff, Popi," Pavel said.

"Then don't eat it," Skinner told him. "As long as you tried it first, you don't have to eat it if you don't like it."

"I like the rice stuff," Ivan said. Ivan ate the rice and Pavel ate the salad.

Scully watched them and shook her head.

"That is so weird," she said in a low voice to Skinner. "You'd think they'd like and dislike the same things."

Skinner nodded. "I know. Pavel likes chocolate, Ivan likes strawberry. Pavel likes coffee, Ivan hates it. Not that they should be drinking it at their age, anyway. Pavel likes red meat, Ivan prefers poultry. Pavel will sit and watch sports, Ivan would rather read a book. Both like to play sports, though."

"Hawk and Dove?" Scully suggested.

"I think so," Skinner said. "Two opposites of the same coin. It's fascinating watching their personalities emerge."

"Are we fastenating?" Pavel asked.

"Yes, you are," Skinner assured him.

"Is that good or bad?" Ivan asked.

"I think that's very good," Skinner said. "It means that you are interesting."

The boys accepted that.

"They aren't the only ones with emerging personalities," Scully said with a lift of an eyebrow.

"How's that?" Skinner asked.

"You," she said, knocking his knee with hers. "When you were in this office, no one would even consider questioning you, and went out of their way not to make mistakes, and yet two -no, three- little boys have you wrapped around their cute little fingers and you couldn't be happier. You look ten years younger and more alive than I've ever seen you. It's nice."

He picked up her hand and brought it to his mouth, brushing her knuckles.

"I'm very happy, Dana, happier than I've ever been before. Thank you." To some degree, he was sure that having the children saved his life. Having someone to love and accepting love from someone else had kept him alive. He would never have killed himself, he was too selfish for that, but that part of him that craved human contact had been in danger of being shut off due to unuse. He would have become no more than a soulless drone if Mulder hadn't re-entered his life. Skinner looked at the twins and realized that Krycek had a major hand in his rebirth, also. There was only one thing missing -the touch of a woman's hand. He loved Mulder, there was no denying that, and Mulder could turn him into a quivering mass of jello with a glance, but there was something about a woman's soft hand, her cries and whimpers as he made love to her, that would round out his life. And there was only one woman he could think of whose cries and whimpers, whose hand, he wanted in his bed. Only one woman he wanted to watch his lover touch. Skinner slowly rubbed his thumb across Scully's palm and licked a drop of sauce from the inside of her wrist. He felt the hand jerk in his and tighten around his fingers. Scully gulped and her face flushed.

Skinner felt the knot in his stomach begin to loosen and sensation returning to his nether region.

Reality crashed back in when he heard giggles.

"Popi, use a napkin," Ivan admonished him, pushing the pile of napkins nearer.

Skinner released Scully's hand with a squeeze.

"So, Dana, did Fox tell you about the latest remodel idea?" he asked, finishing his sandwich. "We're going to turn the entire upstairs into a loft. Enlarge the bathroom, add a closet, a larger bed. And a nice big lock on the door."

"What's a loft?" Mr. Big Ears asked.

They stopped at the Home Depot where Skinner got the brackets he would need for the shelves for Mulder's library. The twins took one look at all the nifty stuff in the huge warehouse and went into raptures. By the time they were ready to leave, Skinner found himself promising to build them a playhouse when the weather got better. And they wanted it painted purple.

"Why purple?" Skinner asked.

"Why not?" Ivan asked.

Skinner could find no suitable reply other than, "Alright." Thankfully, they had a fenced in back yard where the neighbors wouldn't be offended by the eye-sore. Hopefully, the boys would forget about it by then.

"Popi?" Ivan said, swinging on Skinner's hand.

"Yes?" He was actually getting used to that word, and it thrilled him to hear it. No matter how they came to be, he had sons. He had already called his main lawyer, Jane, and had her change his Will. She'd send it to him for his signature when it was ready. Mulder didn't know it, but he had also added Adam as an equal beneficiary along with the twins. Mulder was named as their guardian should anything happen to him, with Scully secondary pending Krycek's approval. Krycek had the final say on anything concerning the twins. Skinner felt that it was only right, since they're technically Krycek's anyway. If Krycek returns to his old ways or places the boys in danger, Skinner would then change his Will again.

"Do kids go on dates?" he asked. Skinner looked down at him.

"What do you mean?" Skinner asked.

They were heading into the mall. The boys needed new pants again. He called home first and confirmed with Natti that Adam could use a couple more pairs of pants, too. And socks and underwear for all three boys. "Me, too," he heard Mulder croak in the background. Four boys. And Adam begged for the latest CD of his favorite group. "And ice-cream. Oh, and more blank disks for the computer."

"You went on a date with Uncle Fox and now you're going to go on a date with Aunt Dana," Ivan explained. "When we go out to eat or shopping, is it a date?"

"What, you mean us? You, me and Pavel?"

Ivan nodded.

Skinner found the thought to his liking. A date with his sons. "I guess so," he said. He stopped and knelt down to eye level with them. "Mr. Krycek and Mr. Krycek, would you go on a date with me?" he asked. The boys giggled and agreed. During the adoption process, the only thing Krycek requested was that Skinner not change their names. Mainly not wanting to confuse the boys, Skinner agreed to the request.

On their trip through the crowded mall, the boys had to ride the merry-go-round in the food court and play a few of the games in the game room. They didn't quite get the point of Skee-ball, they kept tossing the ball as though it were a softball. A photo booth caught their attention and they dragged Skinner into it. Of course, they had to have wallets to put their new pictures in.

His cell phone rang and Skinner answered it.

"This is a warning," he heard. "Do NOT buy those boys too much crap. Be strong. Have willpower. Be a man. *Ah-choow!*"

"Fox, go back to bed," Skinner said and hung up the phone. As if he'd buy the boys crap.

"Popi, can we have a ice cream?" Pavel asked, seeing a Ben and Jerry's.

"Sure."

Mulder and Natti took one look at the stains on the boys' shirts and shot Skinner a look of pity.

"Sucker," Mulder informed him from inside the blanket he was walking around in. "Try thinking of them as agents under your command. Do you know how hard it was for me to get anything out of you when you were AD?"

Skinner stripped the ice cream coated shirts from the boys and sent them up to start their bath. "It wasn't hard for you at all," Skinner said. "You had me wrapped tighter around your finger than the boys do." He snagged a feel of cheek on his way past Mulder and into the laundry room, shooting the soiled shirts into the basket.

"Feeling me up isn't going to help you control your addiction," Mulder said.

"What addiction?" Skinner asked.

"To the boys. Do they really need stuffed pink elephants?" Mulder picked up one of the creatures.

"Shall we discuss those god-awful noise-makers you bought all three boys and then proceeded to torment the cats with?" Skinner countered.

"What noise-makers?" Mulder asked.

"Those kazoos," Skinner said. "I swear they were invented as a torture device."

"Those are musical instruments," Mulder informed him. Skinner had been ready to visit with Reverend Johnson after 1 minute of exposure to the kazoos. Even Krycek came down from his apartment to glare at them. "And they have since mysteriously disappeared, which is more than I can say for these pink...."

Skinner caught Mulder by the waist and grabbed a hand. "Have I told you lately that I love you," he sang as he danced Mulder around. Mulder shut up and rested his head on Skinner's shoulder. Skinner could feel the heat radiating from him.

"You still have a fever," he said in Mulder's ear and put a kiss on Mulder's neck. "Take another aspirin. I stopped at Trader Joe's. Dana had me get a bottle of eucalyptus oil. Draw a hot bath and pour some in, soak, and then go to bed. Let me wash up the boys, and then I'll rub your back and chest with that smelly stuff." He held Mulder tightly. "I love you, Fox. I can't promise that I'll never fuck up again, but I do promise that it will never be intentional." He held Mulder's face and risked the cold germs by kissing him.

"I'm sorry, too," Mulder said. He sniffed and touched Skinner on the cheek. "I love you, Walter. I can't promise that I'll never fuck up again, but I do promise that it will never be intentional."

Skinner gave a hoarse laugh and wiped at his eyes.

"Wuss," Mulder croaked, wiping a damp trail from Skinner's jaw.

"Sissy," Skinner countered, and wiped at Mulder's eyes.

Mulder gave Skinner's side a rub and went up stairs. Skinner went into the downstairs bathroom and began to fill the tub before rounding up the boys who had disappeared after starting the water. Skinner tested the temperature and turned the hot water on. Seeing them crowd the tub, Skinner could tell that Adam would be taking his baths separately soon. Another reason to enlarge the upstairs bathroom.

The twins were their usual rambunctious selves as they played in the water but Adam was quiet.

"What's wrong?" Skinner asked as he ran the washcloth over Adam's back.

"How come you and Daddy were arguing? Are me and Daddy going to live someplace else?" Adam asked.

Skinner dropped the washcloth and took Adam's chin. "God, no!" he said. "Son, everyone argues sometimes, it doesn't mean we don't love each other. We had a misunderstanding, that's all. We said we were sorry and we made up. When I'm in a bad mood and I snap at you and the twins, don't I apologize?" Adam nodded. "And when you and the twins have a fight, that doesn't mean that you don't like each other anymore, does it?" Adam shook his head.

"Belinda in school said that her Daddy said that men who live together beat each other up when they fight," Adam informed him.

Shocked, Skinner shut his mouth with a snap. He quickly washed Adam's hair and got him out.

"Natti!" he called out the door as he dried Adam off. Natti was in the doorway a moment later. "I need to have a talk with Adam, could you watch the boys, please?"

"Of course," she said.

"Thank you. Fox!" he called out as he herded Adam into his bedroom. Mulder shuffled in a few minutes later, his blankie wrapped around him.

"Sit down, Fox," Skinner requested. Mulder sat next to Adam on the bed.

"Fox, have I ever hit you?" Skinner asked. Mulder raised both eyebrows to his hairline.

"No, of course not," Mulder said.

"Have you ever hit me?" Skinner asked.

"Aside from that one time at work when I was poisoned? No, not that I'm aware of," Mulder said. "What's going on?"

Skinner told him what Adam said. He sat quietly and listened while Mulder set his son straight on a few facts.

"You know what?" Mulder said. "I have an idea. An experiment. Do you think you could tell if I was lying or not if you lowered your shields and I lowered mine?" Adam thought about it.

"I think so," he said.

The idea so astounded Skinner that he barely noticed the two being still, seeming to 'listen' to each other. Without saying a word, Adam snuggled down into his bed and went right to sleep, a contented smile on his face.

Mulder tucked Adam in and put a kiss on his cheek before pulling Skinner from the room and shutting the door.

"What was that?" Skinner whispered.

"I'm not sure," Mulder said, scratching at his day old stubble. Skinner was miffed; stubble made Mulder look even sexier. "It felt, I don't know, warm and fuzzy. Comforting. Almost a memory of being a baby, cuddled in a soft blanket and being held against my mother's chest, gently rocked."

"Not painful, like before?" Skinner asked. Mulder shook his head.

"No, nothing like that."

The twins ran out into the hallway, screeching with laughter, naked and wet. Natti came out from the bathroom with a towel and a brush.

"Alex insisted on air-drying, too," she told the men with a martyred expression. "You know, I don't care what shrinks say, there's something to be said for genetics."

Skinner took the towel and brush from her and followed the wet footprints. When he was done begging, pleading and cajoling them into their PJ's and into bed, Skinner went into the livingroom to find Mulder finishing up a report on his impromptu experiment and sending it off to the Kurts.

"How are they coming on this problem?" Skinner asked. "Any closer to a solution?"

Mulder shook his head. "Not that I know of, but they say that our reports are helping to bring them closer to the problem itself. Although, personally, I'm not sure it's such a big problem. Think of all the problems in the world that could be solved if people could simply read each other's thoughts. Without the communication barrier, people would understand each other and not strike out in fear."

"You're preaching to the choir, here, babe," Skinner told him. "It isn't the general public that's worried, though; it's the Intelligence community. You take away their secrets, and they no longer have power. Be careful with this one, Fox," he asked, worried. "This isn't a small group we're talking about, these are the people who run the world."

Mulder shut down his computer and stood up. "You misunderstand, Walter," he said. "I don't approve of shutting off the brain surge, but it's being worked on to do so. This is a problem that the Intelligence community should be backing with everything they have. Which reminds me; I'll talk with Alex in the morning and see if he knows anything."

That was something that Skinner could relate to; Alex needing the contact of family. After discovering his and Mulder's genetic link, Alex practically clung like a drowning rat to Mulder. Skinner doubted that Krycek was aware of it, but he was just as much in

need of human contact, of family who would accept him, as Skinner was. Mulder, who took people at face value, who believed that people could change, set his sights on rehabilitating one Alexei Krycek. It must be working, because Skinner now saw a man who could be fun to be with, bright, witty, and who had a sense of duty and honor toward those he cared for. Instead of a half wild man who was on the verge of burying the remainder of his humanity in a sewer. Although Krycek would discuss personal issues with Skinner, it was Mulder he turned to for the scary stuff; issues of trust and of the heart, of the soul. Krycek submitted to no one -except to Mulder. Everyone else, Krycek did as asked only if he wanted to.

The next evening, Mulder watched as Skinner fussed about in his closet for something to wear.

"Oh, for pity's sake, Walter, it's Scully!" Mulder finally declared. "You've had dinner with her dozens of times. Just put on a clean shirt and jeans and go."

Skinner took a deep breath and forced himself to relax. Mulder was right, he was being anal about this. Mulder pushed him out of the way and reached into the closet.

"Here," he said, pushing clothing into Skinner's hands. "This looks nice on you."

Looking in the mirror, Skinner wasn't sure. "It's tan and brown, Fox, isn't it a little plain?"

"Who are you, Martha Stewart?" Mulder asked. "It's nice, Walter, it brings out your eyes. I like the color of your eyes, they change from golden brown to a warm chocolate."

Mulder ran a hand over Skinner's buns and nipped at his neck. Skinner wasn't sure about the light tan shirt and brown slacks but Mulder was happy with it, so Skinner put his socks and shoes on and took the black jacket Mulder handed him.

"You be good, be home by midnight, no drinking and driving, watch the speed limit and stop signs, be a gentleman, hold the door for her and the chair, knockon her door don't honk, walk her to the door when you drop her off, don't dominate the conversation, listen to what she has to say, and remember that condoms are a good thing." Mulder brushed the lint off Skinner's shoulders and back.

"Fox!" Skinner protested with a flush. "I have no plans on sleeping with her tonight, I'm always careful when I drive, I always listen to her, and I'm always a gentleman. Mama insisted on it." He ran a brush over what was left of his hair, hugged his little men, and was out the door.

Although nervous on his way into town, by the time Skinner saw Scully he was calm again. Mulder was right, it's just Scully. As stated, he was a gentleman; he kissed her

cheek, handed her into his car, did the doors and chair thing, and listened to her talk. Dancing her around the dance floor was heaven to have her in his arms, to have her looking up at him with her sparkling blue eyes and ruby red lips, bee-stung and completely kissable.

"God, you're so beautiful," he whispered. She smiled shyly, something Skinner had rarely seen her do, and laid her head on his chest. Skinner breathed in her scent and filed it right next to Mulder's.

"I never thought I'd actually be in this position," she said. "With your arms around me."

"Why didn't you say something before?" he asked. He would have jumped, arms wide open, and announced it to the world.

"Why didn't you?" she countered.

"Point," he conceded. "I'm thirteen years older than you, and you were completely in tune with Fox. I was your superior. Why would I risk everything just to hear you turn me down in an overly polite voice? I do my best not to put myself into those types of situations. Especially with subordinate personnel."

Her fingers curled around his and he filed another memory away.

"Are you sure about this?" she asked. "I don't want to cause you and Mulder to break up. I enjoy seeing you two together. I could never have imagined the two of you together but I love to see you holding hands, hugging, teasing each other. Kissing. Other things." She broke eye contact with him, biting her lip and playing with his collar.

Skinner flushed, remembering what she saw the last time the three of them were together.

"I'd like you to be with us for those 'other things'," he said. "If you want to be. Be a part of us. You don't have to sit back and watch, you're free to participate. Touch us. Ask to be touched. As you will."

"I'd like that," she whispered, her color deepening. Skinner stopped them.

"I need to say something about the other night," he said. "Let's go for a walk."

He paid their bill, helped her into her coat, and went outside. The night air was chilly and brisk. Large, fat snow flakes fell with a whisper, illuminated in the glow of the street lights. Scully put her hand through his arm and walked close.

"Are you too cold?" he asked in concern. Scully shook her head. He covered her hand with his and drew her closer.

"I'm sorry about the other night," he said. "Not that you saw that but in the way it happened. I put the blame on Fox, which was wrong of me. I could have stopped him, if I truly wanted to. I could have let you walk back up the stairs. But I didn't. It felt good and I enjoyed having you there. It was my reaction afterward that hurt Fox. I didn't realize until it was pointed out to me that I humiliated him by seeming to reject what he did. He surprised me, I admit that; I honestly didn't think that he'd jump me with you there. I was teasing him. I gave the wrong signals and I misread his. I think that my reaction afterwards was.... well, I have no good reason. I think I just had an anxiety attack and I didn't know how to handle it. I didn't reject him and I don't want you thinking badly of him just because I acted like an ass."

Scully was quiet for a few minutes as they walked. She didn't pull away or immediately berate him, which Skinner felt was a hopeful sign.

"I thought that you didn't want me there and you didn't know how to stop him or send me away," she finally said. Skinner stopped and turned toward her. He put his gloved hands on her face and looked into her eyes.

"My bedroom door has a lock on it. I know how to use it. I will never send you away, you are, and always have been, welcome to be with us. All I can do is to ask you to forgive me in advance for all the stupid and immature things that I will say and do in the future." He watched as her eyes filled and her chin quivered. He didn't understand how people could think that she had no emotions; he had always found her to be so expressive.

"I'll forgive you, if you will forgive my moody bitch days. I have about another twenty years or so of them," she said with a watery laugh and snuffle. Startled, Skinner laughed out loud, his rich baritone echoing in the quiet street. He pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly against him. She slid her arms into his jacket and around his waist, nestling into his warm chest. Skinner found memories of her naked body pressed against him, undulating and crying out in orgasm. He had very few memories of their drugged dance together, but once in a while, one would spring up on him. His slid his hands down to her hips and she looked up at him. He could do nothing else but kiss her. The last shred of doubt left him as she returned his kiss.

The house was dark when he got in. He put Kisa on her leash and took her out for a quick walk.

"Well?" Skinner heard as he entered the darkened bedroom just after midnight. He said nothing as he undressed. He put his pajamas on and went into the bathroom to brush his teeth.

"Walter, if you don't spill the beans, I'm going to have to hurt you."

Skinner chuckled as he got into bed. "Good night, Fox." Mulder let out a strangled yelp and attempted to put Skinner in a choke hold. Attempted being the operative word. Skinner pinned Mulder under him. The room was pitch dark but he knew his way around Mulder's body and knew exactly where Mulder's face would be. He kissed Mulder gently, lightly, skimming his lips across Mulder's face.

"Turn around, let me hold you," Skinner asked. Mulder turned and Skinner wrapped himself around Mulder's back, nuzzling into Mulder's neck and hair, and fell into a peaceful sleep.

In the morning, Skinner stopped in the doorway of the kitchen, taken back to see Marco sitting at the breakfast table. The young man colored and greeted him. Krycek was sitting next to him, a contented cat smile on his face, dimples at full depth.

"Uh-huh," was all Skinner said.

"Nice dog," Marc said, holding Kisa on his lap.

"You met her last week," Skinner said.

"Oh... right," Marc stumbled.

Skinner helped himself to eggs and bacon, and sat down. "Relax, Marco, I'm for anything that keeps him out of mischief," he said, pointing his fork at Krycek. "So, how long can you stay this time?"

"I have a month off," Marco said. "Ali is writing some new music. We're due to go into the studio next month. He wants to put the wedding song on it and I get full writing credit for it."

"That's great, Marc," Skinner congratulated him. "I get a copy, right?" Marco assured him of it just as the boys hit the kitchen, scrubbing at their sleep-swollen eyes.

After breakfast, Skinner put the boys to work hauling books from all over the house down to the basement room after he and Krycek moved the big screen TV upstairs.

"What are you going to do with the smaller TV?" Marco asked as Skinner unhooked the livingroom TV from all the cords and set it aside.

"I don't know," he said. "Fox doesn't want it in downstairs, he said it would distract from the point of having a library. The boys asked for it, but I don't think they need it. They watch enough TV outside their room."

"Can I buy it off you?" Marc asked. "Pop dropped his while he was moving it in. Slipped on a patch of ice."

Skinner didn't know that. "Take it," he said, waving at the TV. "Call it a housewarming present." He'd have to get over to see Carlo. With his uncle living so close, Skinner had no excuse for not spending time with him and getting to know him better. Marco thanked him and recruited Krycek to help him bring it over. Natti technically had the weekends off. She wasn't around so Skinner assumed that she was at Carlo's. Whether or not they'd have time to watch TV was debatable. So far, Krycek hadn't growled about it, but Skinner could tell that Carlo was being carefully sniffed out. Skinner hoped that there was nothing in Carlo's past that would cause Krycek to bite. Maybe he should ask.

The day went by fast as Skinner kept busy with the downstairs. Before he knew it, it was five o'clock and Mulder was reminding him to take a shower. An hour later, Skinner stood in front of the mirror, adjusting his bow tie.

"You're perfect, get out of here," Mulder said and sneezed. Skinner turned to him.

"Are you sure? I can stay home and watch the boys while you rest," he said.

Mulder shook his head. "I'm going for some of Natti's chicken soup, curl up on the couch with a blanket, check over homework, and watch TV with the boys. I'll be fine. Besides, I can always call Natti or pull Alex away from Marco. You go have fun."

Skinner snorted. "At a stuffy AD's Ball? Please."

Jaws were clenched to keep from dropping as Scully entered the room on Skinner's arm. As the invitations stated, everyone was in black and white tuxedos and evening gowns. Skinner was sure he wasn't being biased when he puffed up with pride at escorting the most beautiful woman present. Most of the women didn't have the shape to pull off the dresses that they chose, but Scully's black sequined gown with the plunging neckline, string straps and no back to speak of set off her classic beauty to perfection. Even he could see the green invade the faces of some of the women.

"AD Scully, lovely to see you," the Director said, shaking Scully's hand as they walked the Gauntlet.

"Thank you, Sir," she responded politely. She was introduced to his wife.

"Mr. Skinner, this is a surprise," the Director said. "Life is treating you well it seems." Skinner shook his hand. This was Director Montgomery's final year in office and as such, he was being careful to step on as few toes as possible; rumor had it he was going to run for the Senate. Skinner had barely tolerated working under Montgomery; the man was so careful that Skinner found it hard to get any work done at all. Mulder and Scully

may have gotten irritated with him but they didn't realize that it was Montgomery holding up the process. Unfortunately, with the office of Director being a temporary position, Skinner couldn't even blame the Consortium on Montgomery's actions. Or inaction.

"Where's ASAC Mulder this evening? We were assuming that he'd be putting in an appearance," Montgomery was commenting with a gentle probing.

"He's getting over the flu, Sir," Skinner said. "I hope I'm not unwelcome?" Try kicking me out, you officious son of a bitch.

"No, no, no!" Montgomery blustered. "Always welcome, always!" He quickly introduced Skinner to his wife, forgetting that Skinner had met her often in the past. Skinner greeted her warmly with a little courtly flirting. He certainly remembered her; she was as officious as her husband. As they moved through the room, Skinner dug through his mental Rolodex, flattering the wives by remembering their names and insisting that they were more beautiful than ever. He introduced Scully to those she didn't know, and she introduced him to some of the new comers that he hadn't met.

"How do you do that?" she asked after making the rounds. They found the table with Scully's reservation and signaled a waiter for two glasses of champagne.

"Do what?" Skinner asked.

"Remember all those names."

"This isn't just an office party," he said, jerking his chin at the room. "This is a political zoo. All the monkeys vying for the best banana in the bunch. If you don't play nice, shmooze the right people or you forget the names of their most beautiful wives, you may as well give it up. Don't flirt with the agents, their wives will rip you to shreds. Most of the wives think that female agents are lesbians, anyway. Flirt with the women, they'll pretend to be outraged and it'll give both husbands and wives wet dreams for months. Remembering the name of a kid or two is major brownie points. You get invitations to private parties and bonuses to high class restaurants with that one. Asking after the cat or dog's latest trip to the vet will get you a Christmas present. Usually in the name of said animal. Send your thank you note in the animal's name, Sir or Madam whomever at Chateau family name. Ask Kim, she became an expert at it."

Scully laughed and blotted a drop of champagne from her chin.

"It's true," Skinner insisted. He leaned close, his voice a low rumble in her ear. "Take Evelyn Montgomery, for example. She doesn't eat enough to keep a bird alive. Thinks she's one of those 18 year old anorexic models with no tits, gets her dresses directly from the designers, and her make-up from Tammy Faye."

He could see that Scully was trying very hard not to crack up in hysterics and it pleased him to make her laugh.

"At some point this evening, don't wait too long, go and compliment her on her dress. Let her know how envious you are. See, if I compliment her, tell her how lovely she looks and I refuse to believe that she's married to the old goat oh no she must be his secret daughter, I'd get him off my back for a good couple of months. Luckily, I'm not AD anymore. You, on the other hand, need the brownie points. Beg her to take you shopping or something. You're new on the political scene and could use some advise from someone with such good taste as she. I highly doubt she'll call you because you're obviously a little miss upstart nobody obviously from one of those low immigrant Irish families ignoring the fact that she's only two generations from the lower Eastside of London herself, but she may whisper some confidential female stuff. Thank her most humbly for her wisdom. It'll get Montgomery off your back, hopefully until he's replaced, and she gives expensive presents."

Scully choked and hide her face behind a napkin for a moment to compose herself. "I cannot believe you just said that," she said with a gulp and a swipe at her red cheeks. She looked at the entrance. "Oh, look. Vice President and Mrs. Phillips. I heard she's really sick. People keep talking about it like I'm supposed to know."

Skinner shook his head. "You need information if you're going to do your job properly. I'm sorry, I don't mean to lecture you but I don't want to see you fail because one small piece of information, no matter how insignificant it may seem, gets by you. Find the truth of every rumor. Rumors are important. They're usually bullshit, but they also indicate the weather in the office and who's storming on whom. Briggs!" he waved over the AD from Administrative Services. The men shook hands. "Ben, what's the latest condition?" he asked with a nod toward Mrs. Phillips. Briggs sat down and leaned in.

"A very rare condition of the heart, called Aortic Myoplasty," Briggs informed them.

"There's no such thing," Scully protested.

Briggs nodded. "I know that, and so does everyone else, but her husband is the VP. Her trips to the hospital in a LifeFlight 'chopper makes front page and has all the religious leaders praying for her on national TV. The American Heart Association has had a monumental windfall this month."

"Dana, this is Ben Briggs. Have you two met?" Skinner introduced them.

"Briefly," Scully said, shaking Briggs' hand. He shook Scully's hand, clapped Skinner on the shoulder, and excused himself to find his wife.

"He's good people, Dana, he weathered the Consortium shuffle," Skinner said. "Don't hesitate to listen to him or go to him with questions. If you need an opinion on his opinion, ask me or Fox. Even Alex." He realized that he was taking charge again, something Mulder gripes about once in a while. "Did I over-step my line?"

Scully shrugged. "I'd say yes, but it took you less than five minutes to put me where I've been trying to get for the past two years; in the Loop."

Skinner turned to face her, concerned. "Haven't you made any contacts?" he asked.

She plucked at her napkin, looking at the people mingling about in the room, dancing on the floor. "A few," she said. "None of the AD's, though. A few DAD's. My own Deputy Assistant, Pritchard, has been great, once he learned to loosen up around me. I hesitate to complain of the 'boy's club' but...."

"Unfortunately, you're probably right," Skinner said. "You are the first female AD of the Criminal Investigation Division. You'll have to prove yourself to them. It shouldn't be that way and it isn't fair, but my brothers haven't evolved past Cro-Magnon yet." Scully chuckled. "Do you know what goes on at the Breakfast when no women are present?" She shook her head. "The worst women, gay and any minority you can think of that isn't present jokes. It sounds like a high school boys locker room. Put a woman in the room, and they shut up, don't know what to say." He picked up her hand and gave it a squeeze. "You're a strong woman, Dana, a strong person, very intelligent or you wouldn't be sitting in that office. That Office is too important to give it away to just anyone. Don't hesitate to haul someone in and make them give you the low-down on whatever you want to know. I earned my reputation as a bastard, I worked very hard for it." He straightened his tie and sniffed.

Scully gave him a pat on the arm. "And a damned fine job you did, too," she said.

"Will you allow me to set up your contacts?" he requested.

"Actually, if you can get them together, I'd like to open dialog myself. You're right; I've been busy trying not to step on toes and it's gotten me practically no where."

Skinner nodded his approval. While Scully made a bee-line for Mrs. Montgomery, Skinner had a word in the ears of Tanner from the National Security Division, Haines from Counter terrorism, and Bentley from Investigative Services. All three men were just as new as Scully, having been emergency replacements during the Crisis a few years earlier. Skinner saw no reason for them keeping Scully out of their little circle just because they had danglies between their legs and she didn't. He had sought Scully's advice many times and he never regretted it. He had never met these men before but they knew of him and politely agreed to his request for an impromptu meeting.

Scully came over to the quiet table in the corner and sat down with the men. Skinner saw the guards in the room shift unobtrusively. He approved; the four most important Assistant Directors were all sitting together. Easy pickings. These four die, and the Nation's security is up for grabs from the first terrorist to snatch the gold. He made to leave them their privacy, but Scully had him stay.

All in all, Skinner thought it was a very productive evening. Scully had gotten a foot into the door of the Boy's Club, gained brownie points from the Director via his wife, and comforted Mrs. Phillips on her 'illness', and thus getting an invitation to dine with the Vice President at the White House. Everything was going great -until the guards began to collapse with blood seeping from tiny holes in their chests and heads.

Right on que, women began to scream and agents reached for guns that they didn't have. Skinner snarled and Scully swore as they ducked under the table. Tanner took off and headed for the Vice President and his wife.

"Did anyone see where the bullets were coming from?" Scully asked.

"No," three of them said.

"Several different directions," Haines said. "I'd say there are more than one and they're all in this room."

"But who the hell has guns?" Bentley asked. "We were all checked at the door. It's standard policy, no guns at the Ball."

"Except for the guards," Skinner said. They looked at him.

"Those guards are our men," Haines said. "I'd know if..."

"Would you?" Scully whispered. "Didn't some of them come from out of town? Have you met each and every agent in the past two years?"

Skinner held up a hand. "Even I didn't know all my agents after fifteen years. "

Haines reluctantly granted him that. "We need to get to Phillips and help Tanner with protection. See any way over?" he asked. Guards were shouting over the screaming, and rounding up people to sit at the nearest table. A few dead bodies on the floor were ignored by the guards and looked upon in horror by the civilians.

Skinner shook his head. "Naw, listen, guys," he said. "Phillips isn't going to die, not yet. He's the primo hostage, and then Director Montgomery. Deputy Director Waters isn't here, he's got the flu. The next in line are you four. If they wanted everyone dead, they wouldn't be making this bug production of it."

Haines stuck his head up to see what was going on. "Alright, the good news is, not all the guards are dead. The bad news is, the ones that are alive I've never seen before. It seems to be quieting down. Tanner made it to the VP, everyone seems to be alright in that section."

It was quieting down, Skinner noticed. Their hurried conversation only took a couple of minutes and in the mean time, the women had stopped screaming and were reduced to

sniffles. He was thankful that Scully wasn't a hysteric; he never did understand women who screamed instead of trying to help.

"Who is in charge?" Skinner heard a voice ask. He lifted his head just above the table and looked around. The women were huddled against their husbands. Skinner grimaced; if those agents needed to move fast, they wouldn't be able to.

"I'm in charge," Montgomery stepped forward. Skinner had to give him points for the bravery. An instant later, Montgomery was on the floor, a hole in the center of his forehead. Mrs. Montgomery screamed and then fainted. Skinner swore; their captor was a planet short of a solar system. That changed the rules.

"That was to get everyone's attention," the man said over the screams and sobbing. "The local satellite is down, so don't bother trying the cell phones."

Skinner couldn't see where the voice was coming from.

"By the bar," he heard Scully whisper in his ear. She had come up for a look around, too. Skinner looked toward the bar and noticed a blond man in a tux, a hell of a lot more relaxed than everyone else. He wasn't holding a gun; someone was doing his shooting for him.

Movement from their little corner happened and before Skinner knew it, Haines had slowly stood up, his hands raised, and stepped forward.

"My name is Haines," he said calmly. "I'm the Assistant Director of Counter terrorism. I'm the one you will need to speak with. May I inquire as to your intentions?"

The blond man took his time, lighting a cigarette and enjoying the first puff.

"One hundred million US dollars worth of Russian rubles, and passage into Russia for myself and my men."

Shock swept through the room.

"Sir, even if we could get that for you from our end, the Russians won't let you inside the borders. Could I at least ask why you want to go to Russia?" Haines asked. Skinner nodded; he'd like to know, too. The borders had been completely closed off for years with the most God-awful rumors coming out from the surrounding area.

"Because they don't have alien freaks being allowed to live there," the man said, as though it were a perfectly normal conversation.

"Excuse me?" Haines said.

"The children, Mr. Haines, and those inhuman clones," came the patronizing words.

"Since I don't believe I could convince you to kill all of our changeling children and start the next generation over again, wouldn't it be easier for me to leave?"

Before Skinner could stop her, Scully stood up and slowly moved into the center of the room next to Haines.

"Scully, NO!" Skinner hissed.

"If you pay attention to the news about aliens and what's happening with the children, then you know who I am," she said. The man slowly nodded.

"Assistant Director Dana Scully," he acknowledged with a short bow.

Bentley leaned into Skinner. "I think I recognize him," he whispered. "I don't know his name, but I think he's ex-CIA."

Which meant that all his men were ex-Military or ex-Intelligence.

"Fuck," Skinner mouthed silently. Bentley agreed.

"Sir, as a doctor and a scientist, I can assure you that what is happening with the children is a normal, Human, evolutionary process. It has been increased due to..."

The man stood up and pulled a gun from the back of his belt and pointed it at her.

"Just like a woman, gab, gab, gab," the man said. "There is nothing normal about all this crap. You've been brainwashed and you don't even realize it." He waved his gun and Scully slowly moved backwards to find a chair. As the man's attention was focused on her, an agent near him sprang towards him. The agent was shot by the man. Skinner could see the agent; AD Pearson, Training Division. Quantico. Groans could be heard all around by agents who trained under him.

Skinner slowly sat in a chair next to Scully and put his tux jacket around her shoulders. She wiped her cheek and sniffed. She trained under Pearson, too.

"Save it, Agent," Skinner snarled at her. "You can mourn later. Don't pull a stupid stunt like that again, not if you want to live."

He was pleased to see her old instincts kick in at his tone of command. Scully pulled herself together, as did the other agents close by who heard him.

"As I was saying," the man said. "We are leaving this country, and since you are forcing us out, it's only fair that you pay us to leave. There are ten Assistant Directors left, yes, I know who that was, and the Vice President and his wife, not to mention various odds and ends. One hundred million and passage is a cheap asking price for you lot. Get on the house phone, Mr. Haines, and start the process. Mr. Jones, please accompany Mr. Haines.

You have one hour." One of the phony guards stepped up and waved his gun in the direction of an office. "Everyone else may relax. For the moment."

"Where's Bruce Willis when you need him?" Bentley whispered. Scully tried to smile. Skinner gasped as blood rushed to his head.

"What?" Scully whispered.

"Alex," Skinner said. "I want to try something. Fox did it earlier. I don't know if it will work, I've never tried it before. Just... wait.. there may be a saving grace to all this." Skinner took a deep breath and shut his eyes. He concentrated on Adam, hearing his voice, seeing his face, his scent, his touch. Adam.... open up, son...Skinner sent an image of the man with the gun and of Scully in the line of fire. He sent the image over and over, calling Adam's name and then sending a picture of Mulder and Krycek. He wasn't sure if he was doing it right, but if Adam saw things in picture form, it made sense to send pictures. He stopped when he began to see spots before his eyes. He forgot to breathe.

"Walter!" Scully shook him by the shoulder. He pressed his fingers at the throbbing in his temples. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," he said. "I gave myself a headache, though."

"What were you doing?" she asked.

The blond man was directing the clean up of the bodies, not paying attention to agents in the corner.

"Trying to contact Adam," Skinner whispered. Scully's eyes opened wide in understanding.

"Do you think you did?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "Like I said, I've never done that before. I faked it from reading too many sci-fi books. Hopefully, the Collective Unconscious caused the writers to postulate the same way for a reason."

Scully leaned back and stared at him.

"What?" he asked.

"You've been living with Mulder far too long," she said.

"Hey, I happen to be a Jung fan, okay?"

Scully smiled up at him and ran a finger across his cheek. "Very okay, I wouldn't have you any other way," she said. Skinner grabbed her finger and bit it before kissing it and wrapping her hand in his. He noticed Bentley watching them from the back of the table.

"Yes?" he asked.

"You're confusing us, Skinner," Bentley said. "Muddy-ing up the information. Do you know how painful that is to the intelligence community? Very cruel of you."

The last thing Skinner wanted was to cause harm to Scully's career or reputation. He stiffened his shoulders and tried to put an inch or two between them but Scully was having none of it. She laced their fingers together and pulled his hand onto her lap.

"Is this a problem for you?" she asked sweetly. The man quickly shook his head. Skinner thought that it showed the intelligence that he claimed to have.

"Now," Scully whispered to Skinner. "What if your 'experiment' doesn't work?" she asked.

"We'll know in about an hour," he said. No matter how talented Mulder and Krycek were, they couldn't get from home into the city much sooner than that. Hopefully, Haines would be able to keep the man occupied for a while. Idle conversation would make the time go by. There was nothing they could do at the moment, they didn't have their guns and there were too many non-agents present to risk a shoot-out.

"They're calling me 'Popi', Dana," he said with a wry grin. "They refuse to even consider 'Daddy', thanks to little Elana. I got to hear it for a whole three days, and then it was 'Popi'. I can't even work up a decent argument; it sounds cute coming from them. Alex howled the first time he heard it, which didn't help."

Scully chuckled. "It is cute," she insisted. "When will the adoption be legal?"

"Legally, in about another six weeks. But as far as the boys are concerned, it's a done deal. I'm planning on spending the day with them. Maybe take them someplace, movies, the zoo, I don't know yet." He chuckled. "They've taken to calling our outings 'dates'. They wanted dates with me, just like you and Fox get. Dinner and a movie, that kind of thing."

"But that's sweet!" Scully crowed. "If nothing else, it'll strengthen your relationship with them, and help them develop their social skills."

"That's what Fox said," Skinner told her. "Can't I just have fun with them? Anyway, it took 40 years before Alex began to evolve into a halfway decent human being, I'd rather not wait that long for the boys. I can deal with 'Popi' and 'dates'."

"You love it, don't grumble," she said, on to him. "You also have an anniversary coming up in two months. Made plans, yet?"

"Two years, can you believe it?" he asked. "No plans, yet. So far, we haven't been able to go anyplace without something happening."

"No, really?" Scully asked, looking out at the terrorist covered room. "You're a walking disaster, Skinner."

"Right," he smirked. "Need I remind you that you are always somewhere in the vicinity of those disasters? Maybe I shouldn't have blamed all those expenses on Fox while you two were partners."

Scully grinned and pulled his head down to whisper into his ear.

"How much longer till we know if your 'experiment' worked?" she asked.

"It's an hour from the house," he whispered back. "It's been about forty minutes already. Fox has made it home in 45 when he had to."

"That's cutting it close. And if Krycek is driving?" Scully asked.

Skinner looked at her and then looked carefully around the room for anything unusual. Well.... as unusual as possible in this particular situation.

"Hey," Bentley interrupted them. "Mr. Blondie is getting antsy."

They looked across the room at the polite terrorist. Bentley was right, Blondie was beginning to pace, his hands flicking with agitation.

"Haines!" he yelled. "Where is that...." Blondie fell to the floor, a red spot seeping from his shoulder.

Skinner pushed Scully to the floor and covered her. The women erupted in screams again as gun fire began. The kitchen door flew open and agents poured out.

"FBI! Freeze!" they heard.

Mulder!

Skinner breathed a sigh of relief and waited where he was until the air was clear of bullets.

"Walter! Scully! Are you alright?" Mulder ran up to them and knelt down, touching them to confirm that they were alive and well.

"We're fine, Fox," Skinner insisted. "Go do what you need to do."

Under the sudden odds against them, the rogue guards quickly surrendered and were rounded up. Blondie was helped to his feet, blood coating his right arm.

"I missed?! No way," Skinner heard said in disbelief. Krycek stormed through the crowd and pointed his gun directly at Blondie's chest.

"Alex, NO!" Skinner, Scully and Mulder all shouted at once. The room stilled for a moment at the action. Mulder held up a finger and shook it at Krycek. Krycek wavered and withdrew his gun.

"You guys never let me have fun anymore," he complained. Mulder patted his shoulder in sympathy.

"Go arrest someone," he said. "Use your handcuffs, that should amuse you."

Krycek brightened up and went to find someone to arrest while Mulder took care of Mr. Blondie.

Most of the agents in the room didn't quite know what to make of Krycek, but they got an education when they watched Krycek report to Tanner.

"Shit!" Skinner heard someone whisper in shock. "He's a spook!"

Which put Krycek, officially, on the 'hands off' list. Even that meat-head Erickson isn't dumb enough to mess with an NSA agent, Skinner told himself.

Mulder came back over to them, his usual panther grace marred by a sneeze. Skinner felt bad, bringing Mulder out on a winter's night. Mulder pawed at Skinner's dress shirt, giving him a look over, and then turned to Scully. She was showing too much skin to be hiding any wounds from him. Mulder went back to Skinner, walking around him, poking and prodding.

"Fox, will you knock it off?" Skinner begged, brushing Mulder's hands away. "They never came near us. We.. are.. fine," he annunciated.

"Hmpf," Mulder snorted. He looked at Scully. "You never dressed like that for me," he complained.

"You never took me out," she pointed out. "Come on, boys," she said, putting an arm around them both. "We have reports to write and people to talk to. It's going to be an even longer night."

Both men groaned. Skinner couldn't say he missed the paperwork.

"Walter?" Mulder said. "Adam said not to shout, you gave him a major headache." The rest of the night was spent in deposition. Neither Mulder nor Krycek would say how they knew about the situation only that they received an anonymous call from an electronic voice. By the time they got out of depositions, the dawn was breaking the morning sky.

"We're going to breakfast, Alex, you coming?" Mulder asked as they stopped on the steps of the hotel where the party was held.

Krycek shook his head. "No, I'm just going home and going to bed."

Agent Giuliani had begun to discover the price of living a few blocks from Mulder -he got shanghaied when he least expected it. He turned down Mulder's offer of breakfast, too, and went with Krycek.

They took Scully home to change out of her formal dress. Skinner had kept his habit of keeping a spare change of clothing in the trunk, just as any good agent did, so he went in to change, too. While Scully was in the shower, Skinner groaned as he sat on her bed to pull a fresh pair of socks on.

"I'm getting old, Fox," he informed Mulder. "My bones are feeling it." Mulder tossed a shirt at him.

"Bull crap," Mulder said. "You had a long night, that's all. Hurry, I'm hungry." He sprawled out on the bed and waited for Skinner and Scully. Skinner laid down and put his head next to Mulder's.

"You do realize that I'm going to be 60 in six years, don't you?" he asked Mulder. "That's less than a decade."

"I can count," Mulder said. He poked at Skinner's stubby nose. "You could be 110 and you'd still be as sexy as you are now. I don't care how old you are."

Skinner ran his eyes across Mulder's face and found only sincerity. "You really do find me attractive, don't you?" he asked in wonder. Mulder waited a moment and then pulled Skinner down to his chest.

"I swear you're trying to kill me, Walter, I really think so."

Skinner shut his eyes with a contented sigh. I'll only take a five minute cat-nap, he told himself and snuggled down into Mulder's chest.

Fifteen minutes later, Scully came out of the bathroom and stopped short at the sight of the men sound asleep on her bed. She shook her head and smiled at them, covering them with a blanket. Hell, it was her bed. She put on her pajamas and climbed in next to Skinner, since Mulder was hogging the edge of the bed where she usually slept.

Skinner awoke to the pleasant sensation of fingers lightly trailing over his chest, playing in his fur and hesitantly skimming across his nipples, tracing his muscles. He groaned and stretched and the fingers pulled away. He blinked the sleep from his eyes and found blue and red coming into focus. Scully, looking down at him. Breakfast.

"I'm sorry, Dana," Skinner said. "I only meant to nap while you were changing."

"That's alright," she said. "I fell asleep, too. We needed it."

He turned his head and saw that Mulder was still asleep, snoring lightly through his cold. Having gotten used to the boys whispering to Skinner in the mornings, Mulder no longer awoke to quiet voices.

"I don't think I slept this peacefully in a long time," Scully whispered. "It was nice."

Skinner reached out and snagged a lock of hair, pushing it out of her eyes and around her ear. Scully hesitated and then leaned down, brushing her mouth over his. Skinner felt the butterflies and tingling between his stomach and groin. He put a hand around to Scully's back and brought her down the rest of the way, opening his mouth to her. He didn't know how far she was going to take this, but he didn't care, he wanted her. If all she wanted was a few kisses and some petting, he could do that. If she wanted to ride him, he could do that, too. He slid a hand down to her butt and she moved a leg in between his. Taking that for permission, he slid his hand inside her pajamas to caress her soft skin.

Scully lifted her head and reached into the side drawer. She showed him a condom.

"Are you sure?" he whispered. He hadn't counted on making love with her so soon, but when the time was right, it was the right time.

She nodded. Skinner turned her onto her back and put his mouth to hers. He refused to count their time in Florida as their first time, and undressed her, tasting her skin as he moved across her body. Her gasps and soft cries were all that he had dreamed of and more. She was very responsive to him, and it thrilled him when she took the lead, finding places that had taken Mulder months to learn. When he finally entered her, she was eager to accept him. Her legs wrapped around his waist, he moved evenly within her, her fingers digging into his back, her cries echoing in his ears until she clamped down hard on him and bucked as her orgasm hit. Skinner saw the light show behind his eyelids as he came, and almost blacked out.

Scully made no effort to push him off of her as he caught his breath, resting on her chest. Her breasts were glistening with sweat, her nipples extended and red from his mouth sucking at them. He cupped a breast and put light kisses along the soft underside. A sneeze brought them back down to earth.

"I guess I don't need to ask how your morning went?" Mulder said with a gleam in his eye.

"Good morning, babe," Skinner said, and leaned over to kiss him.

"Hmmm, now where do I know that flavor from?" Mulder teased, tasting the inside of Skinner's mouth. "Seems familiar. Musky, a little salty; I know, it reminds me of Scully. Isn't that a strange thought? Walter, my love, where has this mouth been lately?" Skinner was about to tell him there his mouth has been when a sneeze took over his speech. He quickly turned his head and sneezed into the bed. With a look of dawning understanding, Skinner glared at Mulder.

"You did this," he accused. Next to him, Scully sneezed.

"Mulder!" she scolded him.

Chapter 21: A Family Affair

"*Ah-ghmszt!*" Skinner groaned in misery and curled up on the couch. His head felt like a lead balloon. This is definitely Fox's fault, he told himself. The thing in his mouth beeped and Dr. Pavel took it out.

"It says one oh one and then a little dot and a four, Zia Ginny!" he called out. A moment later, Nurse Ivan came in and tossed a damp cloth on Skinner's face. Skinner sputtered and took it off, throwing it to the floor.

"No, Popi," Ivan reprimanded him. "Zia says you have to cool down."

Pavel put the cold end of the stethoscope to Skinner's over-heated chest. Skinner cringed and pulled the blanket up over his head, silently damning Scully for giving them that stupid doctor's kit. Kisa lay at his feet, keeping them warm. At least someone was being helpful. When he first got to the couch, she thought he was playing a new game and tried licking his face and pushing her cold, wet nose into his neck.

"Zia, he's doing what Uncle Fox does," Ivan tattled. Skinner heard the rustle of Zia Ginny's dress.

"Gualtiero Sergei," he heard her scold. Uh-oh, he got the full name. Sort of. The edge of the blanket was yanked out of his hands. Zia Ginny frowned down at him and shook her finger. "You are behaving like a baby. No, even worse; you are behaving like a sick man. You weren't this bad when you were a baby."

"I am a sick man, Zia," he croaked. Didn't people understand that? "Let me die in peace." He got his ear yanked.

"God forbid!" she swore. "It's just a cold, you big baby!"

The cold may have been Mulder's fault but Zia Ginny was Carlo's fault. Natti told him that Skinner was sick and the next day Zia Ginny was storming through the door and taking over his recuperation. She handed out generous hugs and kisses, and then informed her nephew that come hell or high water, he "was going to be better by the time she left or Someone would be answering to her", she announced with a look at the ceiling. Skinner was sure that she wasn't talking about Mulder who was up in the bedroom and out of harm's way. The chicken shit.

Zia had immediately ejected Skinner from his own bed and put him on the couch in the livingroom where she didn't have to climb the stairs every time she wanted to check up on him. He had his pillow and blanket, hot tea, and the loving attention of Dr. Pavel and Nurse Ivan. Even Adam was hiding snickers behind a book. Krycek was off somewhere, having left with that look on his face that told Skinner he was hunting something. Skinner didn't ask. Natti went to Carlo's after blessing Zia Ginny for her courage. Skinner didn't even have Scully to keep him company; she was being looked after by her mother. Skinner coughed and held his throat as glass shards rubbed against it.

"Juice?" he begged.

Zia Ginny immediately went to the kitchen and brought him back a large glass of orange juice with lots of ice in it. She then rubbed more Vicks into his chest and put another hot water bottle on him. The heated eucalyptus went straight to his lungs. Mulder had offered his muck from the natural foods store but Zia took one whiff and carried it by the tips of her fingers to the garbage. For the most part, she approved of Natti's chicken soup. She added peppers, garlic and more onions before bringing it to Skinner. He had to admit it cleared his passages. Mulder had a taste and his eyes began to water.

"Good stuff, Zia," he sputtered. Chicken soup via Szechuan. She nodded approvingly at him and waited for Skinner to eat his own soup. He took another sip of the broth and felt his sinuses being eaten away from the inside out. At least he could breathe again.

"This is your fault he's sick?" Zia interrogated Mulder. "You couldn't sleep on the couch while you were sick?"

Mulder held a hand over his chest and shook his head. "Not my fault, Zia, he knew I had a cold and he kissed me anyway."

"Traitor," Skinner muttered and pulled his blanket up. He felt a dishcloth swipe at him.

"Then it's your own fault," Zia announced. She walked away muttering about men who had no common sense.

Mulder went to round up the boys. They had a meeting with one of the Kurts. The twins for a check-up, and they wanted to check Adam due to his emerging skills. Skinner, Mulder and Krycek had discussed it; Scully could oversee the boys for the average things, but the twins especially needed their development monitored by a specialist. After receiving Skinner's call for help the night before, the Kurts urged the men to allow them to take a look at Adam first hand instead of an e-mailed report. Despite people who were concerned for their mental privacy, so far it seemed that the children were only Receiving strong mental images. If people would get better control over their own minds, the children wouldn't be getting anything at all.

A knock came to the door, and Zia bustled to answer it.

"Zia!" he heard KC squeal in surprise. Sometimes he forgot that KC was a cousin; she had the Irish elf genes, instead of the Italian sausage genes. The women greeted each other warmly before entering the livingroom.

"What's with you?" KC asked, seeing Skinner bundled on the couch. Kisa thumped her tail in greeting and KC picked her up for a cuddle and some doggie kisses.

"He's on his way to pneumonia," Zia predicted.

"It's just a cold," he insisted before dragging a tissue under the blanket and honking loudly.

KC invited herself to a chair. "Well, here's something to shock it out of you."

Skinner lowered the blanket. "What?"

"The Rev's car was found in a ditch last night," she said. "Looks like he slid on a patch of ice. You know he drives like a bat out of hell. Sorry, Zia."

Comprehension took a moment. "Is he....?"

KC nodded. "Like a block of ice."

"Holy shit!" he breathed. He got a rap with the dish cloth. "Sorry, Zia."

KC leaned forward with a gleam in her eyes. "Rumor has it, last Sunday he did a big hellfire and brimstone, and demanded that God to make His intentions clear once and for all."

Skinner began to laugh and ended up choking.

"That isn't funny," Zia blasted at him. "He was a man of the cloth, even if he was misguided in his choice of Church. He will be in my prayers."

He'll need them, Skinner thought. Uh-oh. "Where was Alex last night?" he suddenly wondered. "KC, get the phone for me, please." She went and pulled the phone from its recharger on the kitchen wall and brought it to him. Skinner dialed Krycek's cell phone. It was next to impossible to get him on his office phone; the PBX operator insisted on a caller's life story and the results of their latest blood tests before swearing that whatever agent is asked for doesn't work there but she'd take a message just in case someone is interested. Skinner could get into the White House easier.

"Where were you last night?" he asked when Krycek answered.

"Home, why?" Krycek said. Skinner thought he sounded sincere.

"Did you do anything to Johnson's car?" he asked.

"Skinner, make some sense," Krycek sighed. "Some of us work for a living."

"He's dead," Skinner informed him. "Apparently his car slid on an ice patch."

"HA!" Krycek barked. "Tough nuggies. Not my work, sorry." He hung up before Skinner could say anything else.

"What'd he say?" KC asked.

Skinner put the phone on the floor next to the couch and laid back down. "He expressed his condolences."

"And so he should," Zia nodded approvingly. "You could be a little more respectful of the dead. If not him, then his family for their loss."

He wasn't about to explain it to her. "Yes, Ma'am," he said. "KC, find me a nice card to send them, would you? When's the funeral?"

"I have a box of all purpose cards, you can pick something from it. And I don't think the funeral will be rushed. It's winter, the ground is frozen so they're keeping him on ice." Skinner hid his face in the cushions while KC howled. Zia Ginny gave up on the godless creatures and left the room.

"What's going on?" Mulder asked as he came into the room. KC told him. "Where's Alex?" was the first thing he said.

Skinner waved a hand at him. "I already called him. Said it wasn't his work. He sounded honest about it."

Mulder looked at him. "Walter, he could have killed Abraham Lincoln and he'd sound sincere about his alibi."

"You guys are joking, right?" KC asked, looking back and forth at them.

"Where's Johnson's car, Kase?" Mulder asked her.

"In the Yard," she said. The Yard being the back yard of the Sheriff's station where cars were impounded.

"I'll get someone to look it over," Mulder said, and picked up the phone.

Another knock came to the door, and KC went to answer it.

"May I... you're a Kurt!" Skinner heard her say. Mulder went to the door, the phone to his ear. "I saw you, or one of you, on TV with Mulder. Come in. I'm KC Moynahan, Walter's cousin."

The Kurt hesitated before shaking her hand. They weren't use to being deliberately touched by the so-called 'normal' population.

"Hey, KC?" Mulder said, his hand over the phone's speaker. "Could I get you to show Zia Ginny your house? For a couple of hours? Please? Take her over to Carlo's maybe? She can visit with Marc."

KC looked between the men and said, "Sure, not a problem." She put her hands over her eyes and then her ears before zipping her mouth.

Skinner was thankful that Army sergeants knew the meaning of the word 'discrete'. He groaned as he sat up, fluffing a pillow to lean against, as KC bundled up Zia who protested.

"Zia, it's nothing personal," Skinner said. "We need to talk about some things that have to do with national security, that's all."

"Hmpf," she waved a hand at him. "You and your men stuff. That's the problem with this world."

"And Scully would agree with you," Skinner said after the door closed. "Ah-ghngzt!" He groaned and reached for another tissue.

"Bless you," Kurt said politely. "Tell me, does that hurt?" he asked curiously.

"Not really," Skinner croaked, his voice an octave lower than usual.

"After a while, blowing hurts," Mulder said, sitting down. "The outside rim of the nose becomes extremely sensitive due to the moisture and the tissue. Also the sinuses become clogged and when you blow, it feels like your eardrums are going to be blown out along

with the mucus. If the virus settles in the head, the entire head feels as though it were being squeezed between a press. If it settles in the chest, in the lungs, it's hard to breathe and the throat becomes raw from coughing. A chest cold, I think, is worse because it can turn into pneumonia a lot easier than a head cold can. Sometimes you get the chest and head at the same time. Not fun."

Kurt nodded in understanding. "I see, thank you."

Skinner found the conversation distasteful, but the Kurt, who didn't get colds, found it interesting. In a scientific, doctor, kind of way.

"How's progress on the psychic thing going?" Skinner asked.

At a silent invitation from Mulder gesturing toward a chair, Kurt sat.

"It's going slowly," he told Skinner. "So far, the only way to stop it would also take away the immunity it was originally placed there for. To withstand the alien virus. They seem to be tied too close together. Our labs are working around the clock on it, though."

Kisa sniffed curiously at Kurt's shoes and cocked her head in puzzlement. This human smelled different and she didn't know why.

"Put your hand out, let her sniff you," Mulder said. Kurt held his hand out. Kisa sniffed and licked, deciding everything was alright. This human reminded her of her master's pups. She jumped back up on the couch and curled up at Skinner's feet again. "She approves," Mulder said.

The cats were at their watch post, on top of a bookcase that Skinner hadn't moved yet. They contemplated the room smugly before allowing the humans to continue with their socializing.

"Do I take it that Adam does not know about Pavel and Ivan's origins?" Kurt asked them. Both men nodded.

"Right," Mulder said. "We're educating them on the current history, they've seen that NOVA tape of you guys. They enjoyed it, by the way. We felt that if they were raised in compassion for your situation, and for the situation that other political prisoners around the world are in, then it would be easier for them to accept when they are old enough to understand. Telling them now would not be a good idea; the children are too young to know how to keep secrets and one wrong word to the wrong person, and they'd end up under a magnifying glass."

Kurt nodded. "I understand, you don't need to explain yourself," he said. "What did you tell them of the reason for my visit?"

"That you're here to see Adam about his head, and that you're going to check the twins just as a precaution," Mulder said. "Go through the same steps with all three, even though you'll be doing two different things." Kurt agreed. The twins had been checked by Kurt once before, just after Krycek brought them in. Skinner didn't think they remembered; they didn't remember much of anything during those first few weeks and nothing at all from before. They certainly never mentioned the Kurts when they watched the video. Scully had collected blood and tissue samples twice during the past year, and sent them directly to the Kurt's lab. They had a regular pediatrician in the city for the ENT check-up stuff to keep the school board happy. Unless the doctor thought to give DNA samples to a geneticist, there was no way she could tell that there was anything unusual about the twins.

"Ready?" Mulder asked.

"Ready," Kurt said, and picked up the two black cases he brought, putting them on the table and opening them while Mulder went to get the boys.

Thrilled at meeting one of the Kurts from their video, the boys were in a very agreeable mood to be poked and prodded and put through strange tests. None of the tests hurt, except for a blood draw, so they didn't complain.

To Skinner's irritation, he dozed off while the boys were squirming. He woke up to see them being sent off to play.

"What'd I miss?" he asked Mulder.

"Not much," Mulder said. "Adam grew a snake tongue, Ivan did a 360 with his head, and Pavel levitated about 2 feet."

"Ha ha," Skinner grumped. Mulder leaned over and patted him on the shoulder.

"Nothing happened, babe, you needed to sleep, so you slept."

Kurt watched them as he put his equipment away.

"May I ask something?" he asked. Skinner felt his head ballooning up again and shifted back down under his blanket, only half hearing them.

"Sure," Mulder said.

"Why does society frown upon people of the same gender being together? We have studied the information on the subject but we still don't understand."

Skinner opened his eyes and peeked over the edge of the blanket to see Mulder put a hand on Kurt's shoulder and steer him toward the kitchen.

"Now there is a story," he said. "You may not want to be a part of the human race after you've heard it. It will confirm that we are certifiable."

Skinner dozed off again, this time to the muted sound of the boys playing and of Mulder and Kurt talking in the kitchen. He vaguely heard Zia and KC enter the house and ask if the coast was clear. The blanket was tucked in around him and a hand stroked his head before a light kiss touched him. He recognized Zia's perfume and felt safe.

"Mr. Skinner," a voice awakened him. He saw a red blur before Kurt's face came into focus. "I'm sorry to wake you. I'm leaving and I just wanted to say something to you. This is a good thing you are doing with Pavel and Ivan, we envy them very much. They are thriving here under your care. They are happy, healthy, and loved. Thank you."

"They will always be my sons," Skinner mumbled. "I love them." He didn't register the door shutting.

While Mulder took his shower, Skinner lay on the couch reading a book. In the kitchen, the cats eyed the territory with flicking tails and a gleam in their eyes. They jumped from the top of the refrigerator. The counter-tops were the first leg of the race, across one side, a spectacular leap to the other side, narrowly missing the toaster and coffee pot, over the microwave, the coffee mug holder was shaken but not stirred. They made a stupendous leap to the kitchen table where Joxer slid and hit the napkin holder off and onto the floor. Point taken away from Joxer! Aries led the way into the livingroom, followed closely by Petunia with Joxer bringing up the tail. Over the back of a chair they went with a quick, physics defying turn to go under the chair and through the coat hanging from it. Skinner looked over his book and over the top of his glasses, shaking his head before returning to his story.

The cats high-tailed it over the TV and stereo, before heading over the back of the couch where their Human made proper obeisance to their prowess. (Skinner ducked). They headed for the finish line, the book case, which was half empty. They scrambled up the shelves, knocking books off in their effort to be the first to the top.

Skinner shook his head. "Crazy cats," he muttered before going back to his book.

The front door opened and the gang trooped in, the boys laughing at something only another child would understand. Kisa ran in, stumbling over her over-large paws. She and the boys they ganged up on Skinner for hugs before running to their rooms. Natti and Zia looked disapprovingly at him.

"What?" he asked. Natti walked over and picked up the books, replacing them on the shelves.

"Really, Walter," Zia said. "That is expected from the children, not a grown man. If you knock something down, pick it up." She shook a finger at him and his book. Skinner knew he was innocent this time!

"But I didn't..." he began. "The cats... they.. Never mind." It was useless, they'd never believe him. "Sorry, Zia, Natti."

The cats lay on top of the bookcase, curled up together with their eyes half closed and smug smiles on their muzzles.

Monday morning brought a knock to the door.

"Si?" Zia answered it.

"I'm sorry," a woman said. "I was looking for the home of Walter Skinner. I think I have the wrong..."

"No, no," Zia assured her. "I'm his aunt, come in out of the cold. Walter!"

Skinner put his book down and went to the door. A woman he had never seen before stood in the hallway.

"Can I help you?" he asked. The woman hesitated.

"I'm sorry to barge in like this, but could I speak with you? Privately?" she asked.

"Sure, come in," he said, ushering her into the livingroom. He sneezed and grabbed a tissue. "Sorry," he said after a moment. "Halfway through a cold."

"Not a problem," she said. She reminded him of someone, but he wasn't sure who. She was pretty, early thirties, short brown hair, brown eyes. She had a military sense about her. Skinner took her downstairs into the half remodeled family room/library.

"How can I help you?" he asked. "Maybe I can get your name?"

She flushed and sat gingerly on a couch. "Sorry. My name is Stephanie Ramsey. I huh, I'm not sure where to begin. It may even be a mistake coming here." She stood and prepared to walk back up the stairs.

"No, please," Skinner said. "Obviously you have something on your mind. It's a long way to drive out here just to turn around and head out again. Say what you need to say."

Stephanie hesitated before sitting down again. She dug into her purse and held a sheath of papers. "My.. my mother's name was Clare Wiggins. Do you know that name?"

Skinner had no trouble remembering that name. His eyebrows rose to his scalp line.

"Clare Wiggins?! Oh, my God! It's been about thirty years or so since I've heard that name! You're her daughter? How is she?" How could anyone forget their first lover?

"She's dead, actually," came the unexpected response. Shocked, Skinner reached over and touched Stephanie's hand.

"I'm sorry," he said. "When? May I ask what happened?"

"It's been ten years," she said. "Car accident. Drunk driver. I huh, God, I don't know how to say this..." she said. Her hands were trembling as she shifted the papers. "I have a daughter. She's very sick. Leukemia. I've asked everyone, but there haven't been any HLA matches for her. I don't match her closely enough, my other three daughters don't match, and my husband was killed in the Middle East two years ago. His parents and siblings don't match. She's on the national registry for a MUD, a non-related donor. I would never bother you except I don't want her to..."

Skinner handed her his box of tissues.

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand," he said. "How can I help? Do you need money...?"

Stephanie shook her head, wiping her cheeks. "No, the USMC is paying for it. I.. would you... be willing.. to be typed for an HLA match?"

Skinner sat back, confused. "Whatever I can do to help. But I still don't understand. An unrelated donor is even harder to match than a relation."

Stephanie dabbed at her eyes and looked at him, equally confused. "But.. my mother said.. she said she wrote to you. Told you."

"Your mother?" Skinner asked. "You said she's been dead for ten years. I've never received a letter from her. I haven't heard from her since I was eighteen, just before I went to Viet Nam."

She sat still for a moment. "Well. This is certainly not what I expected to hear," she said. She sifted through the papers she held, looking for one in particular and held it out to him. "Congratulations, Mr. Skinner. It's a girl."

Skinner took the paper. It was a birth certificate dated 1970. A baby girl born to Clare Wiggins and... *Walter Skinner*????

"Oh, my God," he breathed as light speckles sparkled in front of his eyes.

"It's for real, Walter," Mulder said. Skinner had faxed the birth certificate to Mulder's office along with a frantic phone call. "Confirmed with Social Security and the city of Portland, Oregon. I called Alex, he's running a check of his own, just in case. You know Alex. But I think it's authentic, babe. You have a daughter. I supposed you can have a DNA run, if you really wanted to."

Skinner sat down with a thud. "Fox? My daughter has four daughters. I'm a grandfather. I think I need a drink."

Stephanie was meeting Zia, Natti and the twins while Skinner talked with Mulder. The boys were excited; they had a big sister. Stephanie was charmed by them, already taken prisoner by the rugrats. Skinner could see the mother in her as she fussed over them.

"You may be a grandfather, but you're the sexiest grandfather I've ever met," Mulder was saying. "I can't wait to meet her. Is she ok with us?"

Damned if he knew... "I don't know," Skinner said. "We haven't gotten around to discussing my love life yet. I'll be surprised if she doesn't know, though. The rest of the world does. God, Fox, do you realize that she's only four years younger than Dana?"

"Walter, do you realize that we're suddenly out-numbered by women?" Mulder countered. "Natti, Zia, Scully, and now Stephanie and four little girls. Alex is amused, by the way. I don't think that it's occurred to him that he's an uncle again. Even if it is by marriage."

That cheered Skinner up considerably. Krycek was going to turn green at the gills when he did realize it.

"You're not working late tonight, are you?" Skinner asked.

"No," Mulder said. "I'll be home as soon as I can. Is she staying for dinner, at least?"

"She's staying the night. I invited her to use the family room. The pull-out couches are still down there," Skinner said. "She's beautiful, Fox. Looking at her, and knowing this, I can see her mother's mouth and nose, and my cheek bones and coloring."

"She's your daughter, Walter," Mulder said gently. "I know she's beautiful even without seeing her. This has been quite a year for you, so far, hasn't it?"

Skinner leaned back against the couch and shut his eyes, listening to the comforting sound of his lover's voice. "It's been an incredible year, Fox. This has to be the best year

of my life. I'm glad you've been here to share it with me. My life is full and bursting at the seams. Come home soon. I need to hold you."

"I'll be home by 5," Mulder assured him. "I love you. Go and get acquainted with your daughter. Scully said Doc Wilkins can do the blood draw and send it to whatever lab he uses. She looks forward to meeting Stephanie, too."

Skinner hung up and sat still, listening to the boys laughing downstairs in the kitchen. He had a daughter. Against all odds, he was a father.

"I wish she could have been ours, Sharon," he whispered. "I hope you approve of her." He went downstairs and entered the kitchen to find the twins holding court with cookies and milk. Skinner let Kisa out back before sitting down.

"A friend of mine is a doctor," he said to Stephanie. "She said the local doc can do the blood draw. I left a message on his voice mail."

"Thank you," she said with watery eyes.

"Why don't we go back downstairs and talk?" he suggested. She agreed and stood up. The boys stood, too. "No, boys," he said. "I need to talk with Stephanie alone. You can spend time with her later."

They pouted but acquiesced.

"They said their father is someone named Alex, who lives upstairs, is your boyfriend's brother, and you're adopting them?" she asked with an amused glint. Skinner pointed out one of the pictures of Krycek and the boys.

"That's Alex," he said.

"Wow," Stephanie breathed, looking at the pictures on the wall. "It's like a three-way mirror."

Skinner nodded. "Alex Krycek is my wife's brother. My wife died many years ago. We recently discovered, through a very long and complicated story, that my partner, Fox Mulder, is also their brother. Half-brother. Alex is not father material, as you will find out. The twins' mother is dead, died at childbirth. I fell in love with the boys and Alex is allowing me to adopt them." He'd tell her a closer version of the truth at a later time, if he needed to.

More truth.... "Are you ok with the fact that my partner is a man?" he asked.

"I'm a child of the last part of the 20th century," she said with a small smile. "Love whomever you chose. I admit to my own experimentations before I met my husband, so I

can't condemn you. Please keep it to yourself, though. Between my in-laws and my job, that would not be a good thing to have known."

Surprised, Skinner inclined his head in acknowledgment. They sat on one of the couches in the family room.

He looked at her brown locks glowing in the light and couldn't resist reaching out to touch her hair. She sat still, allowing it. Her body language told him that she was use to being in charge and he appreciated the fact that she looked someone in the eye when she spoke or listened. This was not a woman that could be pushed around.

"If I had known about you, I would never have let you grow up without my being a part of your life," he said. "I was shot in 'Nam. I can't have children. The fact that you are sitting here, is a very big blessing." He gave a small laugh. "I'm betting that Zia Ginny is calling my cousins as we speak. There's going to be a rush to Church to light candles. I should warn you; we have a very big, insane, Italian family. I hope you'll let me be a part of your life now. If it isn't too late?"

Stephanie choked and grabbed a tissue. "Can I hug you?"

Skinner pulled her into his arms and held her tight. He was holding his daughter! He breathed in her scent, memorizing her, kissed her cheek.

"I asked myself so many times," she said, pulling away. "Why doesn't my father want me? Am I such a bad person? I've longed for you and hated you all at the same time. I told myself that if we ever met, I'd rage at you, hit you, swear at you.. It never occurred to me that you just never knew. And I think I believe you. I've met enough liars to know when I'm being lied to."

He understood what she was saying. "If it'll make you feel better, go ahead and throw a few punches, I can take it. Swear if you want to, you're a big girl. Just don't cry, I can't deal with women's tears." She chuckled and dabbed at her eyes. Skinner could make out the outline of contacts; she wore glasses, too.

"Popi!" one of the twins called down the stairs. "Doctor Wilkins is on the phone!"

"Thank you," Skinner called up and picked up the extension. He quickly explained the need for a blood test for an HLA match. Doc Wilkins told him to come on over. Skinner and Stephanie bundled up and took the car to the other side of town. The test only took the time to draw the blood and they were on their way back to the house.

"What should I call you?" she asked. "I think 'Dad' is a little too late and can't see myself calling you Popi."

Skinner chuckled. "It took me a while to get used to it," he said. "Call me whatever makes you comfortable. Walter is fine,"

"Not Walt, or Wally?" she asked with a glint.

Skinner made a mock growl. "Only my cousins get away with Walt, because they're bigger than me, and it's never been Wally."

"What does your.. partner.. call you?" she asked.

"Walter, babe, he used *caro* last week," Skinner said. "Skinner once in a while. And he prefers Mulder, but you can probably get away with calling him Fox since you're family."

Stephanie nodded. "The girls will want to call you Grandpa. Would you prefer Popi from them, too?"

Skinner nodded gratefully. "I don't think Grandpa is me." He shuddered internally.

She smiled. "No, you don't have that Grandpa look about you," she said. "I'll tell them to call you Popi. Um," she hesitated. "My in-laws... they're very conservative. " Skinner had a feeling he knew what was coming. "My father-in-law is retired USMC. Career USMC. They're both highly disapproving of 'alternative lifestyles'. When I told them who my father was and that I was going to find you and ask you to be tested for Bethy, he jumped on the Internet and did a little research. He... was rather insistent that you also have a.. uh.. an HIV test. I'm sorry, I tried to talk to him..." she rushed.

"It's alright," Skinner interrupted her. "Thank you for your candor. I think that the doctors will do every test under the sun before considering a transplant, anyway, but if it will make things easier at home for you, I'll have the test. But I can guarantee you that I've never been exposed to that virus. I'll be equally candid, Fox is the only man I've ever been with. He was a surprise. My middle-aged breakdown," he said with a snort.

He pulled the car to the side of the road, keeping the engine going.

"While we're being honest, if you've read a little about us, then you know that our lives aren't exactly wine and roses," he said, needing to be clear with her. "People shoot at us. Fox's son, Adam, has already been kidnaped once. I've been kidnaped and so has Dana Scully. Fox was shot recently, and kidnaped just last month. That isn't for public knowledge, by the way. It's been dealt with. We get stalked, threatened, we live in a fish bowl. You need to know that if you're going to join the family being my daughter makes you and your girls an automatic target for any crazy person with a grudge. I'll understand if you want to back away." He prayed that she'd stay but he really would understand if she didn't.

Stephanie took her time answering. "I'm not an innocent housewife, blind to life. I'm a JAG lawyer," she said. "If anyone wants me, they'll have to get to me through the Navy and the Marines."

That can be done, Skinner told himself silently. He almost sent her away anyway, for her own good. He gave her hand a squeeze before driving again.

"Who's that?" she asked, pointing at his driveway after they headed out again.

"Carlo," Skinner said. "He's Zia Ginny's and my mother's brother. One of them. He lives here in town. He's the new principal of the local public school."

Skinner parked and introduced Carlo and Stephanie when they approached the front door. Carlo wrapped her in a bear-hug before introducing her to Marc, Anna Marie and Elena, who were visiting for a few days while Anna Marie's husband pulled a long weekend at work.

"Tell me the entire crew isn't about to invade from New York again," Skinner begged.

Carlo laughed and waved him off.

"No, they're snowed in," he said. Everyone entered the warm house and were greeted by Kisa, barking joyously at Skinner who was gone far to long for her tastes.

"Did you get a owie, Popi?" Pavel asked. Skinner showed him the small puncture mark. The boys were disappointed, the blood-thirsty little devils. He got in a loud smack on each cheek before they were off to play with Elena.

Adam came home soon after to a houseful of people. He met Stephanie shyly before running off to find the boys. KC was over as soon as she got off her shift. The men were kicked out of the kitchen while Natti and Zia oversaw the making of dinner. Mulder was home just after five, dragging Scully in with him. Mulder handed Stephanie a rose and kissed her cheek.

"You're right, Walter," he said. "She is beautiful."

"And you're a flirt," she countered and thanked him for the rose and the compliment.

Mulder loosened his tie and excused himself to go and change out of his work clothes. Skinner followed him up the stairs.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well, what?" Mulder said, taking his shirt off. "You have a daughter. How do you feel about that?"

Skinner sat on the bed and fell backwards, staring at the ceiling. "I don't think the shock has worn off yet. I'm not sure how to feel. I'm thrilled, I can't believe it. After all these years... I went with the guys to brothels a couple of times when I was over there but I wasn't stupid, I used protection. I met Sharon soon after I got back, so I'm pretty sure

there won't be anymore surprises showing up on my doorstep. I have four grandchildren, Fox. I'm old."

Mulder leaned over him, arms on either side pinning Skinner in. "Alright, you're over fifty. It happens. I'm getting there, myself and Scully will be forty this year. She's in complete denial. She's positive her breasts and butt are starting to sag. Yes, you have a few more lines than you did last year, a few more grays in what's left of your hair. I look forward to seeing those little girls gathered around you, and I look forward to seeing them driving our sons crazy. You drive me crazy." He leaned down and kissed Skinner. "Now stop feeling sorry for yourself. You have a house full of cousins to tend to. I'll make you feel better later, I promise."

Skinner told Mulder what he wanted and pulled Mulder's face down and kissed him after Mulder agreed. The door opened and Scully stuck her head in.

"Knock it off, guys, you have company," she said.

"You're just jealous," Mulder said, coming up for air. Scully marched over and kissed them both.

"Am not," she said, walking back out the door.

"Are too!" they called out after her.

"When the twins become fathers, you know what that will make Alex, don't you?" Mulder asked Skinner as they sat eating a plate of pasta. They sat in the kitchen while Natti and Carlo watched the children in the livingroom. The table was crowded even with the extra leaf set in.

Scully burst out laughing, her voice echoing delightfully through the house.

"Grandpa Alex!" she chortled in glee. Skinner snickered and picked up the phone.

"Alex," he said innocently when Krycek answered. "You do know that when one of the twins father's a child, in maybe about fifteen short years, that will make you a grandfather?" He held the phone away from his ear with a wince. The disconnect click from the other side was clearly audible. Mulder roared and slapped his knee.

"I'm not sure, but I think I counted about eight languages," Skinner commented. He picked up Mulder's hand and laced their fingers, giving the hand a squeeze. Mulder leaned over with a gleam in his eyes.

"A-HEM!" Scully cleared her throat. "Ignore them," she told Stephanie as the cousins snickered. "It's been two years and they still can't keep their hands off each other. It's pathetic. Tell me about you. Where do you live? Did you have to drive far?"

Stephanie shook her head. "No, not too far. I live in Church Falls."

"Church Falls?" Mulder questioned. "Are you military?"

"My husband was a Marine, I'm Navy. I'm a JAG lawyer," she said.

"Oooh, beautiful and brains," Mulder whistled. "What's your rank?"

Stephanie smiled at his compliment. "Commander. I plan on being Admiral."

Mulder raised a solidarity fist. Skinner felt a flush of paternal pride. It was too bad that he couldn't take any of the credit for her.

"Admiral Stephanie Ramsey, Judge Advocate General. Sounds nice," Mulder said. "What did your husband think about all that?" he asked.

"He was supportive," Stephanie said. "For a Marine, that is. He huffed and puffed sometimes but he was a good man, a good father."

"Now don't pick on Marines," Skinner said. "I was a Marine."

"Yeah, and we know all about you cleaning the house until it shines," Mulder said dryly. "He does," he said to Stephanie. "After the boys go to bed, after Natti cleans, he still has to find something to scrub at before he's satisfied. You should see his dress shoe collection. I think he's worn some out just by polishing them."

"You're exaggerating, Fox," Skinner said. "You're simply used to being a slob. You leave clothes everywhere, dishes in the sink, wet towels on the floor..."

"You two stop," Scully reprimanded them. Mulder waved a finger at her.

"You're just as bad, Scul," he said. "We've seen your apartment. It's so clean you could operate in there. Of course, it isn't so clean when we find you shot or the apartment broken into. I still can't figure out how you get all the blood out of the wooden floor. My old apartment, I had to get area rugs to hid the spots, and the last time we saw Walter's condo, I swear there was still some of Alex's blood on the balcony."

"Alex's blood...?" Marc questioned, his fork full of spaghetti stopping midway to mouth.

Scully spread her hands. "What can I say? It takes a woman to know how to get blood stains out."

The men shuddered. "We won't go there," Skinner said. "Definitely out of our genetic ballpark, right, Fox?"

"Absolutely," Mulder said with Marco nodding his agreement.

Everyone was looking at them in horror. "How many times have you been shot?" Stephanie asked incredulously.

"Me, only about eight times," Skinner said as he fed Kisa a meatball. "Dana, about what? Seven? Fox....?"

Mulder stood up and began pointing out spots. "Here, here, here, there, that one hurt like a muther... almost took a ball off with that one.... there, no that was just a graze... Scully shot me here..."

"Hold it, ok, enough," Stephanie said, holding up her hands in defeat. "You keep getting shot and no one has forced you into an early retirement? Who's your boss?"

Both Skinner and Mulder pointed at Scully.

"She is," they said in unison.

It would be a couple of days before the histology report was back so the only thing they could do was to wait and get to know each other. Stephanie called home and handed the phone to Skinner. He talked with three shy girls for a few minutes, promising to meet them soon. The baby, three year old Danielle, didn't say anything. Stephanie assured him that was normal for her age and a telephone. Thirteen year old Amanda was on the edge of childhood and adolescence, one moment a shy child and the next a rebellious teenager. Bethany, ten, sounded tired. Skinner couldn't blame her. She thanked him very nicely for trying for her. Catherine, eight, was chatty, and told him about her new braces and how much she hated them. Danielle was three, Stephanie said. That was all she needed to say.

"You alphabetized them?" Skinner had questioned.

"I'm a lawyer," she said. "I need things orderly."

"Remind us not to ask you to babysit the twins," Skinner chuckled. "For your own sanity."

"Oh," she waved a negligent hand. "After four girls, how hard can two little boys be?"

Scully winced and gave her a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. "Three boys," she said.

"Mulder's son isn't exactly an angel."

"Yeah, yeah," Mulder said.

"Zia, have you heard from Dom?" Skinner asked, realizing who was missing from the group. Zia frowned.

"No, he is still in Rome," she said. "I wish he'd call, I'm getting worried. I know he is safe, being with the Holy Father, but still."

At Stephanie's look of confusion, Skinner gave her a quick run-down of current events.

"Which reminds me," Mulder said. "How's psychic life in your house?" he asked.

Stephanie blotted her mouth of sauce. "Starting to look like a bad movie until you came out with your meditation video," she said. "Listen, Mulder, I don't know who's doing what about all this, and I don't want to know, but I can tell you that I've had a little pressure to use the girls for digging into a few criminal minds. Among others. I've resisted, but I don't know how far they'll take it. Base brats are in more danger than civilian kids."

"We know," Mulder said with a frown. "It's being worked on, believe me. Around the clock. "

"Are the girls only receiving?" Mulder asked. Stephanie nodded.

"As far as I can tell," she said. "Catherine began recently. Thankfully, she took to the meditation easier than Mandy and Beth did."

Skinner nodded. "I was thinking that might happen," he said. "With Adam learning it now, and the twins seeing it, I thought that it would be normal for them by the time they needed it."

"And nothing new starting with Amanda?" Scully asked. "What with puberty and all?"

Stephanie thought about it. "Not that I can see. She seems like a normal teenager to me. Grouchy one minute and bubbling the next. The only thing new is her cycle."

Scully nodded thoughtfully. Skinner could see that his partners needed to talk with him in private. It would have to wait, they had a houseful of guests.

They heard a knock at the front door and someone got up to answer it.

"Hey, Ali!" Carlo yelled out. Skinner groaned and Mulder patted his arm.

"Am I crashing a party?" he heard Ali ask, not sounding the least bit sorry.

"Yes!" Skinner yelled out. Ali came into the kitchen.

"Food," Ali eyed the laden counter. Zia knew an empty stomach when she saw one and soon had Ali shoveling his way through a plate.

"Aren't you supposed to be writing or something?" Skinner asked. Ali mumbled around a mouth full of spaghetti and waved a finger at his briefcase sitting on the floor. Marc picked it up and opened it, taking out a handful of papers.

"Yup," he said. "New music." He hummed a small snatch of a tune. Three more men walked into the kitchen. Skinner vaguely recognized them from the band. His house had been invaded. Stephanie was looking at Ali with wide eyes. Ali noticed, wiped his mouth and took her hand, pressing her knuckles to his mouth. Skinner swiped a dish towel at him.

"No," he said. "My daughter. I'll tell your wife," he warned. Ali pouted but released Stephanie and went back to his pasta.

"Too late," Sylvia said, stepping into the kitchen. She tweaked Ali's ear. All five of Ali's children rushed in, "Hi, Uncle Fox!", filled plates with food, and went back out into the livingroom. Skinner gave up and introduced everyone. Zia played the Grande Dame very well, used to hostessing large parties. Mulder gave Skinner's knee a pat under the table. A half an hour later, the back door swung open and everyone winced at the sudden onslaught of cold. Krycek stopped short at all the people in the kitchen. He saw Marc and showed his pearly whites.

"Down, Alex," Skinner said in resignation. One of the new men stepped up behind Marc and glared at Krycek over Marc's shoulder. Great, Skinner thought, a caveman fight. Krycek glared back.

"Alex," Skinner said, getting Krycek's attention. "This is Stephanie." Skinner wasn't sure that was better; Krycek's attention was most definitely turned.

"Fox," Skinner said in a low voice.

"Alex, I need to talk to you," Mulder said, tugging on Krycek's arm. "Come on upstairs." He pulled Krycek back out the door and up to Krycek's studio apartment. Skinner noticed that the wind had picked up and the snow had started again.

"Alright, what brings you out here, Ali?" Skinner asked him. Ali waved a fork and swallowed.

"Music, what else?" he said. "Tonight, we are going to torture Alex with children's songs." Now that was something Skinner could agree to. He told Stephanie about Ali

promising the boys they could help with a children's record. She nodded, but he had a feeling that she didn't approve for some reason.

"I thought you were going to do this in a studio?" Skinner asked. Ali shrugged.

"More homey this way," he said. "The engineers can fix any sound problems on the computer later. We don't have to, if you object," he offered, suddenly serious.

Skinner thought about it. They had nothing better to do...

Marc went to organize the children and to find out what songs they knew and which ones they could learn quickly. Ali's own children would fill in vocals for the songs that the boys were weak on. The kitchen was cleared except for Skinner, Scully, Stephanie, Zia and Natti.

"Do you like music?" Skinner asked Stephanie.

"Sure," she said.

"But..." Skinner prompted. "It's alright, speak your mind."

Stephanie hesitated, fiddling with her glass. "Well... I'm just not sure it's a good thing to get children excited about a field that very few people excel in. They get into music, ignore their more serious studies, and when they get out of school they fail at becoming 'big stars' and they have nothing to fall back on."

Skinner understood her fears, he had seen too many jocks with the same problem.

"Which one of your girls wants to sing?" Natti asked, taking a dish to the sink. Stephanie flushed at being caught.

"Amanda. My oldest," she said. "I can't get her to concentrate on her school work, all she wants to do is sing. She has a nice voice, I know that, but there are a lot of nice voices -all of them standing out on the corner asking for spare change. She's failing math and science. She does well in English, if she's allowed to write poetry. She says she doesn't understand the math and no matter how much she studies, she fails her tests. She's smart, I know she is, but she won't go near numbers."

"Have you had her tested?" Scully asked.

Stephanie nodded. "She falls in the normal range, if you ignore all the logic questions that she skipped over. She did the simple math, but ignored division and anything over two places."

"What's her complaint about the math?" Carlo asked, stepping into the kitchen with a handful of dishes.

"She says she just doesn't understand it," Stephanie said. "I don't understand what she doesn't understand. One plus one is two. Big deal."

Carlo nodded. "It is a big deal," he said. "If she has calculexia."

Everyone looked at him. "Has what?" Skinner asked.

"Cal-cu-lexia," Carlo said. "It's like dyslexia, only it's numbers instead of letters. It's a problem that's only just starting to be recognized. Most of the kids fail math because they are too lazy to study, but a few really don't understand it because the numbers get jumbled up in their heads. You should find someone who knows about it and get her tested for it. In the meantime, you should also let her make friends with music; it's audible mathematics. It's a proven fact that kids who take music classes do better in math and science. Besides, you're trying to fight genetics." Carlo pointed at Skinner with a knowing nod of his head.

"What does that mean?" she asked Skinner.

"When there's no getting over that rainbow, when the smallest of dreams won't come true..." he sang. Stephanie's mouth snapped shut in shock.

Ali came running in. "Who was that?" he demanded. Everyone pointed to Skinner. "You're coming on tour with me, right?"

Skinner gave an emphatic NO. He knew he could sing, but the world didn't need to know. Although, he was flattered by Ali's offer.

The boys made Alex sit with them as they began with 'Puff'. Skinner almost laughed out loud at the face Krycek was making. Skinner remained silent, not wanting to be caught on tape. He knew he was being paranoid. All the children sang with Ali and his band members half the night, the kids danced and laughed, not caring if they hit the right note or not. They were having too much fun.

A portable sound table was set up on the coffee table with one of Ali's men sitting behind it wearing a pair of headphones and fiddling with the knobs as Ali, Marc and the other two band members led the children and played guitars and a small keyboard synthesizer. Skinner sat on the floor against a chair, comfortable with Mulder between his legs leaning back against his chest. Scully sat next to them. Skinner didn't notice the raised eyebrows they were receiving as he sat with an arm around Scully's shoulders. Mulder couldn't help himself -he began to sing with the children. Ali stopped everything and winced as he insisted that Mulder not sing. Mulder laughed at himself along with everyone else.

Even Stephanie began to relax and enjoy the sound of the children's voices. Skinner hoped she would; he understood her dilemma with her daughter and it frustrated him that he could do nothing about it. He could advise her, if she wanted it, but he couldn't tell her

how to raise her children. Between raising four girls on her own and one of them being deathly ill, worrying as a mother would about her child's mortality, Stephanie needed this break. Skinner could see her face flushed and relaxed; it pleased him to see all the tension leaving her. She turned and saw him looking at her and smiled at him. Skinner thrilled to see his own rounded apple cheeks appear on her face.

When the children were sung out and fast asleep in various corners with blankets thrown over them, Ali and Marc began to take turns with more adult tunes. They were in an oldies mood. With one love song, Carlo stood and bowed to Natti, holding out his hand. Skinner watched as they danced. They looked right together. Scully was pulled to her feet by Krycek while Sylvia danced with her oldest son. Mulder turned his face and Skinner kissed him.

"Come on, Walter," Marc called to him. "The recording stuff is off. It's just us."

"I'm busy," Skinner said and nibbled at Mulder's lip.

"You can get that anytime, come sing with us," Marco said.

Mulder turned around. "Get what anytime?" he asked. "What are you implying, boy?"

Marco gave him a knowing grin. "Let's just say that I suspect that you and Alex have the same libido."

Scully opened her mouth to say something and immediately shut it. Zia got a suspicious look on her face and snapped something at Krycek. He answered back innocently and found himself chased out of the room under a barrage of rapid-fire Italian. Everyone laughed and shouted encouragements to Zia. The children woke up, irritated, and were carried off to bed with the guest kids spread out on the bedroom floors with blankets and sleeping bags.

It took a couple glasses of wine, but they eventually got Skinner to sing some oldies with them until the wee hours of the morning.

An insistent nudge at his shoulder woke Skinner up. Marco handed him the phone and went back to his pillow. Everyone had fallen asleep in the livingroom, sprawled out like a high school sleep-over.

"Hello," Skinner croaked. He barely registered the voice at first and had to force himself to comprehend the person. He thanked them and hung up. He sat up, noticing that he was warm because Mulder and Scully had taken either side of him with Kisa at his feet. Did he remember to put papers down in the kitchen?

"Stephanie," Skinner called out to her. Someone nearby gave her arm a shake. She sat up, wiping the sleep from her eyes. Skinner raised the phone. "It's a match, honey."

It took a moment to sink in. Stephanie burst into tears.

Chapter 22: Spring Is In The Air

Dinner consisted of hot dogs, macaroni and cheese and applesauce. It was Adam's dinner and that's what he wanted. The look on Krycek's face echoed what Skinner was feeling about it but he kept it from showing and ruining Adam's night.

"Just eat it," Skinner said in a low whisper to Krycek.

"You owe me for this," Krycek whispered back as he sat at the table.

"Mmmm, looks good," Scully said, shooting a 'help me!' look to Skinner. Of the adults, only Mulder seemed unfazed by the menu. No one sat at the foot of the table where a plate sat holding a small amount of each food item present. Skinner wasn't sure that it was psychologically sound for a child to set a place for a dead person, but Mulder said that Adam needed the reassurance that his mother wasn't forgotten.

"It's his first year," Mulder had said. "He'll probably forget about it next year."

Stephanie had gone back home to her children, euphoric with the news that Skinner was going to be able to infuse her sickened daughter with new stem cells for her bone marrow. The doctors told Skinner to wait another week to give him time to get over the cold virus that was in his system, and then he'd have to come in once a day for five days to receive a shot of growth hormone to stimulate his cells before the doctors could harvest them. The nearest Bone Marrow Transplant Unit was at the University Medical Center.

A transplant coordinator at the BMT called him with the schedule and that he needed to sign consent forms. Skinner would go into the city in the morning and sign whatever they handed him; he had a granddaughter and her life depended on him. They wanted to draw a second blood sample anyway, the coordinator told him. Just to be sure. Of the donors found for BMT patients in general, only about 1 percent came from a grandparent. After reading through the newspaper that morning, and looking over the electronics ads, Skinner was struck by an idea. He called a store that set up the computers with specific software before delivering the hardware to an on-site customer, and had it sent to the hospital in care of Mrs. Walton, Bethany's coordinator. He then called the coordinator back to make her aware of it's arrival. She thought it was a good idea, too.

Dinner was followed by chocolate ice-cream. Krycek and Scully both spoke up about a weight gain, and were excused from the added fat grams. Skinner looked Scully over and almost asked her "in which little finger?" She actually looked as though she had lost weight.

The phone rang and Natti reached up for it.

"It's Emilia," she said, holding the phone out to Skinner. He knew what she wanted.

"Hi, Em," he said, taking the phone. "No can do, busy week. Ok."

"Posters," he said to his waiting family.

The children were excused to go and play after dinner. Adam didn't look any worse for wear as he ran off with the twins.

"You ladies take a break," Skinner said. "Alex and I will clear the kitchen." Krycek opened his mouth to protest but shut it without a word uttered.

"Actually, I need to get going," Scully said. "I have an early meeting in the morning." Skinner kissed her and thanked her for coming to dinner. Despite the menu.

"I think the last hot dog I had was bought by Mulder about five years ago. It was covered in chili sauce," she said.

"Coney dogs can be a good thing," Skinner said with approval. Krycek agreed as he loaded the dishwasher. Scully wrinkled her nose and patted Skinner sympathetically on the back.

"It must be a guy thing," she said before going to find Mulder and her coat.

"Alex, I need to talk with you," Skinner said. "Privately."

They finished up and Skinner followed Krycek up to his apartment.

Skinner fell back onto the couch. "I need you to keep this from Fox," he said. "I'll talk with him about it, but I need to clarify some thoughts first."

Krycek nodded and got them a couple of beers.

"You know that Fox... that I.. hell, the man makes me hotter than Phoenix in the middle of summer," Skinner began. Krycek chuckled appreciatively.

"That's an understatement, but go on," Krycek said.

"But... I'm no more than comfortable with Dana."

"Ahh." Krycek understood. Skinner hung his head, watching the condensation on his beer bottle.

"I don't know how to tell him," Skinner said. "I think Dana feels the same way. I haven't discussed it with her, yet. I don't mind sex with her, making love with her, it's nice."

"But you're not hot and horny over her," Krycek finished. Skinner nodded, feeling completely stupid.

"First of all, you do need to tell Fox. And her," Krycek said. "You need to be honest with them, you owe it to them. Second, you need to decide what you're going to do about it after you tell them. Do you want to break it off with her?"

Skinner shook his head and then shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "Sometimes I would like to be with her. It's just.... friends playing. Loving each other." Skinner snorted. "It reminds me of the cats, cleaning each other, purring about it, and falling asleep on each other."

"Now there's an image," Krycek said with appreciation. He leaned forward, beer between his knees. "I'm not sure what to tell you," he said. "Do you need for the passion to be intense before you sleep with someone? I know you love her, I know she loves you. If I were you, after all you've been through, granted some of it at my own hands, if I were you I'd need some down time once in a while with a friend I could trust. Make her your confidant, someplace to lay your head when things get too heavy to deal with. Friends who can comfort with a stroke of a hand, a shoulder, a kind word, silence, or a little physical release."

Skinner listened and thought about it; Natti was right, there was a little bit of Ivan in Alex.

"She needs a friend, too, Walter. I was just a fuck-buddy, she didn't confide in me. You've been in her position; how hard was it to find someone you could honestly call a friend, someone who wasn't out to get something from you? Who could understand what you were going through when OPC came down on you for something an idiot agent did? I won't name names. Or a bust went down badly? An agent killed? Have you seen the lines under her eyes lately? I know for a fact that a bust did go down bad, and an agent was killed. Has she said anything to you about it? No, it wasn't one of Mulder's team." He looked at Krycek with a dawning shock. Krycek looked back at him. "You know how emotional she gets. She hasn't said a word, much less shed a tear."

Skinner stood up and put his bottle on the counter. "Thanks, Alex," he said. Damn. He didn't see it. Scully was in serious trouble and neither he nor Mulder had caught on to it. Krycek was right; he had seen Scully get weepy over a long-distance commercial, get up, and call her mother.

It was Mulder's turn for bath-time patrol. Skinner poked his head in the door and saw that Mulder was drenched. The twins had decorated Mulder with soap bubble bunny ears and a white beard.

"You wanna help me here?" Mulder begged him.

Skinner shook his head. "No, not really. I think you have everything under control."

"Chicken!" he heard Mulder call after him as he went down the hall. He found Adam in bed, hair wet from his own bath, reading a story off his e-book.

"Whatcha reading?" Skinner asked, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Something called 'The Lion's Paw'," he said, showing Skinner the title page. "Daddy says it's an old story. It's good, though. It's about this brother and sister who run away from an orphanage to find their father who's a sailor. They travel all over the world on a boat looking for him."

Skinner nodded. "That does sound good," he said. "Will you read some of it to me?" Adam pushed over, making room. Skinner lay back against the head board, the small bed barely holding his larger frame. Kisa thought it was a game, and jumped up to play, too. Skinner pulled Adam into the crook of his arm and listened to the boy read out loud to him. Skinner helped him sound out a word now and then, or explained a concept that was out-dated. The book was a fifth grade reading level, but it barely halted Adam's third grade age. Third grade? Only four years and he'll be in Middle School, Skinner thought with amazement.

Skinner finger-brushed Adam's damp hair. "You're mom would be proud of you, you know," he said, interrupting Adam. Adam stopped reading.

"Would she?" Adam whispered. "Daddy says so, but he's supposed to say that."

Skinner turned Adam around to face him. "Let me tell you something about your Dad," he said. "Fox Mulder never says anything he doesn't mean, and that's the truth. I've known him for a long time, and I can guarantee you that if he tells you something, you can count on it."

Adam laid his head on Skinner's chest as Skinner held him close. He saw Mulder standing in the door and sign a 'thank you' to him before going off to find the twins who had escaped from the bathroom wet again. Why didn't people just close and lock the door before taking them out of the tub, Skinner thought.

"Uncle Walter?" Adam spoke after relaxing. "Are you going to marry Aunt Dana?"

Skinner sat up, his brows up an inch. "I hadn't planned on it," he said. "Why do you ask? Did you 'see' something again?"

Adam fiddled with Skinner's shirt. "Just a little," he admitted. "I didn't mean to and I closed up right away," he hurried to explain.

"Did you see something very private or just a little private?" Skinner asked. He could practically feel the heat coming off of Adam's face. He needed to practice his own shields more; Adam wouldn't have 'seen' anything if he hadn't been projecting.

"I think it was very private," Adam said. Skinner sat Adam up to face him, thinking about what to say. Just be open and honest, he told himself. Let Adam help you.

"I'm sorry," Skinner said. "I'll try and be more careful in the future. Kids your age aren't supposed to know about things like that, not for years yet. I'm a little concerned that you will grow up with a warped view of love and sex. Does it scare you? The things you see?"

Adam nibbled his lower lip, the image of his father. "No, I don't think so," he said after thinking about it. "It's a little weird. I don't understand why anyone would want to do those things. It looks icky."

Skinner hid a smile. "It is a little icky and weird," he said. "But when you begin to become an adult, things begin to happen in your brain, making new chemicals that will make your body feel good when you're with someone you love. It will make you want to do those things. But you are in charge of your body, it's your decision to touch someone like that or not to. And if the other person doesn't want to, you don't. Period."

Adam nodded, "I know, Daddy told me that already. I don't think I ever will. Ich!" he shook his body in disgust and Skinner laughed.

"Just remember," Skinner said. "Don't tell anyone that I'm with Aunt Dana sometimes. It's very important. Don't tell the twins, you know they blab everything. Your father knows, you can talk to him about it. It isn't illegal, but some people wouldn't understand and they'd try and take you kids away from us."

Adam nodded again, understanding that the situation was serious, but not knowing why. It was a grown-up thing.

"Are you going to kiss Aunt Dana if you see her when you get your shots?" Adam asked.

"I don't know," Skinner said. "Maybe. The shots might make me sick to my stomach, so I probably won't want to." This was Mulder's fault for encouraging Adam to speak his mind, Skinner thought.

"You're gonna throw up? Ewwie!" Adam wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Don't get the shots," he advised.

That made sense to Skinner. "Remember what we told you about Bethany? There is a special blood in her bones, called bone marrow. It isn't working right, so I have to take these shots to make extra marrow in my bones to give to her. My marrow will teach hers

how to work right so that she won't be sick anymore. If her marrow doesn't learn to work right, she'll die. We don't want her to die, do we?"

Adam shook his head, his face solemn. "And you're Bethany's grandpa? That's funny." Skinner agreed with that, too.

"How can you be a daddy to little kids and a grandpa to little kids at the same time?" Adam asked.

"You know how your Dad didn't know about you until you came here?" Adam nodded. "Well, I didn't know about Stephanie until she came here. She became a mother before I knew her, so I have Pavel and Ivan just like she has kids." Skinner knew that was going to require a more clear explanation as Adam grew older.

"Where's her Mommy?" Adam asked.

"Her Mom died a long time ago," Skinner said gently.

"Is she sad?" Adam asked.

Skinner assumed he meant Stephanie and nodded. "Yes, she misses her mother very much. Maybe next time she's here, you can talk with her about it," he suggested. Adam agreed that was a possibility. Skinner saw that he was running down.

"Are you ready for bed?" he asked. Adam nodded. Skinner moved from off the bed, put the e-book in a safe place, and tucked Adam in. He sat next to Adam, on the edge of the bed, and smoothed the boy's hair before kissing his cheek.

"Love you, have nice dreams," Skinner said. Adam put out his arms and squeezed Skinner's neck tightly before releasing. "Do you want your dad to sleep with you tonight?"

Adam shook his head. "No, I'm alright," he said.

"Alright, but you come and tell us if you change your mind," Skinner told him. He'd have Mulder check on Adam later on in the night, just in case. He hiked Kisa up under his arm like a football and left the room, shutting the light off and leaving the door open a crack. The twins were already half asleep when he went in to check on them. Freshly washed and tucked into bed, they were the picture of innocence. Skinner knew better.

"Good night," he said. "Love you." They murmured back to him and accepted his good nights with contentment.

He set Kisa out back and waited while she did her thing before letting her back in and locking up. Natti shuffled through the kitchen in her slippers, getting a cup of hot tea. Skinner wished her a good night, also.

"I'm happy for you, Walter," she said. "You were alone and now you have a large family. You've been blessed. Tonight might be a good time to give thanks. To Whomever you choose."

Skinner gave into an urge; he bent down and gently kissed her cheek. "If I'm reading my uncle correctly, I think my family is about to grow even more," he said. Natti pinked up and shoo-ed him, heading back to her bedroom.

He locked up the livingroom door and reached over the couch to pull the curtains shut. A bright full moon shone through the window, illuminating the room.

"Thank you. Whomever," he whispered.

Mulder was getting into bed with some paperwork as Skinner entered.

"Hey," he greeted Skinner quietly. "I checked in on Adam while you were waiting for Kisa. He seems ok."

"Yeah," Skinner agreed, pulling his shirt off and tossing it onto the chair. He took the paperwork out of Mulder's hands and put it on the table. "Make love with me, Fox, please?"

Mulder looked at him in concern and held out his arms. "Are you alright?"

"Fine," Skinner said, pulling the covers down. "I just need you tonight."

He fell into Mulder's arms and kissed him, taking an overwhelming joy in the taste and feel of Mulder's mouth. Mulder lifted a leg over one of his and locked Skinner into place as they kissed.

"Do you want in, or am I going in?" Mulder asked, tearing his mouth away.

"You go in," Skinner said. He needed to feel Mulder inside of him. Mulder turned him onto his back. Mulder blazed trails down one side of Skinner's body and then the other, stopping to linger over known hot spots. Skinner surged up and licked, kissed, and nipped his way across Mulder before taking him into his mouth. Mulder gasped in pleasure and grabbed Skinner's head. Skinner usually objected to having his head held on to; it made him feel forced. But tonight he didn't care and allowed Mulder to direct him, following whispered grunts of requests and commands. Mulder finally pushed him away while he still could. Skinner lay on his back, his heels down, knees up, as Mulder slid down him, taking maddeningly little licks at the inside of his thighs. Mulder's tongue entered him

and Skinner gave a cry, lifting his legs to make room. He threw his head back and gasped as Mulder opened him, first with his tongue and then with his fingers.

"Oh, God, yes," Skinner groaned, seeing a vortex of light behind his eyelids. He felt Mulder's weight and wrapped his legs around Mulder's waist, crying out in pleasure as Mulder entered him. They knew each other's best rhythm and Mulder played his like an expert, pulling out just far enough before moving back in with a nice, even stroke. Skinner could hear himself from a distance, begging Mulder to come inside of him. Mulder repositioned his hips and on his next stroke back in, Skinner gave a strangled cry as Mulder stroked his prostate. He felt a bomb go off in his groin, sending a light show to his head as he came, clamping down on Mulder. Mulder gritted his teeth and continued to move in and out. Skinner slowly came to his senses and enjoyed the unusual pressure sensation in his back end. He whispered to Mulder every detail that he adored about Mulder's body, and tried to find the words to describe his feelings when they were joined together. Mulder paused, his face beet red, veins extended in his forehead. Skinner could feel a warm rush of liquid flood him. He held Mulder, stroking him, kissing him, murmuring words of nonsense to him, locking his legs around Mulder again, not releasing him until Mulder softened and slid out on his own.

Skinner lifted Mulder's left hand and kissed the gold band.

His cell phone rang on the way into town. It was Emilia again. Skinner cut her off, claiming he couldn't hear her due to the mountains. He was actually driving through open farm land.

He was met at the hospital by Stephanie, who had brought Bethany to begin her own side of the preparations. Bethany would begin chemo, which would kill off what was left of her stem cells. By the time Skinner was ready to be harvested, Bethany would be ready to receive his stem cells. She was already getting her room set up for her extended stay. Stephanie went back to her daughter while Skinner finished his paperwork. Skinner could see her later.

By mid-morning, Skinner had completed signing the consent papers and filling out all the necessary forms for the BMT coordinators. He was overwhelmed, he had no idea it was so involved. He had literally signed his life away before he was taken for a tour of the facilities and shown around the Pediatric Oncology ward where Bethany would be spending her immediate future. Children were hooked up to IV bags, some were completely bald from their chemotherapy, and others had colorful scarves wrapped around their heads. The walls were covered with paintings of Disney characters and the nurses wore smocks of animals and cartoon characters. Several nurses had little stuffed animals hanging from their stethoscopes.

He had held an image of a ward of depressed children in dull, drab rooms, and cold nurses who went about doing their duty until they were off the clock. What he saw was completely the opposite; rooms were decorated with a child in mind, nurses and techs, anyone with a moment free, visited with the children, played games with them and read stories to them. One happy tech had the music up and was dancing with a couple of children. Even a doctor had taken time out of his busy schedule to sit with a child and talk.

"Their immune systems have been compromised," Mrs. Walton told him. "Destroyed, actually. It's from the chemo. So their visitors are very limited. Most of these kids are here for at least a month, so the staff becomes their surrogate family. Everyone becomes very attached to the children and when one of them dies, everyone is effected. It isn't unusual to see one of the doctors storm out of here in tears. Spending time with the children helps to keep morale up. Including the children's."

"Do all these kids have leukemia?" Skinner asked in dismay. Mrs. Walton shook her head.

"No, I believe there are only three leukemia patients here at the moment. The rest are different forms of cancer. Pick an organ. The worst is an eight year old with a brain tumor. It's inoperable, so he's being made as comfortable as possible. That one's going down hard; his doctor is becoming more irritable by the day because of his frustration at not being able to do anything for the child. The boy will probably die within the week. At least it isn't painful. He blacks out once in a while. He'll black out one day and simply not wake up. He's going home in the morning. A hospice nurse will be visiting him. His parents want him in the bed he was born in."

She took him to another side of the ward and pointed into one of the large, picture windows of the sterile rooms. The curtain was drawn open and Skinner watched Stephanie helping her daughter unwrap new nightgowns and stuffed animals. He could see the laptop already set up on the bedside stand. A new boombox, CD's and books lined a shelf. Plastic wrapped posters waited for wall space.

Skinner tapped on the window. Startled, Stephanie jumped and then waved.

"Would you like to go in?" Mrs. Walton asked. Skinner nodded. "She isn't sterile yet, go on in."

Skinner pointed to himself and then inside, and Stephanie nodded, waving him in. She introduced him to Bethany. Skinner saw a tired little girl, thin and pale. Her brown hair and eyes were his own coloring.

"How are you feeling?" he asked her after lightly kissing her cheek.

"Tired," she confirmed. "Are you going to make me better?" she asked.

"I hope so, honey," he said. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she leaned forward and wrapped her arms around his waist. Stephanie sniffed and wiped at her cheek.

"Walter, about this laptop," she began after a moment.

"Now don't say no," Skinner immediately interrupted her. "There's a lot she can do with it. She'll have Internet access, games, a good writing program, and a cam so that she can see her friends. You should be receiving a cam for your own computer at home and at your office, so that you can see her anytime. I also sent an extra for your in-laws to use, and I have one for my computer."

"But the expense...."

Skinner shook his head. "Between you and the girls, I've missed 69 birthday present opportunities," he said. "One laptop is cheaper than 69 presents. The girls can share it after Bethany is home. It's for all of you," he warned Bethany. She nodded and ok'd him. "The cams don't cost very much, so if you tell your friends that you have it, maybe their parents will buy them one and they can see you and talk to you, too."

Bethany thought that was a good idea.

"Do not spoil these girls, Walter," Stephanie warned him with a shake of her finger.

Skinner spread his hands. "What is it with you parents?" he said. "First Fox and now you. I do not spoil the children."

"Yeah, right," Stephanie said, clearly not believing him.

Skinner gave his girls kisses on their cheeks and excused himself after giving Bethany his home and cell number with instructions to call him at anytime.

He made his way back to the coordinator's office where Skinner sat still long enough to have more blood drawn.

"This is a wonderful thing you're doing, Mr. Skinner," Mrs. Walton told him. "Stephanie has been a nervous wreck, hidden under that lawyer's need to know every single detail. You seem to be doing ok; how's your wife handling all this?"

Skinner lifted a brown brow. "Boyfriend," he corrected with a nod. "I think someone has been a little neglectful in keeping you updated. And he's doing fine. He's been very supportive."

Mrs. Walton colored a bit and apologized. "It's fine," Skinner assured her. "Happens all the time." They talked a while longer before Skinner left, satisfied that he had done all he could for the time being.

He returned home to find the twins having milk and cookies in the kitchen while they did some work in their books.

Skinner took one look at Pavel and swore.

"How did you get that?" he asked the boy, taking Pavel's chin and turning it. Half his bottom lip was swollen and bruised.

"Billy Joe hit me," Pavel said. Ivan nodded his agreement.

"Why wasn't I called?" Skinner asked. "Did you show Uncle Carlo that cut?" Pavel shook his head.

"I tried calling you, Walter," Natti said. "I think your cell phone is down. I called Mulder, he said so long as Pavel didn't need stitches, that I should just wait until you got home." Skinner checked his phone. It was indeed not working. He apologized for snapping and bundled the boys up, heading out to the school.

He dragged the boys to the office, barging in on the startled secretary. "Is he in?" he asked the secretary. He didn't wait for an answer, and barged into Carlo's office. Carlo looked up in surprise.

"Walter, what's wrong?" Carlo asked. Skinner held Pavel's face up.

"First, that nurse doesn't show much concern over Adam in hysterics, and now a teacher doesn't bother telling anyone, like a parent, when a fight occurs with blood flow," he growled. "I know this isn't your fault, you don't know what's going on if no one tells you, but I want something done about Mrs. Hanratty. My children are not going to get into a fight on school grounds, during school, and not have me informed immediately. Is this where the kids are learning to beat up on each other with impunity and...."

"Whoa," Carlo held up his hands in a T, halting Skinner's progressing diatribe. "I'm sorry this happened, Walter. I'll take care of it, I promise." He motioned Pavel over to him and hiked the boy up onto his lap. "How did you get that cut, Pavi? Tell us what happened." Skinner knew that was the wrong way to ask a question as soon as he saw Pavel take a deep breath.

"Billy Joe said that it was Popi's fault that Reverend Johnson was died 'cause God got mad at Reverend Johnson for not sending Popi and all of us away and Popi was a bad man 'cause he kisses Uncle Fox and they hold hands and hug and Alex is bad 'cause he wears black and leather and he has a gun but I don't unnerstan that 'cause lots of people have guns and Uncle Fox must be a sissy 'cause he doesn't have muskles like Popi does and he's skinny but I don't think Uncle Fox is a sissy 'cause he bosses Alex and Popi around and wrestles on the floor with him and he chases bad mans -men- at work and puts them in jail so they don't hurt anyone and he called me and Ivan weirdos 'cause we was smart but Popi and Uncle Fox says it's good to be smart so I called him a big fat pig

and punched him in the mouth and then he punched me." Pavel touched his lip, expressing his indignation.

"Yup," Ivan nodded his agreement of the story.

Skinner rubbed his head which was suddenly in pain, while Carlo shook his to try and clear it.

"Carlo, I must be nuts," Skinner said. "I don't want them to be violent, but having been a boy myself, I understood what he just said. Their teacher should have reported this anyway. If I can't be reached, Natti is usually home during the weekdays. Fox and Alex can be reached at their offices which should be on record." Carlo was nodding with Skinner's assessment of the situation.

"You're right, Walter," Carlo said. "Besides being Walter Skinner policy, it's also school policy. I will talk with Mrs. Hanratty. And you!" he said with a stern look at Pavel and shook his finger. "No fighting! Billy Joe wouldn't have hit you if you didn't hit him first." He put Pavel down with a pat to his rump.

The last thing Skinner wanted was one of the boys becoming more like Alex than just their faces. It was good that Pavel wasn't afraid to stick up for himself, but where is the line drawn between self-protection and deliberately pulling the first punch? The boys were smart, but they weren't ready for philosophical debates in the art of war. At the moment, they had the instincts of every other normal, red-blooded boy; when attacked, fight back. Skinner knew that he had to punish Pavel for throwing the first punch, the question was how. He began to see Mulder's reasoning behind not spanking the boys; what was the point in telling the boys not to hit and then being hit for it?

"Go sit outside for a minute so that I can talk with Uncle Carlo," Skinner told the boys. They were in a fairly agreeable mood, so they went out and immediately began to bother the secretary.

Skinner collapsed into a chair.

"Don't fight it, Walter," Carlo said. "All boys get into this. It's normal. They'll grow out of it. Hopefully."

"Yeah, hopefully being the operative word," Skinner said. "How do you fix a mistake with your kid? I mean, it's pretty much theory, parenting. What do you do when you raise them with a specific intention but it back fires which you can't see until they're older and it's too late to fix?"

"Parents have had that problem since time began," Carlo told him. "If you don't like a behavior with one child, alter your approach with the next child. In your case, though, I don't see that happening. I don't think you'll have the same types of behavioral problems with Ivan that you will with Pavel."

Skinner agreed with him. "No, their personalities are already taking a wide berth of each other. Dana calls them Hawk and Dove. I'm not worried so much about Ivan, as I am about Pavel. He's so much like Alex. Alex's history is a very violent one and I don't want that to happen to Pavel."

"Of course you don't," Carlo immediately responded with a wave of his hand. "No parent does. The only thing you can do is to show him that violence isn't the only way. Telling Ivan that is one thing, but I think you're going to have to set an example for Pavel. And when Ivan gets older, he can help, providing that he remains a 'Dove'. Pavel may seem to be the leader of their little two-some, but have you noticed that if Ivan puts his foot down, Pavel backs down?"

"No, I haven't noticed," Skinner said. He gave it some thought and slowly nodded. "Remembering some of their decision making meetings, Pavel does usually go along with Ivan's suggestion." He thanked Carlo and stood up to leave.

"Just one thing," Carlo said, stopping him. "Relax, caro. You're doing a good job. Better than a lot of experienced parents that I've met. So you make a mistake or two. We all do. So long as they don't become addicts or start shooting up a McDonalds, consider it a success. The Messiah has already been and gone, be happy with second best."

Skinner gave a wry grin. "Right," he said. "Any suggestions, oh wise-one, on a non-violent punishment?" he asked with a jerk of his thumb to the outer office.

"You mean no spanking?" Carlo asked. Skinner nodded. "I'd put him over my knee, if he were mine, but since he isn't.... you could try grounding him. No computer, except for work, no TV, no going outside to play with Ivan and Adam, no friends inside. His age, maybe two days. That should get his attention. Just be sure that he understands why this is happening."

"I'll give it a try, thanks, Carlo," Skinner said.

Emilia caught him again on his way home. He showed Pavel's face to her and begged her leave to tend to his son. She tossed her hands up and went back to her car.

Pavel wasn't happy about it, and his tears tore at Skinner's soul, but they had a family meeting after dinner where Skinner let everyone know what was happening. Mulder, Krycek and Natti acknowledged the decision and backed up Skinner. Pavel was grounded for two days on the charge of assault.

An hour later, Pavel's howls were reduced to sniffles in his bedroom.

Skinner felt the world closing in on him. He groaned and buried his face in Mulder's neck.

"Can we rewind and start this month over, please?" he whined. Mulder chuckled and Skinner felt familiar arms go around him. He nestled lower and listened to Mulder's heart beating.

"Hey," Mulder said after a few quiet minutes. He poked Skinner on his head. "You want to hear something funny? I got the latest Lone Gunmen. The guys are convinced that the 2000 Presidential election was such a mess because Sadam Hussan rigged it. He was bored and thought that ol' Dubya could give him more entertainment than listening to Gore expound on how bad biotoxins were for the ozone."

That pushed him over the top. Skinner laughed into Mulder's chest. This was why he loved Mulder; the man could say the most ridiculous thing and Skinner would feel the weight of the world leave him.

Mulder ran a finger over Skinner's face, giving a light poke to Skinner's smushed nose. "Would you top me tonight?" Mulder asked, gentle yet serious.

He had thought that 'topping' would be a violent act, but Skinner had come to understand that there was no violence involved if the other person was willing. He refused to do anything that would leave a mark, other than the occasional hicky, and neither would he participate in any act that involved humiliation. Other than those acts involving his own stupidity. Mulder didn't ask too often, but when he did, Skinner had to admit that he enjoyed his own caveman antics. His own one time as 'bottom' was also enjoyable. He had felt a restrained force within Mulder that he had never felt before and it turned him on. It scared him a little, giving himself over to someone else's hands. All too often in the past, giving himself over involved pain. Giving himself to Mulder held only pleasure. It was the ultimate act of trust. And Mulder trusted him.

"I wish we were alone," Skinner said in a low voice. "I'd take you here and now." He ran a hand inside of Mulder's shirt, finding a nipple. He took the hard nub between his fingers and tugged firmly on it until Mulder grunted, being careful not to make a louder noise. The children were still up. "Mine?" Skinner whispered.

Mulder nodded. "Yours."

While Mulder saw to baths, Skinner took Kisa out for a walk. It was snowing again. He raised his face to the gray sky, that strange night-time brightness that only snow clouds brought, and felt the cold, wet flakes dot his cheeks and lips. His pants were a little on the tight side and the cold was doing nothing to diminish his 'problem'. He urged Kisa to hurry.

Going into the house after wiping his boots, he could tell that it was going to be a long night. He went in to find Ivan trying to drag his pj's on over his still wet body. Skinner found a towel and told Ivan for the millionth time that clothes went on better over a dry body. Pavel was quiet as he sulked on his bunk. Skinner lifted him and carried him to the chair, settling Pavel on his lap. Pavel was still damp, too.

"I'm sorry that I had to punish you," Skinner said, trying not to let the guilt get the better of him. "I understand why you hit that boy, I really do, and more than likely, I'd have done the same thing. But I want you to learn that just because someone says something bad to you doesn't mean that it's alright to hit. You could have walked away, you could have yelled at him, called him names, told your teacher, anything but hit him. We told you when it was alright to hit someone if you really had to. Do you remember what we said?"

Pavel gave a reluctant nod. "When someone was hurting us. To protect us."

Skinner ran his fingers through Pavel's thick, dark hair. "I love you very much, Pavie," he said. "I will never stop loving you, so I don't want you thinking that just because I'm punishing you, that I don't love you."

Silent tears streamed down Pavel's face. "Please, popi, I'll be good. I won't hit Billy Joe again," he begged, his voice quivering. Skinner bit back the urge to give in, and instead rocked Pavel against his chest.

"You have to do this," Skinner said. "We all have to pay for our mistakes, in some form or another. You will spend two days grounded. No playing with friends, no TV, and no playing on the computer." Pavel began to cry in earnest. Skinner held him for a moment longer before putting him to bed, kissing his cheek and tucking him in. He quickly kissed Ivan and left the room. He had never punished any of the boys to such an extent and it was killing him, knowing that Pavel was so unhappy. Everyone was right; he was a push-over as far as the children were concerned.

"Babe, you have to go through with this," Mulder said, seeing Skinner's face as he walked into their room. "I know it's hard, but he isn't going to learn if you back down."

Skinner fell onto the bed, face down. "I know," he admitted, his voice muffled by the bedspread. The bed sank as Mulder knelt on it. Skinner felt his shirt being pulled over his torso and yanked off his body before Mulder scooted down the floor and reached under him to unzip his jeans and yank on them. Skinner chuckled into the bed. Apparently Mulder was in a rush to get started. A bite was taken out of his bared butt and Skinner yelped and turned over. Mulder jumped him, straddling his waist with a feral grin.

"Hey," Skinner protested. "Who's being topped here?" He reached down and wrapped his hand around Mulder who stopped moving, a look of stupefied pleasure coming over his face. Skinner abruptly turned them over, putting Mulder on the bottom. With a growl, Skinner used his own legs to push Mulder's up and out while pinning his arms above his head, holding him in place. Skinner could feel Mulder grow hard against his abdomen as his breathing became erratic. Skinner sank his teeth into Mulder's neck and sucked hard. Mulder whimpered in pleasure and arched his neck back. Leaving a purple bruise high enough for all the world to see, Skinner then dropped his head lower and ravaged a hardened nipple before leaving another mark just below it.

"Mine publically, mine privately," Skinner whispered in a low growl.

"God, yes!" Mulder choked out. Skinner turned Mulder over until he was face down. He shoved a pillow under Mulder's hips, spread his cheeks, and attacked him with his tongue and teeth until Mulder was screeching into a pillow and begging to be taken. Skinner entered him with a quick thrust, grabbing Mulder's hair and holding him still. Skinner paid careful attention while he rode Mulder slow but insistant, listening for sounds of distress. He would stop immediately if Mulder was hurt, but Mulder continued to encourage him with the 'oh, Gods!' and 'fuck, yes's!', among other words and phrases that Skinner never heard out of him except during times of extreme pleasure.

Skinner could feel himself almost ready and thrust as deep as he could, enjoying the incredible feeling of that tight muscle squeezing him hard. He shot hot liquid deep inside of Mulder, groaning loudly into the back of Mulder's neck. Skinner held still a moment, pausing to catch his breath. Mulder grabbed his hands, pulling Skinner's arms around him before yanking the pillow out and laying flat on the bed.

"Holy shit, Walter," Mulder moaned. "I think I came twice. The pillow and sheets are a mess."

Skinner chuckled and then winced, feeling himself sliding out of Mulder. "The sheets are an even bigger mess, now," he said. Mulder turned within Skinner's arms and kissed him gently.

"Are you ok with this?" Mulder asked, his eyes bluer than their usual hazel.

"Shouldn't I be the one asking if you are alright?" Skinner countered. He dragged Mulder closer, delving deeply, slowly, into Mulder's mouth.

"I'm fine, babe," Mulder said, tearing his mouth away with a gulp for air. "I feel wonderful, actually." He threw one leg across Skinner's thighs and snuggled in close, using Skinner's chest for a pillow, since he messed up his own.

"We need a shower, Fox," Skinner said, poking him in the shoulder. "We smell. And we can't leave this mess for Natti to find." They never left soiled sheets for Natti to wash. Skinner would die of embarrassment.

"Wait a little bit," Mulder pleaded. "Give me some recovery time. I want to play with you in the shower."

Skinner could wait a while longer.

In the morning, he went to the hospital to report in with the nurses and to get his first shot. It wasn't so bad and he felt fine afterwards. He stopped in to see Bethany. She had her first round of chemo and was a pretty sick little girl. Skinner was allowed to scrub and suit up before going into her room. He sat with her a while, holding her when she was set with more dry heaves, stroking her hair and singing softly to her while Stephanie took a break.

He stopped by a florist on his way to lunch and had a dozen roses and a teddy bear sent to one Mr. Fox Mulder at the Hoover. He walked around the mall while he waited for the phone call on his cell. Which came an hour later.

"Are you trying to get me killed by these bruisers?" he heard.

"I'm sure I don't know what you are talking about," Skinner said. He could hear the women in the back ground chattering a little louder than usual.

"Flowers and a bear? Do you know what the card said?" Mulder asked.

"Of course I do," Skinner said. "I wrote it. It said, 'To Fox, my best friend and the best lover in the world, love Walter.'" Alright, so maybe he went a little overboard....

Mulder sighed in resignation. "Just tell me that you're not planning on making out with me in the bullpen again," he begged.

"I hadn't planned on it," Skinner conceded. "But I can if you want me to." He stopped in front of a men's clothing store to look at the suit in the window.

"NO!" Mulder choked. "God, Walter, sometimes I swear you're trying to...."

"Fox, Leather World has a nice suede jacket for sale, would you like one?" Skinner asked, interrupting Mulder.

"What color?" Mulder asked, immediately diverted.

"Black, of course," Skinner said as he entered the store. "Fox, I just realized that I have a lot of money." The sheer amount of zeros at the bottom of his account book rocked him.

"Walter, don't go crazy on me here," Mulder warned him. "We have a lot of bodies in a small house. We don't need more stuff."

Skinner bought a jacket for all seven of them, including Scully and Alex. The salesman was very happy with his commission for the day. Natti didn't seem like a leather jacket type of person, so he went into a women's store, and with the help of an older saleslady, he bought Natti a nice, fleece filled winter jacket. The miniature jackets for the boys were cute; perfect replicas of the larger jackets, only pint-sized.

Not wanting to put Scully in an awkward position, Skinner took only Mulder's jacket with him to the Hoover, along with lunch. Mulder was in a meeting when he arrived, so he sat at Mulder's desk and kicked his heels up, waiting patiently while he chatted with Virginia, Mulder's assistant. Skinner never really talked with her before, he had always been around Scully's office, where he could chat with Kim. The flowers and teddy bear were prominently displayed on the small table in the room, despite Mulder's protests. His cell phone rang and he turned it off after checking the caller ID.

"Mulder, what.... oh." Fairbanks came to an abrupt halt, seeing Skinner instead of Mulder. "Mr. Skinner, I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting to see you here. Do you know when Mulder will be back?"

"Not a clue," Skinner said. "He's in a meeting."

Fairbanks was from Public Relations and he appeared agitated about something as he waved papers around.

"What's the problem?" Skinner asked, curious.

"Nothing. Everything," Fairbanks spat out. Skinner wasn't sure, but Fairbanks had always struck him as a little on the light-heeled side.

"The Fund Raiser is coming up," Fairbanks said in disgust, rolling his eyes. "We can't get a hold of the star we wanted to book. His manager isn't returning calls. Since Mulder is the one to go to for unusual fix-its, I thought he might have an idea."

Skinner nodded thoughtfully. "So, who are you trying to book?" The annual Fund Raiser was always held around Easter, with the charity changing each year. This year was the Pediatric AIDS Foundation, if he remembered correctly.

"Ali Kat," Fairbanks admitted. "I heard he lived close by, in New York, and he hasn't started his tour yet, so I sort of promised I'd get him."

"And now you're up a creek," Skinner surmised. Fairbanks nodded unhappily. Fortunately, Skinner could fix this. He took out his cell phone and dialed Marc's number off the speed dial.

"Hi, Sylvia, this is Walter Skinner," he said after a moment. "I'm doing great, thanks. No, actually, I'll call Marc later, can I speak with Ali for a moment? Thanks. Hello.... no, Ali, I will not go on tour with you so forget it. Question. Do you know anything about the FBI trying to get hold of your manager for a benefit show? Well, Public Relations has been trying for quite a while. This year's charity is the Pediatric AIDS Foundation. Around Easter, April 14th, I believe. Yeah, have him call." Skinner gave Ali Fairbanks' name and phone number. "Thanks, Ali, I owe you. No, anything except that. Later." Alright, he'd admit it, Ali wasn't so bad when he wasn't 'on'.

He closed the connection and looked up into Fairbanks' stunned face.

"How... what... how..." Fairbanks stuttered breathlessly.

"My younger cousin is in the band," Skinner said honestly. "He lives with Ali and his family. You better get to your office and wait for the phone to ring."

Fairbanks turned and flung himself past Mulder who was on his way in. Mulder jumped back out of the way.

"What was that all about?" he asked, coming into his office. Skinner told him what happened. "Oh," Mulder said. "If I'd have known he wanted Ali, I'd have called for him." He turned his pointed nose to the fragrant bags on the table and began to poke around in them. Skinner watched him for a moment before going to the door and sticking his head out.

"Hold all of ASAC Mulder's calls. If anyone asks, he's in another meeting," he told Virginia. "A very important, do not disturb unless we are being invaded meeting."

The assistant bit her lip in amusement and nodded. "Yes, sir," she said. Skinner shut and locked the door.

"What are you up to, Walter?" Mulder asked suspiciously. Skinner took off Mulder's dress jacket and replaced it with the new leather one before turning him around, putting his arms around Mulder's waist and pulling Mulder back against his chest. Skinner located a tasty piece of neck and nibbled.

"Something I've wanted to do for years," Skinner said, lifting his head. He reached down and unzipped Mulder's fly, slipping his hand inside.

"Walter, I can't walk around all smelly and messy," Mulder protested weakly.

"I have a condom in my pocket," Skinner whispered into his ear. "I want you, Fox, over the desk, pants down around your ankles."

Taking advantage of Mulder's recent 'top me' phase, Skinner abruptly bent him over. Mulder automatically caught himself with his hands on the desk. Skinner didn't hear any sign of protest, so he lowered Mulder's pants, letting them fall to the floor. He inserted his hand into Mulder's shorts. Mulder groaned and spread his legs further apart.

"Don't move," Skinner warned him. He stepped back and reached into an inner pocket of his new jacket. He watched Mulder as he rooted around. The man was bent over his own desk, black leather jacket, pants down around his ankles, underwear half way down his ass, patiently waiting.

"God, Fox," Skinner moaned. "This time, I'm wishing for a camera." He went back and set a couple of items on the desk. He lowered Mulder's shorts and rubbed his denim clad groin against Mulder's bared skin. Mulder pushed back insistently with a grunt. Skinner spread those white cheeks hard apart and looked at his destination, his own need growing hard within his jeans. He unzipped his jeans and drew himself out, stroking himself with one hand while caressing Mulder with the other. He took one of the small packets from the desk and tore it open with his teeth, spitting out the piece of wrapping, and squeezing the Astro Glide onto his fingers. He growled at Mulder to hold himself open, which Mulder immediately did. Skinner inserted two slick fingers. Mulder bit his lip to keep from yelling out as he pushed back to take more. Skinner stroked him from the inside out until Mulder was practically a mass of babbling jello before sliding on the condom. Ignoring Mulder's begging and strangled warnings of imminent interruptions, Skinner kept a slow and steady pace. Soon, Mulder grabbed a napkin from the food bag and pushed his hand below. Skinner could feel his muscles tensing and picked up the pace, wanting to finish at the same time Mulder did. Feeling the large wave beginning to cascade through, Skinner let himself flow with it, and emptied himself into Mulder within seconds of Mulder's own orgasm.

Skinner stayed still for a moment, stroking Mulder's back and hips, kissing the nape of his neck.

"Are you alright, babe?" he asked quietly. Breathing hard, Mulder nodded and gulped for air.

"God, Walter, you continue to surprise me," Mulder was finally able to say. Skinner withdrew, being careful to take the soiled condom with him and not leak onto Mulder's dress pants.

"Stay there," Skinner said. "I'll get a damp towel." He went into the private bathroom and soaked a paper towel with soap and water, disposing of the remains in another towel, before wiping himself off and returning to Mulder. He cleaned up his lover and helped him to dress.

Skinner kissed Mulder with a slow, lingering passion. "Mmmm," Skinner murmured against Mulder's mouth, giving a lick. "I can't seem to get enough of you, Fox," he admitted. "We have an anniversary coming up. I want to take you someplace special. Any dreams? Fantasies?" They sat on the couch, making out in between talking.

"I've always wanted to have sex in the middle of Stonehenge," Mulder suggested.

Skinner shook his head. "I think they have that cordoned off to the public," he said. "Try again." Just then his cell phone rang. Since it was right next to him, he gave in and answered it.

"Skinner."

"If you two are done, can I come over now?" he heard. Skinner chuckled.

"Sure, Dana, come on in," he said.

A few minutes later, there was a knock at the door. Mulder got up and let Scully in, letting Virginia know that the privacy clause was still in effect. She looked at his jacket with a raised eyebrow and nodded, still amused.

Scully took a sniff of the air and went into the bathroom, returning with a can of air freshener. She gave the room a good spray.

"At least burn some incense afterwards," she suggested with a wry grin. Skinner felt himself flush.

"It was his fault," Mulder accused. "He seduced me."

Skinner kissed him quiet.

"So how was your first round of growth hormone?" Scully asked. Skinner reluctantly released Mulder.

"So far, so good," he said. He talked with them about Bethany and they sympathized.

"It's the only way," Scully told him. "If they put in your stem cells while hers are still there, her white cells would over-power yours and she'd still be sick. Hers needs to be put into a position where yours can teach hers the proper behavior of cells."

Skinner chuckled and kissed her. "Thank you, Doctor Scully," he said.

Mulder reached out, trying to find a way into her blouse. She slapped his hand and then fingered Mulder's jacket appreciatively.

"You have one, too," Skinner told her. "It's in the car, I didn't think it would be a good idea to bring it in."

Mulder looked at him suspiciously. "How many jackets did you buy?" he asked. Skinner admitted his guilt. Scully looked at him in shock.

"Walter, can you afford that?" she asked.

"Didn't you tell her?" he asked Mulder, who shook his head.

"Not mine to tell," Mulder said. Skinner told Scully the short version of his new bank account.

"Well, damn," Scully said. "You did say you were taking me to dinner, right?"

Skinner picked up her hand, kissed her knuckles, and readily agreed. Mulder pouted.

"Don't give me that," Skinner told him. "You just had dessert."

"And your point would be?" Mulder asked with a gleam in his eyes. Skinner growled and jumped him.

"Boys, boys!" Scully laughed, shoo-ing at the men wrestling on the floor. "Mulder can join us for dinner, now quit it!"

Mulder escaped from Skinner's clutches and gave Scully a swift kiss.

"No, thank you," he said. "I have children to attend to." He jumped to his feet and straightened his tie and shirt, taking his new jacket off and returning it to its box. He sat behind his desk, perfectly angelic.

"Brat," Skinner accused. He went over and tipped Mulder back, kissing him hard. "Love you. I'll be home late." He stood up, taking in the photos lining Mulder's desk. The two of them and the boys, in various poses and combinations. There was even Alex, Natti, and Scully. A small, three doored, wooden album held Skinner and Mulder, Mulder and Adam, and then all five of them. It looked Slavic, had to be a gift from Alex. Skinner had a sudden need to talk to Alex. He left the two agents to their work and left.

Once outside the building, he called Krycek's cell phone.

"Hi, where are you? Can you meet me across the street at Casey's? Yes, now, if you can." Skinner listened to Krycek. "I need to ask you something. I don't trust those offices not to have ears." Krycek would meet him in ten minutes.

Twenty minutes later, over a pint of some God-awful ale that Krycek had recently grown fond of, Krycek looked at Skinner.

"You have got to be joking," Krycek stated in disbelief.

Skinner shook his head. "Come on, Alex, you put together an entire life for me within these past few years; all Fox has is Adam and you."

"What am I, the Miracle Worker?" Krycek asked with a raised hand. "I told you; any cousins he had disappeared before he was even born. They'd have no emotional connection with him, even if they knew they were related."

"What about nieces and nephews?" Skinner asked. "The first generation may be dead except for you and Fox, but the kids can't all be working for Them. Try, Alex, please," he begged. "If any of them wants to get away from all the corruption, I will fund their

relocation. Fox needs a family of his own blood, too. If it means that he plays the patriarch uncle, fine. At least they're his." And yours, Skinner added silently.

"You are one crazy bastard at times, you know that?" Krycek asked, getting up from the booth. Skinner knew capitulation when he heard it.

"Playing the field, Skinner?" he heard the snide remark from the bar. Both Skinner and Krycek turned. The men at the bar paled, not realizing whose back had been turned to the bar. Colton and Erickson gulped while the rest of the patrons became silent.

"What's the matter, Colton?" Krycek purred. "Jealous? Don't worry, baby, the next time you beg me to tie you to my bedpost and ride you like a horse, I promise to let Erickson milk you like the mare you are when I'm done with your ass. Just don't leave any more riding crop marks on Erickson's ass; he couldn't sit for days after the last time even after you kissed his boo-boos."

The bar erupted in howls as the men turned various colors. Skinner and Krycek escaped before the agents could think of a way to fix their new situation.

Later in the evening, after returning from a nice dinner, Scully went to soak in a hot bubble bath while Skinner called the boys, missing their chattering voices.

"Fox, would it bother you if I stayed the night?" he asked Mulder after talking to the boys.

"No, of course not," Mulder said. "Just try not to have more fun with her than you do with me."

"Actually, I'm more in a mood to talk than anything else," Skinner told him.

"I know something's bothering her," Mulder admitted. "She isn't talking, though. It may take some time, but she'll talk when she's ready. If you can speed things up, go right ahead."

He didn't think Mulder would mind, considering that the man wanted them closer anyway.

"Can I come in?" he asked, giving a knock on the bathroom door.

"Sure," he heard Scully call out. He sat on the floor across from the tub, back up against the wall. Scully lifted an eyebrow.

"What's this?" she asked.

"This is a Walter and Fox thing," he said. "Showers are for wash and play time, baths are for relaxing and talking. Sometimes playtime. If you're uncomfortable, we don't have to."

Scully shrugged and rested her head back against the porcelain.

"So," Skinner began. "How was your day?" They had talked about everything but work at dinner.

"It was work," Scully said. "The next session is about to graduate, so I spent some time going over personnel files."

"Has a new AD been hired?" he asked.

Scully shook her head. "DAD Addison has been doing double duty. I don't think he has it in him to be AD, though. He seems to have a problem with decision making."

Skinner understood that. "Find anyone interesting?"

Scully shook her head again. "They're all such kids," she said softly. "I keep wanting to send them home to their mothers."

"They're grown men, Dana," he reminded her. "They knew when they signed up, that it was a dangerous job and that not all of them would see retirement. You take the best and hope that they have enough common sense to last a few productive years."

Scully flicked at the soap bubbles, not looking at him.

"How did you handle it?" she asked after a quiet moment.

"With a bottle of whisky," he said bluntly. Scully looked up at him in surprise. "I sent a lot of good men to their deaths, Dana, more than I care to count. When it was one that I had taken an interest in, I got plastered. Fortunately, I'm anal retentive enough that I stopped myself before it became a problem that I couldn't handle."

When she began to cry, Skinner stood up and held out a towel. "Come on," he said.

"Mmm... my llll..legsss...." she blubbered, indicating the razor.

"Your legs are fine, honey, get out of the water," he said gently.

He wrapped her in the towel and carried her to the couch, sitting quietly while she cried on him. When she calmed down, he listened silently as she spoke of agents that had died. "It's ok," he said when she finally talked herself out. "It's ok to feel the pain. I'd worry if you didn't. You would be a danger to the agents if you didn't. Don't hide it, not from me or Fox, and certainly not from your agents. If they know you care, they will go out of their way to do their best for you. I learned that the hard way. Go to their funerals, honey, and cry for them. Cry with their wives and children. They may blame you, but it's their pain talking. Those men knew what they had signed up for, they knew that a bullet could get them at any time, but they chose to protect their country and its citizens."

He rocked her gently while she sobbed quietly on him. When she had tired herself out, he stood up and led her to the bedroom, helping her into her pajamas and into bed, before putting a new pair of PJs on. Mulder was not going to be happy when he saw how many clothes Skinner had bought.

"I always took you for a bare skin to bed man," she murmured as he got into the bed.

"I was," he said. "Until the boys began to enter without knocking and waking us up in the middle of the night for one thing or another."

Scully turned and snuggled close to him, content to fall asleep with his arm protectively around her.

On day 9, the doctors had decreed that Skinner had a sufficient supply of extra bone marrow. Since he had been sick to his stomach since day 3, he was extremely grateful. There was a flurry of immediate activity as the staff made the necessary arrangements for the transplant. Stephanie began to cry with relief. Skinner wasn't sure what to make of all this female crying that had been going on lately, he just knew that he wanted his body to quit rebelling.

He had met his granddaughters, though. Dani was too young to know what to make of him, but he got a shy smile from her and that made him happy. Cat was still young enough to throw her arms around him in childish abandon, knowing that another grandfather meant more presents. Mandy stood on the brink of womanhood, wanting to be an adult about meeting him, but he could see the child in her wanting a hug. He asked her permission, one adult to another, and received a hesitant squeeze. Beth was up in her room, where her sisters had been visiting, scrubbed and gowned.

The In-Laws were also nearby, there to support their granddaughter. Skinner shook hands with them politely, on his best Marine behavior. Major Ramsey stood ramrod straight and made nice, thanking Skinner properly for the cam.

Mulder stood by, watching quietly with the boys leaning shyly against him.

A couple of days earlier, Skinner had lunch with Stephanie.

"Walter, I..." she began nervously. "I still haven't... I mean.. I thought I was a modern, open minded person, able to talk about anything, but I don't know how to tell the girls about you and Mulder."

Skinner understood her dilemma. "When Adam came to live with us last year, we didn't make a big deal about it," he said. "No special speeches. Fox said to him, 'Adam, this is my boyfriend, Walter. You can call him Uncle Walter, if you'd like.' And that was that. Sure, Adam had some questions. Basic ones, no searching for deep, philosophical meanings. Do we kiss? Yes, we said. Do you share your bed like Mommies and Daddies? Yes, we said. He said, 'Oh, ok.' Amanda may understand the mechanics, more than you realize, but the other three are probably still too young to know what questions to ask. Just say to them, 'Popi and Uncle Fox' or 'Popi and his boyfriend, Fox'. Deal with the questions later. If it's no big deal for you, it won't be for them. Pretend, if you need to." She nodded, playing with her food.

"You know, for a lawyer, you don't ask too many questions yourself," he said, holding his amusement. She flushed. And all in the same places that he did.

"I know what... men do together," she said with a thick West Virginia accent. He wondered just exactly how long she had lived in the state.

Skinner took a sip of his wine. "What would you like to know, Steph?" he asked.

She took a small bite of her salmon, chewing slowly.

"Do you love him?" she finally asked.

"Very much," he nodded. He could see thousands of questions crossing her face.

"When Adam is feeling lost without his mother, do you know what his question is?" Skinner asked. Stephanie shook her head. "He needs reassurance that Fox loved his mother."

Stephanie's hand shook and she made to stand. Skinner quickly reached out and held her arm, keeping her in the chair.

"You haven't asked me this," he said, keeping his voice low and out of hearing of the other patrons. "So I will tell you anyway. We were eighteen, Stephanie. Do you remember eighteen? We were both virgins and it was a hot, summer night at the shore of the Pacific Ocean. I loved your mother as much as any teenager could. I went to a God-awful country, to fight in a war that, at the time, I believed in. I didn't get one letter from Clare. I'm not going to call her a liar for whatever she told you, I'm sure she did write to me, but a lot of letters were lost between here and there. Since I was only there for four months before I had my guts blown apart, it's very possible that her letters ended up in a dead-heap someplace. Excuse the expression." He stared at her directly, noting her wet face. "I would have been there for you, if I had known. Without reservation. Been a champion diaper changer and bottle washer. Taken a million rolls of film for every First you had and shown them proudly. I can't change the past but I'm here now."

He drew a gentle finger across her high cheekbone. "There have been only a handful of people in my life that I can honestly say that I have loved. Yes, I loved your mother. Yes, I loved my wife, and yes, I love Fox. I love my sons, and I'd like the opportunity to learn to love my daughter."

He paid the bill and took her to Scully's where they could sit and talk in private. They talked for the rest of the afternoon. He even spoke honestly about his relationship with Scully.

Skinner had taken the burden from Stephanie and introduced Mulder himself. Calling Mulder his 'boyfriend' had raised nothing more than a nervous shift of feet from Amanda. Skinner could feel Stephanie begin to relax. Man, Skinner thought. And Alex tells me that I need the Ex-Lax.

The twins blocked Skinner in between them, taking his hands possessively while a nurse prepared the paperwork.

"Are you gonna have a owie, popi?" Ivan asked.

"Just a little one," Skinner assured him, and pointed to his hip. "Right here." Ivan examined the spot with a frown. He turned to the nurse.

"Don't you hurt my popi," he ordered her with a thrust of his jaw.

"Ivan!" Skinner shot an apologetic look at the nurse and picked Ivan up, settling him on his lap. "It'll be alright," he said quietly to the boy. "I know it doesn't make sense right now, but sometimes something has to hurt just a little bit for something good to happen. Do you understand?"

Ivan was clearly unhappy with the entire situation, and if Pavel's brooding glare was any indication, he wasn't happy either. Skinner used one arm to lift Pavel to the other leg.

"Are you going be sewed up like Uncle Fox?" Pavel asked. "And straws in your arm and have to walk to the baffroom in a ugly night-gown with your buns showing and stay here for weeks and weeks and...."

Skinner pulled Pavel's face into his chest and rained kisses on his head before taking his face and kissing his red, bow mouth.

"None of that, Pavie," Skinner promised. "Just two little needles and then I'll come home. That's it. I won't even stay here one night. Uncle Fox is going to take you to get something to eat, and maybe a movie if you ask him nice, and then you'll come back here and pick me up and we'll go home. If you'd like, maybe Aunt Dana will stay and watch me, just to make sure everything is ok. Would that be acceptable? We can call her right now."

Both boys reluctantly nodded. Skinner took Mulder's cell phone and dialed Scully.

"Could you come down to the hospital for the rest of the afternoon?" he asked her. "Pavel and Ivan are very worried and it would make them feel better if you were here to watch the procedure. Thank you."

He disconnected the signal. "It's all set," he told the boys. "Aunt Dana will be here very shortly. Would you like to wait for her?" The boys nodded and Skinner hugged them tightly. Mulder stepped in and Ivan lifted his arms for up. Mulder picked him up and shifted the boy to a hip while Pavel clung to a thigh.

"How about you, Adam," Skinner asked him. "Any worries?"

Adam shook his head. "I understand," he said. "Like a turkey squirter."

Everyone looked at him. "Like a what?" Skinner asked.

"A turkey squirter," Adam said. "You know, that thing that's like a big needle that you suck up the turkey juice in." He made a loud sucking noise, his cheeks hollowed out. "You suck up the turkey juice and then squirt it. The doctor is going to suck up your juice and squirt it into Bethany."

Even the nurses laughed. Skinner gave the boy a hug.

"Yes, exactly," he told Adam. "Boys, Adam has it right," he told the twins. "If Adam isn't afraid, you don't have to be either."

They looked dubious but gave Adam's theory some thought.

Skinner wasn't sure what Ramsey's problem was, but he was clearly disapproving of the boys. Asshole, he thought. Adam slapped his hands over his mouth, startled. Damn, Skinner said to himself, tightening his shields. He gave Adam a warning look, trying to keep his face stern but not quite succeeding. Remembering the age group in the room, Skinner glanced at Amanda. She had that curious, yet bored, teenager look, but there was no indication that she 'heard' anything. Cat, on the other hand, was looking at him wide-eyed.

He tried one of Mulder's experiments. Amanda, he thought directly at her. Adam winced and pulled away as did Cat. No response from Mandy.

The orderly came in and waved everyone out. The girls chattered away as they moved out to the waiting room with Stephanie and their grandparents.

"Fox," Skinner drew Mulder in close. He told Mulder what had just happened; or didn't happen. Mulder drew back and pulled on his lip thoughtfully. He lifted a shoulder.

"I'll mention it to Scully and the guys," he finally said.

As promised, Skinner was home by late evening. A dull ache permeated his body, especially his hip, but a couple of pain pills later, and he fell asleep surrounded by his very relieved boys. All four of them.

The next day her called the hospital and found that Bethany had come through the transplant like a trooper. She was completely isolated for a while, until her body began to manufacture white cells again. Only necessary personnel and her mother were allowed into her room. Time would tell if the transplant took. Her doctors would give her a couple of weeks. If there was too little or no improvement, Skinner would be going in for another withdrawal.

Skinner called Beth's room and got Stephanie. He couldn't talk to Bethany, she was asleep. Stephanie sounded wiped out, her voice hoarse and weak.

"Walter -thank you."

He spoke with her for a few minutes before letting her go back to watching over her daughter.

Skinner stared at the ceiling. He picked up the phone again.

"Ruin, how's life?" he said when Acting Sheriff Ruvin answered. "Am I missed or should I find a hobby in my old age?"

Ruvin began swearing in Spanish.

"I take it I'm missed?" Skinner asked, pleased with the response.

"There are only three of us working," Ruvin said. "I want my old job back. All this caca de toro is not for me! You come and get this paperwork, and all these calls from these officious government types who want information that I could care a less about. I'm tired of being tired. I want to go home and make love to my wife and hug my children instead of sleeping through dinner."

"So I take it you'll campaign for me?" Skinner asked.

"SI!" Ruvin hung up, muttering more swear words in Spanish.

Skinner redialed. "Hey, Em, ready with those campaign posters?" He held the phone away from his ears as she screeched.

"Put Mulder on the phone," she demanded. Skinner held the phone out to Mulder.

"Uh-huh," Mulder said into it. "Yeah. Will do. I'll tell him." He hung up, put his book down, and jumped Skinner.

Chapter 23: Strange Brew

Krycek had a new girlfriend.

Skinner could tell because he was behaving like a 14 year old. Sprawled half off the couch, head on the floor, talking on the phone with a silly smile and cute murmurings, Krycek snapped at anyone who picked up an extension to use.

"Alex, is there something wrong with your phone?" Skinner asked, after having to use his cell phone for the fifth time that day.

"Yes," he snapped with a frown. "Your damned dog chewed through the cord." He turned back to the phone, his frown immediately replaced by a complete smile with dimples.

Skinner looked down at Kisa.

"Good girl," he said, scratching her head. She thumped her tail on the floor.

Unfortunately, Skinner could listen to them all he wanted to but it wasn't going to get him anywhere -Krycek was speaking what sounded like Hebrew. He heard the word 'Yael' several times, so he assumed that it was the woman's name. Skinner went into the other room and picked up his cell phone again and dialed.

"What?!" he heard Krycek answer in stereo.

"I'm not paying for your three hour call to Israel, am I?" Skinner asked. Krycek snarled and clicked back to the first line.

Natti poked her head out of her bedroom door. "Alexei Valerii Krycek!" she called. "Invite the young lady over for dinner and get off the phone," she ordered him.

It took another twenty minutes, but Krycek finally hung up.

"God, can't a guy even make a phone call in peace?" he called out.

"Alex, for the past week, you've been on the phone almost 24 hours a day," Skinner said. "Give it a rest. Go visit her. Go on a date. At least tell us who she is."

He knew she was a she because he had answered the phone several times with the lady asking for Alex. He had been tempted to chat her up and find out more, but good manners over-came him.

The front door opened and Mulder came in. He hung up his coat and took his boots off, looking at Krycek still sprawled off the couch, trying to fend off Kisa who was trying to lick his face.

"Talking with your mystery woman again?" Mulder asked.

"Yes," Skinner answered for him. "For three hours before we cut him off." Mulder took his apple and finished it in a few bites.

"Come on, Alex, give," Mulder said. "Who is she? And what happened with Emilia?"

Krycek pouted. "Em's on a sabbatical," he grouched. "A sexual sabbatical. Can you believe that? Said it's her version of Lent. Only she does her sabbaticals for an entire year. Last year it was chocolate. This year it's sex."

"Bummer," Skinner said. Krycek frowned up at him.

"Was that a crack?" he growled. "Up yours, Skinner. So anyway. I met Yael in London quite a few years ago. Ran into each other on an assignment. She's my counter-part in Israel."

"Heaven help us all," Mulder said, shaking his head. Skinner agreed with the sentiment.

"Alexei Valerii???" Skinner questioned. He turned to Mulder. "According to Natti, he's Alexei Valerii."

Krycek kicked his legs over his head and rolled to his feet. He was in Skinner's face in an instant.

"Do you have a problem with that? *Walter Sergei*???" he snarled. Skinner held up his hands in surrender.

"Nope, not a one," he said.

"*Fox William*?" Krycek turned to him. Mulder formed a halo with his hands over his head. Krycek pointed a finger at them both in warning before straightening his shirt and going into the kitchen.

"Valerii???" Skinner mouthed at Mulder with a wince. "Ouch."

"Is kissing no longer in fashion?" he asked out loud. Mulder was on him in a flash. After several minutes of mouth to mouth, Skinner simply held him, drinking in the weight and scent of Mulder in his arms.

"Are you done hugging yet?" a small voice asked impatiently.

The men looked down to find the boys looking up at them.

"What if we're not?" Skinner asked them. He released Mulder but kept an arm around his shoulder.

"Couldn't you do it later?" Pavel asked. "You said we could go to Miss Emilia's with you tonight. It's six thirty-five o'clock." He pointed at the clock. "You said we could go when Uncle Fox got home at six thirty. Uncle Fox is home, so let's go."

Mulder stooped and picked him up, shaking him in the air.

"Pushy little devil, aren't you?" Mulder said to the giggling boy. He put a smack on Pavel's cheek and set him down. "Let me change out of my work clothes first. Go get your boots and jackets." The boys ran off and Mulder went upstairs to change. Skinner took a moment to call the hospital.

"Hi, how is she today?" he asked Stephanie when she answered.

"A little bit of a scare this morning," she said, sounding tired and worn out. "Her T-cell count went down a little but it's back up again. She's sleeping right now."

"You sound exhausted," Skinner said. "Are you getting any sleep?"

"What's sleep?" she countered. "I haven't been this tired since I had three children under six in the house."

"Well, then, you should know better," he said. "When the baby sleeps, so do you. I haven't had a baby in the house, but that's what Carlo says."

"I know," she said. "And for the most part, I do. I'm having a problem with Mandy at the moment. She needs my attention and I'm not there to give it to her. My in-laws are staying at the house with them while I'm here, but they have no idea what to do with a teenage girl. They have boys. Mandy is pulling one way and Mom and the Major are pulling the other way. I'm sorry, this isn't your problem," she apologized. "I'll deal with it later."

Mulder came down the stairs and sat to pull his boots on.

"Hang on a minute," Skinner said into the phone before covering it with his hand. "Fox, can I invite Amanda to come and stay a week?"

Mulder shrugged. "I don't mind," he said. The boys crowded in front of him, waiting. Skinner took his hand off the phone.

"Stephanie, would you like to give everyone a break and send Amanda here for a week?" he asked. "I'd like the chance to start getting to know them."

"Well... I..." she floundered. "What about school?" she asked.

"Have her teacher send work with her," Skinner said. "Carlo is a qualified teacher, he can oversee her work. I don't think he'd mind. If he doesn't have time, I'll ask one of the other teachers. I can pick her up and bring her here."

"You know what?" she said. "I'm just about at wit's end so I think I'll agree. If she wants to."

"Fair enough," Skinner said. "I have everyone standing here waiting for me, so give me a call in the morning, let me know."

"Are you done putzing around?" Emilia asked him as soon as they were in the door. The boys quickly kicked their boots off, flinging their coats to the floor before they were off with Kisa to run through the house.

"Boys!" Skinner and Mulder both yelled. They pointed to the coats and the boys came back, world weary, to pick them up.

"Playroom only," Skinner said. "No investigating the premises, no casing the joint, no dusting for fingerprints, no searching for hidden treasure, got it?"

"You're no fun, popi," Pavel complained, but they agreed before going off to play.

"Dusting for fingerprints?" Em questioned.

The men nodded. "The latest entry into the Manual," Skinner said. "They covered Carlo's house one day with talc powder and scotch tape. I warned Carlo but he didn't listen."

"And I hope you locked any doors that you'd rather they didn't open," Mulder said. Emilia began to nod and then rushed off down the hall in a panic. She was back a moment later, relieved.

"It was locked," she said.

"What was locked?" they asked.

"The adults playroom," she said.

Skinner was sure he didn't want to know.

"Uh, you said something about putzing around?" he said instead.

"Chicken," she said, turning to lead the way into the livingroom. "I'll get you naked one of these days," she informed him. "Yes, putzing. You have been leading me on a merry chase for two months now. How am I supposed to convince this town that they should vote for you if you're never around? The special election is scheduled for next month and you have hardly shown your face or anything else around here. How's that little girl of yours?"

Skinner took a moment with the sudden change of topic. "She's doing well, thank you," he said, touched that Emilia would be concerned.

"Good," Em said. "I've been prayin' for her, I hope you don't mind a little help from my side of the fence."

"Not at all, Em," Skinner said. "We'll take help from all corners. And I don't know about holding that vote for next month, it's our anniversary, we want to take a trip somewhere." Emilia screeched and put her hands on Skinner's neck, giving him a shake.

"You can't!" she yelled. "I'm calling Alex and I'm telling him to beat you up," she promised. Both men laughed.

"Not going to happen," Skinner said.

"Yeah, it takes three guys to hold him down before Alex can even get in one hit," Mulder told her.

"That's what Alex said about you," she told Mulder.

He shrugged with a dry grin. "I'm a lover, not a fighter," he said.

"Don't change the subject," she snapped at them. "You!" she pointed at Skinner. "Do you want to be Sheriff or don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said humbly.

"You!" she pointed at Mulder. "Stop distracting him!"

"Yes, ma'am," Mulder echoed Skinner's tone.

The finger swung to the diningroom table. "Sit!" The men sat.

"Am I distracting?" Mulder whispered to Skinner.

"Very," Skinner whispered back. They both shut up when Emilia glared at them. She plopped a set of papers down in front of them.

"Please go over these forms, fill out what ever you need to," she said, suddenly prim and proper. "They are questionnaires, for the most part. I tried to think up any question that might be asked by the residents of this town, and you'll need the same answer every time or else they'll think you're making things up. These are to help you get it straight in your mind first. I also need you to ok the posters. Since you've been avoiding me, I got a selection of photos from Mulder." She opened a folder, taking out a pile of miniature posters to be enlarged. Skinner shifted through them and groaned.

"Fox, these look like those Play Girl pictures before the guy strips," he complained.

"So what?" Mulder and Emilia said together.

Skinner waved a hand over them. "So... so, if I'm going to be hired as Sheriff, I want it to be as a professional law keeper, not a Pro."

Em shifted and cocked a hip. "Walter, in case you haven't noticed, this town is filled with people who are female, gay men, and people who just plain like you. You may be living with a man, but you are macho enough for the Latins and butch enough for the gay men. Everyone knows how good a job you can do, this is just a reminder of how good you look filling a uniform. And anything else you wear or don't wear."

"I'm not macho," Skinner frowned. Macho was those ya-hoos taking the truck for 360's while tossing beer cans by the dozen in the back. Macho was hanging out at the bar, dressed in cowboy boots and large buckles, with wide-brimmed hats, spitting chewing tobacco and talking with a drawl that made speech almost sound like a different language....

"And who's been teaching the boys carpentry and home repair?" Mulder asked.

Skinner poked him in the arm. "Don't you start that again," he warned. "Everyone should know how to keep up their home."

"This one," Mulder said to Emilia, tapping a picture. Skinner looked at it. He was reclining across the hood of a police car, leaning on a hand, one long leg bent, uniform shirt half unbuttoned, chewing on a straw as he melted the camera with a steamy gaze.

"No, Fox," he whined. He didn't intend to look like that, but Mulder had seriously kissed him just before snapping the picture.

"I agree," Emilia said. Unfortunately for Skinner, she was agreeing with Mulder.

Skinner sifted through the pictures, dismayed to find all the photos that Mulder classified as 'hot'. "Here, how about this one?" he said, pushing one out of the pile. They both shook their heads.

"You look hot, sexy, and entirely too imposing," Mulder said. Em agreed with him again.

"Yes, you should look approachable," she said. "That one makes you look like a goon at a night club."

"What about that one?" he said, pointed to another picture. They shook their heads.

"Makes you look too butch," Mulder said.

Skinner didn't get it. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"You look like one of the Village People," Em said. "It would completely turn off the Latin and Black population, and the Lesbians wouldn't be able to take you seriously."

The Village People?? Skinner took the picture and tore it up.

The boys came in and gathered around the men, looking over shoulders and under arms.

"I like this one," Adam said, pointing to one. Skinner picked it up. He was sitting in one of the porch chairs, a glass of iced tea in one hand, smiling at something one of the boys had said.

"Why do you like this one?" he asked Adam.

"Because, it makes you look nice," Adam said. "I mean, you *are* nice, but this one make you look nice." The twins nodded their heads.

Mulder and Emilia looked at the picture.

"He's right," Em conceded. "We'll send the sexy one to Play Girl and keep the nice one."

"What's Play Girl?" the boys asked.

"Scully's here," Mulder said, seeing her car as they pulled up to their house.

The boys were completely puzzled as to why men would want to put naked pictures in a magazine and why women would want to buy them. They got out of the car and ran into the house with the puppy.

Skinner's heart raced with anxiety, knowing that his lover was about to be hurt by the conversation that he and Scully needed to have with him.

"Hey, Scul," Mulder said as they entered the livingroom. Skinner nodded to her.

"Natti, would you keep the boys occupied for a while?" Skinner asked her. She nodded and went to find them.

"Fox, we need to talk with you," Skinner said. "Let's go downstairs." Puzzled, Mulder went down. With the door newly put back on the frame, Skinner was able to shut it and give them privacy.

Scully sat on the couch with Mulder between them.

"I'm not going to like this, am I?" he asked apprehensively. Skinner sat sideways, facing him.

"No, I don't think you will," he said honestly. "Fox, I... we... Dana and I love each other, Fox. But we're not in love. We're comfortable in the relationship that we've developed and we don't want to change it."

Mulder folded back against the couch, frowning, lacing and unlacing his fingers. "You said you'd like a threesome," Mulder said, swallowing hard, not looking at Skinner.

"I know I did," Skinner said. "I don't have a problem with the concept of a threesome, but only if it's with someone I was in love with. I thought I was in love with Dana. Maybe I was, but it was years ago. I enjoy being with her, I enjoy making love with her. But it's comfortable, safe. And that's no slight toward you, Dana." He reached across Mulder's thighs and took Scully's hand. "We had fun. I want you to find someone that will rock your world and I'm not that person." Scully smiled and wiped her cheeks, sniffled. She gave his hand a squeeze and released it, taking Mulder's. Skinner took his other hand, feeling it clench tightly, threatening to pull away, but Mulder didn't.

"Fox," she said, sniffing again. "I love you, you know I do. And I know you love me. But I'm not your lover anymore, Walter is. People change, Fox. We have all grown and we each have different needs. You need Walter, not me."

Mulder pulled his hands free and shot up. "Don't tell me what I need, Dana!" he shouted. He stomped a few steps away, turning his back. "I... I love you," he said in a husky voice. "I love Walter, too. After all the three of us have been through, we should be together."

Skinner stood up and went up to Mulder. "We are together, Fox," he said quietly. "We don't have to share beds to be together. We are each other's family and that will never change. Yes, we have been through a lot together and that's what will keep us together, not sex."

Mulder spun around, giving his face a hasty wipe. "You're making me choose, Walter, you said you wouldn't make me choose," he spat out. Mulder turned and took the stairs two at a time, slamming the door behind him.

Skinner bowed his head. "I've lost him, Dana," he whispered. He heard a rustle and felt her next to him. Scully put her hands on his shoulders.

"You haven't lost him," she said. "He's angry and upset. He needs space to think, he always has. He'll cry himself out, get angry some more, cry again, maybe get drunk. He'll spend some time looking through photo albums, mourning the past, and then he'll be ready to get on with things. You'll find him quiet and thoughtful, maybe a few more tears. Hold him, rock him, croon to him. He'll be fine."

"What if he is in love with both of us?" Skinner asked. Scully drew her fingers over his cheeks.

"He isn't," she said with assurance. "He's in love with the past. He's trying to make things the way they were and it isn't working which is why he's angry. You have every right to ask him to choose, you married him, I didn't. He needs to wake up and make a decision." Skinner felt a choke hold on his throat and buried his face in Scully's neck.

He had lost his Fox.

Scully went home after kissing Skinner's cheek, and Skinner got the boys to bed quietly, telling them that Uncle Fox was angry and just needed time alone. Skinner had a hard time looking Adam in the face, seeing the man he loved there. Adam's chin quivered and Skinner shushed him. The tears fell over.

"We argued, that's all," he said in Adam's ear as he held the boy. "Yes, it was a bad argument, but just let us work it out. No matter what happens, you will always be my nephew and Fox will always be your father."

Krycek had taken one look at everyone and surprisingly didn't say a word. He got the twins into the pj's and into bed, was even patient enough to read to them. He took Kisa upstairs with him for the night.

Skinner tucked Adam in, checked in on the twins, and went to bed. Alone. He tucked Mulder's pillow to him and turned over, his shoulders shaking.

In the morning, Mulder was still gone. Skinner got the boys ready for school, giving them extra long hugs, assuring them that he loved them and so did Uncle Fox.

He called Stephanie, but wouldn't discuss what she could hear in his voice. He could pick up Amanda in two days, on Saturday, if he liked. He did like. He needed the distraction, more than anything else at the moment. He spent the rest of the day in front of the TV. Later in the day the phone rang and he looked anxious when Natti answered it. It was Mulder but she handed the phone to Adam who passed it to the twins who then hung up. They didn't know where he was.

Skinner didn't hear from Mulder until the next evening. He was called by Emilia who requested his presence in one hour. He let Natti know he would be gone and paced for an hour.

There were five other cars at Emilia's house. Scully's was one of them. Confused, Skinner rang the doorbell. To his surprise, Krycek answered the door. He was wearing a black robe tied closed with a rope belt.

"Come in," he said, motioning Skinner inside.

"Alex, what...?"

Krycek shook his head.

"Follow me," he said. He led Skinner down the hall and turned on a bathroom light. "Take a shower and put this robe on." He handed Skinner a white robe from the back of the door. He shut the door. Skinner was even more confused. The door opened again and Krycek poked his head in. "Every inch," he said, pointing from head to foot. He shut the door.

Seeing that Krycek was in a mood to be obeyed, Skinner took his shower. From head to foot. Knowing Krycek, he'd insist on checking. Just minutes after the water was turned off, there was a knock at the door.

"You ready?" he heard Krycek call out. Skinner opened the door, tying his own rope belt.

"Ready for what? Alex, what's going on?" he asked urgently.

"Nothing that will be done against your will," came the ambiguous reply.

Skinner found himself following Krycek down the hall to a door that he had seen but had never been in. He had always felt a strange urge to stay away from it. A man he had never

seen before stood at the door. Skinner would know if Denzel Washington's twin lived in town.

"Do you enter of your own free will?" the man asked Skinner.

"Do I... *Aleeeexx...*" Skinner turned to Krycek. He saw something that he had never seen before in Krycek; a light of peace on his face.

"Trust me, Walter," he said quietly.

Skinner found himself agreeing. What was Krycek up to?

He followed the stranger down a flight of stairs into a cellar that he didn't know the house had. It was warm, lit with candles everywhere. The floor was covered in pillows, except for the very center where they had been cleared out. Emilia stood there in a black robe, along with another stranger, a man also in a black robe. Mulder was with them, kneeling in the middle wearing a white robe.

Skinner was flanked by Krycek and the stranger as they stood still, just outside the circle of the others. He began to speak but was shushed by Krycek. They seemed to be waiting for something. Or someone. Scully was escorted into the room by two women, neither of whom Skinner had seen before. Scully was in a white robe, while the others were in black.

She stood near Skinner and looked over at him. He shrugged, he didn't know what was going on either. The air was thick with candle heat and incense.

"This is sacred space," Emilia said, breaking the silence. "All who enter are free of their earthly confinements. No lies are spoken, no truths left unsaid. Nothing is hidden." Everyone in black robes untied their belts and dropped their robes to the floor, remaining naked.

"We are aware that you are not of our spiritual path, and no one here will seek to change your own personal ideology" she continued. "This Circle, however, is not one of spirituality. This Circle gathered here tonight is at the request of Fox, who has asked for neutral space and for the intervention of a Monitor. What he has to say is extremely personal. Rest assured that nothing said here, nothing done here, will leave here. I will not speak to you of it once we are outside and neither will Alex. It will not have happened. Unless you specifically request it. Will you enter this Circle of your own free will and accept this intervention?" Emilia waited, her skin glowing with the candle light.

"I will," he heard Scully say. He got the impression that she knew these people. There weren't too many people that she felt safe with but she seemed at ease here. Mulder stood up as Scully was escorted to the center. They stood next to each other. Scully reached out a hand but Mulder stepped back.

"Walter?" Emilia asked. Skinner swallowed his pride and stepped forward.

"I will," he said.

"Trust," he heard Krycek whisper next to him. He turned. Krycek was naked also. Krycek and his other escort walked him to the center. Skinner drank in the sight of Mulder. He looked pale and exhausted, but he was keeping himself together.

"Fox, do you have anything to hide from Dana or Walter?" Emilia asked.

"No," Mulder said, his voice a little husky. Skinner wasn't sure because of the light from the candles, but he thought that Mulder's eyes were bloodshot. Mulder untied his robe and dropped it to the floor, standing nude before them.

"Dana, do you have anything to hide from Fox or Walter?" Em asked her.

"Nothing," Scully said. To Skinner's surprise, she dropped her robe, too. They were both beautiful, perfect with their skin aglow.

"Walter, do you have anything to hide from Fox or Dana?" Emilia asked him. Skinner looked at his friends and lovers, feeling strengthened by their very presence.

"No, I don't," he said. He untied his robe and dropped it to the floor.

Skinner had seen Emilia's public rituals before and they were nothing like this. Everyone was naked this time but there was nothing sexual about it. Instead, it seemed to bind them together. None of the strangers were any that Skinner had seen at the public rituals. This must be her Inner Circle, he thought, remembering a piece of one of Mulder's lectures. Mulder said that the Inner Circle is the most powerful of the Coven. And since when is Krycek....? Skinner wondered what was going to happen.

Krycek and 'Denzel', and the two women that escorted Scully, joined Emilia and the other man, forming a circle around the three in the center.

Behind him, Emilia spoke again.

"Each of you will have the chance to open yourselves to each other," she said. "No interruptions while one is speaking, even if it takes all night. Fox will go first, since this meeting is at his request. Listen with your hearts, not just your ears. Sit. Fox?"

They all sat on the pillows, spreading the robes out, facing each other. Mulder sat with his head bowed, gathering himself. Skinner didn't notice the low hum that began.

"First, I love you both so much," he said, clearing his voice. "I'm sorry I've caused all this to happen to us. I would never hurt either of you for anything in the world, and here I've gone and hurt us all so bad." He sniffed and swiped at his cheek. "Dana, I'll start with

you. When you entered my life, you were so young and naive. I couldn't believe that fresh face was so eager to dig into dead bodies. You looked like a co-ed. When you didn't scare off easily, I became intrigued. I didn't realize that I had gone and fallen in love with you until I thought you were dead. I was ready to sell my soul for you. Someone beat me to it. I took too long making my intentions known, I know that. I was afraid. Everyone else that I loved had gone away and I didn't want you to leave me, too, so I kept quiet. When you asked for my help in getting pregnant, I was jealous. Of the baby. It would have come between us and I was too selfish to want that. But your happiness came first, so I agreed. Having my own son now, I know that the baby wouldn't have come between us, I would have. I cried so hard when the baby was lost. For you and for her, for the new love that I was just beginning to feel.

"I haven't been able to see the woman that you've become. You're more centered, more aware of what you want, stronger and happier. I do love you, Dana. I think that what has hurt the most is discovering that I'm in love with the you of the past. That person who looks up at me starry-eyed, willing to lie to the Supreme Court for me, go to jail for me, who accepts me as I am. In my own self-interest, I didn't see you. You needed someone to be there for you and I wasn't. I haven't been. I'd tell myself that I loved you, all the while wanting to get home to Walter and our sons. I've been so unfair to you. Please forgive me, Dana, I love you so much and I only want your happiness." Mulder bent low, his head on his crossed legs as he cried out the last few words. Scully wailed and threw her arms out, encircling him. Skinner took a deep breath, trying to clear the rock in his throat as they cried on each other. They released their arms enough to touch and kiss. A hand put a box of tissues next to them. Skinner didn't see who it was, the entire area outside their triangle seemed to be pitch black even though he could see the candles still burning. He took a tissue and wiped his own face.

To Skinner's horror, he saw Mulder take his ring off.

"Walter, I... I have never felt anything as intensely as when I'm with you," he said, twisting the ring between his fingers. " Sometimes it scares me. I would be perfectly happy to spend the rest of my days doing nothing except being near you. I didn't trust you when I first met you, and I think you can agree that you didn't trust me either. We know why. When you began stepping out for us, and speaking up for us, I noticed. Strange things began begging for attention. Your aftershave, the way your eyes darken, how soothing your voice is. Sometimes I got angrier because I felt that I had a right to be angry at all the confusion that you were causing to my hormone levels but the sound of your voice kept driving my anger away. You would touch my shoulder or shake my hand and I'd feel electric shocks. I would think, 'great, I'm in love with my partner and lusting after my boss'. Typical Mulder weirdness.

"When you began being hurt because of us, because of me, you could have protected yourself and stopped defending us. But you didn't. You kept right on. I thought you had something going for Dana, but when you backed me through some things I also won't mention here, it shocked me to the core that you might have feelings for me. Feelings other than wanting to punch my lights out for putting you through all that crap. Dana

once said something about seeing a person in a different light. You began glowing like a supernova. I think my biggest shock was after all this mess. I was paid a visit by a brother that I didn't know I had, even though he had tried to kill me several times, and we all came close to doing him in. We got to talking and he spilled the beans on you. You should have seen your face when I kissed you on the porch. I thought you were going to have a heart attack. But God those fireworks! I wish I'd have done it sooner. You give me life, Walter, you make me believe that no matter what happens, everything will be alright just because you say so. No one has stood by me like you do, no one else but you would have stormed the Hoover and kissed me in front of all those men except you. You could have taken me on the floor or bent over a desk right then and there and I wouldn't have cared who was watching.

"I think I was doing fine until Dana began seeing someone. Someone who's name she wouldn't give us. When we found out who it was, I thought I was ok with it. I'll talk with you later, Alex. I didn't realize that it would effect me like that. All I could think of was that she was being taken away from us again. She was ours and how dare he. It was making me crazy and I didn't know it. I wanted her with us. I wanted to protect that sweet, naive co-ed who had the balls to tell Einstein he was wrong. In not having faith in Dana to make her own decisions about her love life, I hurt you, Walter. You've risked your life for me, you put your trust in me, your faith in me, you've loved me, told the world to go to hell to be with me, and I failed you." Mulder held out the ring with shaking fingers, sniffing and rubbing at his eyes.

"Take it, Walter," he said. "I want to earn that back from you, if you'll give me the chance. Please, Walter. Don't send me away, give me one more chance to prove how much I love you. Please forgive me."

Skinner grabbed the ring and pulled Mulder to him, crying into his hair as Mulder sobbed loudly on his chest. Mulder's arms went around his waist, squeezing the air from him. Skinner had never felt anything more welcome in his life.

"I'm sorry!" Mulder cried out. "I love you so much, I'm sorry!" Skinner held him as he kept repeating his mantra.

Skinner stroked his hair and back, everywhere he could reach. "Don't, babe, you'll make yourself sick," he said in Mulder's ear, barely able to talk. "I love you, Fox, I don't know how else to tell you, to make you understand that. Maybe if Dana and I told you up front how we felt, this wouldn't be happening, but we tried to make a go of it, for you, Fox." Skinner sniffed and lifted Mulder's head, forcing him to look Skinner in the eyes. They both looked like shit from all the crying and stress.

"We can't be forced into being in love," he said. "I'm already in love, with you, you goon. Someone recently asked me if I need the passion before I slept with someone. No, I don't need the passion. But if I'm going to make a commitment to someone, yes, I need the passion. You make me passionate, Fox. I love Dana, and at one time there was passion, but no longer. We've been together for two years now, you and I, and you still make me

hot. If I need to make love with you right here in front of these people in order to prove that to you, I will." He stroked the tears from Mulder's face, touched his lips with his fingertips.

"We are your family, Fox. Don't push us away in your anxiety to keep us together. You are not alone, you will never be alone. We will always be here with you. Me and Dana, Adam and the twins, even Alex and Natti are all here for you. I know that Adam, Alex and the twins are your only blood relatives but this is your chance to chose your family, when most people can't. By choosing us, you are willing to fight to keep us together, excluding all outside forces. Will you fight for us, Fox? Will you fight to keep me?" He gave Mulder a shake. More tears fell.

"Yes," Mulder croaked, trying to nod his head which was captured between Skinner's hands. "Just us, no more pushing for more. I have so much, I've been so blessed these past few years. You are the center of my universe, my best friend, my lover, my husband. I know that I have a family and I'm proud to have all of you walking at my side. In trying to pull Dana into our circle, I had forgotten that she was already there. I'll fight for us, Walter, anything. I know you love me, you will always be my choice. There is nothing you have to prove to me, but I need to prove myself to you. Tell me what I can do." Skinner leaned forward and kissed him. "Nothing, Fox. By bringing us here, you have proven all you will ever need to." He picked up Mulder's left hand and slid the ring back on. "I told you before, Fox, I take my vows seriously. I married you, not Dana. I will fight to keep us together. It will take a hell of a lot more than your anxiety attacks to keep us apart. Emilia, I know it's early, but would you renew our vows right now? I believe that the next contract calls for five years."

Suddenly, Skinner could see the rest of the room. No lights had been turned on, the candles still burned, but it seemed to him as though a veil had been lifted from his eyes. Em stepped into their space, her own face conspicuously wet.

"Fox, do you agree to a five year contract with Walter?" she asked.

"I do," Mulder said, staring at Skinner.

She put out a hand and helped Scully to her feet. She touched both the men on the shoulders before walking to the outer circle to stand next to Krycek. 'Denzel' stepped into the center and stood opposite of Emilia. Skinner made to rise, but Em signaled him to stay on his knees with Mulder. This wasn't like it was lastyear. There was also another man's penis close to his face but he didn't seem to care as he stared at Mulder.

Em held out her hands over them, one palm up and the other down. Her partner positioned his to mirror hers and they locked their hands together, keeping Skinner and Mulder in the center of the circle of their arms. The High Priest, Skinner realized. Nothing was said, but he felt the hairs on his body stand up as the room blacked out again. A compulsion hit him and he took Mulder's hands, staring into Mulder's eyes. He felt a breeze, but there were no windows in the room, nor a fan. The candle flames

remained steady. All the hurt and pain that he had been feeling was suddenly gone, his heart, soul, and mind were calmed and centered. Centered on Mulder. Mulder had stopped crying, the waterworks turned off suddenly as though a faucet had been shut off. Mulder gasped and Skinner wondered what he had felt. Skinner had an immediate sense that a rope of some sort had been attached to his heart, tossed out, and knotted with a second rope coming from Mulder. The knots dissolved and formed a single thread that stretched between them.

He could *feel* Mulder. What an amazing sensation! He was seeing himself from the eyes of another person. Did he really radiate like that to Mulder?

~Yes~ he heard echo in his head.

~Fox?~

Skinner heard a rambling of bad love sonnets stream through his mind, echoing off into a mediaeval wilderness.

~*I make you think of poetry?*~ he thought.

~*You are poetry*~ he heard. Skinner felt a brush of pain behind his words. A sense of dozens of people filled him along with a void between them and him, Mulder. A sense of aloneness.

~*You feel alone, Fox? Why?*~ Skinner asked him.

~*You have so many people who love you and care for you. I know it isn't your fault, it's no one's fault, it's just life. I can deal with it.*~

Skinner was dismayed. ~*God, Fox, no! You are not alone! You belong with them just as much as I do! You have Adam and Alex. You're still fertile, if you want more kids, just say so. We can find someone willing to surrogate for you. I would love to hold your baby. I'm your family. Pavel and Ivan are your family, hell they're Alex's clones, that makes them more your brothers than nephews. Fox, I...*~ How could he make Mulder understand? Through Mulder's eyes, he saw himself begin to brighten, the radiant light around him becoming as luminous as the Sun, stretching out and enveloping Mulder. He felt Mulder's Awareness jump in shock before taking a deep gasping breath, as though suddenly rescued just before being swept away in a strong tide.

~*Walter???*~

~*I love you, Fox. Now do you understand?*~

~*I... no one has ever... made me feel like that before.*~

~*Fox*~

~Who?~ they said together. A third party had entered their private conference. The feminine presence felt familiar but Skinner couldn't place it. An image of a white haired woman filled them.

~Mom???!~ Mulder's Awareness cried out. Teena Mulder? Skinner thought.

~Yes, Fox~ she said. ~Hello, Walter.~

~Mrs... Mrs. Mulder~ he stumbled.

Her spirit raised an amused eyebrow and looked over his nude body still kneeling on the floor of the Circle. ~Oh, I think we can dispense with the formalities, Walter. Teena will do. Or Mom if you'd like. Ah-hem. Fox William, I'm only going to say this once, so listen carefully.~

~Yes, ma'am,~ Mulder said in his best 'son' voice.

~Quit being a boob.~

~!?!~

~You heard me. All your life, you've put yourself into these fits of self-doubt, now snap out of it. It's my fault that you don't have a family, so if you want to lay the blame somewhere, here I am. Lay it on me, I'll bring it to the Big Guy myself. Or Big Girl, in Emilia's frame of reference. Whatever. I've seen Him dressed like a goat, too. I think it's funny. Anyway. I had to keep you alone when you were little, Fox. Our entire world was filled with people likehim. If I allowed you to associate with them, you would have become one of them. Your cousins, aunts and uncles we kept away from for the same reason. To protect them. Alright, so they don't know you and you don't know them. It would be easy enough for you to find them, if you wanted to. But I'd suggest you clean your own house before you go messing with someone else's first. Reach out, Fox. Don't be afraid. You've made yourself a wonderful family, enjoy them, be happy with them. You don't need a million crazy Italians knocking on your door to make you happy.~

~Hey!~

~Really, Walter, you deny it?~

~Well, no...~

~Keep quiet then. Go and love your son, Fox, he's a beautiful boy. He looks so much like you at that age. And don't worry about his development, he'll be fine. Walter's idea of surrogate is a good one. There are three souls waiting in the wings with your name on them, if you want them. You are going to need a larger house, in any case. Trust me on this. Don't make my mistakes, Fox, don't push people away. It's too late to change the

past, but you can change your future. Being with Walter is exactly where you're supposed to be. I thought it was with Dana, but once I got beyond the Veil, I knew that she wasn't the one for you. Walter was. Imagine my surprise. I learned something over here, Fox. The soul has no gender, it is simply filled with love. No DNA is involved, no genetics to say who you should love. No color, no race, no religion or ideology. Just pure spirit. The world is your family, Fox.~

~I love you, Mom. I miss you.~

~I miss you, too, son. And I love you more than I can ever say. Take care of my baby, Walter.~

~I will, Teena. Mom.~

~I bless this union~ she declared to the Universe.

She was gone as suddenly as she came.

~Walter~

Another presence joined them.

~Mama??~ he breathed, shocked to see the familiar face of his own mother. She bent and he felt a whisper of a kiss on his cheek. He choked as her scent filled him, making him heartsick for her to hold him again.

~Shhh, don't, carino,~ he heard her croon. *~I'm so happy that you found everyone again. Ginny missed you so much. She prayed for you every day. You don't know this, but you were her favorite nephew. I had a hard time with your birth, you were a big baby, and I was a little weak after, so Ginny stayed with us for just a while and helped me with you. Dominic was so jealous of you, taking his mama's attention from him. You know that tiny scar you have on your finger? Dominic's teeth made it. But don't be mad at him, he was only a toddler and he didn't know better.~*

~You have found where you're supposed to be, Walter. I don't think I could have accepted this while I was still with you, but knowing what I do now, I'm just glad that you have someone to love and to share your life with. The twins are yours, never fear that they will be taken from you. They were supposed to be yours from the start, it was important that they be in your life. So arrangements were made. Yes, someone else's genes made them, but they're souls are marked for you. They are your sons in everything that counts. Be patient with Stephanie, her grandparents raised her more than her mother did, so she's a little on the defensive side. She has a lot of shields, pick away carefully and slowly at them. You and she have been siblings in so many other lifetimes. Your current position with her is a little unusual and she's feeling the awkwardness of it. I think you are beginning to sense it, too. She's too old now to accept you as a father figure, so just be her friend. Be her big brother.~

~Fox, his father spent his life showing him love and then pushing him away when he needed more love. Don't do that to him. He's been starved for attention so give him all he can take and then push some more on him. Yes, he acts the big, strong, tough guy, but he needed to be or else he'd be walked all over. He's really a big fluff ball.~

~Mama!~

~You are, Walter. Fox, if he wants to give you flowers and candy and stuffed bears, let him. If he wants to croon sappy love songs in your ears, let him. Immerse yourself in his attentions. I can guarantee you that you'll have more attention than you'll know what to do with.~

~Thank you, Maria, I will,~ Mulder said.

Skinner looked at her. She looked so young and beautiful.

~Stop that, Walter, you'll make me outshine the Archangels. They can get a little cranky about that,~ she said.

~I miss you, mama,~ he said. *~I love you.~*

~I miss you, too, caro. And I love you so very much.~

She raised her arms and face skyward.

~I give blessings to this union~ she called out before vanishing.

The Universe gave a jerk and suddenly Skinner found himself on solid ground, feeling the weight of the world again. He was back in his own body, staring at Mulder, holding hands.

"The Union of Walter and Fox is now complete," Emilia said out loud. She released her hands and clapped them once. Skinner jumped, startled at the crack. Once more, the world came back into focus.

"What was that?" Skinner breathed out loud as he stared in wonder at Mulder.

"Just a little playtime on the astral plane," Emilia said. "Don't worry, nothing happened against your will. Stand up, guys."

Still holding hands, Skinner and Mulder stood. Skinner released his hands and touched Mulder's face before pulling him into his arms.

"Were they really here, Fox?" he whispered in Mulder's ear. Mulder tightened his arms and nodded.

"I think so," he said. "I can smell her."

Skinner slid his hands down Mulder's bare back and remembered that they were all naked.

"Um," he began. Em chuckled and he felt the robe go around his shoulders just as one was placed around Mulder by 'Denzel'.

"You have nothing to be ashamed of, Walter," she said. "And neither does Mulder. Turn and face me, please."

The men turned, still linked by their hands. Skinner resisted the urge to close and tie his robe, instead he stood proudly before her. Em gave him a slight nod of acknowledgment. Despite her own extra fifty pounds or so, she held herself regally. Skinner could understand what attracted Krycek.

"Somehow, the bonds between you came undone," she said with a frown of contemplation. "We have repaired and strengthened them. It is up to you both to make sure they stay that way. I think that you're going to find yourselves exclusive, which means don't even try to bring someone else into your relationship, it will backfire on all of you. My choices concerning my relationships works for me, that doesn't mean you have to make it work for you. Follow your own hearts. Mulder, how are you feeling? More centered and calm?"

Mulder nodded. "Yes. I didn't realize it before, but I was feeling -lost- is the only word I can think of."

Em nodded and cast a look to her partner. Skinner decided that he didn't understand the look and he wasn't sure he wanted to. The evening had been weird enough as it was.

"Well, be that as it may, you're alright now. Your contract is renewed for five years and a day. Walter, do you accept the terms of agreement of that contract and pledge yourself to Fox?"

"I do," he said.

"Fox, do you accept the terms of agreement of that contract and pledge yourself to Walter?"

"I do," Mulder said.

"As witnesses to your pledge, we acknowledge your rite of marriage. May blessings continue to rain down upon you. Heard and witnessed!"

"Heard and witnessed!" everyone yelled in echo.

Skinner turned to Mulder and kissed him, wrapping their arms around each other as they opened their mouths. Skinner thought he'd never be able to hold and kiss Mulder again, and yet here he was, suddenly renewing their vows, standing naked in front of strangers, holding his lover, kissing him, tasting his mouth. To Skinner's great concern, he felt the lower half of his body begin to respond. He broke away and hesitated. Emilia's partner chuckled.

"It's alright, Walter," he said, his voice a velvety bass. "Pan is a frequent visitor here. The energy of ritual causes it, just ignore it. Or do something about. The choice is yours. There are certainly enough pillows in here."

Skinner cleared his throat and looked at Mulder's glittering eyes. "I, uh, I think we'll wait until we get home to do something about it."

"Good idea," Mulder said.

"Chickens," Krycek spoke up.

"Shut up," both Skinner and Mulder said. The others laughed.

"Oh, and Walter?" the man said. "My name is Michael, not Denzel."

Emilia stepped forward. "We need to speak privately for a moment with Walter, Fox, Dana and Alex." The others gathered their robes and left the room, chatting, not at all put out by her request. "I'll be straight with you on this," she said to them seriously. "Michael and I heard every word your Visitors said to you, just as we heard everything you said to each other. We heard what you said about the twins and Alex."

Skinner wasn't the only one pausing and stiffening in alarm. Em held up a hand.

"Your secret is safe with us," she said. "I understand now, why you go out of your way to protect the twins over Adam. I had thought that you were being a little unfair, making a preference of one child over another, but knowing this; if word got out about them, they'd be taken away and used as lab rats in a circus."

Everyone nodded, relieved that she understood their situation.

"We make ourselves known to you for this," Michael said. "As Pagans in a Christian world, we understand the need to protect our own. If something ever happens, know that you have an entire community of hundreds of thousands of people to fall back on in your time of need. The Burning Times still lives as a constant fear within our hearts and souls. If you need, we will hide your children for you."

Skinner held out his hand to Michael and had it shook in a firm grip. Before he knew it, he had been pulled into a hug against the man's bare body, and his mouth brushed.

"Blessed be, Walter," Michael said, releasing him.

They were quiet on the way home after having sent Scully on her way with prolonged hugs.

"That was seriously weird, Fox," Skinner said, breaking the silence. Mulder squeezed his thigh.

"Weird doesn't cover it," Mulder said. "I think I'm going to write this up as an X-File and put it in my private collection." He leaned down and put his head on Skinner's shoulder, snuggling in with happy sounds. Skinner looked down at him and smiled, placing a kiss on the top of Mulder's head.

"I missed you, babe," he said.

"Missed you," Mulder murmured sleepily.

"Fox? Next year, if Adam wants to set out a plate for his mother, I think we should let him."

"Mmmmm," came the sleepy reply.

After calming the boys down and taking an ecstatic Kisa out, they changed and got into bed.

"Just hold me tonight?" Mulder asked, leaning on an elbow to look down at Skinner. He wrapped his arms around Mulder and pulled him close.

In the morning, Skinner's irritation was on the rise again as Krycek paced the house, watching the clock.

"What is your problem?" he finally snapped. Krycek whipped his head around, giving an equal glare.

"I'm waiting for the 10am," he said.

"10am what?" Skinner asked.

"Flight," Krycek said, rolling his eyes. "10am flight, Mr. Nosy."

Skinner looked at the clock. He reached up, lifted it off the wall, and reset it, bringing the hands forward an hour before putting it back on the wall.

"If you're going into the city for a 10am flight, don't you think you'd better get moving?" he suggested. Krycek looked at the reset time. "You forgot to reset the clocks last night, Alex," Skinner said. Krycek panicked and shot out the door, the newspaper flying behind him and settling to the floor.

"What was that?" Mulder asked, coming down the stairs rubbing his face.

"Alex," Skinner said. "He forgot to reset the clocks so now he's late for an appointment."

Mulder looked at the clock in confusion. "You reset the clocks last night," he said. Skinner took the clock back down and set it back.

"I know that," he said. "I was just torquing him."

Mulder chuckled and put his arms around Skinner, holding him tight before locking his arms around Skinner's neck and kissing him. Skinner hummed in contentment and nibbled his way down to Mulder's neck.

"Again?" a small voice complained. The men looked down at the boys.

"Make up your mind," Skinner said. "Do you want us fighting or hugging?"

Pavel turned and shuffled into the kitchen, waving his hands at them in a mirror image of his older self. Adam held out his arms and Mulder picked him up, just as Skinner picked up Ivan. They carried their sons into the kitchen. Adam was giggling as Mulder buzzed him in various places on his head and neck.

"Can we go with you to get Amanda?" Ivan asked as Skinner sat him in a chair.

"No, not this time," he said. "I'd like a chance to be alone with her and get to know her a little before I spring you boys on her." He tweaked Ivan's ear as he sat down. "Just remember, she has sisters, not brothers."

"Will she play with us?" Pavel asked.

"She might," Skinner said. "You'll have to ask her. She's a lot older than you are, so she might want to go and find kids her own age to play with."

The phone rang and Skinner reached up to answer it.

"Skinner," he said.

"Hi, Popi," he heard a young girl's voice say.

"Hi, honey, how are you feeling today," he asked Bethany. It tickled him to hear the girls call him that.

"Tired but good," she said. She sounded weak. "I tried calling you on the computer but you haven't been on."

"I know," he said. "I'm sorry, it's been very busy here lately. Have you been able to talk with your mother and everyone else on it?"

"Yeah, it's really cool, thank you for giving it to me."

Skinner indicated the coffee and Mulder got up and poured him a cup. "You're welcome. Amanda will be here this afternoon for a few days, would you like to set up a chat time?"

"Ok," she said. "Will I be able to come over for the weekend, too, when I'm better?"

"Yes, of course," he said, taking a sip. "Your mother has to ok it, though."

"Ok. I'm tired."

"Then you go back to bed," Skinner said. "Get plenty of rest and get better fast. Is there anything you need?"

"No," she said. "But... could I have the new Brad Pitt movie?"

Skinner reached for the toast. "Uh-huh, how about something that isn't over PG-13, Ms. Ten-year old?"

She sighed. "Alright," she reluctantly conceded. "Molly Ringwald Sixteen Candles?"

Who? he asked himself. "Let me check with your mother and we'll see."

"Ok, but she lets us watch it when it's on TV," Bethany pointed out.

"How is she?" Mulder asked. Skinner reached past Ivan for the butter.

"She sounds tired, but that's to be expected," he said. "She reprimanded me for not being on the computer."

Mulder chuckled and hooked an ankle around Skinner's. "That's a first," he said. "We're usually on the computer too much. What did she want that was over PG-13?"

"Brad Pitt," Skinner said.

Mulder contemplated and shrugged. "Not a bad choice for a kid," he said. Skinner threw a piece of the crust at him.

"Alright, tell me this," Skinner said. "Who is Molly Ringwald and what is Sixteen Candles."

Mulder spent the rest of breakfast discussing Molly's career and the merits of said movie. He ran down a list of movies but nothing rang a bell until he said, "The Stand". Skinner finally placed the woman's face. Mulder then launched into a one-man discussion on the career of John Hughs and the teenage flicks of the eighties.

Skinner finally halted him. "I have to go, babe," he said. "We can do an eighties retrospective later." He buzzed Mulder and ran a hand over the boys heads before heading out the door, calling for Kisa. She leapt joyously and ran for the door, doing a happy dance and chasing her tail. The cats turned up their noses but were quick to jump down from the refrigerator when Mulder put his bowl of cereal milk on the floor.

The trip into Church Falls was uneventful except for a doggie pit-stop. The countryside was beautiful, dressed in snowy gown. Skinner enjoyed the sight-seeing aspect of the trip and made a mental note to have a family drive sometime soon.

He made his way around the town and found the address after getting lost several times.

"Stay," he told Kisa, She was disappointed but she stayed in the car. Cat answered the doorbell and pulled him into the house by his hand.

"Mommy!" she yelled. "Popi's here!" She pulled him further into their home until he stood in the livingroom. The Major sat stiffly on a chair.

"Sir," Skinner greeted him. "Ma'am," he said to Mrs. Ramsey. She was holding Dani on her lap. The child gave him a shy look and buried her face in her grandmother's chest. Mrs. Ramsey gave him a small smile while shooting a look at her husband.

"How was your drive up, Mr. Skinner?" she asked.

"Walter, please," he invited. "And it was a beautiful trip. Very peaceful, thank you. Are you enjoying your stay with the girls?" She assured him she was.

"So. FBI, huh?" the Major finally spoke. Skinner nodded, letting the older man lead the way with pretend ignorance. He was positive the Major had investigated him thoroughly.

"Yes, sir," Skinner said. "I retired a couple of years ago."

"And you were a Marine?" the Major asked.

"Yes, sir," Skinner said. "Wounded in 'Nam. Honorable discharge."

The Major nodded. Skinner was feeling more like a prospective date for their daughter than an equal.

"Alright, dad, stop interrogating the suspect without a proper defense counsel," Stephanie said, coming into the room. "Hello, Walter," she greeted him. Amanda was right behind her carrying a back pack and suitcase.

"Ladies," Skinner sketched a bow to them. Mandy smiled and bit her lip, looking away. He took the suitcase from her. "Say good-bye," he told her. Amanda went back and hugged her mother and grandmother. The Major broke his stiff posture long enough to hug her back.

"How are you doing?" Skinner asked Stephanie while Mandy said her good-byes.

Stephanie lifted her shoulder and one side of her mouth. "I have no choice, do I?" she asked. "I'll be at the hospital today, if you need me."

"Let Beth know that I'll come by tomorrow to see her, will you?" he asked. Stephanie nodded. "Oh, she wants some movie called Sixteen Candles. Is that alright?"

"Yes, it's fine," she said. "It's harmless and silly. Kind of sweet."

"Stephanie," began the Major in disapproval.

"Dad, she's ten, not one of your recruits," Stephanie responded with a bite. Skinner could see that she was close to losing it, so he took his leave before war broke out.

It was almost fifteen minutes before Amanda spoke up.

"They always fight," she said, looking out the window. Kisa moved back and forth in the back seat, looking out one window and then the other.

"They both have a lot on their minds," Skinner offered. "How are you doing, ok?"

Amanda nodded. "Can I turn the radio on?" she asked.

"Sure," Skinner said. He asked questions, receiving mostly monosyllable replies. This was going to be tough, he thought.

They stopped at a drive through for something to eat and soon after Skinner noticed a car tailing them. He groaned mentally. Not with her in the car, he complained. He took a second look as the car got closer. The car looked like Krycek's. It was Krycek's, as Skinner could see when it coasted up along side him. Skinner rolled down his window.

"Put the car in neutral," Krycek said casually.

"What?"

"You heard me," he said. "Don't touch the gas peddle or the break, just put it in neutral."

"What are you up to, Alex?" Skinner asked.

"We will discuss your little joke with the clock later, just do it."

Krycek was being unusually insistent in a carefully calm voice. Skinner put the car in neutral, wincing at the engine's protest at the cruel treatment.

"Now just let it drift to a stop. When it does, both of you get out and move away from it."

"Alex, do you know how much this van cost me?" Skinner asked him as the car began to slow.

"I didn't do anything to it," Krycek said. "I don't even know if anything is really wrong, I'm just following a warning."

A dark-haired woman sat next to Krycek, looking interested but not alarmed. Skinner had to hand it to Krycek, he knew how to pick the beauties. Krycek let his car fall back behind Skinner's.

"Mandy, when the van stops, get out and go to that car behind us," Skinner told her. "I need to check the engine on this one. You'll be alright." She nodded, beginning to look interested. She grabbed her back pack, ready to bolt.

When the van stopped, Skinner clicked for Kisa and opened the door. Kisa shot out and raced through the snowy field, barking at a snowshoe rabbit. He and Amanda walked back to Krycek's car. Just as Krycek opened the door, the van exploded. Skinner lifted his face from the snow and raced to Amanda who was also face down in the cold, wet stuff.

"WOW!" she breathed, looking at the burning van that she had just been riding in.

"Are you alright?!" Skinner yelled, turning her over. She seemed unhurt, not even a scorch mark. She nodded as he brushed the snow from her face.

"Krycek..." Skinner said, standing up, helping Mandy to her feet. Krycek stood next to them, watching the van. He held out his hands in innocence.

"Hey, a practical joke with the clock isn't worth blowing up your van," he said. "I got a call from Em. She said to find you and get you away from your car, that was it. Said the cards were reading bad this morning. Your cell phone isn't working again."

"Uh-huh," Skinner said. "Amanda, meet your Uncle Alex."

Krycek heard the word 'uncle' and winced.

"Just Alex, please?" he begged.

The van blazed away merrily as they stood around and watched.

"Uncle Alex is cute," Amanda said to Skinner, fluttering her eyelashes at Krycek.

"Yes, he is," Skinner said. "He's also off limits." He moved her further away from Krycek.

Krycek moved closer to Skinner. "You think I'm cute, Walter?" he asked.

"Shut up, Alex. Did you call the fire department? Let's avoid Fox as long as we can," he suggested.

Krycek took his cell phone out and called in the fire. Skinner looked at the dark-eyed beauty next to him and held out his hand.

"Walter Skinner," he said.

She put her hand in his. "Ya'el Gaist."

He like the sound of her soft accent. She was so tiny, though, he didn't know how she would hold up against Krycek when he got into one of his pushy moods.

"How is Israel these days?" he asked, escorting the ladies into Krycek's car.

"She is war-torn and weary," Ya'el said, sliding into the front seat. "And I think that ours is one of the few countries that doesn't have to thank you for that." She yelled something out the window at Krycek, pointing imperiously to the driver seat. Krycek immediately got in at which Skinner choked down a laugh.

The fire department and police arrived soon after, along with Scully who was called in because of Skinner. Stephanie arrived and it took all powers of persuasion to convince her to allow Amanda to continue with her trip.

"It's probably just a manufacturer's problem," Skinner said. Thankfully, several officials spoke up and agreed with him. "Steph, if I thought for one minute that she wasn't safe, I wouldn't allow her to come over."

Scully motioned him over, frowning at her cell phone. Krycek followed, his nose in the air.

"No one is answering at your house," she said. "Not even the phone. Its ringing out of order."

Skinner grabbed her cell and dialed. She was right, there was an operator recording. Mulder's cell phone was dead, too. He dialed the Sheriff's station.

"Becky, is there.....? What?! Yes, get him!" He lowered the phone from his mouth.

"The house is on fire," he announced. Scully snapped up Krycek's cell phone and dialed someone from her office and began issuing orders. "Fox!" Skinner yelled into the phone. "Is everyone alright?!"

"We're all fine," Mulder assured him. "Even the idiot cats. They had gotten out so we went chasing them. We were down the street when it happened. How did you know about it? I've been trying to call you and Alex's cell has been busy."

Skinner told him what happened. Mulder was silent for a moment.

"Call in the troupes, babe," Mulder said. "We're having a confab."

Chapter 24: Dark Before the Dawn

The house was blazing away as Skinner stood in the snow and watched.

"You had insurance, right?" Stephanie asked, her arm around Amanda as the girl huddled close in the cold.

"Yes, we did," Skinner said, his brain on pause as he anxiously searched the area for his family.

"You can replace the house, but not the things in it," she continued. "God, Walter, I'm so sorry."

Skinner nodded. "Some of those pictures were the only ones I had. But Fox and the boys, and Natti, are safe. We can make new pictures." He felt a hand touch his back for a moment.

"Popi!" he heard the boys yell. He turned to see them streaking across the road to him. He caught them both and lifted them, squeezing them hard as they wrapped their legs around him and threatened to choke him with their death grips on his neck.

The fire trucks and police had raced past them on their way home. They had arrived to find the trucks shooting water from the large hoses at the house, along with the local

volunteer fire department. Neighbors had tried to be helpful by shoveling snow at the house until the Law set them back.

Krycek and his lady had immediately left the scene, both of them shifty-eyed with their noses in the air as they hunted for quarry. Skinner had hoped that some nice girl, or boy, would settle Krycek's butt, but it didn't look like that was going to happen anytime soon. Ya'el snapped her fingers and Krycek jumped. Well, maybe.....

Adam attacked Skinner's legs and he knelt, putting his arms around all three boys. They clung to him in fright and he let them nuzzle into him while he stroked them, trying to calm them as he passed out kisses to their cheeks and hair. Mulder stood a few feet away, pacing off his anxiety while he waited his turn. Scully went up to him and began questioning him.

Skinner saw Ruvin and KC standing in the waiting line. He could see that they had something to say. He stood amidst protests but he shushed the boys, promising that he wasn't going anywhere. Mulder took the moment to break from Scully and get in his own death grip on Skinner. Skinner felt his lungs threaten to explode and took his mouth away with a deep breath of air.

"Everyone is fine, Fox," he assured Mulder. They held each other, surrounded by their boys wrapped around their legs and hips.

"Sir?" Ruvin spoke up after a long moment.

"Talk, Ruvin," Skinner said, not moving from his spot of comfort.

"Yes, Sir. Sir, we think we heard a small explosion just before the fire started."

Skinner and Mulder lifted their heads up. Skinner sent Adam running after Krycek while Scully and Mulder descended on Ruvin and KC.

"We were writing up reports when we heard a sharp crack," KC said. "At first I thought it was gunfire, but when we poked our heads out the door, we saw flames shooting up from the bottom of the house. We called the volunteers but the fire spread fast. Cell phones weren't working again."

"Mine was in the house," Mulder said. Skinner took his out and looked at it.

"Fox, I think mine should be taken apart and checked out," he said. "It keeps breaking down at inconvenient moments."

"Get it into a bag," Scully ordered. Ruvin went into the station.

Skinner looked around at the neighbors standing by.

"Miguel!" he called out, waving a hand over. Skinner shook his hand. "Were you home today? Did you see or hear anything unusual?"

"Si," Mr. Chavez said, nodding his head. "A popping noise just before we smelled the smoke. Is everyone alright, Walter?"

"Yes, thank you," Skinner said. "No one was home at the time."

Miguel crossed himself. "Gracias, Dio," he said. "Would you like us to take the boys while you work on this?"

Skinner nodded. "It might be a good idea to get them out of the way," he said. "Remember the protocol, though; authorized personnel only to see them."

Miguel gave a sloppy salute and Skinner sent the twins along with him. He saw Adam coming back and waved him over.

"What did Alex say?" Skinner asked him.

"He said he'd take it under consideration," Adam reported. Skinner couldn't damn Krycek for it; if Krycek said he'd keep it in mind, he would. Skinner sent Adam along with Mr. Chavez and the twins. Ruvin hopped back over and held open an evidence bag which Skinner dropped his cell phone into. Scully took the bag from them.

"Where's Natti?" he asked Mulder.

"With Carlo," Mulder said. "She was pretty upset, so I sent her to bed. Doc Wilkens went over with a tranc just before you got here."

Skinner felt a warning coming on. "You know, Fox, I think we'd better get organized before Zia gets here leading the entire clan." And he'd better call Zia before she gets there with a reprimand for not calling her.

Both Mulder and Scully agreed with him.

"Speaking of leading the people," KC said. She tilted her jaw and they followed it. Down the street strode Miz Adelle carrying a tray of something, and marching after her were quite a few of the women's church league, all carrying plates, trays, and dishes. They turned to the station and continued their march right on in.

Skinner turned his attention to his house; it looked as though the upper portion was going to be spared from fire damage, but it was still unlivable without some major renovations. The Moms were right, they were going to need a new home. Skinner cast his mind over the properties that were available in the town. He wasn't up for farm life, his current position was as rural as he would accept. He felt Mulder's arm go around his back and rested his own across Mulder's shoulders.

"Carlo is setting up his kids' rooms for us," Mulder said.

"We go house hunting tomorrow, Fox," Skinner said. Mulder nodded his agreement. A car drove up with official state tags.

"The Police Chief from Fredericksburg?" Skinner asked, looking at the plates.

"You know him?" Mulder asked.

Skinner shook his head. "Nah, never met... *no way*."

They watched a man get out of the driver's seat and walk over to them.

"Mr. Skinner?" he asked, holding out a hand. "Michael Aspinwall, Chief from Fredericksburg."

It was Skinner's Denzel from their Circle experience. Being a pro at keeping up appearances, Skinner shook his hand. Michael gave a slight nod of acknowledgment before shaking Mulder's hand.

"Heard about your problem on the radio, thought I'd come by and offer our services," he continued. "No offense to you, Sheriff," he said to Ruvin. "We deal with more arson than I'm sure you all do out here." Ruvin cooled his hackles and gave a reluctant nod.

"Actually, since this involves two agents and a former AD, I have a team on their way out," Scully said, not blinking an eye at Michael's appearance. "Thank you, though, it's a kind offer. May we keep you on the side, just in case?"

"Certainly," Michael said with a bright, friendly smile. "AD Scully, isn't it? I've seen your picture everywhere." They shook hands. Skinner was sure Michael held her hand just a second longer than social niceties allowed. He began to wonder if Scully had 'played' with Michael while she and Krycek were at Emilia's. If Em was on a sabbatical, then that meant Michael was also presently without a partner. Supposedly. Skinner felt a pinch on his back as Mulder sent a warning.

"Sorry, I guess I'm in a little bit of shock," he said to Michael, indicating their house. Michael frowned and turned to look at the house. The fire was almost under control as the volunteer team worked hard to water it down.

"Understandable," Michael said. "I don't know what I'd do if it were my house. Thank heavens no one was inside. Do you need anything until you get on your feet? We're all brothers, don't be too proud to ask."

Skinner and Mulder were shaking their heads even before he was finished.

"No, thank you," Skinner said. "We're fine, we just need to find a new home. Money is not an issue. I have family here that we will be staying with until we get a place."

"Hey, Walter," KC spoke up. "What about that old B&B just past Dom's place?" she suggested. Skinner thought for a moment.

"I'm not sure I know which one you mean," he said.

"I'm sorry, this is a bad time to talk about real-estate," she said, looking contrite. "I go past this place all the time on my rounds. It's all boarded up, but I stop and check it out once in a while. It looks pretty well built, it just needs to be aired and a few structural repairs. I can find out who owns the property, if you'd like."

Skinner nodded. "I remember the place now. I never paid much attention to it. We'll go out tomorrow and take a look at it," he said. He flung an arm around Mulder's shoulders again and stared at their house. It was soaked. The air was filled with smoke. Skinner had to admit that the volunteer crew did a good job; there seemed to be quite a bit that remained unburnt, mostly the upper portions and the children's side of the house.

Several cars sped down the street and screeched to a halt in front of them. Scully looked at her watch.

"Not bad," she said. "Forty-five minutes. They've been taking driving lessons from Alex."

"Ma'am?" they said upon striding up to her.

"Dust it," she said, pointing to the smoking, dripping wet house.

"Yes, ma'am," they said.

Michael gave her a nod of respect. "Now I understand," he said. "CSI experts over city cops. No offense taken. My mistake for not thinking of that."

"That's why she's the AD," Krycek said from behind. They jumped, startled, and turned. He held up a zip-lock baggie with a piece of torn fabric in it. "This was hanging off the back stairs," he said. "And don't start with me about evidence, I was very careful. Take a close look at it." Skinner took the bag and held it up to the sunlight.

"Let me see?" Mulder said, taking it from him. He turned it this way and that.

"Give it," Scully said, taking her turn. She frowned, wrinkling her nose. Seeing the light catch an aspect of it, Skinner took it from her and held it up to Ruvin's shoulder.

"It's a piece of uniform," they said.

They went through all the uniforms in the station but found nothing out of order. While slowly munching on a salad, Skinner had an unpleasant thought begin to creep into his head.

"Whatever it is, just say it, Walter," Mulder said, seeing his face.

Skinner leaned forward, pushing his plate around. "Has anyone seen John lately?" he asked after a moment. Ruvin and KC protested, shoving their chairs back. Skinner held up a hand.

"I know," he said. "And I'm not accusing him of anything, I just want to know where he is."

"I think I'd like to know, too," Scully said. "All this action and your deputy isn't around?"

KC touched Ruvin on the arm. "Let us deal with it," she asked Scully, who nodded.

"Fifteen minutes," Scully warned. "If there's a gunshot, time's up."

KC took Ruvin and led him out. When they heard the car drive off, they got up to follow. Krycek took Ya'el and drove in the opposite direction.

"Sirs?" Giuliani called to them from across the street where he was standing guard. He jogged over. "The house isn't as bad as it looks," he said. "The basement is wiped, the livingroom, the kitchen. The rest is just water and smoke damage. The pictures on the wall of the staircase are water damaged, but negatives can be made of them and reprocessed, unless you kept the negatives upstairs. Your... the master bedroom is mostly water damage, parts of it is smoke. The children's rooms are water damaged. The electronics and paper products are dead, but the plastic and metal toys are fine. Furniture is completely soaked, it will probably need to be replaced. Mildew will set it. Mr. Krycek's apartment isn't as bad, due to it's location in the back, but there is some water and smoke damage. A little bit of fire damage on the floor, since it's over the kitchen."

Skinner and Mulder shook his hand. "Thank you for checking it out for us," Skinner said.

"Yes, thank you," Mulder echoed him.

"Ma'am?" one of the investigators came over to them.

"What did you find, Perry?" Scully asked. He held out a plastic bag with something small and melted in it.

"Detonator, Ma'am," he said.

Scully turned to the men behind her before addressing Perry again. "Trace it ASAP," she ordered. The man practically saluted as he backed away and returned to the scene.

"Giuliani, get over to Carlo's house," Mulder told him. "Take three more agents with you, I don't care who as long as they're armed. Make sure everyone is alright and stay there until one of us relieves you."

Just then a car came screeching around the corner and zoomed past them. Skinner found himself on the ground, face in the snow, as Mulder tackled him, yelling, "GET DOWN!" A gun shot sounded in the cold, smokey air.

A second car, Krycek's, careened after it.

Agents jumped into their cars and began to chase the suspect as Scully yelled orders, jumping into Michael's car as he slid behind the driver's seat, taking off before the doors were even closed.

"Walter?" Mulder called anxiously. "Are you hurt?"

Skinner got to his feet with Mulder tugging at his arms to help and getting the snow brushed off him.

"I'm fine, Fox, he missed," Skinner said, taking stock of himself.

"That was John's car," Mulder said. "He panicked."

The chase went on through the town, bringing people back out of their homes. A few of the rowdier ones cheered John on with high-pitched yells and fists in the air. The chase ended abruptly when John's car slid on a hidden patch of ice and skid into a telephone pole. Agents jumped out of their cars and pulled the man out, handcuffing him and reading him his rights.

"Wait!" Skinner called out, jumping from his car and rushing over to them. He looked down at his former deputy who sat in the snow, blood trickling from his scalp and nose.

"Why?" Skinner asked him.

"Sir, his rights," an agent reminded him. Skinner glared at him.

"Will you wave your rights and talk to me, John?" Skinner requested.

John struggled to his feet and spat blood into the snow.

"Roy McCombs is my father," John said. "We all have our orders, now, don't we?" John refused to say anything further as he was escorted away.

After spending the evening filling out reports, it was after midnight when Skinner and Mulder collapsed into bed at Carlo's house. They had to push the children and puppy over in order to do so, but collapse they did. With all three children nestled securely between them, Skinner finally began to relax.

"Will our pasts ever leave us alone?" he whispered to Mulder. In the dark, Skinner felt an arm reach across to him until their hands were clasped.

In the morning, they were awoken by Zia shaking Skinner's shoulder. She put a hand to his forehead and cheeks.

"I'm not sick, Zia," he protested. Uh-oh. He forgot to call her. He abruptly sat up, dislodging Kisa onto the floor. Both females looked at him accusingly. "I'm sorry!" he said to them. "I forgot to call you! I meant to, really I did, we just got caught up in events and when we got back from doing reports we were just so tired and...."

Zia shushed him. "You sound like Pavel," she said. She took his face. "I understand. Most of my sons and grandsons are police, remember? Get dressed, breakfast is almost ready." She turned to go and Skinner got out of the bed. He turned her back around and hugged her tight.

"Thank you, Zia," he said. "For everything." He kissed her cheek and she waved him away, wiping her eyes as she left the room.

He found Stephanie and Amanda at the breakfast table. He stopped short.

"Good morning," Stephanie said, sipping her coffee. "I contemplated taking Mandy home, but I thought you might need my professional services so we stayed. You lead an interesting life. Certainly not a boring one."

"Did someone get arrested, popi?" Amanda asked.

"Yes, he did, honey," Skinner said, sitting down after letting Kisa out the back door. "And I think we can all be thankful that no one was hurt in the process."

"Amen," Zia called out, crossing herself. Carlo automatically echoed her movements.

"I'm sorry this wasn't the weekend we had planned," Skinner said to Amanda. She shrugged with a teenager's view on life.

"That's ok," she said. "This will make an cool report for school; '*How I Spent My Spring Vacation*'." She held up her hands, spreading out the headlines in the air. "I'm sorry about your house," she said, casting her eyes down to her plate.

"Thank you," Skinner said with a nod. "I'm a little concerned about you, though," he said. "How are you doing with the car fire and all?" he asked. The boys came in and were immediately clucked over by Zia who took a damp cloth to their faces before allowing them near the table. Ivan climbed up onto Skinner's lap and helped himself to Skinner's eggs and toast.

"I'm fine," Amanda said. "It was kinda scary. Why did the van catch on fire?"

"I don't know," Skinner said. "Someone from a special garage came and took it away. They're going to take it apart and try to find out."

"Cool," he was informed. "Where's Uncle Alex and his girlfriend?"

Skinner shook his head.

"I have no idea."

It took surprisingly little time to talk with their insurance agent. To Skinner's frustration, they were going to withhold the insurance settlement until a full investigation was made on the house. The fact that there was a suspect in jail, who confessed to the arson, didn't make one wit of a dent in the hide of the tight-fisted company. Mulder decided on hiring another company for their new home.

Quite a few of Skinner's cousins showed up during the day and helped with raking through the house and taking out anything salvageable, which was more considerable than Skinner thought it was going to be. The boys were happy that most of their toys survived. He took time out to call Bethany and talk with her for a while, telling her about their weekend so far, before he handed to phone over to Stephanie and Amanda.

"How is she?" Mulder asked.

"Doing good, she says," Skinner reported. "She sounds a little better than last week. Says she isn't hungry, though."

"That's normal," Mulder said. "Remember when Scully was being worked over? Had the damnest time getting her to eat."

"She's still a little on the thin side," Skinner pointed out.

Mulder shrugged. "High metabolism," he said. "Believe me, I've seen her pack it away, and God forbid anyone stands between her and chocolate during certain days of the month."

Skinner accepted the point; he and Scully had dug their way through pints together a few times themselves.

The neighbors had come out in force once they saw what was going on. The men went in and brought out furniture while the women carried what they could. With all the family around, Skinner wasn't worried about the boys. Someone would be there to wipe a bruise and feed them. Skinner was amused to see that for all of Mario's blustering, he was a doting father. What he was beginning to get worried about was Dominic. Who still wasn't back from Rome, nor had he called. Zia refused to admit it, but she was worried too.

"Hey, Walter," KC said, coming up to him. "Let's go for a ride." She jangled her car keys in front of him. Skinner grabbed Mulder and left Natti in charge of the boys.

KC had been right. Just about a half a mile past Dom's house was an old, boarded up B&B. The outside was a little on the 'Ol Miss' side, but he could live with it. With a few remodeling touches. He'd keep the wrap-around porch, though. He liked them.

They took a crowbar out of the trunk and pried open the back door. Skinner hit the doorframe, giving it a shake and noting that the wood hadn't rotted.

"Look closer, city boy," KC said. She tapped the frame. "That is cherrywood. Do you know how expensive cherrywood is? I don't even want to think about it. I'll stick with my oak and pine, thank you. This stuff lasts forever."

She dragged them into the building, turning on flashlights to see better in the dusty gloom. There was hardly any furniture at all, just hardwood floors covered in a thick coat of dust.

"A fireplace, Fox," he noted to Mulder. They went over and down two short steps into a sunken half-circle that surrounded the central firepit. Skinner squatted down. He could see all the way through into another room on the other side. Mulder stuck his head into the pit, daring the gods of soot and ash.

"It's a library!" Mulder exclaimed. He rushed out of the circle and around the corner to find a door. Skinner followed him. The room was wall to wall book shelves that reached up two floors to a second story sitting room. A winding, metal staircase arose in the far corner of the room. Skinner looked down the hallway and noted four good sized bedrooms. There were four more bedrooms on the other side of the library. Both sides had full baths which two rooms shared between them.

The layout of the place was similar to Emilia's. Maybe the same architect, Skinner thought. Was there also a hidden room beneath?

To the right of the library and firepit, was a set of sliding glass doors which led to what was probably a garden during the spring and summer. To the right of the doors was a full

chef's kitchen with an island in the middle and a stainless steel refrigerator that was set into the wall. He'd have to get a specialist out to check it. There was a small breakfast nook in a corner of the kitchen, while a large dining room table would fit in the main room, in front of the glass doors. Next to the kitchen was a large empty room with a huge walk-in closet and it's own bathroom with a large, clawfoot tub and a separate standing shower.

Stairs climbed in front of the master bedroom door to a second floor, it's hallway visible instead of being enclosed by a wall. There were four more bedrooms on the second floor with two bathrooms between them. The upper hallway wound around the house just as the outside porch did, and led to the sitting room with the metal staircase leading back down into the library. Large beams streamed overhead, perfect for feline acrobatics.

"Wow, Fox," he breathed, craning his head to take in the entire picture.

"Hey, look!" Mulder said, rummaging in the closet of the master bedroom. Skinner followed him in. The closet divided into two walk-ins, one on each side of the entrance. There was another door opposite the entrance, which was where Mulder had disappeared to. Skinner went in. It was another room, smaller than the other bedrooms. "It would make a perfect office," Mulder said. He traced an invisible square on the wall. "Just cut in a door here, and it could be gotten to from the livingroom."

Skinner was sold; he'd find a price and pay whatever it was.

Skinner stood in the livingroom of their burned out home and looked around him. The floor was weakened, completely gutted in most. He had braved the staircase to retrieve a couple of salvageable photos that were on the upper wall. They were water damaged, but he could have negatives made and reprocess them. In their bedroom, which was mostly just smoke damage, he boxed up what he could. Clothes and bedding could be washed. He reached into the closet and bent to lift the small safe out. He had always bought a fire-proof box, and this time he was glad he had spent the extra cost. He set it down on the soaked bed with a grunt. It was heavy! He opened it and pulled out envelopes, checking the papers. They were perfect. Birth certificates, their insurance papers, bank ID's, and film negatives. He looked at those with a lift of an eyebrow. He thought they were in his desk drawer which was destroyed in the livingroom.

"I put them in there months ago," Mulder said, coming into the room. Skinner turned and pulled him into his arms, holding him tightly. They were safe. They were all alive and well.

Skinner lifted his face from Mulder's neck and kissed him. He touched Mulder's tongue, invading his mouth in possession. Mulder gave a small groan and wrapped his arms

around Skinner's neck. Skinner reached down and squeezed those tight cheeks before running his hands up to Mulder's shoulders and back down again, finding the hem of Mulder's jacket and sweater, sliding his hands underneath to caress the soft, warm skin of Mulder's back. Neither heard footsteps on the stairs until a throat cleared at the doorway.

The men separated their mouths but not their arms.

"Yes?" Skinner said, resting his forehead against Mulder's, looking into his stormy, hazel eyes.

"Sorry, Sirs," a CSI agent said. "Krycek is looking for you. He's snarling about something. No one wants to go near him to find out what the problem is."

Skinner lifted his head. A snarling Krycek was not a good thing.

"Just a hint, Agent," Skinner said, turning. "Krycek only bites if you piss him off or stand between him and his job."

"Or if you ask him to," Mulder said helpfully, following him out.

Krycek was indeed snarling. He was pacing the sidewalk, his eyes narrowed, teeth bared.

"Pashli!" he ordered them, jerking his head toward his car. He called out to Natti, rattling off something in rapid Russian. She answered back with a simple, "Da."

Skinner and Mulder looked at each other. Something was really wrong if Krycek wasn't thinking in English.

"Alex, we can't leave now," Mulder protested. Krycek shoved him toward the car.

"Natti will oversee everything," Krycek said.

Some of the cousins called out to Skinner, wondering where he was going. Damned if he knew.

They got into the back seat. The front was occupied by the mysterious Ya'el.

"Would you at least tell us where we're going?" Skinner asked as Krycek revved the engine and sped out of town. Skinner yanked his head off the back seat, catching up with the inertia.

"DC," Krycek said.

He refused to answer any more questions until they were off the freeway an hour later, having driven through Alexandria and Arlington. To Skinner's dismay, they were immediately joined by four black sedans that screamed 'Government!'. They drove

through downtown DC until they came to a large, fenced in mansion. The Governor's Mansion.

"Alex....," Skinner and Mulder both said from the back. Krycek and Ya'el left the car.

Skinner got out of the car and found Scully, AD Tanner, and Director Waters, newly appointed FBI Director, waiting for them.

"What the hell is going on?" Skinner hissed at her.

"We're making an arrest," Scully said, twitching her finger as she turned to enter the gate. Skinner, Mulder, Scully, Tanner, the Director, Krycek, Ya'el, (who was curious) and eight Secret Service agents paraded in, past a security guard who swallowed hard.

"Thought you'd like to witness it."

Their footsteps echoed on the tile. Servants moved to protest but were silenced by a wave of badges and a warrant. There was a luncheon party going on in the main dining hall. Silverware and glasses clinked in surprise as they entered.

"What's the meaning of this?" Governor Hague demanded, standing up. "*Director?! Assistant Directors?* George, what's going on?" he insisted from the Director.

"I'm sorry about this, Tom," Waters said. He walked up to the man seated to the right of the governor.

"Senator James Alexander? You are under arrest for the attempted murder of Walter Skinner. Among other things."

When Alexander protested, Krycek threw a handful of photos across the table for one and all to see. The dinner guests turned their heads away in disgust. The senator was handcuffed by the Director and taken away.

Alexander was arrested on eight accounts of attempted murder (one for each house member plus Amanda who was in the car), destruction of private property, namely the house and van, and conspiracy to commit murder. Seven counts. And as a side dish, he was charged with statutory rape, endangering the welfare of a child (including the boys via the fire), contributing to the delinquency of a minor, and child abuse. Twelve counts.

Skinner looked through the photos, feeling the nausea rise as he saw clear images of Alexander with children, boys and girls, between 7 and 17. Krycek then handed him another set of pictures. The Senator with Roy McCombs and Deputy John.

"John confessed," Krycek said. "It's in his depo. Alexander hired him. Half a million dollars. We found the bank account and it's traceable, as are the explosives in the car and house. Alexander is also a major stock holder in a pharmaceutical company that specializes in psycho-tropic drugs, including anti-depressants. John confessed to drugging that water jug in your office. He wasn't about to go down alone. He fingered McCombs, too. Since McCombs is already on trial for Conspiracy, this is going to be secondary. If he survives the first trial. John said he even got desperate enough to hire a voo-doo woman, of all things, when you proved harder to fell than he thought you'd be." Krycek snorted his opinion. "I could have told him that."

"Is that all my head's worth?" Skinner asked, handing the photos back. "Half a million? I was sure I pissed off more people than that. A million, at least."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Mulder asked Krycek.

Krycek shrugged. "And say what? Finding Alexander mixed up in attempted murder was unexpected; I was following the abuse issue. I didn't receive these pictures until this morning. My surveillance person didn't think they were important. He now knows otherwise to keep anything from me."

Skinner put out a hand. After a moment, Krycek shook it.

"You're a pain in the ass, Alex, but you have your moments," Skinner told him. Krycek agreed. Ya'el pointed to the car and Krycek hopped to it.

"I think I like her," Mulder said, watching them. Skinner agreed. She had barely said two words since she arrived, but she was sure making Krycek dance to her tune.

They hugged Scully, shook hands all around with the men, and went hunting for a new family car. Skinner looked longingly at the dark green Taurus before putting his credit card down on the Aerostar van. Mulder gave him a proud pat on the shoulder. Skinner signed his name on the line and dated it. He hesitated and then put the pen down. The keys were handed over.

They left the show lot and drove back to Arlington, where they could shop for replacement things a little cheaper. Skinner parked in a paid parking garage and turned to Mulder, lifting his hand and bringing it to his mouth.

"What?" Mulder asked.

"What's today's date, Fox?" Skinner asked, taking a knuckle between his teeth for a gentle nibble.

"April 5th, why.... God, we forgot," Mulder breathed, his eyes opening wide.

"Happy anniversary, Fox."

They did some clothes shopping for everyone, a few new toys and books for the boys, and stopped in to see Bethany, bringing her the promised video. She was pale and tired, but Skinner could see a new life in her brown eyes. They sat with her and watched the movie, Skinner close to the bed, holding her small hand in his.

Later, Skinner called in a few connections, and he and Mulder went to have a private talk with a government official. The man made some phone calls and they left their meeting with a new home, having only had to pay the back taxes. It was thirty thousand, but considering the price of houses and the fact that this house had fifteen acres attached to it, Skinner shelled out the money without a word of protest. It was a bargain.

They called home to let Krycek and Natti know. The boys were excited. No, the twins were not ready to have separate rooms. That was fine with the men, they'd just use one room as a play room until one of the twins was ready for it.

A call to the Parkside got them a suite from cousin Renaldo who was only too happy to finally meet cousin Walter, whom he had been hearing all about from little cousin KC. Skinner groaned, wondering what KC had been telling him. Quite openly, Skinner told him that he wanted something special for dinner, it was his and Fox's anniversary. Renaldo didn't skip a beat as he promised the best his chef had to offer.

An hour later, Skinner shut the door to their room. He turned to find that Mulder had disappeared.

"Fox?" he called out, stepping into the huge room. The suite was bigger than some of his apartments had been.

"In here!" he heard. Skinner followed the voice and found himself in the bathroom. Mulder was filling the tub, adding bubble bath. The tub was big enough for four adults. Seeing possibilities, Skinner had a notion to replace the clawfooted tub at their new home. Mulder stripped and sank into the water with a groan as he laid his head back.

"Well?" Mulder said. "Get in here." He hit the water, making it splash.

Not needing a second invitation, Skinner shucked off his clothes and got in. He took the soap, lathered up his hands, and put them to Mulder's chest. He was slow in his bathing of Mulder, letting his fingers slide over Mulder's skin, taking in every detail, the bone structure, every muscle. He took Mulder's nipples between his fingers and stroked them, pulling gently on them. Mulder caressed his fingers for a moment before letting his hands fall away again. Skinner ran his soapy fingers over Mulder's face, feeling the stubble of his beard. Skinner grabbed his bag off the side board and took the straight razor out. He

lathered up Mulder's face and slowly shaved him. Mulder watched his face through half closed eyes, limp, trusting Skinner completely with the open blade. When he was done, Skinner rinsed Mulder's face, taking the time to caress Mulder's lips with his thumb. Mulder flicked his tongue out and took the digit into his mouth, sucking on it, licking it. Skinner moaned at the sensation, wanting something else filling Mulder's mouth.

Reluctantly, Skinner took his thumb back. He soaped up his hands again, washing Mulder's arms and hands, gliding his fingers through the fine hairs under Mulder's arms before sliding down his rib cage. Skinner knelt between Mulder's legs and washed one leg at a time, taking each long toe between his fingers before giving the sole a message and going over to the other leg, repeating his actions. He slid his hands up Mulder's thighs and to his center. He found Mulder hard and waiting for him. Skinner stroked him, loving the way Mulder shut his eyes and flowed with Skinner's touch. Skinner slid a finger lower and slowly, firmly circled before going in. Mulder whimpered and pushed back for more, setting his feet up on either side of the tub.

"Come for me, Fox," Skinner whispered. "This is for you, babe, just let it go." He stroked slowly, in and out, with one hand while the other continued to caress Mulder's hardness. He kept his strokes light, bringing Mulder to a gentle orgasm. Skinner rinsed them both and kissed Mulder, sucking on his lip before releasing him. Mulder reached under the water for him but Skinner took his hands away.

"No, not yet," he said. "The water is cooling off, let's get out." He quickly washed the day's dirt and grime away while Mulder ducked his head under the water for a shampoo. Skinner released the water and stood up, water and soap cascading from his body.

"Poseidon," Mulder murmured, staring up at him. Skinner stepped out and patted himself down with a towel before holding out a dry one for Mulder. Mulder stepped into it and Skinner held him for a moment before drying him off. Mulder turned, facing the mirrored door and walls, as Skinner dried his back and legs. Skinner knelt and touched Mulder's cheeks, circling them with his large hands before flicking his tongue at them. He felt Mulder shiver and steady himself by placing his hands on the mirrored door. Skinner found a patch of velvety skin at the top of Mulder's thigh and licked at it before taking a playful nip. He spread Mulder open, gazing at him. As he tasted Mulder, he heard the man groan. Mulder spread his legs in a wider stance, balancing himself. Skinner loved the way Mulder tasted, finding the entire concept to be incredible. He used his tongue well and made Mulder cry out in pleasure from the sheer torture. When Mulder had begged sufficiently, pleading for Skinner to take him, Skinner stood up.

"Watch us, Fox," he whispered into Mulder's ear from behind. "Look into your own eyes as I enter you. I want you to see what I see when I'm on top of you."

Mulder forced his eyes open, looking at himself, at first a little uncomfortable with it. Skinner slowly entered him, moaning out loud at the heat and the familiar tingling of joy in his groin. He watched them from over Mulder's shoulder, seeing Mulder's eyes glaze over in pleasure. Skinner looked down at their joining, watching himself move in and out,

feeling that tight ring of muscle stretch around him, milking him as he prolonged their love making by going as slow as he could, increasing the speed a little at a time until their moans and the sounds of their joining were echoing off the tile. Skinner gasped, pulling Mulder tightly against him as he came. Mulder came again, his seed dripping down the mirror in front of him, covering his image.

They washed off and ate dinner in the nude, sitting on the sofa together, drinking wine. They didn't talk, letting the silence speak for them as they absently stroked each other, sharing light kisses. Mulder lay his head on Skinner's lap, turning his head and lipping at the hairs that ran from Skinner's navel to his groin. He dipped his head lower and buried his face in Skinner's hair, kissing his way down the half erect member. Skinner took a breath as Mulder took him into his mouth. Skinner ran his fingers through Mulder's hair and over his back, reaching between Mulder's legs to play gently at his entrance. After a few minutes, Mulder pushed off.

"It's my turn," Mulder said. He stood up, taking Skinner by the hand and leading him to the bedroom. Mulder spread a large towel on the bed and laid him on his stomach. "Don't move," Mulder warned him. Skinner heard him fumbling around in their packs. The bed dipped as Mulder knelt on it, his knees on either side of Skinner's thighs. He felt something cool trickle onto his back.

"What...?" He tried to lift his head and look around.

"Shush," Mulder said, holding him down. Mulder dug his hands into Skinner's shoulders, rubbing the stuff in. Skinner realized that it was oil, as a light, fragrant smell hit his nose. Mulder slowly worked his way down Skinner's back, loosening muscles and realigning his spine. Skinner felt his joints pop, and that feeling of euphoria hit his head as his natural energies flowed freely again. Mulder pressed on his gluts and Skinner felt a thumb dip in to rub at him, entering him briefly before withdrawing, the hands continuing down one leg to his feet and back up the other leg.

"Turn over, babe," Mulder said. Skinner turned between Mulder's legs, the evidence of his enjoyment obvious. Mulder ignored it and poured oil onto Skinner's chest. He touched Skinner's face, running his fingertips over Skinner's features, his lips, high cheek bones, before taking one arm and rubbing oil into it, pressing the muscles, releasing them, down to his hands. Mulder took each finger and gently pulled, pressing his thumbs into Skinner's palm. He kissed Skinner's palm, laying it on the bed, spreading the oil across Skinner's chest, rubbing at the small nipples, pinching them into hardness, going across to the other arm and repeating his motions.

When Mulder reached his belly, he paused to shift his legs, spreading Skinner's legs to kneel between them. Skinner put his feet flat on the bed as Mulder oiled his thighs, slowly going lower and lower until only his center remained untouched. Oiled hands enclosed around him and Skinner moaned, needing more. He was slowly stroked and caressed, one finger at a time entering him, tormenting him, until he had three long, slim fingers inside, insistently stroking that small gland that brought so much pleasure.

"Fox, please," Skinner begged, feeling his entire body quivering. Mulder withdrew his fingers. He leaned over Skinner, holding his eyes, and entered him. Mulder was silent as he undulated above Skinner, claiming his territory. Skinner knew a long time ago that he was forever Mulder's.

Not having gotten much sleep the night before, they none-the-less expected to see someone in town to greet them. There was no children, no Natti or Krycek, no Carlo or Zia, and no cousins. A whistle captured their attention. KC stood on the porch of the station and waved them over.

"Where is everyone?" Skinner asked her.

"With all the crap that went down yesterday, everyone decided that they'd had enough government interference so they took matters into their own hands," she stated.

"Care to clarify?" Mulder said.

KC held out a piece of metal, the morning sunlight sparkling off it.

"Residents of six months or more voted yesterday," she said. "It was unexpected, but the town board called an emergency meeting. Almost everyone showed up. They decided that if you can stand up to murderers, arsonists, kidnappers, Senators, and Alex, then you should be their Sheriff, and damned be any so-called proper voting process. God bless America."

Skinner looked from the badge to his younger cousin. She waved it at him.

"Go on, Walter," she encouraged him. "You won it fair and square. You got 72 percent of the vote, all legally counted by a show of hands and signatures. No little punch cards to eyeball."

The door opened and Ruvn stepped out onto the porch, zipping up his jacket.

"Awaiting your orders, Sheriff," he said as he stood next to KC, his deputy's badge clearly decorating his jacket.

Skinner took the badge with shaking hands and pinned it to his jacket.

"Orders....," he cleared his throat. "Orders are -where is my family?"

KC toed up and buzzed his face.

"Cleaning house, Sheriff Cousin, Sir," she said with a cheeky salute.

She strode down to the car along with Ruvin. Mulder took Skinner's hand and dragged him to follow.

They followed KC and Ruvin out to the far end of town. Skinner could see a hell of a lot of cars and trucks sitting around their new property. Ladders scaled the walls and people were peeling boards from the windows and scraping old paint. The doors were opened and more people came out of the house, carrying buckets of stuff and whatnot, dumping it into the backs of some of the waiting trucks. Women wore rags on their heads, protecting their hair from dust and mites. When Skinner and Mulder got out of the car, everyone stopped and called out to them, waving. All their neighbors were there. The boys ran out of the house, their faces covered in dust and smelling of detergent.

"Hi, Popi!" they yelled and threw themselves at him. Skinner caught them and lifted them up, putting smacks on their dirty cheeks.

"What's going on here?" he asked them. There was the sound of a buzzing chainsaw coming from somewhere.

"We're cleaning," Pavel said, self-evident. "The house is really dirty." He wrinkled his nose.

"We saw a bunny, popi!" Ivan informed him, eyes glittering with excitement. "It was white, just like the snow, and it hopped away when we chased it. Can we have a bunny, popi?"

Skinner rubbed noses with him. "No," he said. He stopped, realizing that it was the first time he said a definite no to them. Neither boy seemed unduly harmed by the event. Mulder patted his back.

Kisa raced around his feet, barking her joy at his return. She snatched at the snow with her teeth before running some more. Mulder was holding Adam, while Stephanie stood off to the side with Amanda.

"I claim the two rooms closest to the far back corner," Krycek announced, coming out from around the side of the porch. "There's an outside door back there, and its own alcove." He was holding a broom. Ya'el stood behind him, not a speck of dust on her. There was a crash from inside, and Skinner set the boys down to rush in. Just inside the door, a rectangle of wood lay on the floor, obviously just cut from the wall. Cousin Ricky stepped out from the new hole, raising his goggles. He had a chainsaw in one hand.

"Ricky, what are you doing?" Skinner asked him.

Ricky gestured toward the hole. "Making a door, what's it look like?" he responded.

Skinner looked around him, seeing the freshly scrubbed main room. The cherrywood shone and sparkled at a high gloss. A meow caught his attention and he looked up. The cats had found the high beams and were immensely impressed with themselves.

Zia and Natti stepped from the kitchen, wiping their hands on towels.

"Welcome home, boys," Zia said.

Chapter 25: Deja Aliens

Note: the Roswell characters are not mine, they belong to who ever owns them from the TV show, Roswell.

Their new home was livable, it only needed a few structural repairs, mostly on the outside. Skinner went with Mulder to the warehouse where his parents' furniture was being stored and they went through everything. Antiques and children didn't mix well, but they took Teena Mulder's bedframe, dining room table, and chairs, along with the kitchen supplies. They then went through Bill Mulder's things and took out the couch, livingroom chairs, an armoire, and bedroom dressers. Lamps, some nicknacks and various small odds and ends came from both. Mulder then dug out his own old leather couch and smiled at it, patting it. Skinner reminded himself that he loved Mulder and would do anything for him.

Skinner watched Mulder touching his parents' things, the emotions that ran across his face.

"Babe, we can take it all, I don't mind," he said quietly. Mulder shook his head.

"No. I'm just remembering them, that's all," he said. "Mom's stuff is a little too feminine for me. Dad's stuff just isn't my taste. The rest wouldn't survive the kids and animals. Besides, I'm not an antiques type of person. Except my preference for older men, of course."

Skinner squeezed his shoulder in passing.

"I think I'll see if Scully would like a few things," Mulder said. "There's no point in my keeping this stuff, is there?"

"That's up to you, Fox," Skinner said. "You can keep it for the memories, for the quality of the things. If you think you might want something later on, by all means keep it. If not, sell it or give it away. Do what you think is best with it."

Mulder lifted a tarp and sat on a couch. He bent and sniffed at the headrest before caressing the fabric.

"I can almost make out the smell of his tobacco," Mulder said. "He liked a pipe in the evenings. He'd sit out on the porch and puff away, looking at the stars. I'd sit with him and he'd tell me the names of the constellations, or tell me which animals were making the nighttime noises. This was before Sam was taken. Mom didn't like him to smoke in the house. He'd come in after, still smelling like pipe tobacco. I think I'll take this couch. It looks like shit, but I'd like to put it in my office."

"Sure, Fox," Skinner said. "Where were you planning on putting your old one?"

"In the library, of course," Mulder said. That's what Skinner was afraid of.

On their way to the new house, Mulder was the first to notice a light on at Dom's place.

"Think he's home?" Mulder asked. Skinner pulled up to the driveway.

"He'd better be, or else it's a B&E," he said.

They knocked on the front door but there was no answer. Both men pulled their guns and Skinner tried the knob. It was unlocked and they went in.

"Anyone here?" Skinner called out. "Dom? This is the Sheriff, speak up!"

There was no response. They heard a faint noise from upstairs and they carefully climbed the staircase. Skinner was about to turn right at the top of the stairs, but another noise made him turn left. The sounds were coming from Dominic's room.

"Dom?" he called out. "It's Walter and Fox."

He knocked on the door.

"Come in," he heard. They lowered their guns in relief. It was Dom's voice and he didn't sound distressed.

Skinner opened the door and saw his cousin folding clothes and putting them into a box that was sitting on the bed.

"Hey," Skinner said quietly.

"Hey."

"Everyone's been worried about you."

Dom continued to put clothes into the box.

"Soooo.... How are you?" Skinner tried again.

"Fine," came the non-responsive answer.

Dom took t-shirts from a drawer and put them into the box.

"Where's your collar, Dom?" Mulder asked.

"In Rome," Dom said, heading for the closet.

"Dom, please, stop and talk to us," Skinner begged him.

The atmosphere was thick enough to cut with a knife. Skinner heard a roaring in his ears. Could the unthinkable have happened?

"Were you fired, Dom?" he could barely ask.

"Si. Finito." Pants followed the t-shirts into the box. Dom began to tape the full box shut.

"Oh, my.... but why?" Skinner asked, appalled.

"Because I refused to retract my statements," Dom said. He started another box.

Skinner strode up to him urgently.

"Dominic, you have to!" he insisted. "Take it back, whatever they want! Your entire life is with the Church!"

Dom sat on the bed abruptly, hands between his opened knees, staring at the floor.

"My life is with my God, Walt," he said after a moment. "My faith is with God, and if He chooses to lead me away from the Church in order for me to do His bidding, then so be it."

"Dom, this wouldn't have happened if I hadn't asked you to write that report," Skinner said, squatting down in front of him. "Please. Don't do this."

Dom smiled, a little sadly, and patted Skinner on the cheek.

"You've always done that," he said. "Even when Mario and I were taking your ice cream cones, you'd still offer to share your dessert with us. You should have been the priest. I love you, Walter, but this is my decision. None of the blame is yours, so don't take any of it."

He stood and went back to his packing.

"This is my fight, Dom," Mulder said quietly. "This shouldn't have happened to you."

"Don't you start, too," Dom said. "I won't lie, Fox. I believe everything that I wrote. I see no division between the beliefs that I hold to be true and whatever's out there." He jerked his chin toward the ceiling. "Just because God didn't bother telling us about his side projects, doesn't mean they don't exist. I do believe in our Messiah. I also believe that He either came, or will come, to any and every sentient life form, in whatever form they will best recognize Him in. We see God in our own image. Isn't that what the Bible teaches us? So if we had big black eyes and we were short and gray, wouldn't Jesus be also? I'm afraid the Holy Father disagrees with me."

"So what will you do now?" Skinner asked.

Dom tossed an armful of socks into the box.

"I don't know," he said. "First, I'm going home and begging Mama's forgiveness. If she kicks me out, I might be showing up on your doorstep. After that, I don't know."

"The Protestants are pretty open minded about all this," Mulder said helpfully. "So are the Unitarians, for that matter. Then there are the non-Denominational churches."

Dom chuckled, wrapping up some belts.

"That's kinda like offering your wife to someone on the eve of his divorce," he said. "But I understand what you're saying. And it is a consideration. Don't worry, fellas, I'll be fine. Listen, give me some space, ok, guys?"

Skinner shook himself and stepped back.

"Yeah, sure, Dom," he said. Mulder stepped back toward the door.

Dom turned and hugged Skinner tightly, holding him for a moment.

"Not one ounce of this is on you, Walter," Dom assured him. "I made my own decisions and I will stand by them. Fox?" he turned to Mulder. "I do believe in your work. A case could be made that you even saved the world. But even more importantly -I may disagree with your lifestyle, but I know that you love my baby cousin. I can only bless you for that. Continue to love him, and let me deal with my own soul's rumblings."

Mulder held out his hand. Dom shook it.

"Dom?" Skinner said from the door. "We've moved. Just up the street, you're welcome at any time. There's plenty of room. At least stop in and see Carlo on your way." He gave Dom the address and directions. "He and Natti are engaged."

That caught Dom's attention.

"Really?" he asked with a look of astonishment.

They nodded. "It really wasn't much of a surprise," Skinner said. Dom conceded the point.

"Hmpf. Good for them. Carlo deserves it. He's a good man. And I like Natti, she'll keep him in line. I'll stop and see him," he said.

"Dom, do you like Matthew Fox?" Mulder asked. Dom turned and gave him a half smile.

"Love Matthew Fox," he said. He gave a nod to Mulder, acknowledging his help to a new path.

The men left Dom to his packing. Skinner boiled with anger on Dom's behalf, and guilty that he did indeed have something to do with Dom's dismissal.

"Who's Matthew Fox?" Skinner asked Mulder as they got into the van.

"Ex-priest," Mulder said. "He and the Church parted company a long time ago when they disagreed on Father Matthew's interpretation of the Bible." He turned his head, looking at Skinner. "Actually, I think you might like him. I have a book on my.... never mind. I have to go and get another copy. I'm getting you a copy of his book called 'Original Blessing'. I have a feeling you'll find something in it that will speak to you."

Skinner frowned. "Fox, I don't want to..." he began. Mulder shushed him and squeezed his thigh.

"Babe, don't give me that," Mulder said with a shake of his head. "I know you too well. You miss having that special Something in you life. You accept a little of Emilia's side of the fence, and you accept a little of the Catholic side of the fence, whether or not you admit it. Don't argue with me until after you've read this book."

Skinner found himself reluctantly promising.

"But if you try and convert me, I'm going back to Scully," Mulder warned with a shake of his finger. Skinner smiled and caught the finger, giving the tip a nip.

"Just so long as you don't go to Alex," Skinner said.

Mulder wrinkled his nose. "Incest is NOT best," he said vehemently. They turned into the long driveway.

"But once upon a time....." Skinner sing-songed.

"Yeah, yeah," Mulder said, waving a hand. "Before I knew, when I had first met him, maybe. I'll give you that."

Skinner chuckled and turned the engine off. "The image of you and Alex together..." he said, wonderingly. Mulder turned and Skinner put up his arms to fend him off, but he just sat there with a smirk on his face.

"You, however, are not related by blood to him," Mulder said. "I can picture him pounding your ass."

Skinner unlocked the door and stepped out.

"Once upon a time, Fox," he said and shut the door. It took a minute, but Mulder ran after him insisting on clarification. Skinner wasn't giving it to him.

"What's going on?" the object of their discussion asked, coming out of the kitchen.

"Nothing," Skinner said. "Help us with furniture?"

The boys ran in at the sound of their voices and clamored around the men. Skinner put them to work by carrying small, light stuff. He whistled to Kisa who barked excitedly and followed him back out.

"Fox," Krycek called him over. "I fell asleep today and took a nap. I had the strangest dream. I dreamed that Walter shot me. About five years ago. You weren't with the FBI anymore, Scully was having an alien baby, I was torturing Walter, and he shot me."

"You were torturing me about five years ago," Skinner said, opening the back door of the van. Krycek waved him off.

"And it has been about five years since the baby died," Mulder reminded him. "Maybe your subconscious was remembering that and you overlapped events. You felt that Walter should have shot you because you were a very naughty boy." Mulder shook Krycek's shoulders in emphasis.

Krycek nodded thoughtfully, scratching at his stubble.

"And Fox was out for a while," Skinner said. "Until the director over-ruled that as... idiot Kersh." He looked around for little ears but they were too busy nosing through the moving van that he had rented.

Krycek nodded again.

"Now him I should have shot," Krycek said. "He *was* an idiot. The world's gene pool would have been spared."

"Shot who, Alex?" Mr. Big Ears asked.

"It was just a video game, Pavie," Skinner assured him with a warning look at Krycek who sucked in his lips and zipped them.

"Oh, ok," Pavel said, a little disappointed.

"Hey!" Skinner yelled. He grabbed Pavel and turned him upside down, dangling him in the air. "I don't believe I've had kisses today," he gruffly informed the giggling child. He held Pavel up and put a smack on the upside down face before lowering the boy to the ground. Pavel's round cheeks were red and flushed, his green eyes shining.

"Silly, popi," Pavel said. He ran into the yard, Kisa chasing him and barking her pleasure.

"Thank you, Walter," Krycek said softly.

"For what?" Skinner asked. He handed a cushion to Ivan, put a smack on his cheek, and a lamp to Adam who held his face up for some sugar, too. They carefully carried them into the house.

"For loving him," Krycek said, lifting a chair. He followed the boys in.

Skinner was still for a moment.

"You know what, Fox?" he said.

"What, babe?" Mulder said.

"He *is* going to kill me. With surprise."

They spent their first full night in their new home. It was still a bit on the empty side, even with all the furniture they brought in, but at least it was theirs. In the darkness, with the moonlight shining through the window, Mulder made love to Skinner, their limbs quietly rustling the sheets, their soft gasps and moans barely making a squeak in the night as they consecrated their marriage bed.

In the morning, Skinner stepped out of their room and looked around at the main livingroom. The wooden floors gleamed, glass windows sparkled. The house was huge, almost three times the size of their previous one. And the spirit of Teena Mulder thought they were going to fill it? Skinner highly doubted it.

The phone rang, echoing across the wooden floors.

"Skinner," he answered.

"Good morning, Sheriff," he heard KC greet him, entirely too cheerful for that hour of the morning. "Baby is stuck in the tree again. I think it's your turn." His deputy hung up on

him. Skinner groaned. Maybe he should give Krycek permission to go and do some target practice on that demon cat.

At lunch time, Skinner walked into the kitchen just in time to see Mulder coat a pickle with peanut butter and take a bite of it. Skinner stopped short, wrinkling his nose.

"I'm pregnant," Mulder said around chipmunk cheeks. The boys giggled. Skinner came in and grabbed an apple from the counter.

"A sterile man making another man pregnant; after everything you've thrown at me over the years, I'll buy it." Skinner bit into his apple while giving Kisa a scratch on the head.

"You would?" Adam asked, believing him.

"Sure," Skinner nodded. "Your father has told me about giant alligators in the middle of a forest, ghosts, demons, time traveling, shape-shifting aliens, flying cows, and your Aunt Dana singing to him. I can believe in a pregnant man."

The boys looked at him wide-eyed and jaws unhinged.

"Daddy, are you pregnant?" Adam asked Mulder seriously. Mulder choked on his pickle and threw his napkin at Skinner.

"No, I'm not," he insisted. "Don't listen to Uncle Walter, he tells even bigger whoppers than I do."

Adam rolled his eyes and went back to his sandwich.

"Hallo," a woman's voice said, coming into the kitchen.

"Ya'el," Skinner greeted her. Mulder raised his pickle in salute.

"Want a pickle?" he asked. "They're kosher."

She raised an eyebrow. Skinner thought he detected a hint of humor.

"That's good, but I'm not Orthodox," she said. She leaned over the table and took his pickle. "I even like bacon," she said in a stage whisper, taking a bit.

Skinner still didn't know what to make of her. She was just a slip of a thing, barely five feet tall, certainly not over one hundred pounds, not even dripping wet. Short black hair, black eyes, olive skin. A Sabra woman, if he remembered his phrasing correctly. But if she was Krycek's opposite in Israel, she was as deadly as Krycek. Skinner had in mind

two Black Widow spiders mating. He also wondered if she was the reason Krycek winced when he sat down at breakfast that morning.

"Ya'e'l, do you have any kids?" Ivan asked her as she sat next to him.

"No, I don't," she answered him.

"Do you want kids?" he asked.

"Not particularly," she said. "Why?"

Ivan shrugged. "Just wonderin'," he said. She looked at the twins and then shook her head, not saying anything. Skinner knew what she was thinking, 'how alike they are!'. The twins didn't know what to make of her, either. She was nice to them, but so far she had resisted even Ivan's charms.

She held the rest of her pickle up to the boys.

"Kavhamutz," she said, indicating the pickle. They giggled and repeated the word.

"Karikh," she said, poking Pavel's sandwich. She lifted an edge and swiped at the peanut butter. "Boten," she said, licking the sticky stuff from her finger. The boys repeated the words.

"Tov," she nodded approvingly, standing up. She left the kitchen, grabbing a paper towel on her way out.

Mulder looked at Skinner.

"Honey, I don't think she'd do as our new nanny," he said. Skinner agreed. The boys finished their lunch and ran off to play.

"Too bad Natti isn't here," Skinner said. He leaned in over the table. "I could use a nooner," he whispered with a gleam in his eyes. Mulder answered his gleam with one of his own and met him halfway across the table. Skinner kissed him and drew back, wiping his mouth.

"Babe, I love you, but I think I'm drawing the line at pickles and peanut butter."

"Chicken." Mulder went to find his toothbrush.

"What's a nooner?"

Skinner groaned and buried his face on the table as Pavel waited for his answer.

Everyone seemed happy to have Skinner back in uniform. Almost everyone. There were a few here and there that ignored him, glared at him, or deliberately turned their backs on him. He didn't really care, as long as they behaved. He drove out to check in on Emilia.

"You ruined my fun, Skinner," she informed him when she opened the door.

"How so?" he asked, stepping into the house.

"I didn't get the chance to play campaign manager. You stole my fire. And I have one other thing to say to you."

Skinner sat on the couch, picking up a nearby cat and scratching it between the ears.

"What?" he asked.

She fell into a chair opposite him.

"It should be illegal for you to wear clothes," she grinned wickedly at him.

Skinner flushed and put the cat down.

She reached over and patted his knee. "No, seriously, Walter, how are you and Mulder doing?"

"We're fine," he nodded. "I don't understand how we could have gotten so messed up, or how we were fixed, but things are good again."

"Playing muskrats again, are you?" she asked.

"As often as possible," he returned her fire. "And what's this I hear about you going celibate?"

She rolled her eyes. "Alex," she guessed. "It's not a big deal. I do a fasting every year. Something different each year. Something that I enjoy. It helps me to appreciate what it is that I'm enjoying and to give a fuller blessing for having it in my life. Last year it was chocolate. I fudged a couple of times, no pun intended, but I lost fifty pounds over the year, and I feel a hell of a lot better. I'll probably be putting it back on this year," she said ruefully.

Skinner could sympathize. "I don't think I have the willpower to give up chocolate or sex," he said. "I've been working out at the station in the mornings. I keep a punching bag there. You're welcome to come over, and I'll show you how to use it. I think you're

beautiful the way you are, but if you're concerned about yourself, you're welcome to join me. It's a good aerobic."

"Thank you," she said. "Actually, I take a kick-boxing class twice a week."

The sweet Southern Bell image flew out the door.

They spent another hour discussing form and technique before Skinner went back to his rounds. It felt strange, but good to be back in uniform, checking on the town. He tossed Tommy Lee into the can and he knew he was back where he was supposed to be.

After dinner, the family headed into the city. Bethany was doing much better and her doctors gave an ok for a brief visit from the boys. They were excited and insisted on bringing her presents, so Skinner stopped off at a department store where the boys chose a gift for her.

"How about a board game?" Adam suggested. "It's wrapped and her doctors and nurses can play with her. The other sick kids, too."

Skinner ruffled his hair. "That's a terrific idea," he told the boy. They looked the games over but couldn't decide. Skinner called Stephanie and went over games with her. They didn't have Monopoly, of all things.

"It'll help Amanda with numbers, if nothing else," Mulder said. They bought the old family board game, and had it gift wrapped. The boys were happy.

Bethany was pleased to see them. Her grandparents were not.

She sat in a chair, hooked up to an IV, wearing a paper face mask. Skinner thought she looked a hell of a lot better than she did just weeks earlier. She was also completely hairless. Not thin and brittle, but a completely shaved skull. Her grandparents were definitely not happy.

"I had spots with no hair, spots with a little hair, and spots with a lot of hair," she said. "So I took some scissors and cut it all off." She was quite defiant and pleased with herself.

"I think you look good," Skinner said with a nod. He stroked his head. "Not that I'm biased, mind you. You have a well formed head; it makes you look elegant."

She dug into a box of things and came up with one of those baby headbands. She put it on and giggled behind her mask.

"Perfect!" Skinner clapped. He could practically hear the Major grinding his teeth down to the gums.

"It was kinda raggity but when Mommy saw it, she yelled at me and had a tech come in and shave my head," she said. "She said when I'm all better, I'm grounded for a month."

"You look just like popi!" Ivan declared.

The Major went into the bathroom and took a long gulp of water.

"But with a pretty nose, thank goodness," Skinner said, touching the tip of her nose poking up through the face mask with his finger.

"I don't know, I kinda like your smushed nose," Mulder said, touching Skinner's nose. The children giggled. "Of course, there are times when you snore something awful."

"Fox!"

The boys demonstrated snoring techniques to Bethany who laughed at them. Mrs. Major was biting her lip, casting an eye to the bathroom as she tried not to laugh. She winked and Skinner knew he had an ally in enemy territory.

"Popi, did your house really catch on fire? And did Mandy almost blow up in your car?" Beth asked, wide-eyed. Skinner sat on a chair and told her a tame version of the story, making an emphases of their new home and how much they liked it, and that no one was hurt.

The twins weren't quite ready for Monopoly, not grasping the concept of money yet, so Skinner and company left Bethany to play her new game with her grandparents.

The boys were bathed and tucked into bed when they got home, Kisa was let out for a run, and Skinner dumped himself into a bath of his own. He leaned back and shut his eyes, relaxing into the hot water. A hand crept down into the water and encircled his genitals. He didn't move. The hand slowly stroked him, not in any rush. He went with the sensations coursing through him, making an audible noise only when he was touched in a particularly sensitive spot. He made a small grunt as he came, a nice, easy orgasm caused by the hand of someone who knew him so well. A mouth touched his, a gentle kiss, sweetly caressing.

"Come to bed, Walter," Mulder whispered.

It was officially Summer Vacation for the elementary school.

Skinner began making daily plans to keep the boys occupied. Carlo had taken Natti up to New York to spend time with his family, while Dominic showed up on Skinner's

doorstep. Skinner let him in without a word. Dom was taken upstairs and given a room of his own while he figured out his life.

"I'm too old to be starting over," Dom said, staring out the window.

"Dom, I didn't become a father or take a male lover until after I retired," Skinner reminded him. Dom nodded.

"Point," he conceded. "I think I can handle the thought of children, but don't expect to see me bringing Mr. July home any time soon."

Skinner watched his cousin for a moment.

"What did Zia say?" he asked.

Dom was silent. "Don't worry about it, Walter, she doesn't hold grudges. Not for long, anyway."

"Well, if you want something to take your mind off things, I could use someone to watch the boys while I go to work," Skinner said. Dom agreed.

Once at work, Skinner was joined by KC for patrol. Ruvin decided that he needed a vacation. They hadn't gone more than two blocks when Becky called them on the radio. They both groaned, hearing the address.

".....I'm going to skin that insane cat!" shouted Mr. Cuypepper from next door as they pulled up to the house. "Come 'er, puppy," he called, clicking his teeth and rustling his fingers. Skinner scrunched down and looked under the porch. A large set of dark eyes stared back at him mournfully. Slowly, the dog came out. It was enormous, a huge ball of black fur. The man stroked his ears and ruffled the thick mane surrounding the dog's face. Mr. Cuypepper murmured baby gibberish, making kissy noises. Skinner held his gaze steady while KC rolled her eyes.

"Did you actually see the chase, sir?" Skinner asked the man. Mr. Cuypepper yanked his head around, glaring up at Skinner.

"Not all of it, but I saw that... that... MONSTER! chase my Wolfgang under the porch where he's been shaking ever since. I want that... that... put down as a danger to society!" he shouted, pointing imperiously down the street.

Skinner looked down at the quaking New Foundland. The dog seemed to look back at him in apology. Skinner wasn't sure if it was for his master's behavior or his own cowardice.

"We'll check it out, sir," Skinner said. He and KC went back to the car.

"I'm buying the shots at the bar tonight," she said after shutting her door.

"You're on."

Mrs. Plotsky denied the entire incident, pointing out an innocently sleeping cat on a doily covered chair.

"My Baby has been sound asleep, exhausted from her ordeal in the tree this morning," she insisted. When her back was turned, one green eye opened for a moment and slowly shut. Skinner would swear he heard a nefarious snicker.

Without physical proof, there was nothing Skinner could do.

"Wait!" Mrs. Plotsky said, remembering something. She went into her kitchen and was back a moment later with a plate.

"Welcome back, Sheriff," she said.

They got into the car where Skinner put the plate on the back seat.

"How the hell am I supposed to arrest her cat after that?" he asked. KC patted his knee.

"You just do," she said. "Unless you're accepting bribes?"

They drove out to the farm houses and stopped to surreptitiously feed the nice piggies a few crunchy cookies.

"Gun fire at Smith and Pine," Becky said over the radio. Skinner pushed his foot down hard on the gas and they high-tailed it back into town while KC set the siren.

Neighbors poked their heads out of their houses, eager to get them shot off, Skinner assumed. A teenage boy ran across the street, clearly afraid for his life. The car screeched to a halt and the boy dropped down behind it, panting, on the ground.

"Rafael?" Skinner questioned, looking out the window at him. "What's going on?"

The young man hung his head, catching his breath, and gestured toward the houses across the street.

"Mr. Thomas... gun..." Rafael got out.

Skinner was confused. Gentle, hen-pecked Mr. Thomas? With a gun?

"Why?" Skinner asked. As an answer, a shot rang over the hood of the car. Skinner and KC ducked.

"Where are you, you no good bastard?!" they heard shouted. "That's alright, I know where you live!"

"What'd you do, Rafe?" Skinner asked him urgently.

"I got Mary pregnant," came the groan.

Skinner groaned himself. A fifteen year old cheerleader pregnant by the senior quarterback. Great.

"Hey, Carl, it's sheriff," Skinner said loudly out the window. "I'm coming out, alright? Let's talk about this?"

"Come on out, sheriff," he heard. "I'm gunnin' for that horny little prick, not you."

By the time Skinner talked Mr. Thomas out of killing the teenager, he was ready to call Scully and beg for a job. Then he remembered that he had forgotten to remind Dom about The Manual and twin survival techniques. Skinner raced home in a panic.

Kisa had been shaved.

She looked pathetic as she wagged her miserable excuse for a tail when he entered the house.

"Boys!" Skinner yelled. He scrunched down and scratched her head, letting her know that everything was alright. The boys came running in and Skinner pointed to the puppy.

"What have you been told about shaving the animals?" he asked. The twins looked at him innocently.

"But, popi, you said not to shave the cats," Pavel protested. Ivan nodded; he remembered quite clearly popi said not to shave the cats. Skinner groaned and rubbed at his face.

"Kisa was hot. She was making her tongue hang out and she was dripping spit all over," Ivan said, wrinkling his pert little nose in disgust.

Skinner found himself wishing for a bottle of something. Anything.

"Where's Adam?"

The twins rolled their eyes.

"Making faces at Jennifer," Pavel informed him.

"Where's Dom?" Skinner asked.

"Cooking," Ivan said.

"Does Dom know how to cook?" Skinner asked. He headed for the kitchen. It was a disaster area. Dom was covered in flour and red sauce.

"Hi, honey, I'm home," Skinner said dryly.

Dom waved a spatula, shooting more red sauce everywhere.

"This is harder than it looks," he said apologetically.

"Dom, you're an Italian who can't cook?" Skinner asked.

Dom waved his hands, splattering sauce on the walls.

"I've always had mama or one of my sisters to cook for me," he said. "What's wrong with the dog?" he asked, seeing the weebegone puppy drag herself in.

Skinner could see he had no choice.

"Alright," he sighed. "Boys, go outside and play. Take Kisa with you. Dom, out of my kitchen."

Krycek and his shadow walked into the kitchen, stopped short, and turned around without a word, walking back out.

The kitchen was cleaned and dinner almost edible when the next crisis occurred. Skinner heard a thud. A second later, he heard one of the boys screaming. He dropped a dish on the floor and ran for the back door. His heart stopped for a moment, seeing Pavel laying on the ground under a tree.

"Popi!" Ivan yelled, running for Skinner. "He fell!" Ivan had tears streaming down his face as he watched his brother in fear.

Skinner ran for Pavel and fell to the ground next to him. Pavel was screaming in pain. His arm at a crooked angle.

"ALEX!"

By the time Mulder got to Doc Wilkins' office, Pavel was mostly asleep, shot up with pain killers as his arm was x-rayed and reset before being put into a plaster cast.

"He'll be fine, Walter," Doc assured him with a pat. "It's a rite of passage for boys. I've probably put the arms and legs of just about every boy in town into a cast at one time or another. Take him home, put him to bed. He'll be right as rain in about six weeks."

Skinner gripped Mulder's hand and took a deep breath, nodding. It was just a broken bone. He broke his arm once himself. It hurt like hell, but he survived.

He picked the drowsy child up, carefully cradling him, while Krycek took an anxious Ivan. Mulder went to the White's house to find Adam.

"Popi?" Pavel said groggily. Skinner kissed his forehead. "Hurts," Pavel whimpered, pouting.

"I know, son," Skinner said. "We'll get you home and you can go to bed. You'll feel better in the morning."

He took the pain killers from Doc and got into the car, carefully sliding into the passenger seat while Krycek drove them home. Ivan leaned over the back seat to peer over Skinner's shoulder.

"He'll be fine, Vonnie," Skinner said softly, more calmly than he felt. Ivan rested his chin on Skinner's shoulder and touched Pavel's free hand.

Once home, with Krycek driving slow and careful, Skinner put Pavel to bed and went outside to glare at the offending tree.

"Babe, it isn't the tree's fault," Mulder said, coming up behind him.

"It needs to come down, Fox," Skinner informed him.

"Why?" Mulder asked.

"What if he had broken his neck? Or his spine? Poked an eye out on a small branch?" Where did he put the saw?

Mulder turned him around. Skinner could see a logical lecture coming on.

"Who was it that lectured whom about not being able to protect certain children from the world?" he asked.

"That was words, Fox," Skinner said. "You can't protect them from hurtful words. This was physical. That's different."

Mulder nodded. "How so? Kids commit suicide every day over words. They bring guns to school over words. They kill their best friends over one glance from a pretty girl. This was a tree, Walter. The normal act of a boy climbing a tree. The normal act of a boy falling out of a tree. If you take the tree away, the only thing he's going to learn is that whenever something hurts him, either he, or someone else, will get rid of it for him. He needs to learn how to deal with his world, not make it go away. Next time, he'll think twice about climbing that tree."

Skinner hated it when Mulder was right. All the time. He nodded, unhappily accepting the lecture.

"Now, tell me something," Mulder said. "What happened to Kisa?"

Kisa was shaved completely, all the rows and tufts of uneven fur taken off, all the while praised and assured of her good girl-ness. She swallowed hard and bravely accepted her master's kindness. She ignored the cats, who practically rolled off the high beams in laughter. She didn't understand why her master kept the ungodly creatures.

Ivan and Adam sat quietly working in their work books, Ivan glancing worriedly toward their bedroom once in a while. Skinner checked in on Pavel, who was sound asleep from the pain meds. He felt the boy's fingers. They were warm, reassuring him of good circulation. He straightened the covers and kissed Pavel's forehead, brushing the dark hair away from his face. They needed a haircut again.

Skinner dragged himself to the livingroom and plopped into the couch, turning the TV on to the news. Ivan came in and climbed up onto his lap, curling up against his chest. Skinner held him, soothing himself as he stroked his son. They're getting big, Skinner noticed, as the top of Ivan's head brushed the underside of his chin. They'll be six next month, he realized.

After the dishes were done, Mulder came in and sat next to him.

"And how was the rest of your day?" he asked.

Skinner smiled a little. "Busy," he said quietly. An understatement. "Baby was terrorizing that Newfie down the street, Mrs. MacGillicuddy locked herself out of the house. She was wearing her nightgown and curlers. Patrick O'Toole is in a cell for smacking his wife; fifteen year old Mary Thomas is pregnant by Rafael Vargas, the quarterback of the high school football team. Her father tried to shoot his a... butt with a sawed off. Last I saw, Mr. Vargas was whomping his son upside the head and yelling in Spanish fast enough to peel bark from a tree. Is it too soon for a vacation, Fox?"

Adam came in and lay next to Mulder on the couch, resting his head on Mulder's thigh as he watched the news.

"Actually, I was thinking of a little side trip this weekend," Mulder said. Skinner looked up from playing with Ivan's little fingers.

"Oh? Where?" he asked.

"Roswell."

He didn't need to ask which Roswell.

"Why?"

Mulder shrugged. "Just because," he said. "Come on, Walter, it'll be fun. Delegate some authority. There's no rule that says you have to work weekends."

"Can we go, too, Uncle Fox?" Ivan begged, lifting his head. Adam sat up and echoed his plea. Skinner was out-numbered.

Invited to join them, Krycek's expression spoke volumes. He politely declined. Pavel wasn't too thrilled about going anywhere, but by the weekend, he had begun to come around and made a brave stand at being well. He became quickly frustrated at trying to do things one-handed to the point of throwing temper tantrums. Skinner put a sudden halt to that, insisting that Krycek show the boy how to fend for himself until the cast was off. He saw a few ghosts pass Krycek's face, but decided that it would be good for him. Mulder gave an approving nod.

They flew into El Paso late Friday night, took a room, and drove out to Roswell in the morning with a rented Bronco. The boys grew bored with the monotonous desert scenery and Mulder distracted them with an oral exam on their current books.

For all the hype, Roswell turned out to be nothing more than a two stop light town out in the middle of nowhere. Road signs excitedly warned them that they were approaching the famous town, along with waving green aliens smiling at them. Mulder pointedly ignored them.

"Gray, not green," he muttered at one point.

"I'm hungry, popi," Ivan complained, obviously starving to death. Pavel and Adam agreed; they were hungry, too. Mulder's stomach grumbled.

"Alright," Skinner said, giving up. He saw a strange diner and parked in front. "Will burgers do?" His men assured him that burgers would do just fine.

The diner was relatively quiet, only a few people enjoying a meal. Skinner was pleasantly surprised to see that the place was clean and well lit. He looked at the tables -they had all been washed down. No sticky spots on the floor. He had expected a small place like that to be trashed and staffed with dower waitresses. It was a little on the kitschy side, but he could deal with it.

"Hi, welcome to the Crashdown," a perky young lady greeted them. Her shy smile was warm and generous. She ruffled Pavel's hair, squatting down to coo sympathetically over his arm. Pavel ate it up and put on his best pout of despair. The young lady stood, took Pavel's hand, and led them to a booth, promising the boy an extra scoop of ice cream. She put menus down on the table.

"I'm Liz, take your time and I'll be back for your order," she said, her brown ponytail bouncing as she turned.

Skinner silently indicated his admiration to Mulder who shrugged and nodded. They perused the weirdly named dishes, finding appropriate things for the boys before choosing their own lunches. The bell on the door jangled as another waitress came in.

"Sorry I'm late," she said to Liz.

"It's about time," a male voice said from the kitchen. Skinner looked up at the surly voice to see a young man stick his head out of the hole in the wall. The girl stuck her tongue out at him.

"I wouldn't have been late if you'd have set the alarm clock like I asked you to, Michael," she snapped back at him. He shook his head and went back to cooking.

They had their cokes in a moment. Skinner looked at the straw with the alien head. He decided that he couldn't drink from an alien head and took it out.

"Where to first, Fox?" he asked. Mulder turned and looked out the window.

"We probably need to see that place," he said, indicating the building across the street. Signs encouraged them to stop in and see the evidence. "Of course, we'll need to go out to the crash site."

"Of course," Skinner agreed. Mulder stopped craning his neck.

"Walter, you don't have to come with me," he said, giving Skinner's knee a pat.

Skinner shook his head. "No, Fox, we came here as a family and we will sight-see as a family. I don't mind, really. It just might be interesting. Just promise me that you won't get into any trouble while we're here."

"Walter, forgive me if my memory is a little faulty in my old age, but I think it's you that trouble follows."

The boys were no help, agreeing with Mulder.

Their waitress, Liz, brought over a tray with their burgers and set it down. She looked at the possessive hand on Skinner's thigh but didn't say anything as she easily set their food out.

"Just yell if you need anything," she told them.

"Daddy, can I play the juke box?" Adam asked, seeing the machine's lights. Mulder forked over the coins and all three boys ran over to it.

"Boys, your lunch is going to get cold," Skinner called over to them. They were too engrossed in the selections that Adam was reading off to them. The twins couldn't see the panel that was so much higher up than they were.

The door jangled again and another teenager came in.

"Aren't there any adults in this town?" Skinner whispered to Mulder.

"Hey, Liz," the boy called with an air of urgency. Skinner paid attention while not paying attention, sensing that something bigger than an acne outbreak was up. "Have you seen my father?"

Liz shook her head. The other girl stood next to Liz.

"What's up?" the cook asked, sticking his head out.

The dark haired boy went over to him and said something too low for Skinner to hear. The cook went back into the kitchen and came out the door in a moment.

"Maybe he just took some time?" he suggested to his antsy friend.

The second boy shook his head. "No, he wouldn't leave without telling me," he said.

The girls nodded. "That's true," the cook's girl said. "He practically still has a leash on Kyle," she told Michael. Kyle straightened with a look of denial.

"He does not," he protested.

"Please," the girls both said. Michael took his stained apron off and shoved it at Kyle.

"Here, make yourself useful," he said. "And don't burn my kitchen down."

Skinner and Mulder both raised their heads at the adult air of command coming from this teenager.

"Where do you think you're going?" his girlfriend asked.

"Stay, Maria," Michael ordered her. "I'm going to find Max, and we will go and look for the Sheriff."

Skinner put his burger down. The door clanged shut as he motioned the girls over.

"Listen, I don't want to butt into your business here," he said. "But if we can be of any help, let us know." He introduced himself and Mulder. Instead of relaxing into the arms of the law, the girls stiffened.

"Why... what brings you here?" Liz asked hesitantly, looking at both of them.

Skinner raised an eyebrow. "Weekend vacation for the family," he said, motioning to the children. "Is there a problem?"

"Nnn.... no," she said with a nervous smile. She shouldn't lie, Skinner thought; she does it even worse than I do.

Pavel climbed back into his chair and made an attempt at picking up his hamburger. All the innards fell out and he sat back with a pout.

"Pav, remember that big sandwich we shared when all the cousins came for a visit?" Skinner reminded him. Pavel nodded. "When you couldn't fit it into your mouth, how did we fix that?"

Pavel thought for a moment. "You broke it in half?" he said. Skinner took a knife and reached over to cut the hamburger into pieces for the boy. Pavel happily took a piece and stuffed his mouth with it.

Their waitress relaxed slightly and went back to the other side of the room, bending her head to whisper to her friend.

"Fox," Skinner said in a low voice.

"Damned if I know," Mulder said, taking a bite of his burger.

A thought occurred to Skinner.

"Adam, any voices or anything?" he asked the boy. Mulder looked up in objection but Adam shook his head.

"Nope," he said, dipping a fry in ketchup. "Haven't heard anything in a while." He popped the red fry into his mouth.

"Hmmm," Skinner muttered, unconvinced.

By the time they finished their lunch, and the boys halfway through sundaes, the door opened again. Their cook was back, along with another dark haired teenager. Skinner was almost convinced that the town of Roswell was inhabited by only teenagers.

The make-shift cook came out of the kitchen.

"Well?" he asked anxiously.

"Go find Isobel and bring her here," the newcomer quietly ordered him in a tone that would have brought a general to his feet. Kyle took off the apron and practically saluted as he left. Liz yanked on the new boy's shirt and brought his head down, whispering to him. Skinner noted that the young man softened slightly in her presence before he found himself under the intense scrutiny of the young man's eyes. Maria stood behind Michael's protective shield, silently daring anyone to get through him.

What the hell was it with these kids? he asked himself.

"Walter, I swear you must have a curse on you," Mulder informed him, poking a spoon into Adam's ice cream. "Scully's gonna love this one."

The young man moved quietly as he strode over to their table.

"May I speak with you?" he asked politely, avoiding the boys. Skinner told the boys to stay as he and Mulder took a few steps away from the table.

"Look," the young man began under his voice. "Every time one of you people comes here, one of us becomes a target. The sheriff is missing. Is he next in line for your little crusade? Just give him back, he hasn't done anything."

Skinner shook his head. "Son, I have no idea what you're talking about," he said. "My partner is a fan of your town's history. He wanted to come out for the weekend. We thought our sons would enjoy it. That's it." He reached into his pocket, slowing down as the young man tensed. Skinner realized that all of the teenagers were reacting as though they expected someone to pull guns on them. Who hurt them?

He showed the young man his ID and badge. The young man barely glanced at Mulder's, unimpressed.

"You're badges mean nothing to us," he said. "So far, I've been threatened, kidnapped, and tortured by the FBI, so if you're going to do it, get on with it and do it in front of witnesses this time. Valente has nothing to do with this, so let him go."

Mulder stepped forward and motioned him to a booth.

"I think we need to have a good long talk," Mulder said. He sat down and waited. He patted the seat in invitation. The young man looked around, showing a hint of teen

nervousness for the first time. Skinner sat next to Mulder, leaving the young man free to move away. He motioned the boys to stay where they were. Their waitress, Liz, seemed to have a mothering instinct and she sat with them, distracting them. Michael stood off, but was obviously guarding his friend.

"What's your name?" Mulder asked the young man.

"Max. Max Evans."

Mulder held his hand out. Max looked at it warily before reluctantly taking it. "Well, Mr. Evans, I don't know what you've been saying or what's been happening here, but I can guarantee you one thing," Mulder said seriously. "If any FBI agents have been here, they came without official orders. I should know, I would have given those orders. Because of the history of this town, anything that happens here is under my direct supervision. I would have come out, no one else, to investigate anything that needed to be investigated."

"And I'm supposed to believe that?" Max asked, clearly not believing it.

Mulder shrugged. "You know that game of the seven steps? You are just one person away from talking to any President, King, Queen, anybody, in the world. Find a phone," he said. "I won't give you any numbers, you can get them yourself. Call DC information, get the number for the Hoover, ask for Assistant Director Scully. The magic word is 'Mulder'. She'll connect you to the President of the United States, if that's what's necessary to convince you. I had lunch there last month. The chef makes a killer Baked Alaska."

There was something about this boy, Skinner thought, watching his face. Even more than the fact that it seemed as though he didn't recognize any of the names that were being thrown at him. Something.... unearthly. A centered calm amid the storm. Most adults didn't have the presence that Max Evans had, it certainly was out of place in a teenager.

"All we want to do is help," Skinner said in quiet assurance. "We'll take our boys on the tourist thing and stay out of your way, if that's what you really want."

Max looked both of them over carefully, weighing decisions. He nodded.

"If you're telling the truth, fine, play with all the stuffed green aliens you want," he said. "If not.... then you have an idea of what could happen if you get in my way."

He stood, gave them a final look, and turned.

"Michael," he said. His friend continued to stare at Skinner and Mulder. "Now, Michael."

The girls were quietly ordered to stay put, along with Kyle. Michael leaned in and whispered urgently to Max who considered the words carefully. The three were told to come along.

The store was suddenly empty except for Skinner, Mulder, and the boys.

"That was weird, Fox."

Mulder nodded. "Major weird," he agreed.

They rounded up the boys, left money on the table, and went across the street to the alien museum. Skinner was glad to find adults, even if they were tourists. Mulder nitpicked his way through the place, stopping once in a while to peer with interest at some piece of knickknack or photo. He put his foot down on alien antennas that the boys wanted until Skinner gave him a 'chill out' look. The boys got their antennas.

"You know we have a shadow, right?" Skinner leaned over to whisper to Mulder who nodded.

"Pretty blond, a few yards back," Mulder murmured back, leaning in to look closer at a photo. "If it makes him feel better, let her."

"Popi, I can't see that one," Ivan complained, pointing to a picture far above his head. Skinner lifted him and Pavel up for a look.

"Is it real, Uncle Fox?" Pavel asked, looking at the shadow of what could be an alien. Mulder looked at it.

"Looks like a warp from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*," he said after a moment. "I don't think so, Pav."

"Show us real ones, Uncle Fox," Ivan insisted. Skinner set the boys down and they followed Mulder as he pointed out different photos and told them what made them real and how others, most, could have been faked. They soon had a crowd following them, listening avidly to Mulder's discourse.

"Here, now," they heard a strong British accent say over the people. A young man with hair that looked as though he stuck his finger in a light socket came through the crowd. "Disperse," he said, shooing the people back. They chuckled and went on their way. "Now, then. What's the meaning of playing Pied Piper?"

"Sorry," Mulder said. "I was only showing our sons the...."

The young man snapped his fingers. "You're Fox Mulder!" he said excitedly. "Oh, this is an honor! You must have terrific stories to tell, and I want to hear them all. Come on back," he invited. Mulder shot Skinner a plea for rescuing. Skinner ignored him.

It took the rest of the afternoon to get Mulder out, and they only did so by pointing out that little boys get bored very quickly. They were reluctantly allowed to leave.

Mulder next wanted to see the crash site. The boys spread out in the back and were soon asleep, exhausted from their busy day. They rounded a rock outcropping and stopped in the road, coming upon several cars that were stopped. Men in suits with guns stood defensively, their weapons aimed at the strange kids from the diner. A man about Skinner's age was held with a gun to his head. The MIB were startled at the Bronco's approach and rearranged their stance to include Skinner and Mulder in their standoff.

"I don't recognize any of them," Mulder said, quickly looking them over. "Not mine. And they don't look like Alex's either, for that matter. His men don't dress that well."

Skinner looked back. The boys were still sound asleep.

They checked their guns and slowly got out of the truck, locking the boys in.

"Get back in your car and head out," a man called out to them. "This is government business." He held up an ID badge with the FBI logo.

"From what office?" Mulder called back.

"DC," the man said importantly.

Mulder pulled out his own ID.

"That's funny, I'm the ASAC and I know you're not from DC. Who's your SAC? Shall we call the AD and ask her for clearance?"

Skinner pulled his gun, standing beside Mulder as the men stiffened even further.

"You are not FBI. Let the man go," Mulder ordered them, cocking his gun.

After a moment's hesitation, the man was shoved toward the teenagers. In the confusion, their blond shadow was taken by the MIB.

"No! Isobel!" Max shouted. Michael held him back.

Before anyone could move, something small streaked past Skinner and Mulder and into the chaos, jumping at the man who held Isobel.

"Don't you hurt the pretty lady!" Pavel yelled. He attached himself to the man's leg and bit the back of his thigh. The man howled and released Isobel who double-timed it toward Max and Michael.

"Pavel!" Skinner and Mulder yelled in a panic. Something pushed the MIB back, knocking them over and scattering their guns. Skinner jumped in and hooked an arm around Pavel's waist, pulling him away.

The teenagers and the older man stepped back as Skinner shoved Pavel toward the Bronco. "Get back inside," he ordered the boy. Mulder stood over the MIB, holding his gun on them.

"Get out," he commanded them. Skinner was going to object, but knew that there was no way that men like them would be in jail much more than a few hours, not if they were taken in privately. He knew Consortium when he smelled them.

"And, gentlemen?" Mulder said. "This town is under my microscope now. Tell your boss to find another toy. Or I'll send Alex after her."

The MIB didn't understand that, but they'd give her the exact message. They got into their cars and drove off.

"Who, Fox?" Skinner asked.

"Who else could have pulled this off?" Mulder said. "Alex's Ice Queen has come out of hiding."

Marita. Shit.

The man with the teenagers stepped forward, his hand held out.

"I don't know who you are, but thank you," he said. Skinner and Mulder shook his hand, introducing themselves. Max came up to them, his expression slightly softened as his hand was also held out.

"Thank you," he said.

"Mind telling us what this was all about?" Skinner asked after shaking his hand.

"The less you know, the better," Max said.

Mulder got that 'look' on his face. How does he do that? Skinner wondered for the millionth time.

"Max, don't box yourself in," Mulder said quietly. "You need to get out and make your case known. I know it scares you, but if you're in the public eye, there's less a chance of anyone getting to you. You have friends that can help. Lots of them. There are safe places for you to go. We can give you contacts."

The teenagers stared at him. After a moment, Max and Michael both gave a nod.

"Michael will protect us," Max said. "But thank you. We will remember."

Skinner gave Michael a close look. A seventeen year old Krycek stood there, ready to take on the world in a battle to the death. Teenager or not, Skinner would not underestimate Michael.

Max squatted down and motioned for Pavel to come close. He held out his hand and took Pavel's.

"You saved my sister's life," Max said. "That was very brave of you. Thank you." Pavel shook his hand importantly. Max took the cast between his hands. He seemed to be concentrating on it but Skinner couldn't tell what he was doing.

"Did you break your arm?" Max asked. "I'll bet that hurt."

Suddenly the cast broke into a dozen pieces and fell to the sand. Pavel gasped.

There seemed to be a faint glow on Pavel's skin before fading. Skinner was sure it was just a reflection from the bright sun. Max brushed the dust from Pavel's skin.

"It must be all better now," Max said. Pavel swallowed hard before moving his arm. He looked up in amazement when there was no pain.

"Popi, my arm is all better!" he exclaimed, holding it up to Skinner. Skinner touched it. He couldn't feel anything other than a perfectly straight bone. He picked Pavel up and hugged him.

"Am I grounded again?" Pavel asked in a moment.

Skinner gulped and nodded.

"No beating up the bad guys until you're an adult," he said in a husky voice. "He could have killed you, Pavel. And I wouldn't have you anymore. You scared me very much." Mulder took out a business card from his wallet. He took the pen from Liz's apron and wrote several numbers on the back before handing it to Max.

"There are your emergency contact numbers," he said. "You'll get one of us, my boss, AD Scully, or a man named Alex Krycek. If you get one of them, tell them everything. I'll let them know you have the numbers. Nothing you say to them will surprise them. If it helps you any, think of Alex as a forty-four year old version of Michael. We live near Quantico. If you need to, come to Virginia. Call and we'll be there. We'll find a safe place for you. Call anyway."

Max gave a nod and handed the card to Michael.

Sitting in the Bronco, Mulder looked over at Skinner.

"Babe, the next time we go on a trip, I'm leaving you home."

Chapter 26: Birthday Blues

"Fox, they're going to be six," Skinner mourned as he watched the children play in the yard.

Mulder rustled the paper as he turned the page. Stephanie put a cup in the sink and smiled.

"It happens, Walter," she said, giving him a pat on the shoulders.

"Ditto," Mulder said from behind his paper.

Skinner turned.

"And the fact that Adam will be nine in six months doesn't disturb you?" he asked with an arched brow.

"Adam will never be nine," Mulder answered. "I refuse to allow him to grow up and leave me."

Dom took a sip of his coffee. "Admit it, Fox, you want to be a grandfather."

Mulder lowered the paper, his eyes wide.

"That's a lie!" he exclaimed. "Besides. This weekend is Walter's birthday. I'll worry about Adam's when it gets here."

"Will Zia be here, Dom?" Skinner asked him as he sat down. Dom turned his cup, not looking at him.

"So she says," he said.

"Are you going to stay?"

Dom lifted a shoulder. "I don't know," he said. "I may go to Carlo's for the weekend." Damn.

Skinner had a date that night. Promised to his oldest granddaughter, who's birthday was also that week. Oh God, he had a granddaughter that could make him a great-grandfather within a short four years. Skinner put his head on the table and groaned. He was old.

"I'm old, Fox," he said to the table. "I don't want a birthday." A finger rapped on his head.

"Quiet, geezer," he heard Mulder say. "You will have a birthday, with all fifty-five candles, and I will jump you, several times this weekend, and you will enjoy it. Get over it."

Even Dom gave them an indulgent smile.

"Marky will be here," Dom said. Skinner lifted his head.

"He will?"

Dom nodded. "I'm picking him up at the airport at 8am. He's catching the red-eye."

"Are you going to behave?" Skinner asked with a frown.

"I think I'm mellowing in my own old age," Dom admitted. "I'll behave. Besides, listening to you yell in the middle of the night is an eye-opening experience."

Stephanie burst out laughing as Skinner reddened. His face went back to the table.

"What was that?" Dom asked, hearing Skinner mumble.

"I said it's Fox's fault!" Skinner shouted.

"Well, I should hope so," Dom responded.

Krycek came in and grabbed two sodas from the refrigerator.

"Hello, Uncle Alex," Stephanie said with an innocent grin. Krycek watched her with narrowed eyes as he left the room as quietly as he came.

Mulder chuckled.

"Playing with fire," he warned.

"What's his story anyway?" she asked.

"Think of Alex as highly classified material," Skinner said. "Don't ask, and you live longer."

She could see that he was serious. Skinner trusted she understood that, since she was military.

The kids came in, yelling and laughing, blazing their way through the kitchen and into the main room of the house. Bethany came in more slowly, breathing heavy through her face mask, clearly unhappy. Stephanie hooked an arm around her.

"Be patient, honey, you'll get your strength back," she said.

"Why don't you go and pick out the movies for tonight?" Skinner suggested. "And you can help Uncle Fox plan the dinner menu."

"Nothing over PG-13," Stephanie warned.

Bethany nodded. "Ok," she said. "Can we have ice cream for dessert?"

"If it's in that freezer, you can have it," Skinner said.

Perked up a little, she went to find movies.

Ivan came running in and yanked on Skinner's t-shirt.

"Popi, come down here," he said. Skinner obediently lowered his head and Ivan whispered moistly into his ear. He ruffled Ivan's hair.

"It's alright, just go play," he said. Ivan ran back into the melee.

"Dani had a small accident," Skinner told Stephanie. "The boys aren't quite sure what to make of it."

She sighed and stood.

"We're doing better," she said. "We're down to only one or two a week. Is it ok if I pop her into a bath?"

"Of course," Skinner said. "And the washer is in there." He pointed to a closed door on the opposite side of the kitchen. She thanked him and went to find her youngest.

Krycek deigned to show his face again. He looked exasperated.

"What's your problem?" Skinner asked.

"This house is infested with children," he complained.

"Two of which are your fault. So?"

Krycek glared.

"How am I supposed to be a proper sub with seven children running around?" he asked.

Mulder laughed and smacked the table with his hand.

"As a sub, I'd say that was your problem," Mulder finally informed him. "Be a good sub and beg forgiveness from your Mistress, promise to make it up to her later tonight when the kids are asleep. Until then, you should chill out and have some fun. Have you ever played miniature golf?"

Krycek snarled and left the kitchen.

Dom sat back and looked at them. Skinner could feel his face becoming flushed again.

"Don't look at me in that tone of voice," he said to his cousin. "Fox likes to be topped once in a while, that's all."

Dom put his hands over his ears.

"Too much information."

Listening to a teenage girl chatter was a different experience for Skinner. He discovered that he sort of liked it. Amanda's face radiated as she talked over their dinner. Talked about everything from school work, how unfair her mother was, how irritating little sisters were, and boys. Boys were gross, smelly beasts and they should all be locked up somewhere. Having been a teenage boy himself once, he had to agree with her.

"Just keep that thought," Skinner said. "At least until you're thirty. Give me sixteen years before you make me a great-grandfather."

"Popi!" she admonished, flushing.

Not knowing what to get her for her birthday, Skinner consulted his resident expert in young girls. He asked Natti. He pushed a small box across the table to Amanda.

"Go ahead, open it," he said. She quickly picked up her present and unwrapped it, drawing a surprised breath as she carefully lifted out a necklace.

"Are they real?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"Yes," Skinner nodded. "A young lady should have at least one strand of pearls for special occasions. I'm told that she usually is given her first pearls by her father. I hope you don't mind if I stand in for this."

Amanda held them up and touched them carefully. Skinner took them from her and stood up, going around the table to her. He set them on her neck and fastened the baby pearls, bending to kiss her cheek before going back to his own chair. Seeing the woman-to-be sitting before him, he was feeling old again. The band began a waltz and he stood again, buttoned his jacket and held out his hand.

"I don't know how," she said. Skinner took her hand and brought her to her feet.

"I do," he said. "Come on, I'll teach you."

He was patient as he positioned her and began the first step. The other dancers watched them with indulgence, and Skinner was sure that the band leader changed his music list once or twice, keeping it to simple beginner's steps. He hummed softly, directing her attention to the timing and the notes. She began to hum the notes back to him and Skinner's inner antenna went up.

"It's the same as rock," she said in amazement.

Skinner nodded. "The beat stays the same, no matter what the genre is."

When she began to tire, Skinner called it quits, paid their bill, and began the drive home. Out of curiosity, he began to sing one of Mulder's favorite songs off the current rock charts. When Amanda joined in, Skinner almost braked in mid-traffic. She had perfect pitch!

If he said anything to Stephanie, it would only start an argument. He needed to find a way for her to come to her own conclusions about Amanda. Marc. He'd have to take Marc aside the next day. Maybe he should invite Ali. God, he must be getting desperate.

"I have a present for you, too, but Mommy said to wait until tomorrow when it's actually your birthday," she said. "But since you gave me mine tonight, can I give you yours tonight?"

"If you want to," Skinner said. "You can wait, it's alright."

When they got back to the house, Amanda ran to the room she was sharing with her sisters and rushed back with a package in her arms. She held it out to Skinner.

He opened it and found a photo album. Inside was filled with pictures of little girls, starting with Stephanie as a baby and up to the present, before beginning again with each of her daughters. All the pictures were labeled with names, dates, and occasions. Skinner sat down as his vision blurred. He set the book aside and pulled Amanda down, hugging her tightly.

"It's perfect," he whispered. He gave her a swift kiss on the side of her head. "Go on to bed," he said. "It's late."

After a while, he carried the album into his bedroom where Mulder was reading.

"Hey, how was your date?" Mulder asked. Seeing Skinner's white face, he set his book aside. "What is it?"

Skinner handed him the album and lay across the foot of the bed.

"Walter, this is incredible," Mulder said as he looked through the album.

"So many What If's, Fox," Skinner said to the ceiling. "What if I had gotten the message that I was going to be a father? I would never have married Sharon, never have met her father, never have gotten involved in all that crap, and never have met you. I would never have had the boys. And yet, look at all I've missed."

Mulder put the book down and crawled down to Skinner's face. Skinner looked at that face he had fallen in love with, looking down at him.

"I can't answer any of that for you," he said. "We can't change the past, and if we dwell on What If's we will only make ourselves crazy. What if I had snatched Samantha away before she was taken? I would never have found the X-Files, and I wouldn't have you, Scully, Adam, or the twins. More than likely, I wouldn't have a brother, either. I would probably be in private practice, married with two point four kids, one or more would be in college by now or making me grandbabies. You're not the only one who started on kids late in life. I am forty-five, you know. And a half, as the boys would say. We send our regrets to what could have been, and we continue with our lives."

Skinner put his hand around Mulder's head and brought his face down.

"You keep me sane, you know that?" Skinner said after a moment, coming up for air. Mulder got a gleam in his eyes.

"Are you aware of how good you look in a tux?" he asked. He rubbed his hand slowly across the front of Skinner's trousers. Skinner poked a finger at Mulder's nose.

"I think you've mentioned it once or twice," he said. Mulder bent and kissed him again as he unzipped Skinner and slid his hand inside Skinner's pants.

Afterward, Skinner undressed and got into his PJs, and into bed, curling up to Mulder's back.

"There's a strange rumor going around the office," Mulder said.

"And what's that?" Skinner asked into the back of his neck.

"Something about Colton and Erickson playing with Alex. Playing rough with Alex."

Skinner snickered. "I don't know anything about it," he denied.

Mulder quickly turned and jumped him, attacking his ribs.

About half an hour after Dom left for the airport, Mulder stuck his head into the kitchen.

"Babe? I think we're being invaded again," he said.

"Zia and company?" Skinner guessed. Mulder nodded a confirmation. "At this hour? What'd they do, drive all night?"

"Hi, Flo," he said, bending to kiss her cheek while Zia fussed over Stephanie and her daughters.

"Zia," he called to her, it took a few tries but eventually she focused on him. "Dom is picking Marc up at the airport. You behave. He's hurting, too."

Mario opened his mouth to protest, silenced when Skinner raised a finger in warning. "I'm serious, Mario," he growled. Mario backed down.

The boys were fussed over, exclamations of their growth rate proclaimed to the world at large. It had only been a few weeks since they last visited New York, but obviously they were growing by leaps and bounds. Kisa ran between legs, barking joyously at all the people who had come to pay attention to her.

Krycek snuck in for a snack and was caught by Flo who yanked his face down, planting a smack on his cheek. Krycek shot Skinner a hard look and escaped, wiping his cheek. He was not having a good weekend, so far.

"Careful, Flo, he knows where I sleep," Skinner begged. She waved a hand at him, unconcerned.

"Yo, Walt," Mario called, grabbing Skinner's arm. "Come and tell us about this Senator thing."

Skinner groaned. He knew they'd ask about that, cops were cops in or out of uniform, but no matter what he said, he couldn't convince the cousins not to abbreviate his name.

The morning went by quickly as the women took themselves on a tour of the house while the men talked Skinner's ears off. If Krycek thought seven children were too many, he had completely gone into hibernation over the twelve that were now running around. At

least Skinner was calmed by Mulder's presence as they did the guy thing with the other men.

"What's wrong?" Skinner asked Ricky, seeing his cousin begin to twitch.

"Could you not, you know, not hold hands?" he pleaded, avoiding Skinner's fingers linked with Mulder's. Skinner unlaced them and slid them over Mulder's thigh and between his knees.

"What's wrong, Ricky, jealous?" Skinner asked. Ricky covered his eyes while his brothers laughed.

"Hey, guys," came a greeting from the doorway.

"Hey, Scul," Mulder called out. Scully came in, handed Skinner a present, and kissed his cheek.

"Happy Birthday," she said.

"Thank you." Skinner gently shook the package but nothing rattled.

"Hey, lady," Mario called to her politely. "Tell me sumpin. Does dat bother you?" he asked, pointing to Skinner's hand on Mulder's thigh.

Scully looked at the offending hand and tilted her head conspiratorially.

"Boys, that's nothing compared to what I've seen them doing," she assured them. The men rocked, covering their ears. She winked at Skinner and Mulder, and went back to the womenfolk, keeping gender peace.

"Was she foolin'?" Ricky asked hopefully.

"Why, Rick, are you curious? We can go back to our room and you can watch," Skinner offered generously. "You wouldn't mind, would you, Fox?"

Mulder shook his head. "Not at all," he said. "If Ricky's curious enough, he can even try it for himself."

Ricky sprung to his feet, fists in the air.

"Knock it off, boys," Carlo said as he entered the fray. "Down, Ricky, they're only teasing you." Carlo stood in the middle of the room, beaming. "Announcement. My Anna is pregnant again."

The room erupted in cheers as the men descended on Carlo. Skinner was grateful, it meant that the attention would be taken off him. He left the library with them to find

Anna Maria who was being fussed over by the women. Scully sat quietly at the table, making an attempt at being a giddy female. It wasn't working. Skinner gave his congratulations to Carlo's daughter and sat next to Mulder and Scully just as the boys came to see what the noise was about. Adam shrugged and ran off. The twins stood and stared at Anna's stomach. The wheels were turning at a rapid rate and Skinner found that he wasn't the only one holding his breath, waiting for It.

"I thought when a lady had a baby in her, she was fat," Pavel complained.

"Yeah," Ivan agreed. The women all stopped talking and turned to look at the twins. Skinner covered his eyes as Mulder chuckled. A pin dropping would have shattered the silence, instead, it was Mario's bellowing laugh setting everyone else off. To the immense disgust of the twins, they were inundated with hair ruffles and kisses. Scully had both hands over her mouth as her eyes watered.

Someone picked up a pea from a bowl and showed it to the boys, indicating Anna's stomach. The boys clearly didn't believe it. The lessons were on. After twenty minutes of trying to convince them, Scully broke in and gave the boys a dry, clinical lecture of how cells divide and the growth rate of a fetus, a step up from her previous discussion on that subject with them. The boys contemplated her.

"Ok," they decided, temporarily satisfied, and left the room to go play.

The adults looked at Scully.

"Sorry," she said, not. "They respond to logic."

The front door opened and Dom came in, with Marc right behind him. Chris screamed gleefully and ran to hug her brother, followed closely by Anna Maria. Dom lowered his eyes and began up the stairs to his room. Skinner found Zia and silently dared her to go and talk with her son. Zia lifted her chin and followed Dom a few minutes later.

Children raced in and flung themselves at Marc.

The day was loud, not a corner of the house quiet enough to hear oneself think. To Amanda's surprise, the relatives that she had just met showered her with birthday presents. Skinner winced as he opened gifts, finding some of the most god-awful stuff. He smiled and thanked everyone, all the while wondering if he would be able to get away with breaking them all and blaming it on a dog and cat chase. The cats sat on the beams and turned their noses up.

KC turned up long enough to drop off a present for Skinner, say hello to everyone and to grab a piece of cake for her and Ruvyn. She left the house with loaded plates and complaints of her being too skinny.

During the commotion, Skinner took Marc aside and whispered to him. Marc lifted an eyebrow and nodded.

After everyone was sufficiently stuffed, they spread out in the livingroom. Marc took out his guitar and called the children in closer. They giggled and scooted towards him. With a wicked glance toward the back of the house, he began with Puff. Skinner heard the back door open and slam shut.

Having full bellies, the smaller children tired quickly from their sing-a-long and fell asleep. The adults talked quietly for a while, with Marc absently tuning and plucking at his guitar. He began to sing a soft love song that had been on the radio recently, a duet. When the break for the female came, Amanda took over.

Skinner felt a little guilty when astonished praise rained down at the end and Stephanie looked as though she had lost an important case. Marc looked over at Skinner and gave a small nod.

By the end of the evening, most of the cousins had gone to Cousin Renaldo's for the night before heading home in the morning. Skinner put Mario into one of the spare rooms, since it looked as though Zia and Dom weren't done talking yet. Skinner took that as a good sign.

The girls were sound asleep in their room and Mulder was talking quietly with Stephanie on the back patio. If anyone could make her see reason, Mulder could. Skinner left them alone.

Ok, so he was butting in on his daughter's business, isn't that what a father is supposed to do? He understood Amanda's unhappiness; the reasons were opposite but the same. One wasn't allowed to sing, the other wasn't allowed not to sing. She was in pain, a pain that he knew, and he didn't want her growing up with it.

Skinner began to clean the kitchen, only to be shooed out by Natti who had insisted on staying the rest weekend to help. Skinner thought he detected a hint of guilt at her being gone so much lately. At least she seemed happy with Carlo.

With nothing else to do, Skinner found his book and sat down to read a chapter or two. He was joined by Ivan, his eyes swollen from sleep. The child climbed into Skinner's lap and snuggled down, back to sleep within minutes. Skinner stroked his tousled hair for a moment before going back to his book.

Two weeks later brought another set of birthdays into the house.

Ya'el had gone back to Israel. Krycek was moping around the house.

"Being someone's bad boy is fun sometimes," he had told Skinner. "But I couldn't make her understand that it isn't fun all the time." Skinner gave him a candy bar to make him feel better. It worked on the twins.....

Marc was still around, having been visiting with his father and step-mother to be. Skinner enjoyed the company of his younger cousin; Marc was talkative, but he didn't babble, saying what he needed to and in an entertaining manner. Marc had taken Skinner aside the night before for a man-to-man chat. The subject being a certain dark-haired Russian with green eyes.

"What's his problem?" Marc asked, seeing the object of his desire rummage in the refrigerator, closing it without taking anything, and then leaving.

"He's been looking for love in all the wrong places," Skinner said dryly. "He wants flowers and romance. For the moment."

"Oh?" Marc asked, a gleam in his eyes. "Excuse me." Skinner watched in amusement as Marc went outside, pulled a few wild flowers, and came back in with a determined look on his face. He disappeared down the hall, flowers in one hand, guitar in the other. Skinner chuckled, Krycek won't know what hit him. Skinner went back to work, his lunch break over.

The day had been quiet as Skinner sat writing reports and filling out mandatory paperwork for the Federal Government. Even Kisa was bored as she snoozed on the floor next to his desk. His phone rang with Becky informing him that he had a citizen with a problem. Curious, Skinner told her to send this person in.

In a moment, a child stood before him. A child who was trying very hard not to cry.

"Good afternoon, sheriff. I want to file a missing person's report," the girl informed him.

Skinner nodded and took out a form. "I see," he said gravely. He invited her to have a seat. "May I have your name?"

"Lisa Fisch," she told him. "That's with a *s.c.h*, not like a fish."

"And how old are you, Ms. Fisch?"

"I'm ten and a half," she said.

Skinner took her address next.

"And now, who is missing?"

"George is missing."

"Who is George?"

"He's my best friend." Ms. Fisch wiped at her eyes, and Skinner politely handed her a tissue. She thanked him and dabbed delicately at her skin.

"Could you describe George for me?" he asked.

"He's eight, but he's a mature eight," she sternly informed him. Skinner nodded, making a note of it. "He has brown hair. And a little gray striping. And some black stripes. And a white bow tie. He's very proud of his tie. I have a picture, would you like to see?"

"Please."

She dug around in her little purse and came up with a photo, handing it over to him.

Skinner found himself looking at a tabby cat, one ear flattened, not at all happy about the party hat on his head.

"A very handsome fellow," Skinner commented, handing the photo back.

"Thank you," she said, dabbing and sniffing.

"When did you last see him?"

"This morning after breakfast," she said. "He requested the need to go outside for... you know... necessary things.... and he never returned. He always comes right back in, you see. That bully down the street beats him up if he doesn't," she said, leaning in for a conspiratorial whisper.

Skinner frowned. "What bully?"

"Mr. Baby Plotsky!" she crowed.

Skinner contained his groan. He shuffled papers in an important manner.

"I believe I have enough information to begin this investigation, Ms. Fisch," he said. "I'm fully aware of Mr. Plotsky's reputation, so I will start by questioning him on his whereabouts this morning. May I contact you, should the need arise?"

"Please do," she said primly, rising from the seat. She held out her hand and Skinner jumped to his feet, shaking it with a small bow.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Fisch, even under these trying circumstances."

"The pleasure was mine, sheriff."

Skinner watched the girl walk back out, her head held regally, and shook his own.

"Tell me I didn't just hear what I just heard," Ruvin begged, sticking his head in the door.

"I'm afraid so, Watson," Skinner said, searching for his car keys. "The game's afoot."

He whistled for Kisa.

Mrs. Plotsky wrung her hands.

"I'm sure my Baby is innocent, sheriff," she insisted as Skinner stood at the door, hat in hand. He glanced behind her, into the house. Baby sat at the top of the stairs, hind leg in the air as he licked, pausing to glare at Skinner, pink tongue protruding impudently.

"I'm sure he is, ma'am," Skinner said. "We have to follow up on all leads."

"Of course, of course," she murmured, nodding her head with understanding.

Skinner felt ridiculous, walking up and down the street, whistling for George and peering into the bushes and up trees. He left Kisa in the car, not wanting to scare the cat. Ruvin walked the opposite side of the street, making even less of an attempt at taking their search seriously.

A car door slammed and the loud voices of children pierced the air.

Skinner hustled over.

"Let me help you with that," he offered, taking an armful of groceries from Mrs. Giuliani. She gave him a grateful roll of the eyes, shifting the baby to her other arm.

"Thanks," she said. She gave a yell to the other kids, who were running and screaming around the yard. He grabbed a few more bags from the van and followed her into the house.

"My sons are having a birthday party tomorrow night," he mentioned, setting the bags on the counter. "You're welcome to bring your kids over for cake and ice cream. And don't worry about presents; my cousins sent plenty for them."

She thanked him, surprised at the invitation. Skinner clicked his teeth at the baby, chucking him under his chin before leaving.

"Hey, sheriff," Skinner was greeted half a block later. He sent a wave to Mrs. Miller who was harried from keeping Mr. Miller from tripping and breaking his neck; he was roaming around with a video camera attached to his eye.

"What's this?" Skinner asked, stopping to watch the action.

"Insurance," she said in exasperation. "He's getting tape of every square inch of the house -just in case. He's filled two tapes already."

"I see," Skinner commented. "I don't suppose you've seen a tabby named George today?"

She shook her head. "Lisa's George? No, not today."

"I have," Mr. Miller called out, craning his neck up to the eaves.

Skinner paused as he turned to continue his walk. "You have?"

"Sure thing. Got him on tape while he was having a contest of wills with that evil demon down the street this morning," Mr. Miller chuckled. He went in for a close-up of a window frame.

"May I see it?" Skinner asked.

"Sally, get tape one for the sheriff," he called over to his wife.

"Watch him," she ordered Skinner, and went into the house. She was back a moment later, and handed a video tape to Skinner.

"I want that back," Mr. Miller warned him. "It was about an hour after I started."

Skinner thanked him and called Ruvin. They went back to the station and popped the tape into the VCR, fast-forwarding it an hour. It was actually about an hour and a half that the incident in question occurred. The men watched the two cats duke it out until the tabby slunk off, tail between his legs.

"That was just plain cruel, catching a guy when he's taking a dump," Ruvin said. "He's limping pretty bad." Skinner agreed. He rewound it, paying attention to George's direction. They went back to the car.

George was found lying in a run-off, clearly miserable and in pain. Skinner crept close, whispering softly to the cat. George growled but made no move to fight; his back leg was torn open and the bugs had begun to march.

"Get me that blanket from the trunk," Skinner asked Ruvin. The deputy ran to the car and was back in minutes. "I'll get him to a vet, you stay here. With KC hiking, we need someone to keep an eye on things." Ruvin agreed as Skinner carefully wrapped the cat in the blanket.

Surgery took almost two hours, most of it spent cleaning the bugs out of the wound. The vet loaded George up with antibiotics and poured some foul smelling substance into the

open gash to kill any parasite eggs before sewing him back up. Skinner handed over his credit card, lifted the groggy cat, and took George home to his mistress.

George was laid carefully in his bed and fussed over by Ms. Fisch as Skinner shook her father's hand. Mr. Fisch offered Skinner payment for the vet bill but Skinner refused.

"No, really," Skinner said, waving his hands. "I told the vet the story, and he called it his good deed for the month."

Dabbing at her face, Ms. Fisch held her hand out to Skinner who shook it in all seriousness.

"Thank you for all your trouble," she said.

"Not at all," he responded. She nodded and returned to her vigil.

"She's addicted to soap operas," her mother whispered in apology.

"It could be worse," Skinner said. Her parents agreed.

Now for the really hard part -letting Mrs. Plotsky in on Baby's misadventures.

"No one should look like that first thing in the morning," Mulder grumbled as he poured himself a cup of coffee. He was referring to Marc who sat at the table with a cheshire grin. Krycek was still asleep.

"Do I take it your offering was accepted?" Skinner asked his younger cousin. Marc nodded.

"Several times," he said.

Skinner raised his coffee in salute.

The twins came in, shuffling their feet as they rubbed the sleep from their eyes. Ivan ducked under Skinner's arm and climbed onto his lap for a snooze against Skinner's chest. Skinner caught Pavel around the waist with one arm and lifted him up for a kiss on the cheek, setting him down and then putting his mouth to Ivan's head.

"Happy birthday," he told them. "Natti's making you a special breakfast."

Micky Mouse pancakes with blueberry eyes and a bacon mouth. The boys attacked them with gusto. Adam straggled in quietly and picked at his breakfast. Mulder put a hand to his forehead.

"You feeling all right?" he asked. Adam shrugged and then nodded.

"Just tired," he said, popping a berry into his mouth.

"Did you sleep?"

"Yeah."

"Do you want me to stay home?" he asked Adam. The boy shook his head.

"No, it's all right."

Mulder didn't look satisfied but he'd leave it for the moment. He straightened his tie, gave kisses to his guys, and told the twins he'd be home early for their party that evening.

"Call me if he gets worse," Mulder said to Skinner. He gave Skinner another kiss with a lingering promise and left for work.

Ivan held a blueberry up and Skinner took it, pretending to eat Ivan's fingers. Ivan giggled and yanked his fingers free.

"That blueberry tasted a little funny," Skinner commented. "Almost like little boy fingers. Yucky."

Ivan strenuously denied having yucky fingers. Skinner took his hand, stuck the fingers into the blueberries, and back into his mouth.

"Mmmm... well, ok, I guess they're not so bad," he conceded. He stuck his nose to Ivan's. "Know what?" Ivan shook his head, rubbing noses. "There's an early present for you boys out back," he whispered.

Ivan and Pavel were off in a flash. Kisa barked and followed them, escaping the closing screen door before her tail got caught in it.

"What'd you get them?" Marc asked.

"New bikes," Skinner said. "Theirs were burned in the fire. You have one, too, Adam, but I didn't think it was fair to the twins, since it's their birthday, to give you yours at the same time. I have yours in the van. Wait a little while, and I'll get it out for you."

Adam nodded, not very interested.

Squeals of surprise could be heard just before the boys ran back in to hug Skinner. They were gone a moment later to give their new bikes a try.

Natti came in and set a bowl of strawberries on the table. Marc took the entire bowl and excused himself. Skinner and Natti chuckled.

"I think Alex has met his match," Skinner commented. Natti agreed.

The bikes were without training wheels. Skinner and Natti spent the morning helping the twins learn to balance on two wheels. Ivan, always better coordinated, was riding down the driveway before Pavel who was studiously attempting to stay upright.

"Do you want the training wheels back on for a while longer?" Skinner asked him. Pavel frowned and shook his head, refusing to allow his brother to show him up. With his tongue sticking out, Pavel continued to concentrate. Fall after fall, Skinner picked Pavel back up until the boy refused to go near the bike, tears of anger and frustration about to spill. Skinner lifted him up and hugged him.

"It's all right, Pavie," Skinner said softly. "You're just upset, that's all. When you calm down, you'll be able to do it."

"Here. Bring him over."

Skinner didn't hear Krycek come out until he spoke. He turned to see Krycek pouring flour on the ground in a straight line about two inches wide and three yards long. Krycek took Pavel from Skinner and set him down, squatting to look into the boy's eyes.

"Shut your eyes and take a deep breath," Krycek told him. "Breathe in through your nose and your mouth at the same time, as deep as you can until you can't take anymore in. All the way down to your belly and fill up your lungs. Hold it. One, two, three, four, five. Let it out slowly until it's all out. Don't suck it back in, breathe it in slowly. Good. Open your eyes."

Even Skinner could see that Pavel was much calmer. But that was the beginning of Adam's meditations, Skinner thought in confusion. Krycek lead Pavel to one end of the flour line.

"I want you to walk on this line. One foot in front of the other. If you fall off the line, stop and put your foot back on it. Hold your arms out, it helps."

Pavel put his arms out and took a step on the line, pink tongue back out and curled up. After two steps, he stumbled.

"Breathe," Krycek reminded him, taking a deep breath. Pavel huffed and put his foot back on the line. "And put your tongue back in before you catch a fly. If you fall, you can bite it off and you won't be able to talk for the rest of your life."

Skinner thought that was a little on the extreme side, but the tongue went back in.

Krycek stepped away, giving Pavel space as the boy concentrated on walking in a straight line. Skinner gave Krycek a look.

"What? I had a balance problem, too," Krycek said. "My father made me walk a line until I stopped tripping." Natti nodded in confirmation.

One crisis was being taken care of, so Skinner went inside to halt another one in the making.

He found Adam playing a computer game, lifelessly targeting the bad guys. Skinner sat in a nearby chair and stared at him. Adam attempted to ignore him, but Skinner could see his eyes flooding and his lip start to quiver. He was on Skinner's lap a few minutes later, sobbing into Skinner's chest. Skinner stroked his back and pressed his mouth to the boy's hair, rocking him gently until Adam began to calm down.

In hiccuping stops and starts, Skinner understood that it was girl problems, that plague of mankind since the dawn of time; it seemed that Jennifer had turned her attentions toward another boy. This called for the official cure-all that the women stole from the men -the birthday party could do without two small dishes of ice cream. Covered in fudge.

An hour before preparing the yard for their birthday party, the adults were called out as Pavel proudly demonstrated walking the entire length of the line without stumbling. Everyone clapped and cheered as Skinner hoisted him into the air, smacking a loud buzz on the boy's cheek. Even Krycek gave in to a request for kisses. Pavel hugged him hard around the neck but neither said anything. Krycek returned the hug and went back into the house.

Pavel walked bravely up to his bike, righted it, and straddled the seat. It only took two tries and he was wobbling down the driveway after Ivan.

Just before it was time to set up for the party, Skinner was called into town. Mulder's car had died. Literally. He was parked in a department store parking lot just around the corner from the Hoover. Last minute shopping for the boys. The department store was new and there was a crane lifting the new sign to it's home. A wrong button was hit and the sign fell, landing on top of Mulder's car. Since it was actually from the fleet, Mulder had to stay and fill out additional paperwork. Skinner felt a headache blooming in sympathy for Scully. At least the government wasn't paying for this one, and neither was he.

Forgetting that he was in cut-offs and a tank, sneakers and no socks, and a baseball hat, Skinner strode into the Hoover. Several women tripped over themselves before he noticed

what he was wearing. He found his way to Mulder's floor. He wasn't in his office, but Skinner received a dropped jaw from Mulder's assistant. He excused himself and went to the bullpen where he found Mulder finishing up his report.

"Hey, boys," Skinner greeted Colton and Erickson. They looked at him suspiciously. "Krycek is not happy about that hicky one of you left on his neck. You'd better find some way to apologize. I think he mentioned the need for another case of candles. You guys went through them awfully fast last time. He'd like thicker ones though, about a three inch diameter. I don't know why, I myself am not into that sort of thing. I was afraid to ask."

Since Krycek was indeed sporting a prominent hicky, things should be interesting when he got to work on Monday. Colton and Erickson stormed out of the room as the remaining agents snickered.

"You are truly evil," Mulder informed him.

"Come on, Fox, you know Alex wouldn't go near them with a ten-foot pole," Skinner said, loud enough for the others to hear. "Besides, I have a feeling Alex has been claimed."

Scully came in and looked Skinner over from head to foot with a raised eyebrow.

"What, what?" Skinner grumped, spreading his hands. "Everyone wears shorts and a tank, so why am I being singled out? It's hot outside, in case no one has noticed."

"It's hot in here, too," Scully said, fanning herself as she looked at him.

"Amen, sister," Mulder muttered as he stood up. He handed Scully his report and grabbed Skinner's hand, pulling his Mr. June centerfold out the door with him.

"Comin' to the party, Dana?" Skinner called back.

"Will be there," she said.

They stopped at a toy store on the way out of town where Mulder insisted on picking something up. He only bought one thing, not two. Skinner agreed when he was told why. For the transgression of his choice of clothing, Mulder forced Skinner off the road into the middle of nowhere on their way home and jumped him, bending him over a rock, shorts down around his ankles. Skinner didn't complain but the animals may have had a problem with all the yelling.

They got home, snuck into their bedroom to clean up, and went out to check on things. Natti, Carlo, and Marc had the party already begun. The twins rushed them, and the men apologized for being late. Scully came in about a half hour later. To Skinner's surprise, she had a guest with her.

"I hope you don't mind?" she asked Skinner. At a loss for words, Skinner shook his head and held his hand out to Michael.

"Welcome," Skinner managed. Scully was glowing as she went to find the birthday boys. Skinner straightened his shoulders and puffed. Michael smiled softly and inclined his head in a formal gesture.

"She is the queen of my universe," he assured Skinner quietly.

Skinner gave a slight nod with a warning look and Michael excused himself to find his queen.

"At least he won't leave her bored in bed," Krycek said behind him. "I can guarantee you that he is definitely build for action." Skinner shushed him, looking around for little ears. Natti and Carlo came out of the house carrying more food for the hungry hoard. The yard was filled with about thirty children, including a few cousins, and Stephanie and the girls. Giuliani and his wife watched their children screaming and yelling with the others, and Marc sat with a small group of younger children having a sing-a-long.

"Sir?" someone spoke next to Skinner. He turned to see several agents. "I'm sorry to interrupt your party, Sir, but we just need some last minute details before we close the Alexander case. We were hoping to have it signed, sealed, and delivered first thing in the morning."

They couldn't have caught him while he was in the city? Skinner nodded and took them into the house. Mulder had his newer agents working hard and Skinner fully approved. The agents didn't fidget, instead they sat completely still, not even relaxing when Skinner told them to. His reputation had preceded him. He nit-picked his way through the reports, deliberately adding commas in red ink and glowering over badly written statements. The agents whitened and stared ahead as Skinner snarled.

Ivan came running in and shoved a grimy hand into Skinner's face. There was a tiny cut on his palm. Skinner kissed the owie and Ivan ran off. A misspelled word and Skinner circled it, almost cutting through the paper with the pen. He added his own two cents at the end and signed it.

Mulder calmly sent his agents outside, instructing them to eat.

"And you're torturing my agents because.....?" he asked Skinner.

"So they don't get sloppy," Skinner informed him. Mulder nodded. He reached up and yanked on Skinner's ear.

"Torquemada," he accused, and brushed a swift kiss across Skinner's mouth.

A low hiss took their attention. Natti stood at the door, twitching her head at them. They went over and stood next to her, looking out.

"What are we looking at?" Skinner asked.

"Alex," Natti said softly. Krycek was making an attempt at being his usual anti-social self and sitting off, trying not to take an interest in the activities. Marc was sitting next to him. He took Krycek's hand only to have it jerked away. Persistent, Marc took it again. Krycek frowned and said something with a shake of his head. Marc leaned in and spoke quietly. Krycek looked at the ground, not saying anything. Marc took his hand again and it stayed. After a moment, Marc lifted Krycek's arm and put it around his shoulders, fingers laced. He snuggled in, perfectly content.

Skinner and Mulder chuckled softly.

"The shot heard 'round the world?" Mulder suggested. Skinner and Natti agreed.

As the cake was brought out, Mulder stood behind Skinner, arms wrapped around Skinner's waist. The cake held three candles. The boys were told it looked nice that way. While everyone sang Happy Birthday to the twins, Skinner, Mulder, and Natti were looking at Krycek who twitched nervously when he noticed.

It was just before midnight when Natti brought Krycek out of his room. Marc followed, rubbing at his eyes and yawning. They stepped into the livingroom and stopped short. Skinner and Mulder waited, standing in front of the fireplace, Scully and Michael next to them, and Natti and Carlo on the opposite side.

"What's this?" Krycek asked in a dire tone. Marc watched from over his shoulder.

"Come here, Alex," Mulder gently called to him, motioning him over. Krycek reluctantly stood in the center of their Circle. Mulder took a small box from the couch and handed it to Krycek who stared at it.

"Open it, meely," Natti urged him.

Krycek swallowed hard. He tried to keep his fingers from shaking as he carefully removed the wrapping.

"Why?" he asked, his voice almost non-existent.

"Because," Mulder said, stepping up to him. "Everyone deserves a teddy bear. Happy birthday, Alex."

The End