

## Once Upon A Time by Xanthe



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### Story Notes:

Picture courtesy of Wheatgrass

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"Let me tell you a story." The man moved into the light cast by the dying rays of the sun as they slanted through the open window. He was neither young nor old - an ageless man, silver wisps visible in his short, cropped dark hair. He had the soul of a child, but the eyes of one who has lived for an aeon and lost his heart somewhere along the way. "It's a fantastic story. A story of family and kin, of whole nations, of love and loss and betrayal. Yes, most of all it's a story of betrayal." He sat down on a chair and pulled it close to the couch where the other man sat.

"Is it a long story?" The man who was seated on the couch wanted to know.

"Why? Are you uncomfortable?" The storyteller asked. The other man leaned back, the metallic handcuffs that bound his wrists behind him digging painfully into his flesh.

"No," he whispered, his head bowed. He watched as the storyteller got to his feet and paced the room, his lean body moving slowly and deliberately. He remembered a time when that

body had been suffused with nervous energy. He remembered a time when those long limbs had quivered with purpose, hating to be still for even a second. He remembered that it was a time that had long since passed. There was no urgency now in the storyteller's movements. They were quiet and stealthy, detached but intense - like a cat playing with its prey, like a predator stalking. A man who knew his purpose. A man who had stopped looking because he had found what he sought and now he intended to destroy it.

The storyteller went to the fireplace and leaned against it. He stood there for a long time, regarding his captive and then he began.

"Once upon a time..."

"Is it a fairy tale then?" The other man interrupted. The storyteller frowned.

"You might have said so once. You never believed. Or I thought you didn't. See how the layers upon layers of deception have made liars of us all? No, not a fairy story. Fairy stories have happy endings and our story does not."

"Our story? A story of you and I?" The captive's eyes were dark with some unexpressed emotion. The storyteller shook his head.

"Once upon a time, there was a lie. And it began before I was born and it lay like a curse upon my family. Because of the lie, my sister was taken from me, my family destroyed. I believe you knew my sister?"

The captive was quiet for a moment then he nodded.

"I know what you've told me of course."

"No. You know more. You know because you were there when she was taken - you helped to plan the abduction."

The captive shook his head and gazed unblinkingly at the storyteller.

"You cannot believe that, Mulder," he whispered.

Mulder shrugged. "I have the evidence." He laughed, a bitter ironic sound. "Oh yes, this time I actually have some evidence!"

Beyond the open window there was a balcony and beneath the balcony there was a city that knew nothing of their pain. The city serenaded them with its symphony of traffic, counterpointed by the harmony of screeching tires.

"I expect you're asking yourself what the nature of this evidence is?" Mulder asked.

The captive nodded. "It seems to be a matter of some importance in respect of my future," he murmured with a nod of his head at the gun the other man held loosely in his hand.

"Not really. Your future is already decided. As is my own." Mulder walked slowly towards his captive and sat in front of him once more. He held the gun against the other man's forehead, then traced the cold metal down along his nose, over his mouth. He tipped the man's head back with the edge of the weapon and allowed the gun to caress the warm flesh

of his captive's neck. He stopped when he reached the fabric of the other man's shirt and smiled a bitter smile into the man's eyes. "Not yet," he whispered. "First you have to hear the story." He removed the gun and the captive let out the breath he hadn't even been aware he was holding. "You were part of a covert military unit that had no name. An elite unit and you were the best of them - the strongest, fittest, meanest and most ruthless and your cunning was legendary. For a long while you were a spy - able to deceive all who knew you, even those who were your closest friends. You had no real friends - who knows the true color of your heart? Maybe you don't even know yourself?" Mulder looked questioningly at his captive who shook his head, a gentle gesture.

"Go on," he murmured. "I would like to know of what I stand accused."

"It wasn't easy." Mulder stood up and walked to the window, shielding his eyes against the red glare of the sunset, looking down on the people who wandered the streets below, unknowing. "It was well hidden in places I never even thought to look before. Until he came to me."

"Who?" The captive asked, leaning forward to catch the other man's words.

"Krycek." Mulder turned. "He sold me some information."

"And what was the price of this information?"

Mulder was still for a while, a knowledge in his eyes that hinted of dark rooms and bitter deals sealed with hatred and the endurance of some great ordeal.

"It doesn't matter." He waved a languid hand, but the captive noticed that the other man's fingers were shaking. "So, I started looking. It took a long time and at first I refused to believe. Me! Refusing to believe! But if there is one thing that Scully taught me, it's to find the evidence, to weigh and evaluate the scientific data..." Mulder winced at her name as if in speaking it he recalled a pain too physical to be ignored. "We were lovers - did you know that?" He asked, a savage undertone in his voice, the muscles in his cheek clenching involuntarily.

"I guessed as much." The captive nodded. "I'm not surprised."

"I am." Mulder shook his head as if he still couldn't believe the fact. "Three weeks before her death we became lovers. When there was finally nobody left for either of us to trust, we turned to the only person we both knew we couldn't live without. Only we were wrong. I'm still here. Still alive. If you can call it living." He paused. Shrugged. "I've been a whore - I've sold myself in more ways than one. My soul, my heart, my integrity, even my body..." Again, the captive noticed the way those long, sensitive fingers shook, belying the relaxed calm of Mulder's stance, the way his slender frame leaned against the window with a deceptive, casual ease. "Three weeks. It isn't long. I don't think either of us believed we'd have a lifetime together but even so. Three weeks." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a packet of cigarettes, took one out, lit it, his fingers still trembling.

"You don't mind, do you?" He asked with an ironic smirk, lighting one up. The captive made no reply. He had no rights. The question had merely been a re-statement of the power his captor had over him.

"It's strange isn't it?" Mulder moved close again, sitting down in the chair opposite his captive, their knees almost touching as they faced each other. "How we become like those we hate most." He gestured to the cigarette with a wry smile, took a long inhalation and blew the smoke into his captive's face. The bound man remained impassive. He didn't even move his head to avoid the nicotine fumes. He regarded his captor steadily, his body remaining, taut, aware. Anyone watching wouldn't have known which of the men faced death and which held the other on the brink of that dark abyss. "So she died. So what?" Mulder shrugged. "So I woke to find her cold in the bed beside me - did I ever tell you that? Maybe I did." His gaze dropped, unable to fight back the memory of tears shed against a comforting shoulder, a torrent of grief-stricken words spoken in the aftermath of a trauma so terrible that those ramblings may or may not have made any sense. He wasn't sure what he had said during those long, numb days after her death.

The captive shifted on the couch, trying to relieve the pressure in his aching wrists. Mulder jerked upright, the gun in his hand, alert once more.

"Don't." He hissed. The captive shrugged.

"Sorry," he said. "Go on with your story."

"I spent so long looking for the truth that it never occurred to me that I had already found it. That it isn't "out there" but in here." Mulder gestured with his cigarette to his own heart. "Or in there." Now he gestured with the gun to his captive's heart. "The truth, all the time, too close for me to see. In the hearts of those I saw nearly every day. How can one man be so blind?" Mulder laughed another of those bitter, ironic, heart-breaking laughs. The captive closed his eyes. "When Krycek first told me, I wanted to kill him for his lies but that wasn't an option at the time." The fingers trembled even more fiercely and both men watched in slow motion as Mulder lost his grip on the cigarette and it fell to the floor, landing on the captive's bare foot, burning it. The captive made a soft sound in his throat but didn't stir. Mulder leaned forward and picked up the cigarette once more, stubbing it out aimlessly on the table.

"No ashtrays?" He inquired with a raised eyebrow at his captive. The man shook his head.

"You know my foibles," he said. "I dislike the habit."

"Yes. I know that." Mulder reached into his pocket again and drew out another cigarette, lit it, took a gasping breath of smoke as if his life depended upon the nicotine reaching his lungs as quickly as possible. "So where was I?" Mulder asked, his hazel eyes lost in genuine confusion.

"Krycek." The captive whispered.

"Oh yes. Krycek. Really after what happened to Scully you wouldn't have thought there was anything else that could be done to me that would matter, would you?" The tremor that had begun in Mulder's hands travelled along his arms and down into his body until he was visibly shaking. He got up angrily. "It didn't matter. It really didn't. Some prices are worth paying." He tipped some ash onto the carpet. "To get to the truth."

"You shouldn't have gone." The captive's face remained impassive, the expression in his

eyes unreadable.

"I needed the truth." Mulder shrugged. "And now I have it." He went back over to the window and closed it, shutting out the sounds of the city. When he returned he had somehow regained control over his body.

"When you left the marines you didn't leave your covert unit did you?" Mulder's thin face was taut and hard, the lines of his jaw merging with the harsh angles of his cheekbones, lit by the dark red sunset which cast a demonic gleam over his grief-ravaged visage. The captive's head snapped up.

"Ah, you didn't think I had that information. I do. You were always working for someone else. A deep mole - not government, not military, something outside both. An elite unit. Run by whom? Or what? And you one of their best men. They got you young, trained you up and when your usefulness in Vietnam was over, they sent you to the FBI to further their agenda there. You did well, of course you did! No false modesty." He silenced the other man's wordless protest with a smile. "And it wasn't easy - answering to two masters. Or more than two. The evidence I have isn't exactly clear on all the details. Just the most important ones. However you're clever. I never realized just how clever until I saw the reports - they go all the way back to your school days. Your college degree - the highest grades ever achieved for your subject. What is your subject incidentally? Betrayal? Let's leave that aside for now, shall we? So, you are adept at leading a double life. No wonder your marriage failed - did your wife even know the man she woke up next to every morning? Did you know yourself? Did the lie ever become too complicated for you to follow?"

The captive shook his head, the fading red light glancing through the window and gleaming on his hairless scalp, bathing him in the glow, embracing his features warmly, eerily.

"She didn't know me, no," he whispered. "How could she? When I couldn't tell her what was deepest in my heart. And you don't know either. You just think you do."

"So." Mulder ignored him. "You served your masters well. Then they sent him to you. You know, the Morley man." Mulder broke off and gestured at his nerveless fingers, still holding a burning cigarette, the ash falling to the floor as he spoke. "You didn't like him. And his agenda, strictly speaking, wasn't your own - or that of your masters. Your brief was to evaluate him. To work with him for as long as it was expedient. However you had another agenda as well, didn't you?" He put his head on one side, inquiringly. His captive was silent, his face impassive. He made only the smallest movement of his eyebrow, a gesture that his captor should continue. With another of his bitter laughs Mulder did.

"Your agenda. You were well placed within the Consortium. They suspected our Morley friend of being...a loose canon. They disliked his methods and they disliked him but they needed him and he knew too much. When he came to you he thought you were under orders to help him. He was wrong. You were under orders to observe him. The Consortium has sects within sects don't they? And did they know that you were a double agent even then? Your allegiance never belonged to the FBI, or to the Consortium did it? Lies, beneath lies, beneath lies. You were already working for a different organization."

"The CIA?" The captive queried facetiously. For the first time the laugh that forced its way

from Mulder's lips held some sound of genuine mirth.

"Hardly."

"Then who? This is the stuff that conspiracies are really made of." The captive twitched one side of his mouth into an approximation of a wry smile. "Please - I'm intrigued. There's no reason why I should allow you to be sloppy, Mulder. Not after all this time."

"They don't have a name. Any more than the Consortium really has a name."

"How convenient." The captive shrugged.

"You don't believe this story then?" Mulder queried.

"I was right. It is a fairy story. I only wonder that you believe it."

"Ah well, but then you would say that, bearing in mind the gravity of your situation." Mulder waved his gun flippantly.

"True. Whether guilty or innocent I would say the same thing. That makes your task particularly hard." The captive pointed out. Mulder's mouth hardened into a straight line. He swung the gun ferociously against the other man's jaw and the captive fell onto his side, his lip and chin bleeding from the cut.

"Not hard at all. Don't mistake this for vacillation." Mulder snarled. The captive struggled to right himself, licking the blood from his chin. "You ran me from the very beginning. You pulled strings to get me assigned to you, you had me watched, taped, bugged. You knew my every move. You needed me to trust you and to that end you aided me when I least expected it. You won my loyalty, selling yourself to the highest bidder in order to secure it. Scully knew - she never trusted you and she was right. I should have listened to her. For a long while Scully was part of your equation wasn't she? But she was expendable and I was not. I was not because of the secret that runs through my veins. This blood that they don't want spilt because of the treasures to be found in the twisted strands of my DNA. A component in an experiment. An experiment my sister was taken away to be part of. As I was part of it. As you were part of it by aiding in her abduction. Did she scream when you stole her from our house that night? Did she struggle? She was 8 years old, you were a grown man. You'd seen active service in Vietnam. What were the cries of one little girl compared to wiping out whole families in the jungle? Oh yes, that was in the files too. The secret experiments on soldiers and Vietnamese civilians, the drug trials, all part of the same project that spawned me and my sister. Just lab rats. That's all we ever were. All any of us ever were."

"Mulder..." The older man began but the other didn't listen. He pulled the cartridge from the gun, examined it, then slammed it back in again.

"And so I found the truth that had been in front of me the whole time. And when your masters decided to reel me in, Scully became dispensable didn't she? They wanted me vulnerable, dependent only on you, the last person in my world I could trust. The only one they knew I'd turn to. And I did. Fool that I was."

"Not a fool. Never a fool until today."

"Was it you who gave the order to have Scully killed?" Mulder held the gun up and took mock aim, pretending to fire. "Probably. I think I could forgive you anything but that. I could probably even forgive you for what happened to my sister. But not that. Not Scully. The toxin that killed her was 10 times the strength a man your size could tolerate. Why? She was tiny. A fraction of that dose would have killed her. You must have really wanted to make sure."

"You're wrong." The captive looked tired. His face was pale and the dark shadows under his eyes gave him a haunted look. There was a line of drying blood on his jaw.

"How many times have I slept on this couch? This one here, the one you'll die on?" Mulder asked. "How many times did you let me stay here, cover me with a blanket, sit beside me and listen to me weep for all that went wrong in my life? How could you do that and never feel a twinge of regret? One moment of remorse for your part in my tragedy. How?" Mulder held the lit end of the cigarette between his thumb and forefinger and snuffed it out. "Dying is easy. I've done it many times. You'll do it only once," he said.

"You're wrong about that as well." The captive shrugged. "I told you, I've died once before." "But can we believe any of what you say?" Mulder asked. "What is true and what a lie? What really goes on inside the heart of Walter Sergei Skinner? Does he even know himself any more?"

Skinner lay back, his eyes bleak. He noticed that the sun had now disappeared completely and the room was nearly in darkness. His last sunset. His last day. His last night. He watched as Mulder came towards him, placed the gun against his temple, his eyes unfocused, distant, deranged.

"Mulder." Skinner spoke softly. "I'm all you have left. If you kill me then you'll kill yourself. Your mother, father, sister - all gone. Scully - gone. You have nothing but me. I stand between you and the abyss and I'm the only living being who cares if you go there or not. Don't go there, Mulder. Don't kill me. That's what they want. Can't you see that this whole thing is a pack of lies? You'd believe Krycek for god's sake? Since when has he been trustworthy?"

"It wasn't Krycek." Mulder's hand tightened around the gun. "He only gave me the beginnings. I unravelled the rest myself. It was hard - it was well hidden."

"They planted this 'evidence' of yours. They wanted me dead - but more than that, they needed you to be the one to kill me. They knew it would be the last nail in your coffin. If they could make you do this one thing, they would own you. And that has always been their purpose."

Mulder licked his lips, tasting nicotine and the salt of his own sweat.

"If you are who they say you are, then that is exactly what you would say," he whispered.

"And if I am who I say I am, then it is also exactly what I'd say." Skinner replied. "I told you that before. You have no answers, no guarantees. You have only what is in your heart. Only you can decide."

"I've been betrayed once too often. How can I tell any more?" Mulder asked, the gun faltering in his hand as his fingers began to shake once more.

"Trust." Skinner told him. "Trust me."

"Make me." Mulder sat there, in the chair, in the darkness. He ran the gun along the side of Skinner's face, like a lover's caress, his eyes intent on the movement, transfixed by it like a snake looking at its prey or a child painting a picture. His expression was one of concentration and contemplation. Skinner didn't move. He accepted the cold caress for endless long minutes and then, finally, he cleared his throat.

"Let me tell you a story." Skinner said. Mulder stopped the caress and looked up. His hazel eyes were too bright and they gleamed demonically.

"Once upon a time..." Skinner began.

"Another fairy story?" Mulder knocked the gun against the cut on the other man's face, making him wince.

"No, not a fairy story. Something very different." Skinner's eyes never left Mulder's. Mulder looked puzzled. He moved the gun away, put it on the table and sat back in the chair, crossing his arms.

"There was once a man who did some of what you say." Skinner paused, took a deep breath and then continued. "I was part of a covert military unit in Vietnam, I did participate in experiments. That much is true. But I was young. Too young to know that it was wrong, too young to recognise the evil that was done in the name of patriotism. However I had nothing to do with the abduction of your sister. Once I realized that there was a darkness at the heart of what I had been forced to do, I turned my back on that world forever. My new agenda, my only agenda, such as it was, was to be loyal to the FBI. If I learned anything from what happened to me in Vietnam, it is that the law must be upheld at all costs. That we, who work in law enforcement are not immune from the law. That we cannot bend it or break it to suit ourselves, however right and true and just our mission might be. That once any society condones such methods it is lost. Any conflict I ever had with you, Mulder, arose from that belief, not from some secret agenda. You cannot fight lies with lies, or evil with evil. You must stand or fall by your own integrity, find weapons that are within the armory of law and order and a civilized world. I have tried and yes, at times I have failed in that ideal. You can accuse me of nothing more heinous than that." Skinner sat back, frowning wearily. It was so dark now, that all he could see of the other man was the pallor of his face and the whites of his eyes.

"Is that it? A short story. I kept you entertained for longer." Mulder picked up the gun again and pressed it with languid grace against his captive's head.

"I haven't finished. You wanted to know the color of my heart but when I tell you, you'll be shocked, repulsed even." Skinner closed his eyes and then opened them again. The gun in his captor's hand pressed closer to his temple, making an indentation in his flesh. "But not for the reasons you imagine." Skinner whispered. "I remember the jungle well - I remember comrades and the sticky heat and the longing for love and comfort amid the blood and



sweat. I remember taking embraces where I could find them - lips, tongues the burning kisses of men who might be dead within hours. Intimate caresses that I felt I shouldn't enjoy or seek, but which I did anyway, because I was young and in need and desperate for that pleasure. And nothing since has felt the same. No lover's touch can compare to the heat of the jungle, the furtive embraces snatched in between moments of great danger. My emotions were heightened but I was alive. I was truly alive with every nerve fiber in my body. I never forgot, even through the long barren years of my marriage. I yearned to recapture those feelings, those emotions, that longing. And then you came along."

"You're turning this into a love story?" Mulder asked incredulously, his hazel eyes coming into focus as he realized what he was being told.

"It is a love story. It always was. For me at least." Skinner shook his head. "Not at first maybe. You were too irritating - let's be honest, you were. But later, as I grew to know you, admire you - your brilliance, passion, dedication. I sold myself for you, Mulder. Over and over again, to keep you safe or to keep Scully safe for you and you never asked why. You who see lies and conspiracies everywhere have trouble seeing a very simple truth. The truth that I love you."

"What is this?" Mulder drew back, his face confused. "They said you were clever. Outplaying me even now? I wondered what story you'd come up with, but this? Am I to believe this? Walter Skinner, the hard man of the Bureau, is what? A love-sick homosexual? It's absurd. Ludicrous." He tried to laugh but the sound wouldn't be conjured from his dry mouth.

"Not really." Skinner shrugged. "What do you really know of my heart, Fox? What does anyone know of someone else's heart? You worked with Scully for years before either of you knew what went on in the other's heart. It's not so strange, really, is it?"

"Yes. Yes it is." Mulder's tone was edgy with panic. "I don't understand. You love me? Why?" He got up, his body shaking once more, paced the room, a shadow of that old, nervous energy returning to those long, lean limbs.

"Is it so hard to believe that you're loveable? Scully loved you." Skinner pointed out. Mulder hissed as if he had been physically assaulted, the muscles of his body tensing at the sound of her name and the way it was being used against him.

"This is what you would say. To save your life. You knew you'd have to come up with something good. A master spy, deep cover. And this, a master-stroke worthy of you. I'm impressed." Mulder came back to the couch. "It's not good enough to save you though. It's just another lie."

"Kill me if you want to, Fox." Skinner whispered softly. "But kill me for the truth - kill me for loving you and wanting you. Kill me for the nights I sat in that chair where you sit now, watching you breathe, watching your chest rise and fall and wanting to cover your face with kisses. Wanting to smooth your hair and take you in my arms, wanting to hold you and make love to you. Kill me for that, but don't kill me because you believe I've betrayed you because I never could." His voice broke and his head dropped down on his chest.

Mulder watched him for a long while.

"I wanted to be loved once," he said. "Scully took me my surprise. I took her love because she gave it. I never realized how much I needed it until that moment of her giving."

"I couldn't take her place." Skinner shook his head. "But don't doubt that I love you as much

as she did."

"Love?" Mulder leaned forward, wiped some of the blood off the other man's chin with the sleeve of his shirt. "I've never had the least understanding of it." He pressed his lips against Skinner's, tasting the blood, tasting fear and regret and loneliness and some other emotion he couldn't identify. "If you're lying, then you'll have a high price to pay," he whispered. "If you're lying, I'll find out. I'll find out when I take you in my arms. If you're lying, I'll find out when we make love...only we won't get that far will we?" Mulder stared into Skinner's dark eyes. "Because if you're lying, as soon as I release you from those handcuffs, my neck will be snapped in two between your fingers like a twig. Your own survival would be paramount. I've uncovered your secret, you wouldn't let me live. Precious DNA or not, you'd kill me. Who are you really? A chimera, an illusion? My enemy, my friend? Even..." he hesitated, hope and desire warring with distrust and despair, "my lover?"

"It all comes down to one thing in the end." Skinner shook his head. "Trust."

"No-one." Mulder added. "Trust no-one."

"Then kill me." Skinner said. "And take your chances with the dark and with our enemies, Fox." He held himself up straight, gestured with his head to the gun. "Kill me," he whispered. "Do it now." Mulder reached out, unbuttoned Skinner's shirt slowly, sensuously, his hazel eyes never leaving his captive's dark ones. He smoothed the shirt open, caressed Skinner's chest with his fingers. Strange how they no longer trembled. Skinner leaned back, the handcuffs burning into his wrists. It was his turn to tremble now. Mulder's head ducked down onto Skinner's body, his kisses burning a trail of fire into his skin.

"The fairy tale or the love story. Which is it?" Skinner gasped.

Mulder picked up the gun once more, ran it along the other man's naked chest, pressed it against the exposed flesh that covered Skinner's heart.

"You once asked me," he said, "what I hoped to find 'in the end.' I never thought it would be this. Your heart, one way or the other. Your heart - black or red, traitor or lover, dead or alive. That's what it comes down to in the end."

"You said this story didn't have a happy ending." Skinner could hear his heart beating beneath the cool embrace of the gun as he gazed into the other man's lost soul. "We could write one. Together."

**THE END**

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