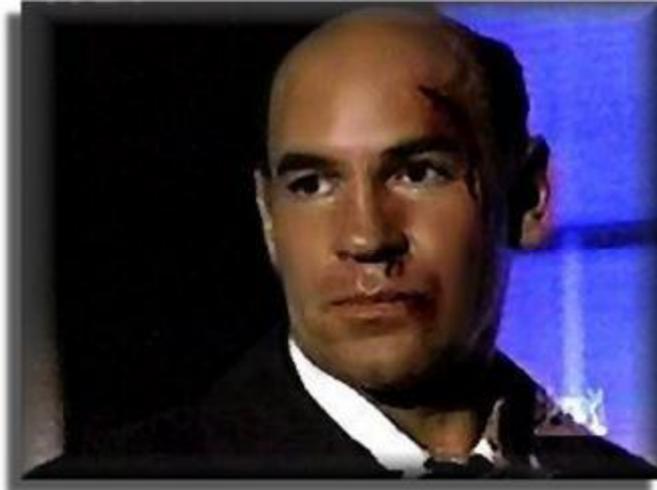


**Warning:** array\_key\_exists() [function.array-key-exists]: The first argument should be either a string or an integer in `/home/xanthe/public_html/includes/storyblock.php` on line **103**

## Just a Secretary...? by Xanthe

<http://www.xanthe.org/just-a-secretary/>

### Story Notes:



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This story is for Kristen K2 - good friend and thoroughly lovely person! Happy Birthday, Kristen!

Thank you to Phoebe for the beta and dot too :-)

Posted: 16th March, 2002



*Winner of the Spooky Award for Outstanding  
Other Series Character Characterization*

JUST A SECRETARY BY: XANTHE

*(First Place)*



Kim glanced at the clock on the wall, a worried frown on her face. It was nearly 7pm and the Assistant Director still hadn't returned. Usually Kim would have left for the day by now, but Skinner had hurried out of the office at 2pm, promising he'd only be an hour or so, and Kim had a gut feeling that something was wrong. She had been scheduled to meet with her boss at 4pm, as was their usual routine on a Friday afternoon, to take inventory of the week's work and sort out what would be a priority on Monday morning – and whether it would be necessary for Skinner to either take work home with him, or come into the office over the weekend. The 4pm meeting on a Friday was so much a part of their routine that Kim knew Skinner wouldn't miss it...and she knew he would have called if something had come up and he had to cancel...so something had to be wrong.

Kim sat at her desk, trying to figure out what she should do. She considered going home, and immediately rejected it – she wouldn't be able to rest easily all weekend knowing that her boss might be in danger. She cared about him too much for that...she cared about him too much, period, but that was her secret and she thought she hid it well. He certainly didn't know and she doubted that anyone else ever looked closely enough to see it. She was just a secretary, a permanent fixture, always there, sitting in her office, someone to be walked past on the way to her boss's door. She knew she was small, but sometimes irate agents barged past her as if she didn't exist, intent on haranguing her boss, not caring how they treated her in the process, as if she wasn't a real person. Sometimes she felt almost invisible as they ignored her protests and attempted to side-step her on their way to Skinner's office. Kim was nobody's doormat though, and did her best to stand up to each un-scheduled visitor, facing them down, all 5 feet nothing of her, going nose to nose against even the tallest, brawniest, gun-carrying FBI agent. She guarded Skinner's door like a lioness – fuming inside not for herself, but for him. He worked hard and deserved the respect of his agents – a respect that wasn't always forthcoming – and that saddened her.

Skinner had never treated her like just a secretary – and that was at the root of her regard for him. For ten years they had worked side by side - and worked extremely well. She had arrived at the FBI aged 22, straight out of college with excellent qualifications, and had quickly been promoted to work as Skinner's PA, a position she was proud of. She had always intended to move on somewhere else and use her qualifications in a more high-powered job, but she had found it hard to leave – and she knew why, although she always denied it to herself. The truth was that it wasn't the job she found hard to leave – but the man she worked for. There had been many ups and downs during the past ten years, but one thing

had never changed – her respect for her boss. The nature of their work meant that they worked closely together and she had come to admire not only his tremendous capacity for sheer hard work but also the way he never once lost his temper with her even whilst under extreme stress. For his part, he always seemed grateful for her ability to prioritise, and her attention to deadlines – she kept him on time and ensured that he always had the right documents to hand for any meeting he was attending. His work was often complex, and sometimes it was also painful and distressing. Kim had lost count of the number of funerals or visits to the hospital beds of agents under his command he had attended during the past ten years. She knew such events affected him profoundly. After a funeral he would walk back to his office with a slow pace, like an old man, his shoulders bowed. He'd ask her politely to ensure that he wasn't disturbed, would close the door, and that would be the last she'd see of him for several hours. Sometimes she fantasised that he'd allow her to comfort him. She day-dreamed of slipping quietly into his office, and holding him, soothing his tense, muscled body in her arms, but she knew it was just a fantasy. While Skinner might not treat her as just a secretary, she knew she had no claim on his heart. Their working relationship had always been cordial – but strictly professional.

Kim glanced at the clock again. Ten past seven. She twisted a piece of her red hair between her fingers anxiously. She had already tried calling him on his cell phone several times but either he didn't have it switched on or he couldn't get to it. Kim fought down a wave of panic – her boss was a meticulously organised man and she had never known him to be out of contact except when he was in trouble.

She considered calling someone – but who? Agents Doggett and Reyes were out of town on an assignment, Agent Mulder was missing, god knew where. Deputy Director Kersh and AD Follmer were no friends of Skinner's – she had frequently seethed inside at the way the Deputy Director so frequently summoned Skinner for a dressing down, as if her courteous, hard working boss were Kersh's own personal lap dog, and as for Follmer – that man was after Skinner's job as plain as day. There was always Agent Scully. Kim thought about that option for a moment and then dismissed it. She wasn't sure why, but the truth was that she just had a bad feeling in her gut about Agent Scully. There had been a time when she had wondered if she and the red haired agent who looked so much like her, could be friends, but that time was long since past. Scully had shown time and again that she didn't trust Skinner, so why turn to her for help when he was missing? Kim felt indignant about Scully's mistrust of her boss. The Assistant Director had taken a bullet because of his refusal to drop the case into the murder of Scully's sister, and had worked tirelessly to aid Scully and Mulder in their cases. Kim had seen Skinner do battle with Mulder and Scully's enemies, had witnessed how he had helped the X Files agents keep their jobs, despite enormous pressure from the upper echelons of the FBI. Skinner had saved their lives and their jobs on too many occasions to count yet still Scully didn't trust him? No, she wouldn't call Scully.

Who else to turn to then? She had run out of options. Besides, she didn't even know where he was. Maybe he was fine. Maybe she was worrying unnecessarily. She knew there was a protocol she should follow in these circumstances but that would involve informing Kersh, and she was aware that Skinner didn't always play by the FBI rules these days – and she didn't blame him. Kersh had slapped so many prohibitions on him that the Assistant Director was hardly allowed to go to the bathroom without getting Kersh's permission first. If Skinner

had been working on something that Kersh hadn't rubber stamped, then she could inadvertently get her boss fired if she followed the protocol for missing agents...so what **should** she do?

One thing was for sure – she wasn't going to sit here any more, worrying about a man she had come to think of as much more than just a boss. Kim got up and slipped silently into Skinner's office. She walked over to his desk and began sorting through his papers, trying to get some idea of what he had been working on and why he had left so abruptly, without saying where he was going...but she found nothing. Just expense reports and budget spreadsheets – nothing that told her anything about where he could be or who he had been meeting. Kim sat down in his black leather chair with a sigh. How she longed for him to be sitting here, his broad shoulders filling the space, his blunt fingers sorting through papers, his dark eyes speed-reading their way through the huge mounds of paperwork he had to negotiate each day. Supposing he never came back? Supposing he never sat in this chair again? Kim felt a cold sensation in the pit of her stomach and she wrapped her arms around her body. What point would there be in coming to work if **he** wasn't here? She wasn't sure when her friendly regard for her boss had turned into something much deeper – not until after his wife had died, of that she was certain. She had been involved in a bad relationship with a charming but unreliable man for the first couple of years of her working partnership with Skinner anyway, and she had been too young and immature to even consider looking at her older, worldly boss as a potential lover at that point in her life. That had long since changed. Somehow, at some point, her feelings had shifted irrevocably until it had reached the point where the highlight of her existence was coming to work, being with him, working alongside him, exchanging pleasantries, laughing with him. She often cut out humorous articles and political cartoons from her newspaper and showed them to him. He, in turn, would frequently call her into his office during his lunch break and ask her to help him complete his crossword. He had sent her flowers when her mother had died, and been a tower of strength as she arranged the funeral. She had visited him in the hospital when he had been hurt in the line of duty, taking books and crossword puzzles, and had seen to it that he had groceries in his apartment when he was discharged.

What had started as simple friendship – a friendship founded in part by mutual loneliness - had turned into something deeper, and more enduring, and, on Kim's part at least, something very akin to love. They never talked about how close they were becoming – as if they were both afraid they'd break a magic spell by drawing attention to it. And yet she saw that there was a special warmth in his eyes when he bid her good morning each day – a warmth she never saw him bestow on anyone else. With her he would smile, even laugh – whereas usually his work wore down too heavily on him, and his expression was solemn and grim. She hoped that she provided some respite for him in a difficult, stressful job, amid people who either he couldn't trust or who couldn't trust him. She wished she could tell him that he was **her** respite, her reason for getting up in the morning, her reason for still believing in the FBI, despite all she'd seen, but she had neither the words nor the confidence with which to share her private thoughts and emotions with him, so they went unsaid. She hoped he heard those unspoken words anyway, that he saw them in her faultless work, her willingness to stay late to help him, whenever he asked, in the way she always remembered his birthday and the anniversary of his wife's death, and treated those two dates in very different ways, bringing him a home baked cake and present on his birthday, and not

scheduling any appointments on the anniversary of Sharon's death, so that he had some time to think, and be alone, and, if he wanted, to visit her grave, which he often did.

Kim had never, in all the time she had worked with Skinner, had cause to worry about him in this way; god knows she had endured many sleepless nights on hospital vigils by his beside, but he had never not returned from a meeting – he always called to let her know if he had been delayed and would be late back. He had an old fashioned respect for manners that she had rarely encountered before and she knew that it just wasn't like him not to have called by now. She tried to think where he might be. He had received an unexpected call, relating to a case that she knew Kersh had warned him against pursuing. She had no idea why the Deputy Director had issued such a warning – before Kersh had taken over such cases always fell under Skinner's remit. Kersh seemed to have an agenda that nobody understood – and she knew that Skinner worried that the FBI wasn't fulfilling its duty because it wasn't just him who was denied permission to investigate certain cases – as far as Skinner had been able to find out, **nobody** was allowed to investigate them, and it worried him. It smacked of corruption – as if Kersh was being paid off from pursuing certain avenues of investigation or was stifling investigations that might be embarrassing to powerful people, and Kim knew that Skinner was deeply concerned by how wrong that was. Not that he ever said anything to her about it but she could read between the lines and she knew him well enough to notice the way his forehead creased into worried lines as he surveyed the list of cases that were being sidelined into Kersh's "Dead case" pile.

Kim glanced at her watch in despair – it was now half past seven. Skinner's briefcase was still beside his chair – so he clearly intended to come back – but when? And why hadn't he called? An idea occurred to her, and she examined his notepad. Remembering a trick from a film she had once seen, she picked up a pencil and lightly ran it over the pad. As he had left, she had noticed Skinner putting a piece of paper in his jacket pocket – maybe the imprint of whatever he had written down would still be here, on the sheet beneath. Much to her own disbelief, the faint outline of words, written in Skinner's distinctive firm hand started to rise on the pad. It was the name of a street and a house number! Kim grabbed a map of DC, and found the address. It wasn't far – she could be there in 15 minutes. The only question now was – should she go there? Supposing Skinner had met someone for a romantic assignation? Kim almost laughed out loud at that thought. Her boss wouldn't dream of leaving the office in the middle of the day for such a reason. It was absurd. However...supposing he was in a business meeting and had just forgotten to call? She squirmed, imagining the embarrassment of invading the meeting, and admitting to him that she had spied on him in order to get the address. And yet...she couldn't just do nothing. Kim squared her shoulders, got up, and ran for the door, full of resolve. She paused when she got there. She was wearing her usual office clothing of smart work suit, and heels that, while not particularly high, were clearly not made for running. If Skinner **was** in any danger then what use would she be, dressed like this? She wasn't a trained FBI agent...but she had completed several courses in self defence, and she used the FBI firing range regularly so she was a fairly competent shot...Kim turned back to Skinner's desk, opened the bottom drawer, and removed the spare gun that Skinner always kept there. She didn't own a gun herself, but if she was seriously going to do this then she'd need some kind of weapon – and while she was at it, she had to get rid of these unsuitable clothes. She decided to change into her gym clothes – black leggings and a black tee shirt – which she kept in her locker in the FBI gym

downstairs. Suddenly feeling full of purpose, Kim grabbed her bag and keys, tucked the address into her purse, and ran out of the office.

Ten minutes later she was in her car, speeding towards the address. Her heart was beating too fast, and she was torn between the almost certain knowledge that Skinner was fine, and she was making a complete idiot of herself, and worry that it might be too late, and that her boss, the man she cared about more than any other in the world, might already be dead.

It was dark by the time she drew up outside the house. She sat in the car and peered at the place for a long time. It wasn't a nice neighbourhood, and the house appeared derelict.

"So, Kimberly Cook. Now what?" She asked herself, gazing at the gun on the seat beside her. What did she do? She didn't have a search warrant, and she wasn't an FBI agent so she couldn't hide behind the badge. What **should** she do? She decided there was only one option – she'd have to walk right up to the house and take a look around from the outside. Taking a look around wasn't illegal and wouldn't get her into any trouble. Kim took a deep breath, got out of the car and then hesitated...where should she put the gun? She didn't have a holster or even a convenient pocket so she decided she'd have to improvise. She increased the length of the strap on her purse, emptied it of its contents, and slipped the gun inside. Then she slung the purse over her shoulder and arm so that it was firmly anchored around her body. Thus prepared, she took another deep breath and walked towards the house. Her heart was beating so fast that she thought it might explode. She hadn't been more scared in her entire life as she was at this moment in time. She tried to calm herself, reminding herself of the number of Agent Scully's reports she'd looked at where the diminutive agent had been in a situation such as this. If Scully could do it then so could she – especially considering what was at stake. She remembered the way Skinner's kind, dark eyes would look at her as he handed her a file, the way he would always make eye contact with her when they were working, as if he really saw her, as if she were more than just a secretary, not the invisible guardian of his door who so many of his agents ignored. Thus motivated, Kim reached the house and hesitated again. She didn't knock on the front door, deciding that was much too dangerous. Instead, she crept slowly around the house, looking in the windows. There was nothing around the front of the house, which was in darkness, but as she tiptoed around the side she saw a dim light emanating from what must have been a basement window, set low in the ground. She got down on her hands and knees and tried to peer through the grimy, cracked window, but the light from the interior was so poor that she couldn't see anything. Disheartened, she got up to carry on her search, when she heard the unmistakable sound of someone in pain. There was a low moan, and then a sharp crack followed by a shout of pure agony. Kim froze, the hair on the back of her neck standing on end. She silently rubbed some of the grime from the window with the hem of her tee shirt, and then peered in again – and gasped; in the room, just beneath her, there was a man tied to a chair, his head lolling to the side, a huge bruise on his jaw from where he had clearly been hit. There were two other men in the room but she didn't recognise either of them. She recognised the tied man though - it was Skinner.

Kim's heart tumbled into her sneakers as she watched one of the men backhand her boss on the jaw again. Skinner gave another growl of pain, and said something in a low, defiant tone – something that clearly didn't please his captor, who hit him again. Kim winced, and stifled

a cry. Skinner's face was bruised and his lip was cut – there was no sign of his glasses and he was clearly in great danger. What should she do? She couldn't just sit here that was for sure. Kim began edging away from the window – she had to call the police, this went far beyond any situation she could expect to handle herself. She was about to run back to the car when there was another crack – a louder one this time, and Skinner gave a hoarse shout. Kim threw herself back to the window and looked in. The man standing over Skinner had just hit him with the butt of a gun, and was now standing there with the weapon's muzzle pressed against her boss's forehead. The other man was standing by the door shaking his head. She strained to hear what he was saying.

"If he won't tell us, then he's no use to us," she thought he said. "We might as well kill him." He gave a nonchalant shrug and nodded to his colleague. The second man, the one beating Skinner, gave an unpleasant smile and his fingers tightened on the trigger. Kim's reaction was immediate – she was beyond coherent thought now, and acting on instinct alone. The word "NO!" emanated right from her heart and into her throat, taking her by surprise, and, grabbing the window sill, she crashed through the cracked glass feet first and landed, awkwardly, on top of the man with the gun. He went down heavily, his gun flying across the room. Adrenaline coursed through Kim's body, and she somehow managed to get to her feet and draw the gun in her purse. The other man in the room didn't have a gun. He put his hands cautiously in the air and backed towards the door.

"Freeze – federal agent!" Kim cried, because it sounded threatening, even if it wasn't true. The man gave a smirk, glanced pointedly over her shoulder at his fallen comrade, distracting her, and then took his opportunity to run out of the room.

"Look out!"

She recognised Skinner's voice and turned, the gun flailing wildly in her hands. The man she had landed on when she came through the window was hurling himself towards her. She hesitated, her finger on the trigger and time seemed to freeze as she struggled with her decision. She had never shot at anyone before and she wasn't sure that she **could**. Even as she thought that, she realised that she had no choice, that she had to do this – that she was the only one who could and that Skinner depended on her to save both their lives. She was just about to fire, when, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Skinner throwing himself and the chair bodily in the path of her assailant. Time seemed to return to its normal speed, and both men came crashing down in a tangle of rope, limbs and pieces of broken wood. Their attacker looked at her with an assessing stare, standing with the gun half raised. Then he slid out from under the debris of the broken chair and edged towards the door, following his comrade who had already disappeared. Kim raised the gun again but she knew that without the threat of immediate assault she couldn't shoot – and her attacker knew it as well. He ran out of the room and Kim stood there, watching him go, her entire body shaking violently, the gun hanging uselessly in her hands.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to Skinner. "I couldn't do it. I'm sorry."

Skinner was lying on his side, breathing heavily, still tied with rope, blood trickling down the side of his bruised face and he didn't seem to have heard her. Panic-stricken, she ran to his side.

"Are you okay? Sir? Sir?" She patted his face blindly. He blinked, slowly, and then gazed up at her. His dark eyes were full of pain.

"Scully?" he whispered, squinting at her myopically in the dim light.

"No, sir. It's me - Kim," she said, working hard to undo the tight knots on the ropes that bound him.

"Kim?" He shook his head and slowly managed to sit up, wincing as he did so. He gazed at her, his expression bemused, as she fumbled with the ropes. "Where did you learn those kind of moves, Kim?" he asked.

"I...I don't know," she admitted, as she finally finished untying him. "I just...I was acting on instinct I guess." She helped him to his feet, and he leaned his weight on her for a moment, breathing heavily.

"They were good instincts," he murmured, glancing towards the open door through which their assailants had disappeared. "Thank you."

Now that the immediate danger had passed, the enormity of what had just happened kicked in, and Kim felt suddenly weak. All her energy vanished in one go, as if it had been forcibly sucked out, and her knees buckled beneath her.

"Steady. It's okay." Skinner put one big hand under her elbow and held her upright. "You'll be fine. Give me the gun, Kim," he said gently, and she realised that she had picked it up after untying him, and was holding it so tightly that her knuckles were white.

"Sorry...I...I took it from your desk...sorry..." Damn but she wished she could stop shaking.

"That's fine. I'm glad you did," he said reassuringly. His weary, pained features broke into a gentle smile. "Let go," he told her, his big hand covering her much smaller one on the gun.

She nodded. "You do actually have to loosen your muscles and let the gun drop," he prompted as her hand remained tightly fixed around it. She grinned, shakily.

"Sorry...I'm not used to doing this kind of thing," she whispered, finally managing to release her tense muscles enough to offload the gun into his hand.

"You're doing great," he told her, his dark eyes glowing with sincerity. He pushed a slice of her red hair behind her ear. "You've been hurt," he said, his voice husky with concern. She put a hand up to her face and it came away streaked with red.

"Just a cut...from when I came through the window," she told him. "I can't even feel it."

"That's the adrenaline. You might feel it later," he warned.

"I'm sorry...I let them go," she told him, tears pricking the back of her eyes as reality came crashing back in. "I couldn't pull the trigger. I'm sorry."

"Kim...it doesn't matter. I'm just glad you're okay."

She tried to smile through her tears but she was shaking too much. Skinner never took his dark eyes off her.

"Kim, it's the adrenaline – it's normal."

"Feel so cold..." she muttered, ashamed of herself. "Sorry," she apologised again.

"For what – saving my life?" He countered, and then, unexpectedly, he wrapped his arms around her quivering body and pulled her firmly against him. His body was warm and his arms made her feel safe. He held her for a few minutes while the shaking gradually subsided, along with her tears. His hand gently stroked her hair, and she was surprised when he dropped a kiss on her head.

"Better now?" he asked, as she finally drew back.

"Yes...they have gone, haven't they?" she asked fearfully.

"Yes, they've gone...my guess is they won't be back in a hurry," Skinner told her softly.

"We should call the police...an ambulance...you're hurt," she said, trying to get back to her normal, organisational self, trying to figure out what had to be done next.

"I'm not badly hurt. Just a few cuts and bruises. I've had worse," he said tiredly. "Do you have a cellphone? They broke mine..." He gestured with his head at a bundle of smashed plastic and wires lying on the floor next to a pair of shattered spectacles.

"I kept trying to call you...I suppose that explains why there was no answer," Kim murmured. "Oh...yes, I do have a cell phone..." Kim reached into her purse and then grimaced. "I emptied everything out," she admitted. "It's in the car. Sorry...I forgot."

"Okay...then let's go to the car," Skinner said gently. Still keeping one arm around her, the other gripping the raised gun tightly, he walked them both towards the door.

"They're not out there, are they?" Kim asked fearfully.

"I'm sure they've run off, but I just want to be careful," he told her. "You've been in enough danger for one day. I don't want anything else to happen to you."

"I haven't been in the kind of danger you have," she whispered, as they slowly edged their way up the stairs. "I'm sorry I didn't come earlier. I'd have come earlier if I'd have known you were in such trouble."

"It's okay." He squeezed her reassuringly. "You couldn't have known." Kim was terrified as they walked up the stairs, wondering whether the men were still there, waiting for them,

but Skinner was right, and there were long gone – although Kim noticed that the tension didn't go out of his body until they were out of the house and standing beside the car.

Kim got into the car and waited while Skinner eased his battered body in beside her. Now that it was over, Kim was full of regrets. Oh, how she wished that she could have pulled this off with more aplomb! How she wished she was Agent Scully, who, according to her reports at least, seemed to face death defying situations every day and still looked great at the end of it. Agent Scully would undoubtedly never burst into tears and collapse after every close shave. It was so annoying – she was thoroughly ashamed of herself. As for Skinner – she was sure he must be comparing her unfavourably to the cool, calm collected Agent Scully. The whole world could probably disappear from under Agent Scully's feet and she'd probably still file her report on time without a hair out of place.

Skinner sat down heavily beside her and took a deep breath, his hand pressed to his ribs so she guessed his face wasn't the only part of him that had taken a beating.

"Why did they do this?" She blurted. "What did they want?"

"I don't know. I got a tip off from an informant – I was looking for some documents but I stumbled upon them instead. They were waiting for me – got the drop on me before I even knew what was happening. I was out cold for a few hours and when I woke they were making frantic phone calls to someone – after that they decided to try and find out what I knew." He winced. "They kept asking me questions – strange, disconnected questions," he frowned. "I have no idea what they're involved with or who they thought I was working for, but I bet Kersh knows." He winced as he pulled his seat belt on.

"Should I take you to the hospital. Should I call the police?" she asked, fumbling for her cellphone in the debris from her bag that was scattered all over the car floor.

"No. I'm fine. I'm worried about that cut on your face though – does it need stitching?"

"No. It's just a scratch. What shall I do? Who should I call?" She asked him. He sighed, and shook his head, his shoulders dejected, his expression one of despair.

"Nobody," he said softly. "There's nobody you can call, Kim. I'm fine – or at least I will be in a couple of days. The police won't catch those men, and the FBI won't even try. Kersh has made sure of that."

"But they were going to kill you!" She said in a choked tone.

"I know." He shook his head. "And they could have succeeded – they would have succeeded if you hadn't come along – but Kersh wouldn't have investigated, even then. He's hiding something, Kim, and the worst thing is that I'm not even sure what. There's a big picture here that I'm just not seeing...but I will keep trying," he said in a determined tone. "Please don't tell anyone I said that. Kersh is looking for a way to get rid of me – I need time to

figure out what he's doing and I have to play along with him in the meantime."

"I understand. I kind of figured that's what you were doing anyway." Kim gave him a little smile and he smiled back.

"Nothing much gets past you," he said.

"Well, nothing much except for Agent Mulder when he's got a bug up his ass!" she replied. Skinner gazed at her for a moment, and then he put his head back and gave a deep, heartfelt laugh. His laugh was so infectious Kim soon joined in. She guessed they were both laughing to release all the tension of the past hour, but it felt so good! When they'd finished, Skinner smiled at her, a warm light in his dark eyes.

"You're so good for me. That wicked sense of humour coming out of the left field – it always takes me by surprise but I love it," he murmured and she felt as if her entire body had been warmed by his words.

"Come on. Let me get you home," she said, starting the car, her face flushing red. She always found it hard to accept a compliment – and even harder from this man who she so desperately wanted to think well of her.

They drove back to his apartment in silence. Kim stole glances at Skinner as she drove. He was leaning back in his seat, his eyes closed, his features utterly weary. There were lines of pain etched into that familiar, beloved broad forehead. Not for the first time she longed to soothe his worries away, and bestow a kiss on his brow. She was realistic enough to know that couldn't happen though. Next week he would be Assistant Director Skinner again and she would be just a secretary, as usual.

She helped him to his apartment, relishing the feel of his heavy arm around her shoulder. She wasn't sure whether she was keeping him up or he was keeping her up –her legs were still shaky after the events of the evening - but she knew that she loved being this close to him. He sat down on his couch with a heavy sigh and she went into the kitchen to find medical supplies to tend to his injuries. There was a first aid box in the cupboard under the sink. She filled a bowl with water and took the box and bowl back to the couch. He smiled at her gratefully when she returned.

"You don't have to do this. I'll be fine," he said.

"Nonsense. I **saw**, Walter," she told him. "I saw how badly they beat you." She stopped, momentarily surprised by her own temerity in addressing him by his first name – and yet it had felt so nice – so **right**. He obviously didn't mind because he just smiled at her again. Duly encouraged, she sat herself down on his coffee table, and dabbed a cotton ball into the water. He remained perfectly still while she gently bathed the cuts on his face, applying light pressure to the various facial bones to be certain they won't broken. Satisfied that he wasn't too badly hurt, she let her fingers drift to the side of his cheek, enjoying the feel of his skin

under her hand. There was blood on his shirt but his injuries hadn't diminished his strength and force of personality. If anything, he seemed even more strong and vital as he surrendered himself up to her ministrations. There was a core of the man that was just solid and utterly valiant. He was a man who could always be depended upon in any kind of crisis – she hoped he knew that she was the kind of woman who could also be relied upon. Like him, she wasn't a taker – she was a giver, and right now she wanted nothing more than to give to this man.

Kim came to with a start, realising that she had been lost in a reverie of appreciation and longing, and found that his dark eyes were fixed firmly on her face.

"Kim...I want to say...thank you," he said in a heartfelt tone. "I didn't think I was going to get out of there alive. But...how on earth did you know where to find me? And why did you come alone? You shouldn't have put yourself in that much danger. I could have lost you." His voice was hoarse as he said those words, and his eyes were so dark with pained realisation that she was momentarily surprised. "God...I could have lost you." He reached out and cupped the side of her face with his hand, gazing at her intently. "How would I stay sane at the office if you weren't there? What would even motivate me to get up in the morning and go to work?" He asked huskily.

"That's what I kept thinking about you!" She blurted out. Then she flushed. "I mean..." She shrugged, and bent her head to her box of medical supplies again. "You hurt your ribs," she told him, hoping her tone sounded matter of fact. "I saw you wince in the car. I should look at them – make sure nothing is broken."

"I think they're just bruised. The man you landed on when you crashed through that window landed a few punches on me before they tied me to the chair." He started to unbutton his shirt but one of his fists was swollen and his movements were clumsy.

"Here – let me," she said. He willingly relinquished the task and she took over. She tenderly smoothed his shirt open and gazed at the dark purpling bruise on his ribs.

"Ouch," she murmured. She ran her fingers gently over it but was fairly sure he was right – and nothing was broken. "There's not much I can do for that," she told him. "You'll just have to rest up and allow it to get better."

"I don't have time to rest," he shrugged. "Too much work to do."

"You are NOT going into the office tomorrow," she remonstrated, her concern for him making her bold. Somehow after the events of the past few hours, she felt she had a right to talk to him like this. He shot her a wry grin, clearly amused by her vehemence.

"The work still has to be done. I'm behind now after this unscheduled outing," he said, with a grimace in the direction of his battered ribs.

"I'll bring it over then. We'll get through it together – but you can't go into the office after this. You need to rest. Please, Walter. Please rest," she implored.

His eyes met hers. There was an expression of surprise in them – and she guessed it had been a long time since a woman had cared what hours he worked or in what condition he worked them. She was fairly sure that there had been nobody in his life since Sharon – when would he have found the time apart from anything else? He worked all the hours god sent as it was.

“I will. I’m sorry – I didn’t mean to worry you. I didn’t know you’d be so concerned,” he told her. She bit on her lip and looked down, afraid that she had given herself away. She turned her attention once more to his injuries in an attempt to cover her emotions, which she was sure were shining all too plainly out of her eyes. She picked up his swollen hand, placed it carefully on her lap, and began bathing his knuckles.

“You’ll have to tell me where you learned to crash through windows and disarm dangerous men,” Skinner joked gently.

“I...I don’t know how I did that,” she said, half apologetically, never raising her eyes from his bruised hand. “I can hardly believe that I **did**. I wasn’t even thinking...I just heard that man give the order to kill you and...I just found myself flying through the air covered in glass!” She tenderly bathed his hand, concentrating on the task. She might never be able to tell him how she felt about him, but at least she could express it in the way she always did – by being by his side, by helping him, by silently guarding his privacy, his health, his secrets.

“You never did tell me how you knew where I was.”

“I was worried. You hadn’t come back and you didn’t call and you **always** call. I didn’t know what to do. Doggett and Reyes are out of town and I didn’t want to compromise anything you might have been working on to go to Deputy Director Kersh or AD Follmer. I know I should probably have followed Bureau protocol but...” she shrugged. “I didn’t want to get you into any trouble. So I went into your office and looked for clues as to where you’d gone. I used a pencil to find the outline of the address on your note pad.”

He whistled, and gave a little laugh. “So that **does** work does it?” He asked, an incredulous note in his voice. “I assumed that was just something they did in the movies!” She gave a little smile, knowing he was trying to put her at her ease, but she still found she couldn’t look at him. If she did, she’d betray how she felt about him. It had been hard enough at the office, all these years, but at least there they had the formality of their routines to keep them anchored in their respective roles of boss and secretary. Here, sitting with him in his apartment, bathing his hand while he sat there with his shirt open, she had nothing to hide behind. All these years she had told herself it was enough just to see him every day, and to be near him, to be able to help him in his working life – most people saw much less of their loved ones in a marriage. She had always told herself that was enough, but now, sitting here with him, she knew that it wasn’t, that she wanted much, much more.

“You could have just gone home,” he said softly. “Most people would have just assumed I’d been delayed somewhere and gone home for the weekend.”

“No – you always call...and, to be honest...something didn’t feel right...I had a...a gut instinct

that something was wrong.”

“You could have called Agent Scully,” he said.

She stiffened. She had always wondered whether her boss had a romantic affection for Agent Scully – he had certainly put himself out enough over the years to help both her and her errant partner out when they were in trouble.

“I expect I should have called her,” she replied, her tone frosty. “She would have known what to do. She wouldn’t have allowed those men to escape. I’m sure she does a dozen brave things before breakfast without bursting into tears and making a complete idiot of herself afterwards. I know I’m not her. I know I’m just a secretary...”

“Hey...” He broke into her speech, and gently took hold of the hand she had just been using to bathe his knuckles, holding it gingerly in his own. “You’re the bravest woman I know,” he told her. “You don’t have Agent Scully’s training or her experience in handling this kind of situation, and yet you acted on your own initiative, found out where I was, followed me, rescued me – at extreme risk to your own safety. And for the record...” He tipped up her chin and gazed into her eyes. “I have never viewed you as ‘just a secretary’.” His brown eyes were so sincere that she found herself blushing, but his finger under her chin wouldn’t allow her to drop her gaze. She opened her mouth to make her usual distracting, distancing comment, maybe something flippant, or something negative – anything to change the subject, anything to stop her betraying her emotions, but instead something else entirely came out of her mouth.

“That’s good...because I’ve long since stopped viewing you as just a boss.”

His eyes flickered in surprise as he read the look on her face, a look she could no longer hide. He moved his fingers from her chin and gently pushed some of her hair away from her face, tucking it behind one of her ears. His fingers were so gentle, like a whisper on her skin. He stroked her hair softly, and she leaned into his caress, and then found herself moving forward, meeting him as he moved toward her in a movement so graceful that it could have been choreographed...and then their lips were touching. It was a tender, gossamer light, exploratory kiss but it changed everything. His lips were firm but soft beneath her own, and she rested her hands on his broad shoulders to balance herself. She closed her eyes and felt as if she were flying through the sky, weightless, without a care in the world. After all these years hiding their feelings, there was no mistaking the tenderness and love in their first kiss.

“I probably shouldn’t tell you this, Kimberley Cook,” he whispered in a husky tone when at last their lips parted, although their hands remained locked and their foreheads touching. “I swore to myself I never would – why would a lovely young woman like you be interested in a man like me, with all the problems I have going on in my life?”

“Oh...but I don’t view you that way!” She protested, interrupting him.

“Then maybe you won’t mind me telling you after all,” he said with a smile. “I think you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known, Kim Cook. Not just on the outside, but all of

you. There are times these past few years when I don't think I'd have gotten through the day if it hadn't been for you. You have that rare beauty that shines through from your soul. You're good – kind and giving. You're thoughtful and you're funny. You've made me laugh at times when I've thought I could never laugh again."

"You look so different when you laugh." She drew back and gazed at his features critically. "I love the way you look when you're smiling - I'd do anything to make you smile."

His eyes glowed and he obliged her readily with a smile that came straight from his heart. He turned her hand over in his, raised it gently to his lips and kissed it.

"I'll remember that," he said softly. "Kim, there's an old saying...if you save someone's life then it belongs to you. Well you saved my life today so..." he smiled at her conspiratorially and then gave a little shrug. "Although, to be honest, I think that I get the better part of that arrangement," he added.

He held out his hands and she took them, and he pulled her towards him and held her close to his body, shifting to make room for her on the large, comfy couch. She nestled safely against his broad chest and it felt like coming home. It felt like where she belonged.

She was no longer "just a secretary" to him, and somehow, Kim had the feeling that she never would be again.

**The End**

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