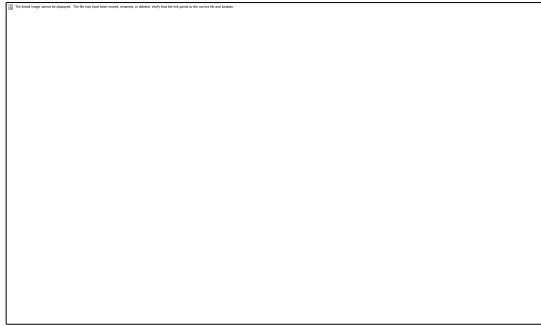


~ Crush ~

by KG MacGregor

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Disclaimer: The following story contains minor references to statistics and other mathematical procedures. If you are averse to this content, or if you live in a state where such numerical inferences are prohibited, this story is not for you.

This story was written for the 2004 Valentine's Special at the Royal Academy of Bards. It's a hurt/comfort tale, emphasis on the comfort. Thanks to

the Academy for the invitation; and thanks to my Sweetcakes for her unending inspiration for love stories.

"Did you see that reading list for PS 2113? We're gonna wipe out a whole forest if we have to copy all those articles!" The pony-tailed grad student wearily dropped her backpack with a *thud* and slumped into the leather chair.

"I'll trade you that any day for Frazier's class. He's making us write three papers, plus a midterm, plus a final!"

Nina Brown chuckled to herself at the exchange between the first-year master's students. This was only their second semester in the program; they had no idea what they were in for next year when the hand-holding stopped. Once they made it through this first year-if they made it-they'd find their workload doubled, and there wouldn't be anyone there telling them what to think anymore.

At 33, Nina practically considered herself a professional student. She was at the end of her doctoral program, working now on her dissertation, which she hoped would be finished in another year...two at the outside. Having to work full-time slowed her progress, but she needed the money to pay off the medical bills that mounted after a motorist clipped her bike and fled the scene three years ago. Her student health insurance didn't cover her extended hospital stay; she was on the hook for over twelve thousand dollars...as if six years of student loans hanging over her head wasn't enough.

The seven grad students-four women and three men-took their seats around the conference table, ready to get started on the spring semester's spate of interviews. This was the Southern Political Research Institute, a grant-supported organization that tracked political opinion in the South. It was loosely affiliated with the Political Science Department at Hartman University in rural Tennessee, and located in one of the older buildings on campus. Interviewing jobs at the Institute

were coveted by those not already blessed with teaching assistantships in the Poli Sci department. The Institute paid well for part-time work, and the hours were more flexible, with a lot of their work done in the evenings and on weekends.

Nina Brown took the seat closest to the head of the table, where supervisor Ruby Collins would sit when she got the rest of their materials copied. No one but Nina ever sat next to Ruby; the others preferred a little distance so they could whisper and giggle about the woman's management style.

Ruby had a mantra for her staff: Garbage in, garbage out. "If you don't put good data into the computer, you don't get good data out." She routinely monitored their interviews, and debriefed after any that she deemed difficult or unique. Her hands-on style was more intrusive than most people liked, but Ruby took her job seriously. Through her diligence, she routinely caught errors before they became part of scholarly papers or conference presentations. She was proud of her work, even if she wasn't particularly admired as a boss.

Nina was at the meeting today to lend Ruby a hand with the training on the new survey instrument. She worked not as an interviewer, but as a statistician. She'd been recruited last year by the Institute's director, Dr. Arthur Grimes, who was impressed with a paper she'd gotten published in the *Journal of Southern Politics*. His own number-crunching skills were outdated, what with the new statistical software; but what he liked most about Nina's work was the straightforward way she presented her findings.

Right on schedule, Ruby marched into the room, her arms loaded with training packets, stacked alternately for easy distribution. "Good morning, everyone. I hope you all had a nice holiday break. I'm really excited about this next round of interviewing, because as you know, this is an election year. The new survey has an interesting battery of questions on political advertising...."

Nina studied the faces of the interviewers as Ruby delivered her overview. They rolled their eyes, they smirked, and they poked one another underneath the table each time Ruby's voice escalated in enthusiasm for the project. For them, this was just a job that would offset their tuition for grad school. A few might parlay their work here into access to data for a thesis or conference paper. What none of them realized, Nina knew, was that Ruby's passion for the work they were doing was genuine.

Ninety minutes into the training session, Ruby looked up to find her crew fidgeting and glassy-eyed. "Why don't we take a little break? Fifteen minutes?"

No one answered; instead the group rose in unison to file out the door.

Nina hung back for a minute to see if Ruby needed any help with her materials, but when the supervisor dashed out as well, she decided it would be a good time for a bathroom break. When she entered the tiled room, she saw that the others had the same idea.

"She's really something, isn't she, Nina?" This was Charlene, a second-year interviewer.

The statistician entered a stall, cringing at the pronunciation of her name, which the girl rhymed with Tina. "It's Nina," she corrected, rhyming with Dinah.

"Oops, sorry. I don't know why I can't keep that straight."

Because you're addle-brained, Nina thought.

"Anyway, I was just telling them that Ruby's always like this...going over every last detail like we won't be able to figure anything out without her telling us exactly what to do. And the checklist! I can't believe she's making us initial every single step. She's just so...compulsive about all this."

Nina knew when she saw Ruby's new checklist that the interviewers would be griping about yet another piece of paperwork. The statistician exited the stall and headed for the sink, mindful that the two new interviewers would be interested in her take on the morning's training session. After washing her hands, she fluffed her short blonde hair in front of the mirror.

"I don't know, Charlene. Being compulsive is probably a good thing in this kind of work. Ruby's just trying to cut down on errors. That's her job."

"Yeah, but there's got to be some kind of...diminishing return thing. I don't see how all the extra time we spend on this paperwork is going to make that much difference down the road."

"But if the interview isn't going to be accurate, why do it at all?"

"Well...isn't some information better than no information?"

Nina fought the urge to roll her eyes, but she didn't want Charlene's attitude rubbing off on the first-year interviewers. It would just make everyone's job that much harder. "I don't think it's such a bad idea to have a checklist. A lot of people forget to fill out the contact log...and some of the interviews that got turned in last semester were missing the supplemental questionnaire. Those participants had to be re-contacted over the holiday." *By Ruby and me, while you were home on vacation.* "The checklist makes everybody stop and think about all the steps. I don't see how that can hurt."

The two new hires nodded in agreement, eager to demonstrate that they understood the importance of strict methodology. Nina knew that they probably didn't grasp the whole picture, but if they just accepted it for now, they'd get a better idea when they started to do research on their own.

When they filed out of the ladies' room, the interviewers gathered in the hallway to chat, determined to spend their full fifteen-minute break on their feet. Nina stood off to the side to avoid engaging in another discussion of Ruby's management style. Hers was an odd position, caught between management and staff. Ruby did seem to go overboard at times, but quality control was a tough job, and she couldn't afford to be lax.

Eventually, the group sauntered back into the conference room, ready to get the morning session over with. When their supervisor failed to appear after the fifteen-minute break, Nina went to see about the delay. Ruby's office door was closed, which was unusual, considering that she always encouraged everyone on the staff—from the lowest interviewer to the director himself—to come to her with questions or problems. Nina was about to knock when the door suddenly opened.

"Oh...sorry. I was just...." The statistician was surprised by the look on the manager's face, a grim expression that turned blank in an instant. "I thought I could start on the coding categories if you were going to be a few minutes."

Ruby pushed her glasses up and managed a smile. "Thanks, Nina. I'm ready to get back now. Maybe we can wrap this up in an hour or so...I feel bad keeping everybody awake when it's clear they're trying to sleep."

Nina smiled, appreciating the supervisor's attempt at self-deprecating humor. Ruby knew she was the object of ridicule by her staff, but she didn't let it deter her when it came to doing her job. As they walked back to the conference room, the statistician got the distinct feeling that something was amiss, but she didn't know Ruby well enough to poke her nose in her business.

"I ran those reports you wanted." Nina stood in Ruby's open doorway with a small stack of printouts. "You were right about the primacy effects. We should probably rotate those advertising questions."

The supervisor had noticed a response pattern in the first twenty interviews from last week and she'd asked Nina to check it out. The order of the questions seemed to be influencing the answers; it was a common problem in surveys like this, but the fix was easy.

"I was worried that might be the case. Can you program that list to rotate?"

"Yeah, it's no problem." They did all of their interviews using automated computer software, so little changes in things like question wording or skip patterns were easy to implement. "That was a really good catch, Ruby."

The supervisor shrugged. "That's why they pay me the big bucks." Both of them chuckled. Big bucks and state jobs did not go hand in hand.

"Ruby?" It was Jessica, one of the new interviewers. "I was...like...doing an interview with this man just now...and I was going through this list of...like these economy questions...and I go 'Which one of these most closely resembles your point of view?' and this guy on the phone...he like goes...'neither one.' And I like go 'But which one is closest?' and he like goes again...'neither one.' So I just checked the 'No Answer' box and went on to the next question. Was that...like...what I was supposed to do?"

"That's correct. You read the question exactly as it's written, and you give them one prompt. If

they're unable to choose, you proceed to the next question." Ruby was pleased that this new hire had remembered the procedure.

The interviewer beamed with pride. "That's good. I was like...oh, gosh...my first difficult respondent."

"You handled it very well, Jessica."

Jessica left and Ruby turned to Nina, barely able to conceal her smirk. "What do you think would happen if we took the words 'like' and 'go' out of the English language?"

"We would silence a whole generation," Nina answered, pleased to get another small glimpse of the supervisor's sense of humor.

In the last week, the statistician had thought a lot about Ruby. The woman really didn't deserve the hard time she got from her staff. She was a nice lady; she was fair and understanding when they needed time off to study or to work on papers, and when she handed out criticism, it was always in private, and always respectful and constructive.

In fact, Nina had caught herself noticing other things about Ruby, too-things she hadn't paid much attention to since coming to work at the Institute last year. The woman looked to be about forty, give or take a couple of years. She was tall and slender, and always wore her dark hair pulled back in a large barrette. The only times Nina had ever seen her without her glasses were those occasions when Ruby would take them off to rub her tired eyes. And she seemed to do that a lot lately.

Nina also found herself paying attention to how Ruby looked. She always came to work in a skirt or dress...never slacks, and she dressed things up even more with scarves and pins. One might argue that Ruby dressed better than pretty much anyone else on the staff. Even Art Grimes wore blue jeans once in awhile, but Ruby never dressed down, not even on casual Fridays. The statistician suspected that it was part of Ruby's overall professional demeanor, the one for which her staffers ridiculed her...and the one that caused her to do her job so well.

"So, Ruby...? You want to...go get some lunch or something?" Nina felt her face go red as soon as she extended the invitation, but over the last week or so, she realized that she really wanted to get to know this woman.

"Oh, I wish I could," Ruby said sincerely. "But I have an errand to run at lunch today. Can we do it some other time?"

"Sure. That'd be great." *Because I think I might be getting a crush on you, Ruby Collins.*

Nina pulled up the hood on her jacket before racing out to the parking lot. It wasn't exactly a downpour, but the rain was steady and icy cold. From the corner of her eye, she could see a

couple of coworkers scrambling for their cars too. But when she reached her Ford Escort, her heart sank. The back rear tire was flat as a pancake.

"Forget it. Ride with me."

The statistician turned to find Ruby crossing the lot to the red Chevy Blazer beside her. She was wrapped tightly in a tan trench coat, and carried a wide golf umbrella that kept everything dry but her feet.

"But...what about my car?"

"You can worry about it when it's not raining. Come on, get in."

Nina wasn't going to argue with the invitation, not in this weather. Nonetheless, she was suddenly nervous about being alone with the object of her infatuation. Ever since she admitted to herself that this was a genuine crush, it was all she could do to concentrate on her work when Ruby was around.

"I really appreciate this."

"It's okay. And if you want me to, I'll swing by and pick you up in the morning." She unlocked the Blazer and they both climbed in. "You don't live in Alabama, do you?"

Nina chuckled. "No, I live in Hartman Village...on Cardinal Road."

"I know where that is. That's a pretty nice complex, isn't it?"

"I don't know if I'd go that far, but there aren't many undergrads there, and that's a plus." Undergrad housing meant too much partying.

"So it's quiet, then?"

"Mostly...but I have a roommate. And she has a new boyfriend. And he has a Great Dane." Nina spent a lot of her evenings in the library on campus to give her roommate Candace some private time with her boyfriend, but Candace was starting to take advantage of her generosity. The statistician didn't like the idea of sharing her space with a guy; in fact, she didn't want to share much of anything with a guy.

"You want to stop and get some...Chinese food or something?" Ruby didn't take her eyes off the road as she extended the offer.

The invitation was a nice surprise, Nina thought. Finally, here was a chance to find out a little more about Ruby outside of work. "Yeah, that'd be good."

Minutes later, Ruby was pulling into the Dragon Inn, a mid-priced restaurant with table service. As a grad student, Nina was more accustomed to the cafeteria style express restaurants near

campus, where one could get a whole plate of shrimp fried rice for two dollars. But having dinner with Ruby was worth straining her budget a little.

"So are you almost finished with your dissertation?"

"I'm afraid not. I probably have another year or so. I'm looking at the effects of editorial endorsements on the outcome of gubernatorial races."

"That sounds interesting."

"It was a lot more interesting when I started it two years ago. Now, it seems like an albatross. Believe me, it's more than you ever wanted to know about state politics."

"I think it's all interesting. I wish I understood the statistics as well as you did. I read a lot of articles that seem interesting, but when I get to the findings, most of the numbers just don't make sense."

"Next time that happens, you should bring it to me. If I can figure it out, I'll walk you through it."

"Wow, that would be great. I was thinking I might take a refresher class in statistics one of these days."

"That's not a bad idea, but I'm afraid most of the new studies go way past what's covered in the first stats class. Now that the computers are doing all the math, the numbers are getting more and more complicated."

"Believe me, I've noticed." The waitress interrupted to bring their entrees. "So how'd you end up at Hartman? Art said you did your undergrad at Tulane."

For some reason, it struck Nina as odd that Art would have talked to Ruby about where she'd gone to school, but it was probably just a routine conversation they'd had before she was brought on board last year. But the why of how she ended up at Hartman wasn't exactly an easy thing to answer.

"I...was looking for a strong quantitative program. I always liked statistics." That much was true, but the main reason she chose Hartman was because Roxanne had been rejected at both Michigan and Texas. Had Nina known that her former girlfriend would drop out and return to New Orleans after only a year, she'd have chosen Ann Arbor instead.

"Well, you're certainly good at it. I know Art thinks a lot of your work."

Nina smiled shyly at the praise, but hoped that they weren't going to talk about work and school all night. Still, it was only polite to follow Ruby's lead. "And what brought you to Hartman?"

"Would you believe it was Art Grimes? I always wanted to study southern politics-it's fascinating to look at the dynamics over the years. Anyway, he was publishing in the Poli Sci

department then. I read a couple of his studies and applied here. I was lucky enough to work as his research assistant while I was getting my master's."

"I'm surprised you didn't go on to the PhD program."

"Well...it was complicated. I needed to work, and he got a grant for the Institute. I was one of the first people he hired, in fact. And I'm the only one on the staff besides him who's been there since Day One."

Nina got the feeling there was more to the story than Ruby needing to work...just as there had been more to her story. But whatever it was, Ruby didn't want to share the details right now any more than she did. Maybe when they got to know each other a little better....

They chatted a little more about where they were from-one from Louisiana, and the other from Chattanooga. They were finished with their food when Nina observed her companion shiver. It was then she noticed that Ruby was drenched in sweat.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I get these...they're like hot flashes sometimes, but it's nothing. I guess I should get you home." Nina reached to see how much her half of the check was, but Ruby snatched it away. "Let me get this. I know what it's like to be a grad student. Besides, I asked you."

Nina thanked her host, but had to ask, "Does this mean I have to pay if I ask you to come to lunch with me?"

"No, lunch is always Dutch," Ruby clarified seriously, as if she were reciting one of their interviewing procedures.

A few minutes later, they were pulling up to Nina's building in Hartman Village.

"Great. There's the boyfriend's car. That means there's probably a very large dog on my bed." Nina reached over the console to grab her backpack from the back seat. "Thank you for rescuing me. You probably saved me from getting pneumonia."

"It was no problem. Do you want me to pick you up in the morning?"

Yes, or you could just take me home with you now. But it had stopped raining and they were calling for better weather tomorrow. "I think I'll probably walk...but thanks a lot for the offer."

"Okay." Ruby gave her a small smile. "If you change your mind, my number's in the book. I leave the house about seven."

Nina saw the smile, and felt her knees go a little wobbly as she got out of the Blazer. "Thanks, Ruby. Thanks for everything." *Oh, yeah, Ruby Collins. I've got a crush on you.*

"I tell you, that woman can be such a bitch!" Charlene was at it again in the ladies' room, grousing about their boss. What she didn't know was that Nina was in the stall on the end.

"What did she do?" Jessica asked.

"She monitored my whole interview, and then when I got done, she called me in and pointed out every teeny tiny little thing I didn't read exactly right."

"And why does that make her a bitch?" Nina challenged, exiting the stall and proceeding to the sink.

Charlene tried not to show her surprise. "You know how she is, Nina. She just wants everything to be perfect."

"That's the way research is supposed to be. It's her job to make sure it's done right."

The other interviewers were fascinated by this exchange. They looked to Charlene as a leader of sorts, but nobody here understood the data as well as Nina did, and for that, she was given a lot of respect, especially by the first years.

"Come on, Nina. I thought you were on our side."

"I only see one side, Charlene. It's right...or it's wrong." She turned to the others to make her point. "And if you want to learn how to do it right, listen to Ruby Collins."

Around the corner, the supervisor let the door close quietly. She would come back to the ladies' room a little later.

"I think we ought to build a composite variable for political interest. All these items are highly correlated, and that's a problem in the multivariate model." Nina was walking Dr. Grimes through some of her preliminary findings.

"And how would you do that?"

"I'd go for factor analysis first to see if there were some orthogonal concepts. If not, we should do a reliability scale." Nina laid out the statistical options that she thought would solve the problem, and they agreed to meet again when she got the results.

"You know, Nina, I really appreciate what you bring to this project. It's refreshing to have somebody on the staff that can cut through all of this and see the big picture. And I get the impression you really like this."

"I do, Art." It had taken her almost six months of reminders before she stopped calling him Dr. Grimes. "But the best part of being a statistician on this project is that I get to see the answers before anybody else."

The director smiled. "I remember what that was like. So have you given any thought to what you want to do when you finish school?"

Nina shrugged. "I guess I'll apply for a teaching job somewhere. What else do you do with a PhD in Poli Sci?"

Grimes chuckled. "Yeah, it's not like there's any money in it. But this kind of setting is an option for you, isn't it? I'd like to think you'd consider staying on...joining our permanent staff here at the Institute."

For a moment, Nina didn't know what to say. This was exactly the kind of job she wanted, but she always figured they'd just pick up another grad student when she left. "Sure, I'd consider it."

They both knew it wasn't exactly a job offer, but Nina got the distinct impression that if things worked out over the next year or so, something might materialize. This kind of job was way better than teaching Intro to Government in a third-tier state university.

As she picked up her set of printouts, they both caught sight of Ruby entering her office across the hall and closing the door. Nina felt her stomach drop when she looked back and caught Art's worried look. *Something is wrong with her.* "Art...Is Ruby okay?"

The man wasn't surprised by the question, but he wasn't in a position to answer it. That would be violating his old friend's confidence. But he liked Nina, and he sensed that the two women would make good friends if only Ruby would push aside her long-held reservations about getting close to people.

"I can't answer that, Nina. But maybe you should ask her." His tone was more like a request than a suggestion.

Nina nodded. "Okay, I will."

Nina rapped her knuckles gently on the door and held out a tray with two steaming cups. "Hey, I hope you're in the mood for hot chocolate."

Ruby was looking over several pamphlets on her desk and hurriedly scooped them into a folder. "Sure, come on in."

Nina stepped in and started to push the door closed with her elbow. "Do you mind?"

"No, not at all." Ruby had sort of been expecting this, figuring that Nina would want to talk with

her about the incident in the ladies' room with Charlene.

The statistician sat down and pulled her chair close to Ruby's desk. "I wanted to ask you...if everything was okay."

A look of panic crossed the supervisor's face. "What do you mean?"

"Look, I know we're not really close friends or anything, but I've just been a little worried about you lately." Nina knew from Ruby's expression that she was on track here, but she honestly didn't expect the stoic woman to be forthcoming. She was going to have to pry a little. "I've noticed that you look kind of tired...and you've lost some weight. Is something wrong, Ruby?"

The dark-haired woman's face took on a grim look as she nodded slowly. "I haven't really told anyone but Art...", she sighed, "but it looks like I'm going to have to have an operation."

Nina felt her stomach sink again, just as it had when she'd seen Art's troubled face. "An operation?"

Ruby opened the folder and pushed the pamphlets across the desk.

"Endocarditis? That has to do with the heart, right?"

"Yeah, it's a bacterial infection. Turns out I have something called a mitral valve prolapse. They're pretty common, and they don't usually cause any serious problems. But they make you susceptible to heart infections, especially if you're like me and don't know you have one. They think I picked this up when I got my teeth cleaned."

"This infection...is it serious?"

Ruby nodded. "The doctor says it's damaged one of my valves and they want to replace it. I just called a little while ago and they scheduled the surgery for Monday."

Monday! That was four days away. If it was something serious, Nina wanted them to do the surgery today. "Why didn't you tell somebody? You probably shouldn't even be here!"

"We were waiting to see if the antibiotics would clear it up. But they didn't...so then it took me a little while to make all the arrangements for...afterwards."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I live alone, so I needed to line up a place to go after I got out of the hospital, because they say I won't be able to stay by myself for the first couple of weeks. I found an opening at the Falls Center."

"That's a nursing home. For old people!"

"I know, but they have some beds for convalescence patients. That's what I'd be. If I don't go to a place like that, they'll make me stay in the hospital. I just can't go home without somebody there."

Nina didn't even stop to think about what she going to offer. "I'll come stay with you."

Ruby smiled warmly and shook her head. "I can't ask you to do that."

"You didn't. But you should have. I want to help, Ruby. You don't have to go through this by yourself."

"Nina, I don't think you know what you're getting into." And Ruby wasn't sure she wanted this new friend that close...especially given how she'd started to feel. "I think it...well, it might involve a lot."

"Like what? Is it something that needs a nurse, or can I do it?"

"No...it's just like cooking, and walking with me a little, and helping me...with some things." She looked at Nina with trepidation. In truth, the worst part of this whole experience was going to be having to go into the Falls Center. It really would be nice to be able to go home instead.

"I can do all of that stuff."

"But you have to work. In fact, you're probably going to have to take over part of my job for awhile. It looks like I'll be out of the office for about ten weeks."

"I can manage that. But this place can run without both of us for a few days, Ruby. I've got some vacation time coming...and I can bring stuff with me to work on." Nina's mind was made up.

"I can't let you use vacation days on this. Those are for you."

"Look, I was in an accident on my bike three years ago, and I had to spend a long time in the hospital. I was just like you...well, I had a roommate, but I couldn't ask her to help take care of me or anything, because we weren't really that close. But I know what it's like to feel like you're all by yourself." Nina reached across the table and laid her hand on Ruby's wrist. "And I don't want you to feel like that...because you're not by yourself."

"I thought cats were supposed to be aloof," Nina said as the black tabby circled twice and plopped down into her lap.

"I think Spooky knows you're all that stands between him and the kennel for the next few weeks."

The two women had cleaned up the kitchen and were settling in the den to relax before heading

on to bed. Tomorrow was the big day, and they had to be at the hospital at five a.m. They agreed it was best for Nina to spend the night.

Spooky purred contentedly as this new person scratched behind his ears.

"It's not too late to have him stay there. I know it's a long way out here when you're used to being right by the campus." Ruby's old farmhouse was twelve miles outside of town.

"I don't mind. Besides, it'll be nice to have a little space away from Candace and her boyfriend for awhile." Nina liked it here. The old house was full of polished wood, with soaring ceilings and elegant crown molding. It was obvious that Ruby had put a lot of work into restoring the 1940s home.

"You're going to have to do something about that situation. It's not fair to you to have visitors in your home all the time."

"Yeah, I know." Nina realized soon after she arrived at Ruby's that the woman didn't want to talk about her upcoming surgery. So she kept the small talk going until nine, when they both decided to go on to bed.

"Are you sure you have everything you need?" Ruby asked.

"Yes, thank you." They stood now at the top of the stairs, where the master suite was separated from the guest room by a narrow hallway.

"I know I said this already, Nina, but I really appreciate all that you're doing for me."

"You're right, you've said it already...enough." The blonde flashed a warm smile of reassurance and impulsively drew her new friend into a hug. "Get some sleep, okay?"

The taller woman tightened the embrace, holding on as if clutching a lifeline.

She's afraid, Nina realized. From the things she'd read over the last couple of days, she knew this surgery was no small matter; but Nina wasn't willing to consider the possibility of Ruby not being all right. Gently, she stroked the woman's back and started to sway, whispering over and over, "It's all going to be fine."

"Nina Brown?"

"Yes?" Nina shoved her papers into her backpack and jumped up. She'd been waiting for two hours since the surgery ended to see Ruby in recovery. Thankfully, everything had gone just as planned.

"You can come this way."

The nurse led her through a maze of hallways that passed ward after ward of electronic equipment so large it dwarfed the occupants of the beds. Finally, she entered the room where Ruby lay, a nurse at her bedside to monitor her vital signs. The pitiful sight almost moved her to tears.

"Five minutes. That's all for now, but you can come back in another hour."

Nina nodded and stepped closer to the bed, shaken by the enormity of what her friend had been through. Ruby's face was pale, a stark contrast to the orange antiseptic that painted her throat and the top of her chest. The massive bandage across her chest protruded from beneath a blood-stained cotton gown, and two tubes drained the excess fluids from her side and neck. Nina felt the tears starting to form when Ruby suddenly opened her eyes and blinked.

This was a time to show confidence and encouragement, so Nina checked her tears and reached out to take Ruby's hand in her own. "The doctor said everything went just right. He said you were going to be good as new."

Ruby tried to moisten her lips and speak. The look on her face was one of confusion. And it was clear that she was uncomfortable.

"Just take it easy, sweetheart. Try and get some rest so you'll feel better. It's all okay now, good as new."

The nurse came over to adjust the drip in the pain medication. "If you want to know any secrets, this is a good time to ask. She isn't going to remember any of this."

Nina smiled and leaned close, whispering softly, "I've got a big old crush on you, Ruby." Then she planted a gentle kiss on the woman's forehead and stepped back to watch the blue eyes flutter and finally close. As Nina turned to leave, she barely caught Ruby's mumbled reply.

"Me too."

Nina saw Ruby for five minutes every hour on Monday until they closed the ICU to visitors at six. The nurse felt certain that her patient would be moved to a private room sometime on Tuesday, and she advised the blonde woman to come back then.

And so it was that Nina was at the university's medical center on Tuesday morning at a quarter to seven, anxious to learn what kind of night it had been for Ruby. After a fruitless trip to the ICU, she located her friend in a quiet room in the cardiac care unit on the fourth floor. She was sleeping peacefully, the drainage tubes removed and the bulky bandage gone. A heart monitor above her bed beeped softly in a rhythm of 88 beats per minute.

The statistician was filled with relief to see her friend's progress. She sat quietly by the bed,

asking herself over and over if Ruby had any idea what she was saying the day before when she'd been so heavily medicated. Nina had let herself imagine all night that the words were true.

The blonde woman tiptoed into the room again just after five o'clock in the afternoon, not wanting to wake the patient if she was still resting. She smiled at once to see that Ruby was now awake and alert, and wearing a feeble smile of her own.

"Hey, there."

"Nina."

"How are you feeling?"

"Like a Christmas turkey."

"You poor thing!" Nina hurried to her side and picked up her hand without thought. "Has it been a hard day?"

"Not too bad," Ruby conceded. "I've probably worn the shine off this button they gave me to push for my pain medication."

"It must hurt a lot."

Ruby nodded. "Yeah, but I'm feeling a little better than I did this morning. They made me get up and sit in the chair...and I went to the bathroom by myself."

"That's great!"

The patient frowned. "I sound like a two-year-old. I should have said potty."

Nina chuckled and sat on the narrow edge of the bed. "You can say whatever you want, as long as it means you're getting better." She still held Ruby's hand in her own, gently stroking it, careful not to interfere with the IV drip. "Spooky slept with me last night."

"I'm not surprised."

Both women looked up when a knock sounded at the door. It was Dr. Winslow, Ruby's cardiologist, here to have a look at her progress and give her a report on what they expected.

Nina dropped her friend's hand and stood up. "I'll wait outside so you can have some privacy."

"It's okay...you can stay. I don't mind." Ruby introduced the two and explained that Nina would be staying with her once she was released.

"Then I'd like for you to listen to this also, if you don't mind." The doctor proceeded to outline his orders for aftercare, including the salt-free diet, mild exercise, and restrictions about driving and work. Nina felt her pulse pick up a little when he matter-of-factly told Ruby that she should refrain from sexual activity for at least the next three weeks, and to resume such activity only when it felt comfortable to do so.

Finally, he wanted to inspect her incision, and Nina thought again about taking her leave.

"There are a couple of things we always watch out for with these incisions." He directed his words to Nina, and it was clear that he expected her to come see what he was talking about. Practically speaking, it was a little late for her to run out of the room.

As she stepped closer the bed, he untied the corner of Ruby's gown and pulled it back to bare her chest. Nina sucked in a breath when she saw the horrific red scar with its metal staples, black stitches and clear plastic tape. It was incredible to think that these doctors had torn into her body this way.

"This should be washed every day with soap and warm water. You want to watch for seepage around these stitches, and look for any unusual redness or heat. This tape should fall off on its own after a week or so."

Nina nodded obediently, stealing a look at Ruby's face to see how she was handling all of this sudden attention to her naked chest. The woman wore a slight frown and her eyes were closed. Nina's heart went out to her, unsure if Ruby was embarrassed at being so exposed, or perhaps overwhelmed by the sight of the scar on her chest. Again, she reached down and took Ruby's hand, and was moved deeply when the woman squeezed it hard.

"If you need to rest, just stop. Don't push yourself."

Ruby intertwined one arm with Nina's and grasped the handrail with the other, willing her legs to carry her up the front steps to the porch. Collapsing into a chair, she struggled for breath. "Remind me again why I wanted a two-story house with such a high porch."

Nina hurriedly unlocked the front door and walked back to where her friend sat, worried that she would get a chill from being outside. "Can you make it in where it's warm?"

Ruby nodded and leaned forward, careful not to push up from the chair with her arms. She'd done that a couple of times at the hospital, and it sent a searing pain to her chest. The doctor said that the sternum was the last thing to heal after surgery like hers.

"Look who's home, Spooky."

The black cat stretched languidly on the rug at the bottom of the staircase and gave them both a dismissive look. He didn't seem to appreciate being disturbed in the middle of the day.

Nina stayed close to her charge until she got her settled in the den, stretched out on the couch with her feet up. Then she disappeared for a few minutes, returning with two cups of hot tea.

"Thank you, Nina. I really appreciate everything you've done. I know I've said that over and over, but I don't think you have any idea about how grateful I really am."

The blonde woman pulled a swivel chair close to the couch so they could share the coffee table. "I haven't minded at all. In fact...to be honest, I've enjoyed spending time with you over the last couple of weeks. I don't know why we weren't friends sooner."

Ruby stretched out her arm and Nina took her hand.

"I never have gotten really close to anybody at the office...except for Art. I hear the way they all talk about me, Nina...and make fun of me behind my back. They've done it for years."

The statistician was ashamed to hear that her friend knew about the ridicule, and wished she'd done more to stop it. "I think you're really good at your job, Ruby. It's not easy to ride herd on a project like this. Who else is going to pay attention to the details like you do?"

"Well, even I'll admit that I get carried away sometimes."

"There's nothing wrong with that. Anybody can get carried away when they get excited about something." Nina tried hard to think if she'd ever said or done anything that might have hurt Ruby's feelings. "You know, I've always had a lot of respect for you. I hope I never made you think otherwise."

"No, not you, Nina. I...started into the ladies' room once and heard you sticking up for me. I appreciated that...it meant a lot." Ruby pulled her arm back so she could tuck it under the blanket.

"Are you cold?"

"A little."

Nina pulled the afghan from the back of the couch and spread it on top of the blanket, tucking it snugly around Ruby's feet. "More?"

"No, that's good."

Nina had a stack of work to review in the other room, but she was glad to finally have Ruby home after six days, and she didn't want to leave her side. "Do you want to take a nap?"

Ruby chuckled. "I don't think any of my naps are conscious decisions these days. I just seem to go to sleep at the oddest times."

Like in the middle of a sentence. Nina was thinking of their conversation last night at the hospital, during which Ruby had dozed off during a story she was trying to tell. *Or now.*

The door to Ruby's bedroom was closed, less for privacy than to prevent Spooky from taking up his usual position in the big bed, where he sometimes walked across his mistress in the middle of the night just because he could. Nina knocked softly and pushed the door open. Knowing that the first night at home might be a rough one, she was especially attuned to noises from the master suite, and she'd heard Ruby tossing about. "Is everything okay?"

The woman responded with a snuffle.

"Ruby?" Nina hurriedly entered the room and turned on the bedside lamp. She was heartbroken to see that her friend had been crying. "What is it?"

"It hurts."

"Oh, you poor thing...I'm so sorry." She could see from the way Ruby was curled up that her chest was sore. "What time did you have your medicine?"

"When I went to bed...about nine, I guess."

Nina looked at the clock. "That was almost five hours ago. You can have more now." She got up to get the vial and a glass of water from the master bathroom. "Here you go."

Ruby sat up and took the pill while Nina fluffed her pillows. "I'm sorry I woke you up."

"It's okay. That's why I'm here, remember?"

Ruby handed her the empty glass and leaned back gingerly onto the pillows.

"You want to talk awhile, or are you ready to try to sleep?" She sat on the edge of the bed and laid her hand on Ruby's forearm. Over the last week, they'd both grown quite comfortable with these casual touches and caresses. Nina even made it a point to kiss her friend on the cheek or forehead every time she left.

"You must be exhausted. You're bringing home all that work...and taking care of me. And now I'm waking you up in the middle of the night." From her raspy voice, it was obvious that Ruby was a little short of breath.

"Shhh. Don't worry about me, Ruby. You just have to get well." Dr. Winslow had warned them that many patients experienced moodiness or depression, and they grew fixated on their illness. "I just know you're going to start feeling better soon."

Ruby grabbed her hand and squeezed it. "Will you sit with me till I go to sleep?"

"Of course I will."

The dark-haired woman pulled gently at the covers beside her. "Get under here if you're cold."

And that was how the women came to spend the night together in the same bed.

"You hungry?" Nina entered the master bedroom carrying a breakfast tray.

Ruby struggled to sit up. "This is a surprise. I thought that breakfast in bed stuff was over with when I left the hospital."

Nina set the tray on the dresser and opened the curtains to let in the sunshine. "I found your tray tables in the pantry. If you want to sit in the chair, I'll go get one."

"Okay, thank you." The dark-haired woman threw the covers back and swung her feet over the side into the waiting slippers. Her robe was draped over the wingback chair. By the time she emerged from the bathroom, Nina had her tray table set up in a sunny corner of the room.

"Did you remember to weigh?" It was important to monitor the threat of water retention.

"Yes...no change. You really don't have to wait on me like this. I should be able to make it downstairs for breakfast."

"I know. I just thought for the first couple of days that this would be easier...so you won't have to do the stairs so many times." Nina had brought her own cup of coffee, and she sat on the bed to keep Ruby company while she ate. "I thought you might want to take a shower before you went downstairs for the day."

"Good idea...but what I'd really like to do is wash my hair." She ran her fingers through the dark locks, grimacing at the texture. "It feels even worse than it looks."

"I think you're allowed to do that as long as you don't stand too long under the water."

Ruby shook her head. "I don't think I can hold my arms up that long."

"I...can help... if you want." It was pretty obvious that Ruby still had some issues with modesty, issues that might be more important than having her hair clean. "I have an idea."

Twenty minutes later, Ruby called out to her. "Okay, I'm ready."

Nina went into the master bath to find her friend sitting on the side of the claw-footed tub. She was wrapped in an oversized bath towel, and her long hair was streaming wet. Nina massaged a generous supply of shampoo into her scalp and scrubbed.

"I really like all the renovations you've done here. Somebody else might have ripped all this out and put in a glass block shower or something. But I think this old tub looks great."

"It's not the original. That one had a lot of chips and stains."

Nina kept up their casual conversation, hoping that Ruby would relax and not worry so much about giving up her privacy this way. She stepped out while the woman rinsed and returned for a second round. When they were done, Ruby sat in front of the vanity while Nina brushed and dried her hair.

Ruby slipped her glasses into place and checked her look. "Thank you. I can't tell you how much better I feel." Ruby parted the top of her robe and leaned closer to the mirror, trailing her fingertips lightly along the jagged crimson line. "It sure is ugly, isn't it?"

"No." Nina stood behind her, looking at the same image Ruby saw. Her eyes welled with tears as she reached around her friend and laid her fingers gently on top of Ruby's. "It saved your life...it isn't ugly."

"I'm sorry...I didn't mean..."

Nina reined in her emotions and locked eyes with Ruby in the mirror. "It's okay. It just hit me all of a sudden what a big deal this was. Who cares what it looks like?"

"You're right." Ruby stood up and turned to face her friend. "I'd give you a hug, but I'm afraid it would hurt too much."

Nina's serious face broke into a smile and she took both of Ruby's hands in her own, bringing them to her lips for a soft kiss across the knuckles. The dark-haired woman returned the gesture, and they both blew out a sigh, glad to have the uncharacteristically awkward moment behind them.

"I can't believe you hang up your jeans!" Nina deposited a pair of jeans and a pale blue sweater on the coffee table. Art Grimes and his wife were coming over and Ruby didn't want to have company while in her sweat pants. She knew they would be forgiving, but it just wasn't in her nature.

"I need a different top." She held up the one Nina had selected. "This one's too thin and too tight to wear without a bra."

That's a matter of opinion. "Oh, that's right." Nina took it and dashed back upstairs, exchanging it for something looser in dark blue. She hurried back down, knocking on the door of the powder room to pass through the new sweater. Next, she raced to straighten the den, folding blankets, stacking papers, and picking up cups and glasses. "They're here."

Nina met the guests at the door, intrigued at the look she got from Betty Grimes. It felt like an appraisal...and an approval, all within about ten seconds. She showed them into the living room, where Ruby was seated next to the fireplace, the gas logs flickering more for ambience than heat.

"I have to say, you look a lot better than you did the last time I saw you," Art said. He had visited the second day after her surgery, before she'd gotten her color back.

"I certainly feel better. It's really nice to be home." Ruby suddenly realized that Nina wasn't coming back to join them.

"It looks like Nina is taking good care of you," Betty said.

"Yes, she is." Ruby stood, forgetting that she wasn't supposed to push up with her arms. Her face contorted in pain, causing Art to jump up and catch her elbow. "I'm okay...I'm not supposed to use my arms like that. Will you excuse me for just a minute?"

Ruby walked through the kitchen to reach the den, where she found Nina hard at work on her laptop. "You didn't have to leave. You should come back in and sit with us."

Nina looked up from her work and smiled. "That's okay. They've come to visit with you, not me. Besides, I already had my daily dose of Art at that meeting this morning. He's the one that gave me all this work to do."

"But...I think...Betty wanted to talk with you, too." Ruby's look was pleading. "You can stay in here if you really want to, but I'd like it if you'd come back out with us."

Haven't you figured out by now that I'll do anything you ask? "Okay."

They returned together to the living room for the visit, which was, as promised, brief. As Nina showed them to the door, Betty turned and gave her a hearty hug. "Whatever you're doing for Ruby, you keep it up. It's nice to see her smiling at somebody again."

Nina tried not to show her surprise at the remark, but felt her face redden nonetheless. "I promise to take good care of her."

"I know you will."

"You had a big day."

Ruby was exhausted from all she'd done on her first full day at home, which included not only the shower and visitors, but several laps around the first floor of the old house, where all of the rooms were connected in a circuit. She saved her last burst of strength to climb the steps to her bedroom, collapsing in her wingback chair as soon as she reached her room. It was only eight

o'clock, but she'd given it everything she had.

Nina went to the dresser and pulled out a fresh pair of pajamas for her friend. These were light blue silk. "Did you remember to check your incision today?"

"No." Ruby was short of breath. "Just when we were at the mirror."

Nina could see that Ruby was spent, but she needed to make sure that the area was healing and free of problems. That's what she'd promised Dr. Winslow. "Do you want me to have a look at it?"

This time, exhaustion won out over modesty. "Sure." Gingerly, she pulled the sweater up over her head and dropped it onto her lap, leaning back in the chair so the lamp would shine on her naked chest. As usual, she closed her eyes.

"Here...slip this on." Nina held out the pajama top and Ruby gratefully slipped her arms through the sleeves, pulling the front together so that only the scar was visible.

"I don't know why I'm being so silly. It's not like you haven't already seen everything."

"It's okay. I remember what that feels like...being exposed. It's hard to have much privacy in the hospital." Nina peered closely at the scar as she talked, touching the skin gently to see if it was hot. "This looks good. Can I check the little one?"

Ruby pulled the side of her top up, lifting her breast to give Nina access to the scar resulting from the drainage tube.

"This one looks good, too." Without even thinking, she reached forward and started to button Ruby's top. The long hands wrapped around hers and she stopped, frozen in time as her eyes met Ruby's.

"I'm so glad you're here, Nina."

Nina saw something in Ruby's eyes that hinted at more than simple gratitude. For her, it had gone past just helping her friend through surgery. With every day that passed, she found herself drawn more to Ruby Collins.

"I'm glad I'm here too."

For the first time in the week she'd been home, Ruby awoke first. That wasn't surprising for a Saturday, given that Nina was burning the candle at both ends all week, and for once, hadn't set the alarm. In addition to taking care of her patient, the statistician kept up with her own work and picked up a good bit of the slack that resulted from Ruby being out.

Deciding to assert some independence, Ruby managed a shower on her own and got dressed. When she opened her door, she could see directly into the guest room, where Nina lay sound asleep on her back, the big black cat curled up in the crook of her arm. She tiptoed past the door and descended the stairs, determined to return some of the kindness that Nina had shown over the last few weeks.

The tray that Nina had been using to bring breakfast upstairs sat on the counter, but carrying something like that up the stairs really wasn't an option for Ruby. Instead, she set the table for two, sliced strawberries and bananas, and put on some water for oatmeal. Just for fun, she poured Nina a glass of the awful prune juice she'd been forced to drink every morning.

Ruby smiled when she heard the floor creak above her, but she didn't expect the clamoring of heavy footsteps on the stairs that followed. Nina rushed into the kitchen in her red flannel pajamas, barefooted and without her robe.

"Is everything okay?" Even as she asked, she eyed the breakfast table and her host, who was fully dressed and prepared for the day.

"Everything's fine." Ruby added the oats to the boiling water and covered the pot.

"I'm sorry I overslept. I forgot to set the alarm."

"It's all right. I made breakfast." With her back to Nina, she strained slightly to lift the coffeepot, pouring each of them a cup. "Have a seat."

"Hey, what's wrong with this picture?" Nina pulled out her shirt to look at her chest. "Just as I thought. You were the one that had surgery."

Ruby laughed and brought the cups to the table. "I'm a lot better, thanks to you. I just thought I'd let you sleep a little, and do something for you for a change."

Nina took her seat as Ruby served her breakfast. She was uncomfortable at this turning of the tables, realizing its implications. Ruby was doing more and more things on her own, which meant she wouldn't need help much longer.

"I can't believe you gave me prune juice."

"I wanted you to have the full experience." Ruby clinked her juice glass with Nina's and drained it, no longer making the awful face she had at first. "I think I'm starting to like this stuff."

Nina watched from the foyer as Ruby climbed the stairs for the third time in a row. She was glad to see her friend getting stronger, but it brought her back to what she'd been thinking about at breakfast.

"That's it. I'm going to lie down for awhile."

Nina applauded. "That was great! Do you need anything? A bottle of water or something?"

"Would you mind bringing up the newspaper?"

Nina went to the den to retrieve the paper, smiling as she noticed the date. When she returned, Ruby was lying on the bed, her glasses on the table beside her.

"Happy Valentine's Day."

"That's right...I forgot. All my days just seem to run together." Ruby shook her head and patted the spot beside her.

The statistician sat on the edge of the bed, a spot that had become familiar over the past couple of weeks. It was funny to Nina to realize how her feelings for Ruby had grown since that training day in early January. Whatever it was that triggered the attraction had given way to genuine affection. It was amazing that she'd never noticed before in all the months they'd worked together that Ruby Collins was a beautiful woman...not really in a classic sense, but her features came together in a very nice package.

"But that's about to change, Nina. I feel like I've...turned a corner in the last couple of days."

That was undeniable. "I can see you getting stronger every day...and your scar's a lot better. It won't be long before you can manage on your own."

Ruby reached out for her hand. "I bet you're looking forward to getting your life back."

Nina considered deflecting that question with a crack about how much she missed Candace's boyfriend and his Great Dane, but her thoughts today had left her in a more sober frame of mind. "I can't say that I am, Ruby." She took the hand and intertwined their fingers. "I've liked being here with you."

They gazed at one another without speaking, both understanding that something smoldered beneath their simple words. There was a palpable anticipation about where their conversation would go next.

"On the day of your surgery...I came to see you in the recovery room." Nina looked down at their joined hands. "The nurse said you wouldn't remember anything, so I leaned down and whispered something in your ear. Do you...remember any of what I said?"

Ruby shook her head, not taking her eyes from Nina's.

"I told you...that I had a big old crush on you." The blonde woman smiled softly, glad to have the admission off her chest. "I still do."

"So that was real...I thought I dreamed it."

"You remember it?"

"I guess I do." She squeezed Nina's hand and closed her eyes, her ambitious day taking its toll. "And I kind of remember answering it...but in case I didn't, I would have said I did too."

Wait! This is not a good time to fall asleep, Ruby. Ruby's face relaxed and the lines disappeared...until a small smile began to creep across her face. Nina leaned down to plant a kiss on her cheek; but Ruby turned, reaching up to caress the blonde woman's face as she guided their lips together. Their kiss was soft...and simple. And neither woman would forget that it happened.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Nina."

The End. And a Happy Valentine's Day to you too. kgmacgregor@yahoo.com.

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