

The party was in full swing as I bolted out the open doors of Knightley Hall. The night air was cool and quiet after the music and laughter inside. I wiped the tears off my face and walked over to stand under one of the ancient elm trees that dotted campus. I texted my best friend Leah. “Can you come over and pick me up at Knightley Hall right now? Rick and I had an argument and I don’t have a ride home.”

“Be there in ten minutes.” Leah’s good about answering right away.

Inside, the band was loud, the students were partying hard, the invitation had said dressy-cool, and people had on everything from jeans and tee shirts to tuxedos and off the shoulder gowns. And somewhere in the crowd my boyfriend Rick, looking great in jeans, an open collar tuxedo shirt, and a sports jacket, was ignoring me.

Twenty minutes ago when we’d walked in arm in arm, he was bubbling over with enthusiasm. His senior thesis film was among the finalists for first prize in the annual film school competition, and clips of the top three were going to shown on the big screen at the first band break. But things had gone very wrong...

Leah’s white Sentra pulled up and I got in.

“What happened?” Leah said as we drove off. “By the way, you look great except for that mascara running down your face.” I had on an expensive purple dress I’d bought for this party, black heels, and a shorter hairstyle that I thought looked pretty flashy.

“This has been the worst night of my life,” I said dabbing at my face with a tissue. “Rick’s film has been disqualified. They just told him tonight.”

“I thought it had already been selected as one of the top three.”

“It was. But now it’s been disqualified completely. And he’s blaming me.”

“What! Why?”

“Well, I suggested his topic be the genetic research I’m doing. He shot a bunch of footage in the University lab. It’s his senior thesis film, a two minute promo film for the University Chancellor’s Office. Films they can use to showcase University research...”

“I know all that.” Leah interrupted. “I want to know about you and Rick.”

“Well, we hadn’t been there fifteen minutes when somebody from vice chancellor DeSteele’s office took Rick aside. I wasn’t part of the conversation. But apparently they disqualified his film because it showed some of the equipment in my genetics lab.”

“Your lab, your gene splicers and such?”

I nodded.

“I helped Rick shoot some video last Wednesday night in my lab. I thought the lab would be empty, but there was some guy there, who left as soon as we showed up. I don’t know all the people who have projects in genetics and use the lab.”

“So what was the problem? That guy object to being in the film?”

“No, the guy was not in any of the film, but his equipment was. One of the gene sequencers in the lab. Apparently professor DeSteele herself is sponsoring that particular project. And she wants it confidential. Nobody notified me of this.” I started crying again.

Leah stopped to wait for a University Catering truck to back into the catering center through an intersection.

“Would you look at this idiot?” Leah snapped gesturing at the truck which now had one rear wheel up on the curb and was easing back toward the loading dock.

“Idiot!” Leah snorted. Now the light at Parker street had changed to red so we had to sit and wait some more.

“Anyway,” I continued. “Rick was in high spirits when we arrived, the happiest I’ve seen him in weeks...”

“That would be an improvement.” Leah interrupted. “He’s really seemed sour lately.” She cast a glance at me. “You do too. I think both of you are working too hard.”

“Anyway,” I continued. “After getting this bad news, Rick came back to me as angry as I’ve ever seen him. “I’m out of the competition” he said, and stomped off to the party bar. I haven’t seen him since.”

The Catering workers from the truck were now unloading and glass holders, probably from the party at Knightley Hall.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea!” I told Leah.

“Are you crazy?” Leah said, but she pulled over. Nobody was around the loading dock so I picked up a plastic tray with twenty-four empty champagne glasses in it ready

for the dishwasher. “Pop the trunk,” I told Leah. I stowed the tray in the trunk of her car, got in, and we continued toward my apartment.

Leah raised an eyebrow at me. “You go from crying over Rick to stealing glassware? Does the word schizophrenic mean anything to you? You want to explain what you just did?”

“I need random DNA samples for my research.”

“I thought you were using volunteers to provide you gum swabs.”

“We are, but it’s too slow. Students come in once in a while, and even though we give them five dollar for two minutes of their time, I’ve only got a handful of samples. I need a lot more. I can get samples from these used glasses. It’ll same me two weeks...”

“And cost you a hundred dollars for stolen glassware.”

“I’ll take the samples tomorrow and return the glasses tomorrow night.”

“Well, at least it took your mind off Rick. He’ll come back to you. He’s a nice guy.” Leah said in her mothering tone, then added briskly “At risk of reopening the wound, I wonder why Vice Chancellor DeSteele considers research in your lab so confidential that she’s disqualifying Ricks video. I thought you told me all the corporate-funded, confidential research, was being done at the Research Park up in Coralville.”

“That’s what I thought. But I guess there’s some pet project of DeSteele’s being run in the grad student lab. I know nothing about it.”

Leah stopped at the visitor drop-off at my apartment building.

I sat there a moment. “I’ve never seen Rick so angry. I thought he was going to punch somebody...me, maybe.”

“I think you two ought to cool off—you’re both wound way too tight.”

I nodded and was horrified to feel a tear leak out of my eye and fall on the back of my right hand.

“Sorry,” Leah said. “You and Rick will make up. Give it a little time...”

My phone pinged.

“It’s a text from Rick,” I told Leah. “He says he wants to talk.”

“Good,” Leah said, back in mothering mode. “Tell him you’ll meet him, now, someplace you both like. Tell him you’re sorry...”

“I’m not sorry! It’s not my fault...”

“You ARE sorry his film was disqualified, that’s all. You’re not saying you are responsible. But don’t argue with him about who’s right and who’s wrong. Talk about how to make things better. Besides, you need to learn what’s this deep dark secret in your own lab that you don’t know about.”

I thought about it.

“Answer Rick,” Leah said. “Don’t delay.”

I texted him that I’d meet him at the Airliner bar in fifteen minutes. That was our favorite hangout – should be a good place to put things right. I felt better already.

“OK mother Leah, I’ll take your advice,” I said cheerfully as I got out of the car. “Pop the trunk will you, so I can get that glassware.”

“Fix your makeup,” Leah called after me as I wrestled the tray of glasses out of the trunk. “You look like Vampirella.”

I went up to my apartment, changed, and was at the Airliner right on time. Rick was there.

But things did not go well at all.