

## Francesca, Chapter 2

Rick was sitting at our usual booth, two glass of the IPA we like already on the table. His glass was half empty, which increased my nervousness another notch. I was expecting him to be angry, although he didn't look angry. I'd been telling myself on the drive over here that Rick never really got angry. He was a calm, centered kind of guy. Except for that blowup at the party an hour ago. I slid into the booth, took a sip of beer to steady my nerves, and launched into the speech I'd rehearsed.

"I am sorry your film wasn't previewed at the party, Rick, I'm really sorry about that. I should have checked with somebody with the research director's office to make sure it was okay to do video in my lab. I didn't. It never occurred to me that anything we're doing should be kept secret." I paused, took another sip, and pressed ahead. "What can we do — what can I do to see that your film gets back in the competition?" I took his hand and held it. Then he smiled and flicked a glance at his phone lying on the table between us.

"It's alright, Fran. It's already fixed. I just got a text from De Steele's office, her admin assistant, saying the whole thing had been a mix-up. Her staff had assumed my video was shot at the Coralville lab. They apologized and said they'd notified the film judging committee that my film could be put back in the competition."

"That's great news," I breathed.

He pulled his hand slowly from under mine and sipped his beer. "Strange message. Seems the Strategic Directions Office, Dr. DeSteele herself, wants to meet with me. Tomorrow."

"Maybe they've already decided to select your film..."

He shook his head. "The announcement of winners won't be until Saturday. Big alumni meeting here on campus and they're going to unveil the winning films then."

I felt fully relaxed. The beer tasted great. "You got a text from Dr. DeSteele's admin assistant?" I said. "She's Director of Research, not the head of the Strategic Directions office."

Rick shrugged, "So what?"

"Nothing," I said. Still, there was something strange about the Director of Research herself, being touchy about filming in the gene-splicing lab, then suddenly reversing herself. Genetic medicine was one of the University's primary

initiatives. I would have thought she, and Strategic Planning, would have been encouraging film students to film in the lab.

Rick was staring at his beer. His smile had disappeared. "Yeah, my promo video may get selected, but it's my thesis video that counts." He looked at me with a look I couldn't read. Was he blaming me for convincing him to take the time to enter the promo video competition? He'd originally said he was too busy, but Leah and I had convinced him to take time to make the promo video. He really is a talented cinematographer.

"I'm way behind schedule on my thesis film," he held up his phone. "And now, not only do I have to take the time to go see DeSteele tomorrow, but just a few minutes ago I got a text from Sherry Alton, my cameraman. She's quitting my project. Says she has to concentrate on her finals."

"You've still got three weeks, right?"

"Yeah, three weeks." Sarcasm was rare from Rick, but tonight, it was there. The PA was softly playing some old Johnny Rivers songs that under other circumstances would have brought a smile to both our faces. I still hoped Rick would talk out his anger tonight and we could get back on track with each other. My thesis project was behind schedule, too. We needed each other to be supportive, not use up time neither one of us had blaming each other.

"How can I help?" I said.

"You can't." he said bluntly. "Unless you can run a Arri video camera. I've got no cameraman and 10 percent of my principle photography still to be done, not to mention any reshooting we need to do. I told you last week that my editor said she was withdrawing from the project."

"Yes," I said as sympathetically as I could. I knew Cynthia, Rick's film editor, had quit, Rick hadn't told me any reason for her 'withdrawal' from his project, but Leah told me she'd heard through a mutual friend that Cynthia had quit because Rick was becoming so authoritarian about his film that she didn't want to work with him.

I was silent. Rick quit squinting at his beer, took a solid slug of it and breathed a great sigh. "Guess I'll have to be cameraman and editor and director." After a moment's silence, he looked around the empty bar, frowned, sighed another sigh and started turning his glass in quarter circles. "...I need to talk about something with you, Fran."

My blood froze; I tried to keep my expression neutral.

He paused, not meeting my eye, then said, "I think... I know... we're both under schedule pressure. I think that pressure is making us both feel bad. I know I haven't felt well the last few weeks. It's just the stress of getting my film shot and cut together. I know I can do it...but, I can't deal with distractions right now. The rough cut is due in three weeks and I'm just barely going to make it." He glared at his beer. "And it doesn't help to have people quitting my team at the last minute." He shook his head and tried to smile at me. "Anyway..." He stopped talking, looked at his glass, at the nearly empty bar, the bartender, everywhere but at me.

I found I was holding my breath and quietly let it out.

He drank some beer and continued. "What I'm saying, Fran, is that I think, just for a while, we shouldn't see each other." He took my hand. "It's not about you, it's about me. I've got to get my film done even if I have to work 24/7...I've got to get it done."

*And once it's done, you'll graduate, I said to myself. And then what happens to us? You're not going to hang around Iowa City a year waiting for me to graduate. You're going to want to go someplace where you can get involved with the Indie film scene...while I'm still back here slogging away in the lab. Might as well just say goodbye now.*

I squeezed his hand and nodded okay, hoping he didn't see the tears in my eyes. "I understand," I managed to say.

"Sorry," he said. He stood and pulled cash out of his jeans and laid it on the table. "We'll get past this, Fran. I know we will, but right now, I've got to focus..."

"It's okay, Rick," I told him. He stood and tossed some cash on the table. I linked arms with him as we strolled out into a mild summer night. "I know we're both under pressure, but maybe, if you truly don't feel well, you're coming down with something," I said. "You should stop by the campus clinic."

He shook his head. "I'll be alright." He smiled his winning smile at me as he started for his car, but somehow it didn't seem quite right, so I stayed in step with him. But I couldn't think of anything more to say.

When we got to his car, he gave me a quick kiss on the cheek, then got in and drove away, leaving me standing alone in the soft night breeze.

A tear trickled down my right cheek and I wiped it off with the back of my hand. If I were in his place, I'd say the same thing. God knows it will take me at least two weeks of solid work to get my thesis project back on schedule.

I walked to my car and got in, telling myself: *once he graduates, and the pressure is off, we'll figure out what comes next. It will all work out.*

I tried to smile at myself in the rearview mirror, but my smile slid away and I sat there crying.