

I dried my tears.

Sitting in my car moping over Rick was not helping me get my thesis back on schedule. I was still upset over today's events, and I knew I couldn't sleep, so I drove to my lab in the Hathman building.

That's what I always do in times of emotional stress — bury myself in work.

It was ten-thirty at night. I often worked late hours, as did most of other twenty researchers in the building.

The front entrance of the Hathman was well lighted, though I've never trusted the hedges the University insists on having on either side of the entrance. I hurriedly swiped my card through the reader, pushed inside and made sure the door was firmly locked behind me. The indicator lights by the door showed three of us in the building.

Motion sensors turned on the lights in the hallways and stairs as I went downstairs and swiped my card in the reader at my lab door. Inside, I heaved a sigh, sat down at my desk and got the software running.

An hour later I had all 200 of my samples sequenced and my computer software had done a basic statistical analysis. The curve-fit was good, but not great. I needed it smooth enough to indicate the consistency of data, but still jagged enough to identify the locations for potential gene splices. The data tabulation showed two out-of-range data points. Probably contaminated samples. I instructed the software to eliminate them from the data set and the curve smoothed nicely. I had an accurate map of the genomic section I needed.

Now I increased the scale on the vertical axis to make all the various splice points apparent. The spikes were there, but there was still too much scatter to clearly define the exact splice point. To get those spike points clearly defined would require more samples.

I slumped in my chair. I had already spent three months persuading student volunteers to drop by and let me take a gum swab. It was painless and took about one minute, but nobody wanted to do it. Two months ago I'd taken five hundred dollars out of the fast-dwindling miscellaneous expenses account in my grant funding and offered student volunteers \$5 each for a sample. That had gotten me my second hundred samples. But I figured I needed at least two hundred fifty samples to be able to make the point density around the spike points increase, and then I'd know exactly where the enzyme needed to clip the DNA strand.

The tray of wineglasses would give me twenty-four more data points, but it was now midnight and I was too exhausted to do the tedious work of sample prep and analysis.

Instead I wrote out a paragraph describing the data analysis I had done tonight, including eliminating the two outlier data points, inserted an Excel curve in the document, and saved it in the lab notes file on my computer.

I stood up and stretched. Time to go home and get a good night's sleep, then bring in the glasses and get back to it fresh, in the morning. In the last hour and a half I hadn't thought about Rick once. That, at least was good.

It was then that the soft sounds I'd been hearing for a few moments registered. Footsteps out in the hallway, the sensors had switched the lights on. The sounds were not those of someone purposefully walking by, this was more like someone furtively creeping along. The red indicator light on the lab door was red, locked. Only someone with a key to this lab could get in, and as far as I knew only my lab-mate, Susan and I had the coded ID cards. I turned my desk light off and stood listening.

The sounds stopped.

Was that pale splotch of light in the opaque glass sidebar someone in a white lab coat standing outside my door? I started to call out "Susan?" but didn't.

After a moment, the white splotch faded and I heard footsteps shuffle down the hall toward the exit. Should I open the door and see who it was? No, better to let them get well away from my door before I went out. It was probably just another researcher walking down the hall.

The hall lights went out. The motion sensor could detect no one in the hallway, so whoever it was had gone up the stairs. I eased my door open. The hallway was empty, lit only by the red emergency exit light by the stairs. I went out into the hall, and I hurried up the stairs to the main entrance to the building. Nobody there either.

The lock indicator panel beside the front door showed only one person in the building now, me. Nobody in sight outside; only my car in the parking lot. But who knows who might be hiding in the hedges, and my car was a hundred feet away.

I stood inside the door and texted Leah, *Are you sleeping or are you up and about?*

She texted me back immediately. *I just finished drafting a paper that's due next Monday and I'm feeling pretty good. Let's go get a glass of wine, or is it past your bedtime?*

I told her: *It is past my bedtime, but let's do drink a glass of wine. I'm just leaving the lab. I'll meet you at the Airliner in fifteen minutes.*

This way, if somebody grabbed me when I crossed to my car, at least Leah would know where to come looking for me.

I took a deep breath, sprinted to my car, and drove straight to the Airliner. The yellow lights in the booths and the smell of beer made me feel safer already.

Leah was in the last booth on the right. "You look distraught," Leah said. "Two Alexander Valley Cabernet's please," she told the waiter.

"Just jittery," I said as I slid into the booth. "My lab is a pretty spooky building at night."

Our wines came. This is another feature I like about the Airliner, the service is lightning fast. Leah and I toasted each other and sipped.

Before she could say anything, I told her. "Don't counsel me about Rick, okay? We had a talk, we're working things out. He's not mad about his film; in fact that was all a misunderstanding. But we've agreed not to see each other until he gets his thesis film finished." I flashed her the best smile I could muster. "I'm still his date at his film's wrap-party. Why are you rolling your eyes?"

"I'm your best friend so I can say this without you taking it the wrong way."

"I don't like it already," I said.

"Maybe you two should stop seeing each other right now. He's going to graduate in three weeks. He'll doubtless be offered a job and it won't be here in Iowa City. Trying to maintain your relationship after he graduates...I just don't think it could work."

"Okay, Okay, that's logical," I said, my anger rising. "But I'm going to wait a while to make that decision. I said I don't want to talk about it, okay?" I just realized why my stomach was growling—I hadn't eaten anything since lunch. "I'm starving. I'm going to order a salad."

Leah nodded, "Good. You eat while I read you some of my paper, which I just happen to have right here on my phone."

I ordered a Cajun chicken salad with blue cheese dressing on the side.

"This wine tastes great," I told Leah. She signaled for two more glasses, which arrived at the same time as my salad. I dug in.

Leah pulled her paper up on her phone. "OK, while you stuff your face, I'll educate you on an interesting facet of fourteenth century Europe..."

"That assumes there is an interesting facet," I mumbled around a mouthful of lettuce.

"Shut up and listen...the black death that decimated Europe in the fourteenth century, spread far faster than could reasonably be expected to happen if the disease vector was exclusively flea-ridden black rats..."

"This is not great dinnertime conversation."

Leah continued. "...which was the accepted theory, although the rat vector was at odds with the extremely fast spread of the disease. Kantor hypothesized that the black death was actually two diseases. One was plague, caused by infected fleas on rats, the other was anthrax, transmitted from infected cattle to humans." Leah smiled at this grim bit of history. "It all makes sense, cattle carrying anthrax could quickly spread the infection through every cattle market on the continent and across the channel to England."

She read on for a few more moments, about how cattle anthrax worked in tandem with plague bacteria. After finishing my salad I was suddenly overcome with fatigue. I couldn't concentrate on what Leah was saying. I found myself staring at her hand on her wineglass, which she was absentmindedly turning in small circles as she read from her phone. I remembered Rick's strong, beautiful hands turning his beer glass in quarter circles and I began to tear up.

Leah saw the tears in my eyes. "I didn't realize how affected you would be by my descriptions of the black death." She put her phone down. The blue light on her face disappeared.

I wiped my eyes with my napkin. "I'm just tired."

"You are way past being tired, Fran, you're exhausted. Go home. Get some sleep."

I nodded, "You're right..."

"And text me when you get home so I'll know the bogeyman didn't get you."

When I got to my apartment I dutifully texted her, then slipped off my clothes and was asleep the moment I laid down. But my dreams were not pleasant: dark figures creeping by my door, data sets that I couldn't interpret, and a nightmare in which my enzyme treatment was being used on people but instead of curing them, they lay dying horribly deformed by symptoms of the black death.

That was the worst one.