

Sick with Submission



*This is a work of fiction intended for adult audiences only. All characters depicted in sexual situations are **18 years of age or older**. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. The events, locations, and individuals portrayed in this book are products of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously. This material contains explicit content and is not intended for readers under the age of 18. Reader discretion is advised.*

Chapter One

Rats and Results

“I’ve got to get up early,” Jennifer said, setting down her fork. “I’m sorry I have to cut tonight short.”

Frank looked across the table at her, disappointment flickering in his eyes. He had been looking forward to a quiet evening—just the two of them, a good meal, maybe a glass of wine afterward. But the third plate sat untouched in front of the empty chair, and the echo of Darren’s footsteps still lingered somewhere in the house.

“Already?” Frank asked. “How ‘bout another hour?” He gave her his best pouting face.

Jennifer shook her head, already gathering her composure. “I can’t. The sample comes in early, and I have to be there to set everything up.”

Frank exhaled, “You have an assistant. What’s her name? Annie? She’s capable, isn’t she?”

“She is,” Jennifer said. “But this is too important. Sorry. You should know how this works. You’re the one who married a scientist.”

Frank smirked and shrugged. “To be honest. I thought you’d grow out of this whole, super smart, successful, bad ass scientist thing.”

Despite herself, Jennifer laughed, and for a moment, the dining room felt warm again. That was what she loved about Frank—he could find humor even when things weren’t going his way.

The laughter faded, and Jennifer’s gaze drifted toward the hallway. She lowered her voice. “Besides, I think I’ve had about enough of...” She gestured vaguely toward the doorway.

Frank didn’t need her to finish. He knew who she was referring to. “He’s been my friend for years, Jen. He’s going through a rough patch.”

“I know,” she said softly. “I know you’ve known him forever. I’m not asking you to stop being his friend.” She paused, choosing her words. “But he’s a lot to tolerate. He stays too long, pushes himself into our evenings, and some of the jokes he makes are... offensive and gross.”

Frank rubbed the back of his neck. “He doesn’t mean anything by it.”

“Sometimes I catch him staring,” Jennifer said, her tone careful. “Not just looking. Staring.”

Frank tensed, but he held his ground. “That’s just Darren. He looks at every woman like that.”

“That doesn’t excuse it.”

“He’s harmless, Jen. Crude sure, but harmless.”

Jennifer sighed. She didn’t want this to become a fight again. Not tonight. “I know. I know he probably doesn’t mean anything by it. It’s just exhausting.”

Frank reached across the table and touched her hand. “I hear you.”

Before either of them could say more, the sound of heavy footsteps echoed from the hallway. Darren walked in. Jen and Frank straightened up and looked up at him, silent and blinking.”

Darren stood in the doorway, looking back and forth. “Are you two talking about me?”

Jennifer and Frank answered at the same time. “No.” “Not exactly.”

Darren’s grin widened as he dropped into the empty chair and began reaching for the unfinished burger on his plate. “Uh-huh. Sure.” He took a bite, chewing with exaggerated satisfaction. “If you all want to do a three way, just ask.”

Jennifer rolled her eyes and quickly stood up, picking up her plate.

“What? What did I say?” Darren said with a mouth full of food.

“Nothing, Darren. I’ve got a work thing tomorrow morning, so I’m going to call it early.”

“Come on, Doc,” Darren said, waving a hand. “The night’s still young. You work too much. That’s your problem.”

“Sorry. You two have fun tonight. Just keep it down.” Jennifer leaned down and pressed a kiss to Frank’s forehead.

She straightened just as young woman appeared in the doorway.

“What is it Becky?”

Becky was Jennifer and Frank’s only child. She was 19 and very beautiful. A little shorter than her mother, with an athletic build. “Mom, where’s my acceptance letter? I want to show Kelly.”

“It’s in my office, honey. Go ahead and grab it.”

“Okay.” Becky turned, quick and dismissive.

Darren called after her. “Hey, Becky!”

She glanced back, rolled her eyes, and kept walking.

“Congratulations on getting into Harvard!” he shouted, still grinning.

Becky didn’t respond.

After she was gone Darren turned back to Jennifer and Frank with a look of mock pride.

“She loves me.”

Jennifer didn’t miss a beat. “No, she doesn’t.”

Frank snorted. Even Darren laughed, though his hand moved to his chest as if wounded.

“Ouch.”

“Good night.”

Jennifer shook her head and walked away, leaving Frank and Darren behind. As she moved down the hall, the voices resumed—Darren’s loud, Frank’s laughter blending in. She entered the bedroom, closed the door partway, and began her nightly routine: undressing, setting her ring on the dresser, washing her face at the sink. The alarm was already set. She checked her bag for the morning. Through the walls, laughter swelled, then faded, then swelled again.

She paused once when a clatter and a shout came from the dining room, considering whether to go back out. She decided against it.

As she settled into bed, her mind drifted ahead—to the morning, the lab, and the sample waiting for her.

* * *

The fluorescent lights hummed overhead, a sound Jennifer had long ago stopped noticing. Sublevel 3 felt different before the work began—quieter.

She ran her gloved fingers along the edge of the stainless steel table, checking for residue. Nothing. The surface gleamed under the harsh white light, sterile and waiting. She’d already switched on the microscope, its digital display flickering to life with a soft blue

glow. Beside it, the centrifuge sat ready, and the incubator had been holding steady at thirty-seven degrees since she'd checked it twenty minutes ago.

The rats stirred in their cages along the far wall.

Jennifer glanced toward them as she laid out the last of the sterile pipettes. The larger enclosure held five of them—brown, twitching, climbing over one another in that restless way healthy specimens always did. In the individual cages along the shelf, three more sat in isolation, their pink noses pressing through the bars. Controls for later. She'd labeled everything twice.

She pulled her ponytail tighter and checked the clock. 7:42. Annie was cutting it close.

The laboratory door hissed open behind her.

"There you are," Jennifer said, not turning around.

"Sorry." Annie's voice came breathless, the transport box clutched against her chest like something precious. "I got a little lost. These corridors are crazy."

Jennifer raised an eyebrow and finally looked at her. Annie's cheeks were flushed, a strand of blonde hair escaping from beneath her protective cap. The box looked heavy, its biohazard symbol bright orange against gray metal.

"You've worked here for five months," Jennifer said. "You still don't know your way around?"

"I do." Annie set the box down on the main table with exaggerated care. Her hands lingered on its edges. "I'm just a little nervous today. You know." She gestured toward the box. "With this."

Jennifer's gaze dropped to the container. Locked. Sealed. Tagged with identification numbers that matched the paperwork she'd received yesterday evening. A corporate liaison had described it as "anomalous biological material," as if that phrase meant anything at all.

"Right," Jennifer said. "That's fine. Let's get going."

She crossed to the table and pulled the accompanying forms from a drawer. Intake protocol was tedious, but she'd seen what happened when labs got sloppy. A cracked vial in Cleveland. A mislabeled specimen in Atlanta. Entire teams quarantined because someone decided paperwork wasn't important.

Not in her lab.

Jennifer checked the identification numbers first, reading each one aloud while Annie verified against the digital manifest on her tablet. The serial codes matched. She traced her finger down the chain-of-custody log—three separate facilities, four authorized handlers, every transfer signed and countersigned.

“No reported damage,” she murmured, circling the statement on the paper form. “No breach.”

“Everything checks out,” Annie said.

Jennifer signed the receipt and slid it aside. Then she leaned over the box’s lid, where a small keypad glowed with red numbers. Her fingers moved automatically, entering the code she’d memorized the night before. The lock disengaged with a soft click.

Inside, six Petri dishes sat in individual foam compartments. Each one was labeled in precise block letters: SPECIMEN 7-CH, followed by a date and a dilution factor. The agar inside looked faintly pink, undisturbed.

Jennifer removed the first dish with the care of someone handling something that could, theoretically, end her career. Or worse. She’d worked with dangerous pathogens before—everyone at Biotech had, that was the point.

“I just wanted to say,” Annie began, “it’s been wonderful working with you these last few months.”

Jennifer didn’t look up. She was positioning the dish on the microscope’s platform, adjusting the focus with small, precise movements. “Mm-hmm.”

“This project especially. I’m really excited.”

The cells came into view. Jennifer typed a quick note on her keyboard, marking the time and magnification level. The cultured rat cells looked healthy—uniform membranes, nuclei clearly visible. She’d expose them to the specimen soon, but first she wanted a baseline. Something to compare against once the organism had done whatever it was going to do.

“I’ve read everything you’ve done,” Annie continued. Her voice had taken on a quality Jennifer recognized—the slightly rushed tone of someone who’d rehearsed this. “All of your published work. The paper you wrote on retroviral gene therapy, the one about cross-species transmission vectors. I just feel like I was so lucky when they assigned me to you.”

Jennifer’s hand paused over the focus knob.

She looked up.

Annie stood near the table, her tablet forgotten against her thigh. Her eyes were fixed on Jennifer with an intensity that didn't quite match the laboratory setting. Admiration, certainly. But something else flickered beneath it, something Jennifer couldn't immediately name.

She studied Annie for a moment. The younger woman didn't look away.

Was that intentional? Jennifer couldn't tell. The comment could have been professional enthusiasm, the kind of hero-worship that graduate students sometimes developed for their supervisors. She'd seen it before. But the way Annie spoke made Jennifer wonder.

She decided not to pursue it. Not here. Not now.

"Okay," Jennifer said. "Well, thank you, Annie. But can we get to work?"

Annie's expression flickered. Embarrassment. "Oh, of course. Yes. Here, let me—"

She grabbed a clipboard and retreated toward the animal cages, her heels clicking too fast on the concrete floor. Jennifer watched her go for a moment, then turned back to the microscope.

Jennifer guided the first sample onto a prepared slide, watching through the eyepiece as the organism made contact with the rat cells. What she saw was...

"A virus of some sort," she said aloud. "Although not quite."

Annie was at her side now, pen hovering over a log sheet. "What do you mean?"

"If I have to classify it, yes, it's some form of virus. But it has some very peculiar attributes."

Under magnification, the organism behaved like nothing Jennifer had studied before. Most viruses were blunt instruments—they invaded, they replicated, they destroyed. But this one moved with an almost deliberate precision, attaching to the cell membrane and then... slipping inside, like a key turning in a lock.

"Most viruses interfere with a cell's DNA in one way or another," Jennifer said, her voice dropping to the quieter register she used when she was thinking. "But this is different. It's making substantial changes almost immediately."

She leaned back and gestured toward the microscope. "Look there. See how easily it latches onto the rat cell?"

Annie bent forward. The silence stretched for several seconds.

"Interesting," Annie murmured.

“Interesting doesn’t cover it. Watch what happens after attachment. The cell doesn’t fight back. No immune response, no inflammation markers. It just... accepts it.”

Jennifer stood and began pacing the length of the table. The rats rustled in their cages. The centrifuge hummed. She ran through everything she knew about viral mechanics, comparing it against what she’d just witnessed, and found herself coming up short.

“Where was this discovered?” she asked.

Annie crossed to the filing cabinet and pulled a clipboard from the second shelf. She flipped through several pages before finding the right report. “Chile. South America. A corporate research station in the jungle—remote, just a handful of scientists. They were studying ferns. Insect life. Nothing viral.”

“And they just happened to find this?”

“It was recovered accidentally, according to the notes. Someone noticed odd behavior in a group of captured rodents near the station and took samples. No human infections reported.”

Jennifer stopped pacing. “Well, they found something quite unique.” She looked at the Petri dishes, still sealed in their foam compartments. “We have a lot of work ahead of us.”

“Really?” Annie’s voice pitched upward. “Do we have something new?”

“I can’t be certain yet. But—” Jennifer hesitated. Scientists weren’t supposed to get excited. Excitement led to assumptions, and assumptions led to mistakes. “I’d say it’s very likely we’re looking at something unusual. And yes, maybe something entirely undiscovered.”

Annie squealed. The sound was so unexpected, so out of place in the sterile laboratory, that Jennifer flinched. Annie clapped her hands together, the clipboard banging against her thigh.

“Hold on,” Jennifer said, raising a hand. “We still have a lot of work to do. It could turn out to be nothing.”

“It doesn’t look like nothing.”

“Early results can be misleading. Scientists see what they want to see when they get excited too quickly.” Jennifer heard her own voice turning stern, the tone she used when her daughter Becky was about to make a rash decision. “We need to repeat the cellular tests. Determine exactly how the organism changes host DNA. Confirm that the results remain consistent across multiple trials.”

Annie nodded, though her smile hadn't faded.

"Then," Jennifer continued, "assuming everything holds up, we move on to controlled animal testing." She gestured toward the cages. The rats in the larger enclosure had stopped climbing over one another. One of them sat very still, its dark eyes reflecting the fluorescent lights. "Our little specimens over there."

Annie followed Jennifer's gaze. Her nervousness had been replaced by something sharper now—eagerness, bright and focused. "Ooh. I can't wait."

Jennifer glanced at her. The enthusiasm in Annie's voice had a strange quality, something that didn't quite fit the professional setting. But Jennifer let it pass. The girl was young. Eager. That was all.

Probably.

Annie turned back from the cages, her clipboard gripped in both hands.

"Well," she said, "what's next?"

Jennifer looked at the microscope, at the Petri dishes, at the rats waiting in their cages. Somewhere in the building above them, corporate supervisors were probably already asking for preliminary reports. Somewhere even farther away, in a jungle research station in Chile, a team of botanists had stumbled onto something they didn't understand and shipped it north.

And now it was here. In her laboratory. Under her microscope.

"Next," Jennifer said, "we do it all again. And then we find out what this thing really does."

* * *

The days blurred into a rhythm of repetition.

Jennifer and Annie worked through the battery of preliminary tests with a methodical patience that felt, at times, almost absurd. They exposed the organism to heat gradients ranging from minus twenty to sixty degrees Celsius. They subjected it to pressure variations, ultraviolet radiation, sonic vibration. They altered pH levels, introduced competing microbial life, starved samples of oxygen.

The virus endured.

Not simply survived—endured, as though none of it mattered. Under the microscope, its behavior remained eerily consistent. The same deliberate attachment. The same seamless integration with host cells. The same absence of immune response. Jennifer filled three notebooks with observations that amounted to a single frustrating conclusion: the organism was unusually stable across an unusually broad range of conditions.

“Nothing fazes this thing,” Annie said on Thursday afternoon, her forehead pressed against the eyepiece. “It’s like it doesn’t care what we throw at it.”

“It’s not a question of caring,” Jennifer replied. “It’s a question of adaptation speed.”

That was the one finding that refused to sit quietly in her mind. Whenever conditions shifted enough to produce a measurable change in the organism’s activity, the response came almost instantly. Not gradually. Not after a lag period. The virus corrected for environmental alterations as though it had anticipated them.

Jennifer refused to use the word *intelligent*. She was a scientist, not a science fiction writer. But late at night, alone in her office with the day’s data spread across her desk, the thought crept in anyway. Not intelligent, exactly. Something else. Something she didn’t yet have language for.

By Friday evening, standing beside the rat enclosures with a clipboard in her hand, she made the decision.

“We start animal trials tomorrow.”

Annie looked up from her workstation, eyes bright. “Really?”

“We’ve exhausted the preliminary phase. Whatever this organism is, it’s not going to reveal itself through stress tests.” Jennifer tapped her pen against the clipboard. “We need to see how it behaves inside a living system.”

Annie’s enthusiasm was immediate—too immediate, maybe. But Jennifer didn’t care. She’d been running on five hours of sleep for most of the week. Frank had noticed. Becky had noticed. Even Darren, during his latest uninvited visit, had made some comment about her looking “wound tight.” She’d ignored him, as she always did.

* * *

Now it was Saturday morning, and the house was quiet.

Jennifer dressed in the gray light of early dawn, pulling on slacks and a blouse before retrieving her lab coat from the closet. Frank stirred briefly when she clicked the bedside lamp on, mumbled something about coffee, and rolled back toward the wall. She didn't wake him. The conversation they needed to have—about Darren, about boundaries, about the way Frank kept choosing loyalty to his friend over loyalty to his family—could wait. It had been waiting for years. Another few hours wouldn't matter.

She gathered her keys and her bag, pausing at the hallway mirror to pull her hair into its usual tight ponytail. The woman in the reflection looked tired. Focused. A little older than she remembered.

Becky's bedroom door was closed. Jennifer considered knocking, decided against it, it was too early, and so she headed downstairs.

The kitchen would be empty. The house would be still. She'd grab a granola bar, review her notes one last time, and leave before anyone else woke up. That was the plan as she rounded the corner into the kitchen.

What she saw stopped her mid-step.

Darren stood near the counter, his body angled toward Becky, one arm draped across her daughter's shoulders like he had every right to be there. Becky's posture was rigid, her arms crossed tight against her chest. Her face wore the frozen half-smile of someone enduring an interaction they desperately wanted to escape.

"Come on," Darren was saying, his voice pitched low in what he apparently believed was a masculine register. "You should let loose a little. You're beautiful. You know that, right?"

Becky's mouth opened, closed. Her eyes darted toward the doorway where Jennifer stood, but Darren didn't notice.

"When you get to Harvard, people are going to be looking at you," he continued, squeezing her shoulder. "I'm just saying, you should have the full college experience. Don't make it all books and studying. Trust me. I'm only trying to help you out."

Jennifer's bag hit the floor. The sound was loud in the quiet kitchen—keys jangling, the thump of leather against tile—and Darren's head swiveled toward her. His arm stayed where it was.

"Hey," Jennifer said. Her voice came out low and hard. "What are you doing?"

Becky slipped out from under Darren's arm like a fish escaping a net. She moved toward the far side of the kitchen, putting the island between herself and Darren, her cheeks flushed.

Darren straightened. His hands came up, palms out, the universal gesture of a man pretending to be misunderstood. “What? What did I do?”

“Don’t talk to her like that.” Jennifer crossed the kitchen in three strides and positioned herself between Darren and her daughter. Close enough to make the boundary physical.

“Like what? We were just talking.” Darren’s grin flickered, uncertain. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“You’re a friend of this family.” Jennifer’s voice shook, not with fear but with the effort of containing something sharper. “You’re too old to talk to her that way.”

The grin faded. Something else surfaced in Darren’s expression—a flash of resentment, quickly masked. “She’s nineteen.”

The words hung in the air.

Jennifer’s hand connected with his cheek before she consciously decided to swing.

The crack of the slap was sharp and clean. Darren stumbled back a step, his hand flying to his face. The kitchen went very still. Becky made a small sound, something between a gasp and a sob.

“How dare you?” Jennifer’s voice had dropped to a near-whisper. “Get out.”

Darren touched the reddening mark on his cheek. A small, uneasy chuckle escaped him—the sound of a man trying to convince himself that this wasn’t serious, that he could still laugh his way out of it. “Okay. I get it. I’m sorry. You know me, Jen. I’ve got a big mouth. I was just trying to help.”

“Get out.” Jennifer pointed toward the front door, her arm rigid. “Now.”

He held her gaze for a moment longer than he should have. Something moved behind his eyes, something calculating and cold that had nothing to do with the bumbling persona he wore like a costume. Jennifer catalogued it even in her fury—*there you are, that’s the real you*—and then it was gone, replaced by wounded innocence.

“Fine. Fine.” Darren backed toward the hallway. “I’m going.”

He nearly collided with Frank, who appeared in the doorway in rumpled pajamas, his hair uncombed and his eyes still clouded with sleep. “What the hell is going on?”

Darren clapped him on the shoulder as he squeezed past. “Sorry, bud. Guess I’ve got to get out of here.” His voice was light, dismissive, as though he’d been asked to leave because the dinner conversation had gotten too political. “I’ll meet you at the golf course, okay?”

Frank blinked. "Uh, yeah. Okay." The response was automatic.

Then Darren was gone, the front door clicking shut behind him with a softness that felt obscene.

Jennifer turned to Frank. "I don't want him here anymore."

"What happened?" Frank looked past her, toward Becky, who had pressed herself against the far counter. "Becky? You okay?"

Becky nodded, but it was a fragile, unconvincing motion. She wouldn't meet her father's eyes.

"He was hitting on our daughter," Jennifer said. Each word came out separate and distinct, as though she was explaining something to a slow student. "I walked in and he had his arm around her, telling her how beautiful she was. Telling her to enjoy the attention when she gets to college."

Frank rubbed the back of his neck. "Was he? Come on, Jen. He's a goofball. He doesn't think before he talks."

"He wasn't just talking."

"You know how he is." Frank paused, thinking, then continued. "He's naturally flirtatious. He probably didn't realize how it looked. That's just Darren being Darren."

Jennifer stared at him. The morning light was stronger now, slanting through the kitchen windows, illuminating the tired lines around Frank's eyes. She loved those lines. She'd traced them with her thumb a thousand times, in bed, on vacations, during long lazy Sundays when Becky was small and the world felt safer. Now she looked at them and saw the shape of every excuse he'd ever made.

"You weren't standing here," she said. "I saw him. I heard what he was saying. Becky was uncomfortable. That should be enough."

Frank looked at Becky. His daughter's silence was louder than any explanation. He wiped his brow with the heel of his hand and took a breath that seemed to empty him out.

"Okay," he said finally. "Fine. We'll take a break from him for a while. He won't hang around here. I'll meet him other places. Is that enough?"

Really? The golf course? After all this, he was still planning to meet Darren at the golf course.

Jennifer shook her head. "I don't know why you still give him the time of day. You're better than that, Frank."

“He’s my best friend and he’s got... nevermind...”

Jennifer could hear everything Frank wasn’t saying: *He’s all I have from before. He knew me when I was nobody. I can’t abandon him now.* There was something else. She thought for a moment, but decided not to inquire.

It would have been easier if the plea had come from malice. But it came from something softer—a misplaced sense of duty that Frank had never learned to examine.

Jennifer picked up her bag from the floor. Her keys were cold against her palm.

“He’s my best friend.” Frank repeated, nearly in a whisper.

“Yeah, well,” she said, crossing toward the hallway, “should he be?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “I’ll see you tonight.”

* * *

Sublevel 3. Jennifer stood before the center glass container, her arms folded, her ponytail pulled so tight it tugged at her temples. She'd been staring for ten minutes. Maybe longer.

Annie hovered at her shoulder, tablet in hand, her short red hair tucked beneath a sterile cap. “Anything?”

“Look at this,” Jennifer said.

She tapped a fingernail against the outer glass. Inside the center enclosure, the infected female rat barely twitched an ear. She lay along the left wall of her prison, pressed close to the transparent barrier that separated her from the chamber on the left.

That chamber held a single uninfected male. On the surface he was ordinary in every way. Brown fur, dark eyes, the restless energy of a healthy rat who wanted to explore.

To the right, a larger enclosure housed several more rats. Controls. Witnesses. They climbed over one another in the oblivious way of animals who had no idea what was happening... or why.

“Interesting,” Annie murmured, leaning closer. “She's barely moved in the last hour.”

“She's quite lethargic.” Jennifer straightened, her eyes still fixed on the female. “Actually, let me correct that. She looks more... content.”

Annie frowned. “What's the difference?”

Jennifer gestured toward the rat's face. "Look at her whiskers. Still twitching. Her tail moves when she shifts position. Her reflexes are intact."

The latest readings confirmed what Jennifer's eyes were telling her. The virus had spread through most of the animal's body. Liver, lungs, lymphatic system, portions of the brain stem. The infection was extensive, thorough, and utterly baffling in its effects. The rat wasn't sick. She wasn't dying. She simply appeared to have lost all interest in doing anything except staying exactly where she was.

Against the left wall.

"She isn't wandering," Jennifer said. "She keeps returning to that side."

The male in the adjacent cage sniffed at his own clear barrier, stood on his hind legs, dropped back down. He was aware of her. He had to be. But his behavior remained unchanged—still eating, still drinking, still investigating every corner of his enclosure like a rat who expected to find something new.

"She's fixated on him." Jennifer said, eyebrow raised.

"Yeah, she's taken quite a liking to him."

Jennifer allowed herself a small smile. The tension in her shoulders eased a fraction. "Here come the wedding bells."

Annie snorted. The laugh that followed was genuine. For a moment, the two women were simply colleagues sharing a joke. The strange weight of the experiment, the exhaustion of the past week—all of it faded behind a shared moment of laughter.

But the moment passed.

Jennifer stepped back from the enclosure and crossed her arms. "We need to test direct transmission. She's been isolated since she was infected. We don't know how fast it spreads through ordinary contact."

"You want to introduce another female?"

"Let's add another female to her chamber." Jennifer nodded toward the larger holding cage on the right. "We'll see how quickly it spreads. Whether the behavior transfers. Whether it changes anything about how she's interacting with the male."

Annie's fingers were already tapping at her tablet, logging the decision, marking the time. She'd learned to anticipate Jennifer's rhythm. "Which one?"

"The smaller brown one. She's young. Healthy baseline."

* * *

The transfer took less than a minute. Gloves, a transport box, the soft click of a sealed latch. The new female entered the center enclosure with the nervous energy of an animal deposited in unfamiliar territory. She circled the perimeter. She sniffed the air. She flinched when the other female rat approached.

The infected rat's response was immediate. Her attention shifted away from the male in the neighboring cage as though he had ceased to exist. She followed the newcomer with a patience that bordered on methodical—never rushing, never aggressive, but never letting the distance between them grow beyond a few inches. She sniffed at the new female's flank. Brushed against her shoulder. Maintained contact at every opportunity.

"What is she doing," Annie asked.

"She's transmitting."

The new female tried to keep her distance at first. She circled. She retreated. She pressed herself against the far corner of the enclosure whenever the infected rat drew close. But over the hours that followed—Jennifer marked the time in careful notes, sixty minutes, ninety, one hundred and twenty—the resistance eroded.

The new female's movements slowed. The tension drained from her posture. The nervous twitching of her whiskers settled into something calmer, something almost placid. By the first hour, she was no longer retreating. By the second, she had stopped trying to maintain distance at all.

"Check her readings," Jennifer said.

Annie pulled up the data. Her eyes widened. "Wow. That's fast."

"She's infected."

"Already. Yeah." Annie stared at the screen, then at the two rats, then back at the screen. "Full markers. It's everywhere."

Jennifer exhaled. The confirmation should have been satisfying—a successful transmission, clean data, everything documented and timestamped—but it felt instead like another piece of a puzzle she didn't yet understand. "You ok, Louise?"

Annie blinked. "Louise?"

"I named them." Jennifer shrugged, unapologetic. "That's Thelma, and that's Louise."

The corner of Annie's mouth twitched. "Of course you did."

"Thelma and Louise," Jennifer repeated.

Annie examined the data more closely. Her amusement faded. "Thelma's viral load increased after contact with Louise. The transmission didn't reduce her concentration at all. They're both showing elevated readings now."

"So it doesn't dilute. It compounds."

"Apparently."

Jennifer opened her mouth to respond, then stopped. Both rats had moved. Thelma and Louise, their brief period of mutual interest apparently concluded, were returning to the left side of the enclosure. They settled together against the barrier, their bodies pressed close, their dark eyes fixed on the male in the adjacent cage.

"And look at that," Jennifer said. "They're both going back to the same side."

Annie followed her gaze. The two females sat motionless, watching the male with an attention that seemed almost reverent. He was doing nothing remarkable—scratching at his bedding, investigating a pellet of food—but their focus on him was absolute.

"They're definitely both focused on him now," Annie said. "Did you give him a name too?"

Jennifer considered. The male looked up at that moment, his whiskers twitching, his body framed by the stark white light of his enclosure. He was a handsome animal, objectively speaking. Strong jaw. Healthy coat. The kind of rat a researcher might choose for breeding stock if he weren't already dying.

"Fabio," Jennifer said.

Annie's laughter was immediate and sharp. "Fabio. All the girls love Fabio."

"Apparently."

Jennifer's smile didn't reach her eyes. She was thinking about the way the females had changed. Not just their behavior—their bodies. The slight but perceptible shift in Thelma's posture over the past several days. The way Louise was already beginning to mirror it.

"Fabio isn't going to last much longer," she said.

Annie's smile faded. "Why?"

“Advanced cancer. He came in with it. The vet gave him maybe a week, and that was four days ago.” Jennifer tapped her fingers against her clipboard. “If we’re going to learn what this virus does to him, now is probably our only chance.”

“Poor guy.”

“He’s terminal regardless. If we infect him, we might get data we can’t get any other way. Whether the virus alters his disease progression. Whether the females’ behavior changes when he’s infected. Whether a male host responds differently to the organism than the females do.”

Annie was quiet for a moment. Then she nodded. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

* * *

The next hour dissolved into the familiar rhythms of laboratory protocol. They administered the virus to Fabio through a precisely measured injection, documenting the dose, the time, the immediate physical response—which was nothing, no flinch, no reaction at all. They verified containment three times. They recalibrated the monitoring equipment and positioned the cameras to capture every angle of all three enclosures.

Annie checked her watch. The clock on the wall read past eight in the evening. The laboratory’s fluorescent lights had taken on that harsher quality they always seemed to acquire after dark, when the rest of the world was heading home.

“I should probably get home,” she said. “We can pick this up tomorrow. The cameras will record everything overnight.”

Jennifer shook her head. “I’m staying.”

“Really?”

“This virus has reacted too quickly in every previous test. The cellular integration, Thelma’s behavioral shift, Louise’s infection—none of it followed the timelines I expected.” She pulled out her phone, her thumb hovering over Frank’s contact. “I don’t want to miss the first major response in the male subject because I was asleep at home.”

She typed the message quickly: *Staying at Biotech overnight. Important development. Will call tomorrow.*

Frank responded with a sad face emoji.

Annie gathered her belongings, her bag slung over one shoulder, her tablet tucked under her arm. "Call me if anything wild happens. Promise?"

"Will do."

"I mean it. If Fabio suddenly grows another tail... or whatever... I want to know."

Jennifer laughed—a real laugh. "Go home, Annie."

Then Annie was gone, her footsteps fading down the corridor, and the laboratory settled into a deeper silence. The hum of the ventilation. The soft rustle of bedding in the holding cages. The faint electronic chirp of the monitoring equipment cycling through its readings.

Jennifer pulled her stool closer to the enclosures and sat down.

The hours passed with excruciating slowness. She checked the monitors. She wrote notes. She drank coffee that went cold before she remembered to finish it. She walked the length of the laboratory and back again, stretching her legs, rolling the stiffness from her shoulders. The rats in the holding cage fell asleep in a pile of warm fur. Thelma and Louise remained at the left wall, their bodies pressed together, their eyes half-closed but still oriented toward Fabio.

Fabio showed no changes. His readings remained stable. His cancer remained terminal. Whatever the virus was doing inside him, it wasn't announcing itself yet.

Somewhere around three in the morning, Jennifer's head drooped. She caught herself, straightened, wrote another line of notes that she wouldn't be able to read in the morning, and then—despite herself—her eyes closed.

She dreamed of nothing.

When she woke, the laboratory lights had dimmed automatically to their nighttime setting. The monitors glowed in the darkness. The ventilation hummed its endless, patient hum.

Jennifer looked toward the cages.

She blinked.

Rubbed her eyes.

Looked again.

Fabio was no longer the thin, averaged sized animal she'd left hours before. His shoulders had broadened. His chest had thickened. His entire upper body had transformed into something denser, healthier, impossibly robust. He lay near the right side of his cage facing

Thelma and Louise, and his body was no longer the body of a dying rat. It was the body of something that had been remade.

Jennifer's gaze shifted to the females. Thelma and Louise had not developed the same muscular growth, but their lower bodies had changed. Fuller through the hips. Broader through the hindquarters. Both of them were pressed against the barrier, their bodies angled toward Fabio, making slow, repetitive movements against the cage wall. Their posture was not passive anymore. It was not content. It was expectant.

Coordinated.

Directed.

Jennifer stared at the three transformed animals, her clipboard forgotten at her feet, her heart beating hard against her ribs.

"What the hell?"

Jennifer didn't blink. She didn't move. Her fingers were still curled around the edge of the stainless steel table, knuckles white, the cold metal pressing into her palms. She was exhausted but...

"No," she said.

The word was loud. Not a whisper. A declaration.

She pushed herself upright, her stool scraping against the concrete floor with a sound that cut through the laboratory's ambient noise. The sight in front of her, the rats—Fabio's transformed body, the females' swollen hips, the slow, lewd, rhythmic movements they were making against the clear barrier—she had to know... How did this virus work?

The only way she knew how to process something this impossible was to break it into pieces small enough to examine. She would need to add a second male. Not Fabio—he needed to remain isolated for now, his transformation documented under controlled conditions. But another holding cage held several uninfected males. Healthy specimens.

If the virus had affected Fabio so dramatically, then a healthy male might respond even more. Or not at all. Or in some entirely new way that Jennifer couldn't predict. Only one way to find out.

She selected a male roughly the same age and size as Fabio had been before the transformation—young, healthy, no visible abnormalities. His fur was a uniform brown, his eyes clear, his movements quick and alert.

"All right," she said, lifting him gently from the holding cage. The rat squirmed in her gloved hands, investigating her fingers with quick sniffs. "Let's call you Zeus."

She carried Zeus to the center enclosure. Thelma and Louise barely glanced at him. Their attention remained fixed on Fabio, their bodies pressed against the barrier, their hindquarters making those slow, deliberate movements. Jennifer hesitated for a moment, her hand hovering over the enclosure's access port. Part of her wanted to wait for Annie. She really was very tired, and two sets of eyes were better than one, especially when documenting something this unprecedented.

But Annie wouldn't arrive for hours. And the virus had already demonstrated that it didn't wait for convenient timing.

The access port opened with a soft hiss. Jennifer guided Zeus inside, closed the port, and stepped back.

Thelma noticed him first. She turned her head, whiskers twitching, and sniffed the air. Louise followed a moment later, her posture shifting from its fixed orientation toward Fabio to something more alert. Both females approached Zeus with the same deliberate patience Thelma had shown when Louise first entered the enclosure.

Jennifer held her breath.

The sniffing began. First Thelma, then Louise, circling Zeus with methodical precision. He stood still, allowing the investigation in the way healthy rats sometimes did when introduced to new cage-mates. Thelma brushed against his flank. Louise sniffed at his hindquarters. For perhaps sixty seconds, the interaction looked promising.

Then Thelma turned away.

Louise followed.

Both females returned to the left wall. They settled against each other, their bodies oriented toward Fabio, and resumed their slow, rhythmic movements as though Zeus had never entered the enclosure at all.

Jennifer stared. "You two don't care about him at all, do you?"

Over the next couple hours she ran more tests and continued to checked the monitors. Zeus's readings were unchanged. Thelma and Louise had made brief physical contact with him, enough to transmit the virus surely, but his blood work showed nothing. No viral markers. No behavioral changes. Not even a trace.

"No transmission," Jennifer murmured. "Why?"

She checked again. And again. Each time, the result was the same. Zeus remained uninfected despite direct contact with two heavily infected subjects. The females had ignored him after their initial investigation. Whatever signal they were responding to—whatever invisible thread connected them to Fabio—Zeus didn't generate it.

Jennifer pulled blood and tissue samples from all four animals. Zeus first, to confirm the negative result. Then Thelma and Louise, to measure their viral concentration against the previous readings. Finally Fabio, whose transformation had been so radical that she half-expected the needle to bend against his thickened hide.

She loaded the samples into the centrifuge. She prepared slides for the microscope. She calibrated the chemical analyzer and set it running through its diagnostic cycle. The work absorbed her completely, the familiar rhythms of pipette and petri dish blotting out everything beyond the laboratory walls.

More time past. Her eyelids were heavier than ever.

The centrifuge whirled to a stop. The analyzer beeped its completion. Jennifer moved from machine to machine, collecting data, comparing readings, writing notes that grew increasingly disjointed as her exhaustion crept back in. Her handwriting deteriorated. Her thoughts began to loop. She caught herself staring at the same column of numbers three times before the pattern finally clicked.

Fabio's viral concentration was orders of magnitude higher than the females'. His cellular growth rate was off the scale. His hormonal activity had spiked to levels that should have been toxic, that should have killed him, that should have done something other than transform a dying rat into... whatever he had become.

And beneath every other reading, the cancer was still there.

Jennifer straightened so fast her vision swam. "That's it!"

Fabio's cancer cells were still present, still dividing, still spreading through his body. But they weren't destroying tissue anymore. The virus had wrapped itself around the malignant cells—penetrated them, integrated with them, something—and redirected their growth. The unchecked reproduction that would have killed Fabio had been channeled into muscle, into bone, into the exaggerated anatomy that now dominated his cage.

"It's the cancer," Jennifer whispered.

She checked the females' samples again, comparing them against Fabio's. Healthy cells versus malignant cells. Steady viral concentration versus explosive growth. Minor physical changes versus complete bodily reconstruction. The difference wasn't sex. It wasn't

hormonal levels or infection order or any of the other variables she'd considered. It was the disease itself. The cancer had given the virus something to work with—a cellular engine already running at full speed, already rewriting its own genetic code, already growing without limit. The virus hadn't stopped the cancer. It had hijacked it.

"Oh my God."

Jennifer looked up from the microscope. Through the glass barrier, Fabio lay in his cage, his transformed body rising and falling with slow, steady breaths. Thelma and Louise remained pressed against the wall that separated them from him, their bodies still making those repetitive motions, their dark eyes half-closed. Zeus slept in the far corner of the enclosure, healthy and uninfected and utterly ignored.

A pathogen that created biological hierarchy.

A virus that didn't simply suppress—it reorganized. Infected hosts didn't just become passive. They oriented themselves around the strongest signal, the most transformed host. The females could transmit to each other because their bodies were receptive, waiting, primed for the signal that would organize their behavior. But Zeus —healthy, unremarkable Zeus —had nothing to offer that the virus wanted.

Jennifer's hand trembled as she reached for her coffee mug. It was empty. It had been empty for hours. The clock on the wall read 6:47 AM. Annie would arrive soon. The world aboveground was stirring into its morning routines. She should go home. She should shower, eat something, sleep for at least a few hours.

But her shoulders sagged. The adrenaline that had carried her through the night finally began to drain away, leaving something hollow and unsteady in its place. She felt lightheaded. The laboratory tilted slightly. She grabbed the edge of the counter and waited for the dizziness to pass.

Jennifer gathered the vials one by one. The animal samples went into the refrigerated storage unit. The slides returned to their racks. The centrifuge was cleaned and powered down.

The last item on the counter was the concentrated virus sample. The pure culture, extracted from the original Chilean specimen and amplified through five generations of cell cultures. It sat in a small glass vessel, sealed and labeled, waiting to be returned to its secure storage container.

Jennifer picked it up.

Her foot caught on the leg of her stool. She didn't feel herself falling until she was already falling—her hand shooting out to catch herself, the vessel slipping from her fingers, the world

tilting sideways in a blur of fluorescent light and concrete floor and the terrible, slow-motion arc of the virus container rising above her.

Too tired. I knew I was too tired. I should have known better.

It hit her and broke against her face.

The glass broke and liquid splashed across her mouth, her lips, her cheeks. Something wet and faintly metallic slid past her parted lips and onto her tongue. She tasted it—registered the taste with awful clarity—before her mind caught up with what had happened.

She lay braced against the counter, one hand still gripping the stainless steel edge, her breath coming in short, ragged gasps. The broken vessel lay in pieces on the floor. The sample dripped down her chin. The open storage unit waited on the counter, empty.

Jennifer pushed herself upright. Her hand rose to her mouth. Her fingers came away wet.

“Fuck.”