

Bonus Scene

Isabella's POV

The lecture hall buzzes with energy, a low hum of excitement that grows louder as more students file in. Every seat is filled, and latecomers hover, standing at the back, craning their necks to glimpse the legendary Dr. Raffaele Rossi. My father might be retired, but his reputation in the chemistry world is anything but. Today, he's sharing unpublished data from his research notebook, the one Diego salivated over when I translated for him.

I spot Diego near the front, leaning forward in his seat with his phone open and his thumb hovering over the record button. Beside him, Dominic lounges like he's at a backyard barbecue, one ankle propped casually on his knee. The contrast between them makes me smile—Diego's intense focus, Dominic's quiet indifference—but both are here for the same reason. They respect my father's work, even if they show it in entirely different ways.

I weave through the crowd and slide into the empty seat beside Diego. He barely glances at me while his friend gives me a nonchalant head nod, typical of the few times we've ridden with him. After that disastrous confrontation with his friend, Hollister, Diego hasn't introduced me to any others, only referencing them occasionally or after a night out with them, retelling some of their crazy antics.

Dominic was a total fluke when he caught up with us riding, introducing himself with his visor flipped up and a head nod when stopped at a light. He's not one for words, or at least to me, although Diego says he's like that with everyone. He seemed nice enough the one time we stopped for a beer at a place called Muddy something. We didn't stay long. Diego worried someone from campus would see us and out our relationship.

After we reconciled, he guarded my privacy with his life—always on guard about who was around. Muddy’s wasn’t supposed to happen. I picked up something in my tire, and we happened to pull into the parking lot. I went to the bathroom while the boys worked on it. I offered beer for my appreciation, Dominic agreed, and Diego warned only one.

Today’s lecture is far from Boston University. Princeton invited Papà to speak at another lecture—a series they are bringing back this fall semester, which we only learned about when he was asked. Papà was over the moon.

“Professor,” Diego murmurs, shooting me an appreciative side glance and a taunting smirk. “Nice boots.”

The teasing nickname makes my chest flutter, but I keep my voice low as I lean closer. “Thank you, *Mr. Kahale*.”

His obsession with my riding boots is still lost on me. After seeing the dozen or so I have in my closet to ward off the cold and slushy winters, his dark eyes sparkled, and he picked out a pair for me to wear naked when he bent me over the bed.

Dominic snorts softly. “You two can’t go five seconds without being disgusting, can you?”

My gaze flickers past my boyfriend to him, catching the gleam in his eyes before he looks away with his usual disinterest. I’m unsure if Diego shared his boot obsession with his friend or if he’s that astute that he picked up on our secret. Either way, I don’t care.

In the little I’ve learned about him, he’s some sort of science prodigy, already published and recognized as a rising star. He has completed college in three years with a double major and is in graduate school at Harvard studying neurochemistry.

The room quiets as Papà approaches the podium, adjusts his glasses, and scans the crowd. The years haven’t dulled his presence—he commands attention with nothing more than a glance.

“Good afternoon.” His deep voice fills the room with a quick wink at me in the front row, which I return with a caring smile. “Today, I’ll present research on a novel catalytic process I developed during my career. This process has significant implications for sustainable chemistry and industrial applications.”

Diego already has his phone recording, fussing over the framing while Dominic settles back, arms crossed like he’s watching a show that might finally get interesting. The front of the room darkens slightly as pages from his notebook project onto the screen beside him.

This is why my father is so beloved. He carries no ego, no airs of superiority—just an unwavering passion to share his work and contribute to something greater than himself. His desire to see his research live on, to inspire new ideas and discoveries, is what sets him apart. Watching him up there, giving away the secrets he’s spent years perfecting with nothing but generosity and hope for the future, makes my chest ache with emotion. Tears blur my vision, and Diego’s hand moves to my knee, his touch comforting with a gentle squeeze.

Dominic lets out a low whistle under his breath. “Man, your dad’s on another level.”

“Brilliant,” Diego murmurs, his face tight while concentrating on getting the screen in full view of his phone’s camera. He angles it back and forth as my father walks attendees through his discovery, where he got stuck, and how listening to classical music helped his brain relax enough to realize the breakthrough was in front of him all along.

Halfway through the lecture, my father pauses and looks directly at Diego.

“Mr. Kahale, would you care to join me?”

Diego freezes. Both he and Dom stare at me in complete disbelief. I merely shrug, not having been told the secret my father had planned. Whispers ripple through the crowd behind us.

I nudge him gently with my elbow, my voice barely above a whisper. “Go on.”

Dominic claps him on the shoulder, a smirk playing on his lips.

“Don’t blow it.”

Before Diego can respond, Dominic swipes the phone from his hand, aiming it squarely at him.

“I had the good fortune of having Mr. Kahale as a lab partner for a class I was auditing this semester at BU.” Up front, my father’s voice carries through the lecture hall, affectionate and inviting when gesturing to Diego.

The audience breaks into applause—polite claps and enthusiastic cheers. Diego stands, giving a half-hearted wave, and the applause swells. He hesitates for half a heartbeat, smoothing his hands over his shirt like a suit of armor.

He catches my eye briefly, a flicker of nerves behind his calm exterior, then strides toward my father. Every step is deliberate, steady, commanding attention without asking for it. When he reaches the front, he extends his hand to my father, and the two shake firmly, mutual respect and friendship passing between them. My heart clenches at the sight of the two most important men in my life sharing the same passion but with different outlets.

My father hands him a pair of gloves and safety goggles, which Diego quickly puts on before picking up an empty flask on the demonstration table beside them.

“I’d like you to demonstrate the next step in the reaction,” my father says, stepping aside to give Diego the spotlight.

It’s a generous move to include him in the demonstration. An acceptance of our relationship that he admitted he knew about at breakfast that last day before he returned to Princeton. Something about sensing the charge in the atmosphere but not expanding beyond that. It was more of a quiet acceptance of how things would be. If I’m honest, his non-judging attitude helped solidify my feelings for Diego. Papà seemed to enjoy his company just as much as I do. A

new partner in crime, he calls it from time to time, asking about him on our weekly calls when we're not traveling back to New Jersey to spend the weekend with him.

Diego picks up the catalyst and carefully adds it to the solution in the flask. The liquid changes color, shifting from clear to a vibrant emerald green. A murmur of awe spreads through the room, followed by scattered applause.

Papà nods approvingly, clapping Diego on the shoulder.

"Well done. This young man has a bright future ahead of him. I expect great things from you at MIT."

Diego smiles, his confidence glowing brighter than the solution in the flask.

"Thank you, Dr. Rossi."

With my father's arm around Diego's shoulders and them facing the lecture hall, a collective clap goes up, leaving both men beaming. My heart squeezes with so much emotion that I tear up.

"You're a goner."

Dominic scoffs watching me as I was watching them. The applause dies down, and I wipe my tears before they fall. Diego takes off his glasses and gloves and returns to his seat. He thanks his friend for filming and looks at me, still beaming and mouthing, "Thank you."

As if I can handle much more, tears spring back into my eyes, and I bite the inside of my cheek so as not to completely start blubbering while Papà's lecture resumes. Our eyes stay on each other for a few more seconds before I clear my throat and look away, needing to compose myself.

The lecture lasts another twenty minutes before Papà opens the floor to questions. Diego ends his recording, sinking into his seat with an easiness that wasn't there before. Content to listen to the answers flying over us and nodding when his friend whispers in his ear. When the session finally ends, Diego bolts from his chair to stand by my father, listening to the personal exchanges from the crowd forming around them.

I remain seated, watching them and knowing this could easily go on for another hour with all the adoration for my father in this room. Dominic leans over, his smirk lazy as ever.

“You know.” His voice is low enough for only me to hear. “If you’re not careful, your dad might end up liking Diego more than you.”

“Hardly.” I roll my eyes and shove his shoulder, fighting a laugh.

“You’re good for him. It’s easy to see.”

Dominic’s words whisper past me as he stands, leaving me more teary-eyed than before. Not that I needed that confirmation, I tell myself. I know we are good together and Diego is very good to me. He understands me better than anyone ever has aside from Papà. But hearing that I’m equally good for him when he has the world on the string, all his options and opportunities laid before means everything. Especially coming from his friend, who is quiet and scrutinizing as they come.

After waiting for the crowd to disperse, a lunch to follow, and my father sitting at the head of the table with department chairs and his old colleagues, I stand to join the guys.

Diego slips his hand into mine and pulls me close for an innocent peck on my cheek.

“That was amazing!”

His smile is so broad that I think his face will crack.

“You better make it big at MIT, man. If you don’t, I’ll never let you live it down,” Dominic says, roughing him up by the shoulder.

Diego laughs, shaking his head as we head for the door. “Noted.”

His friend slips out before we do, Diego intentionally holding us back while the crowd empties until we are all alone.

“What—”

His lips meet mine, aggressive and insistent for several prolonged kisses. Just as I’m about to push him away for the wrong setting and timing, he senses my hesitancy and pulls away.

“You looked too hot for too long, and I just had to get it out of my system.” A guilty expression hangs on his face for a few fleeting seconds. “Iz, I can’t thank you enough for today. Being here with you, your dad and even having Dom tagged along. It’s been . . . I just . . . I love you, Izzy.”

Just when I saved my heart from bursting earlier, it finally does, causing tears to trickle down my cheeks. Diego’s hands are quickly cupping my face, his thumbs wiping away the wetness to kiss me slowly and sensually, lingering before pulling me into a tight embrace. I reciprocate, clutching onto him as tightly as he is me, whispering the words I’ve mulled over for a while now.

“I love you too.”



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