

## Final Presentation

By Scott Cimarusti

This was just like one of his recurring stress dreams, he noted as he raced across campus, late for his final project presentation.

How cliché.

Even down to the fact that he couldn't readily recall attending Chemistry 325 for the last several weeks and now he would be expected to present his part of a group presentation for the class's final project.

It wasn't like he didn't have a good reason to attend class... After all, Diana Spalding, a Tri-Delt, was in his project group. So on those rare occasions when he did attend, he felt his time was well-spent staring at that amazing rack of hers—clearly visible even under her bulky white lab coat. She even had the "smart girl" thing down—her wavy blonde hair pulled back into a loose ponytail and her glasses perched on the bridge of her pert nose. He spent many a class period fantasizing about her whipping off those glasses as she yanked out that ponytail holder—and then with a slow-motion shake of her golden hair, leveling a smoldering come-hither stare at him right before she dropped to her knees before him and unzipped his fly.

Of course that never really happened—well, not yet, he snickered to himself. Not just because she was *way* out of his league, but because everyday life bore little resemblance to porn videos. So now he found himself wondering if perhaps his time in class wouldn't have been better spent paying attention to the coursework—especially the group project, so he might be better prepared for his part of the presentation.

The campus architecture blurred by him with surreal speed, the sidewalks noticeably devoid of other students—which wasn't too surprising, considering he was already almost five minutes late for class, and he still had another block to go. The rest of the student body had been more punctual than he.

Still... He would have expected to see at least some other activity...

Before he knew it, he rounded the last corner of the main quad, his backpack bouncing on his shoulder and probably leaving a bruise he'd discover later. He bounded up the steps two at a time and bulldozed through the front doors of MacGregor Hall.

He almost skidded right past his destination, but his sneakers found purchase on the faded linoleum right in front of room 112. He froze with his hand on the tarnished brass knob, trying to peer through the frosted glass in the door, but he was unable to discern anything but vague shadows. He knew he had no choice but to barge right in and suffer the disapproving glance of not only Professor Lydia Penrose, but also his fellow classmates—especially the members of his project group, who had the best reason for their disdain.

He took a deep breath and slowly turned the knob, cringing against the inevitable rusty squeak. Steeling himself, he nudged open the door with a groan of hinges.

As he expected, all eyes turned on him the moment he entered. It reminded him of the cliché scene in westerns when the stranger strides through the batwing doors of the saloon and the piano music suddenly stops, the bartender looks up from spit-shining a glass, and even the whores momentarily pause their sales pitches.

The first eyes he met were those of the group that was presenting first. To their credit, they were too focused on their presentation to waste any attention on him. So he slunk past them toward his seat, keeping close to the wall, as if he could camouflage himself against the plaster like a chameleon.

Deliberately avoiding the professor's contemptuous stare over her half-moon glasses, he found Diana Spalding's icy glare instead as she looked up from her notes. The best he could offer her was a sheepish shrug of his shoulders as she rolled her eyes with an almost imperceptible shake of her head before returning her attention to her notecards. All he could do then was drop his own gaze—but not without sneaking a quick glance at her tits.

Resigning himself to being the pariah of the class and his group, he slunk into his seat and opened his backpack to retrieve his notes. His only hope now was to bullshit his way through this presentation the best he could—the type of challenge to which he was no stranger. After all: this would not be the first time he bullshitted his way through a paper or an exam or a presentation or—

A whispered voice hissed in his ear, cutting off his train of thought.

It was Andrea, the de facto leader of their group. She sat between him and Diana.

"What the hell, man?" Her exasperation was unmistakable, even in a whisper.

All he could do was shrug in response. "I must have overslept. Sorry."

She continued to stare daggers at him for a heartbeat longer. "You better not fuck this up," she warned before turning back to Diana to continue their vilification of him.

He sighed and went back to skimming through his notecards.

And then he paused.

*Did* he oversleep? He couldn't remember.

All he could recall was speeding past the main quad... As strange as it was, he couldn't remember how he got there. Or leaving his apartment. Or even getting out of bed, for that matter... He must have been so distracted by racing to class, he had mentally checked out.

Regardless, he didn't have time for that right now—he needed to figure out what the hell he was going to say for his part of the presentation.

Only it turned out his notecards would be of no help to him in that regard.

Since they were all completely blank.

He filed through them again and again, his heartbeat thudding in his ears as panic began to flutter in his chest. But no amount of shuffling would make any words appear on them, it seemed.

He hardly had time to comprehend this latest and even more disturbing turn of events when an abrupt outburst of applause startled him.

It was the rest of the class clapping for the first group who had just finished their presentation. As the group exited out of their PowerPoint presentation and gathered up their presentation props, Professor Penrose sauntered up to the front of the room with a rustle of her wool skirt and tweed jacket.

"And now..." Dr. Penrose began, her voice flinty, "Group two will present their experiment and report their findings." Her tired grey eyes swept the room but lingered on him a little longer than he would have liked.

He had no choice now but to follow his group up to the front of the class and wing it.

He stood by idly, pretending to give his notecards one last scan while Andrea arranged the beakers and test tubes and Diana started their PowerPoint from her flash drive. They both made a point to ignore him while they went about their respective tasks—which he preferred, actually, rather than continue to suffer their steely glares. Their preparation completed, they both threw him a quick glance to signal to him that they were ready, and then Andrea began.

Her voice was a low warble in his ears. He was trying to pay attention—because he knew he should—but he just couldn't seem to focus. He thought it might be performance anxiety in anticipation of his turn, but he couldn't be sure of anything. Everything seemed so surreal.

While he fidgeted with his notecards, out of the corner of his eye, he thought he noticed Diana glancing at him occasionally. Dismissing it as his imagination—or worse yet, another opportunity for her to stare daggers at him—he ignored it until he couldn't anymore.

Preparing himself for yet another withering glare, he raised his eyes to meet hers.

And found her smiling at him.

Taken aback, he blinked at her in disbelief, which caused her smile to widen.

Still skeptical, he offered a hint of a smile in return and pretended to study his notecards—which were still oddly blank. But that didn't seem to matter to him as much anymore.

Because Diana Spalding had smiled at him.

He could distantly hear Andrea still droning on somewhere on the periphery of his attention, but all he could concentrate on now was Diana. He thought he felt the weight of her stare again, so he tempted fate one more time and raised his eyes to meet hers.

She was staring at him again, but her smile was somehow different this time. He thought he perceived a glimmer of mischievousness in that smile—which threw him even more.

And then with the slightest tilt of her head she winked at him.

His eyes widened in shock—but he quickly recovered. She had to be fucking with him, trying to get a reaction and throw him off-guard so he would screw up his part of the presentation even more.

You can't bullshit a bullshitter, his dad used to say. So he offered Diana a dismissive smile and went back to his blank notecards.

He'd barely lowered his gaze when he felt someone sidle up next to him in a dizzying fog of perfume.

He looked up, ready to flash his "back-off" glare, but was completely disarmed by what he saw.

Diana was standing right next to him, biting her lower lip saucily while her smoldering eyes crawled over him with a ravenous lust. He'd never seen a woman look at him that way before. The only way he recognized her expression was from the porn movies he and his roommates watched.

He gestured with his eyes to both Andrea, who was still prattling on about their presentation, and the rest of the class, hoping Diana would take the hint.

She must have understood, but she didn't seem to care.

On the contrary, in fact. Her eyes never leaving his, she pressed her body against him, the swell of her breasts against his chest sending tingling ripples of anticipation through his body. The fact that the leader of their project group was still giving her part of their presentation and the entire class was watching became increasingly insignificant to him. He'd gladly accept a failing grade on the project—hell, for the class even. Shit—it would even be worth disciplinary action for one hell of a story to tell his roommates.

Then before he could even begin to process this incredulous turn of events, he could feel Diana's hand slither up his inner thigh to the growing tightness at the fork of his crotch.

He closed his eyes and reflexively leaned himself into her hand as she began to slowly stroke him down there—which completely eclipsed anything resembling rational thought about the inappropriateness of such behavior during a class presentation.

Maybe he had been wrong... Maybe everyday life *could* be like a porn movie...

He could feel her breath misting against his neck, her nose gently nuzzling him just below his ear as her hand slowly increased the pace of its stroking where he wanted—no, needed it most.

He could still hear Andrea's voice as a distant murmur, the rapidly shrinking rational part of his mind wondering why no one had noticed what was going on between him and Diana—though he really couldn't care less. If anyone had noticed, they weren't making any effort to stop it. And, God, he wanted her to keep going.

He opened his eyes to find Diana's filling his field of vision right before she slowly closed them to lean in for a kiss. His heart was a jackhammer in his chest as he felt his own eyes close again in eager anticipation of her lips on his.

Then he felt the velvety caress of her kiss.

Except it was so cold.

Her lips were so cold.

His eyes flashed open to find Diana's lips an unsettling shade of blue, her skin pale, and her eyes rolled up to the whites.

Instead of standing at the front of the class, he was crouched over her as she lay sprawled out on the classroom floor, her blonde hair spilled out around her head in a tangled halo.

Horrified, he looked up to see what all the surrounding commotion was—only to find that many of his other classmates also lay contorted on the floor or slumped over at their desks, greedily gasping for oxygen and clawing at their throats while a noxious fog hung in the air.

Then it all came back to him in a stampede of thoughts racing frantically through his panicked brain.

They were all choking on the toxic gas he had accidentally created when it was his turn to give his part of the class presentation. Because he had been so ill-prepared, he must have inadvertently mixed together the wrong chemicals in the wrong order. If instead of ogling Diana Spalding all semester and ditching class, he had paid better attention to Professor Penrose's stern and repeated warnings about mixing these particular chemicals, he might have known better.

His memory after mixing the chemicals was a complete blank—his rational mind must have shut down. The only thing that made some semblance of sense to his unnerved brain was that he must have tried to give Diana CPR—that could be the only explanation for why he'd found himself with his lips on hers.

As for the accompanying bizarre fantasy that his brain had conjured up for him... He couldn't begin to guess. The brain must devise novel methods for coping with an overload of stress—especially when subjected to a lethal dose of toxic fumes.

If he were to find any consolation from the horror he had created through his own carelessness, he wouldn't have to bear for very long the guilt of having been responsible for the deaths of his classmates and his professor. He could already feel his head spinning and his breathing becoming more labored.

That would be the bitter irony of his final presentation.