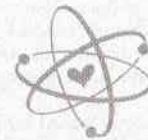


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**Hypothesis**



ALI HAZELWOOD

  
SPHERE

me. And—I don't trust anyone else to do it. Because they haven't so far. Because . . ." *Because something bad happened. Because I want to do my part so that it won't happen again.*

Heavy thoughts to have in the presence of a stranger, in the darkness of her closed eyelids. So she cracked them open; her vision was still blurry, but the burning was mostly gone. The Guy was looking at her. Fuzzy around the edges, perhaps, but so very *there*, waiting patiently for her to continue.

"It's important to me," she repeated. "The research that I want to do." Olive was twenty-three and alone in the world. She didn't want weekends, or a decent salary. She wanted to go back in time. She wanted to be less lonely. But since that was impossible, she'd settle for fixing what she could.

He nodded but said nothing as he straightened and took a few steps toward the door. Clearly leaving.

"Is mine a good enough reason to go to grad school?" she called after him, hating how eager for approval she sounded. It was possible that she was in the midst of some sort of existential crisis.

He paused and looked back at her. "It's the best one."

He was smiling, she thought. Or something like it.

"Good luck on your interview, Olive."

"Thanks."

He was almost out the door already.

"Maybe I'll see you next year," she babbled, flushing a little.

"If I get in. And if you haven't graduated."

"Maybe," she heard him say.

With that, The Guy was gone. And Olive never got his name. But a few weeks later, when the Stanford biology department extended her an offer, she accepted it. Without hesitating.

## Chapter One

♥ **HYPOTHESIS:** *When given a choice between A (a slightly inconveniencing situation) and B (a colossal shitshow with devastating consequences), I will inevitably end up selecting B.*

Two years, eleven months later

In Olive's defense, the man didn't seem to mind the kiss too much.

It did take him a moment to adjust—perfectly understandable, given the sudden circumstances. It was an awkward, uncomfortable, somewhat painful minute, in which Olive was simultaneously smashing her lips against his and pushing herself as high as her toes would extend to keep her mouth at the same level as his face. Did he *have* to be so tall? The kiss must have looked like some clumsy headbutt, and she grew anxious that she was not going to be able to pull the whole thing off. Her friend Anh, whom Olive had spotted coming her way a few seconds ago, was going to take one look at this and know at once that Olive and Kiss Dude couldn't possibly be two people in the middle of a date.

Then that agonizingly slow moment went by, and the kiss became . . . different. The man inhaled sharply and inclined his

head a tiny bit, making Olive feel less like a squirrel monkey climbing a baobab tree, and his hands—which were large and pleasantly warm in the AC of the hallway—closed around her waist. They slid up a few inches, coming to wrap around Olive’s rib cage and holding her to himself. Not too close, and not too far.

Just so.

It was more of a prolonged peck than anything, but it was quite nice, and for the life span of a few seconds Olive forgot a large number of things, including the fact that she was pressed against a random, unknown dude. That she’d barely had the time to whisper “Can I please kiss you?” before locking lips with him. That what had originally driven her to put on this entire show was the hope of fooling Anh, her best friend in the whole world.

But a good kiss will do that: make a girl forget herself for a while. Olive found herself melting into a broad, solid chest that showed absolutely no give. Her hands traveled from a defined jaw into surprisingly thick and soft hair, and then—then she heard herself sigh, as if already out of breath, and that’s when it hit her like a brick on the head, the realization that— No. No.

Nope, nope, *no*.

She should not be enjoying this. Random dude, and all that.

Olive gasped and pushed herself away from him, frantically looking for Anh. In the 11:00 p.m. bluish glow of the biology labs’ hallway, her friend was nowhere to be seen. Weird. Olive was sure she had spotted her a few seconds earlier.

Kiss Dude, on the other hand, was standing right in front of her, lips parted, chest rising and a weird light flickering in his eyes, which was exactly when it dawned on her, the enormity of what she had just done. Of *who* she had just—

Fuck her life.

Fuck. Her. Life.

Because Dr. Adam Carlsen was a known ass.

This fact was not remarkable in and of itself, as in academia every position above the graduate student level (Olive’s level, sadly) required some degree of assness in order to be held for any length of time, with tenured faculty at the very peak of the ass pyramid. Dr. Carlsen, though—he was exceptional. At least if the rumors were anything to go by.

He was the reason Olive’s roommate, Malcolm, had to completely scrap two research projects and would likely end up graduating a year late; the one who had made Jeremy throw up from anxiety before his qualifying exams; the sole culprit for half the students in the department being forced to postpone their thesis defenses. Joe, who used to be in Olive’s cohort and would take her to watch out-of-focus European movies with microscopic subtitles every Thursday night, had been a research assistant in Carlsen’s lab, but he’d decided to drop out six months into it for “reasons.” It was probably for the best, since most of Carlsen’s remaining graduate assistants had perennially shaky hands and often looked like they hadn’t slept in a year.

Dr. Carlsen might have been a young academic rock star and biology’s wunderkind, but he was also mean and hypercritical, and it was obvious in the way he spoke, in the way he carried himself, that he thought himself the only person doing decent science within the Stanford biology department. Within the entire world, probably. He was a notoriously moody, obnoxious, terrifying dick.

And Olive had just kissed him.

She wasn’t sure how long the silence lasted—only that he was the one to break it. He stood in front of Olive, ridiculously intimidating with dark eyes and even darker hair, staring down from who knows how many inches above six feet—he must have been over half a foot taller than she was. He scowled, an expression that she recognized from seeing him attend the departmental

seminar, a look that usually preceded him raising his hand to point out some perceived fatal flaw in the speaker's work.

*Adam Carlsen. Destroyer of research careers*, Olive had once overheard her adviser say.

*It's okay. It's fine. Totally fine.* She was just going to pretend nothing had happened, nod at him politely, and tiptoe her way out of here. *Yes, solid plan.*

"Did you . . . Did you just kiss me?" He sounded puzzled, and maybe a little out of breath. His lips were full and plump and . . . God. Kissed. There was simply no way Olive could get away with denying what she had just done.

Still, it was worth a try.

"Nope."

Surprisingly, it seemed to work.

"Ah. Okay, then." Carlsen nodded and turned around, looking vaguely disoriented. He took a couple of steps down the hallway, reached the water fountain—maybe where he'd been headed in the first place.

Olive was starting to believe that she might actually be off the hook when he halted and turned back with a skeptical expression.

"Are you sure?"

*Dammit.*

"I—" She buried her face in her hands. "It's not the way it looks."

"Okay. I . . . Okay," he repeated slowly. His voice was deep and low and sounded a lot like he was on his way to getting mad. Like maybe he was already mad. "What's going on here?"

There was simply no way to explain this. Any normal person would have found Olive's situation odd, but Adam Carlsen, who obviously considered empathy a bug and not a feature of humanity, could never understand. She let her hands fall to her sides and took a deep breath.

"I . . . listen, I don't mean to be rude, but this is really none of your business."

He stared at her for a moment, and then he nodded. "Yes. Of course." He must be getting back into his usual groove, because his tone had lost some of its surprise and was back to normal—dry. Laconic. "I'll just go back to my office and begin to work on my Title IX complaint."

Olive exhaled in relief. "Yeah. That would be great, since— Wait. Your what?"

He cocked his head. "Title IX is a federal law that protects against sexual misconduct within academic settings—"

"I know what Title IX is."

"I see. So you willfully chose to disregard it."

"I— What? No. No, I didn't!"

He shrugged. "I must be mistaken, then. Someone else must have assaulted me."

"Assault—I didn't 'assault' you."

"You did kiss me."

"But not *really*."

"Without first securing my consent."

"I *asked* if I could kiss you!"

"And then did so without waiting for my response."

"What? You said yes."

"Excuse me?"

She frowned. "I asked if I could kiss you, and you said yes."

"Incorrect. You asked if you could kiss me and I snorted."

"I'm *pretty sure* I heard you said yes."

He lifted one eyebrow, and for a minute Olive let herself day-dream of drowning someone. Dr. Carlsen. Herself. Both sounded like great options.

"Listen, I'm really sorry. It was a weird situation. Can we just forget that this happened?"

He studied her for a long moment, his angular face serious and something else, something that she couldn't quite decipher because she was too busy noticing all over again how damn towering and broad he was. Just massive. Olive had always been slight, just this side of too slender, but girls who are five eight rarely felt diminutive. At least until they found themselves standing next to Adam Carlsen. She'd known that he was tall, of course, from seeing him around the department or walking across campus, from sharing the elevator with him, but they'd never interacted. Never been this close.

*Except for a second ago, Olive. When you almost put your tongue in his—*

"Is there something wrong?" He sounded almost concerned.

"What? No. No, there isn't."

"Because," he continued calmly, "kissing a stranger at midnight in a science lab might be a sign that there is."

"There isn't."

Carlsen nodded, thoughtful. "Very well. Expect mail in the next few days, then." He began to walk past her, and she turned to yell after him.

"You didn't even ask my name!"

"I'm sure anyone could figure it out, since you must have swiped your badge to get in the labs area after hours. Have a good night."

"Wait!" She leaned forward and stopped him with a hand on his wrist. He paused immediately, even though it was obvious that it would take him no effort to free himself, and stared pointedly at the spot where her fingers had wrapped around his skin—right below a wristwatch that probably cost half her yearly graduate salary. Or all of it.

She let go of him at once and took one step back. "Sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"The kiss. Explain."

Olive bit into her lower lip. She had truly screwed herself over. She had to tell him, now. "Anh Pham." She looked around to make sure Anh was really gone. "The girl who was passing by. She's a graduate student in the biology department."

Carlsen gave no indication of knowing who Anh was.

"Anh has . . ." Olive pushed a strand of brown hair behind her ear. This was where the story became embarrassing. Complicated, and a little juvenile sounding. "I was seeing this guy in the department. Jeremy Langley, he has red hair and works with Dr. . . . Anyway, we went out just a couple of times, and then I brought him to Anh's birthday party, and they just sort of hit it off and—"

Olive shut her eyes. Which was probably a bad idea, because now she could see it painted on her lids, how her best friend and her date had bantered in that bowling alley, as if they'd known each other their whole lives; the never-exhausted topics of conversation, the laughter, and then, at the end of the night, Jeremy following Anh's every move with his gaze. It had been painfully clear who he was interested in. Olive waved a hand and tried for a smile.

"Long story short, after Jeremy and I ended things he asked Anh out. She said no because of . . . girl code and all that, but I can tell that she *really* likes him. She's afraid to hurt my feelings, and no matter how many times I told her it was fine she wouldn't believe me."

*Not to mention that the other day I overheard her confess to our friend Malcolm that she thought Jeremy was awesome, but she could never betray me by going out with him, and she sounded so dejected. Disappointed and insecure, not at all like the spunky, larger-than-life Anh I am used to.*

"So I just lied and told her that I was already dating someone else. Because she's one of my closest friends and I'd never seen her

like a guy this much and I want her to have the good things she deserves and I'm positive that she would do the same for me and—" Olive realized that she was rambling and that Carlsen couldn't have cared less. She stopped and swallowed, even though her mouth felt dry. "Tonight. I told her I'd be on a date *tonight*."

"Ah." His expression was unreadable.

"But I'm not. So I decided to come in to work on an experiment, but Anh showed up, too. She wasn't supposed to be here. But she was. Coming this way. And I panicked—well." Olive wiped a hand down her face. "I didn't really think."

Carlsen didn't say anything, but it was there in his eyes that he was thinking, *Obviously*.

"I just needed her to believe that I was on a date."

He nodded. "So you kissed the first person you saw in the hallway. Perfectly logical."

Olive winced. "When you put it like that, perhaps it wasn't my best moment."

"Perhaps."

"But it wasn't my worst, either! I'm pretty sure Anh saw us. Now she'll think that I was on a date with you and she'll hopefully feel free to go out with Jeremy and—" She shook her head. "Listen. I'm so, so sorry about the kiss."

"Are you?"

"Please, don't report me. I really thought I heard you say yes. I promise I didn't mean to . . ."

Suddenly, the enormity of what she had just done fully dawned on her. She had just kissed a random guy, a guy who happened to be the most notoriously unpleasant faculty member in the biology department. She'd misunderstood a *snort* for consent, she'd basically attacked him in the hallway, and now he was staring at her in that odd, pensive way, so large and focused and close to her, and . . .

*Shit.*

Maybe it was the late night. Maybe it was that her last coffee had been sixteen hours ago. Maybe it was Adam Carlsen looking down at her, like *that*. All of a sudden, this entire situation was just too much.

"Actually, you're absolutely right. And I am so sorry. If you felt in any way harassed by me, you really should report me, because it's only fair. It was a horrible thing to do, though I really didn't want to . . . Not that my intentions matter; it's more like your perception of . . ."

*Crap, crap, crap.*

"I'm going to leave now, okay? Thank you, and . . . I am so, so, so sorry." Olive spun around on her heels and ran away down the hallway.

"Olive," she heard him call after her. "Olive, wait—"

She didn't stop. She sprinted down the stairs to the first floor and then out the building and across the pathways of the sparsely lit Stanford campus, running past a girl walking her dog and a group of students laughing in front of the library. She continued until she was standing in front of her apartment's door, stopping only to unlock it, making a beeline for her room in the hope of avoiding her roommate and whoever he might have brought home tonight.

It wasn't until she slumped on her bed, staring at the glow-in-the-dark stars glued to her ceiling, that she realized she had neglected to check on her lab mice. She had also left her laptop on her bench and her sweatshirt somewhere in the lab, and she had completely forgotten to stop at the store and buy the coffee she'd promised Malcolm she'd get for tomorrow morning.

*Shit. What a disaster of a day.*

It never occurred to Olive that Dr. Adam Carlsen—known ass—had called her by her name.