

THE GLOBAL BESTSELLER AND TIKTOK SENSATION

ALI HAZELWOOD

'Hazelwood is a
Grandmaster of romance'

Ashley Poston, author of
The Dead Romantics

Check & Mate



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PRAISE FOR
ALI HAZELWOOD

“A literary breakthrough. . . . *The Love Hypothesis* is a self-assured debut, and we hypothesize it’s just the first bit of greatness we’ll see from an author who somehow has the audacity to be both an academic powerhouse and divinely talented novelist.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Contemporary romance’s unicorn: the elusive marriage of deeply brainy and delightfully escapist. . . . *The Love Hypothesis* has wild commercial appeal, but the quieter secret is that there is a specific audience, made up of all of the Olives in the world, who have deeply, ardently waited for this exact book.”

—Christina Lauren, *New York Times* bestselling author

“With her sophomore novel, Ali Hazelwood proves that she is the perfect writer to show that science is sexy as hell, and that love can ‘STEM’ from the most unlikely places. She’s my newest must-buy author.”

—Jodi Picoult, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Wish You Were Here*

“Funny, sexy, and smart, Ali Hazelwood did a terrific job with *The Love Hypothesis*.”

—Mariana Zapata, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Gloriously nerdy and sexy, with on-point commentary about women in STEM.”

—Helen Hoang, *New York Times* bestselling author, on *Love on the Brain*

“STEMinists, assemble. Your world is about to be rocked.”

—Elena Armas, *New York Times* bestselling author, on *Love on the Brain*

“This tackles one of my favorite tropes—Grumpy meets Sunshine—in a fun and utterly endearing way. . . . I loved the nods towards fandom and romance novels, and I couldn’t put it down. Highly recommended!”

—Jessica Clare, *New York Times* bestselling author, on *The Love Hypothesis*

“Pure slow-burning gold with lots of chemistry.”

—PopSugar

“A beautifully written romantic comedy with a heroine you will instantly fall in love with, *The Love Hypothesis* is destined to earn a place on your keeper shelf.”

—Elizabeth Everett, author of *A Lady’s Formula for Love*

“Smart, witty dialog and a diverse cast of likable secondary characters. . . . A realistic, amusing novel that readers won’t be able to put down.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“Hilarious and heartwarming, *The Love Hypothesis* is romantic comedy at its best. . . . A perfect amalgamation of sex and science, sure to appeal to readers of Christina Lauren or Abby Jimenez.”

—Shelf Awareness

“With whip-smart and endearing characters, snappy prose, and a quirky take on a favorite trope, Hazelwood convincingly navigates the fraught shoals of academia.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

Also by Ali Hazelwood

ADULT NOVELS

The Love Hypothesis

Love on the Brain

Love, Theoretically

ADULT ANTHOLOGY

Loathe to Love You

Check & Mate

ALI HAZELWOOD



SPHERE

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Contents

Prologue

Part One: Openings

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Part Two: Middle Game

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Part Three: End Game

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty-One

Epilogue

*To Sarah A. and Helen,
who'll always be my faves.*

Prologue

“I am reliably informed that you’re a Gen Z sex symbol.”

I nearly drop my phone.

Okay: I do drop my phone, but I save it before it splashes into a beaker full of ammonia. Then I glance around the chemistry classroom, wondering if anyone else heard.

The other students are either texting or puttering around with their equipment. Mrs. Agarwal is at her desk, pretending to grade papers but probably reading Bill Nye erotic fanfiction. A hopefully- not- lethal smell of ethanoic acid wafts up from my bench, but my AirPods are still in my ears.

No one is paying attention to me or the video on my phone, so I press Play to resume it.

“It was on Time magazine two weeks ago. On the cover. A picture of your face, and then ‘A Gen Z sex symbol.’ How does that feel?”

I am expecting to see Zendaya. Harry Styles. Billie Eilish. The entirety of BTS, crammed on the couch of whatever latenight show the YouTube autoplay algorithm decided to feed me after the pH experiment tutorial ended. But it’s just some dude. A boy, even? He looks out of place in the red velvet chair, with his dark shirt, dark slacks, dark hair, dark expression. Intensely unreadable as he says in a deep, serious voice, *“It feels wrong.”*

“It does?” the host— Jim or James or Jimmy— asks.

“The Gen Z part is correct,” the guest says. *“Not so much the sex*

symbol.”

The audience eats it up, clapping and hooting, and that’s when I decide to read the caption. *Nolan Sawyer*, it says. There’s a description explaining who he is, but I don’t need it. I might not recognize the face, but I can’t remember a moment in my life when I didn’t know the name.

Meet the Kingkiller: The No. 1 chess player in the world.

“Let me tell you something, Nolan: smart is the new sexy.”

“Still not sure I qualify.” His tone is so dry, it has me wondering how his publicist talked him into this interview. But the audience laughs, and the host does, too. He leans forward, obviously charmed by this young man who’s built like an athlete, thinks like a theoretical physicist, and has the net worth of a Silicon Valley entrepreneur. An unusual, handsome prodigy who won’t admit to being special.

I wonder if Jim- Jimmy- James has heard what *I’ve* heard. The gossip. The whispered stories. The dark rumors about the golden boy of chess.

“Let’s just agree that chess is the new sexy. And you’re the one who made it so— there has been a chess renaissance since you started playing. Someone was running commentaries of your games, and they went viral on TikTok— ChessTok, my writers tell me it’s called— and now more people than ever are learning how to play. But first things first: you are a Grandmaster, which is the highest title a chess player can achieve, and just won your second World Championship, against”— the host has to look down at his card, because normal Grandmasters are not as famous as Sawyer— *“Andreas Antonov. Congratulations.”*

Sawyer nods, once.

“And you just turned eighteen. When, again?”

“Three days ago.”

Three days ago, *I* turned sixteen.

Ten years and three days ago, I received my first chess set— plastic pieces, pink and purple— and cried with joy. I’d use it all day long, carry it everywhere with me, then snuggle it in my sleep.

Now I can’t even remember the feel of a pawn in my hand.

“You started playing very young. Did your parents teach you?”

“My grandfather,” Sawyer says. The host looks taken aback, like he didn’t think Sawyer would go *there*, but recovers quickly.

“When did you realize that you were good enough to be a pro?”

“Am I good enough?”

More audience laughter. I roll my eyes. *“Did you know you wanted to be a pro chess player from the start?”*

“Yes. I knew all along that there was nothing that I liked as much as winning a chess match.”

The host’s eyebrow lifts. *“Nothing?”*

Sawyer doesn’t hesitate. *“Nothing.”*

“And— ”

“Mallory?” A hand settles on my shoulder. I jump and tear out one pod. *“Did you need any help?”*

“Nope!” I smile at Mrs. Agarwal, sliding the phone into my back pocket. *“Just finished the instruction video.”*

“Oh, perfect. Make sure you put on gloves before you add the acidic solution.”

“I will.”

The rest of the class is almost done with the experiment. I furrow my brow, hurry to catch up, and a few minutes later, when I can’t find my funnel and spill my baking soda, I stop thinking about Sawyer, or about the way his voice sounded when he said that he never wanted anything as much as chess. And I don’t think of him again for a little over two years. That is, until the day we play for the first time.

And I wipe the floor with him.

PART ONE

Openings



Chapter One



Two years later

Easton is smart, because she lures me out with the promise of free boba. But she's also dumb, because she doesn't wait till I'm sipping my chocolate cream cheese foam bubble tea before saying, "I need a favor."

"Nope." I grin at her. Pluck two straws from the bin. Offer her one, which she ignores.

"Mal. You haven't even heard what—"

"No."

"It's about chess."

"Well, in that case . . ." I smile my thanks to the girl holding out my order. We went out twice, maybe three times last summer, and I have vague, pleasant memories of her. Raspberry ChapStick lips; Bon Iver purring in her Hyundai Elantra; a soft hand, cool under my tank top. Sadly, none of said memories include her name. But she wrote *Melanie* across my boba, so that's okay.

We share a brief, secret smile, and I turn to Easton. "In that case, double no."

"I'm short a player. For a team tournament."

"I don't play anymore." I check my phone. It's 12:09— twentyone more minutes before I need to be back at the garage. Bob, my boss, is not exactly a kind, forgiving human being. Sometimes I doubt he's even human. "Let's drink this outside, before I spend the afternoon under a Chevy Silverado."

“Come on, Mal.” She glowers at me. “It’s chess. You still play.”

When my sister Darcy’s sixth- grade teacher announced that she was going to send the class guinea pig to a “farm upstate,” Darcy, unable to ascertain whether the farm really existed, decided to kidnap him. The piggie, not the teacher. I’ve been cohabitating with Goliath the Abducted for the past year— a year spent denying him scraps of our dinners ever since the vet we cannot afford begged us on his knees to put him on a diet. Unfortunately, Goliath has the uncanny ability to stare me into submission every single time.

Just like Easton does. Their expressions exude the same pure, unyielding stubbornness.

“Nuh-uh.” I suck on my tea. Divine. “I’ve forgotten the rules. What does the little horsie do, again?”

“Very funny.”

“No, really, which one is chess? The queen conquers Catan without passing Go— ”

“I’m not asking you to do what you used to do.”

“What *did* I use to do?”

“You know when you were thirteen and you’d beaten all the other kids at the Paterson Chess Club, then the teenagers, then the adults? And they brought in people from New York for you to humiliate? I don’t need *that*.”

I was actually twelve when that happened. I remember it well, because Dad stood next to me, hand warm on my bony shoulder, proclaiming proudly, *I haven’t won a game against Mallory since she turned eleven a year ago. Extraordinary, isn’t she?* But I don’t point it out, and instead plop down in a patch of grass, next to a flower bed full of zinnias barely hanging on to life. August in New Jersey is no one’s favorite place.

“Remember halfway through my exhibition matches? When I was about to pass out and you told everyone to step back— ”

“— and I handed you my juice.” She sits next to me. I glance at her perfect eyeliner wing, then at my oil- stained coveralls, and it’s nice, how some things never change. Perfectionist Easton Peña, always with a plan, and her messy sidekick Mallory Greenleaf. We’ve been in the same class since first grade but didn’t really interact until she joined the Paterson Chess Club at ten. She was, in a way, already fully formed. Already the