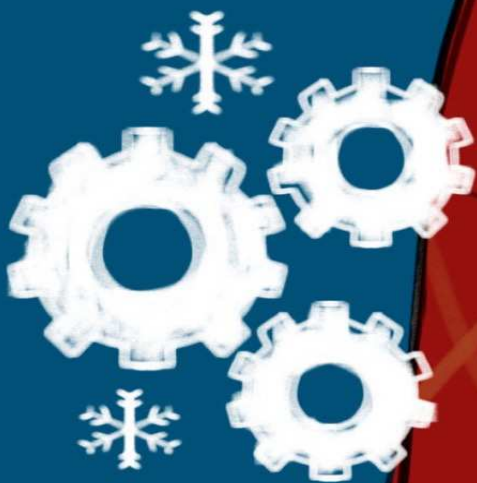


ALI HAZELWOOD

*New York Times Bestselling Author
of *The Love Hypothesis**

Below Zero



PRAISE FOR
The Love Hypothesis

“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 the Olives in the world, who have deeply, ardently waited for this exact book.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Christina Lauren

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

—*New York Times* bestselling author Mariana Zapata

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

—*New York Times* bestselling author Jessica Clare

“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.”

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“Smart, witty dialogue 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)

“With whip-smart and endearing characters, snappy prose, and a quirky take on a favorite trope, Hazelwood convincingly navigates the fraught shoals of academia. . . . This smart, sexy contemporary should delight a wide swath of romance lovers.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

Titles by Ali Hazelwood

The Love Hypothesis

LOATHE TO LOVE YOU

Under One Roof

Stuck with You

Below Zero

Below Zero

Ali Hazelwood

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For Shep and Celia. Still with no polar bears, but with lots of love.

Prologue

Svalbard Islands, Norway

Present

I dream of an ocean.

Not the Arctic, though. Not the one right here in Norway, with its close-packed, frothy waves constantly crashing against the coasts of the Svalbard archipelago. It's perhaps a bit unfair of me: the Barents Sea is perfectly worth dreaming of. So are its floating icebergs and inhospitable permafrost shores. All around me there is nothing but stark, cerulean beauty, and if this is the place where I die, alone and shivering and bruised and pretty damn hungry . . . well, I have no reason to bitch.

After all, blue was always my favorite color.

And yet, the dreams seem to disagree. I lie here, in my half-awake, half-unconscious state. I feel my body yield precious degrees of heat. I watch the ultraviolet morning light reach inside the crevasse that trapped me hours ago, and the only ocean I can dream of is the one on Mars.

"Dr. Arroyo? Can you hear me?"

I mean, this entire thing is almost laughable. I am a NASA scientist. I have a doctorate in aerospace engineering and several publications in the field of planetary geology. At any given time, my brain is a jumbled maelstrom of stray thoughts on massive volcanism, crystal fluid dynamics, and the exact kind of anti-radiation equipment one would need to start a medium-size human colony on Kepler-452b. I promise I'm not being conceited when I say that I know pretty much all there is to know about Mars. Including the fact that there are no oceans on it, and the idea that there ever were is highly controversial among scientists.

So, yeah. My near-death dreams are ridiculous *and* scientifically inaccurate. I would laugh about it, but I have a sprained ankle and I'm approximately ten feet below the ground. It seems better to just save my energy for what's to come. I never really believed in an afterlife, but who knows? Better hedge my bets.

"Dr. Arroyo, do you copy?"

The problem is, it calls to me, this nonexistent ocean on Mars. I feel the pull of it deep inside my belly, and it warms me even here, at the icy tip of the world. Its turquoise waters and rust-tinted coastlines are approximately 200 million kilometers from the place where I'll die and rot, but I cannot shake the feeling that they want me closer. There is an ocean, a network of gullies, an entire giant planet full of iron oxide, and they're all calling to me. Asking me to give up. Lean in. Let go.

"Dr. Arroyo."

And then there are the voices. Random, improbable voices from my past. Well, okay: *a* voice. It's always the same, deep and rumbling, with no discernible accent and well-pronounced consonants. I don't really mind it, I must say. I'm not sure why my brain has decided to impose it on me just now, considering that it belongs to someone who doesn't like me much—someone I might like even less—but it's a pretty good voice. A+. Worth listening to in a death's door situation. Even though Ian Floyd was the one who never wanted me to come here to Svalbard in the first place. Even though the last time we were together he was stubborn, and unkind, and unreasonable, and now he seems to sound only . . .

"Hannah."

Close. Is this really Ian Floyd? Sounding *close*?

Impossible. My brain has frozen into stupidity. It must really be all over for me. My time has come, the end is nigh, and—

"Hannah. I'm coming for you."

My eyes spring open. I'm not dreaming anymore.

Chapter 1

Johnson Space Center, Houston, U.S.

One year ago

On my very first day at NASA, at some point between the HR intake and a tour of the Electromagnetic Compliance Studies building, some overzealous newly hired engineer turns to the rest of us and asks, “Don’t you feel like your entire life has led you to this moment? Like you were *meant* to be here?”

Aside from Eager Beaver, there are fourteen of us starting today. Fourteen of us fresh out of top-five graduate programs, and prestigious internships, and CV-beefing industry jobs accepted exclusively to look more attractive during NASA’s next round of recruitment. There’re fourteen of us, and the thirteen that aren’t me are all nodding enthusiastically.

“Always knew I’d end up at NASA, ever since I was like, five,” says a shy-looking girl. She’s been sticking by my side for the entire morning, I assume because we’re the only two non-dudes in the group. I must say, I don’t mind it too much. Perhaps it’s because she’s a computer engineer while I’m aerospace, which means there’s a good chance that I won’t see much of her after today. Her name is Alexis, and she’s wearing a NASA necklace on top of a NASA T-shirt that only barely covers the NASA tattoo on her upper arm. “I bet it’s the same for you, Hannah,” she adds, and I smile at her, because Sadie and Mara insisted that I shouldn’t be my resting-bitch self now that we live in different time zones. They are convinced that I need to make new friends, and I have reluctantly agreed to put in a solid effort just to get them to shut up. So I nod at Alexis like I know exactly what she means, while privately I think: *Not really.*

When people find out that I have a Ph.D., they tend to assume that I was always an academically driven child. That I cruised through school my entire life in a constant effort to overachieve. That I did so well as a student, I decided to remain one long after I could have booked it and freed myself from the shackles of homework and nights spent cramming for never-ending tests. People assume, and for the most part I let them believe what they want. Caring what others think is a lot of work, and—with a handful of exceptions—I'm not a huge fan of work.

The truth, though, is quite the opposite. I hated school at first sight—with the direct consequence that school hated the sullen, listless child that I was right back. In the first grade, I refused to learn how to write my name, even though *Hannah* is only three letters repeated twice. In junior high, I set a school record for the highest number of consecutive detention days—what happens when you decide to take a stand and not do homework for any of your classes because they are too boring, too difficult, too useless, or all of the above. Until the end of my sophomore year, I couldn't wait to graduate and leave all of school behind: the books, the teachers, the grades, the cliques. Everything. I didn't really have a plan for *after*, except for leaving *now* behind.

I had this feeling, my entire life, that I was never going to be *enough*. I internalized pretty early that I was never going to be as good, as smart, as lovable, as wanted as my perfect older brother and my flawless older sister, and after several failed attempts at measuring up, I just decided to stop trying. Stop caring, too. By the time I was in my teens, I just wanted . . .

Well. To this day, I'm not sure what I wanted at fifteen. For my parents to stop fretting about my inadequacies, maybe. For my peers to stop asking me how I could be the sibling of two former all-star valedictorians. I wanted to stop feeling as though I were rotting in my own aimlessness, and I wanted my head to stop spinning all the time. I was confused, contradictory, and, looking back, probably a shitty teenager to be around. Sorry, Mom and Dad and the rest of the world. No hard feelings, eh?

Anyhow, I was a pretty lost kid. Until Brian McDonald, a junior, decided that asking me to homecoming by opening with “Your eyes are as blue as a

sunset on Mars” might get me to say yes.

For the record, it’s a horrifying pickup line. Do not recommend. Use sparingly. Use not at all, especially if—like me—the person you’re trying to pick up has brown eyes and is fully aware of it. But what was an undeniable low point in the history of flirting ended up serving, if you’ll forgive a very self-indulgent metaphor, as a meteorite of sorts: it crashed into my life and changed its trajectory.

In the following years, I would find out that all of my colleagues at NASA have their own origin story. Their very own space rock that altered the course of their existence and pushed them to become engineers, physicists, biologists, astronauts. It’s usually an elementary school trip to the Kennedy Space Center. A Carl Sagan book under the Christmas tree. A particularly inspiring science teacher at summer camp. My encounter with Brian McDonald falls under that umbrella. It just happens to involve a guy who (allegedly) went on to moderate incel message boards on Reddit, which makes it just a tad lamer.

People obsessed with space are split into two distinct camps. The ones who want to *go* to space and crave the zero gravity, the space suits, drinking their own recycled urine. And there’re people like me: what we want—oftentimes what we’ve wanted since our frontal lobes were still undeveloped enough to have us thinking that toe shoes are a good fashion statement—is to *know* about space. At the beginning it’s simple stuff: What’s it made of? Where does it end? Why do the stars not fall and crash onto our heads? Then, once you’ve read enough, the big topics come in: Dark matter. Multiverse. Black holes. That’s when you realize how little we understand about this giant thing we’re part of. When you start thinking about whether you can help produce some new knowledge.

And that’s how you end up at NASA.

So, back to Brian McDonald. I didn’t go to homecoming with him. (I didn’t go to homecoming at all, because it wasn’t really my scene, and even if it had been, I was grounded for failing an English midterm, and even if I hadn’t been, fuck Brian McDonald and his poorly researched pickup lines.) However, something about the whole thing stuck with me. Why would a

sunset be blue? And on a red planet, no less? It seemed like something worth knowing. So I spent the night in my room, googling dust particles in the Martian atmosphere. By the end of the week, I'd signed up for a library card and devoured three books. By the end of the month, I was studying calculus to understand concepts like thrust over time and harmonic series. By the end of the year, I had a goal. Hazy, confused, not yet fully defined, but a goal nonetheless.

For the first time in my life.

I'll spare you most of the grueling details, but I spent the rest of high school busting ass to make up for the ass I hadn't busted for the previous decade. Just picture an '80s training montage, but instead of running in the snow and doing pull-ups with a repurposed broomstick, I was hard at work on books and YouTube lectures. And it was *hard* work: wanting to understand concepts like H-R diagrams or synodic periods or syzygy did not make them any easier to grasp. Before, I'd never really *tried*. But at the tender age of sixteen, I was confronted with the unbearable turmoil that comes with trying your best and realizing that sometimes it simply isn't enough. As much as it pains me to say it, I don't have an IQ of 130. To really understand the books I wanted to read, I had to review the same concepts over, and over, and fucking *over* again. Initially I coasted on the high of finding out! new! things!, but after a while my motivation began to wane, and I started to wonder what I was even doing. I was studying a bunch of really basic science stuff, to be able to graduate to more advanced science stuff, so that one day I'd actually know all the science stuff about Mars and . . . and what then? Go on *Jeopardy!* and pick Space for 500? Didn't really seem worth it.

Then August of 2012 happened.

When the *Curiosity* rover approached the Martian atmosphere, I stayed up until one A.M. I chugged down two bottles of Diet Coke, ate peanuts for good luck, and when the landing maneuver began, I bit into my lip until it bled. The moment it safely touched the ground I screamed, I laughed, I cried, and then got grounded for a week for waking up the entire household the night before my brother left for his Peace Corps trip, but I didn't care.

In the following months I devoured every little piece of news NASA issued on *Curiosity's* mission, and as I wondered about who was behind the images of the Gale Crater, the interpretation of the raw data, the reports on the molecular composition of the Aeolis Palus, my hazy, undefinable goal began to solidify.

NASA.

NASA was the place to be.

The summer between junior and senior years, I found a ranking of the hundred best engineering programs in the U.S. and decided to apply to the top twenty. "You should probably extend your reach. Add a few safety schools," my guidance counselor told me. "I mean, your SATs are really good and your GPA has improved a lot, but you have a bunch of"—long pause for throat clearing—"academic red flags on your permanent record."

I thought about it for a minute. Who would have figured that being a little shit for the first one and a half decades of my life would bring lasting consequences? Not me. "Okay. Fine. Let's do the top thirty-five."

As it turns out, I didn't need to. I got accepted to a whopping (drumroll, please) . . . one top-twenty school. A real winner, huh? I don't know if they misfiled my application, misplaced half of my transcripts, or had a brain fart in which the entire admissions office temporarily forgot what a promising student is supposed to look like. I put down my deposit and approximately forty-five seconds after getting my letter told Georgia Tech that I'd be attending.

No backsies.

So I moved to Atlanta, and I gave it my all. I chose the majors and the minors I knew NASA would want to see on a CV. I got the federal internships. I studied hard enough to ace the tests, did the fieldwork, applied to grad school, wrote the thesis. When I look back at the last ten years, school and work and schoolwork are pretty much all that stand out—with the notable exception of meeting Sadie and Mara, and of begrudgingly watching them carve spots for themselves in my heart. God, they take up *so much room*.

“It’s like space is your whole personality,” the girl I casually hooked up with during most of my sophomore year of undergrad told me. It was after I explained that no, thank you, I wasn’t interested in going out for coffee to meet her friends because of a lecture on Kalpana Chawla I was planning to attend. “Do you have any other interests?” she asked. I threw her a quick “Nope,” waved good-bye, and wasn’t too surprised when, the following week, she didn’t reply to my offer to meet up. After all, I clearly couldn’t give her what she wanted.

“Is this really enough for you? Just having sex with me when you feel like it and ignoring me the rest of the time?” the guy I slept with during the last semester of my Ph.D. asked. “You just seem . . . I don’t know. *Extremely* emotionally unavailable.” I think maybe he was right, because it’s barely been a year and I can’t quite recall his face.

Exactly a decade after Brian McDonald miscolored my eyes, I applied for a NASA position. I got an interview, then a job offer, and now I’m here. But unlike the other new hires, I don’t feel like Mars and I were always meant to be. There was no guarantee, no invisible string of destiny tethering me to this job, and I’m positive that I made my way here through sheer brute force, but does it matter?

Nope. Not even a little bit.

So I turn to look at Alexis. This time, her NASA necklace, her T-shirt, her tattoo—they pull a sincere smile out of me. It’s been a long journey here. The destination was never a sure thing, but I have arrived, and I’m uncharacteristically, sincerely, satisfyingly happy. “Feels like home,” I say, and the enthusiastic way she nods reverberates deep down inside my chest.

At one point in history, every single member of the Mars Exploration Program had their first day at NASA, too. They stood in the very spot where I’m standing right now. Gave their banking information for direct deposit, had an unflattering picture taken for their badges, shook hands with the HR reps. Complained about Houston’s weather, bought terrible coffee from the cafeteria, rolled their eyes at visitors doing touristy things, let the Saturn V rocket take their breath away. Every single member of the Mars Exploration Program did this, just like I will.

I step into the conference room where some fancy NASA big shot is scheduled to talk to us, take in the window view of the Johnson Space Center and the remnants of objects that were once launched across the stars, and feel like every single inch of this place is thrilling, fascinating, electrifying, intoxicating.

Perfect.

Then I turn around. And, of course, find the very last person I wanted to see.

Chapter 2

Caltech Campus, Pasadena, California

Five years, six months ago

I'm finishing my initial semester of grad school when I first meet Ian Floyd, and it's Helena Harding's fault.

Dr. Harding is a lot of things: my friend Mara's Ph.D. mentor; one of the most celebrated environmental scientists of the twenty-first century; a generally crabby human being; and, last but not least, my Water Resources Engineering professor.

It is, quite honestly, an all-around shitty class: mandatory; irrelevant to my academic, professional, or personal interests; and highly focused on the intersection of the hydrologic cycle and the design of urban storm-sewer systems. For the most part, I spend the lectures wishing I were anywhere else: in line at the DMV, at the market buying magic beans, taking Analytical Transonic and Supersonic Aerodynamics. I do the least I can to pull a low B—which, in the unjust scam of graduate school, is the minimum passing grade—until week three or four of classes, when Dr. Harding introduces a new, cruel assignment that has fuck all to do with water.

“Find someone who has the engineering job you want at the end of your Ph.D. and do an informational interview with them,” she tells us. “Then write a report about it. Due by the end of the semester. Don't come to me bitching about it during office hours, because I *will* call security to escort you out.” I have a feeling that she's looking at me while saying it. It's probably just my guilty conscience.

“Honestly, I'm just going to ask Helena if I can interview *her*. But if you want, I think I have a cousin or something at NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab,”

Mara says offhandedly later that day, while we're sitting on the steps outside the Beckman Auditorium having a quick lunch before heading back to our labs.

I wouldn't say that we're close, but I've decided that I like her. A lot. At this point, my grad school attitude is some mild variant of *I did not come here to make friends*: I don't feel in competition with the rest of the program, but neither am I particularly invested in anything that isn't my work in the aeronautics lab, including getting acquainted with other students, or, you know . . . learning their names. I'm fairly sure that my lack of interest is strongly broadcasted, but either Mara didn't pick up the transmission, or she's gleefully ignoring it. She and Sadie found each other in the first couple of days, and then, for reasons I don't fully understand, decided to find me.

Hence Mara sitting next to me, telling me about her JPL contacts.

"A cousin or something?" I ask, curious. It seems a bit sketchy. "You think?"

"Yeah, I'm not sure." She shrugs and continues to make her way through a Tupperware of broccoli, an apple, and approximately two fucktons of Cheez-Its. "I don't really know much about him. His parents divorced, then people in my family had arguments and stopped talking to each other. There was a lot of prime Floyd dysfunction happening, so I haven't actually spoken to him in years. But I heard from one of my other cousins that he was working on that thing that landed on Mars back when we were in high school. It was called something like . . . *Contingency*, or *Carpentry*, or *Crudity*—"

"The *Curiosity* rover?"

"Yes! Maybe?"

I put my sandwich down. Swallow my bite. Clear my throat. "Your cousin or something was on the *Curiosity* rover team."

"I think so. Do the dates add up? Maybe it was some kind of summer internship? But honestly, it might just be Floyd family lore. I have an aunt who insists that we're related to the Finnish royals, and according to Wikipedia there are no Finnish royals. So." She shrugs and pops another handful of Cheez-Its in her mouth. "Would you like me to ask around, though? For the assignment?"

I nod. And I don't think much about it until a month or so later. By then, through means that I am still unable to divine, Mara and Sadie have managed to worm their way into my heart, causing me to amend my previous *I did not come here to make friends* stance to a slightly altered *I did not come here to make friends, but hurt my weird Cheez-It friend or my other weird soccer friend and I will beat you up with a lead pipe till you piss blood for the rest of your life*. Truculent? Perhaps. I feel little, but surprisingly deeply.

"By the way, I sent you my cousin-or-something's contact info a while ago," Mara tells me one night. We're at the cheapest grad bar we've been able to find. She's on her second Midori sour of the night. "Did you get it?"

I raise my eyebrow. "Is that the random string of numbers you emailed me three days ago? With no subject line, no text, no explanations? The one I figured was just you tracking your lottery dream numbers?"

"Sounds like it, yeah."

Sadie and I exchange a long look.

"Hey, you ungrateful goblin, I had to call about fifteen people I'd sworn never to talk to again to get Ian's number. *And*, I had to have my evil great-aunt Delphina promise to blackmail him into saying yes once you reach out to ask for a meeting. So you better use that number, and you better play the Mega Millions."

"If you win," Sadie added, "we split three ways."

"Of course." I hide my smile in my glass. "What's he like, anyway?"

"Who?"

"The cousin-or-something. Ian, you said?"

"Yup. Ian Floyd." Mara thinks about it for a second. "Can't really say, because I've met him at like, two Thanksgivings fifteen years ago, before his parents split. Then his mom moved him to Canada and . . . I don't even know, honestly. The only thing I remember is that he was tall. But he was also a few years older than me? So maybe he's actually three feet. Oh, also, his hair is more brown? Which is kind of rare for a Floyd. I know it's scientifically unsound, but our brand of ginger is *not* recessive."

Great-Aunt Delphina's emotional manipulation game is clearly on point, because when my assignment's deadline approaches and I text Ian Floyd in a