

ALI HAZELWOOD

New York Times Bestselling Author of *Deep End*



☒ PROBLEMATIC
☒ SUMMER
☐ ROMANCE

a novel

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 [a] divinely talented novelist.”

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“Another Hazelwood home run.”

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“*Bride* is a delight! Passionate and witty and primal in its intensity, Ali Hazelwood’s paranormal debut introduces a world as intriguing as its characters. I absolutely adored this read.”

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“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.”

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“It’s official. There’s nothing Ali Hazelwood can’t do brilliantly when it comes to writing. LOVED it.”

—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Jodi Picoult

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—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Hannah Grace on *Bride*

“Everything I want and more in a paranormal romance novel.”

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—*New York Times* bestselling author Simone St. James

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

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

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

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—*New York Times* bestselling author Elena Armas 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 toward fandom and romance novels, and I couldn’t put it down. Highly recommend!”

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“Ali Hazelwood finally gives us paranormal, with her trademark humor, twisty plot, and spice that doesn’t quit—buckle up.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Hannah Whitten on *Bride*

“Hazelwood unleashes her sparkling voice and wit on a paranormal Romeo and Juliet.”

—International bestselling author Ruby Dixon on *Bride*

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The Love Hypothesis

Love on the Brain

Love, Theoretically

Bride

Not in Love

Deep End

ANTHOLOGIES

Loathe to Love You

NOVELLAS

Under One Roof

Stuck with You

Below Zero

Two Can Play

Cruel Winter with You

YOUNG ADULT NOVELS

Check & Mate



Problematic Summer Romance

ALI HAZELWOOD



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Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[7 Days Before the Wedding](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[6 Days Before the Wedding](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

5 Days Before the Wedding

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

4 Days Before the Wedding

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

3 Days Before the Wedding

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

2 Days Before the Wedding

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

The Day of the Wedding

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[After the Wedding](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[*Author's Note*](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

*Once again, for Jen, the only one who asked for this.
Happy birthday. I made them extra messy, just for you.*



Prologue

It shames me to admit it, but for a brief period I seriously consider not showing up to my brother's wedding.

"Does Eli know?" my friend Jade asks.

"That I'd rather hug the floor of a lavatory than be present while he exchanges vows with the love of his life?"

"No. That you *overheard* him."

I shake my head, eyes glued to my skates. I like to pretend that the ice is the thing I would have been better off not knowing, and that I'm stabbing it over and over with my blades. A little violence never failed to brighten my mood.

"Maya, just don't go. It should be easy enough to skip. Isn't that the whole concept behind having a destination wedding? You discharge your familial duty by inviting everyone you've ever met—including creepy, doll-collecting aunts and the third cousin who gives sweaty hugs—while fully expecting that ninety percent of your acquaintances will send their regrets and refuse to show up. For real, if people had thousands of dollars to blow on a vacation, they wouldn't use it to go eat shitty fondant cake at a location picked by someone else."

"In theory, yeah." It would be so much more satisfying if the ice bled, just a little. "That's not why Eli's having a destination wedding, though. For one, he's flying out everyone who can't afford it." Which is me, mostly. My brother is older than I am, and has a very remunerative job—two qualities he shares with every other person on the guest list.

Not everyone can be like me, part of the glitzy, rarefied world of graduate students.

"Hang on. Isn't the wedding in fucking Italy? That's a lot of money."

"Yeah, well. He has it."

“Still. Can’t he just hoard it?” She pretends to gag. “I hate generous people.”

“Un-fucking-bearable.” I spin backward, arms out angel-wide. “It’s an intimate thing, anyway. Less than a dozen close friends for the week leading up to the wedding. About thirty more flying in for the rehearsal dinner. The other day I had this moment of weakness—*not* proud of it—and lied to Eli about having to stay longer in Austin for my final interview for that MIT project. Told him that I’d only be able to join them later, for the ceremony.” I sigh. Let myself fall back in step with Jade. The rink around us is nearly deserted, and the ice gleams white under the ceiling lights.

“And?”

“And, he stared at me like I’d pinched his dog, told him that the tooth fairy doesn’t exist, and tried to slide my foot up his ass. All at once. The look of sheer *betrayal*.”

“How *dare* he value your presence to this extent?”

“I was *enraged*. Here I am, thinking that my brother and I are both soulless, pragmatic people who don’t put stock in ceremonies. It’s not like I’m *not* planning to harass him and his new bride for the next five to eight decades.”

“Clearly, being in love has mellowed him past your direst suspicions. But do not fret, my friend.” Jade swirls to a stop in front of me, blocking my path. “You’ve come to the right person. I have *plenty* of experience in bullshitting my way out of things.”

“Right. Let’s hear it.”

“The most effective way to avoid a commitment is an ailment—one that meets three C’s.” She ticks off her finger. “Cringe. Contagious. And, above all, quick.”

I blink. She does not falter.

“Your illness must befall you so suddenly, you could not have anticipated it. It must be transmittable to others and prevent you from traveling. Most important, it must be embarrassing. I’m talking purulent itches. Odors.

Fluids. It has to be so devoid of grace, no one would believe that you're telling a lie, because why would you destroy your own good name—"

"Jade." I take her hands in mine. "Thank you. This is *priceless* information."

"You're welcome. I've been thinking of running a workshop."

"*But*, I didn't tell you about this because I wanted to brainstorm ways to avoid showing up."

"Oh. Really?"

I take a deep breath. "If my brother wants me at his wedding, I'm going. End of story."

"Ah. I see." A deep sigh. "Remember when you used to hate him?"

"Yup. I miss those times more than ever." I force myself to shrug. "But it's just a week. Honestly, I'm being a crybaby."

"You sure?"

I nod, and resume skating. A moment later, she catches up with me. "Well, don't forget that fulminating diarrhea is your friend." Her arm twists around mine. "It might come in handy, if you ever find yourself sitting across from Conor Harkness."



7 days before the wedding





Chapter 1

In a much-appreciated stroke of luck, my brother's favorite creature in the whole universe is a dog.

Or...that's not *wholly* true. The orbit of Eli's life spins around a single center of mass: Rue, his fiancée. And after two years of observing her, studying her, teasing her, squinting at her, and making stilted conversation with her, I must admit that I cannot blame him. Rue is unique, and complicated, and loyal, and silent, and most people don't like her very much.

I once suspected her to be cold. I worried that her relationship with my brother was doomed to be lopsided, and that it would end with her breaking his heart. And yet, over time it has become obvious that she'd do anything for him, including patiently pretending to be interested as his little sister ventilates the idea of getting bangs for the fourth time in a month.

I see her, and I have judged her worthy of his love.

The dog, however, predates Rue. Tiny is a sweet-tempered, two-hundred-pound mutt rescue whose hobbies include snoring, slobbering all over himself, and being indiscriminately, aggressively affectionate. And when Eli started musing that it might be nice, having a destination wedding with close friends and family, it was Rue who said, "*We should stay nearby, though.*"

"*Why?*"

"*Wouldn't you want Tiny to be there?*"

Indeed: worthy of his love.

Fortunately, Tiny is an enthusiastic traveler, which allowed them to keep Europe on the table. Unfortunately, not every airline allows in-cabin transport of bear-sized dogs who bark through their night terrors after being awakened by the smell of their own farts. Tiny's substandard sleep hygiene breaks my heart, but it's a sliver of an opportunity—one I latch on to like a barnacle in a hurricane.

“I found this airline,” I told Rue and Eli a couple of weeks before the wedding. *“The flight wouldn’t land until the day after yours, but it comes with all these special accommodations for large dogs. Tiny would be comfortable. And I could accompany him.”* I smiled at Tiny, whose head was already leaning against my knee. *“Hey, you perfect boy. Do you wanna go on a road trip with Aunt Maya?”*

His tail helicoptered so hard, I expected him to levitate.

That’s how I manage to shave one day off Hell Week *and* to hang out with the only dude who never once broke my heart. “Tiny Archibald Killgore,” I tell him when he rolls over in the aisle, soaking up belly rubs from the seventeen new best friends he made since boarding. “You could *never* disappoint me.”

My dream guy jumps onto my lap during a spot of turbulence, and forgets to leave.

Traveling from Austin to the Catania airport, one layover, takes about fifteen hours. I make the deliberate decision not to buy Wi-Fi, and instead of spending the trip stress-texting Jade, I focus on what needs to be done: buckling up.

Whatever defenses I’ve constructed against Conor Harkness, they are in dire need of bolstering.

I never doubted that he’d be at the wedding. He is, after all, my brother’s closest friend, if one doesn’t count Tiny. (I do.) They’re both general partners, or czars, or whatever their title is, of Harkness, a biotech-focused firm that does abstract moneymaking shit that I do not comprehend, but have been repeatedly reassured is legal. He is, in ways that have yet to be fully explained to me, the reason the wedding is happening in Sicily as opposed to Lake Canyon or Galveston, Texas.

Bar a falling-out over the dip of the Nasdaq composite, Conor was always going to be Eli’s best man.

Like I explained to Jade: *“The problem is not Conor, per se.”*

Although, even that feels like a lie. In the air, accepting a never-ending parade of increasingly caffeinated soft beverages from the flight attendants, I

realize that for someone who *isn't* a problem, Conor has a funny way of taking up my mental space, and I'm no fan of the brainpower I am expending on someone who hasn't thought of me in years.

Untrue, says a pedantic, timekeeping voice. *At the very least, he thought of you last August.*

It's so overplayed stock character—the twenty-something-year-old with a crush on her brother's friend, who happens to have a decade and a half on her. But maybe this is the week I sanitize myself. Redact my life. Purge it all out—Conor, and all the bullshit between us. Like drinking bleach: it's going to be unpleasant, might even kill me, but if it doesn't, I'll be so much stronger.

Or in critical organ failure. I'm not a doctor.

Still, I can dream—even as my nightmare scenario materializes just a few hours later, at the Catania airport. While Tiny charms the attendants in the pet-relief area, my phone scrabbles for a network to connect to. I glance around, taking in the warm greetings, loud gestures, and unhurried pace of Italy, and when texts begin buzzing in my hand, I tap on the most recent one from my brother.

ELI: A driver will pick you guys up and take you to the villa.

Sounds good, I type back.

It sounds, in fact, potentially *really* bad. It's that *you guys* that has me worried: Eli could be referring to Tiny and me, or to me and another guest. In which case, I want a name. Ideally, without having to ask.

But there's no time for that. Tiny's brick-sized stack of health papers is being inspected by customs agents, and we're pushed out of the security area, where a handful of tween girls chug espressos from tiny cups like they're mezcal shots. I clutch the handle of my luggage, ready for anything, and thank god for that. When I spot a bored-looking man holding a KILLGORE PARTY sign, and the brunette next to him, my heart drops down only to my stomach. As opposed to, say, the center of the planet.

Ah, yes. The exact person I hoped to avoid. Right in front of my eyes.