

THE GLOBAL BESTSELLER AND TIKTOK SENSATION

**ALI HAZELWOOD**

**'Hazelwood is a  
Grandmaster of romance'**

Ashley Poston, author of  
*The Dead Romantics*

# Check & Mate





**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**



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ALI HAZELWOOD



SPHERE





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*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.