

ALI HAZELWOOD

New York Times Bestselling Author of *Deep End*



☒ PROBLEMATIC
☒ SUMMER
☐ ROMANCE

a novel

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"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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"*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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—*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*

ALSO BY ALI HAZELWOOD



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

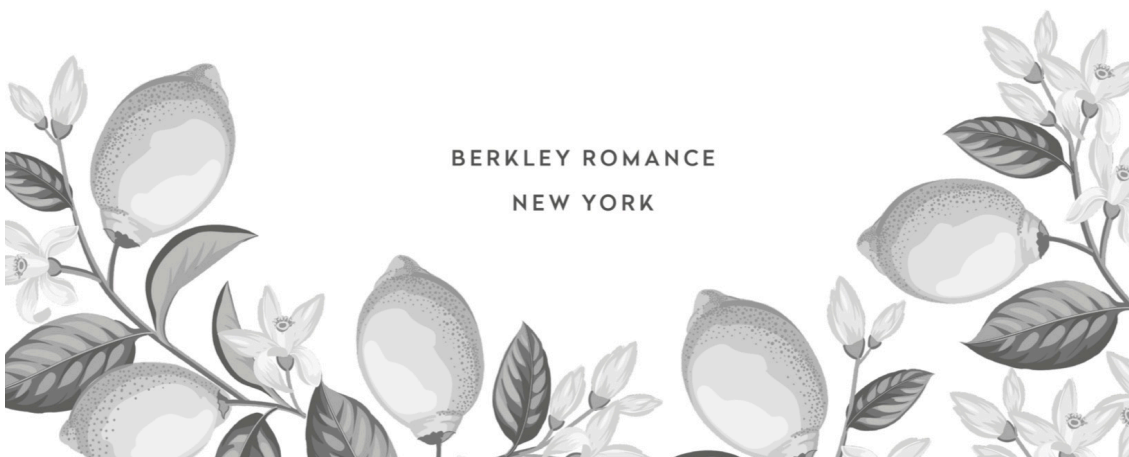
YOUNG ADULT NOVELS

Check & Mate



Problematic Summer Romance

ALI HAZELWOOD



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*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.

"Maya, right?" the woman asks, taking a few graceful steps in my direction. A wide smile carves a dimple on her left cheek. "I'm Avery." I don't say *I know*, because it would come across as chilling, like I'm the kind of person who invests huge chunks of her time online-stalking her crush's girlfriend to find out ultimately insignificant things about them.

It's *exactly* the kind of person I am, of course, but I will attempt to bring it to my grave. Jade is under strict instructions to wipe my devices the second I flatline.

"I've heard so much about you, Avery." It's the truest thing I can think of. I expect us to shake hands, but she pulls me into an affectionate hug, which has me begging my overtraveled pores to take a break from perspiring for just a second.

"It's so cool to finally meet you. Can't believe it hasn't happened before." She's a little shorter than me, and we fit oddly together. Her nose against my shoulder. My frizzy hair in her mouth. When I pull back, I feel awkward and frumpy in my dog hair-speckled sweats and UT crop tee.

I should act distant. Icily polite. The problem is, Avery seems really nice, and I like nice people. "It's so weird," I say, "that we both live in Austin—"

"—but we're meeting for the first time in Italy, I *know*. And after I've been hearing so much about Eli's sister."

"The rumors have been greatly exaggerated."

Her head tilts. "Rumors of what?"

"Everything."

She laughs, musical, a little husky. Shit, I think she might be sexy. "No, no—your brother and Minami are so proud of you. All those startups that were recruiting you, and that award you won, and the MIT stuff—everyone admires you so much. I was so sad to be the only one who hadn't met you."

"Yeah, well, that's on me. You only began working at Harkness last summer, right? I spent most of last year in Switzerland. Only came back a few weeks ago."

"Hard girl to track down, for sure." Her shrug is as beautiful and put together as the rest of her, even just off a transatlantic flight. I don't want to make her uncomfortable by gawking at her dewy skin and unpuffy eyes, so I force myself to glance around. Take in reunions, the babel of languages, hugs upon kisses upon hugs. Eli's driver crouches in front of Tiny and pets his head—a willing new subject to our king.

Avery's eyes remain locked on me. "Sorry. I don't mean to stare, but it's...striking."

"What is?"

"How much you look like Eli."

I laugh. "Yeah, I get that a lot." I'm used to being identified as Eli Killgore's little sister first, and only later as an individual in my own right. And I don't mind much.

"Yeah. You look like him, but also..."

"But also, not at all like him?"

"Yeah. It's uncanny."

I give her my standard response. "It's the curly black hair. And the blue eyes." Truthfully, it's much more than that. Eli and I have the same chin, sharp canines, legs too long for our torsos. We have strong eyebrows, Cupid's bows, and the infamous Killgore nose, roman-shaped and narrow-bridged. The main character of our faces. "*An important, proud nose*," Dad used to say, and I would shake my head and google makeup tutorials on how to smooch and mirror my way into a cute little button, or calculate how long I'd have to save

up for plastic surgery. When we were thirteen, Jade offered to hit me with a hockey stick to see if it would “*redistribute stuff, maybe?*” Hard pass.

Then, one day, I woke up and decided that my face was fine the way it was. Dad would be so happy that I’ve come to embrace, no, *flaunt* the Killgore genes.

“I love it, the family resemblance.” Avery laughs, sheepish. “I’ll stop talking about it. It’s just, you’re really pretty, and he’s...” She scowls, as if realizing where her sentence is heading.

“No, no, I get it.” I wave her worry away, because I know what it is that trips her up: That Eli and I are made of the same exact parts, but the resulting collages give starkly different impressions. That the same features can be handsome on someone and pretty on another. It doesn’t help that he’s traditionally masculine, while my personal style is as cutesy as they come.

“You know,” she says, “I think you and I are going to get along great.”

I swallow thickly. At her kindness. At the idea of having a relationship with this woman who...

“Go?” the driver asks, interrupting us. He’s older. Round. Doesn’t appear to speak enough English to follow the conversation between Avery and me, but boy, he’s bonded hard with Tiny. “Go,” he repeats more forcefully, pointing at the exit.

“Yes, please,” Avery says.

I nod, too. Relieved.

He points at my suitcase with a quizzical offer. When I shake my head he winks, grabs Avery’s luggage, and together we head into the bright Sicilian heat.