

LBRIS

We know
books

Problematic
Summer
Romance

ALI HAZELWOOD


SPHERE

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 smoke 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.

Chapter 2

first moved to Europe when I was nearly seventeen, after finishing high school early, driven by the unquenchable urge to *get the fuck out of Austin! Out of Texas! Out of the States! Right now!*

Get me. The fuck. Out.

It wasn't the most carefully deliberated decision. I didn't enroll at the University of Edinburgh because I wanted a prestigious research institution that would provide a rigorous academic environment—even though, stroke of luck, it did. My choice of college came down to three criteria: Did it offer me a spot with financial aid? Was the coursework in English? And: Was its location far enough from the black hole of my worst memories? Scotland simply happened to be the first to meet all of them, and I started packing my bags the second I received my acceptance.

I wasn't very rational. Then again: I'd challenge any teenager whose parents both unexpectedly died in the span of two years,

and who was sent off to live with her virtual stranger of a brother, *not* to act irrationally.

It was a rough time. Before the illness, before the accident, I'd been my mom's best friend and Daddy's little girl. I missed them so much, held inside such mountains of grief, I constantly felt on the brink of choking. Only one thing lent me air: my rage. It reached through my rib cage and pierced little holes in my lungs. It allowed me to function. It kept me alive.

Even at the time, as dizzy and disoriented and *young* as I was, I understood that neither my anger nor the strategies I used to cope were healthy, that I was pushing away the people who loved me, that my constant outbursts would only end up turning me into a wasteland. But being furious was all I had. Therapy helped, but not enough. Same for the meds. So I acted out. I defied my brother, who was just as much at a loss as I was. I said terrible things, reacted impulsively, and did a lot of dumb, risky shit.

I don't like to think about that time. I don't like to remember that I once went on a trip with my friends and disappeared off the face of the earth for twenty-four hours, worrying Eli sick. That I ruined his college jersey to retaliate after he yelled at me in front of the neighbors. That I lost my virginity on molly to some nameless guy who insisted that driver's licenses were a ploy of big government. Plainly, I don't like who I used to be. I've been trying not to use my pain as an excuse: I behaved stupidly, and selfishly, and out of anger, and I regret a lot about my actions from approximately age twelve to . . . I might *still* be in my regret era. Certainly, I'm *still* trying to make amends.

And yet, moving to Scotland was a solid decision—one that I would make all over again. Being on my own gave me the space I