Check & Mate



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SPHERE

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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 late-night 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.

PART ONE

Openings



Chapter One

Two years later

Easton is smart, because she lures me out with the promise of free boba. But she's also dumb, because she doesn't wait till I'm sipping my chocolate cream cheese foam bubble tea before saying, "I need a favor."

"Nope." I grin at her. Pluck two straws from the bin. Offer her one, which she ignores.

"Mal. You haven't even heard what—"

"No."

"It's about chess."

"Well, in that case . . ." I smile my thanks to the girl holding out my order. We went out twice, maybe three times last summer, and I have vague, pleasant memories of her. Raspberry ChapStick lips; Bon Iver purring in her Hyundai Elantra; a soft hand, cool under my tank top. Sadly, none of said memories include her name. But she wrote *Melanie* across my boba, so that's okay.

We share a brief, secret smile, and I turn to Easton. "In that case, double no."

"I'm short a player. For a team tournament."

"I don't play anymore." I check my phone. It's 12:09—twenty-one more minutes before I need to be back at the garage. Bob, my boss, is not exactly a kind, forgiving human being. Sometimes I doubt he's even human. "Let's drink this outside, before I spend the afternoon under a Chevy Silverado."

"Come on, Mal." She glowers at me. "It's chess. You still play."

When my sister Darcy's sixth-grade teacher announced that she was going to send the class guinea pig to a "farm upstate," Darcy, unable to ascertain whether the farm really existed, decided to kidnap him. The piggie, not the teacher. I've been cohabitating with Goliath the Abducted for the past year—a year spent denying him scraps of our dinners ever since the vet we cannot afford begged us on his knees to put him on a diet. Unfortunately, Goliath has the uncanny ability to stare me into submission every single time.

Just like Easton does. Their expressions exude the same pure, unyielding stubbornness.

"Nuh-uh." I suck on my tea. Divine. "I've forgotten the rules. What does the little horsie do, again?"

"Very funny."

"No, really, which one is chess? The queen conquers Catan without passing Go—"

"I'm not asking you to do what you used to do."

"What *did* I use to do?"

"You know when you were thirteen and you'd beaten all the other kids at the Paterson Chess Club, then the teenagers, then the adults? And they brought in people from New York for you to humiliate? I don't need *that*."

I was actually twelve when that happened. I remember it

well, because Dad stood next to me, hand warm on my bony shoulder, proclaiming proudly, *I haven't won a game against Mallory since she turned eleven a year ago. Extraordinary, isn't she?* But I don't point it out, and instead plop down in a patch of grass, next to a flower bed full of zinnias barely hanging on to life. August in New Jersey is no one's favorite place.

"Remember halfway through my exhibition matches? When I was about to pass out and you told everyone to step back—"

"—and I handed you my juice." She sits next to me. I glance at her perfect eyeliner wing, then at my oil-stained coveralls, and it's nice, how some things never change. Perfectionist Easton Peña, always with a plan, and her messy sidekick Mallory Greenleaf. We've been in the same class since first grade but didn't really interact until she joined the Paterson Chess Club at ten. She was, in a way, already fully formed. Already the amazing, stubborn person she is today.

You really enjoy playing this crap? she asked me when we got paired for a match.

You don't? I asked back, appalled.

Of course not. I just need a wide range of extracurriculars. College scholarships don't win themselves. I checkmated her in four and have adored her ever since.

Funny, that Easton never cared for chess like I did but stuck with it much longer. What an odd love triangle the three of us make.

"You owe me for the juice box, then—come to the tournament," she orders. "I need a team of four. Everyone's either on vacation or can't tell the difference between chess and checkers. You don't even have to win—and it's for charity."

"What charity?"

"Does it matter?"

"Of course. Is it for a right-wing think tank? The next Woody Allen movie? A made-up disease, like hysteria or gluten sensitivity?"

"Gluten sensitivity is *not* made-up."

"Really?"

"Yes. And the tournament is for—" She taps furiously on her phone. "I can't find it, but can we cut this short? We both know you're going to say yes."

I scowl. "We know no such thing."

"Maybe *you* don't."

"I have a spine, Easton."

"Sure." She chews on her tapioca balls, aggressive, daring, suddenly more grizzly bear than guinea pig.

She remembers ninth grade, when she talked me into being her VP as she ran for class president. (We lost. Overwhelmingly.) And tenth grade, when Missy Collins was spreading gossip and she recruited me to hack her Twitter. Eleventh grade, too, when I starred as Mrs. Bennett in the *Pride and Prejudice* musical she wrote and directed—despite my better judgment and my half-an-octave vocal range. I probably would have agreed to something moronic during senior year, too, if things at home hadn't been . . . well, from a financial standpoint, less than good. And I hadn't spent every spare second working at the garage.

"We all know you're unable to say no," Easton points out. "So just say yes."

I check my phone—twelve more minutes in my break. Today's hot as soup, I'm done scarfing down boba, and I eye her cup with interest. Honeydew melon: my second-favorite flavor. "I'm busy."

"Busy how?"

"Date."

"Who? Carnivorous plants guy? Or the Paris Hilton look-alike?"

"Neither. But I'll find someone."

"Come on. It's a way to spend time together before college."

I sit up, knocking my elbow against hers. "When are you leaving?"

"In less than two weeks."

"*What?* We *just* graduated, like—"

"Like three months ago? I have to be in Colorado by mid-August for orientation."

"Oh." It's like waking up from an early afternoon nap and finding out that it's already dark. "Oh," I repeat, a little shocked. I *knew* this was coming, but somewhere between my sister's bout of mono, my mom's week at the hospital, my *other* sister's bout of mono, and all the extra shifts I picked up, I must have lost track of time. This is terrifying: I've never *not* lived in the same city as Easton. I've never *not* seen her once a week to play *Dragon Age*, or talk about *Dragon Age*, or watch *Dragon Age* playthroughs.

Maybe we need new hobbies.

I try for a smile. "I guess time flies when you're having fun."

"*Are* you, Mal? Having fun?" Her eyes narrow on me, and I laugh.

"Don't *laugh*. You're always working. When you aren't, you're chauffeuring your sisters around or taking your mom to doctor's appointments, and—" She runs a hand through her dark curls and leaves them mussed—a good indicator of her exasperation. Seven out of ten, I'd estimate. "You were number one

in our class. You're a math whiz and can memorize *anything*. You had *three* scholarship offers—one to come to Boulder, with me. But you've decided not to go, and now you seem *stuck* here, with no end in sight and . . . you know what? It's your choice, and I respect you for it, but at least you could let yourself do *one* fun thing. One thing that you enjoy."

I stare at her flushed cheeks for one, two, three seconds, and almost open my mouth to tell her that scholarships pay for you to go to college, but not for the house's mortgage, or your sister's roller derby camp, or your other sister's kidnapped pet's vitamin-C-reinforced pellets, or whatever it takes to melt the guilt that sticks to the bottom of your stomach. Almost. At the last minute I just look away, and "away" happens to be toward my phone.

It's 12:24. Shit. "I gotta go."

"What? Mal, are you mad? I didn't mean to—"

"Nope." I flash her a grin. "But my break is over."

"You *just* got here."

"Yeah. Bob's not a fan of humane schedules and work-life balance. Any chance you're *not* planning on finishing that bubble tea?"

She rolls her eyes hard enough to pull a muscle, but holds out her cup to me. I fist-pump as I walk away.

"Let me know about the tournament," Easton yells after me.

"I already have."

A groan. And then a serious, pointed "Mallory," which has me turning around despite the threat of Bob's smelly breath yelling that I'm late. "Listen, I don't want to force you to do anything. But chess used to be your entire life. And now you don't even want to play it for a good cause."

"Like gluten sensitivity?"

She rolls her eyes again, and I jog back to work laughing. I barely make it on time. I'm gathering my tools before disappearing under the Silverado when my phone buzzes. It's a screenshot of a flier. It says: *Clubs Olympic team tournament. NYC area. In affiliation with Doctors Without Borders.*

I smile.

MALLORY: okay that is a good charity

BRET EASTON ELLIS: Told you so. Also:

She sends me a link to the WebMD page on gluten sensitivity, which apparently does exist.

MALLORY: okay, so it IS a real thing

BRET EASTON ELLIS: Told you so.

MALLORY: you know that's your catchphrase right

BRET EASTON ELLIS: That would be "I was right." So you'll do the tournament?

I snort and almost type *no*. I almost remind her *why*, exactly, I never play chess anymore.

But then I picture her gone to college for months—and me here, alone, trying to have a conversation about the latest *Dragon Age* playthrough with some date who just wants to make out. I

think about her coming home for Thanksgiving: maybe she will have an undercut, become a vegan, get into cow print. Maybe she'll be a new person. We'll meet up at our regular places, watch our regular show, gossip about our regular people, but it won't be the same, because she'll have met new friends, seen new things, made new memories.

Fear stabs into my chest. Fear that she'll change, and bloom, and won't ever be the same. But I will be. Here in Paterson, stagnating. We won't say it, but we'll know it.

So I type:

MALLORY: k. last hurrah

BRET EASTON ELLIS: See? I was right.

MALLORY: 

MALLORY: you'll pay me back by driving my sisters to camp next week so i can pick up more shifts

BRET EASTON ELLIS: Mal, no.

BRET EASTON ELLIS: Mal, please.
Anything else.

BRET EASTON ELLIS: Mal, they're TERRIFYING.

MALLORY: 

"Hey, Greenleaf! I don't pay you to browse Instagram or buy avocado sandwiches. Get to work."

I roll my eyes. Internally. "Wrong generation, Bob."

"Whatever. Get. To. Work."

I slide my phone into my coveralls, sigh, and do just that.



"MAL, SABRINA JUST PINCHED MY ARM AND CALLED ME A DICK-breath!"

"Mal, Darcy just yawned in my face with her gross, smelly *dickbreath*!"

I sigh, continuing to prepare my sisters' oatmeals. Cinnamon, skim milk, no sugar or "I'll stab you, Mal. Ever heard of something called *health*?" (Sabrina); peanut butter, store-brand Nutella, banana, and "Could you add a bit more Nutella, please? I'm trying to grow a foot before eighth grade!" (Darcy).

"Mallory, Darcy just *farted* on me!"

"No—*Sabrina* is a douchewad who put herself in ass range!"

I absentmindedly lick discount Nutella off the spoon, fantasizing about pouring nail polish remover in the oatmeal. Just a dollop. Maybe two.

There would be some cons, such as the untimely demise of the two people I love most in the world. But the pros? Unbeatable. No more middle-of-the-night, likely-rabid bites on the toes from Goliath. No more vicious verbal abuse for washing Sabrina's pink bra, for misplacing Sabrina's pink bra, for allegedly stealing Sabrina's pink bra, for not keeping abreast of the whereabouts

of Sabrina's pink bra. No more Timothée Chalamet posters staring creepily at me from the walls.

Just me, sharpening my shiv in the peaceful silence of a New Jersey prison cell.

"Mallory, Darcy is being a total poopstain—"

I drop the spoon and stalk to the bathroom. It takes about three steps—the Greenleaf estate is small and not quite solvent.

"If you two don't shut up," I say with my most hard-ass 8:00 a.m. voice, "I'm going to take you to the farmers market and trade you for cotton candy grapes."

Something weird happened last year: almost overnight, my two sweet little dumplings, who used to be the best of friends, became rival swamp hags. Sabrina turned fourteen, and began acting as though she was too cool to be genetically related to us; Darcy turned twelve, and . . . well. Darcy stayed the same. Always reading, always precocious, always too observant for her own good. Which, I believe, is the reason Sabrina used her allowance to buy a new lock and kick her out of the room they shared. (I took Darcy in—hence Timothée Chalamet's Mona-Lisa-effect eyes and the forthcoming rabies.)

"Oh my God." Darcy rolls her eyes. "Relax, Mallory."

"Yes, Mallory. Unclench your butthole."

Oh, yeah: the only time these ingrates manage to get along? When they're ganging up against me. Mom says it's puberty. I lean toward demonic possession, but who knows? What I do know for sure is that imploring, tearing up, or even trying to reason with them are not effective techniques. Any display of weakness is seized, exploited, and always ends with me being blackmailed into buying them ridiculous things, like Ed Sheeran body pillows or graduation hats for guinea pigs. My motto is *rule*

through fear. Never negotiate with those hormonal, anarchic, bloodthirsty sharks.

God, I love them so much I could cry.

"Mom's asleep," I hiss. "I swear, if you're not quiet I'm going to write *dickbreath* and *douchewad* on your foreheads in permanent marker and send you out into the world like that."

"Might want to rethink that," Darcy points out, wagging her toothbrush at me, "or we'll sic Child Protective Services on you."

Sabrina nods. "Possibly even the police."

"Can she afford the legal fees?"

"No way. Good luck with your overworked, underpaid, court-appointed defense attorney, Mal."

I lean against the doorframe. "*Now* you two agree on something."

"We always agreed that Darcy's a dickbreath."

"I am *not*—*you* are a ho-bag."

"If you wake Mom up," I threaten, "I'm going to flush you both down the toilet—"

"I'm awake! No need to clog the plumbing, sweetheart." I turn around. Mom ambles down the hallway, shaky on her feet, and the bottom of my stomach twists. Mornings have been tough for the past month. For the entire summer, really. I glance back at Darcy and Sabrina, who at least have the decency to look contrite. "Now that I'm up with the chickens, can I have hugs from my favorite Russian dolls?"

Mom likes to joke that my sisters and I, with our white-blond hair, dark blue eyes, and rosy oval faces, are slightly smaller versions of each other. Maybe Darcy got all the freckles, and Sabrina has fully embraced the VSCO aesthetic, and I . . . If there weren't so many five-dollar boho chic outfits at Goodwill, I

wouldn't look like an Alexis Rose cosplayer. But there's no doubt that the three Greenleaf girls were made with a cookie cutter—and not Mom's, given her once-dark, now-graying hair and tanned skin. If she minds that we take so much after Dad, she's never mentioned it.

"Why are you guys up?" she asks against Darcy's forehead before moving on to Sabrina. "Do you have practice?"

Sabrina stiffens. "I don't start until next week. Actually, I'm *never* going to start if someone doesn't sign me up for the Junior Roller Derby Association, which is due *next Friday*—"

"I'll pay the dues by Friday," I reassure her.

She gives me a skeptical, distrustful look. Like I've broken her heart one too many times with my paltry auto-mechanic's salary. "Why can't you pay right now?"

"Because I enjoy toying with you, like a spider with her prey." And because I'll need to pick up extra shifts at the garage to afford them.

Her eyes narrow. "You don't have the money, do you?"

My heart skips a beat. "Of course I do."

"Because I'm *basically* an adult. And McKenzie has been working at that froyo place, so I could ask her to—"

"You're *not* an adult." The idea of Sabrina worrying about money is physically painful. "In fact, rumor has it that you're a douchewad."

"Since we're requesting and obtaining things," Darcy interjects, mouth full of toothpaste, "Goliath is still lonely and depressed and in need of a girlfriend."

"Mmm." I briefly contemplate the number of turds two Goliaths could produce. Yikes. "Anyway, Easton kindly offered to drive you guys to camp next week. And I'm not going to ask

you to be good, or normal, or even decent for her, because I enjoy toying with her, too. You're welcome."

I step out of the bathroom and close the door behind me, but not before noticing the wide-eyed look my sisters exchange. Their love for Easton is historied and intense.

"You look cute today," Mom tells me in the kitchen.

"Thanks." I show her my teeth. "I flossed."

"Fancy. Did you also shower?"

"Whoa, calm down. I'm not a fashion influencer."

She chuckles. "You're not wearing your jumpsuit."

"They're called coveralls—but thank you for the make-believe." I look down at the white T-shirt I tucked into a bright yellow embroidered skirt. "I'm not going to the garage."

"Date? It's been a while."

"No date. I promised Easton I'll . . . " I stop myself.

Mom's fantastic. The kindest, most patient person I know. She probably wouldn't mind it if I told her that I'm going to a chess tournament. But she's using a cane this morning. Her joints look swollen and inflamed. And I haven't used the c-word in three years. Why break my streak?

"She's leaving for Boulder in a couple of weeks, so we're hanging out in New York."

Her expression darkens. "I just wish you'd reconsider continuing with your schooling—"

"Mom," I whine, tone as hurt as I can make it.

After several trials and many errors, I finally discovered the best way to get Mom off my back: to imply that I want to go to college so little that every time she brings up the topic, I'm tragically wounded by her lack of respect for my life choices. It might not be the truth, and I'm not a fan of lying to her, but it's for her

own good. I don't want anyone in my family to think that they owe me anything, or to feel guilty about my decisions. They shouldn't feel guilty, because none of this is *their* fault.

It's exclusively mine.

"Right. Yes, sorry. Well, it's exciting that you're hanging out with Easton."

"Is it?"

"Of course. You're being youthful. Doing eighteen-year-old stuff." She gives me a wistful look. "I'm just happy you took a day off—YALO and all that."

"That's YOLO, Mom."

"You sure?"

I laugh as I pick up my purse and kiss her on the cheek. "I'll be back tonight. You're okay alone with the ingrates? I left three meal options in the fridge. Also, Sabrina was a total pain last week, so if McKenzie or another friend invites her, *don't* let her go to their place."

Mom sighs. "You know you're my child, too, right? And you shouldn't be stuck co-parenting with me?"

"Hey." I mock-frown. "Am I not doing a good job? Should I crush more prescription-strength Benadryl into the harpies' breakfasts?"

I want Mom to chuckle again, but she just shakes her head. "I don't like it that I'm surprised that you're taking a day for yourself. Or that Sabrina looks at you when she needs money. This doesn't—"

"Mom. *Mom*." I smile as earnestly as I can. "I promise you, it's fine."

It's probably not. Fine, I mean.

There's something supremely un-fine about the fact that my family has the Wikipedia entry on rheumatoid arthritis memo-

rized. That we can tell whether it'll be a bad day by the lines around Mom's mouth. That last year I had to explain to Darcy that *chronic* means forever. Incurable. It won't ever go away.

Mom has a master's degree in biology and is a medical writer—a damn good one. She has written health education materials, FDA documents, fancy grant proposals that have won her clients millions of dollars. But she's a freelancer. When Dad was around, and when she was able to work regularly, it wasn't much of an issue. Unfortunately, that's not an option anymore. Some days the pain is so bad that she can barely get out of bed, let alone take over projects, and her impossibly convoluted Social Security disability application has now been denied four times. But at least I'm here. At least I can make things easier for her.

So maybe, just maybe, it will be. Fine, I mean.

"Rest, okay?" I cup her face. There are about seven gray circles under her eyes. "Go back to bed. The creatures will entertain themselves."

When I let myself out. I can hear Sabrina and Darcy kvetching about their oatmeals in the kitchen. I make a mental note to stock up on nail polish remover, and when I spot Easton's car rounding the corner, I wave at her and jog up to the street.

And that, I guess, is the beginning of the rest of my life.