

# Check & Mate

ALI HAZELWOOD



putnam

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



First published in the United States of America by G. P. Putnam's Sons,  
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2023

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hazelwood, Ali, author.

Title: Check & mate / Ali Hazelwood.

Other titles: Check and mate

Description: New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2023. |

Audience: Ages 14 years and up. | Summary: When eighteen-year-old Mallory begrudgingly agrees to return to chess in one last charity tournament, her surprise upset against Nolan Sawyer, the reigning world champ and bad boy of the chess world, sets her on a whirlwind adventure as she rediscovers her passion for the game.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023017578 (print) | LCCN 2023017579 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593698440 (library binding) | ISBN 9780593619919 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780593619926 (epub)

Subjects: CYAC: Chess—Fiction. | Interpersonal relations—Fiction. |

Family problems—Fiction. | LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.H39724 Ch 2023 (print) | LCC PZ7.1.H39724 (ebook) | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023017578>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023017579>

Printed in the United States of America

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

LSCH

Book design by Kristin del Rosario

Interior art: Chess art © JuliPaper/Shutterstock.com

Text set in Chaparral Pro Regular

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*To Sarah A. and Helen,  
who'll always be my faves.*



*Check*  
& **Mate**



# 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

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# 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 buttohole."

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.

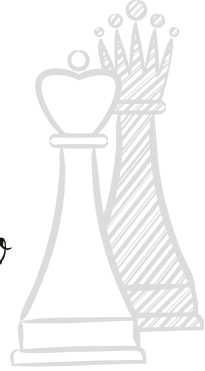
So maybe, just maybe, it will be. Fine, I mean.

"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.

## Chapter Two



“It’s a Swiss-system tournament. Kind of. Not really, though.”

Easton gathers our team around her, like she’s Tony Stark briefing the Avengers, but instead of quippy one-liners she hands out Paterson Chess Club pins. There must be three hundred people on the second floor of the Fulton Stall Market, and I am the only one who didn’t get the business casual memo.

Oops.

“Each one of us is going to play four matches,” she continues. “Because it’s for charity, and because the tournament is open to amateurs, instead of using FIDE ratings, players are going to be matched according to self-reported ability.”

FIDE, the World Chess Federation (Why isn’t the acronym WCF? Not sure, but I suspect the French language is involved) has a complicated system to determine players’ skill levels and rank them accordingly. I knew all about it when I was seven, chess obsessed, and wanted to grow up to be a mermaid Grandmaster. By now, though, I’ve forgotten most bureaucratic stuff, probably to make room for more useful information—like the best way to crimp a wire terminal, or the plot of the first three seasons of *How to Get Away with Murder*. All I remember is that to get a rating one

needs to sign up for FIDE-sponsored tournaments. Which, of course, I haven't done in ages—because I haven't played in ages.

Four years, five months, and two weeks, and no, I will not stoop to counting the days.

“So we have to self-report our level of skill?” Zach asks. He's a Montclair freshman who joined the Paterson Chess Club after I left and has some ambitions of going pro. I've met him once at Oscar's place and I'm not a fan, for reasons that include his penchant for derailing conversations with unrelated mentions of his FIDE rating (2,546), his ability to carry out hour-long monologues on his FIDE rating (2,546), and his lack of understanding that I'm not interested in going out with him, no matter his FIDE rating (2,546).

But he's still better than our fourth member, Josh, whose claim to fame is repeatedly implying that Easton would be a little less gay if only she made out with him at least once.

“Since I'm the team leader, I went ahead and declared your skill levels,” Easton tells us. “I put—”

“Why are you the leader?” Zach asks. “I don't remember having an election.”

“Then I'm the team dictator,” she hisses. I fix my pin to my tee to hide a smile. “I put Mallory in the highest bracket.”

I drop my arms. “Easton. I've *barely* played in—”

“Zach's in the highest, too. Third highest for myself,” she continues, ignoring me. Then she looks at Josh and pauses for effect. “The lowest for you.”

Josh bursts into his wholesome, golden boy laughter. “Joking aside, what bracket did you . . .” Easton keeps staring, serious as death and taxes, and he lowers his eyes to the floor.

“Does the PCC have your browser history?” I ask Easton once it's just the two of us, heading toward the hall.

“Why?”

“There’s no way you’re here of your own free will, not with those two. So either they found out about the tentacle porn, or—”

“There’s *no* tentacle porn.” She gives me a scathing look. “The manager of the club asked me to put together a team. I couldn’t say no, since he wrote me a rec letter for college. He was just exploiting the fact that I owe him a favor.” She shoulders past two older men in suits to get to the tournament area. “Like you did when you sicced your sisters on me.”

“It’s what you deserve for bringing Zach and the rook he shoved up his ass.”

“Ah, Zach. If only we could know what his FIDE rating is.”

I laugh. “Maybe we should ask him and . . .”

We walk through the doors, and my voice trails off.

The noise in the bustling room dims, then quiets.

People walk around me, past me, into me, but I stand still, frozen, unable to step out of the way.

There are tables. Many tables pushed together to form long, parallel rows—rows and rows, covered in white-and-blue cloth with plastic, foldable chairs tucked into each side, and between each pair of chairs—

Chessboards.

Dozens of them. Hundreds. Not good ones: I can tell even from the entrance that they’re old and cheap, the pieces chipped and poorly cut, the squares dirty and discolored. Ugly, mismatched sets all around me. The smell in the room is like a childhood memory, made of familiar, simple notes: wood and felt and sweat and stale coffee, the bergamot note of Dad’s after-shave, home, belonging, betrayal, happiness, and—

“Mal? You okay?” Easton tugs at my arm with a frown. I don’t think it’s the first time she’s asked.

“Yeah. Yeah, I . . .” I swallow, and it helps. The moment breaks, my heart slows, and I’m just a girl—perhaps a slightly fawn-kneed one. It’s just a room that I’m standing in. The chess pieces—they’re just stuff. Things. Some white, some black. Some can move in any number of unoccupied squares, others not so much. Who cares? “I need a drink.”

“I have Crystal Light. Strawberry.” She hands me her CamelBak. “It’s disgusting.”

“Guys.” Zach comes up to us from behind. “Don’t freak out, but I’ve spotted some preeetty big names walking around. I’m talking international.”

Easton lets out an exaggerated gasp. “Harry Styles?”

“What? No.”

“Malala?”

“No.”

“Oh my God, Michelle Obama? Do you think she’ll sign my pocket constitution?”

“No—Rudra Lal. Maxim Alexeyev. Andreas Antonov. Yang Zhang. Famous chess people.”

“Ah.” She nods. “So regular, not-at-all-famous people?”

I do love watching Easton mess with Zach, but I *have* heard these names. I wouldn’t be able to pick them out of a lineup, but at my most fervent, chess-obsessive stage I’ve studied their games on books, simulation software, YouTube tutorials. Old impressions surface quickly in my brain, like long-unused synapses sputtering awake.

*Lal: versatile openings, positional*

*Antonov: tricky, but technical*

*Zhang: calculating, slow*

*Alexeyev: still young, uneven*

I shrug the memories away and ask, “What are they doing at an amateur tournament?”

“The director’s well connected in the chess world—she’s the owner of a respected New York chess club. Plus, the winning team gets twenty thousand for a charity of their choice.” He rubs his hands together like a cartoon villain. “I hope I get to go against the big guns.”

“You think you can beat them?” Easton’s eyebrow lifts, skeptical. “Aren’t they pros?”

“Well, I’ve been training.” Zach brushes nonexistent crumbs off his blazer. “My rating’s 2,546”—we all roll our eyes—“and Lal’s not exactly at the top of his game. Did you see him lose to Sawyer at Ubud International two weeks ago? It was embarrassing.”

“Everyone’s embarrassing against Sawyer,” Josh points out.

“Well, plenty of people are embarrassing against *me*.”

Easton’s eye twitches. “Are you comparing yourself to Sawyer?”

“People say we have similar playing styles . . .”

I cough to hide a snort. “Do we know who we’ve been paired with yet?”

“Sort of.” Easton unlocks her phone and texts everyone a screenshot of the organizers’ email. “We don’t know *who* we’re going up against, because it’s a team tournament. But Mal, you’re PCC Player One, and you’ve been paired with the Marshall Chess Club Player One. Row five, board thirty-four. Good news: you’re White. Round one starts in five. The time limit is ninety minutes, then round two starts. So we should get going.” Easton tugs at



my hand. “Wouldn’t want to make Lal wait for the thorough ass-kicking he’s about to get, right, Zach?”

I can’t tell whether Zach recognizes the shade. He puffs up and struts to his board, and I’m left wondering how soon the black hole of antimatter that is his ego will swallow the solar system.

“Listen,” Easton whispers before we go separate ways, “I put myself in a too-high bracket. I’ll probably be destroyed in about five moves, but it’s okay. All the PCC wanted was for us to have a presence here, and I delivered. That’s to say, if you let whoever you’re playing destroy you quickly, we can pop by Dylan’s Candy Bar and be back before round two.”

“Are you buying?”

“Fine.”

“One of those macarons stuffed inside a cookie?”

“Sure.”

“Deal.”

It won’t be hard, getting checkmated like a total loser, not with how rusty I am. I take a seat at board thirty-four, White side, and watch the chairs around me fill up, people shaking hands, the introduction and chitchatting as everyone waits for the start announcement. No one is paying attention to me, and . . . I just do it.

I reach for my king. Pick it up. Feel its slight, perfect weight in my hand and smile softly as I trace the corners of the crown.

The stupid, useless, good-for-nothing king. Can barely move one square, scurries into hiding behind the rook, and he’s so, so easy to corner. A fraction of the queen’s power, that’s what he has. He is nothing, absolutely *nothing*, without his kingdom.

My heart squeezes. At least he’s relatable.

I put the king back on his square and stare at the skyline made up by the pieces—the trivial and yet monumental landscape of chess. It’s more familiar than the view from my childhood bedroom (unspectacular: a busted trampoline, lots of ornery squirrels, an apricot tree that never learned how to bear fruit). It’s more familiar than my own face in the mirror, and I can’t tear my gaze away, not even when the chair in front of mine drags across the floor, not even when one of the tournament directors calls for round one to begin.

The table shifts as my opponent takes a seat. A large hand stretches into my line of sight. And just as I’m about to force myself out of my reverie to shake it, I hear a deep voice say, “Marshall Chess Club Player One. Nolan Sawyer.”

## Chapter Three



He's not looking at me.

He's holding out his hand, but his eyes are on the board, and for a split second I can't figure out what is happening, where I am, or what I came here to do. I can't figure out what my name is.

No. Wait. I do know *that*.

"Mallory Greenleaf," I stammer, taking his hand. It completely engulfs mine. His shake is brief, warm, and very, very firm. "PCC. That is, Paterson. Club. Uh, chess club." I clear my throat. Wow. So eloquent. Much articulate. "Nice to meet you," I lie.

He lies right back at me with a "Likewise," and still doesn't look up. Just sets his elbows on the table, keeping his gaze fixed on the pieces, as though my person, my face, my identity, are utterly irrelevant. As though I am but an extension of the white side of the board.

It cannot be. This guy cannot be Nolan Sawyer. Or, not *the* Nolan Sawyer. The famous one. The sex symbol—whatever that even means. The guy who a couple of years ago was number one in the world and now . . .

I have no clue what Nolan Sawyer's up to now, but he *can't* be

sitting across from me. The people on our left and right seem to be not-so-subtly eyeing him, and I want to yell at them that this is just a doppelgänger. Plenty of those going around. Doppelgänger-palooza, these days.

It would explain why he's sitting there, doing nothing. Clearly, bizarro Nolan Sawyer doesn't know how to play and thought this would be a mah-jongg tournament and is wondering where the tiles are and—

Someone clears their throat. It's the player sitting next to me: a middle-aged man who's neglecting his own match to gawk at mine, pointedly staring between me and my pieces.

Which are white.

*Shit*—I have the first move. What do I do? Where do I start? Which piece do I use?

Pawn to e4. There. Done. The most common, boring—

"My clock," Sawyer murmurs distractedly. His eyes are on my pawn.

"What?"

"I need you to start my clock, or I won't be able to respond." He sounds bored, with a dash of annoyed.

I flush scarlet, utterly mortified, and look around. I can't find the stupid clock until someone—Sawyer—pushes it an inch toward me. It was right by my left hand.

Perfect. Lovely. Now would be an excellent time for the floor to morph into quicksand. Swallow me alive, too.

"I'm sorry. Um—I *knew* about the clock. But I forgot, and—" *And I'm thinking of stabbing myself in the eyeball with that pencil over there. Is it yours? Can I borrow it?*

"It's fine." He makes his move—pawn in e5. Starts my clock.

Then it's my turn again, and—shit, I'm gonna have to move more than once. Against Nolan Sawyer. This is unjust. A travesty.

Pawn in d4, maybe? And then, after he takes my pawn, I move another to c3. Wait, what am I doing? Am I . . . I'm not trying a Danish Gambit with Nolan Sawyer, am I?

*The Danish Gambit is one of the most aggressive openings in chess. Dad's voice rings in my ears. You sacrifice two pieces in the first few moves—then shift quickly into attack. Most good players will have learned how to defend themselves. If you really must use it, make sure you have a solid follow-up plan.*

I briefly consider my glaring lack of follow-up plans. Well, then. I could *really* use a puke bucket, but instead I just sigh and resignedly push my bishop into the midst, because the more the merrier.

This is a disaster. Send help.

I make five moves after that. Then two more—at which point Sawyer starts pressing me, dogging me insistently with his queen and knight, and I feel like one of the bugs that sometimes wander into Goliath's cage. Pinned. Squashed. Done for. My stomach tightens, gelid, slimy, and I spend futile minutes staring at the board, scouring for a way out of this mess that's just *not there*.

Until it is.

It takes three moves and I lose my poor, battered bishop, but I disentangle myself from the pin. The dread of the opening is slowly melting into an old, familiar feeling: *I am playing chess and I know what I'm doing*. After each move I punch Sawyer's clock and glance up at him, curious, though he never does the same.

He's always unreadable. Opaque. I have no doubt that he's taking the game seriously, but he's distant, as though playing from far away, locked in a cell on the top level of one of his rooks. Here, but not really *here*. His movements, when he touches the pieces, are precise, economical, strong. I hate myself for noticing that. He's taller than the men sitting at his sides, and I hate myself for noticing that, too. His shoulders and biceps fill his black shirt just right, and when he rolls back his sleeves, I notice his forearms and am suddenly grateful that we're playing chess and not arm-wrestling; I hate myself for that the most.

The Mallory-hate party is clearly in full swing—and then Sawyer moves his knight. After that, I'm too busy trying to remember how to breathe to berate myself.

It's not that it's the wrong move. Not at all. It is, in fact, a flawless move. I can see what he's planning to do with it—move it again, open me up, force me to castle. Check in four, or five. Knife to my throat, and I'd be toast. But.

But, I think it's possible that elsewhere on the board . . .

If I forced him into . . .

And he didn't retreat his . . .

My heart flutters. And I don't defend. Instead I advance my own knight, a little light-headed, and for the first time in—oh my God, have we been at this for fifty-five minutes? How is that possible?

Why does chess always *feel like this*?

For the very first time since we started, when I look up at Sawyer, I notice a trace of something. In the shifting line of his shoulders, the way he presses his fingers against his full lips, there's a hint that maybe he really *is* here, after all. Playing this game. With me.

Well. *Against* me.

A blink and it goes away. He moves his queen. Takes my bishop. Stops the clock.

I move my knight. Capture his pawn. Stop the clock.

Queen. Clock.

Knight, again. My mouth is dry. Clock.

Rook. Clock.

Pawn. I swallow, twice. Clock.

Rook takes pawn. Clock.

*King.*

It takes Sawyer a couple of seconds to realize what has happened. A few beats to map all the possible scenarios in his head, all the possible roads this game could take. I know it, because I see him lift his hand to move his own queen, as though it could possibly make a difference, as though he could wiggle his way out of my attack. And I know it, because I have to clear my throat before I say,

“I . . . Checkmate.”

That’s when he lifts his eyes to mine for the first time. They are dark, and clear, and serious. And they remind me of a few important, long-forgotten things.

When Nolan Sawyer was twelve, he placed third at a tournament because of an arguably unfair arbitral decision on castling short, and in response he wiped the chess pieces off the board with his arm. When he was thirteen, he placed second at the very same tournament—this time, he flipped an entire table. When he was fourteen, he got into a screaming match with Antonov over either a girl or a denied draw (rumors disagree), and I can’t recall how old he was when he called a former world champion a fuckwhit for trying to pull an illegal move during a warm-up game.

I do recall, however, hearing the story and having no idea what a fuckwhit might be.

Each time, Sawyer was fined. Reprimanded. The object of scathing op-eds on chess media. And each time, he was welcomed back to the chess community with open arms, because here's the deal: for over a decade Nolan Sawyer has been rewriting chess history, redefining standards, bringing attention to the sport. Where's the fun in playing, if the best is left out? And if the best sometimes acts like a douchebag . . . well. It's all forgiven.

But not forgotten. Everyone in the community knows that Nolan Sawyer is a terrible, moody, ill-tempered ball of toxic masculinity. That he's the poorest loser in the history of chess. In the history of any sport. In the history of *history*.

Which, because he just lost against me, is possibly going to develop into a problem.

For the first time since the match started, I realize that a dozen people are standing around us, whispering to each other. I want to ask them what they're looking at, if I have a nosebleed, a wardrobe malfunction, a tarantula on my ear, but I'm too busy staring at Sawyer. Tracking his movements. Making sure he won't hurl the chess clock at me. I'm not one to be easily intimidated, but I'd rather avoid a checkmate-induced traumatic brain injury if he decides to smash a foldable chair on my head.

Though, surprisingly, he seems content to just study me. Lips slightly parted and eyes bright, like I'm simultaneously something odd and familiar and puzzling and larger than life and—

He looks. After ignoring me for twenty-five moves, he just *looks*. Calm. Inquisitive. Upsettingly *not* angry. Something funny occurs to me: top players are always given cutesy nicknames by



the press. The Artist. The Picasso of Chess. The Gambit Mozart. Nolan's nickname?

*The Kingkiller.*

The Kingkiller leans forward, ever so slightly, and his intense, awestruck expression feels much more threatening than a folding chair to my head.

"Who—" he starts, and I cannot bear it.

"Thank you for the game," I blurt out, and then, even though I should shake his hand, sign the scorecard, play three more games—despite all of that, I leap to my feet.

*No shame in retreating your pieces if you're being pinned and can get out, Dad used to say. No shame in knowing the limits of your game.*

My chair falls to the ground as I run away. I hear the grating sound, and still don't stop to pick it up.

## Chapter Four



“Mal?”

“*Mal.*”

“Maaaaaaal!”

I blink awake. Darcy’s nose is pressed up against mine, eyes Galápagos-blue in the morning light.

I yawn. “What’s going on?”

“*Ew, Mal.*” She recoils. “Why does your breath smell like a skunk during mating season?”

“I . . . is everything okay?”

“Yes. I made my own oatmeal this morning. We’re out of Nutella.”

I sit up, or some approximation of it. Rub sleep out of my eyes. “Yesterday we had more than half a jar left—”

“And today we’re out. The circle of life, Mal.”

“Are Mom and Sabrina okay?”

“Yup. McKenzie and her dad picked up Sabrina. Mom’s fine. She got up, then went back to bed because she was having a rough morning. But there’s someone at the door for you.”

“Someone at the—?”

Memories of yesterday slowly begin to surface.

Sawyer's king, held in check by my queen. Tripping on the sidewalk as I ran to the train. Texting Easton about a made-up emergency, then turning off my phone. The dull urban landscape outside the train's windows, ever morphing into a chessboard. Then the rest of the night—a *Veronica Mars* marathon with my sister, my head emptied out of everything else.

Not to brag, but I'm good at compartmentalizing. Together with always picking the best item on the menu, it's my greatest talent. That's how I made myself get over chess years ago. And that's how I manage to survive day by day without hyperventilating about all sorts of stuff. It's either compartmentalizing or going broke buying inhalers.

"Tell Easton that—"

"Not Easton." Darcy flushes. "Though you could invite her over. Maybe this afternoon—"

Not Easton? "Who, then?"

"A random person."

I groan. "Darcy, I told you: when people from millenarian restorationist Christian denominations come knocking—"

"—we politely inform them that eternal salvation is beyond us, I know, but it's someone else. They asked for you by name, not for the head of the household."

"Okay." I scratch my forehead. "Okay—tell them I'll be there in a minute."

"Cool. Oh, and also, this arrived yesterday. Addressed to Mom, but . . ." She holds out an envelope. My eyes are still blurry. I have to blink to read, but when I do, my stomach twists.

"Thank you."

"It's a reminder, right?"

"No."

“That we have to pay the mortgage?”

“No. Darcy—”

“Do you have the money?”

I force myself to smile. “Don’t worry about it.”

She nods, but before stepping out she says, “I pocketed it when the mailman brought it. Mom and Sabrina haven’t seen it.” The freckles on her nose are shaped like a cloudy heart, and with the single neuron currently working in my brain I contemplate how unfair it is that she needs to worry about this stuff. She’s twelve. When *I* was twelve, my life was boba and refreshing chess.com.

I slip on dirty shorts and yesterday’s tee. Given Darcy’s gentle feedback, I decide to gargle with mouthwash while I turn on my phone. I discover that it’s 9:13, and that I have a million notifications. I swipe away dating app matches, Instagram and TikTok alerts, News highlights. I scroll through my texts from Easton (a panicked string, followed by Essay question: what does Nolan Sawyer smell like? Two paragraphs or longer and a picture of her vengefully biting into a cookie-macaron), then head outside.

I’m not sure who I expect to find. Definitely not a tall woman with a pixie haircut, a full sleeve of tattoos, and more piercings than I can count. She turns around with a grin, and her lips are a bold, perfect red. She must be in her late twenties, if not older.

“Sorry,” she says, pointing at her cigarette. Her voice is low and amused. “Your sister said you were sleeping and I thought you’d take longer. You’re not going to start smoking because you saw me smoke, right?”

I feel myself smile back. “Doubtful.”

“Good. You never know, the impressionability of the youths.”

She puts out the butt, wraps it in a napkin, and pockets it, either to avoid polluting or to conceal her DNA.

Okay, no more *Veronica Mars* for me.

“You’re Mallory, right?”

I cock my head. “Have we met?”

“Nope. I’m Defne. Defne Bubikoğlu—but unless you speak Turkish, I wouldn’t try to pronounce it. It’s nice to meet you. I’m a fan.”

I let out a laugh. Then realize she’s serious. “Excuse me?”

“Anyone who trounces Nolan Sawyer like you did gets a lifetime supply of admiration from me.” She points to herself with a flourish. “Free home delivery, too.”

I stiffen. Oh, no. No, no. What is this? “I’m sorry. You have the wrong person.”

She frowns. “You’re not Mallory Greenleaf?”

I take a step back. “Yes. But it’s a common name—”

“Mallory Virginia Greenleaf, who played yesterday?” She takes out her phone, taps at it, then holds it out with a smile. “If this is not you, you have some serious identity theft issues.”

She has pulled up a video. A TikTok of a young woman checkmating Nolan Sawyer with her queen. There are wisps of white-blond hair falling across the side of her face, and her eyeliner is smudged.

I can’t believe Easton didn’t tell me that my eyeliner looked like shit.

Also, I can’t believe that this stupid video was taken and it has over *twenty thousand likes*. Are there even twenty thousand people who play chess?

“What was up with the dramatic exit, by the way?” she asks. “Did you double-park?”

“No. I—okay, that *is* me.” I run a hand down my face. I need coffee. And a time machine, to go back to when I agreed to help Easton. Maybe I could go back even further, just murder our entire friendship. “The game . . . It was a fluke.”

Defne’s brow furrows. “A fluke?”

“Yeah. I know that it looks like I’m some kind of . . . chess talent, but I don’t play. Sawyer must be in some kind of funk, and—” I stop. Defne is laughing and laughing. Apparently, I’m hilarious.

“You mean, the current world chess champion? Who also happens to be the current rapid *and* blitz champion? In a funk?”

I press my lips together. “He can be the current champion and still be having a bad month.”

“Unlikely, since he won Sweden Chess last week.”

“Well,” I scramble, “he’s tired because of all the winning, and—”

“Dude, stop.” She takes one step closer, and I smell something pleasantly citrusy mixed with the tobacco. “You won against the best player in the world. You completely blindsided him in a damn good game—the way you feinted a feint? How you got yourself out of that pin? Your queen? Stop putting yourself down and take credit for it—you think Nolan would be half as reticent? You think *any* guy would be?”

Defne is yelling. With the corner of my eye I see Mrs. Abebe, my neighbor, stare at us from her yard, a clear *Do you need saving?* in her eyes. I subtly shake my head. Defne just seems like a very passionate, very loud cheerleader. I think I might even like her. *Despite* the fact that she’s here to talk about chess.

“I can’t be the first person to win against Sawyer,” I say. As a matter of fact, I know I’m not. I studied his play, back when I still . . . studied plays. Antonov-Sawyer, 2013, Rome. Sawyer-Shankar, 2016, Seattle. Antoni-Sawyer, 2012—

“No, but it’s been a while. And when people lose against him, it’s because he makes dumb mistakes—which he didn’t, not that I could see. It’s just that you were . . . better.”

“I’m not—”

“And it’s not like this is your first feat when it comes to chess.”

I shake my head, confused. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I looked you up, and . . .” She glances at her phone. Her case says, *Check, mate!* on a galaxy background. “There are articles of you winning tournaments in the area, and pics of you doing blindfolded simultaneous exhibitions—you were an *adorable* kid, by the way. I’m surprised you didn’t play in rated tournaments, ’cause you’d have *killed* it.”

I might be flushing. “My mother didn’t want me to,” I say, without quite knowing why.

Defne’s eyes widen. “Your mother doesn’t support you playing chess?”

“No, nothing like that. She just . . .”

Mom loved that I played. She even learned the rules to be able to follow my never-ending chess-related chatter. However, she also didn’t shy away from pushing back against Dad. For most of my childhood, the greatest hit in the Greenleaf household was Dad insisting that someone as good as I was at manipulating numbers and pattern recognitions should be cultivated into a pro; Mom replying that she didn’t want me dealing with the hyper-competitive, hyper-individualistic environment of rated chess from a young age; Sabrina emerging from her room to ask flatly, *When you’re done arguing about your favorite daughter, can we maybe have dinner?* In the end, they agreed that I’d start competing in the rated divisions of tournaments when I was fourteen.

Then I turned fourteen, and everything changed.

“I wasn’t interested.”

“I see. You’re Archie Greenleaf’s daughter, aren’t you? I think I met him—”

“I’m sorry,” I interrupt her sharply. Sharper than I mean to, because of the sour taste in my throat. The things she’s saying, it’s like unearthing a corpse. “I’m sorry,” I repeat, gentler. “Was there . . . Is there a reason you’re here?”

“Right, yes.” If she’s offended by my bluntness, she doesn’t let it show. Instead she surprises me by saying, “I’m here to offer you a job.”

I blink. “A job?”

“Yup. Wait—are you a minor? Because if so, one of your parents should probably—”

“I’m eighteen.”

“Eighteen! Are you heading off to college?”

“No.” I swallow. “I’m done with school.”

“Perfect, then.” She smiles like she’s giving me a gift. Like I’m about to be happy. Like the idea of making *me* happy makes *her* happy. “Here’s the deal: I run a chess club. Zugzwang, in Brooklyn, over by—”

“I’ve heard of it.” Marshall might be the oldest, most renowned club in New York, but in the last few years Zugzwang has become known for attracting a less traditional crowd. It has a TikTok account that sometimes goes viral, community engagement, strip-chess tournaments. I vaguely remember hearing about a more-or-less acerbic rivalry between Marshall and Zugzwang—which would explain her glee at my beating Sawyer, a Marshall member.

“Here’s the deal: some of our members decide to use their



overgrown chess brains for something that isn't chess, and—well, they go out in the world, get jobs in finance and other lucrative, amoral fields, make tons of money, and *loooove* tax write-offs. Long story short, we have a bunch of donors. And this year we instituted a fellowship.”

“A fellowship?” Does she want to hire me to keep track of donors? Does she think I'm an accountant?

“It's a one-year salary for a player who has the potential to go pro. You'd be mentored and sent to tournaments on our tab. The primary goal is to give a head start to promising young chess players. The *secondary* goal is for me to eat popcorn while you hand Nolan his ass, *again*. But that's not, like, a must.”

I scratch my nose. “I don't understand.”

“Mallory, I'd love for you to be this year's Zugzwang fellow.”

I don't immediately parse her words. Then I do, and I still have to turn them around in my head over and over, because I'm not sure I heard them correctly.

Did she just offer to pay me to play chess?

This is wild. Incredible. This fellowship—it's like the stuff of dreams. Life changing. Everything fourteen-year-old Mallory Greenleaf would have wished for.

Too bad fourteen-year-old Mallory Greenleaf is nowhere in sight.

“I'm sorry,” I tell Defne. She's still looking at me with a bright, happy expression. “I told you, I don't play anymore.”

The bright, happy expression darkens a little. “Why?”

I like her. I *really* like her, and for a moment I almost consider explaining things to her. Stuff. Life. My sisters, and Mom, and roller derby fees. Bob, and changing windshield wipers, and the fact that I don't need a one-year fellowship but a job that will be

there next year, and the year after, and the one after that. Dad, and the memories, and the night I swore to myself that I was done with chess. Forever.

It seems like too much for a first meeting, so I condense the truth. “I’m just not interested.”

She’s instantly subdued. Her brow furrows in a slight frown and she studies me for a long while, as though realizing that there might be something she doesn’t know about me. Ha. “Tell you what,” she says eventually. “I’m going to get going—Sunday’s peak day at Zugzwang. Lots of prep. But I’ll give you a few days to think about it—”

“I’m not going to change my mind—”

“—and in the meantime, I’ll email you the contract.” She pats my shoulder, and I’m enveloped by her lemony scent once again. One of her tattoos, I notice, is a chessboard, with pieces developed on it. A famous game, perhaps, but I don’t recognize it.

“I— You don’t have my email,” I tell her. She’s already at her car—2019 Volkswagen Beetle.

“Oh, I do. From the tournament database.”

“Which tournament?”

“Yesterday’s.” She waves goodbye as she gets into the driver’s seat. “I organized it.”

I don’t wait for her to drive off. I turn around, walk back inside the house, and pretend not to notice Mom looking at me from the window.