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# Check & Mate

ALI HAZELWOOD



  
SPHERE

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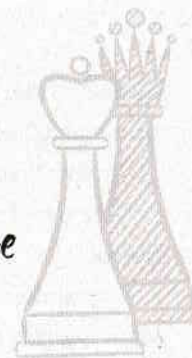
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## Prologue



*"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

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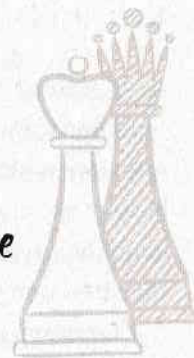
# Openings



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## 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