

***Check & Mate* by Ali Hazelwood**

Mallory Greenleaf was a chess prodigy as a child – coached and encouraged by her dad. Everything fell apart, however, when she was 14 and her dad left; she vowed to never pick up a chess piece again. Now she is 18, graduated from high school, and working as an auto mechanic to help her single mother (who has a chronic illness) and her two younger sisters keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. Her best friend, who is leaving for college, begs her to participate in a charity chess tournament. She reluctantly agrees, but discovers she can still feel the passion she once had for the sport. She ends up facing the current World Champion Nolan Sawyer and...beats him.

When she loses her mechanic position, she is in dire straits until a stranger shows up offering her a one-year paid fellowship at a prestigious chess institute. She eventually agrees and finds herself caught up in the competitive sport – training daily, entering competitions, and navigating her way through the challenging chess world and her tangled up emotions about chess, her dad, and Nolan.

This is a fascinating Young Adult romance. I personally know very, very little about chess – so I didn't understand all the chess terminology, but I was able to easily follow the story line and enjoy the romance. And I learned a lot about chess! Author Ali Hazelwood is well known for her science-themed adult rom-coms, and this is her debut novel in YA fiction. There is less spice than her adult novels, but still some mature themes and language.