

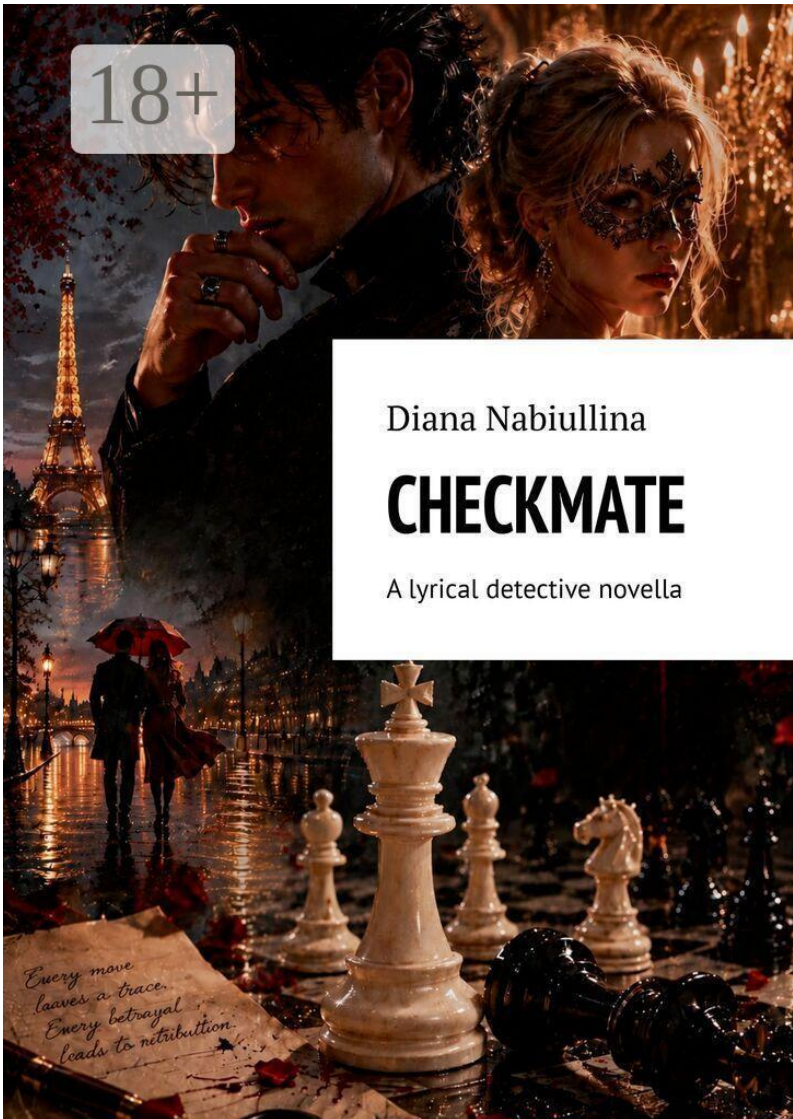
18+

Diana Nabiullina

CHECKMATE

A lyrical detective novella

*Every move
leaves a trace.
Every betrayal
leads to retribution.*



Diana Nabiullina
**Checkmate. A lyrical
detective novella**

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Аннотация

Angel Bettel, a chess teacher, lives a quiet, lonely life. A chance encounter with an old friend drags him into a string of murders — all victims blondes. In Paris he meets Venus, whose friend was also killed. Together they hunt the killer, but the final move is played at a masquerade ball, where the stake becomes Angel's own life. A story of betrayal, retribution, and the most dangerous piece — not on the board, but beside you.

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Chapter 1. Angel

Bettel (e2—e4 | e7—e5)

Evening descended on the city without warning, painting the sky in shades of ink. I walked to the window, a warm cup of tea cradled in my palms, settled onto the sill after pushing aside a flowerpot, and gazed at the panorama unfolding from the second floor. Through the rain-misted glass the world looked like an oil painting: hurried drops danced and slid across the pane, weaving themselves into whimsical, intricate patterns. Down below, huddled under a narrow awning, people shifted from foot to foot, waiting for the bus — office workers from nearby, probably, since it was close to eight. Noisy crowds of students drifted past; their contagious laughter and loud voices reached even me up here. Couples strolled slowly under a shared umbrella, chatting idly about this and that. And there, under the hypermarket sign, two charming young women stood frozen, weighted down by heavy bags — waiting for a taxi or their boyfriends to spare them from dragging those bulky purchases home. Gradually, warm lights flickered on in the windows of the surrounding houses: the city was coming home. I lifted my gaze higher, searching the sky. Through the dense veil of rain clouds bright stars timidly broke through like tiny fireflies, and the enormous round moon shone in majestic silence.

After sitting a little longer, I jumped down and went to my desk for a notebook, eager to catch a few thoughts before the fleeting inspiration left me.

“Dear diary, everything is as usual — except that an emptiness has taken up residence inside me. Days without her drag on like centuries. By the way, I wrote a new poem!”

**The streetlamps flicker, faint and low,
And silent crows behind me go.
I stand alone upon the hill —
The world around me deep and still —
And watch the waves in silver glow.**

“Oh, right — I have work tomorrow! I’ve written about her before, but I don’t mind doing it again. I adore her. Seeing those eyes spark with curiosity during lessons. Those focused, thoughtful faces burning with determination to win a chess match. The children get utterly absorbed in the game — they genuinely love it. And when fatigue builds up, I give them a short warm-up, good for both body and the subconscious mind that needs a break. Those little people practically glow as they shed the burdens of the day. They are so close-knit and open; they feel at home around the board. And the parents are pleased with the results we’ve achieved, shoulder to shoulder!”

**A joy fills my chest,
I can ask nothing more —
Their laughter's the best,
It's for them I live for.**

Chapter 2. Unexpected Encounter (Ng1—f3 | Nb8—c6)

Monday arrived. I reluctantly pried my eyes open and listened: the rain was still tapping monotonously against the glass. How I didn't want to leave that bed. The heavy blanket wrapped me in warmth, shielding me from the damp morning chill, and the pillow felt impossibly soft. But I found the strength to get up, pulled on a gray T-shirt, white sweatpants, and the warm socks my mother had knitted — I treasured them like the apple of my eye. After washing up and packing my bag, I threw on my coat, locked the front door, stepped outside, and filled my lungs with fresh air, immediately opening my umbrella. Despite the drizzling rain, the morning was delightful! I walked along the stone path, skirted the fence around our house and the front garden of flowers that the neighbour tended, and merged into the noisy flow of the bustling street. Those who had been rushing home last night were now hurrying to work or school, occasionally bumping elbows or umbrellas. Matching their pace, I walked briskly toward a favourite café, trying not to step in puddles. It wasn't far — just a dozen feet. Along the way I admired the parks and the tall trees planted along the pavement, and while waiting at traffic lights I studied the faces of passers-by, the streams of cars and buses. My city was as beautiful as

ever.

Soon Angel was stepping into that unremarkable little café on the outskirts; he liked that it wasn't popular. He took his usual table, ordered a latte with vanilla syrup on banana milk and his favourite pepperoni pizza, then pulled out from his leather briefcase — a gift from his father — a book by Ivan Turgenev, *First Love*.

“I haven't been here in a long time. The interior has hardly changed, and the menu is the same. I'll have coffee and pizza — a little treat for myself.”

Suddenly Angel's gaze caught a tall, stately dark-haired man standing at the bar counter. Noticing the intent stare, the bartender whispered to the guy, and he turned around. Genuine astonishment flashed in his eyes.

— An?

— Basford?

— What brings you here? How's life?

— Um... I decided to grab a bite. What are you doing here?

— Well, I was here with my girlfriend. She actually just left — shame I didn't get to introduce you! Oh, how many years have passed! What do you do for a living? Anything on the personal front?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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