

Fool's Mate

"To the east you will see the city's original town hall, built in 1862 in the gothic style," said a female voice in her ear. "It has been a department store since 1927." She had been curious about it, this strange, sad building that looked so much older than it was, and seemed so out of place at the foot of the glass towers surrounding it on all sides. She had thought she might go in, to get some respite from the heat – how she was regretting that black t-shirt, which soaked up every ray of sun – but she needed a drink, and she knew that there was a cafe two blocks away to the north.

The cafe was a dingy, run-down little place, in a neighbourhood that was rather less well-heeled than the one she had just left. It occurred to her that she had passed two more up-market coffee shops on the way. Still, it was out of the sun, and the coffee was not bad. Her GPS audio guide had nothing to say about this location, and instead played quiet, restful music. That, in fact, was what it had done most of the time: only occasionally offering any information about the area through which she was walking. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, when the eager young man approached her in the hotel lobby after breakfast, and offered her the guide, plus a ticket to a matinee show at the Princess, with a meal and a free drink, all for thirty dollars, throwing in a baseball cap, emblazoned with a large capital P, promoting the venue. To Holly, a gap-year student fresh over from England, with more time to spare than money, it had seemed like a great way to sample a new city cheaply. But the guide had been disappointing, and so had the show. There were a couple of indifferent singers, and some dancers of the kind more likely to appeal to a male audience. Then there had been a conjuror, who was not bad, but had insisted on dragging her onto the stage. When he asked her for a ten dollar bill, she had embarrassed herself by getting out of her purse a ten *pound* note instead, much to the amusement of the audience. He nevertheless made the note disappear and reappear again, and gave it back to her. But she had lost it somewhere, so the afternoon had already cost more than she had bargained for. The final act had been a hypnotist, who specialised in making people impersonate animals. That was all Holly could remember – she must have nodded off, waking with a start as the audience began to leave. She had been glad of the hat, though, when she walked out into the blinding afternoon sun. It fitted snugly upon her short, dark hair, and had remained there ever since.

There was nothing about the chess game itself that made it any different from the half dozen other games going on in the prison's recreation room. Yet many pairs of eyes were focused upon the two players. One of them, a white man of about fifty – thick set, square-jawed, with a few streaks of grey in his slicked back hair – stared intently across the board at his opponent, a black man in his thirties, with a slight but muscular build and large glasses that gave him something of the air of a college professor. With an ostentatious flourish, the older man picked up a piece and moved it two squares forward and one to the left. "Knight takes bishop, d4," he said loudly. At the back of the room there was a single telephone, and a queue of inmates waiting to talk to their loved ones. A man broke away from the knot of onlookers around the board and walked towards the telephone. He gave the merest of nods to the prisoner at the front of the queue, and tapped the shoulder of another who was using the telephone. The man lurched around, his half-spoken expletive cut short as he ended his call in silence and walked to the back of the queue. The interloper made the briefest of telephone calls, then turned to the queue and indicated that they should stay put. He pointed to his watch and held all ten fingers of his hands up. They must wait ten minutes.

At Fourth and Denver, a large man in a black suit sat at a table outside a bar. His suit was extravagantly pinstriped, double breasted and finely tailored, and he wore a large fedora hat. There was a red silk handkerchief in his top pocket, with which the man sometimes wiped sweat from his brow. Yet around his neck, incongruously, was the unmistakable white band of a clerical collar. Every few seconds he would take a slug from a bottle of beer, until it took its place beside five other empties in the centre of the table. Periodically, he would examine the mobile phone held in his left hand, as if expecting a call, while his right hand remained in the side pocket of his jacket. A man in a white shirt slipped into the bar behind him, emerging a minute or two later with several beers on a tray. He made a show of visiting two or three other tables before approaching the man in the black suit.

"Would you like another beer, sir?" The man nodded, and reached to take one. Then he noticed the horse's head on the pocket of the waiter's shirt. In another second, his hand would have returned to his jacket and raised his gun. But by then there had been two loud thuds from beneath the tray, not dissimilar to the sound of a beer bottle being put vigorously down upon a table. The arm fell limp, and hung by

the man's side. Calmly, the assassin put his silenced pistol down the back of his trousers, laid the tray of beers upon the table, and walked away.

After eight minutes and thirty seconds, the telephone rang. The man took the call, turned to the chess players and gave a nod, before handing the phone to the inmate who had been waiting patiently at the head of the queue. The man with the slicked back hair sat back in his chair and lit a cigarette. His opponent sighed, and removed his bishop from the board.

For years, the power structure in the city had been stable. The Italians owned the north side, the Irish the west, the Puerto Ricans the east and the African-Americans the south. Sure, there were border clashes now and again, but for the most part people stuck to their own turf, and everybody got richer. But there was something unsatisfying in this cosy arrangement. Working your territory brought in the dollars, and it gained you respect, but there was no thrill in it. Nobody wanted a war, but everybody needed a battlefield, a place where they could test themselves against the others.

That place was downtown. Downtown was everybody's and nobody's. The only people who lived there were rich civilians. So no one owned it, though you might run a nightclub here, a strip joint there. And everyone would operate downtown: it was where the richest prizes were to be had, the place where you could make your name. So the struggles between the four gangs played themselves out, not in the mean streets and apartment blocks where they came from, but on the broad sidewalks of 3rd Avenue and in the steamy nightspots of Chicago Boulevard.

When Greco, boss of the Northside gang, and Sims, boss of the Southside, found themselves in the same prison at the same time, honour required each man to establish his superiority over the other. They could have squabbled about who owned which cell block, who controlled the supply of drugs and the other little rackets that went on in the prison. But they both knew this was chickenfeed, a pale simulacrum of life outside. It was beneath their dignity. So instead they played chess. The pieces were their real-life soldiers, on the outside, dressed according to what colour they were, and what piece they were. And downtown was their board.

Holly had wandered aimlessly northwards during the afternoon, disappointed by how little she had seen of the city, but too hot and too jet-lagged to make an effort to see

more. Here at least there was a little piazza with a fountain (“funded by the city’s businessmen in honour of the dead of World War Two”, the guide had said). And there was a pleasant little cafe with an awning under which she could sit out of direct sunlight and take her time over a small glass of cola. The piazza was on top of a barely perceptible hill, perhaps fifteen metres above the nearby streets. But those fifteen metres, combined with the absence of tall buildings in the immediate vicinity, gave the cafe a fine view in all directions. She could see the skyscrapers of the central business district to the south, the plush hotels and department stores to the west.

The peace of her contemplation was disturbed by two loud bangs. A hundred yards away, at the next intersection, a man was lying face down on the pavement. People crowded around him, and within a couple of minutes the sound of sirens could be heard in the surrounding streets. Suddenly, she was afraid. This was a dangerous place, a place where people got shot in the street. On her little table at the edge of the raised piazza, she felt terribly exposed. The eyes of the people below seemed to be tracking her like the red dots of laser sights. She abandoned her drink, and began to run.

“Pawn to h5, what kind of a dumb-ass move is that?”

“It’s a strategic move. Not something you boys on the north side would understand.”

“Oh yeah? Well shove this up your strategic ass. Queen takes knight, c3.”

They waited seven minutes for the phone call, and the nod that followed. With a shrug, Sims took away his piece.

“It’s only a knight,” he said, “but you just lost your best piece. Pawn on b2 takes queen, c3.”

He nodded to one of his subordinates, who went to the phone. When the return call came, however, there was no verifying nod. Instead, the man put his arms across his chest in the shape of a cross, and flicked his index finger across his throat. A smile that had never quite left Greco’s face since the previous move now broadened into a grin. Pointedly, he removed the black pawn which for several minutes had awkwardly shared a square with his queen, and placed it by the side of the board. Then he leaned forward, until his eyes were no more than six inches from those of his opponent.

“You think you’re so smart, asshole: wanna know why I’m smarter than you? You think this is a game of *chess*, don’t you? Oh, sure, we use a chess board, but the game is played out there, not in here, and it ain’t no chicken shit board game. We know who your guys are, and I’ve got people on every street looking out for ‘em. They don’t do no shooting, but there ain’t nothing in the rules says they can’t let my guys know when someone’s coming after ‘em. That’s why five of your men are down and only two of mine.” He moved his queen two squares back, to safety. “Wanna make another ‘strategic’ move now, sucker?” No emotion registered on the face of Sims. “Pawn to h6, he said.”

They played by the rules of chess, with a single exception. You could ask almost anything of your soldiers and they would do it, out of loyalty, or fear, or ambition. But you couldn’t ask them to sit around meekly and wait for someone to come along and whack them. You had to let them shoot back, if they got the chance. And sometimes, it was the taking piece that got took. This meant that to win the game, it was not enough to put the king in checkmate: you had to kill him, and if you failed, the game carried on.

How long had she been running? She could not remember, but she was exhausted and covered in sweat. It was the audio guide that stopped her. “To the east you can see the Fairy Grotto,” it said, “a very popular place with the youngest inhabitants of the city, especially at Christmas.” She looked around her. How could you be scared in a place like this? There were toy shops, ice cream parlours, and mothers with little children everywhere. She sat down upon a shaded bench, and her heartbeat slowed as the headphones poured soothing music into her ears. What a fool she had been! Of course there were violent men in a big city, but she was no part of their murky struggles. She was a bird blown in on the wind, who could take in the scene and then fly on. There was nothing for her to fear.

“Pawn to h8.” He replaced the pawn with a black queen. “Checkmate. Everything you own downtown, every club, every restaurant, every cop, every politician, is now mine”

“You can say what you like, punk. You got to whack him first, and you ain’t got nobody good enough to whack Vinnie d’Angelo. Not when he’s got five or six guys

watching his ass. Not in a part of town where the only black guys you ever see are pushing garbage trolleys.”

Sims leaned forward slightly. “We’ll see,” he said. “Do you think I don’t *know* that you watch the streets? Who says I have to use black guys? Who says I have to use *guys* at all?”

“You can’t bring in hired guns from outside, it says in the rules.”

“Sure. But what if I could get someone to do it for nothing? Someone who ain’t from southside. Someone who ain’t from this city. Someone who ain’t even from this *country*.”

Greco waved his hand dismissively. “You’re bluffing.” His expression was contemptuous, but upon his forehead there was the merest suspicion of a bead of sweat.

As Holly reached the crossroads, she saw a small florist’s shop and was overwhelmed by a sudden whim to buy some flowers. *As if there is anywhere to put them in my poky little hotel room.* She entered the shop. “I’d like to buy a small bouquet, please,” she said. As she did so, without thinking, she moved her hand to the back pocket in her jeans, where her fingers closed around a banknote. She handed the note to the shopkeeper, who unrolled it and held it up for inspection. She could now see that it was British note, a ten pound note with a large black cross marked upon it. *So that’s where I put it! But I never put money in my pockets.*

“I’m so sorry, I’ve given you a British note by mistake. Let me find you a twenty dollar bill.”

The shopkeeper smiled. “No, lady. This note will do fine. Here, I’ve got a very special bouquet for you. He reached behind him and handed over an extravagant spray of orchids and lilies. “They’re beautiful,” she said, quite overwhelmed.

“Sure are, lady. Here, these will set them off nicely, don’t you think.” He removed the hat from her head and put in its place a garland of gypsophyla. He gestured towards a mirror on one of the walls. With the crown of little flowers on her head, she looked like somebody’s bridesmaid. But it felt magical, it felt right.

A soft male voice in her head said, “go to Eighth and Fresno and get yourself a hamburger from the van”. She forgot the voice immediately, as the restful music resumed, but suddenly she felt hungry. “Is there a burger van near here?” The shopkeeper nodded and pointed. “Two blocks that way.” She thanked him, and left.

“Excuse me, I’d like to buy a hamburger, please.” *But I’m a vegetarian!* The man was looking intently into the middle distance, and seemed preoccupied. “We’re closed right now, lady. There’s a McDonalds two blocks down on Sixth and Fresno.” He turned to face her, and as he did so she saw that upon his white T-shirt there was a large image of a crown. She stood transfixed, and one by one the flower stems fell to the floor. Her hands closed around something cold and hard. A look of realisation came over the man’s face. He reached for something and began to swing his arms towards her. A red spot appeared in the centre of the crown, and the man fell backwards.

The telephone rang. A man answered it and nodded his head. With the faintest of smiles, Sims picked up the queen and flicked the top of the white king, which fell over and rolled onto the floor.

New memories were suddenly flooding her brain and driving out the old ones, as if a dam had burst somewhere inside. The man with his soft, calming voice asking her to jump like a rabbit, asking her to put the ten pound note in her back pocket, asking her to

What was this place? How had she got here? Why were there flowers scattered around her on the pavement? Among the whites and golds and greens lay a small dark object, which she recognised as a pistol. For reasons she did not yet understand, she began to cry.