

By Jacob C. Langley

Checkmate

Although seated some distance away, the woman distracted Simon enough to cost him his speed chess game against Charlie—along with their ten-dollar bet. She sat at a table under one of the giant cottonwood trees scattered throughout the green, urban oasis, staring at the chess game laid out in front of her, her defeated opponent having already vanished.

A sense of unease, of apprehension, grew within Simon as he approached her. The young woman wore a tailored black pantsuit, red silk blouse, matching red high heels, and a string of small black pearls around her neck. She was like a beautiful, exotic flower amid a field of weeds. Unexpectedly, Simon felt himself blushing.

The expressionless dark-haired woman collected the chessmen from the board and, almost reluctantly, drop them one by one into a velvet drawstring bag. She was almost finished.

A sudden panic gripped Simon. “Hello, my name is Simon Mathews,” he blurted as he walked up to her, his voice loud in his ears. “How about a quick game of speed chess?”

Dark brown eyes coolly dissected him. The woman’s lips, the same shade of red as her blouse and shoes, ticked up into a hint of a smile. “Sorry, not my game; speed chess is too unpredictable.” She looked back at the task at hand and dropped her opponent’s white king, the last of the chess pieces, into the bag with finality. She sighed. Another second passed before her eyes swung back to Simon. She held her hand out to him. “Hello, Simon, I’m Sarah Coventry.”

Simon noticed that her manicured nails were that same complementary red. Her hand was smooth and cool and her grip, firm. She held his hand for several seconds before letting go. Her

dark eyes bored into his. It was disconcerting, but Simon swallowed and pushed forward. “A regular game of chess, then, and you can name the stakes.”

Her smile remained, but her eyes darkened. Her next words drained the flush from Simon’s face. “You might want to reconsider that offer, Mr. Mathews. I only play for souls.”

Simon’s awkward grin froze as he waited for the joke’s punch-line or some obscure metaphor, but none came. The silence stretched several uncomfortable seconds as the beautiful pale woman continued to look at him with that enigmatic half-smile on her full lips. It was several seconds before Simon found his voice, albeit hesitant and a little strained. “So... uh... who are you supposed to be... the Devil?” he asked.

Sarah’s smile widened. “Hardly. I guess you could say I’m one of Satan’s minions, or to put it more alliteratively, Satan’s assistant.”

Simon stared at her, slack-jawed. If it wasn’t an elaborate joke, then maybe mental problems or drugs? Sarah seemed clear-eyed, serious, and articulate besides very attractive. Simon humored her. “Okay, but whatever happened to just ‘selling your soul to the Devil?’”

Sarah laughed. “Selling your soul is still acceptable, but it’s easier to tempt people if they’re given a chance to get their heart’s desire and keep their soul in the bargain.”

Simon’s mind was catching up. “So... what about all the Devil’s deceptions and morbid tricks? With Satan, nothing is ever what it seems.”

Sarah picked up her chess clock but hesitated before placing it in her bag. “Please, Mr. Mathews, tricks and deceptions are against the rules. Satan is actually a straight shooter in that respect. You win, you get what you want. You lose, goodbye soul and... well, you know how that story goes. But be positive. As someone once said: ‘Better to rule in Hell than to serve in Heaven.’”

Sarah shook her head, pursed her lips, and continued. “Temptation is the only weapon my Master uses—the only one necessary. Man’s greed and ambition, his conceit, arrogance, and self-worship, his belief that he can be like God, do the real work. Our job is to offer ‘opportunities and improvements’ to his earthly life. Minions—assistants, if you please—are for those tempted, undecided, or lacking in that ‘faith’ thing. Other minions do other things well, but my forte is chess, and I’m very good at it. In your case, chess would decide whether you lose your immortal soul or win your ‘opportunities and improvements.’ And, by the way, Satan doesn’t have horns, a forked tail, or cloven hooves. He just is... like God just is, but Man is so imaginative and melodramatic.”

Grim-faced and a bit flushed, she continued. “God gave Man an immortal soul and the rules to live by, but He also gave them free will, and not only do they break the rules, but look at the evil they commit against their neighbor and fellow man. Many people have already mortgaged their souls—‘the walking damned,’ so to speak.” She took a deep breath and stood. “And that, Mr. Mathews, concludes your condensed Theology 101 course.”

Sarah was shorter than he had thought, 5’4” at best. At 6’3,” Simon towered over her. Simon guessed that she was in her late twenties and much younger than his forty-five. Yet, he somehow felt cowed and unnerved. He couldn’t help himself, the words gushed out. “What if I still wanted that chess game?”

Her expression was almost one of regret. “Yes, if you want.” Sarah bent and picked up her purse—red, of course. She removed a small card and envelope. “Write down what you’re wagering your soul for and seal it in the envelope. Bring it with you tomorrow at 10:00 a.m., this table. Be specific. ‘All the money in the world’ or ‘to live forever’ won’t work. And my Master can’t raise the dead—an item reserved for God. As for the chess game itself: standard

tournament rules, forty moves in two hours. If the game is unfinished, white will write and seal their forty-first move in an envelope and the game will continue the following day. It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Matthews.” She turned to leave.

“Wait, Ms. Coventry. Have you ever lost a chess game?”

Sarah turned back to him. “Twice. Once in 1797 and again in 1878.”

“Huh?” Simon was gaping at her again.

“What did you think, that eternity, for me, started in the twenty-first century?” she said.

“And Satan paid off on the wagers. One player became one of the richest men in the world, and the other became President of the United States. My Master was not happy with my losing. He made me pay in ways you couldn’t fathom.” Sarah’s voice was as cold and bitter as a winter wind, and Simon imagined he saw a tremor pass through her body. With eyes as black as a bottomless pit, she continued. “I haven’t lost since and I don’t plan on losing again.”

Before she could turn to leave, Simon had to ask, his voice soft, “What about you?”

Now it was her turn to look confused. “What?”

“How did you lose your soul, Sarah?”

She was staring at him as if he had just slapped her, her mouth parted, eyes wide. She licked, then bit, her lower lip. Simon didn’t think she would answer, but she did.

“It was 1649. I was twenty-eight, living in London with my husband, Richard, and ten-year-old daughter, Mary. One night, we were returning from my grandpapa’s—my original chess teacher—in nearby Greenwich, and were set upon by three drunken brigands. They murdered my husband, raped and murdered my daughter, raped and left me for dead, but I lived.” Sarah’s voice was flat and emotionless. “Revenge, Mr. Mathews. It took me over a year, but I tracked

down all three, planned, plotted, and killed them. When I finished, I drowned myself in the Thames River, and here I am.” Now she did noticeably shudder.

“I’m sorry,” Simon whispered.

Simon could see her jaw muscles work as she clenched her teeth. “Sorry for what?”

“Sorry for your life, for your death, for your now.”

Storm clouds swirled in her dark eyes. “I’ll see you in the morning, Mr. Matthews.”

Sarah turned and left the park.

Simon was still staring after her when Charlie’s voice came from behind him. “Don’t bother following her; she’s gone.”

Simon turned and looked at him.

Charlie continued. “Sarah is our local ‘urban legend.’ She isn’t here every day, or every week or month, just when she has a game scheduled. She first appeared around fifteen years ago, about six months after I started hanging out at the chess tables, I tried following her two or three times. Kept losing her on the path leading out of the park, then dropped that idea when those three gang-bangers stalked her and wound up dead.”

“What?”

Charlie’s lined, gray-whiskered face split in a wide grin. “You know Roosevelt Park is near Albuquerque’s ‘War Zone’ and home turf to several area gangs, but do you see any of them in the park, or even any graffiti anywhere?”

Simon realized Charlie was right. College kids, retirees, and several families enjoyed the bright sunlit day, but no unsavory characters were present in the clean and well-kept park. “No, it’s one of the nicer parks I’ve been in.”

“It was pretty rough back in ’96,” Charlie said. “A couple of the local gangs claimed this turf. Fights, harassment, and graffiti were common. Three bangers followed Sarah out the second time she was here. The next day, I read in the paper that their bodies were found. Victims of apparent gang warfare, according to the police. A few more weeks, a few more obituaries, and the gangs avoided this place like the plague.”

Simon stood there, musing aloud. “She looks to be in her mid to late twenties. If so, in ’96, she would have been a teenager, if that.” He coughed, clearing his throat nervously. “And would you believe she gave me this spiel about the Devil? Being his minion and playing chess games for people’s souls?” He laughed, “Pretty crazy, huh?”

From Charlie’s expression, it was clear he didn’t think it was crazy at all. He didn’t seem surprised in the least. “I’m telling you what I know,” he said. “Sarah looks the same now as she did back then. She hasn’t lost a chess game here that I know about, and, after losing, all her opponents disappeared. At least I never saw them again. I’d think twice about taking her on, no matter how good you are or how bad you want something. I’d hate to lose you. Good competition is hard to find.”

That night, Simon sat alone in his darkened apartment with the day’s events looping through his mind, the possibilities and consequences ricocheting through that loop. He turned on the desk lamp and stared at the framed picture of his wife and daughter, three years dead, now. He began to relive the accident; the out of control 16-wheeler running the red light, the crash, and the screams as it broadsided their SUV.

Simon stopped the always agonizing train of thought, but couldn't halt the question that always followed: Why had he lived, when they had died? He sighed and looked at the blank card Sarah had given him.

In college, Simon had been president of the chess club and ranked by the U.S. Chess Federation as a Master, only a few points shy of a Grand Master ranking. Simon believed he was as good or better than he ever was, but, maybe, that was part of a damning conceit and arrogance to which Sarah had alluded...

Sarah was sitting at her usual table when Simon arrived, beautiful and stylish in a black skirt and a long-sleeved burgundy silk blouse. A string of small, black pearls accented her slim neck. Simon felt shabby in his tennis shoes, blue-jeans, and blue polo-shirt.

She smiled and held out her hand. "Good to see you, Mr. Matthews."

It might have been his imagination, but he detected a shadow of disappointment in her ebony eyes as he took her hand. Simon sat down, opened his canvas bag, and removed his chess set and clock.

Sarah gave a small laugh. "Don't trust me?"

"Considering the stakes, I'll be more comfortable using my set and clock."

"No problem, Mr. Mathews; whatever makes you happy." Sarah was expressionless, but obviously intended to keep it formal.

Simon secreted a white and black pawn, one in each hand, and held out his fists for Sarah to choose. She chose his right hand, hiding the white pawn. She would have the first move.

Somehow, this didn't surprise him. They set up the chessmen on the cement table's inlaid black-

and-white-tiled chessboard. Next, each pulled out paper and pen with which to record the moves. Simon laid the sealed envelope next to the clock.

Sarah looked at the envelope, then at him, that crooked, half-smile back on her face.

“Last chance, Mr. Matthews.”

Simon took a deep breath and swallowed. “Anytime you’re ready.”

She moved the pawn in front of her queen forward, hit the button atop her clock face, which started Simon’s clock, then wrote the move “d4” on her pad. Simon jotted down her action on his, countered with his knight to c3, hit his button, and then notated his move.

And so it went; move, clock, notation. The only sounds were the faint ticking of the chess clock, a slight breeze rustling the cottonwood leaves overhead, and occasional voices carried to them on that gentle current from distant parts of the park. Distant because their little oasis was shunned by the aware and unconsciously avoided by the unaware.

Simon’s laser-like attention focused on the board before him, but slowly, inexorably, Sarah’s white chess army gained control of the center of the board, methodically pushing his pieces back. He exchanged a bishop and then a knight in an attempt to slow her advance. It was futile. His king and its dwindling defenders were forced to retreat. encircled, surrounded, the pressure building.

Simon felt the panic rising in his chest. His stomach clenched like a fist. Gall rose in his throat. Sarah would soon move in for the kill. Simon couldn’t see a way out.

Sarah had been precise, methodical—almost robotic—in her game. Move, clock, notate, study—she never missed a move, never spoke, and never looked at Simon until the twenty-ninth move.

Simon had been exchanging pieces whenever possible, hoping he could somehow force a draw, but he realized even that would be impossible. Sarah would position her queen on her next move, and checkmate would only be four moves away.

Her hand lifted and hovered over the white queen then withdrew and returned to her lap.

Simon looked up from the board and saw Sarah looking at him, her eyes brimming with tears, threatening to overflow. Her hand again rose, drifted towards the queen, clenched, opened, wavered, then moved her knight, instead.

Simon stared in disbelief. It was the wrong move. It freed his position. He looked up again. Sarah was staring at the chessboard, a single tear coursing down her cheek. He counter-attacked and hit his clock. Seven moves later, Sarah was checkmated.

Her hands resting on the table, Sarah stood, shoulders slumped, head bowed, more tears escaping her eyes. “You win, Simon.”

He rose as well. “Why, Sarah?”

Her hand rose to her lips in a failed gesture to regain her composure. “In over 350 years, you were the only person who was concerned about my life and why I was consigned to Hell. Everyone else cared only for themselves and what they wanted. I couldn’t condemn you to Hell. I just couldn’t.”

Simon smiled. “Sarah, see what I won.”

She looked at him with a lost and desolate look in her eyes. “Why? What difference does that make?”

“Please.”

Sarah opened the envelope and read the card. She looked at Simon, then back at the message. Her hand again fluttered to her lips in another failing effort at composure. Another look

at Simon, and she was crying, sobbing uncontrollably. She opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't, then turned and ran from the park.

Simon sat down and took a deep breath. It felt as if he had just finished an arduous and grueling race. Tension flowed out of him, and relief took its place. Simon picked up the string of black pearls lying on the table. He hadn't noticed when Sarah removed them.

Simon gazed at the treed path that Sarah disappeared through for several minutes, listening to the faint rustling of the leaves and enjoying the clean air of the mile-high city. He heard soft footfalls on the grass next to him.

It was Charlie. "I have to confess, I didn't think you'd be here, Simon. I didn't think you could beat her," he said.

Simon handed him the card. "You just need to have a little faith, Charlie, and I don't think you'll be seeing her again."

The old chess player looked at the card and its neatly printed, "FREE SARAH COVENTRY'S SOUL." He stared, open-mouthed. "You played for her soul?"

"God works in mysterious ways, Charlie, and now I know why I'm here—why I didn't die in the accident. I provided the road, and Sarah traveled it. Redemption. Oh, and she left me these black"—he looked down at his open hand at the string of small, white pearls resting in his palm—"these white pearls."