

Checkmate  
By Fae Sutherland

*“You have not even begun to understand me, James...and as long as you are swathed in your pristine life you never will. Do you really want to know? If so I will show you.”*

The short note on smooth cream coloured stationary sat open on James Hatcher’s desk, the lines where it had been folded neatly creasing the otherwise unblemished page, the cracked waxen seal the only mar on the missive itself. Blood red wax, the oil of it having slightly seeped through the parchment on the underside and James stared at it, idly thinking it had the look of watery blood spreading.

For weeks now he had been on the killer’s trail. James knew it was a man, wealthy and educated, likely a member of Society and well-connected. What he did not know was how the man’s mind operated. He could not peg this one, and having been in the business of tracking down criminals for nearly a decade, it was unusual for him to run across any mind he could not disassemble given enough time.

This one he could not. There was no rhyme or reason to the man’s actions, nor was there a pattern to his victims. If there was a pattern, he could not decipher it. And had he not known different, he would have assumed the man was simply psychotic, unstable and therefore random in his killings. But James knew that was not the case, for all along, from the moment he had been given the case, it seemed, the killer had taken a vested interest in the investigator. Notes had started coming, James had a collection of papers just like this one, all of them stashed safely in his desk at his office. There was intelligence in the letters, a calm sanity that, while emotionally bereft, was undeniable. This was no madman.

This letter had come today, on the heels of another death, and was the most disturbing yet. The tone of it was what bothered him, as if the killer was tiring of their cat and mouse and wanting more, though what more he wanted James couldn’t begin to fathom. But he knew that, whatever the next move was, he himself was at the core of it. And at the same time as it exhilarated him, because if the killer would just once slip up, just once have the bad judgment to make a mistake, James would have him, it also made him nervous...because he had the distinct feeling that if the killer had his way, James would be the next victim.

Tossing back the last of the brandy in his snifter, he set the glass aside, leaning back in his chair still staring at the letter open there, and he swore the damned thing stared back, mocking him, taunting him. Snorting at his own fancy, pushing away from the desk and rising to begin to pace when there was a sound, soft and barely discernable over the crackle of the fire, just behind him. The soft scuff of a boot on the rug and James spun around, hand reaching for the pistol on his desk but freezing in place when the figure in the shadows beside the window stepped forward and James knew he could not reach the weapon in time.

He clenched his jaw, straightening and staring unflinchingly at the intruder. He didn't pretend not to know who his late night visitor was and his heart pounded mercilessly in his chest. The man moved closer and James held his ground. He did not recognize the face that became clear in the flickering light from the fire and the oil lamp on the wall, but then, James had never moved in social circles.

It was a beautiful face though, and the tug he felt in the pit of his stomach startled him. The man was tall, broad in the shoulders and narrow in the hips, with a tumble of pale blonde curls across his forehead that seemed to laugh in the face of the current fashion men had of pomading their hair sleekly back. This man let his curls fall freely and they were glorious. Piercing eyes the shade of which James could not make out pinned him to the spot.

“You are either very brave or very stupid. Care to make a wager which one I think it is?” James' voice was low and mocking, his chin tilted and stance casual as if he could hide the visceral reaction he had to the man's presence.

The other man smiled, and James cursed himself for suddenly feeling ridiculously breathless at the sight of it. He had the face of an angel, yet James knew that pretty package harbored evil of the darkest kind.

“No, I imagine I can presume accurately that you believe me mad, my dearest James.” His voice was warm velvet, rough and silky at the same time, rippling down James' spine.

James shook his head. “No, actually. If you were you'd have hanged in Newgate long before now.” His blood chilled at the look that flashed in the man's eyes and he knew suddenly. “You're going to kill me, aren't you?”

The man tilted his head slightly, a regretful sort of look crossing his features. “Believe me when I say it is not something I will enjoy. I've grown rather fond of you, James.”

James nodded slightly, seeking to buy time, gauging his chances of taking him by physical strength. Not good, he didn't look soft by any means, and had a good half a foot and possibly 2 stone or more in weight. There was James' pistol on the desk if he could just reach it, but just as that thought crossed his mind a long-fingered, elegant hand snaked out and snatched it up, tucking it inside his jacket. Well, so much for that. He had a small derringer in his desk drawer and stalled a bit as he worked out the best way to reach it before the elegant gentleman he knew to be a cold-blooded killer could stop him.

“A last request is standard, is it not?” Arching a brow slightly and the man gave a short nod. “Tell me why you are doing this. Not just tonight, killing me, but all of it. I will admit you've managed to baffle me and I find myself insatiably curious.”

The other man didn't speak for a long moment, staring at him as if attempting to decide

what James was up to and then smiling again. He had apparently decided whatever it was, it was no threat. "Come, sit down. I'll tell you what you want to know." He gestured to the small mahogany table and James sat, tensing slightly as the man chose to sit directly beside him, watching as he reached out to push aside the antique, carved ivory chess set James' great-grandfather had brought back from safari decades ago.

He was startled when the other man held out his hand to take James', a fluttering in his stomach at the feel of that warm, smooth, elegant hand encompassing his own. His visitor smiled yet again. "I felt we should at least be properly introduced, James. I know you but you do not know me. Timothy Stratford III, pleased to meet you." He chuckled softly. "Though I doubt you return the sentiment."

James nodded. He knew the name and recognition swirled inside him. Timothy Stratford, eldest son of a wealthy shipping family, his name had been in the papers often several years back in connection with a series of fires in the shipping yards that were said to have devastated the family's fortune and nearly crippled the business. Something else niggled at his mind, some other reason he felt he should know the name but it evaded him, much to his frustration.

Timothy arched a slim brow. "You're trying to remember why my name is familiar to you, aren't you, dear James?" His eyes, which James could now see were a clear, almost brilliant green, had a soft, amused sort of light in them.

He nodded. "Yes." There didn't seem to be any reason to lie at this point. He also couldn't help but notice that Timothy had not released his hand, instead he held it in his own, his thumb rubbing lightly over James' knuckles, absently it seemed.

Timothy shook his head, looking down at their hands and then back up to meet James' eyes. "You wanted to know why, and you will know, I promise you that. But first I promised you something in my last letter, did I not?"

James nodded, trying to ignore the sparks of awareness that skittered along his nerves with every brush of Timothy's thumb. "To show me...show me what you did not clarify. I don't suppose you'd like to now, hmm?"

Timothy didn't answer in words. Instead he leaned in and captured James' lips, kissing him not hard or rough but demandingly, intently, tightening his grip on James' hand when he made to move away and tugging him closer, his tongue slipping out to demand entrance and after a long moment of struggle between them, James gave it. He cursed himself but his body seemed, even knowing this man intended to murder him, to have a mind of its own and before he could register what he'd done Timothy took the invitation and swept his tongue inside, stealing James' breath and his sanity it seemed.

He'd never been kissed like that in his life, but then he supposed perhaps that was because he'd only ever kissed women, and women did not tend to kiss a man as if they wanted to throw them down and ravish them. And that was exactly what Timothy kissed

like, and God save him James was not entirely averse to the idea.

Within seconds he was kissing Timothy back, no longer trying to tug his hand away but instead trying to get closer, arms twining around his neck and reveling in the spicy sweet taste of him, hot and wet and so different from a woman. When Timothy finally broke the kiss, James unthinkingly leaned in as if to follow those incredibly soft yet firm lips, freezing at the sound of a soft chuckle and realization creeping in.

Anger flushed his cheeks and he jerked back, glaring darkly at the other man, the back of his free hand wiping across his mouth but that did nothing for the fact that the taste of Timothy was on his tongue and in the back of his mouth and damn him he wanted more.

“What the hell was that?!” Snatching his hand free and scowling at him. “Is that the understanding you meant, that you bugger men in your spare time between murders?” His tone a sneer and he flinched inwardly at the sudden icy cold that hardened Timothy’s eyes.

Timothy’s jaw clenched and his smile this time was brittle and hard, tsking softly. “James...I had hoped you would be different. I had hoped you, of all people would understand me. I’ve watched you, James, for a very long time, even before you took on the case. I know about your desires, I know because I was once you. And now...now I am better than you.” His voice sharp at the last.

James’ mind spun as he struggled to make sense of it. “I don’t...”

“Don’t understand?” Timothy gave a mocking laugh, rising and narrowing his eyes down on him. “No, I do not think you do. You are so immersed in your morals and rules and what the rest of society dictates to you that you’ve lost your ability to think for yourself. If you would just think, James, it would all make sense.”

James rose as well, not liking the man towering over him like some avenging angel in full fury. Bits of information whirled through his mind. The victims...a wealthy matriarch with her throat slit in her bed, a priest from a local cathedral found dead in his confessional, a doctor from Bedlam hospital killed by his own electric shock device. One final piece of information hitting him and his eyes opened wide, flying up to Timothy’s face.

He remembered where he knew the name, a case when he’d just been starting in the field, the death of a young man of 17...it had been a scandal because the young man had been not only from a wealthy, well-placed family, he had also been found naked, having been obviously sexually assaulted. Another young man had been questioned, only once and not even as a suspect but as a possible witness...an 18 year old by the name of Timothy Stratford.

Timothy gave a slow smile at the very clear look of understanding dawning on James’ face. “Ah, dear James, I knew you would figure it out. Now do you see? They all

deserved to die, James. Madeline Talbot was a nasty old busybody, she made the mistake of poking her nose into my business and discovered I had a lover. Now this wouldn't have been cause for much scandal except, well, as you've probably guessed, my lover was a he not a she. Quite the tangle, eh? And then there was Father Joseph. I did regret that, you know, and said a dozen Hail Mary's but I don't think it will get me into heaven, do you? Father Joseph didn't seem to think anything would, not when I made confession to him about my practices."

James just stared at him, aghast and seemingly riveted to the spot. Timothy didn't seem to notice and continued on.

"Doctor Lewis...do you know what the good doctor was really doing in that building of torture you people call a hospital? Men strapped to a bed and shocked until they were incoherent for the rest of their miserable lives, men beaten to ribbons and starved to death all in the name of "medicine" to cure them from their unnatural desires." His face was no longer that of an angel, but twisted in fury. "Unnatural desires, James...desires I have. Desires you have. The death the good doctor was given was a mercy compared to what he deserved."

James swallowed hard, throat dry and fear coiling in his belly. "And Michael...the boy ten years ago? Why did you kill him, Timothy?" Inching slowly towards the desk, only a foot or so away, he could leap and clear it and have that derringer before Timothy could stop him if he could just get himself a bit further away.

Timothy rolled his eyes. "Oh Michael...well that was sort of a mistake, you see. I didn't mean to kill him, we were lovers, good friends. Michael had a strange practice of wanting me to choke him when we had sex, he said it made the climax so much better." Shrugging lightly. "I suppose I got carried away." He swept a hand out in a dismissive gesture and knocked over several pieces from the chess set on the table, his eyes flicking down at the clatter they made.

James took the opportunity, knowing it might well be his only one, leaping away and over the desk, hand closing on the handle of the drawer and tugging. Dread and a cold awareness of his own death filling him when it didn't budge. Locked. His eyes lifted as if in slow motion to find his own pistol pointing at him and Timothy shaking his head sadly.

"I had hoped you'd be different, James. I really did."

James opened his mouth to speak, to plead, something, but he never got the chance. The sharp report of the gun filled the air with acrid smoke and an unnatural silence.

Timothy sighed, tucking the gun back inside his coat and closing his eyes briefly. When they opened he was staring at the floor and a white carved ivory rook that lay on it's side there. A small smile quirked the corner of one lip as he stooped down and swept it up into his hand, long fingers stroking the smooth, cool surface before tucking it in his pocket as

well.

He always had loved a good game of chess.