

Andrew V. Kudin

A GAME OF BLIND



KUDIN & SONS

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PROLOGUE

The news presenter's voice came from the car radio, smooth and unmistakable, a voice trained to announce death in the same tone it used for weather.

"Last night, a man identified as Richard Neal was found dead in downtown Los Angeles. Authorities say Neal died after falling from a skyscraper located at the intersection of—"

The roar of a passing car swallowed the rest.

"Richard Neal had been working as a contractor for World of Chess, Inc. Anyone who witnessed the incident is asked to contact—"

The night closed over the number before it could be heard.





PART I

HENRY



CHAPTER 1

"I was supposed to win. I was."

Henry was not saying it to Louise. He was saying it to the screen, to the board still burning behind his eyes, to the same position he had replayed three times already. Each time he drifted back to the computer as if the answer might surface if he stared long enough; each time he pushed himself away and crossed the room in agitation.

Louise would remember it afterward as the day her husband first took notice of Sauganash. The name meant nothing to either of them yet. On that Thanksgiving afternoon there was only Henry in the kitchen, coming apart over a game.

She lifted the turkey from the oven. The room filled with heat and the rich smell of browned skin, butter, and herbs.

"Henry, dear, it's just a game." She shut the oven with her hip. "The children will be here any minute. Turn off that damn computer and help me set the table."

Thanksgiving was her favorite holiday, the one day of the year when the whole family gathered under one roof. She reached into the cupboard for the plates.

"I called Mom," she said. "It snowed in Boston this morning, the first snow of the season. I wish we had snow here in Los Angeles, at least once in a while. I miss winter."

Henry came up behind her and put his arms around her shoulders. For a moment she let herself believe the gesture belonged to her.

"You see, he chose Henry Bird's opening," he said into her hair. "Almost nobody plays it now. It's rarely used these days, not because it's unsound, but because it usually gives White nothing immediate."

Louise stepped out of his arms.

"You really aren't helping." She looked at the table. "How many times have I told you? The fork goes to the left of the plate. The left."

"Oh, really?" Henry murmured.

He moved to the table and rearranged the silverware with absent-minded precision, squaring each fork and knife as if one correct line on the table could repair the ruin on the board.

"I was playing White," he said. "Everything was fine. A few tricks threw him off. I took a piece, then two pawns. I kept attacking. And then everything went wrong. It wasn't random. I'm convinced of that

now." His hands stopped above the table. "How on earth did I allow him to checkmate me?"

Louise leaned down and kissed his forehead. She was five inches taller than he was and had long ago stopped noticing it.

"Henry, I love you. I even love your chess obsession. But please, darling, do me a favor. Go down to the cellar and bring up another bottle of Burgundy."

He sighed like a man called away from the board with the position still unsolved, and went downstairs.

At the beginning Louise had thought the whole venture was nonsense. All of it. The Internet was a place where people lost money, not made it. Henry had named his company World of Chess, Inc., registered a domain, and built a web portal where players could sit down against one another without leaving home. The games were free; the addiction was not. Regular users were encouraged to create profiles and pay for the things that made them feel stronger: computer analysis of their games, archived matches, online training, temporary vacation holds on fees, and other small advantages sold as improvement. Three dollars a month. Five. Fifteen.

Louise had told him, more than once, that no one became rich by collecting such tiny sums from strangers.

Henry had understood something she had not. A man who falls for chess does not get up again. He studies the loss. He buys the lesson. He pays to return to the same wound with better weapons.

Within six months, ten thousand players had registered. Five months later, the company earned its first million. Louise stopped arguing. Now the number of registered users was moving toward a million and showed no sign of slowing down.

She set out the Meissen porcelain, the collection Henry had inherited from his German parents and which she unpacked for Thanksgiving and no other day. The reversal still amused her. The whole house now stood on the thing she had once dismissed as a waste of time.

There had been years when Henry went hat in hand to sponsors. Now grandmasters wrote to him, hoping his company would support their tournaments, their championships, their summer camps for children. He sponsored them generously and called it charity when others were listening.

"It's like chess," he had explained to Louise. "The stronger the opponent, the sweeter the victory. Charity costs less than advertising and does more. People thank you for being useful to yourself."

The doorbell rang. Their son arrived first. Their daughter's family would come late, the way they always did, and once that would have spoiled the afternoon for Louise. Not anymore. She let the house fill with voices, clinking glasses, running children, the bright disorder of family brought back for one day around one table.

Henry did his part. He greeted everyone. He laughed when he was supposed to laugh. He praised the turkey. He lifted his glass. But Louise had lived with him too long to be fooled by correct behavior. Beneath the smile he was elsewhere, three rooms and a whole life away, back inside the game with the stranger who had taken his king.

The turkey was perfect, as it was every year.

Henry tasted none of it.

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He could not put the game down.

The plates were being cleared, voices rose and broke around him, a grandchild shrieked somewhere under the table, and Henry remained inside the position. What kept turning in his mind was the brute simplicity of it: he had lost to a nobody. An unknown beginner. Such things were not supposed to happen. He lost games, of course. Every player did. But he did not lose his head, and tonight, somewhere in the middle of that game, he had lost his head.

There had been a time when newspapers called him America's pride and hope. He was nineteen when he won the U.S. Championship for the first time, a young man who had to look up at everyone in the room and hated it, hated every inch surrendered by his body, and made the board the one place where height meant nothing.

They compared him to Emanuel Lasker. His was the kind of chess that infuriated romantic players. Henry did not hurry toward glory. He removed danger before it could breathe. He built positions that refused to break, watched the opponent exhaust himself against them, and waited for the first lapse of concentration. A careless pawn. A premature attack. One square abandoned too early. The instant the other man blinked, Henry entered through the crack and the game was over.

"You play to exploit your opponent's mistakes," his critics told him. "But you can't build your whole strategy on the assumption they'll slip. What if they don't?"

"A draw is better than a loss," Henry would answer, and continue giving nothing away.

He had always been practical, almost coldly so. After college, he considered two paths: mathematics and chess. Even now he could not say whether mathematics had strengthened his chess or chess had led him deeper into mathematics. But he had known one thing early. He might become a respectable mathematician; he would never become a great one. In chess, he had already climbed high enough for the world to see him. A national championship was the summit available to a man like him. So he took it, held it, and then built something larger than a title.

He built World of Chess, Inc.

The site made him rich. The engine made him powerful.

He had not built it alone. His real genius had been in assembling the team: renowned chess players who knew where the game hid its traps, having fallen into most of them themselves, and software developers sharp enough to turn calculation into authority. Together they created the program chess players had dreamed of and then learned to fear. At first Henry doubted that any machine could truly outthink a human being. He no longer doubted it. At any moment in any game he could consult the program, and it would return the truth of the position with a clarity no roomful of grandmasters could match.

Sometimes, anonymously, he allowed the world to remember him.

He would sit behind a made-up name and play some celebrated opponent online, the engine beside him, its analysis available whenever he wished. He defeated renowned players with ease. The next morning came the admiring emails: brilliant, masterful, astonishingly precise. Henry read every word. When people asked why a man in such form refused to enter tournaments, he said he was too old and too busy.

Both answers were convenient. The whole truth was uglier. In an open world championship, alone, without the machine, he would not last.

He had never worn the world crown. On certain nights, that regret still thinned the air around him. But no chess player in history had become as rich as he was, and Henry had always understood money in the most American way: money was freedom. He had believed it when

he had little. Wealth had only confirmed it. He possessed recognition, influence, a company that shaped the future of the game, and the respect of serious players everywhere. Titles belonged to young hunger. Henry had learned to feed on something more durable.

There was, however, one name he kept clean.

A student from New York. That was the face he liked to wear online: a smiling young man, ordinary enough to be ignored, harmless enough to invite underestimation. Behind that invented student, no one would look for the balding former champion the newspapers had once called a genius.

Under that name, Henry never touched the engine.

That was the point. It was the only mirror he trusted, the only way left to measure what still belonged to him. And, to his private satisfaction, what belonged to him was still formidable. He would never reclaim the U.S. title, but beating him remained no small thing.

The Internet sold anonymity, and Henry knew that promise was false at the level where real players lived. A man could invent a name, a biography, a photograph, even an entire life. He could not invent another hand. Style was a fingerprint. Henry could watch a dozen moves from a stranger and know who sat at the far end, whether openly or under a mask. He knew them all, and his guesses were never wrong.

Now and then he played the younger ones, the rising stars, and allowed himself the pleasure of becoming the older voice at their shoulder. He commented on their moves, corrected them, explained the hidden threat, warned them against impatience. He liked watching a raw mind sharpen under his pressure. He would have made an excellent teacher if the work itself had not bored him.

And tonight, behind the clean name, with no machine beside him, he had lost.

At least it had happened in the dark. At least it had happened under a name that was not his. No one would know to laugh.

He returned to the game again.

He had played Black in the first game and White in the second. In the second he chose the Spanish opening, his favorite, an opening with nearly five centuries of memory behind it, named for the priest Ruy López de Segura, who set it down in his treatise of 1561. Henry liked its depth, its patience, its promise of slow control. Usually, after careful

maneuvering, he would seize the center, open the flank, and deliver the ending with clean inevitability.

He advanced his bishop.

The stranger answered by moving his knight directly into the center of the board.

Idiot move, Henry had thought.

Still, he reached for the reference shelf. It was an old habit. Never trust a stranger's nerve until you have checked whether someone had written about it before.

The book confirmed his judgment. White retained the advantage. After the exchange of knights, the pawn in the center would become weak, almost condemned.

Henry felt the win settle into his hands as if it had been owed to him. The feeling strengthened when he captured a piece. The opponent had simply left it there. Careless. Not a sacrifice. A sacrifice required depth, nerve, distance. A beginner could not have seen that far.

So Henry relaxed. He said something to Louise. Took a phone call. Let his eyes leave the board.

Now he could identify the exact place where it happened. The single move after which the position changed its face. He had two pawns in his pocket, a material advantage, every reason to expect the other man to break. Then the stranger was suddenly everywhere: on every line, every diagonal, every square around his king. There was no attack to stop because the attack had already arrived. There was only the narrowing board, the dead king, and the obscene finality of the mate.

It was not random.

That was the splinter he could not pull out.

The game had the shape of intention. Yet intention belonged to someone capable of seeing the whole trap in advance, and that made no sense. A beginner who abandoned pieces could not calculate with such cold distance. A boy like that could not lead Henry into a room, close the door behind him, and leave him only then to understand that the room had no exit.

There remained the answer Henry could endure.

He had lowered his guard, and the board had punished him.

"I'm getting old," Henry told the dark.

Then he went up to bed.

CHAPTER 2

Louise woke at six-thirty. She put out her hand for Henry and found his side empty, the sheet cold and rumpled. She did not have to wonder where he had gone; with Henry, that had not been a question for a long time. For several seconds she lay still, listening.

The old cherry tree moved in the wind, one branch drawing slowly across the glass, patient, like something asking to be let in. Far down the street a car passed and disappeared. After that, nothing.

Henry never rose before nine. Nine, half past — never earlier. She could have set the year by it. The bedroom still held the warmth of sleep, but his side had gone cold hours ago, and for a moment the morning seemed to be going on without her, somewhere she had not been asked to follow.

She got up, pulled the terrycloth robe around her, ran the cold tap, and brought her wet face close to the glass.

There had been years when the mirror was kinder — when she had been, with no argument about it, a beautiful woman, the kind a room turned to look at. The woman in the glass this morning had her eyes and little else of her. Behind them she was still young, still half certain the best of it lay ahead; the face had simply stopped agreeing. She leaned in and blamed the shadows under her eyes on last night's wine and the late hour.

Not bad, she told herself, for a woman her age.

The wine had nothing to do with it, and she knew that too.

She went downstairs in the dark. She did not turn on a single light. Her hand found the newel, then the wall; her feet knew the stairs, the tread that gave half an inch more than the rest, the turn at the bottom. She had lived in this house long enough to make it, room by room, into the thing she wanted. Every object had its place. Every drawer, shelf, and corner answered to her hand. She could have crossed the house blind without touching anything out of order.

She did not ask herself whether she was happy. She never had, and there had never been time. She knew what belonged to her: the rooms, the order she had built, the family that returned once a year to fill them. And she knew something more solid than happiness. She would let no one take it from her.

At the foot of the stairs, to the right, the study door stood open a hand's width, and a low lamp burned inside.

Henry sat motionless at the desk, his face lit blue by the screen. Beside the keyboard stood his good board, the ivory set a friend had given him for his fiftieth birthday, every piece squared in its place. Around it lay the usual wreckage: books open on the floor, magazines splayed where he had dropped them, papers stacked and abandoned. The one room in her house she had given up trying to save.

"You'll ruin your eyes," she said from the doorway. "You spend far too much time at that thing."

Nothing.

"Why are you up? Did something happen?"

He turned to her slowly. He was not upset. That was the strange part. He was calm, and the calm was worse than any temper.

"His win wasn't luck," Henry said. "Every move I made was his. I thought I was driving him into my game. He was walking me into his."

Louise had come downstairs braced for something real — illness, death, bad news in the night — and found instead that he had risen from beside her to sit with a board. Relief came first. Under it came the older thing, the one she had decided long ago not to look at straight on. She kept her face still and gave a small shrug.

"That's it? You're sitting up in the dark wrecking your eyes because you lost a game?" She stepped inside and straightened a stack of magazines without thinking. "You're not getting any younger, Henry. Look after yourself."

He looked at her then, straight at her, and she understood he was not seeing her at all. For an instant the thought came clearly: he had not seen her in a long time. Then she put it back where it lived.

"You lost because of the holiday," she tried. "You were distracted. The house was full of people. Tonight you'll have a clear head and beat him. Sit here like this and you'll only make yourself sick and lose again."

Henry let out a long breath.

"That's the thing. He doesn't lose. He makes mistakes — I've watched him make them — and he has never lost a game. Not one."

Something moved through her at that, and she did not like the feel of it.

"What do you mean, never?"

"I think he knows them. Everyone he sits down against. I think he can feel the man on the other side of the board — what he'll do before he does it." Henry turned back to the screen. "And he builds the whole game from that. Sauganash."

There was a light in his eyes she did not recognize.

"Take any game of his and walk through it move by move," he said. "You reach a point where you would swear he has to lose. Then he finishes a shade stronger than whoever sits across from him. A single step ahead, no more. The better they are, the better he becomes. There's no style to pin down." He stopped. "I keep asking myself whether there's a person there at all. Or a machine."

Louise raised a hand.

"Henry. You're working yourself into the ground. You need sleep. Come away from there."

"Fischer said it best." His voice lowered. "If he ever sat down across from God, the game would end in a draw."

"Bobby was half mad with his own legend," Louise said. "He lost like everyone else. Why are you dragging him into this?"

Henry had taught her the game himself, a long time ago, and over the years she had followed it closely enough to know the names, the champions, the myths men built around themselves when the board was no longer enough. She knew exactly who Fischer was. She also knew her husband had stopped talking about Fischer some while ago.

He was not listening. He was looking at the screen again.

"Sauganash always wins," he said, to the screen, to himself. "Not a loss. Not even a draw."

Louise had spent thirty years learning his moods, every shade of them. She had no name for this one.

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He did not come back to bed that morning, or the morning after.

Day after day, Sauganash appeared at the same hours, on the same days, with the regularity of something wound and set running. He won. His rating climbed. And the longer Henry watched, the tighter the thing in his chest pulled.

A man, surely. Men played harder and fell for the game worse, gave more of their lives to it. But there was a patience in this play, something that waited past ordinary ambition, that made Henry wonder whether the hand across the board belonged to a woman after all.

Some nights he gave the name a face. A boy throwing pieces forward with the recklessness of the young. An old master, gray and methodical, spending an hour over every move. Or no person at all — a program, clean, tireless, free of nerves. Then he would remember the

mistakes, and the idea collapsed. No machine made mistakes like that: small, human, and somehow placed there with intent.

The registration gave him almost nothing: a false name, an email address, the bare minimum the site demanded. So Henry read the patterns instead.

Sauganash never played blitz. He wanted time: an hour a move, or no clock at all. He took White almost every game and accepted Black only in revenge matches, as if color itself were part of the punishment.

On Thanksgiving, Henry had sat down against him twice and lost twice.

He had told Louise about one of the games. The other he kept. Let her believe it was a single match gone wrong at a bad moment; let everyone believe it. Henry had never been world champion, but he had spent his life among the strongest players alive, and two defeats in one night to a stranger was not a thing a man said aloud.

World of Chess, Inc. had never been only a place to play. That was what Henry had seen before almost anyone else, and what had built his fortune. People came for chess and stayed for the rest: the talk, the company, the illusion of being understood by others who suffered from the same obsession. He gave them forums, seminars, software analysis, trips abroad to the great tournaments, summer camps for their children. He had built them a town and let them go on calling it a chess club.

Sauganash took none of it.

He ignored greetings, questions, and every room where the others gathered. He read no chess news, joined no discussion, and never ran his games through the site's analysis. Either he had a machine of his own, Henry thought, or he simply did not care what anyone made of him.

He came for one thing and got it every time.

Henry could not understand why. What could a player still want after he had already taken everything the board could offer?

Sometimes it looked like appetite. Sometimes it looked worse. Sauganash would pass over the obvious move and choose something weaker on purpose. He would let the other man's confidence swell, let him believe the way through had opened. Then the board would turn over at once, and the king would be dead before the opponent understood the attack had begun.

He took the long way to the kill.

A style, Henry wondered, or a message?

No two games were alike.

He is experimenting, Henry decided at last. He has no question about the ending. He only wants to see how many ways he can get there.

Again and again Sauganash pushed pieces into the center for no reason Henry could find, parking them there as if at random. Only later, three moves on, or eight, did the reason open beneath the board like a trapdoor.

Henry had spent a lifetime reading positions at a glance, and what his eye was telling him now had stopped being only about chess. The thing in his chest tightened another notch. A player who won every time was not on a lucky run. It was impossible, and the impossible always meant that someone, somewhere, had arranged it.

Sauganash wanted something.

Henry was becoming certain it had to do with World of Chess, Inc.

He could not carry the suspicion alone any longer. There was one man he trusted with the things that mattered most to him: his money, and the company that had slowly become inseparable from it.

In the morning, he would take it to Aaron Schwartz.

CHAPTER 3

Aaron Schwartz sat with both hands folded on the slope of his belly and watched Henry wear a track into the carpet.

The hands were the thing Henry's eye kept returning to. Small, soft, always faintly wet, the way glass is wet on a humid day. Aaron never seemed to notice them, never wiped them, offered them for shaking with the serenity of a man who had stopped expecting to be loved for his body. The body itself was an argument against effort: short legs that had never run anywhere, arms too brief for the trunk they hung from, and above it all a small balding head where two restless eyes moved as though they were the only part of him that had ever worked for a living.

In college, while other young men sweated in gyms and at parties, trying to turn themselves into something a woman might want, Aaron had sat in his room and made money. He had been a poor student and an excellent reader of weakness. Securities, bonds, market movements, the small tremors by which money announced where it would go next

— these interested him far more than lectures. His parents breathed with relief when he finally graduated.

He walked out into the world certain of one law above all others.

Make money, and women find you.

He still said it. He had said it to Henry the week they met.

The proof of the law sat in framed photographs along the credenza. Diane. The most beautiful wife any man Henry knew had managed to acquire — younger than Aaron, lit from inside, the daughter of a wealthy Jewish family that had not, at first, understood what she saw in the squat little financier, and had then watched the accounts and understood enough.

She kept her body the way he kept his money. Tennis at a club that did not advertise; salons where women paid to be told that time could be negotiated with. She walked into a room and became its center without seeming to ask for it, and the men who gathered at her elbow had better jaws than her husband and worse balance sheets. Aaron watched all of it without a flicker of jealousy.

“None of them have the kind of money I do,” he liked to say. “That’s the part she likes best.”

What Diane did with the money was spend it, and her genius for spending matched his for getting. Designer clothes, jewelry, shoes, all the bright equipment of being looked at. But her real hunger was for small dead things made of porcelain — antique figurines she chased through auction houses, paying sums that, when she mentioned them over dinner, could drop her husband into a gray silence for three days.

Three round children completed the arithmetic of the marriage, each a small replica of the father, and the whole improbable structure held.

Henry had liked Aaron from the first hour. How could he not? Aaron had been the first to believe. When the rest of the room smiled at the idea of getting rich from chess played by strangers through a screen, Aaron had reached into his own pocket. He had a nose for it, could smell money through a wall, sell snow to men buried in it. Where Henry was careful, pedantic, and given on bad nights to a melancholy he never named, Aaron moved through the world like spilled mercury, gathering people and, with the people, their cash.

They owned World of Chess, Inc. between them in equal shares, and that, more than affection, had made them intimate. Henry gave the

company its soul, its authority, its old chess legitimacy. Aaron gave it teeth.

Later, Henry heard the word used for Aaron in certain rooms downtown.

Unscrupulous.

Behind his back they called him other things too — Squab, Fat Dumpy — and where those names would have eaten Henry alive, Aaron had trained himself not to hear them.

“Everything I do,” Aaron said the one time Henry raised it, “is strictly by the book.”

And then, after a moment, the other thing he liked to say:

“Do nothing, and you give no one a reason to envy you.”

It was true enough. Aaron broke no laws; he lived in the gaps the law left open, and knew those gaps the way other men know scripture. Henry knew the tricks too. Long ago, he had decided to treat them the way you treat a draft in a house you love: present, faintly cold, and not worth tearing open the wall to find.

The one Aaron was proudest of was the time trick.

Registration on the World of Chess, Inc. sites was free. A new player signed up, played, won. Each victory lifted his rating. A man who was winning, Aaron had learned, did not hurry to pay. So, seconds before a strong player closed out a game, the connection dropped. On the user’s end, of course. The fault was always there. The system, blameless and automatic, handed the win to the weaker opponent.

And while the strong player was still staring at the screen with his throat working, a polite message arrived from World of Chess, Inc.: paid members never lost this way. For members, the clock paused and waited.

Three or four such robberies, and even the proudest man reached for a card.

The other trick was cruder and worked better. A free trial. Credit card verification. Cancel anytime, just call. Almost no one called.

Aaron had a talent for inventing ways to turn irritation, vanity, loneliness, and wounded pride into monthly revenue. What mattered was the loop: the player lost, paid, returned, lost better, paid more.

Chess itself had not reached him. He had learned the names of the pieces and how they moved. He could tell a French Defense from a Sicilian the way a tone-deaf man can tell a march from a waltz, and that was the end of it.

“What they play doesn’t matter,” he had told Henry once, kindly, the way one corrects a child. “What matters is that they keep playing, and we keep getting paid.”

So this was what interested Henry now.

Aaron was listening.

Everyone else in the company had shrugged. A player who never lost? The world was thick with talent. The man had caught a streak. Tomorrow it would break. It was, after all, only a game.

Aaron had not shrugged. He had let Henry get four sentences in, then leaned across the desk toward him. The small eyes had gone still in the great soft face, and that stillness unsettled Henry more than any question could have.

“You’re telling me,” Aaron said slowly, “somebody’s running a system. Testing it. Right here. Under our noses.”

Henry stopped pacing.

“It doesn’t play like one man.” He chose the words the way he chose moves, removing danger before it could breathe. “But it isn’t a machine either. A machine doesn’t make the mistakes this one makes.” He spread his hands. “My gut says a group. Strong players. Real coders. People who’ve built something new and are proving it on our board before they take it to market. And when they do, Aaron, they won’t join us. They’ll try to beat us. It’s the only shape the thing makes sense in.”

The word competitor had not yet left Henry’s mouth, but Aaron’s face closed on it anyway, the lips tightening as though he had bitten down on foil. He loathed competitors the way he loathed idle money — as a wrongness in the world that had to be corrected. A monopoly was the only honest road to serious money; everything else was charity paid to strangers.

World of Chess, Inc. led the world. Top players used it. Major tournaments depended on it. Sponsors wanted its name. Promoters wanted its reach. Retail accounts wanted its customers.

And here was Henry, in Aaron’s office, describing the morning it might stop being so.

“We re-vet the key people,” Henry said. “The specialists. Especially anyone whose contract is close to expiration.”

“Won’t help.” Aaron did not even pause. “Contracts are iron. I drafted them myself. A man can’t so much as breathe near a rival shop for years after he walks out.” He turned one wet hand over and examined the palm. “No. What I’d lose sleep over is a leak. Somebody

inside, selling. A few thousand in cash, and your phantom buys something it cost us millions to learn.”

“Then think it through.” Henry’s hands cut the air; he could not stop them now. “Tomorrow a company appears and says it’s better than World of Chess, Inc. First the share price goes through the floor. Then the sponsors — sponsors don’t love you, Aaron, they love the leader, and the second we stop being the leader they start looking elsewhere. The promoters with them. The retail accounts begin reading their contracts, looking for the door.”

“The accounts can’t just walk.” Aaron said it without heat, turning it over like a figure on a balance sheet. Then he conceded, “But the sponsors. Yes. The sponsors could be a problem.”

He was silent for a moment. The pump in the tank behind him sighed; something expensive moved through the green water and vanished. Antique furniture and rare fish — the only beauty Aaron had ever paid for in his life that was not a woman.

“If somebody wants to build a business,” Aaron said at last, and the cheerfulness had drained entirely out of his voice, “let him build it. Under us. On a leash.” He looked up. “What we will not do — not in this life — is allow ourselves a competitor.”

Henry believed him.

People forgot, under the soft face and the by-the-book patter, what Aaron actually was: hard, slow, and without mercy where money lived. The membership fees were the visible water. Henry knew, the way one knows there is a basement under a basement, that the real flow ran somewhere beneath him: sponsorship deals, advertising revenue, promotional income, side ventures Aaron seeded and harvested without always bothering to mention them at meetings.

The company’s annual turnover had reached nearly a billion and a half dollars.

As long as nothing broke the law, Henry let the dark water stay dark. He had told himself this was trust. Some nights he knew it was closer to cowardice, and let that stay dark too.

“Henry.” Aaron’s eyes narrowed to their working size. “Your man. What did he give us when he signed up?”

“I told you. Nothing.” Henry shook his head. “An email address. USA in the country field. He typed the first thing that came to him. I wouldn’t put weight on any of it. He may not be American at all. For all I know, he could be Russian.”

“Russian.” Aaron lifted an eyebrow. “Why not Indian? Why not Polish?”

“Because Russia builds chess players the way Detroit used to build cars. The last century was crowded with champions from that school. And they’re frightening with computers.” Henry heard how thin it sounded. “It’s a feeling. Nothing more.”

But the feeling had a face, and the face was a hundred years old.

Henry’s mind slid back to Capablanca — the Cuban, the natural, the man so far beyond everyone else that people had begun to wonder, seriously, whether anyone alive could beat him. Then out of Moscow, almost from nowhere, came Alexander Alekhine, a former criminal investigator with a mind built for pursuit. He sat down across from Capablanca and took the crown off his head. Behind him came the long, patient force of Russian chess, crowding the summit for the rest of the century.

Henry had never understood that country. Alekhine had written about the prison system in China and then conquered the world at chess. To Henry, mastery meant giving your whole life to one pursuit and refusing the rest. A man who could divide himself and still win was a kind of man he did not trust.

Could it be them again? The same patient force. Coming for him this time.

Aaron watched the thought cross Henry’s face and let it finish.

“Look,” he said, easy again, spreading his hands wide. “Maybe there’s something here. I’m not saying there isn’t. But I’m not ready to lie awake over a man who wins at checkers, either. What if he’s exactly what he looks like — a freak, a once-in-a-life talent, and the two of us in here scaring ourselves in the dark?”

The small eyes brightened with something that was not quite a smile.

“Tell you what,” Aaron said. “Let’s sit Diane down across from him. See what he’s made of.”

END OF EXCERPT

This preview contains pages 1–25 of the complete volume.

The complete edition comprises 180 pages.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Andrew V. Kudin is a Ukrainian-born American writer, scholar, and essayist celebrated for his profound exploration of history, law, and the complexities of the human psyche. Holding doctoral degrees in Philosophy and Religious Studies (1995) and Law (2020), he brings rigorous academic insight to his compelling narratives. His acclaimed works — including *How to Survive in Prison*, *A Handful of Soil*, *The Black Suit*, and *Verdict* — skillfully weave together historical accuracy and penetrating psychological depth, revealing the intricate web of human relationships, power struggles, and moral ambiguity.

Dr. Kudin's literary contributions and unwavering commitment to ethical discourse have earned him prestigious honors, most notably the Order of Saint Prince Vladimir (3rd degree), awarded by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church for preserving historical memory and addressing critical societal issues. A passionate traveler who has explored more than 60 countries, he enriches his storytelling with keen observation and diverse cultural perspectives.

Through gripping psychological thrillers that challenge perception and defy convention, Dr. Andrew V. Kudin continues to engage readers worldwide, inspiring reflection on justice, truth, and the deeper layers of human existence.





ABOUT THE ARTIST



The illustrations for *A Game of Blind* were created by the renowned Ukrainian artist Valeriy Grigorenko (July 3, 1963 – March 4, 2022).

Especially for this book, Grigorenko painted original oils on canvas in his unmistakable super-realist manner. These were not decorative images added after the fact, but full-scale paintings conceived as part of the novel's visual world.

Grigorenko was widely known for his powerful technical imagination, his mastery of form, and his ability to lend machinery, motion, and atmosphere an almost living presence. His work was recognized internationally, particularly among collectors and admirers of aviation, military, and automotive art.

He died tragically during shelling in the first days of the war in Ukraine, on March 4, 2022.

This book preserves his final contribution to its artistic vision with gratitude and respect.

