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## KING'S KNIGHT GAMBIT DECLINED

NEARLY EVERY EVENING during the summer months Harry Lawn could be found at the little park in the town square, along with the other gray-haired elders and an occasional farm boy down from the hills. The attraction was the line of public chessboards set in stone tables along the north side of the square. It was just like in New York, someone had remarked, though perhaps the town's chess players lacked the skill and sophistication of those in Washington Square or in Central Park.

Certainly in the limited sphere of the town square Harry Lawn was considered something of a champion, ready to play all comers. During the summer of '72, when Bobby Fischer won the world's championship from Boris Spassky in Reykjavik, Iceland, and raised interest in the game to a new peak, Harry often played several games in a single evening, invariably winning with a minimum of skillful moves.

This night, a muggy Wednesday in early September, he was seated on one of the wooden spectators' benches, enjoying a particularly spirited game between two friends, when the big green limousine pulled up and parked across the square. Harry Lawn recognized Stringer at once, because it was Harry's business to know people; but he went on watching the game as if he hadn't seen Stringer. After a few moments he heard a voice at his side say, "Hello, Harry."

He turned, feigning surprise. "Well—Stringer! What brings you to my part of the state? Thinking of buying a farm?"

Stringer was a big man, twenty years younger than Harry Lawn. More than that, he was a city man out of place in small-town life. Harry enjoyed kidding him during his infrequent visits.

"You know what I'm here for, Harry," the big man said.

"Checkmate!" one gray-haired man shouted in triumph from the board. "I licked him, Harry! I'm ready now to take on the champ!"

Harry Lawn smiled at the compliment. "Not right now, Syd. I've got a visitor." Then, as an afterthought, he turned to Stringer. "How about it? Want to play me a game?"

Stringer stared at the chessboard in open distaste. "I haven't played in years."

"It'll come back to you."

Stringer glanced at the sky. "Getting dark."

"The park lights will go on soon. We'll be able to see the pieces. Chess has always been a big sport in our town."

"I don't know. I came on business."

"From George Danzig?"

"Of course from Danzig—you know I don't work for myself." He had dropped his voice, so it would not carry to the men at the chess tables.

"You have the envelope?"

Stringer reached into his coat pocket and extracted a fat white envelope. "It's all in there—the money and the name."

Harry Lawn nodded. He opened the envelope enough to see the thick wad of one-hundred-dollar bills and the slip of white notepaper with a single name printed on it in thick black ink. The name was that of Ralph Andow, a downstate judge rumored to be under investigation for underworld ties.

"Big name these days," Harry said with a grunt.

"That's why Danzig is paying so much. We don't want any mistakes."

"I never make mistakes," Harry said. He slipped the envelope into his pants pocket. "Now how about that game?"

Seeing there was no chance of playing the champ, Syd and the others were drifting away. Harry and Stringer were almost alone in the little park, and perhaps this gave Stringer the courage to try it. "Sure, I'll play you, Harry. I might even beat you!"

The park lights went on, bathing the chess table in a soft glow that vied with the last traces of daylight. "Which color do you want?" Harry asked.

"I don't care. Black."

"Then I'll be white. I go first."

Stringer frowned. "Why's that?"

"You really haven't played in a long time. White always moves first." Harry moved his king pawn forward two squares.

"How long you been playing chess, Harry?"

"Nearly all my life. My father and grandfather played, too." He watched Stringer move his king pawn forward two squares, and Harry followed immediately with knight to king bishop three.

"Who's going to do the job on Andow?" Stringer asked suddenly, already beginning to lose interest in the game.

"You know I don't talk about things like that, Stringer."

"Danzig would like to know. After all, he's paying the freight."

Harry watched the big man move a knight. "I thought Danzig understood the way I worked. I'm a middleman and nothing more. I take my cut and pass the money along. Danzig never knows who did the job, and my man never knows who hired him to do the job. That way nobody gets hurt if there's a slip."

"You just said there wouldn't be a slip."

Harry Lawn sighed and ran a hand through his white hair. "I said I never make mistakes, and I don't. But there still could be a slip somewhere."

"Danzig figures he should know who the guy is, in case anything happens to you."

"I'm not that old yet, Stringer. I've got a few good years left."

"Danzig wants to know."

"So he can cut me out of the deal and save himself a grand every time?" Harry reached toward his pocket. "Hell, you can take back your money if that's the way he wants to play!"

"Calm down, Harry. The judge has got to go. He knows your man will do a nice neat job." Stringer touched one of his knights. "You and I are just knights, Harry, working for the king, doing his killing for him, just like in the Middle Ages."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, studying the board.

They played a few moves in silence, then Stringer asked, "How long will it take with Judge Andow?"

Harry Lawn shrugged. "I have to mail the money and the name to my man. That'll be a couple of days. Then he has to find Andow and set the thing up. It's got to take a week, maybe longer."

"Danzig wants it done fast. The judge is getting ready to talk to a grand jury in two weeks."

"No sweat. It'll be done by then."

"And we know you won't be talking about it."

"Have I ever?"

"This one's especially important. That's why Danzig wanted the name of your man."

Harry captured a knight. "You tell him I can handle my affairs without any help from him. Tell him I've been down here running my little business for a hell of a lot longer than he's been bribing judges."

Stringer glanced around nervously. "Take it easy. What if someone hears you?"

"They're all in bed. The whole town's in bed by now, Stringer."

"The mosquitoes aren't—they're eating me alive! Let's quit this foolish game."

"I think I can beat you in three more moves, Stringer."

"The hell with it! Play with yourself!"

"I guess chess isn't your game."

"Damn right! One trip to see you in this one-horse town every three or four months is plenty for me."

"You could mail me the money. Then there'd be no chance of people seeing you."

"These hicks? They probably think I'm a traveling salesman." He stood up and stretched. "Besides, Danzig wanted me to talk to you this time. Make sure we all understood each other."

"We understand each other. You're not getting the name of my man."

"Well, there's something else that's bothering him."

"What's that?"

"On the last job, a couple of months ago, your man stopped long enough to take some money off the body."

"You mean the Foster hit?"

Stringer nodded. "Foster was collecting some money for Danzig when he got it, which was just bad luck. But the money was missing from the body—maybe twenty grand. Your man heisted it."

"Hell he did! My man shoots and runs."

"Not that time. There were no witnesses. He stayed long enough to take the money. Maybe he even split it with you."

"Come on, Stringer. You're making an old man lose his temper."

He took a step forward, but Stringer was faster. His beefy hand grabbed Harry by the shirt, shoving him backward onto the chessboard. Harry rolled off the stone table and fell on the grass, scattering chessmen around him.

Stringer stood above him, breathing hard. "Harry, you know I'm just doing my job. One of the king's knights."

"Is that your message?" Harry asked, getting to his feet.

Stringer stared hard at him. "I guess so, Harry. Do your job so Danzig stays happy. He's a bad guy when he's unhappy."

"Yeah."

Stringer ground one of the chessmen into the soft earth beneath his heel. "Keep your nose clean, Harry. See you next trip." He turned and walked across the square to his car.

Harry watched him for a long time, until the big green limousine rolled away and vanished into the night. Then he walked slowly around the chess table, bending to pick up the fallen chessmen. He placed the pieces gently in their wooden box and went home.

THE HOUSE WHERE HE'D LIVED alone since the death of his wife was just down the street from the town square. He turned on the lights and went to sit at the kitchen table. He noticed that his hands were still shaking from his encounter with Stringer.

Damn! He was getting too old for this sort of thing. Too old, when the young hoods thought he was soft enough to be bullied and threatened!

But he knew it wasn't Stringer's fault. The big man did what he was told. Obviously Danzig had decided Harry Lawn could be leaned on. Harry Lawn was just an old guy who played chess in the town square and happened to have some good guns for hire. Harry Lawn couldn't hurt anybody.

He sighed and opened the envelope, counting out the one-hundred-dollar bills. He placed ten of them to one side and slipped the rest into a fresh envelope. On its face he printed the name and address of a young man who lived in a city fifty miles away. He'd had many occasions to send the young man money, and he'd never been disappointed.

Lastly he picked up the piece of notepaper on which Ralph Andow's name was printed. He stared at it for some moments. Then, remembering the expression on Stringer's face when he'd ground the chessman into the earth, Harry crumpled the piece of paper and dropped it into the waste basket.

He drew a note pad toward him and carefully printed the name of George Danzig on the top sheet. Then he sealed it in the envelope with the money and went out to the mailbox.

As he dropped the letter into the slot he said, very softly, "Knight to king bishop six, checkmate."