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The Cold Game

By Kaleb Duchesneau

​The faculties that govern reason are, in truth, the least graspable of all human attributes. We perceive them only through the marks they leave upon the world, and it is by their effects, rather than their nature, that we come to know them. As the artist finds pleasure in the stroke of the brush, so does the thinker revel in the clarity of thought, each deduction a triumph over the chaos of uncertainty. Except, ignorance is *bliss* and intellect is a *burden*. Where one can merely drive man to a demise that pains them only physically, the latter leads to unbearable torment by the rapid siege of thoughts running through one’s mind. Each idea, a flare arcing through the void, leaves a mark before disappearing into the vast expanse of cognition.

​ There exists a peculiar lament among mothers, a subtle yearning for their children to be endowed with a spark of genius, as though it were an inherent privilege rather than a burden. They envision their children as paragons of intellect, capable of feats beyond the ordinary, yet fail to consider the oppressive weight that such brilliance often carries: an insatiable thirst for perfection, a ceaseless barrage of questions without answers, and the isolation borne of a mind that moves too swiftly for the world to keep pace. For in truth, the “gifted” are oftentimes shackled by their own gifts, while the common mind, though perceived as ordinary, enjoys the serene privilege of simplicity, untouched by the relentless demands of unquenchable curiosity or the paralyzing burden of endless possibility. It is the average who, in quiet contentment, may hold the truer freedom, free from the tyrannical expectation to always exceed.

The realm of chess, often known as a field only fit for genius, is bound to the tormented psyche of those who dare to wander into the abyss. It is a world where the game, deceptively simple to the untrained eye, becomes a deep dark forest where two plus two equals five and the winner is the first to escape. Morphy, Steinitz, Nimzowitsch, and, perhaps most infamous, Bobby Fischer, all succumbed to the weight of their own brilliance. Each was relentlessly pursued by the ceaseless barrage of thought, a tide leading to madness.

The following account seeks not to bind the mind in such torment, rather to free it from the same torment that those burdened with brilliance are forced to cope with. What will be presented is not the struggle of a tortured intellect, but a narrative too long suppressed, too intricate to escape, yet too burdensome to remain unspoken. The silence has taken root, slowly corroding the ability of reason, until I find myself consumed and straining against the confines of my own thoughts. The story is no longer mine to control. It demands release, lest it swallow what remains of clarity.

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Chapter 1

​The amber lights of New York flickered through the smudged window of Sharpe's study. Shadows of autumn leaves danced on the wall, stirred by a brisk wind outside, lending a nice rhythm to the quiet room. If not for the occasional ticking of a clock and the deliberate, almost theatrical rustle of my jacket, the room was silent. A worn chessboard rested between us on an amply crafted mahogany table, squares faintly scratched from years of play. Sharpe’s hand hovered thoughtfully above his knight; his eyes fixed unblinking on the position. I watched with a sly grin, my fingers drumming a steady rhythm on the table's edge.

"You're taking your time, Sharpe. Not thinking of bailing the game so soon, eh?" my voice, carrying my patented unplaceable accent, cut through the silence. I sat back, studying Sharpe as if he were one of the pieces on the board. Me and Sir Jean-Baptìste Sharpe met on our journey for a new life after the war only six years ago.

*A new life for me, Sir Winston Clement*, I’d thought, staring into the waters cascading into a rounded horizon, my pale blue eyes soaking in the sun. I first met Sharpe in the tearoom aboard the S.S. United States. I saw him sitting near a window studying a chess board all alone.

His appearance was unmistakable; he wore a houndstooth-patterned trench coat, slightly rumpled but fastened securely, with a clear disinterest in looking fashionable. A matching hat sat perched atop his head, with a brim that shadowed his exaggerated features. His face wore an impressive mustache, thick and meticulously groomed, which seemed to twitch with each word spoken. His eyes were sharp and unblinking, wide with the intensity of his gaze. His brows, dark and slightly arched, lent his face a look of perpetual suspicion or curiosity, as if he could never quite believe what he was seeing. I approached and asked for a game, which he accepted with an honest grin. Ever since me and Sharpe have been acquainted quite closely.

Sharpe let out a quiet laugh as he made his move, sliding his knight forward to queen’s bishop five.

"Bailing? Hardly." His tone was smooth, his confidence bordering on insufferable, yet laced with charisma. Even as he spoke, he kept his eyes locked on the board, “You know, Clement, it’s strange that someone like you, a self-proclaimed purveyor of all things practical, should find such fascination in a game of mere intellect and strategy.” Sharpe finally looked up, “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you had aspirations.” Winston’s smile didn’t falter, though something hardened in his gaze.

"Chess is more than a game," I replied, boldly marching his king’s pawn up the board. "It’s a test of foresight and resilience. Of learning to read the mind of your opponent. You of all people should be very aware," I said with a forceful gaze.

“Yes, I agree. The game’s application is endless, if one can only see it in the correct light.”

“Precisely. Take the Soviets. They have invested quite heavily in the game, holding the World Champion title for the better half of this century, seeing it as more than a classic board game but rather a test of intellectual superiority.”

“Yes, yes, though I would be careful speaking about them in such high regard my friend,” Sharpe said cautiously.

“My apologies, though the beautiful games that emerge from the Soviet players is something to marvel at. I would venture to say that the precision on the board of a player, in the likes of Mikhail Tal, would be much like our work, wouldn't you agree?"

The clock struck ten, its chime breaking the tension. Sharpe’s study was momentarily filled with its echo. He promptly took the trade in the center and retreated his knight.

“Our work," he repeated, emphasizing the words as if tasting them for the first time.

After immigrating from France, Sharpe began his consulting agency, taking his keen observational skills across the Atlantic. After meeting on our journey, he allowed me to join him, which I accepted, though I hadn’t planned on staying this long, rather wanting to embark on my own and further blend into the American lifestyle. Though over the years I’ve grown quite fascinated by the unique abilities Sharpe possesses. Abilities that I believed were only present in fiction, in characters like Poirot, or even Sherlock himself. Abilities that, if I had not witnessed first-hand, I would not believe to be humanly possible. His methods of deduction and observation to piece together mysteries that had gone unsolved by even the most renowned detectives has continued to amaze me.

"Now that is an interesting way to put it. seems you have left your plans of moving on to the wayside, eh?”

“That was before I found out how much of an asset being associated with you would be.” I had no real fondness for Sharpe; he was quite charismatic, but I did find his air of confidence to be, at times, arrogant and quite difficult to put up with.

“Well, I am quite amazing, aren’t I? I mean you’re lucky to be sharing a room with me so it's not surprising you’ve stayed this long.” Sharpe spoke with a chuckle. Before I could respond, the ring of the telephone pierced through the room. Sharpe’s hand froze over the board, and his expression morphed from interest to a glint of suspicion. He leaned back, casting a wary glance at me before answering the call.

“Yes?” he said curtly,

“Jean-Baptiste Sharpe?” said a familiar voice on the phone.

“Speaking.”

“Good evening, it’s Milo Sinclair,”

“Ah, yes, Milo, how good it is to hear your voice! How are you these days?”

“Ah, good, good, yes. Erm, listen, Jean, I think that there’s something you might want to see down here. If it wouldn’t trouble you too much, I’d fashion it a good idea for you to come to Chicago. Something… peculiar has turned up, and your expertise would be more than welcome.”

Sharpe’s face remained expressionless, though a glint of joy flickered briefly in his eyes. He covered the receiver with his hand and looked at me.

“It appears we’ve been summoned. Chicago.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Chicago, eh?” I said, looking down at the ground in thought for a moment. “When shall we depart?”

“Well, of course, now!” Sharpe said with an air of excitement.

“Excellent, a late-night train, no doubt. . . I do suppose this means our game will remain… unfinished.”

Sharpe gave me a thin smile.

“For now. Consider it a draw.” He glanced back at the board before picking up his pocket watch, adjusting the time with a flick of his wrist, and swiftly placing it in his left coat pouch. His tall, lean figure cast a long shadow over the room, and his trench coat swung around his thin frame as he motioned toward the door.

“Pack lightly, Clement. And bring that notebook of yours.” My eyes lingered on the chessboard a moment before I rose and followed.

*Been quite some time since an adventure beyond the great city,* I thought with the poise of a man in a mission. Outside, the world lay blanketed in fog as we hailed for a cab to the station. The streets were quiet. The uneasy silence hovering over the city seemed to warn of a storm brewing.

#

We arrived at the train station at 10:53 p.m. and immediately bolted toward the ticket booth.

“Two tickets for 20th Century Limited Chicago!” Sharpe said with urgency.

“Ah, yes, would you like tickets for coach or would you like full Pullman Accommodations?”

“Pullman Accommodations? What would be included with that?” Sharpe asked inquiringly.

“Well, you see, the Pullman accommodations would be equipped with all the luxuries a discerning traveler could dream of! Take the Roomette, for instance—your own private little haven, just for one, complete with a plush seat that folds right down into a cozy bed. And, oh—”

“We’ll take the coach!” I butted in, noticing that the train would be leaving in only moments. Sharpe shot me a look of disappointment.   
​“Here you are sirs,” the salesman said while placing the tickets on the counter. “That will be sixty dollars.” He motioned for the payment.

“Now hold on,” Sharpe said quite aimlessly. “I wasn’t done hearing about the Pullman accommodations.”

“Sharpe we really haven’t any time for—”

Sharpe cut me off.

“Continue your pitch, fine sir.” The ticket man hesitated for a moment before continuing.

“Of course, along with the plush seat there is also a washbasin, all within arm’s—”

Suddenly, the loud whistle of the train began to echo throughout the station. I threw the money at the ticket booth and began to race toward the boarding area. Sharpe, noticing the urgency, quickly followed suit.

We made our way through the isles and found our seats; I placed my stuff in the overhead compartment and took the window seat. Sharpe sat next to me.

“You know our very own wash bin would be quite nice right now,” Sharpe remarked snarkily. I ignored him and laid my head against the window, slowly drifting to sleep.

Chapter 2

​ We exited the train the next morning; the clock at the station read 7:00 a.m. The cool fall breeze was drifting through the streets; Milo Sinclair was there to meet us. He wore a charcoal-gray suit, the fabric well-worn in the elbows. Its sharp cut suggests a man who cared more about function than fashion.

“Good morning, sirs,” Milo grunted with his old accent.

​“Milo, how good to see you.” Sharpe and Milo shared a solid handshake as they began catching up.

“How’s the man himself?” Milo turned towards me with a welcoming smile, shaking my hand with a very memorable grip.

“Good, good.” I replied.

“Say, there’s a diner round the corner that’s open, why don’t we go and find a seat.” Milo led the way to the diner, where we found a seat near the window. We ordered some coffee and began sharing the stories filling the gaps from our past meetings.

“Oh, Milo, you know New York has grown a tone drearier ever since you left.” Sharpe voiced with a falling tone.

“Ah, yes, my apologies, but family calls.”

“And how is your mother, Milo?”

“Well, she’s seen better days for sure, watching her slowly decay has been eating me up. She’s still needing brain surgery but that’ll cost an arm and a leg, so I’ve settled for the worst.”

Milo was a detective for the NYPD for many years and worked very closely with me and Sharpe on multiple cases, but he had since moved to Chicago a couple months ago to spend time with his mother.

“She’s a strong woman, and I’m sure she’ll power through.” Milo muttered.

“Milo, if there is anything we can do, don’t hesitate to call on us. We would be more than thrilled to help an old friend,” Sharpe consoled.

“Why, thank you Jean, I can always count on you. Though unless of course you’re sitting on a small fortune then there isn’t much you can do.” Milo said. “Anyway, let’s get on to the reason for your visit.”

Milo took us to the Binga bank on 3633 South State Street. The building's height seemed almost to defy gravity, with narrow, elongated windows standing along its upper stories. Its corners were chiseled with intricate lines, carved by the hands of experts. Inside, the marble-floored lobby glistened from the ornate chandelier sparkling above. Men in neatly pressed suits and women in tailored dresses walked the floors as if to seem more important than they were.

“There have been some threats cast against the bank, and there seems to be some peculiarities about these threats that tie into your agency.” Milo continued to lead through the bank and to the front desk. “I’d like to speak to Jesse Binga. Tell him it’s Milo Sinclair.”

“Yes, sir,” said the man behind the counter. “And please help yourself to some water.” He pointed to the glass water jug by the counter as he headed to the back office. I helped myself. He returned with a tall black man who had an air of quiet authority, the sort cultivated through years of determined labor and unshakable resolve. His expression was composed, with a gaze that was direct, yet kind. A neatly groomed mustache rested above firm, unsmiling lips.

“Milo! Welcome back. And who might these gentlemen be?” The man paused for a moment as he looked at Sharpe. “Jean-Baptìste Sharpe?!” He said with a sudden shock in his voice. “What a pleasure! Jesse Binga, at your service.” The man took Sharpe’s hand and shook it very emphatically.

“The pleasure’s all mine,” Sharpe said with his bold charisma. “I hear that there have been some threats against this fine establishment here?”

“Ah, yes, right this way.” Binga led us down a passage and into his office. “Please sit.” We each took a seat in the chairs afront his desk as he began to ruffle through a drawer. His office was very pristine with a bookcase filled with shiny new books, and a large window which fit the room., which let the sun

“Very nice office you have here Mr. Binga.

“Here it is,” he said as he took a notecard and placed it on his desk. Sharpe picked it up and began to inspect. “We found this hanging on a drawer of one of our safety deposit boxes.”

“I see.” Sharpe looked deeply distressed. He set the card onto the desk as he continued what seemed like searching his own mind. I picked it up to have a look myself. On the front a large ornate “M” was stamped into it with gold leaf.

A black and white logo

Description automatically generated

“Mistletoe,” Sharpe said with eminence.

“Mistletoe?” Inquired Binga.

“It can’t be...” Sharpe continued to explore his brain as he paced the room. “I watched the place erupt in flames… how can he be…”

Mistletoe was Sharpe’s most formidable opponent. A physicist and veteran of The Great War, he was equal parts genius and madman. Having only met the man once, his face is still crystal clear in my head. His bald head always shaved meticulously, with smoothness interrupted by faint scars crisscrossing his scalp. His eyes were unnervingly dark, like polished black sapphire, reflecting no light and betraying no emotion. His gaunt face was accentuated by sharp cheekbones and a jaw that seemed perpetually clenched, giving the impression he was always calculating something.

To the community he was a virtuous figure, earning awards in his field of physics and getting his name, “Mistletoe” from the toe he supposedly lost in the war. No one would ever suspect such an upright man. Yet behind the act, he was a mastermind controlling crime figures as pieces on the board. His schemes always spun just beyond Sharpe's grasp.

Until late one night, when an experiment went wrong, engulfing the lab in flames within mere seconds. The flames destroyed everything inside, and with Mistletoe being the only one in the building at the time, he was destroyed as well. Sharpe had been keeping track of his whereabouts and was watching from afar as the building was swallowed by the flames.

​“You don’t think he’s back?” I asked Sharpe with a prodding tone.

​“It’s not impossible. It’s improbable, but… if Mistletoe lives,” Sharpe said, his voice heavy with dread, “Then he’s more dangerous now than ever.” Sharpe paused to collect his thoughts for a moment. “Mr. Binga, would you be able to give us a tour of the vault?”

​“Absolutely, right this way.” He led us through an elaborate door. At the end of the wall, safety deposit boxes pointed to the large vault door. The vault door was a hulking disc of solid steel, ringed with thick locking bolts and a heavy central hinge. “Here are our basic boxes, where personal valuables are held for our clients. The door there is either guarded or locked tight, the code being held safe with me,” Binga remarked with pride. “And, of course, we have our top-of-the-line vault door, designed in Belarus and perfected here in America.”

​“Excellent. What a grand room you keep here, Mr. Binga,” Sharpe said.

​“Why, thank you, Sharpe. Now on top of the most secure vault doors and state-of-the-art locking mechanism, we also have a new Closed-Circuit Television, or CCTV, system installed on the inside of the vault. *Vericon*, the company that’s developing these, has been using my bank as a testing ground for their new electronics.”

​“Wow, very nice Mr. Binga. Now humor me for a moment. Say I were a thief inside of your state-of-the-art vault. What would I be attempting to, erm, confiscate, per say?”

​“Well, Mr. Sharpe, I’m not supposed to disclose that information for business reasons. But for you I will say that for a thief in this hypothetical scenario, they would take large monetary leaps. Along with miscellaneous items in our premium safety deposit boxes for clients who have extra care for personal privacy. Though someone getting inside the vault would be almost impossible. With the new time-lock mechanism, the code to open the vault will only work during business hours, and the only person who knows the code is me.”

​“I see, very nice, very nice. Thank you, Mr. Binga, for your time, but since there has been no crime committed, I’m afraid there isn’t much we can do. Though if our suspicions are true, and we are dealing with Mistletoe, then situations can unravel at alarming speeds.”

​“Understandably so,” said Mr. Binga.

​“I will take what you have given us to work with and try my best to anticipate what may be to come, though in the meantime I would suggest you tighten up security as much as possible.”

​“Of course, Mr. Sharpe, though the odds are heavily in my favor.”

​ We all waved Mr. Binga a farewell as we left the bank.

#

​Sharpe and I entered our hotel room after the day and began settling in for the night.

​“If Mistletoe has made a return from the grave, supposedly it would be quite the development. Eh, Jean?”

​“I would say, though I do find one thing particularly puzzling,” Sharpe said with a pause.

​“And what would that be?”

​“Ah, never mind for now. Good night, Clem.” I continued to watch Sharpe as he slowly drifted asleep, continuing to work my mind at the possibilities the future holds.

Chapter 3

The sun was barely peeking through the curtains when I woke to the muted rustling of paper and the ticking of the wall clock which read 7:00 a.m. Sharpe, as always, was an early riser, already sitting at the room’s modest desk with a cup of black coffee and the morning edition of the *Chicago Tribune* spread before him. He skimmed the headlines with meticulous attention, his brow furrowing as he read.

“Good morning, Jean,” I muttered groggily, rubbing my eyes as I stumbled to the basin to splash water on my face.

“Good morning, Win. You should read this,” he said, folding the paper to expose the lead story.

I leaned over, scanning the headline.

*RUSSIAN SPY NETWORK UNEARTHED IN THE HEART OF AMERICA*, it read.

“The man was a client at none other than Binga Bank; what a crazy world,” Sharpe said under his breath. Beneath it, a subhead detailed the capture of a Russian operative right here in Chicago, their list of contacts allegedly leaked from a high-level intelligence breach.

“Not surprising,” I said, settling into the chair across from him. “A country that understands the importance of the intellectual high ground would prioritize reconnaissance. It’s tactically sound, wouldn’t you agree?” Sharpe nodded but offered no comment.

“Here’s something of note, a physics convention at the University of Chicago starts today, distinguished guests from across the globe. Interesting timing?” I asked.

Sharpe raised an eyebrow. Before he could respond, the telephone rang, its shrill tone cutting through the quiet morning. Sharpe answered it swiftly, his expression darkening as he listened.

“We’ll be there immediately,” he said before hanging up. Turning to me, he continued, “There’s been a break-in at the bank. Guards tranquilized, the vault breached, and not a single alarm triggered. I should’ve expected this.” He grabbed his coat and hat and dashed through the door; I quickly got dressed and followed suit.

#

We arrived at the bank to find a scene of controlled chaos. Uniformed officers were stationed at every entrance, keeping a crowd of onlookers at bay. Inside, Milo was already waiting for us, his face set in a grim expression.

“Morning, gentlemen,” Milo greeted us, his tone heavy. “It’s bad. All the money's gone. And the guards—” He gestured toward two men slumped in chairs, their pallid faces glistening from the light of the chandelier. “They were found unconscious with tranquilizer darts in their necks.”

“Where’s Binga?” Sharpe asked briskly.

“In his office. He’s rattled, as you might imagine.”

We made our way through the bank, past the ornate marble lobby to the vault room. The massive steel door stood open, its imposing bulk seeming powerless in the face of whatever genius had orchestrated this heist. Sharpe immediately spotted a card lying on the floor near the entrance. He picked it up and examined it. The ornate golden “M” glinted in the overhead lights.

“Mistletoe,” he murmured with a foreboding tone.

“What’s the play, Jean?” Milo asked.

“Everyone out,” Sharpe commanded, his voice firm. “Except for you, Milo, Clem, and Mr. Binga. I need to think.”

Once the room was cleared, Sharpe addressed us. “A crime scene, gentlemen, is an archive of exhaustive details. Every element here is telling a story; you just must know how to listen.”

He began his examination, starting with the perimeter. Giving it a walk, he began inspecting and testing all the windows and doors.

“Mr. Binga, what was the state of the bank when you arrived this morning?”

“Everything was locked just as I had left it the night before, sir.” Sharpe continued the inspection into Mr. Binga’s office.

“Your windows as well?”

“Why, of course, it’s been locked for months,” Binga said adequately.

“Did you check it last night?”

“Well, erm… no, sir, I did not,” Binga replied drearily. Sharpe rattled on the window in Binga’s office, which was still locked tight.

“Interesting,” he muttered. “I was almost certain…”

Sharpe moved past the window and continued his work.

“Other than the three main doors, are there other entrances into the building that I should be aware of?”

“No, sir...well, there is a hatch on the roof, but I’ve had it welded and sealed from the inside because of some leakage problems.”

“I see. What time did you leave the bank last night, Mr. Binga?”

“Why, 11:00 p.m., sir.”

“Do you normally leave around that time?”

“Well, yes. Some nights I leave a bit later, but I’m always out by midnight.”

Sharpe paused for a moment as though to think. “I see,” he said in likely fashion. “Mr. Binga, you mentioned you had a new CCTV system installed.”

“Yes, of course! Right this way.” Mr. Binga led us further down the hall into a dark closet where there were bulky computers set up against the back wall. He pressed some buttons and pulled up the footage from last night.

“Incredible.” I said quietly. We all gathered closely to the screen, watching intently. The screen showed the inside of the vault door, the array of golden boxes lining the back wall, and the centerpiece of a table filled with bills acting as a focal point. The top corner of the screen was a time stamp reading 1:59. As soon as the clock struck 2:00, the money in the center of the vault suddenly disappeared. We all gasped in unison, and Mr. Binga slammed his palm into the desk.

“This can’t be!” He said, filled with distress.

“Calm yourself, Mr. Binga; as long as I’m on the case, you haven’t anything to worry about.” Sharpe spoke with a voice of control.

As we continued closer to the vault, Sharpe began a lecture on its complexities.

“A vault door like this isn’t cracked by amateurs. It’s precision work. To bypass the time-lock without breaking anything in the locking mechanism is very puzzling indeed. Let alone cracking the actual vault code, which would either take someone who already knows the vault and the code… or a mad genius.” Sharpe’s pacing slowed as he stood before the safety deposit boxes. “Someone like Mistletoe would fit this requirement in a sense, though there are two problems,” he said, half to himself. “Mistletoe has no need for anything monetary. If it was him, he would be after something technical, such as an invention or some type of intel–something specific.” Sharpe thought for a couple moments before shouting.

“Mr. Binga, open the premium boxes. Let’s see what’s missing.” Binga hesitated for a moment but nodded,

“I can’t disclose who the boxes belong to for security reasons, I’ve sworn to secrecy.” Binga muttered shakily while retrieving the necessary keys. He opened box after box, checking the catalogs to note their contents. Then he paused, his hand trembling as he held up one particular box. It was empty, except for a neat pile of ashes.

Sharpe leaned in, his eyes narrowing.

“Well,” he said quietly, “It seems our thief left us another riddle to solve.”

Chapter 4

After the unsettling events at the bank, our minds were preoccupied with theories and unanswered questions. Despite the state of the bank there was still a flicker of excitement as we headed to the physics convention. As we approached the entrance, a large banner reading *Chicago Annual Physics Symposium: Pioneers of Innovation* hung proudly over the double doors. Inside, the atmosphere was buzzing with scientists and enthusiasts alike, all swarming around the different exhibits and showings.

Booths lined the aisles, each boasting an array of gadgets or demonstrations that put the laws of physics on full display. One station showcased a levitating globe, suspended midair through the marvel of magnetic repulsion. Another featured an intricate Rube Goldberg machine, its movements a dance of cause and effect.

"Impressive, isn’t it?" Sharpe remarked, his hands resting in his coat pockets as he observed the displays with a casual interest.

"Remarkable," I agreed, my eyes drawn to a pendulum that moved in perfect synchronicity with the vibrations of a tuning fork. "It's a playground for the scientifically inclined." We wove through the sea of people until we reached the main auditorium. Inside, rows of chairs were arranged before a grand stage, where a series of presentations by some of the world’s leading physicists was set to begin. Sharpe and I found our seats near the middle of the room, granting us an unobstructed view of the stage.

The presentations commenced with a flourish; even Sharpe, who rarely displayed enthusiasm for public events, appeared somewhat engaged. As the next speaker was announced, a peculiar figure stepped onto the stage whom I immediately recognized. The man was tall and thin, dark hair resting on his head, yet he was still unmistakable. The faint scars were still distinguishable across his forehead, and though he wore a neutral expression, his piercing black eyes seemed to survey the audience with unsettling precision.

I grabbed Sharpe's arm.

"Sharpe, look at him! It’s him, isn’t it? Mistletoe!" Sharpe, however, remained composed, his gaze fixed on the stage.

"Calm yourself, Clem. We’ve yet to hear him speak, let alone confirm anything."

The figure didn’t approach the podium. Instead, he stood silently at the edge of the stage, his presence looming like a shadow. The event's host briefly gestured to him before resuming the introductions, as if the man’s role was needless. He remained on the stage for the duration of the segment, never uttering a word, and left just as quietly when the next speaker was called.

My excitement refused to wane.

"You saw him, didn’t you? Those scars, that look—it *must* be him!"

Sharpe leaned back in his chair, seemingly unimpressed.

"Coincidences happen, Clem. Though I can see the resemblance, men with scars aren’t as rare as you might think. “The convention concluded with thunderous applause as the final speaker left the stage. The crowd began to filter out of the auditorium, but I couldn’t shake the nagging suspicion. As we walked back to our lodgings, I continued my attempts to engage Sharpe on the subject.

"It’s too much to be a coincidence," I insisted. "The timing, the appearance, and his connection to physics—it all lines up!"

Sharpe dismissed my theory with a wave of his hand.

"The mind is a notorious fabricator, Clem. It strings together unrelated events to form a narrative that feels true. Focus on the facts, not conjecture." His nonchalance only stoked my frustration. "You’re telling me you’re not the least bit curious? That man looked like he stepped straight out of your memories."

Sharpe paused for a moment, then offered a cryptic smile. "Curiosity has its place, my friend, but it’s far too early to draw conclusions. For now, rest. Tomorrow may bring clarity."

Back at the hotel, the evening air was thick with unspoken thoughts. As Sharpe settled into bed, I continued to replay the day’s events in my mind. His calm wasn’t helping.

"Good night, Win," he muttered, his voice low and even.

"Good night, Sharpe," I replied, though sleep felt impossible. As Sharpe’s breathing slowed, I stared out the window at the city lights, my thoughts consumed by the figure on the stage and the lingering question of why Sharpe took no interest in it at all.

Chapter 5

​We continued our investigation through the week. Sharpe began a board of all the facts in our hotel room, noting the important facts of the case.

​“Winston, have you been keeping everything in that logbook of yours?”

​“Yes, very neatly.” I pulled out the notebook and gave it a glance before handing it to him.

*Friday:*

*- Leave from New York at 11:00p*

*Saturday:*

*- Arrive in Chicago 8:00a*

*- Eat Breakfast with Milo 8:30a – 11:00a*

*- Tour the bank with Milo 11:30a – 2:00p*

*- Lunch and dinner in the city 3:00p – 7:30p*

*- Settle in for the night 8:00p*

*Sunday:*

*- Breakfast 9:00a*

*- Call from the bank, rush to scene, investigation 10:00a – 4:00p*

*- Facts: robbery, seemingly no entrance point, all doors still locked, no alarms triggered, men tranquilized, money taken from vault so motive must be money, calling card with an ornate ‘M’ stamped on it found once again, crime happened through the night*

*- Physics convention 4:30p – 8:00p*

*- Back to hotel 9:00p*

He gave the notes a puzzled look.

“Winston, can you help me to formulate a timeline of the crime?”

“Yes, absolutely,” I replied eagerly.

“Let’s begin on the night of the crime. We know that Mr. Binga locked everything in the bank up as promised, and left the bank at around 11:00 p.m.”

“Yes.”

“Though he did admit that he didn’t check the window in his office before leaving that night.” Sharpe lingered on the thought for a moment. “So, the thief would have entered sometime around 2:00 a.m.,” Sharpe said with that old certainty of his.

“2:00 a.m.?” I questioned. “But the footage showed the money disappearing at precisely 2:00 a.m. Wouldn’t they need to enter much earlier than that?”

“Yes, one could only assume, but take a look at your watch and read me the time.” I looked down at my wristwatch, the tiny hands slowly ticking.

“12:32,” I murmured.

“Yes, exactly!”

“Exactly what?”

“It’s not 12:32 but 10:32! Your watch is two hours off.” I sat there staring at him, waiting for an explanation. “The night of the robbery was the first Sunday of November, which is daylight saving time. So, the clocks get set back one hour. On top of that, the travel from New York has put us in the Central Time zone, losing us another hour.”

“I see. But what could this have to do with the robbery?”

“Come on, Win, you’re usually much sharper than this. Think about it.”

I sat puzzled for a moment.

“Ah, I see. The clocks being set back must have triggered something in the CCTV system, leaving around an hour window at 2:00 A.M.”

“Yes! Precisely.”

“So, the man responsible for the crime must have either had prior experience with these systems or, they would have to be smart enough to figure it out.”

“Now you’re getting it Clem,”

“Who would fit those categories?” I said prodigiously.

“There are a few people, though it’s usually best to leave suspects out until everything is sorted,” Sharpe retorted. “So, here’s what we know: the thief must have entered at 2:00 a.m., perhaps a little earlier to deal with the guards, and cracked the vault within an hour. He then left everything neatly for us to find in the morning.”

“Yes, it makes sense, but how did they get into the bank? Everything was locked the night before and was still locked when we found it.”

“Yes, it continues to puzzle me; but my instincts, which are never wrong, continue to lead me to the window. Although it was locked the next morning, there hasn’t been any guarantee that it was locked the night prior. For it to be an entrance point, someone would just have to have been at the bank sometime before the heist to unlock it and find some way to lock it afterwards.”

“Yes, but why not the front or back doors? There’s no way of unlocking or relocking the window from the outside; that is, without breaking it, of course. Wouldn’t it be much easier to pick one of the door locks and just relock it after completing the heist?”

“It would make sense, yes. But with a heist this clean, there was no destruction of any kind. Just pure, meticulous use of vulnerabilities. Our thief, who is so meticulous, wouldn’t want his heist being fooled by a mouth-breathing hobo.” Sharpe stated with some emotion. “So, the window would be the only viable entrance option for our thief.”

“So, is now the time where theories are acceptable?” I asked.

“I believe it is, Clem; why don’t you start?”

Chapter 6

​There was an uneasy air in the room as I began.

​“Well, I believe that there are only two viable people to commit this crime,” I began, “The first of which is, of course, Mistletoe. Being such an accomplished physicist and having such a high intellect, I don’t think that it is too large a leap to assume he could understand and get around the security system. Although getting through the vault would be quite difficult, I believe he would have the capabilities. Not to mention the calling cards with the golden “M” stamped into them.”

​“And who would the second be?” Sharpe asked with the raise of an eyebrow.

​“Well, of course, with Mistletoe as a suspect, there arises some problems. As we’ve established, the likely entrance would have been the office window. So, it would be probable for Mistletoe to have been able to get into the office and unlock the window beforehand. But a problem arises with the window being found locked the morning after the heist. So, whoever set up the heist would have to have been in the office the next morning to lock it again.”

​“Correct,” Sharpe emphasized.

​“So, the only other person who knows how to open the vault, has the ability to bypass the CCTV system, and was at the crime scene to lock the window once again, would be Mr. Binga himself.”

There was a pause in the room as Sharpe began to think.

​“I see, I see.” Sharpe muttered. “I think your conclusions are sound, but they are lacking in motive. So, allow me to add some key details. Mr. Binga would fit a lot of the requirements, but what I couldn’t get around is his motive. Yes, you could peg it down to greed, but I don’t find that to be very reasonable. You see, Mr. Binga isn’t a greedy man, he is someone who came out of poverty through hard work. So, without further evidence, there is no reasonable motive for him.” Sharpe stood up suddenly and began pacing the room. “Also, there would still be a problem with the calling cards that have appeared periodically; you see, our thief must either be Mistletoe himself, or someone who was aware of his ties to crime. To the public Mistletoe would only appear as a brilliant scientist, so it wouldn’t make any sense for Mr. Binga to attempt to frame someone who we believed to be dead.” I began tapping my foot against the floor.

​“Interesting,” I murmured. “What might you be suggesting here?”

​“Patience, Winston. I do, however, agree with your conclusion about the window. I think the only possible explanation for the window remaining locked is that our thief must have been at the scene of the crime to lock the window once again.”

​“I see. So, Mistletoe and Mr. Binga must have been working in cahoots. Perhaps Mistletoe was threatened by whatever was found burnt in the safety deposit box, and used some sort of leverage against Mr. Binga?”

​“That theory works if it wasn’t for one problem…” Sharpe raised his hand to his chin and began scratching. “Mistletoe couldn’t have any involvement in this crime whatsoever.” The silence cut through the room like a knife, as an autumn breeze drifted through the window.

​“How can you say that with such certainty?”   
 ​“I watched him burn with my very eyes.” The tension in the room continued to build. “You see, the fire at the laboratory was lit by Mistletoe in an experiment gone bad. I watched the explosion through one of the windows, and I witnessed as he was burned alive at the scene.”

​“Erm, well…who would that leave our thief to be? You don’t mean…” I said shakily.

​“Well, unfortunately, Win, that leaves our dear friend Milo,” Sharpe said with a sigh. “I assure you I only follow the facts, and this is where they have led me continually. Milo was at the scene before and after the heist, giving him the ability to lock the window. Also, he would have had the knowledge of our feud with Mistletoe in the past. Perhaps the ornate “M” would be signifying Milo rather than Mistletoe. But leaving a calling card such as this one wouldn’t fit Milo, he’s a very caring man and to leave such a card would require someone who’s egotistical. Who sees themselves as superior.

​I sat in silence at the notion.

​“Never to worry, though, Clem. I assure you that I’ve solved the case in its entirety. Winston, would you happen to recall the position we left unfinished back in New York?”

​“With precision,” I replied lightly.

​“Well then, bishop captures bishop.” Sharpe said.

​“Ah, yes, queen captures bishop.” I replied in point.

​“With our current working theory there are still some issues,” Sharpe stated. “The most prominent problem I have is with the ashes in the safety deposit box.” Milo and I watched him intimately. “The problem lies within the contents of that box; bishop captures king's rook seven.”

​“A bold move,” I noted quietly. “How could we know the contents of the safety deposit box, Sharpe? Mr. Binga swore an oath,” I said grittily before stating my move. “King captures bishop.”

​“Ah, yes, but with some simple sleight of hand, the logbook was ripe for the taking, telling us that the box belonged to an Ivan Antonov, the very spy who was captured right here in the heart of the grand city.” Sharpe’s words lingered in the air. “Rook to king’s rook three, check.”

​I paused, feeling a sense of shock at hearing the name. “King back to king’s knight one,” I muttered shakily.

​“I find that coincidence to only be explained with a second thief, alongside our primary suspect. Knight to king’s bishop five.”

​“And who might that be?” I retorted, preparing myself for the worst before belting out my move. “Queen to king’s knight three!”

​“Queen to king’s rook five,” Sharpe said calmly,

​“Queen takes queen!”

​“Knight to king seven, check.”

​“King to king’s rook two…”

​“The name of this conspiracist is Alexei Rybakov.” Sharpe turned his back. “Someone who I know intimately, though under the name Sir Winston Clement.” The breeze from the window morphed into a shrieking wind.

“Rook takes queen; checkmate.”

​“Sharpe, I…”

The silence lingered as Sharpe took out one of the calling cards with the golden “M” centered and slowly rotated it until it morphed into a “W.”

A black and white logo

Description automatically generated

​“W for Winsto–”

Sharpe let out a gasp of air as I plunged a steel blade into his side.

​“It’s been a pleasure,” I whispered into his ear, as I gently lowered him to the ground.

Epilogue

The air in Milo Sinclair's study was heavy with the scent of leather-bound books and faint cigar smoke, the dim glow of the desk lamp casting long shadows on the lined pages before him. The pen in his hand hovered momentarily, the final sentence sat in the silence like a tolling bell.

I leaned back in his chair, letting the weight of the story settle over me. It was more than just a story; it was a confession to a crime that even the brilliant mind of Jean-Baptiste Sharpe had fallen prey to its schemes.

My gaze wandered to the cracked window, where the autumn breeze stirred the edges of my manuscript. The crime, as I had pieced it together, was a stroke of manipulation and desperation. Alexei Rybakov, the man I had known as Winston Clement, was a product of necessity, survival, and ambition. Sharpe had seen through the facade too late, and I couldn’t help but wonder if the great detective had suspected my involvement in the end.

I sighed deeply, the weight of the truth pressing against my chest. It was all there in the manuscript, meticulously detailed:

#

Alexei’s Rybakov, better known as Winston Clement, had grown up in Belarus with his otherwise abusive father. The man was a locksmith who unwittingly honed his son’s exceptional skill with locks and safes. His father died when he was only ten years old and not having anywhere to go, he turned to crime. Breaking into safes and vaults, the news of these break-ins spread like fire. His record was untarnished, until the KGB took note of the boy. They captured him and trained him in the art of espionage, seeing his skills in crime to be a major asset.

The years spent infiltrating American society, building a façade as Winston Clement, a loyal friend and partner to Sharpe. He was living a double life, balancing reports to his handlers with the thrill of solving crimes alongside Sharpe, he had been seamless—until Ivan Antonov’s exposure.

The heist had been both a mission and a favor. Antonov’s safety deposit box contained secrets that could jeopardize more than just a single operative—it threatened an entire network. Alexei’s orders were clear: destroy the information, leave no trace. I had been in desperation since my mother’s need for brain surgery, I was struggling to make ends meet. Winston had reached out to me and made an offer which couldn’t be refused.

The plan was flawless. The unlocked office window provided quiet entry, the precision of Alexei’s vault-cracking abilities bypassed the seemingly impregnable steel door, and the time discrepancies from daylight-saving time rendered the CCTV footage useless. The ashes in the safety deposit box were all that remained of the secrets that could have unraveled an empire. And yet, it had all unraveled in another way.

Three days after the heist I went to Sharpe and Winston’s hotel to find Sharpe left for dead. I glanced at the notebook resting on the corner of his desk. The black leather cover was worn, the pages filled with Alexei’s neat, methodical handwriting. It had been left behind at the hotel, where Alexei had seemingly left in a haste. I had read it cover to cover, the words unveiling the truth behind the enigma that was Winston Clement. I took the notebook for myself, blinded by the fear of being compromised.

I turned my attention from the notebook that lay on my desk back to the manuscript. It ended with Sharpe’s death, the police investigation, and the quiet closing of a case that would forever remain unsolved. Alexei’s disappearance left a void, a mystery that would haunt those who dared to examine it too closely.

The final pages of the manuscript were my own reckoning. I had not reported the heist, not revealed Alexei’s identity, nor confessed my role. The money from the heist had saved my mother, but the cost of my complicity had etched itself into my soul. I had chosen silence, but the weight of the truth had demanded release. The story was my atonement, my attempt to reconcile the man I had been with the man I had become.

I dipped my pen in ink and signed the final page with a flourish. I stacked the pages neatly, slipping them into an envelope addressed to a publisher who specialized in crime fiction. The story, though rooted in painful reality, would be shared with the world as a work of fiction—a tale of brilliance, betrayal, and the cold game that had cost them all so dearly.

As I sealed the envelope, I cast one last glance at Alexei’s notebook, its presence both a reminder and a warning. I stood, walked to the window, and looked out at the quiet street below. The world moved on, as it always did, oblivious to the secrets and sins carried by those who lived in its shadows.

With a final exhale, I blew out the lamp, plunging the study into darkness. The manuscript sat on the desk, a silent testament to a story that demanded to be told. I walked away, leaving the room behind, the echoes of my footsteps fading into the night.

**Winston** **Clemet**:

A charismatic and enigmatic figure, Winston Clement exudes charm and intellect. He is a sharp observer with a mysterious past, known for his tactical mind and subtle wit. His loyalty and ambition make him a trusted partner in investigations, though there always seems to be more to him than meets the eye.

**Jean-Baptiste Sharpe**:

A brilliant detective with an unparalleled knack for deduction, Sharpe is a man of sharp wit and keen intellect. His confident demeanor is balanced by a methodical approach to problem-solving. Though often viewed as arrogant, his insights and natural charisma make him an irreplaceable force in unraveling complex mysteries.

**Milo** **Sinclair**

A grounded man, Milo is a former detective whose warm demeanor and sense of duty define him. A figure of loyalty and reliability, he is deeply devoted to his family and those he cares about. Despite his earnest nature, he wrestles with personal dilemmas that test his principles.

**Jesse** **Binga**:

A composed figure, Jesse Binga is a banker with a strong sense of professionalism and pride in his work He is a self-made individual who commands respect. Beneath his calm exterior lies a deep sense of responsibility for his business and community.

**Mistletoe**:

A shadowy and elusive presence, Mistletoe is a very intelligent and cunning mind. A former scientist with a reputation for brilliance, he is known throughout America though he is thought to be dead from a fire. His ability to manipulate situations and people makes him a formidable opponent, shrouded in intrigue and mystery.