



PART 1 - VICTOR

By
Rajesh Kodaganti

Where Drama Begins, Logic Ends

CHAPTERS

Chapter 1: The Mark of Nishaan

Chapter 2: The Return

Chapter 3: The Obsession

Chapter 4: The First Call

Chapter 5: The Crucifixion

Chapter 6: The Hunt Begins

Chapter 7: The Birthday Gift

Chapter 8: A New Partner

Chapter 9: Domestic Shadows

Chapter 10: The Past

Chapter 11: The Massacre

Chapter 12: The Betrayal

Chapter 13: The Alliance

Chapter 14: The Warm-Up

Chapter 15: The Flight

Chapter 16: The Crash

Chapter 17: The Truth

Chapter 18: The Final Trap

Chapter 19: Resignation

Story From Here...

My name is John Victor, and I am a crime detective with a specialization that sets me apart: I am also a certified forensics expert. This unique dual role has given me an unparalleled perspective on criminal investigation, allowing me to connect the seemingly disparate worlds of high-level detective work and minute-detail scientific analysis.

The following is an account of a particular case that, even after years, still occupies a significant portion of my thoughts. It's a case that didn't just test my skills; it burrowed deep into my psyche, granting me both the highest professional honor—a prestigious medal—and a persistent, gnawing sleeplessness that serves as a permanent reminder.

The official name of the investigation is Nishaan. It is a name that, to me, now signifies an enduring puzzle—a mark, a signature, of a criminal mind whose motives and methods I spent two years meticulously unraveling. It remains the case that has most profoundly piqued my interest, not merely for the complexity of the crime, but for the elusive truth that lay just beyond our grasp.

Chapter 1: The Mark of Nishaan

September 23rd, 2025

Railway Street, 03:47 AM

The chill of the early morning hung thick and damp in the air above Railway Street. It was the kind of industrial gloom that always settled over this forgotten corner of the city. We arrived on the scene to find a sight that immediately clawed at the edges of my jaded professionalism: a corpse, splayed out amongst the grimy ballast next to the abandoned tracks.

This wasn't just another body, however. The victim had been subjected to a horrifying, meticulous form of post-mortem modification. Etched across every visible inch of the skin—from the face and neck down to the hands and even the soles of the feet—were countless, precise thumb impressions. Not inked, not stamped, but engraved, seared into the flesh with what forensics later confirmed to be an extremely high-powered, low-thermal laser. The technique was surgical in its precision and utterly baffling in its intent. It looked less like a murder and more like a macabre, living-flesh canvas for a mad artist obsessed with identification.

The initial shock was palpable even among the seasoned veterans of the unit. We secured the scene, documented the grotesque details, and—following standard, if strained, protocol—dispatched the body to the city morgue for a full autopsy. The forensic team's preliminary estimate put the time required to complete such an intricate 'engraving' at a minimum of six to eight hours. This was not a quick, impulsive crime; it was a dedicated performance.

And then, almost immediately, the case stalled.

The city morgue, perpetually understaffed and overloaded, was buried beneath a backlog. Weeks turned into a month, and the critical autopsy reports—the key to unlocking the true Time of Death, the exact weapon signature of the laser, and any possible DNA evidence—were delayed, repeatedly.

My attention, by necessity, was yanked away. The precinct didn't stop for an anomalous murder. The streets kept churning out their daily quota of mundane burglaries, bitter domestic disputes that spiraled into violence, and the ceaseless tide of drug-related incidents. I was thrust back into the routine, solving case after case with the kind of efficient, almost mechanical ease that had characterized my career. A series of high-profile, complex embezzlement schemes; a quick resolution to a

baffling missing person's case that turned out to be a simple runaway; and a spectacular bust of a counterfeiting ring.

The successes piled up, one on top of the other, each solved case a neat, satisfying conclusion. The ease of it all became the problem. The thrill had evaporated, replaced by a growing, dull ennui. My profession, once a source of intellectual challenge and adrenalized satisfaction, had become predictable. I was too good at it. The complex became simple, the mystery became logic, and I was left staring into the abyss of my own proficiency, dangerously bored. The unsettling image of the Railway Street victim, the body tattooed with spectral fingerprints, faded to a nagging footnote—a file marked "Pending: Autopsy"—tucked away in the back of my mind.

But the quiet lull before the storm... it never lasts. Something was about to break the monotony.

On January 23rd, 2026, the silence of the morgue was shattered once more. We found another body—a gruesome echo of the first, complete with the unnerving presence of numerous fingerprints. This time, I didn't delegate. I took the lead, throwing myself and my entire forensic team into the grueling work of the autopsy and evidence analysis. The revelation that followed was staggering, a curveball that defied every conventional pattern of criminal investigation.

Do you know what we discovered? The bodies weren't just a canvas for one killer's paranoia. The fingerprints lifted from those bodies—from just the first two victims—belonged to one hundred different individuals.

For the next fifteen days, our world narrowed down to microscopic slides, cross-referencing databases, and late-night stakeouts. The connection was elusive until a junior analyst, driven by sheer exhaustion and tenacity, found the common thread. Every single person whose prints were found—all 100 of them—were illiterate.

This group of 100 people wasn't a criminal syndicate or a homogeneous social club. They were spread across different states, yet they all shared a peculiar professional profile: they were employed in various essential municipal services—sweepers, sanitation workers, maintenance staff, and unskilled laborers. The crucial, deeply troubling point to be noted is that every single one of them was formally employed by the government in these different states.

Our initial line of inquiry—contacting the families and colleagues of the known bodies—yielded nothing but confusion and fear. None of them could offer any

meaningful details, any last known location, or any insight into a potential threat. They knew nothing about the multiple prints, and they certainly knew nothing about the third victim we were soon to find.

The case demanded a radical shift in perspective. We abandoned the conventional pursuit of a singular perpetrator and instead focused on the bizarre, almost impossible connection between the victims and the phantom 100. We needed to find the nexus between the first two bodies—and yes, I keep forgetting to mention the latest casualty—three bodies in total.

The third body was discovered on February 15th, 2026, just three weeks after the second. Its discovery intensified the urgency, proving that whatever was happening was accelerating. The sheer magnitude of the individuals involved, their common link to government employment and illiteracy, and the growing body count painted a terrifying picture—a conspiracy operating in the shadows of the civil services, targeting the most vulnerable.

The three bodies discovered were a disparate and unsettling collection of victims. The first was identified as a private bank employee, a detail that immediately suggested a possible link to finance or personal affairs. The second victim was a regular software employee, a seemingly ordinary life cut short, adding a layer of tragic banality to the horror.

However, it was the identity of the third body that elevated this grim discovery from a routine, albeit horrific, crime to a high-stakes investigation demanding immediate and serious attention: she was the daughter of a prominent Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). Yes, it was this specific victim—the MLA's daughter—whose fate personally motivated me to take this case. Her involvement instantly injected a level of political and public pressure that made it impossible to treat this as just another case file; it became a personal imperative. This case, involving victims from such distinct social strata, now had the city's political elite watching, ensuring every move would be scrutinized.

A Personal Confession and the Deepening Shadows of the Case

I want to tell you a short story apart from this case... a story that is the very heart of why I stand here today.

“ The year was 2016.

April 3rd. That date is burned into my memory—not as a day of renewal, but of devastating loss. My sister, Julie Victor, was a victim of a brutal gang rape. The attack was not just physical; it extinguished her light. She died from her injuries shortly after, but not before she found the strength to ask one thing of me. On her deathbed, her voice a fragile whisper, she pleaded with me to become a cop—to seek justice, not just for her, but for every girl who would become a victim like her.

At that moment, standing over her, my grief turned into a single, resolute focus. I decided to become a cop. I wasn't seeking a career; I was answering a sacred vow. This commitment, this trauma, is the reason why the NISHAAN case isn't just another assignment to me. It's personal. It's a fight for Julie, and for every silence she wanted to break. This is why I am approaching this case with such unwavering, absolute seriousness. "-----The Escalation: A Psycho's Game

The emotional weight of the past barely had time to settle when the case took a disturbing turn. We found another body—the fourth in this horrific sequence. This latest victim was a vegetable vendor, a person seemingly unconnected to the previous three. The lack of a clear motive, combined with the escalating frequency of the attacks, brought a terrifying clarity to our investigation: the killer is a psycho.

He is not motivated by revenge or profit; he is killing people purely for fun. His actions are those of a predator playing a perverse game. More disturbingly, he is deliberately challenging the department. This is evident in the clues he leaves behind, particularly the fingerprints. He is taunting us, daring us to catch him, ensuring that we know the evidence is there while simultaneously obscuring its meaning. There is something profoundly significant about these fingerprints; a pattern, a coded message, or a deliberate misdirection that we are frustratingly missing.-----A Labyrinth of Fingerprints: The Forensic Report

The urgency to understand the killer's game intensified after the forensic analysis of the third and fourth bodies was completed. The results were shocking. While the first two murders were linked by a specific, albeit baffling, set of prints, the latest two victims introduced a monumental complication.

The forensic reports confirmed that the fingerprints lifted from the third and fourth crime scenes belonged to over a hundred different individuals. This was not the work of a single killer, nor was it a simple case of contamination. It suggests an elaborate, orchestrated system. Is the killer using a vast network of unsuspecting people to place prints? Is he collecting prints from discarded items and applying them? The shift in evidence—from one type of print in the first two murders to a veritable tidal wave of disparate prints in the latter two—has blown the case wide open, confirming that the killer is not just violent, but terrifyingly intelligent and meticulous in his

cruelty. We are navigating a labyrinth, and every new piece of evidence only seems to bury us deeper.

The Mystery of the Illiterate Fingerprints

The chilling discovery of another body, this time a prominent cardiac surgeon, only deepened the detective's mounting confusion and frustration. "With all these fingerprints, what is the killer trying to communicate?" he muttered, running a hand over his weary face. "Why this relentless, macabre game of murder? Where did the killer obtain this vast collection of prints? And why, of all things, are they only the prints of the illiterate, the disenfranchised, the ones least likely to be tracked or identified by official records?"

The Killer's Motive: Psycho or Purpose?

The most pressing question that pounded relentlessly in his mind was: what is the killer's ultimate aim? Is this the work of a random psycho, a monster who finds twisted pleasure in the act of killing, selecting victims without rhyme or reason? Or is there a calculated, deeply rooted motive behind these heinous acts? What is the specific message the killer is so desperately trying to convey to the world, to the police, to him?

The latest victim only made the motive murkier. The department had found yet another body, a renowned cardiac surgeon who had dedicated his life to healing. The scene was a mirror image of the previous murders: the same baffling inclusion of a hundred different, distinct fingerprints. This doctor was an anomaly among the victims. Despite his high-profile career at a government hospital, where he commanded a respectable salary of \$25,000 per month, his personal life was one of humble altruism. He lived a life of quiet service, using his weekends to travel to distant villages and provide free treatment to those who couldn't afford it. His wife, also a doctor, had given up a hospital practice to join him in this weekend crusade of medical charity. Their family life was equally unassuming; they were raising their twins to value education in a government school. "Why him?" the detective questioned, tapping his pen on the case file. "Why choose a man who dedicated his life to saving others? What possible connection could this good man have to a killer obsessed with the fingerprints of the illiterate?"

A Lone Wolf or a Shadowy Collective?

The nature of the crime itself suggested two possibilities: Is this a sophisticated, meticulously planned one-man show, or the work of a highly organized group?

A part of the detective's mind leaned toward the singular, terrifying genius of a lone serial killer. He recalled his research: "Psycho or serial killers," he mused, "often create a unique, personalized style of killing. They thrive on challenging the police, mocking the system, turning their crimes into a sadistic game. They frequently operate without a clear, logical motive, choosing victims at random to satisfy a dark, internal compulsion."

The Fingerprint Enigma: A Tool of Power

But the unique element of the fingerprints—the illiteracy factor—introduced a sinister, calculated dimension that deviated from the standard profile. This killer wasn't just killing; they were collecting, weaponizing identity. The sheer volume and consistency of prints belonging to different illiterate individuals raised alarming possibilities.

"This person," the detective reasoned, staring at the evidence photos, "possesses incredible power. They have access to the most fundamental marker of human identity—the fingerprint—of those who can least defend themselves. They could use these prints to frame others, hacking into accounts, diverting police investigations, leaving a single, false print at a robbery, a kidnapping, or another murder scene. They could be selling these identities on the black market, taking out fraudulent loans, or simply absconding with money taken in the names of the innocent."

Yet, the killer chose none of these straightforward crimes of financial gain or misdirection. Instead, they were using this vast, terrifying cache of identities to mark a series of murders. "Why this method?" he whispered. "Is this a boast? A demonstration of the unimaginable power they hold over our system, over our very concept of identity? Are they threatening us by showing us what they are capable of, and what they have?"

The Unanswered Question

The ambiguity of the killer's identity—male or female—flickered briefly in his mind, only to be dismissed by the weight of the larger mystery. He... or she? No, he... ah... The simple question of gender felt irrelevant compared to the magnitude of the terror.

These were the questions that shackled his focus, preventing him from formulating a clear plan. He desperately needed to fix his mind on a specific line of inquiry, but for that, he needed a sign—a single, perfect, irrefutable clue. The clock was ticking, and the pressure was immense. If this cycle of baffling, brutal murder continued, the public's trust in the department, already fragile, would shatter. Worse, the detective felt a deep, personal failure. "I don't respect myself right now," he admitted, the fear a

cold knot in his stomach. The most terrifying thought of all settled upon him: "Who is the next victim?"

All these thoughts, a relentless, swirling vortex in my mind, had kept me awake for a grueling two days. I was beyond tired; I was utterly exhausted, a hollow shell drained by incessant overthinking. The simple act of eating had become a burden, and the severe sleep deprivation had left me with a worrying side effect: my eyesight was incredibly blurred and weak. I knew, with a sudden, desperate clarity, that I had to shut down. I had to sleep.

The first step was to sever all ties to my professional life. I called the station, my voice thick with fatigue, and informed them I was taking a week's leave. Without hesitation, I switched off my phone, welcoming the silence and the disconnect. I ventured out just long enough to stock up on a week's worth of essential groceries and vegetables, then retreated, locking myself securely inside my flat, cutting myself off from the world.

To ensure success in my mission for oblivion, I resorted to sleeping pills. The relief when they finally worked was immense. The chemical-induced darkness that enveloped me was deep, restorative, and absolutely necessary. I finally got the sleep I so desperately needed.-----

Chapter 2: The Return

One Week Later... The Return

Stepping back into the precinct after a week of self-imposed isolation, the atmosphere was immediately different. There were more police cars than usual crowding the lot, and the interior seemed bristling with an uncharacteristic tension. I had barely crossed the threshold when a young constable spotted me and practically sprinted over, his face flushed with urgency.

"Sir! Sir, you need to go to your office immediately! A higher-ranking officer has come, specifically for you."

"Okay," I thought, my mind instantly snapping back into detective mode despite the week off. "I get the point. I'm in trouble."

The officer, a stern-looking man I didn't immediately recognize, was indeed in my office, seated behind my desk. I rushed in, executing a sharp, textbook salute.

The first question he fired at me, his eyes boring into mine, was delivered with the precision of a bullet.

"Where were you for the past seven days?"

"On leave, sir," I replied, keeping my voice steady and respectful.

His tone instantly escalated, dripping with cold authority. "On leave? Without proper authorization, you just decided to take off on your own volition. What exactly are you thinking of yourself? You simply called your station and announced you were taking leave. Do you know the rules, Victor? You know there is a rule that explicitly states: When you are experiencing something as minor as a headache, you are not permitted to take leave."

"Sir," I interjected, standing my ground. "I was on medical leave. I am authorized to take medical leave on my own authority!" My voice cracked with a touch of exasperation.

"Let me complete first, Detective Victor," he commanded, the anger evident in his tightly controlled voice.

"Sorry, sir," I mumbled, chastened.

He continued, leaning forward. “More importantly, when you are undertaking a serious, active case—especially a high-profile one—you are absolutely not allowed to take leave without prior approval from a superior. And even if there is an emergency that necessitates your absence, you have an obligation to remain available on your official phone, or at the very least, you must inform your station of your correct, reliable contact details: a personal address, an alternate email, a secure landline. Anything. You did any of that, Detective Victor? Did you?”

He paused, letting the implication hang in the air before answering his own question with a thundering, drawn-out syllable: “NOOOOO....”

“SORRY, sir,” I choked out, a knot forming in my stomach. “I made a mistake.”

At that moment, the door burst open. I heard the unmistakable sound of heavy footsteps approaching loudly, purposefully. A tall, unfamiliar man in a crisp suit strode into the office and snapped a sharp salute toward my superior.

My superior officer’s face immediately softened into a professional cordiality. “Hi Tej, thanks for being here. Any updates on the case?”

Confused, I stepped forward. “What case?”

Tej, ignoring me completely, addressed my superior. “No, sir, not yet, but the pressure is mounting. I’m starting to think about revealing some of the case details to the media, just to try and shake something loose.”

I couldn’t hold back the anger and confusion boiling up inside me. “In what case?” I demanded, my voice dangerously tight and laced with a growing rage.

My superior officer, Commissioner Verma, turned to me, his own face contorted in a matching wave of fury. “John,” he said, his voice a low growl, “meet Mr. Tej, who is currently undertaking the case known as ‘NISHAAN.’” He then gestured to me. “And Tej, this is John. John Victor.”

Tej extended a hand, and we shook hands—a cold, perfunctory gesture of professional acknowledgment.

The moment the handshake was over, I turned to my superior, the adrenaline of the confrontation sharpening my focus. “But sir,” I said, my tone firm, “I don’t want a partner in this case. I can solve it myself.”

“Sorry, I forgot to mention that you are suspended for two months for your irresponsible mistake. And you have also officially lost all involvement in this case.”

The words from my superior, Commissioner Verma, hung heavy and sharp in the air, a final, brutal judgment. I could feel the blood drain from my face, a mixture of disbelief and cold, slow-burning rage replacing my earlier anticipation of a dressing-down.

“But sir, it’s my first mistake in five years,” I pleaded, standing straighter, trying to keep the tremor from my voice. “You can’t just throw me off like this. You know my record. I solved over one hundred cases last year alone. At least you have to consider that, sir.”

Verma leaned back in his leather chair, the picture of detached authority. “John, I’ve told you repeatedly: in this department, especially on a high-profile case like Nishaan, you are not allowed to make even one mistake. You were warned. You vanished for seven days right after the fifth murder, and your assigned partner paid for your absence. We are dealing with a serial killer who is escalating with every victim. Thank me for just a suspension, not a dismissal. You’re lucky, Detective.”

“But in two months,” I insisted, my jaw clenching, “I will be back. And I will return to this case.”

Verma sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “John, I think you’re missing the point. Do you know what happened seven days ago? The day you decided to go incommunicado? Three people died on the same day—i.e., the first day of your unplanned leave. We tried every channel to contact and trace you, but your phone was dead, your apartment was locked, and you were completely unreachable. That is why, effective immediately, we have officially assigned this case to Assistant Commissioner Tej Sharma. Tej is already briefed and running point. So please, John, take your leave. We have a high-priority meeting to discuss the case strategy in five minutes.”

I knew I was defeated, at least for now. I turned toward the door, stopping only to offer one final, unsolicited piece of advice—a warning that felt vital.

“Okay, I will make a move,” I conceded, my voice flat. “But one suggestion, sir: don’t give any of the specific case details to people outside the investigation—or to the media. I’ve studied the pattern. This killer, Nishaan... he wants fame. He wants to be celebrated for his art. That’s why he’s doing all these theatrical murders.”

NISHAAN P1:VICTOR

Verma merely nodded dismissively as I walked out, the door clicking shut behind me on my career, my reputation, and my case.

(and I left from there...)

Chapter 3: The Obsession

Stepping out of the Commissioner's office, the bustling activity of the precinct seemed muted, the noise of ringing phones and hurried footsteps distant. I saw a young, nervous-looking Constable by the reception desk. I walked up to him and quietly gave an order.

"Constable," I said, keeping my voice low and serious. "I need you to compile a complete, unredacted file. All the forensic reports and preliminary investigation notes on the last three bodies—the ones from seven days ago. Email it to my personal account, kodagantir295@gmail.com, immediately. Do not mention this to anyone."

He nodded, eyes wide with apprehension and respect. "Yes, Detective John."

I left the station, the fluorescent lights of the police headquarters fading behind me. I drove straight home, the city's noise a dull roar that couldn't penetrate the silence of my own thoughts. I bypassed the kitchen and living room, heading directly to the bedroom. I didn't even bother to change out of my uniform, collapsing onto the bed, staring at the ceiling.

Nishaan. The name tasted like ash. My case.

Suddenly, my phone vibrated on the nightstand. A mail notification. The Constable was efficient. I grabbed the phone, my fatigue momentarily forgotten. When I opened the attachment, the details hit me like a physical blow. I sat up, leaning against the headboard, eyes scanning the grim facts.

This time, he killed triplets.

The file confirmed it. Three victims, all identical sisters, aged twenty. He had killed all three in the same, ritualistic manner. The forensic photos showed something even more disturbing: the killer had meticulously printed their fingerprints, but they were identically patterned across all three bodies. Not their actual fingerprints, which would naturally differ, but a single, carefully chosen, repeating print. A signature. A mark. Nishaan.

The questions, the persistent, haunting whispers that had plagued my mind for weeks, started again with renewed intensity. Why? What is the connection? What is the goal?

I had time now. Two months. Sixty days of forced leave. Sixty days that I could dedicate entirely to a detailed, microscopic case study. This wasn't a suspension; it was a sabbatical for obsession.

I got up, the suspension notice forgotten. My house was small, but I made room for the investigation. I cleared the wall in my spare room, turning it into a macabre yet ordered "murder board." I started by printing out every photograph, every witness account, every scrap of forensic data. I stuck the pictures of every victim—from the first one five months ago to the three triplets—all along the wall. Next to each photo, I pinned the details: where they were killed, the specific ritualistic wounds, and, most crucially, the exact "tracks" of the fingerprints the killer had left on their bodies.

When I finally stood back and saw that wall, a sprawling, graphic constellation of violence, I had only one question that mattered.

"What is he trying to draw?"

I traced the geographical locations on a pinned map of the city. Was he marking locations in a pattern, like the symbol-drawing burglar in DHOOM: 2? Was there a discernible pattern in the victims themselves? The locations? The dates? Was there any connection, any thread that linked the vegetable vendor, the accountant, and now the three young women?

And again, I was trapped in the loop of insomnia and frantic research. A month passed. Thirty days of endless coffee, stale pizza, and the cold comfort of the glowing screens. The one strange thing: not a single new murder had been officially filed under the name Nishaan.

Did he quit? No. A killer this meticulous, this driven by ego, doesn't just stop. I don't think so.

Is he planning something big? The thought sent a chill down my spine, but a strange surge of adrenaline with it.

Maybe.

Chapter 4: The First Call

The phone, a cheap burner, vibrated relentlessly on the polished wood of the nightstand. The illuminated digital clock beside it read 01:00. The earlier call, right at the stroke of midnight, had already shattered the fragile peace of the late hour. A sense of cold dread had begun to settle.

Then, suddenly, the caller ID flashed TEJ'S NUMBER.

I snatched the phone, my heart slamming against my ribs. "Hello, Tej, Is this you?" I asked, my voice tight, straining against the background static. The line crackled, and a smooth, unnervingly calm voice answered—definitely not Tej.

"Hello, my love," the voice purred, a chilling intimacy in the address. "Tej is out of coverage; you can't talk to him right now."

My blood ran cold. "Who are you? What happened to Tej?" The professionalism I was trained to maintain struggled against the panic rising in my throat.

The voice chuckled—a light, airy sound that was utterly devoid of humor. "Shut up, love; I'm doing you a favor now. I just killed him."

The words hit me like a physical blow. Tej. Gone. "Why did you kill him?" I managed to rasp, the professional investigator in me still seeking a motive, a hook, an explanation for the senseless violence.

The voice shifted, a sudden, sharp demand replacing the earlier mockery. "I want you to take this case. I only want you to take this case. If anyone takes this except you, I will kill them."

This wasn't just a random murder; it was a targeted challenge, a sick, personal game. "Why are you killing all these people...?" I pressed, referencing the string of unsolved, bizarre homicides that had gripped the city.

"Hold on, my love," the voice interrupted, impatience creeping in. "First, inform your department people about Tej and tell them to trace my call quickly. I will give you 10 minutes for all this..."

It was an impossible, audacious instruction. He was demanding I use police resources to track him, the very man who had just confessed to murder. I knew a trace wouldn't happen in ten minutes, but I had to play his game. Survival—and justice for Tej—depended on it.

I immediately called my superior, adrenaline overriding the grief, and kept the killer on the line while my other hand fumbled for my voice recorder. I briefly explained the situation, the murder, and the killer's impossible demand to trace the call. I started recording the conversation.

AFTER TEN MINUTES...

The line remained open. I heard a soft sigh from the other end. "Hello, my love, Are you there?"

"Yes," I confirmed, my voice now steady, emotion tucked away. "I told everyone about this, and they are tracing your call."

"Oh, I like this. Things have really heated up now." A sound of satisfaction followed, like a conductor admiring his orchestra. "Okay, let me introduce myself... I am Ken Adams; you can call me Ken Eve. Only you, my love. I am a professional hacker and artist. And I like to build and test mechanical instruments."

Ken Adams. Ken Eve. A hacker and an artist. The puzzle pieces, though jagged and incomprehensible, were finally beginning to connect to a name.

"You answered many questions that I had," I stated, trying to keep him talking. "Just tell me why you are killing all these people."

He groaned, a sound of theatrical exasperation. "Ufff, I'm not killing; I'm a tattoo artist; I'm just printing tattoos on people's bodies, and they are dying of pain."

"What tattoo? Why does it come between topics?" The shift was jarring, nonsensical. The murders were brutal, not merely painful.

"Oh, my innocent love! Wait, let me finish first," he condescended. "I'm a tattoo artist, and those people whom you are mentioning as having been killed are my clients. They came to me for a tattoo. I used my new laser tattoo printing technology on them, and the minute I started it, they died of pain. So I used their bodies to practice my new method. And then it worked, my love; they didn't even make a little sound, haha... Cool right."

A laser tattoo technology that killed instantly, silently. This wasn't just murder; it was experimentation, a monstrous fusion of art and science.

"What about the fingerprints, then?" I asked, recalling the bizarre lack of consistent suspect fingerprints at the crime scenes—a detail that had baffled the entire department.

"Hmmm," he mused, a hint of pride in his voice. "Previously I hacked the Aadhaar website to delete my details. At the same time, I collected some people's fingerprints for something, then I forgot why I collected them. So I used them on bodies as 'rough' or 'namuna' for new tattoo things."

"Wait, why do you collect their fingerprints?"

"Didn't I mention I forgot..."

"Are you insane?" The question slipped out, raw and unguarded.

The cold, composed reply was immediate and terrifying: "No, my love, I'm an artist."

Chapter 5: The Crucifixion

The apartment was suddenly filled with a chilling, electric tension. Just moments after the initial shock of the call, my radio crackled to life. "Sir, we've traced the burner phone's approximate location," a frantic voice from the department reported. "It's pinging within a hundred-meter radius of your current address!"

My heart hammered against my ribs, a desperate drumbeat in the sudden silence. He was here. He was right outside. I didn't wait to process the fear; I simply ran. Throwing the door open, I burst out of the house, my eyes scanning the street, the shadows, the adjacent shops—every corner that could hide a person.

Then, the burner phone I still held vibrated with an incoming text, flashing across the screen with infuriating casualness: Hey, love, I think your people traced me, but sorry, I'm going now. Just wanted to check out your case study wall for your friend. Don't worry, the charging in Tej's phone is low, so I won't drain his battery. By... mwah...!

The air went cold. The message was a venomous kiss, a mocking farewell. He had been close enough to see the panic on my face, close enough to know he was traced, and still had the audacity to taunt me. And the part about the "case study wall" for Tej—it sounded utterly insane, but in his game, every word was a clue, or a lie dressed as a clue.

I slammed back inside, my feet pounding a frantic rhythm on the floorboards as I headed straight for my case study room. I didn't make it all the way before the first, sickening smell hit me—the metallic, coppery scent of fresh blood. A trail, thick and viscous, was oozing out from under the closed door of the room, snaking across the polished wooden floor.

"Oh my god!" The gasp was torn from my throat, a sound of pure horror. I shoved the door open, the sight within instantly burning itself into my memory, eclipsing every horrific image I had ever seen on duty.

There, on the main wall where I kept my intricate white-board mapping the Nishaan case—the 'case study wall'—Tej's body was affixed. He had been crucified, utterly and horrifyingly nailed to the wall, positioned like some grotesque, modern-day Jesus Christ. But the sickening detail, the hallmark of Nishaan's perverse artistry, was the series of vibrant, scarlet lip prints smeared across Tej's chest, neck, and face. It was an intimate, monstrous violation, a declaration of ownership sealed with a bloody kiss.

I stumbled back, my mind momentarily fractured by the sheer depravity. I barely managed to call my station, my voice a strained, hollow echo as I explained the impossible, sickening tableau before me.

Just as I hung up, a sharp, insistent ringing cut through the lingering horror—the main door call bell.

A cold knot of dread tightened in my stomach. Who was at the door now? Was it him, back for a final, twisted curtain call? I cautiously walked to the main door, my hand instinctively dropping to the service weapon tucked into my waistband, and slowly, deliberately, opened it.

Standing on my doorstep was a boy, no older than fifteen, whom I saw almost every day working at the nearby puncture repair shop. Chotu, they called him.

"What's up, Chotu? Why are you here?" I inquired, trying to keep the frantic edge out of my voice.

The boy, oblivious to the terror just a few feet away, replied with a sheepish grin, "Bro, your friend just repaired his cycle in my shop and told me to collect the money from you. Said you were good for it."

"What?" I stammered, my mind racing. "Who is that? What friend?"

"He told me his name is Nishaan," Chotu said, the name hitting me like a physical blow. "He also told me you two are very good friends. Said he came to your house while I was repairing his bicycle. Didn't he meet you?"

The revelation was a punch to the gut. Nishaan had been here. He had not only been near my location, but he had been at my house, fixing a bicycle, talking to a neighborhood kid, all while Tej was being brutalized just rooms away.

"Chotu, where is he?" I demanded, my hands gripping the doorframe.

"He just left for the market side, bro," the boy replied, pointing vaguely down the street.

"Okay, I will give you money in the morning, Chotu!" I yelled over my shoulder, tossing the instruction as I took off, adrenaline flooding my system. I was running before the kid could even process my words, sprinting toward the market area.

But it was futile. I missed him.

The reality of the last thirty minutes crashed down on me with suffocating weight. He came to my house. He spent thirty minutes around me. He nailed someone to my wall, right under my nose. He gave me so many distinct, undeniable clues—the cycle, the name, the lip prints, the location, the specific mention of the 'case study wall'—but I'm not able to figure out even one of them with enough time to act. What is he trying to do? How crazy, how unbelievably challenging is he being?

I had to admit something. Looking at the scene, feeling the utter inadequacy of my response, a terrifying conclusion was unavoidable. Either he is intelligent beyond measure, or I'm a fool.-----The next day...

The grim reality of the morning did nothing to temper my resolve. I went into the precinct, the heavy scent of disinfectant and coffee doing little to mask the lingering image of Tej's crucifixion.

As I walked into my office, my higher officer was waiting—Verma, a man whose career was defined by procedure and caution. I didn't wait to speak. "Sir," I stated, my voice firm and unwavering, "I will take this case again. I'm the only one who can."

He shook his head immediately. "No," he said flatly. "It's out of your hands, effective immediately."

My jaw clenched. "Listen to me, Verma. Nishaan left a message for you. For everyone." I leaned in, my voice low and intense. "Except me, if anyone else will take this case, he will kill them like Tej. He's made this personal. He's challenging me, and only me."

"What are you talking about, John?" he asked, confusion replacing his professional sternness.

Wordlessly, I handed him the digital recorder. "Then I gave them the call recording that I recorded last night." The recording was the burner phone message, the taunt, the warning.

My higher officer listened to the chillingly casual voice. When it ended, he slowly looked up at me, his eyes wide with a mixture of fear and reluctant respect. He was silent for a long moment before nodding grimly.

"You're in charge, then. You got your case back, son. But if this goes south..."

"I understand the risks, sir."

Chapter 6: The Hunt Begins

Yeah, I got my case back. And the challenge is on.

After a tense moment, John, my higher officer, left my office, the door clicking shut behind him. The air seemed to solidify with purpose. My time starts now. The game is mine to play.

I immediately brought my team in, my commands sharp and non-negotiable.

"I commanded my people in the office some instructions: I want to know how many people have tried to hack the UIDAI database in the last forty-eight hours. I want every single one of them in custody by tomorrow noon. I want their names, their locations, and their digital footprints on my desk." Nishaan's last known move was the UIDAI breach, and if he was playing a high-stakes game, he had to have accomplices, or at least a digital crowd to hide in. I was going to pull the rug out from under his entire operation.

I want every tattoo in the city to be in front of me by tomorrow. Every single shop, every single parlor, every licensed and even suspected unlicensed artist. I want their client lists, their stencil designs, their ink suppliers, and their financial records. I want to know who is getting what, and where they are getting it done. This is non-negotiable.

I want comprehensive data from every consumer who bought material related to laser engraving or printing in the last six months. I want names, addresses, purchase history, and payment methods. This includes high-powered industrial lasers, small desktop engravers, specialized inks, and any unusual bulk orders of printing material. The scope must be exhaustive. If it can be used to make a detailed mark, I want the buyer's information.

And I need all the CCTV footage within a two-kilometer radius of my house in one hour. Not just the main streets, but every camera—private security, doorbell cams, traffic cameras, everything. I want the raw, unedited feeds, time-stamped and organized chronologically. If you need to hack a network, hack it. If you need to strong-arm a private citizen, do it legally, but get me the footage.

Noted Sir. (A unified chorus from the people in my office, their faces a mixture of professional stoicism and mild panic. My office, typically a sanctuary of organized chaos, now hummed with the high-voltage energy of an imminent manhunt.)-----The next day evening,

I was in my office, a fortress of steel and glass high above the city, checking the meticulously compiled data of consumers and the exhaustive CCTV footage. My desk was buried under screens displaying purchase order spreadsheets and silent, looping security feeds. The sheer volume was staggering. Surprisingly, I had no clue how he managed everything, especially the footage. It was too clean, too fast. My initial theory was that he'd somehow compromised the cameras or the central monitoring systems, but the footage was all there, seamless. Maybe he had bought material like Anonymous's hacked CCTV footage, replaced it with a doctored loop for an hour, and then extracted the real feed before anyone noticed the discrepancy. It was a terrifyingly advanced level of operational security for a single individual.

At the same time, my folks got me a list of all the registered tattoo artists in the city, cross-referenced with every independent artist operating on social media. I had personally reviewed the details of over 300 individuals and their work. I can confidently say the 'Anonymous' man was not one of them. His artistry, the intricate, almost digital precision of the mark, spoke of a unique skill set. But I checked on everyone personally anyway, a quiet, intimidating visit to each parlor. I warned them to close their tattoo sessions for a while, a city-wide 'health advisory' that was really a thinly veiled threat to not become the next victim, or an accomplice.

And then I got the hackers' list. There were hundreds of them, divided into tiers. I started with the highest-profile ones, the so-called "white-hat" hackers; they were working for the government and major corporations, supposedly on the side of law and order. Their access was unparalleled, and they could have easily accessed and manipulated the data I was looking at. I interrogated them, pulling them out of their secure labs and government-sanctioned cubicles. But none of them seemed to be the one. They were professionals, yes, but they lacked the cold-blooded malice and the theatrical flair of 'Anonymous.'

Then came the real challenge: the black-hat and gray-hat hackers. The shadow economy. I couldn't arrest them all at once; it would start a digital war. So I filtered the list based on geographical proximity to the known incident areas, their past arrests for high-level data theft, and their known proficiency with optical technology and large-scale network infiltration. I eliminated hundreds of low-level criminals and script kiddies. Finally, I was left with about 73 high-value targets. I investigated them at their place individually—a rapid series of raids and surprise interviews, disrupting their lives, seizing their hardware. And I got absolutely nothing. Again, I was back to zero. The trail went cold, fading into the digital ether.

Suddenly, as the city lights began to sparkle outside my panoramic window, I got a call from an unknown number. The screen flashed 'No Caller ID.' I hesitated, then answered.

Hello.

Yeah, hello, who is this? I kept my voice level, the exhaustion masked by decades of police discipline.

Is this John? The voice was soft, familiar, a gentle melody cutting through the tension of the office.

Yes, I'm John, John Victor. Who the hell are you? My heart had inexplicably started to beat faster.

Happy birthday, John...

A wave of disbelief, then certainty, washed over me. The police brain, analytical and relentless, had found the emotional anchor.

Sarah! Is this you?

Hmmm, the police brain is working... Yeah, John, it's me. The playful tone, a hint of the old days, was unmistakable.

Thank you, Sarah! How are you? A genuine smile finally touched my lips for the first time in days.

I'm fine, John, and I know you are not fine. If you are fine, you will call me every day and be with me at least once a week. The playful tone had shifted to one of genuine concern, a mirror of my own neglect.

Sorry, Sarah. I've been very busy with a case for the past few months. It's... it's complicated. But I will meet you soon. I promised, meaning it deeply.

Okay, John, I will call you back. She knew not to push. She always did.

Bye Sarah! (call ended)

Yeah! Sarah, the love of my life. The one tether to a normal, un-homicidal world. Sorry, I forgot to mention her before; she existed only in the quiet corners of my mind, a casualty of my devotion to the badge.

After the Sarah call ended, before I could even process the warmth she'd brought, I got another call. The incoming number displayed on my screen was the one I was currently using—my private, encrypted police line. Yeah, you read it right. I got a call from the number I was using. The blood drained from my face. This wasn't just a hack; this was a mockery. This was 'Anonymous' playing a personal game. And I think you can guess who it is...

Hello, Ken, I spat the name out, the exhaustion replaced by a surge of pure, cold adrenaline.

John, it's Eva. I already told you right. The voice on the line was distorted, synthesized, feminine, but saturated with malicious confidence. Eva, the name 'Anonymous' had given herself in a previous taunt.

What now, Ken? I leaned forward, my voice low and dangerous. I was no longer an investigator. I was prey. Who is your next victim?

"First, call me Eva, and then I will say whatever you want."

I grit my teeth, the name a venomous drop on my tongue. "Okay, Eva. Who is your next victim?"

A sickeningly sweet laugh echoed in the receiver. "My love, it's your love."

"What?" The single word was a choked gasp.

"You heard it right, my love." The voice was pure malice wrapped in silk.

A wave of cold dread washed over me, instantly replaced by adrenaline-fueled panic. "Don't even dare touch Sarah." I frantically grabbed the land phone and dialled her number, but the ringing stopped immediately—it was switched off. God, no.

"Cool, I won't touch her, I will give her a nice tattoo..."

"Ken, don't..." The primal fear in my own voice was horrifying.

"Hahaha... okay, my love. I'm leaving her as your birthday gift from my side. But you will get another gift from me..." The amusement in his tone was terrifying, the threat hanging heavy in the air.

"What? What are you going to do? Are you killing someone?" I felt desperate, casting about for any way to stop him.

"No, no, no, I don't kill people, honey. And I forgot to say, give money to that poor guy, Chotu, and also to the blood bank. I borrowed some blood to pour into your house that night."

"What?" The question was a low, bewildered sound. The memory of the bloody mess, the sheer psychological terror of that night, flooded back.

"Yes, that was stored blood to panic you and your people. And thanks to soundproof walls and noise cancellation nowadays, everything is mobile. Those made my work easy." He was gloating, peeling back the layers of his psychological warfare with sickening pride.

"Shit, that's how you did that." The elaborate deception, the calculated cruelty—it was vintage Eva.

"Okay, let's wait and see about your gift, my love." The call ended, leaving behind a silence far more deafening than his voice.-----Guess what? Again, a torrent of questions ran through my mind, each one a fresh torrent of anxiety. The casual threat to Sarah, followed by the mock-benevolence of "leaving her," felt like a classic Eva mind game. I couldn't afford to take a chance. Not after everything.

I didn't waste a second. I ran out of the office and drove straight to Sarah's apartment, my heart hammering against my ribs with every mile. I burst into her living room, scanning every corner, prepared for the worst. Yes, she was there. She was fine. Safe. The relief was immediate, potent, and overwhelming, but she was utterly shocked when she saw me there, looking like a madman who had just run a marathon.

"John, what are you doing?" she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

"We have to move. Now." My tone brooked no argument. I didn't want him to ever find her again. I moved her elsewhere with the help of my trusted friend, who specialised in discrete logistics. I sat her down and explained the whole terrifying, surreal situation—the phone call, the threat, the history of the case, the absolute necessity of disappearing for a while. To my surprise and gratitude, she took it all in, processing the unbelievable narrative of her life suddenly being a piece in a psychopath's game. And she was okay with everything I said, nodding solemnly and agreeing to remain in hiding.-----

Chapter 7: The Birthday Gift

@7 O'clock: The Birthday Gift

Back at the station, a tense calm had settled in, but it was the calm before a storm I knew was coming. Exactly at seven, I switched on the old TV in my office, trying to distract myself. The first thing that appeared on the screen sent a shockwave through me: the massive, imposing logo of the NISHAAN case. I didn't understand what was happening. Was this a new lead? A public announcement?

Then, the news anchor's voice cut in, grave and serious. They played a video clip of a masked man—the same mask from the threats—staring directly into the camera.

"Happy birthday, my love," the masked figure said, his voice digitally altered but recognizable as the one who called himself 'Eva.'

The news that followed was an international sensation. The hacker, who the news was now calling 'Nishaan,' had uploaded a staggering 52 unreleased movies as torrents on a newly created website. These weren't just low-budget indies. Some were director's cuts, raw and unfinished. Some weren't even fully edited. Most shockingly, several of them had monstrously high budgets (around 1000 CR, an astronomical sum in Indian cinema), and a handful belonged to major Hollywood studios.

The sheer audacity was breathtaking. The website's name? Nishaan, our very own case name. And the motive, announced in a caption overlaid on the video: "This was a birthday gift to my dear love, John Victor."

That was it. That was my gift on my 30th birthday. A catastrophe of global proportions, delivered with a twisted declaration of affection.

The very next minute, the station lobby was pandemonium. I saw what felt like 100 producers—suit-clad, furious, terrified men—descending on my station. All of them were there to complain about piracy, about a financial bloodbath caused by one man's obsession with me. The media was already outside, a ravenous crowd of cameras and microphones.

The pressure immediately skyrocketed. This wasn't a local case anymore; it was an international incident. The financial and legal ramifications were colossal. The case got high media attention, drawing scrutiny from government agencies and international law enforcement. Private investigations were immediately initiated by every major studio and production house affected. The producers collectively hired a

massive team of renowned hackers, a veritable digital army, with one goal: find the perpetrator.

The fallout was swift and devastating. In the weeks that followed, some of the 52 movies on the list were rushed to release on OTT platforms to salvage what little money they could, but they got nothing. The damage was done; the market was saturated with free, high-quality copies. OTT platforms, seeing the public appetite sated, offered miserably low prices to take the movies, crippling their expected revenue. Most of the planned shootings for new projects shut down across the industry. Producers were paralyzed, too afraid of another Nishaan attack to commit capital. Consequently, countless junior actors, technicians, and crew members suddenly found themselves unemployed, adding a social dimension to the crisis. All the while, the media was unrelenting, placing immense pressure on the police department to make an arrest.

We, too, started our investigation, digging into the digital dirt. The stakes were astronomical, and failure was not an option.

I gathered my folks and, in a strained voice, laid out the new action plan, the tone in the room heavy with the knowledge that we were now fighting a phantom capable of bringing down an entire industry.

I ordered them:

"I want a comprehensive list of every hacker who tried to penetrate these movie databases, looking for anyone who might have failed but paved the way for 'Nishaan.'"

"I want every torrent link banned. Ask your friends, family, and every contact you have to file official complaints on these torrents en masse to get them removed and buried."

"I want the list of the 52 pirated movies and their producers, along with the precise financial shares of each producer in the whole budget. We need to understand the true cost of this attack."

"And the most critical question: How did this website reach so many people in such a short time? A website doesn't go viral globally in minutes without help."

"I want every detail about that Nishaan website—its hosting, its server, how it managed to reach every single person, and an estimate of how many people

downloaded movies from it. Finally, I need to know: which specific computer was used to upload the final files?"

"Internet service provider? Where was the first upload and download? The cell tower data for every device active in the vicinity of the hack, even those turned off, if possible. I need every minute detail about this latest attack—specifically the piracy, but let's not forget the core murder cases. Cross-reference the timeline of the murder victims' last known digital activity with the piracy date. Find any and all common digital threads. Everything. Now."-----I walked away from the briefing room, the demand for information still echoing in my mind. I retreated to my office, a dark sanctuary I'd come to inhabit since taking on this nightmare. I slumped into my worn leather chair and stared out at the city lights, the urban sprawl an unsettling contrast to the mess in my head.

He made a mess. Ken. The perpetrator. The antagonist. The genius. First, a series of baffling, meticulously planned murders. Then, a globally coordinated movie piracy scheme executed with effortless, almost arrogant, precision. What will he do next? If he escalates again, if he drags another major crime into this web, it won't just be a difficult case; it will be a public disaster, a complete humiliation for the department, and a personal hell for me.

He is utterly unpredictable. A ghost in the machine. He's using a staggering intellect—a mind that could genuinely solve global challenges or revolutionize technology—purely for sport, for a destructive game of cat and mouse with the law. He could be the world's richest person, a legitimate titan. Instead, he chose this path of chaos. Why? What is the fundamental drive? Is it ego, a perverse sense of justice, or just sheer, unadulterated boredom?

And what is his next move? The silence is as deafening as his actions. Will he call me again? I'm almost certain of it. He enjoys the connection, the subtle communication.

Then there's that bizarre, almost throwaway mention of a "crush on Eva." Eva was the first murder victim's fiancée. Is he genuinely infatuated? Is he gay, or what? Or is that just another layer of misdirection, a mind-game designed to make me question everything? It's a pointless rabbit hole, I know. And I'm even more certain of this: for now, we won't learn anything substantial about the core mechanics of the piracy. The hack was a clean slate, a digital illusion.-----My thoughts were broken by a sharp, polite knock-knock-knock on the solid oak door.

Chapter 8: A New Partner

"Come in," I called out, my voice sounding more tired than I intended.

The door opened, and a young man in a crisp suit, holding a simple portfolio, stepped into the room. He had the earnest, slightly overwhelmed look of someone new to the deep end.

"Hello, sir. This is Robin. The department head appointed me as your assistant. I was told to report directly to you."

A moment of genuine relief washed over me. "Hi, Robin. It's nice to have you here. Please, come share my headache. I've got enough for two."

Robin offered a tentative smile as he approached my desk. "It's nice to meet you too, sir. I know... I know you had wanted to solve this case individually. But the Head Sir was insistent. He wants me to be with you for... well, 'reasons of strategic support,' was the phrase he used."

I waved a hand dismissively. "Yeah, I know the official line. And honestly, I want a partner now. The case has metastasized. It's no longer a single investigation; it's a criminal contagion interfering with multiple active cases—murders, large-scale international piracy, and unethical hacking that touches every secure network we have. I genuinely need a partner, Robin. Seriously. So don't feel like you're being forced upon me. It's truly nice to have you here. I'm even tired of thinking on my own."

The tension in Robin's shoulders visibly eased. "Thank you, sir. That actually made me much more comfortable with this assignment."

"Yeah, it's okay. And by the way... I liked your name. 'Robin.'"

He brightened, puffing out his chest a little. "Oh, are you a Robin Hood fan, sir?"

I chuckled, a rare, dry sound in the silent office. "No. I'm a Batman fan."

"Oh, okay," he said, accepting the slight deflation. "So, sir, what's your immediate next step in this case? What can I start on?"

"I've ordered our tech folks to collect some deep-dive information. The full digital footprint of the piracy operation, ISP logs, and everything else I just rattled off. We

will get the preliminary data by tomorrow morning, but I'm sure it won't help us crack the case. It'll be static. Right now, I'm waiting for a different kind of data."

"Whose call, sir?"

"Ken's call," I said, a grim certainty in my voice. "He will call me for sure. Not to surrender, but to give me some clue. A riddle."

"Why would he do that, sir? Why give away his advantage?"

"Because he loves to challenge. He loves the game. He's called me twice already and given me so many clues—fragments of code, strange coordinates, esoteric references. The problem is, I haven't been in the right position to decode them. They slip through my fingers."

"Can I watch them, sir?" Robin asked eagerly, already anticipating the work.

"You have to listen to them. They're recordings of the intercepted calls. I will forward both call recordings to your personal number tonight. Please go through every second of them. Listen for cadence, tone, pauses, background noise. Maybe your fresh perspective will pick up something I've missed."

"I will, sir. Absolutely. Sir... I wanted to ask you something."

I leaned back, inviting him to continue. "What, Robin?"

He hesitated, then plunged in. "Can I stay at your place as a paying guest? It would make working together much easier."

I considered it for a moment. The idea of constant collaboration, of having a sounding board twenty-four hours a day, was incredibly appealing. "Yeah, for sure. We can discuss and share headaches about this case all day, all night, if we have to."

"Sir, seriously, can I move in? Tonight?"

I smiled. "Yeah, for sure. Get your luggage. We can go now. I want to take a rest that isn't just a crash at my desk."

"Okay, sir. In five minutes, I will be in the black department jeep waiting for you at the main gate."

"That's my boy. Call me when you get there."

"Okay, sir." Robin nodded sharply and quickly left the room.

After Robin left, the silence settled back in, but it was different this time. I didn't get up to leave immediately. I simply slumped in my chair, shut my eyes, and for the first time since taking this case up, I felt light. Not free, but lighter. I had a partner.-----

Chapter 9: Domestic Shadows

At my residence...

The old house, usually silent and a little sterile, had a new energy. I tossed my coat onto the hall table. "Robin, make yourself comfortable. I'll freshen up and get the recordings sent over to you. I've shown you to the guest room—it's yours for as long as you need it."

"Okay, sir. Thank you," he replied, already pulling out his laptop, ready to work.

I walked toward the shower, the weight of the day starting to lift. The hunt was still on, but now, I wasn't hunting alone.

Ten minutes. That's all the time it took for the sudden, awkward silence to pass. When I re-entered the main hall, there was Robin, utterly at ease, sprawled on my couch, munching thoughtfully on a handful of biscuits he must have found somewhere. The scene itself—this stranger making himself so comfortably at home—should have been alarming, yet it was... domestic.

A familiar, nagging voice started up in my mind, the voice of the hardened, cynical detective. Why did I allow this? Why the impulsive decision to let a man I'd just met, a witness in a high-stakes case, take up residence under my roof? Was it sheer fatigue? Loneliness? A momentary lapse in judgment? I needed answers, not just about the case, but about this guy, Robin, who had so effortlessly inserted himself into my life. The time for polite formality was over.

"Hey Robin," I began, making sure my tone was casual but firm, dropping into the armchair opposite him. "Are you okay with this place? The guest room?"

He looked up from the biscuit tin, his expression genuinely cheerful. "Yes, sir, it feels like home."

"Yeah, good." I nodded, trying to ignore the small, irrational warmth that statement gave me. "Where are you from? And about your parents?" Time to peel back the layers.

"Sir, I'm from Calcutta," he replied immediately, without a hint of hesitation, a good sign. "And my parents live there. They both worked in defense."

That stopped me. “Defence? What kind of defense?” I pressed, leaning forward. Most people would say 'government' or 'private sector.' 'Defense' was specific.

Robin’s chest puffed up just a fraction, a spark of pride in his eyes. “My father is an army man, a Colonel in the Corps of Engineers. And my mother,” he paused, a slight smile touching his lips, “is a scientist. She designs missile guidance systems for DRDO.”

“Woohoo, cool,” I whistled softly, genuinely impressed. That was a serious background, not the profile of a random hitchhiker. It spoke of discipline, intelligence, and a certain kind of patriotic duty. Perhaps my impulsive decision wasn't so crazy after all. A new, more fundamental question popped into my mind. “Do you know how to cook?”

“Yes, sir. You want me to cook something?” he asked, already halfway off the couch.

I sighed, rubbing my temples. The stress and lack of sleep had caught up with me, and the thought of trying to rustle up something edible was exhausting. “Yeah, bro. I’m starving; do something. I need to grab a bite and then I’m going to sleep. I think I finally have enough adrenaline out of my system.”

“Okay, sir,” he said, heading toward the kitchen with an assured stride. “I actually bought fish on the way, figured you might not have much in the fridge. I will cook it.”

“You bought a fish! Awesome.” A legitimate, audible laugh escaped me. “And I think I slept well in the Jeep too, probably the best rest I’ve had in days.”

Robin chuckled, a genuine, warm sound. “Yeah, sir. It was a good ride.” We shared a moment of easy, reciprocal laughter—a moment that broke through the professional formality and the case-related tension.-----Robin was more than good; he was terrific. The kitchen, which I usually avoided, suddenly became a hub of aromatic activity. He prepared a simple yet magnificent Bengali-style fish curry with steamed rice. It was the kind of meal that felt restorative, deeply satisfying, and completely out of place in my lonely, Spartan apartment.

Sitting across from him, eating this incredible dinner, a heavy realization settled over me. I’m an orphan. I only ever had one sister, and she died ten years ago. For a decade, I’ve navigated the world alone. Even with Sarah, my partner and sometimes-confidante, there’s always a wall, a professional distance, a sense of incompleteness.

But Robin... he was different. He was smart, quick-witted, disciplined, and he cooks. The greatest combination. He filled a silence I hadn't even realized was deafening. Suddenly, he wasn't just a witness or a houseguest; he was like a new sibling, a sudden, unexpected fixture that made my life feel less hollow.

That night, I slept profoundly, the kind of deep, dreamless rest that only comes after true mental and physical exhaustion, and the genuine comfort of companionship. Yet, the oblivion was only temporary. I still have this case to solve. The thought was the last one before sleep claimed me, and the first one upon waking.-----The Next Morning...

I woke up, stretched out the lingering stiffness, and entered the main living area. Habit dictated I check on my morning routine first, but my attention immediately fixed on the hall.

Robin was already there, settled on my couch again, looking perfectly composed. He was sipping a mug of something dark and fragrant. It was disconcerting—and oddly comforting—to find him there, a sentinel of domestic order.

“Hey, good morning, Robin.” I tried to sound cheerful. “Is everything okay in the guest room?”

“Yes, sir, everything is fine. The bed was very comfortable.” He held up his mug. “Sir, do you want a coffee?”

The question was so simple, so thoughtful, that I hesitated. When was the last time someone had offered me a coffee in my own home? “Yes, please. I would love to have a coffee.”

Robin went to the kitchen and returned seconds later with a mug. I took a sip. Seriously, that was the first truly good coffee I had ever had. Not the bitter sludge I usually brewed. Man, he had magical hands.

I finished my coffee, completed my workout, and went to get ready for the office. While I was showering and dressing, the aroma of cooking wafted down the hall. He was already preparing breakfast, and I suspected, a packed lunch.

At first, I had just thought he was good—polite, competent, and helpful. But now, seeing the meticulous planning, the effortless maintenance of a domestic routine, a new, slightly uncomfortable thought surfaced. He is almost too... refined. Too attentive to detail. Too good at this. I immediately pushed the thought away. I didn't want to miss this. I didn't want to say anything that might cause him to stop.

I shook my head, forcing the thought away. *No, no, no, stop thinking about that. Focus on the case.*

As I was midway through the first glorious bite, Robin stood a little straighter, his expression shifting from a casual host to a focused assistant.

"Sir, we have all the details you asked our field team for yesterday regarding the producer's list," he announced, his voice crisp and professional.

I put down my fork, the breakfast suddenly forgotten. "Okay, shoot!"

"Sir, everything about the general producer's list is normal. Standard industry contacts. However, there is something seriously wrong with the digital file itself—either the file was hacked after it was uploaded, or the computer used to upload and download it was compromised."

"What's wrong?" I demanded, the adrenaline returning.

Robin's eyes held a grave intensity as he delivered the punchline, the realization chilling me far more than the coffee had warmed me.

"That is your computer, sir," he stated, his voice low and firm. "The one you are currently using to view all of the case details."

"Okay, I thought it would be me." The dry resignation in my voice was a mask for the knot tightening in my stomach.

"What, sir? Seriously, you already knew this," Robin stammered, his eyes wide with a mix of shock and confusion. The "this" he referred to was the identity of the person behind the mass-piracy of the blockbuster movie, Nishaan P1: VICTOR, a case that was quickly spiraling into a personal nightmare.

"I don't know this," I clarified, running a hand through my hair. "But I kind of guessed it already. And I already told you this information is not going to help us. The identity is a diversion. What we need to focus on is the mechanism. What about spreading? How do torrent links get this much reach? This isn't just a handful of downloads; it's a global distribution network."

Robin swallowed hard, the new revelation clearly hitting him harder than the first. "Sir, it's also you. He used your personal number, your primary email, and all your other social media accounts to generate and widely share the torrent links. That's why the reach is so massive and instantaneous. Everyone trusts the source."

A humorless laugh escaped me. "Seriously. He is crazy, and utterly obsessed. Anything else?"

"Yeah, sir, that's what we got," Robin confirmed, shaking his head in disbelief. "But sir, you look so cool. You are not at all surprised. I freaked out when I saw your name on the list, linked to the initial uploads."

"I am used to it," I admitted, the initial surprise having long since given way to grim acceptance. "He has been giving similar, escalating surprises from the beginning of this investigation. The man operates on a level of theatricality that is exhausting."

Robin's next words, however, stripped away my composure. "But, sir, the department filed a case against you. They are not treating this as an identity theft or a hack. They are officially thinking that you are doing it and using some random guy's name—the initial suspect—to cover your tracks, framing him as the real culprit in a twisted act of vigilante justice."

"Seriously, this freaks me out now," I muttered, the gravity of the situation finally sinking its teeth in. "I'm trying to solve a high-profile piracy case, and now I've gotten myself embroiled in a criminal case as the prime suspect. And the worst part? There is no immediate, easy way to prove it wrong. All the digital breadcrumbs lead right back to my accounts."

"But, sir, you can claim it as a systematic, targeted hacking," Robin suggested, his voice now regaining its practical, professional tone. "We have the perfect defense. File a comprehensive report with all the accounts and data breached. Say that a large-scale file with all your personal accounts has been hacked. That way, you can get an edge out of it. It buys us time and shifts the focus back to the crime itself."

The logic was sound. It was the only viable path forward. "Yeah, that's a cool, quick-thinking idea, Robin. Call the department's front desk right now and officially file a report of identity theft and systematic account hacking. Make sure they log it with a priority reference number. I will also immediately call my friend in Cybercrime—Inspector Desai—and ask him to file a parallel case with their department. A two-pronged approach is better."

"Okay, sir, on with it," Robin said, already pulling out his phone and stepping away to make the call.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself for the chaos that lay ahead. "Then, we headed to the main office building."

The scene was pure pandemonium. There was a tight, angry group of producers from the film studio waiting for me—their faces a mask of fury and betrayal. I think they want to kill me, I mused darkly. And surrounding them was a massive bunch of ravenous media people, their cameras flashing like strobe lights. They had clearly had a good day; they got an explosive, high-ranking police officer accused of the very crime he was investigating. A sensational item to roast for the evening news.

Even my own commanding officer, Superintendent Sharma, was waiting for me, standing rigid in the doorway of my small, glass-walled office.

"Good morning, sir," Robin and I said in unison, a tired, practiced professionalism in our voices.

Sharma nodded curtly. "Yeah, good morning, folks. What is going on there, John? I need a clear explanation, and I need it now. This is a PR disaster for the department."

"Sir, I was physically here at the police station—working—when that movie got officially released and pirated," I stated, keeping my voice calm and measured. "In my defense, he is just trying to trap me, to neutralize my investigation. It's a classic misdirection. I have already instructed Robin to file an official complaint of identity theft and hacking."

Sharma, who had known me for years, looked deep into my eyes. "John, I know you well enough to know you wouldn't do this. But the evidence is overwhelming, and optics are everything right now. The integrity of the investigation is compromised. We want you to be under our observation for the next 48 hours. No access to external communication, no leaving the station."

"Okay, sir. That is completely fair," I conceded. I understood. It was damage control. "Robin, one last thing for me before I am effectively confined."

"Yeah, sir, what do you want me to do?"

"I want an exhaustive list of every single complaint filed under the keywords 'hacking' or 'online harassment' in our department's records dating back to at least a year. And I want the same from the Cybercrime department. I already talked with my friend, Inspector Desai, about this; he'll have the file ready. Just go there, collect the physical files, and have them digitized and sent to my secure internal mail. I will be waiting in the investigation room."

"Okay, sir," Robin responded, snapping to attention. He turned and left the room immediately.

I looked at Sharma. "Sir, I will voluntarily be in the investigation room for the next 48 hours. I will not compromise the department or this case. Is that okay, sir?"

"Yes, that will do. John, but be careful. He is actively and deliberately targeting you. This isn't random."

"I know," I said softly, the weight of the realization pressing down on me. I nodded once and then left, walking directly to the secure, internal investigation room.

After some time—what felt like an eternity—Robin was back, not just with digital files, but with stacks of paper documents piled high on a trolley. "Sir, here are the documents I asked for. There are literally hundreds of open and closed cases."

This was the first significant, independent action I'd taken in this entire case without waiting for the culprit's next move. I was finally operating on my own hypothesis. I followed my gut: If he meticulously hacked my computer and accounts, then he will have tried to hack others also.

I felt a surge of hope. Maybe that will give me a lead. The perpetrator told me he was a "professional," operating with extreme precision. I needed to see if he had a pattern, a trail of discarded attempts, before he landed the big hit on the film studio. Maybe he did something similar before September 23, 2025—the date the investigation began. I wanted to filter them all, looking for the tell-tale signature of his method. Robin had already sent me lots of files and tons of PDFs via secure internal mail, and I was ready to dive in. The 48-hour clock had started, and I intended to use every second.

The clock was ticking, a relentless metronome counting down my limited window. "It's okay," I muttered, pacing the length of my small office. "I have 48 hours. I can sort it out easily." I'd already set the groundwork, asking Robin to organize the mountain of digital and physical evidence using a specific set of labels. He'd delivered, compiling everything on time. My initial, fruitless deep dive had been through the paper files—zero leads. Nothing.

Now, I was onto the digital realm. I checked the mail Robin had sent, his neatly labeled folders laid out before me. As I clicked through the labels, one immediately snagged my attention: "College Website Hacked - Student Files Erased." The label detailed an incident where a college website was compromised, and the entire academic year's worth of student records was maliciously wiped clean. This felt too deliberate, too focused to be a random attack. I immediately dispatched Robin to the

college to investigate, seeking more information on the scope and target of the breach.

Simultaneously, my attention was drawn to a disturbing collection of digital complaints—the "unknown complaints." These were emails sent without any identifying sender information, yet they shared a chilling common thread. The majority described a single perpetrator who had hacked their private data and was using it for blackmail and intimidation. The demands were terrifyingly varied, ranging from kidnapping threats and extortion for money and properties, to coercing scientists into performing unspecified work. The victims were terrified and cryptic, refusing to detail the "work" demanded of the scientists. A powerful, gut-wrenching feeling solidified in my mind: this was Ken's former enterprise. This was the dark business he ran before the current, high-profile operation.

"What did he use those scientists for?" I wondered aloud, the questions multiplying in the quiet room. "Were they biological specialists? Mechanical engineers? What kind of terrifying project required that level of expertise?" The timestamp on the complaints was a year old. Did this mean the project was already completed? Or were these just red herring complaints designed to mislead? The familiar paranoia began to creep in. "What if this is driving me insane?" I rubbed my temples, trying to compartmentalize the chaos. All the unknown complaints pointed toward one person—Ken. Was he truly the ghost behind all this? And if so, what stopped him from starting all of it again? A recurrence would elevate this case from a high-stakes investigation to an outright national security threat.

A part of me, a cynical, weary part, suggested an alternative. "Sometimes I feel that he is just having his regular fun, and suddenly we get into it and give him popularity." He lacked a clear motive or pattern; his actions seemed purely for the chaotic thrill of it. He was using my name, Victor's name, as a perverse badge of honor, perhaps believing it would simply amplify his sick game.-----

Chapter 10: The Past

ROBIN @ COLLEGE: A LONE WOLF'S SHADOW

Robin arrived at the designated college and immediately sought out the head of the institution regarding the ancient complaint. He didn't waste time, asking the head to assemble all staff who taught during the academic years spanning 2016 to 2019—the timeframe of the deleted files.

The head complied, and a small group of faculty members were gathered. Robin, methodical and observant, began the process of creating a suspect list. He interviewed each lecturer individually, his questions sharp and precise. It didn't take long for the first bombshell to drop. Through careful questioning, he discovered a crucial, astounding fact: Ken had attended the very same college during the exact academic year whose records had been deleted.

"I was shocked, seriously," I thought, reading Robin's subsequent call summary. My instinct had been right; the unknown complaints and the college hack were connected, forming a timeline of Ken's dark development. I told Robin to press on—his most immediate and crucial task was to procure a photograph of Ken, any photograph.

Robin returned to the staff, pressing them for details about their former student. One of the lecturers, clearly the most effusive, started the narrative: "Sir, he is a very bright student. He graduated with 98 percent. He is good at hacking. He studied here residentially with a government scholarship. He is the favorite student of every lecturer in the CSE department."

"Do any of you have his photographs?" Robin asked, the critical question.

A chorus of negative responses filled the room. "No," all the lecturers replied in unison.

Robin's patience frayed. "What? You people just said he was a topper, a brilliant student, and a favorite of every lecturer."

"Yes, sir, but he didn't come to any college functions. He doesn't like taking photos," another explained. "We had only one picture of him."

"What? You have one!" Robin insisted, his voice rising with urgency.

"Sir, I said we had one. That's his passport-size photo for the scholarship, hall tickets, and hostel purposes, etc."

"What happened to all of them?"

The lecturer looked down. "He took every photo of himself after he completed his graduation. The picture on the website got missed for one year, but eventually, that was gone too."

"Maybe his batch mates or friends have his pictures..." Robin offered, grasping for any thread.

The response was immediate and chilling. "No way, sir; he is a loner, a Lonewolf. He never mixed with anyone in this college. Every guy in the hostel called him a psycho. Maybe that hurt him very much."

Defeated for the moment, Robin gave the head his contact number. "Okay, if you've got anything, let me know."

As he stood to leave, Robin delivered a final, pointed message to the assembled staff: "And your favorite student is the only suspect in Nishaan's case. He is not a lone wolf. He is a werewolf. He is hunting people for fun. Please help us if you know anything about him."-----THE BACKYARD CONFESSION

Robin left the college and walked across the street, stopping at a small tea shop to collect his thoughts and grab a much-needed beverage. He'd just ordered his tea when his phone buzzed. He answered immediately; the caller ID showed an internal college number. It was one of the staff members he had just interviewed.

The voice on the other end was low, urgent, and tinged with fear. "If you want the truth, meet me at the college backyard," the staff member whispered before hanging up.

Tea forgotten, Robin sprinted back toward the college grounds. Behind the main building, near a cluster of neglected storage sheds, a man was waiting for him.

"Hello, sir, I'm Professor Stewart. I teach an ethical hacking course at this college," the man introduced himself, his eyes darting nervously toward the main building.

"Okay. So, what do you want to say?" Robin demanded, his investigator's intensity back in full force.

Professor Stewart exhaled a shaky breath. "I wanted to tell you before, but every lecturer in that room is lying about Ken. After you left the room, I asked everyone. Why are they doing it? Ken made them do it. He hacked their data and intimidated them to talk like that..."

The professor continued, his confession tumbling out. "Ken is intelligent; I agree. But he is no brilliant student. Then also, he intimidated lecturers for marks. He is a true psycho. But he is good at hacking. I'm the one teaching him about hacking stuff. My subject was an extra subject. Students can choose the subject of their interest. One day I was very sad because no one took my subject. Then Ken came to me and took up this subject. He is the only one who attended my classes."

The story took a personal turn. "Then I resigned from my job. The college made me do it because there was less strength in my class. Even though Ken came to my house and learned all the subjects, he also got me a job."

Professor Stewart was the source, the genuine, uncorrupted link to Ken's formative years, a man whose relationship with the suspect was far more complex than a simple teacher-student dynamic. Ken didn't just learn from him; he used him, valued him, and even helped him—a terrifying indication of his manipulative genius and capacity for twisted loyalty. The "Lone Wolf" façade was a lie; Ken was a puppet master, controlling the narrative even years after leaving the campus.

Then one day, amidst a strained silence, he finally disclosed the full extent of his transgressions. He detailed how he acquired all his impressive academic marks—not through diligence, but through calculated digital intrusion, hacking into the personal devices and accounts of his lectures. For the high-stakes board examinations, his ambition escalated; he compromised the central server, illicitly altering his official mark sheets to reflect a fabricated success. The darkness in his actions didn't stop at academic fraud. He confessed, with unsettling calm, to using his hacking skills to manipulate and intimidate several individuals in the student hostel, a campaign of digital harassment that tragically culminated in them committing suicide.

He laid out this horrific catalogue of actions before me, and I could only manage to ask, "Why?" His response, delivered with a chilling casualness that remains etched in my memory, was simply, "just for fun." It was at that moment I fully comprehended the true, terrifying nature of his psyche: he was a genuine, unadulterated psycho.

Remarkably, despite his history of digital predation, he never once attempted to intimidate or compromise me by hacking my personal belongings or data.

"No, sir," I clarified, my voice steady. "Actually, I've always been something of a loner. Ken only reached out to me that single time after our graduation, and he hasn't tried to contact me since. As for the hacking concern? I, too, am a capable hacker, and I am adept at safeguarding my own digital perimeter. But truthfully, he never once attempted to breach my security."

"Thank you, sir," I concluded, the interview complete.

Soon after, Detective Robin returned to the office. He meticulously recounted every piece of information he had gathered. His findings confirmed my growing suspicion: all the previously dismissed, seemingly unconnected, and anonymous complaints were fundamentally centered on Ken. He was the common denominator, the one orchestrating the entire campaign of digital intimidation and manipulation that drove people to such desperate acts.

I immediately instructed Robin to formally consolidate all these complaints and integrate them into the existing "Nishaan" case file. A wave of calculated relief washed over me. "I believe the situation is finally coming under my control, Robin," I stated, feeling a distinct shift in the momentum of the investigation.

"Robin, you can take off now," I said, handing him the keys to the station's armory lock-up, a formality. "But I must caution you, Robin: he is known to occasionally visit my residence. He is extraordinarily brutal. Alternatively, you're welcome to stay here at the office tonight, with the rest of our people. There's safety in numbers."

"But, sir, I have some essential work I need to attend to back at the house," Robin replied, visibly hesitant. "So, I will be heading out."

"Okay, but promise me you'll be careful," I urged, a knot forming in my stomach.

"Yes, sir," he confirmed. Robin then exited the investigation room, and I watched him go, a profound sense of unease settling over me.

Moments later, the silence was shattered by the insistent ring of my phone.-----

Chapter 11: The Massacre

The 3rd Call

I answered, my voice deliberately warm. "Hello, my love. I'm truly sorry; I've been utterly swamped with some pressing work here. That's why I didn't get a chance to call you yesterday. How are you holding up?"

"Hey, Ken," the voice on the other end, Sarah, sounded strained, almost desperate. "God, I missed you, man. Let's just meet. Now."

"No, no, no, my love," Ken's voice was a silky, mocking refusal. "Not so soon. Tell me, how was the birthday present I sent you?"

"Good, Ken. Very good," she spat out the words. "It gifted me two days of absolute, unrelenting panic. Some of the producers are literally trying to kill me. What is it that you truly want, Ken? Do you actually want me to die? Is that what it will take for you to stop all these... things?"

His tone shifted, a calculated seriousness entering his voice. "Yes and no. I want to challenge you. I know, deep down, you feel a profound guilt about all these pirated movies that have ruined careers. That's precisely why I am currently transferring money—the full amount of their initial profits—to all the affected producers..."

Sarah gasped. "What? How are you even doing that?"

"Simply put," he explained, savoring the shock, "I'm transferring it directly from the accounts of the people who downloaded the movies... their victims, essentially."

"What? Are you actively trying to make a complete mess for me now? This isn't a challenge, Ken! This is just outright torture!"

"I think," Ken purred, "I've already made the mess. And I don't torture you, my love. I'm simply expressing my love for you."

"What is the mess you've made?" she demanded.

"I've already sent the money to the producers," he admitted. "I managed to scrape together the whole budget amount from hundreds of people's accounts. But it wasn't enough to cover the profits, too. So, naturally, I just hacked into a government bank database and transferred the outstanding funds from there."

"Seriously, what in God's name? Why are you escalating this so wildly? What is your actual problem, Ken?"

"I don't have any problems, Sarah," he replied, his voice dangerously light. "I just require some fun."

"Okay, you want some fun," I interjected, stepping out of the shadows, my voice hard and challenging. "You remember your college days. You remember your professors. Do you remember Stewart? I know everything about you now, Ken. And I know your current plan."

There was a pause, a moment of profound silence on the line. Then Ken laughed—a short, sharp, terrifying sound. "Robin, ah! Your new friend and roommate got everything for you, didn't he? He is a nice guy, indeed. But right now, he is completely alone at your house. What if I just decide to kill him?"

"No, Ken," I roared into the phone, the rage barely contained. "Don't you dare touch him!"

"I have some other work I need to attend to first," he said, the threat still hanging heavy in the air. "So I will postpone his murder. And you, Detective, be ready to finally meet me."

With that final, chilling promise, he ended the call. My first, frantic action was to immediately call Robin, ordering him to abandon his work and return to the station office right now. I simultaneously contacted Sarah, who thankfully confirmed she was safe, though deeply shaken.

Only a short while later, Robin arrived at the office. He came to the investigation room door and knocked. I confirmed his identity through the sound of his voice, but something was profoundly wrong. I could hear him shivering, his breathing ragged and labored. I threw the door open. His shirt was soaked, stained dark with blood. I demanded to know what had happened. He didn't speak. Instead, he showed me the horror: the full, unspeakable consequence of Ken's actions. Ken had been at the station, killing everyone in my office—a mass murder executed silently, while I sat obliviously in the insulated investigation room. The realization that I had been on the phone with him as he carried this out was a sickening blow.

"Robin, inform the control room immediately," I choked out, the gravity of the situation crushing me.

I checked the CCTV footage. The sight confirmed my worst fear: Ken was there, his long hair falling from beneath a mask. He carried a pistol fitted with a silencer, moving with a cold, efficient detachment. He shot everyone. And as he committed this atrocity, the time stamp showed he was simultaneously engaged in the phone call with me.

The Nishaan case had just exploded. Now, it wasn't just about cybercrime and manipulation; it included massive bank fraud and the mass murder of police officers on duty. The media firestorm, I knew, was going to absolutely consume us. The air in John's sparsely decorated apartment was thick with a frustrated silence. He stood before his reflection, the harsh fluorescent light of the bathroom magnifying the tight lines of anger around his eyes.

"Ken, I will kill you the second I see you." The words were a low, guttural promise spoken only to the glass.

He had barely sat down, the adrenaline still buzzing from the recent skirmish and the subsequent, frantic operation to secure a new line of communication, when his old phone vibrated on the coffee table. A text message, simple and chillingly specific:

"I will kiss you the second I meet you."

A bolt of icy realization shot through him, instantly banishing the anger and replacing it with a cold, professional dread.

I was shocked when I got that text message. The casual intimacy of the threat—the perversion of his own inner monologue—was Ken's signature taunt. He wasn't just near; he was in.

Yeah seriously. I just realized he is listening to everything I say. He is using my phone's microphone for that. The depth of Ken's infiltration was staggering. It wasn't merely tracking; it was eavesdropping on his unguarded thoughts, turning his own mind into a weapon against him.

"Too smart, Ken. Too smart." The acknowledgement was grim, but it spurred him into action.

He had already called Robin and tasked him with procuring the new mobile—a satellite phone. The choice was deliberate and non-negotiable. Satellite phones do not use SIM cards. Instead, all operations are performed using a dynamic IP address, a fundamental difference in architecture that made them exponentially harder to hack or track using conventional cellular network methods. He had taken

painstaking steps to hide that information from his compromised mobile. The purchase was a covert operation in itself. They took that phone with a fake address and details, creating a ghost identity for the transaction. John gave that number to Robin only. To compound the security, even Robin also bought a new mobile, following the same extreme security protocol. They completed all this in one hour, a lightning-fast response that spoke to their desperation, and immediately informed the control center about the situation.

Chapter 12: The Betrayal

Before he could even process the successful acquisition of the new secure line, his higher officer, Commander Davies, a man whose patience was legendary but whose authority was absolute, again came to my office.

John launched into his report, fueled by a mixture of outrage and professional urgency. "Sir, he made a big mistake. He came to our office and killed our folks." The casualties were a rallying cry. "Sir, I need a mass search warrant. So I can search everywhere in the city. Give me all the powers, sir, and I will catch him within one week." John wasn't asking; he was demanding the tools he needed to end this.

Commander Davies' face, usually stern but reassuring, was a mask of disappointment. He sat down slowly, resting his hands on the polished mahogany desk.

"John, you're dismissed."

The two words hung in the air, heavier than any indictment.

"What? Why sir?" John stammered, his mind racing through a list of possible operational errors, but finding none that warranted this.

"You used fake educational and medical certificates to join the department." Davies didn't raise his voice, which only made the accusation more devastating. "In the last 24 hours, the department held an inquiry into your background and educational life. You never went to any college. You bought all the degree certificates. You cheated on medical certificates." Davies looked him in the eye, the judgment clear. "You have sinned, John. The only thing I can promise you is that we will not release any of this information to the media. John, you may leave now. From now on, Robin will take the case."

The blood drained from John's face. The secret he had lived with for years, the foundation of his entire professional life, had been obliterated in less than a minute. "Ok, sir, I will leave now." His voice was a flat monotone of defeat.

"John, you can claim it as a false statement within 3 months if you have proper certificates and proof. You can request a department for another inquiry..." Davies offered a cold sliver of hope, a procedural loophole more than a lifeline.

"Yeah, sir, I will do that." It was a lie, a final deference to the chain of command. He knew there was no proof to be found.-----After 1 hour...,

Robin and John met at a coffeehouse far from town, chosen precisely for its anonymity and distance from any surveillance. They left their phones and all their gadgets at the station, sanitizing themselves of any trace of Ken's influence. They only took their new satellite phones with them, the new, secure lifeline resting in John's jacket pocket. Robin was visibly sad about my dismissal, the loyalty in his eyes unwavering. He pulled John aside and spoke in a low voice. "Sir, I only follow your orders in this case. They can put me in charge, but I answer to you."

A flicker of his old self returned. "Yeah, Robin, I want the same thing. You have to follow my orders from now on. We are operating outside the system, but we will catch him."

"I will, sir." Robin's loyalty was immediate, but his professional focus quickly returned. "First, you have to prove that all your certificates are original. This is the main step we have to do first. I think Ken did this all. Get you out of a job." Robin was trying to rationalize the departmental inquiry as another one of Ken's sophisticated moves.

John sighed, staring out the window at the passing traffic. The moment of truth had arrived. "No. He didn't do that. My certificate was fake."

Robin's reaction was profound, a look of utter disbelief mixed with crushing disappointment. "What sir? Are you serious? Why sir?"

"It's my fantasy to join the department and solve cases. But I am not interested in college or graduation. So I bought certificates. And I gave money to recruitment people to give me an A+ in my medicals." John's confession was stark and unadorned.

"Sir, this is insane." The respect had evaporated, replaced by cold fury. "I thought you were great. But you fooled everyone who took you as a role model. and I am one of them."

"Robin, I may buy all the certificates. But I solved all cases with my brain." John argued, clinging to the only genuine thing he had left—his competence.

"Sorry, sir, I'm not going to follow your orders."

"Robin, you have to." John pressed, desperation creeping into his voice. He needed Robin.

"No, sir, and goodbye." Robin stood up abruptly, pushed his chair back, and walked out, leaving John alone in the silent coffeehouse.

John watched him go, a deep, empty ache settling in his chest. He drove his Jeep straight to his office, efficiently collected all my stuff, which wasn't much, and returned to his house.

He finally collapsed onto his worn couch, the day's relentless spiral culminating in his professional and personal ruin. As he lay there, exhausted, his satellite phone buzzed. It was Robin.

He answered the call, his voice guarded.

"Sir, I just got the information. I will follow your orders." Robin's tone was back to being professional, though devoid of warmth.

The shift was instantaneous and baffling. John did not press for details. He knew a public conversation was out of the question. He replied to him in morse code, using a series of specific taps against the phone's mouthpiece, "Okay."

The moment he finished the code, his old, compromised regular phone—the one he should have left off—started ringing. It was another call. A pit formed in John's stomach.

He ended the robin call quickly and answered the other call, bracing himself for the next inevitable disaster Ken had engineered.

The tension was a palpable thing, stretching taut between the two lines on the phone screen.

Chapter 13: The Alliance

4th call – The Alliance is Formed

"Hello, my love, How are you?" Eve's voice, silky and playful, dripped with a false intimacy that John had already learned to despise.

"Fine Eve, how are you?" John, known to his handlers as Victor, kept his tone cool, matching her casual cadence. The lie of his persona, 'John,' a disgraced officer seeking a new life of crime, was a constant, tiring performance.

"You called me John on 'Eve, the best day of my life. You made my day." There was a purr in her voice, a predatory satisfaction.

"Yeah, I know. I made your day." John's response was clipped. He was fighting the urge to hang up and scrub the last three months from his memory.

"Haha, so what's new? my love."

John took a breath, delivering the fabricated news with practiced resignation. "I left the department. Sorry, they fired me for submitting fake details and all."

The silence on the line was brief, followed by a triumphant, almost manic chuckle. "See, we are made for each other. Partners in crime. Join me; together, we can do wonders."

Partners in crime. The phrase solidified the danger. John was in, deep in the heart of the spider's web. "Yeah, okay, let's meet first. Tell me your place or my place."

"My place is in Darling, always my place. I will message you the location by morning. Be ready, my love."

The call ended.

The instant the line went dead, the real John Victor resurfaced. The first thing I did after that call was to send a rapid-fire sequence of messages (in Morse code) via a secure frequency to Robin. The instructions were critical and precise: trace my phone's location continuously, 24/7, until this case is officially closed, and immediately prepare a backup team. I specified stealth suits, advanced arms, and that the communication should be coordinated through my encrypted satellite phone. The game had just escalated from an investigation to a high-stakes tactical operation.

The Next Morning... The First Deception

Ken (the voice of Eve), messaged me the location precisely at 7:00 AM. It wasn't the shadowy alley or abandoned warehouse I had mentally prepared for. He wanted to meet in the middle of a crowded, bustling market—a calculated move to neutralize any immediate law enforcement action. I was already prepared for his tricks. I had a small, untraceable gun tucked securely into my waistband, a last resort for emergencies.

I drove to the coordinates, scanning the faces in the throng of people. I waited, my eyes constantly sweeping the crowds, my senses on high alert. One hour passed. The sun climbed higher, the market noise intensifying, but no Ken.

Then, a message flashed on my phone: "Drive to the location"

I immediately typed back, furious at the waste of time. "what?"

His reply was instantaneous, laced with an arrogant control. "If you want to meet me, then drive yourself to the location I sent."

I checked the new coordinates. They pointed away from the city, deep into the state's massive, old-growth forest preserve. He wants to meet me in the forest. He was forcing isolation, eliminating the witness protection of the market. This wasn't a meeting; it was a confrontation staged on his terms. I drove, the city slowly melting into silent, oppressive trees.

In the Forest... The Revelation (4th call)

The GPS led me to a small clearing. It was surreal. A small, elegant table draped with a linen cloth, two antique wooden chairs, and a silver dome covering a plate sat in the center. Ken had meticulously staged a picnic. As I stepped out of the car, he called me.

"How's the food?"

I sat down, pulling the chair out and lifting the dome to reveal a beautifully prepared, gourmet meal. "Very good, Eve. So nice. You prepared all this for me."

"Yes, I prepared it all."

"Oh, why are you doing all this?" I asked, feigning confusion.

"For lunch..! " He dismissed the question with a laugh.

"Not this; I'm asking about the case."

His voice hardened, shedding the playful 'Eve' persona completely. "For fun, I just need fun. But with you, it's no more fun. You made it serious with all this undercover operation."

I froze, the fork halfway to my mouth, the gourmet food suddenly tasting like ash. The blood drained from my face. (I stopped eating and was shocked.) "What? What are you talking about? What undercover operation?"

"I'm a hacker, bro. I know all of your secrets. You people hid the information from the database, but not from me. I suspect you when you say all your certificates are fake. Then I started my inquiry. You are a medalist. I saw your pictures on your friend's profile. You faked it. You planned this dismissal with your higher officers and initiated the undercover operation. Why? We were good, okay? Why did you make this all serious?"

He hadn't just suspected me; he had completely dismantled my cover, going beyond the official database, digging into social media, and piecing together the truth. Ken Adams was a far more formidable opponent than anyone had anticipated.

"But I'll give you another chance," Ken continued, his tone shifting to that of a magnanimous ruler. "Let's play a game. If you win the game, I will surrender myself to the department. Only if you agree to play this game."

The simplicity of his offer was staggering, yet I knew it was a trap, a gauntlet thrown down. I had to take it. "I agree, Ken, what's the game?"

"The name of the game is Ken Ball, and you will have 3 levels. At the end of the game, I will surrender if you win the game. If not, you have to shoot yourself. I will message you the game and rules tomorrow morning. Just leave now. Walk east 1 km, and you will reach Robin's new house. And congratulations on your rejoining, my love."

And then he ended the call.

I immediately messaged Robin about the location. Within minutes, he arrived with a full forensic team. We meticulously collected every possible piece of evidence: fingerprints from the chairs and table, shoe prints in the loose forest dirt, and seized

all the materials Ken had left behind. And I have to admit that the food was super. He did better than Robin.

Later, in the secure lab, the forensic analysis confirmed his brilliance and his contempt for us. The fingerprints on the dishes were a perfect mosaic of different people's prints. He had worn specialized gloves with layered, lifted prints from multiple unrelated individuals, ensuring a dead end. He didn't give me a clue again. But he did give me the game. He had asked me to play a lethal game, promising surrender if I won.

I immediately reported everything to my higher officers and officially rejoined the department, the undercover phase over. Robin and I were now waiting for his next communication, the rules of the deadly game set to begin.

Chapter 14: The Warm-Up

Next-Day...

The department was a buzz of frantic activity, but in my cabin, Robin and I were waiting for the inevitable message.

I got a message from Ken.

"Hai there, ready for the game."

"Always, Ken, I'm ready to defeat you."

"Seriously, I didn't expect this much overconfidence from you."

"Just tell me about the game."

"Yeah! I will start the game in the evening at 4 o'clock with a warm-up or practice game."

"What warm-up and practice?"

"John, it's like I'm going to give you a teaser of my game. That will cheer you up for winning or dying."

"Let's see, who is going to prepare to die?"

"Again, again, and again, overconfidence. Be ready, John Victor. This isn't fun anymore. Fasten your seatbelts for rough play."

He stopped texting. But his mention of "Eve" and the subtle way he played with gender roles had sparked a thought, a wild, intuitive leap that felt right for a narcissistic, internet-dwelling hacker.

I went to my office and called Robin to my cabin.

"Robin, Have you had any ideas about gay community websites?"

"No sir, why?" Robin looked confused, the question seemingly irrelevant to the case.

"I just got a thought: if he is gay and uses the internet all the time, there is a chance that he has to be in any one of the gay communities on the Web." My logic was

simple: a hacker's true identity, however shielded, often leaves a trail in the communities they truly belong to.

"So check all communities for Ken Adams or Eva and trace him."

"Right, sir, we can search that way too... I will try to check offline communities too."

"No, no, no. Don't waste time on offline communities that mostly don't exist. He is a hacker. If he does, he will only be in online communities."

"Okay, sir."

The Community Hunt

An hour later, Robin returned, looking defeated. "Sir, we have over 100 profiles in Ken's name."

"Oh! Wow, how many Ken Eva apps are here?"

"Zero, sir; all are in the name of Ken."

"Any duplicate profiles?"

"Yes, sir, over 75 are duplicate profiles created by the same existing users." Ken was using simple volume to bury any real tracks.

"How many were left after we deleted them all?"

"34 profiles from 5 different communities, sir."

"Trace all 34 members' activities in the last six months in their community." I needed an inactive profile, one used for observation, not genuine connection.

The criteria narrowed the field significantly. "Only four people are not using their profiles for any dates and stuff. The remaining all are regularly using this. And those 4 people from 4 different communities..."

"What are they?"

"Sir. male-male, girls not allowed, Masculinity and broken."

"Show me their website logos."

Robin projected the four logos onto the screen. The fourth logo, the one for "broken," struck me instantly. It wasn't just a word. It was a play on his name.

"Robin, it's not broken. It's BRO'KEN. Check this profile and trace the founder. If I'm right, Ken Adams is the founder of this website."

Robin executed the command. A moment later, his eyes widened. "Yes, sir, he is the founder."

"I knew it. Trace his address and contact details." We finally had him.

"Sir, we found details about Ken. But," Robin hesitated.

"But, what?"

"He gave your address and contact details. And he also used your picture for his profile."

Again, he deceived me; he is a crazy man. The realization hit with the force of a physical blow. He had anticipated our strategy, setting up a honey trap using my own identity. He was taunting us with the proximity of the truth while making it legally useless. "What is this, Robin? We are getting the lead, but he is making it useless. Trace all 33 remaining members and investigate them separately."

It was 4 o'clock. The time for the "warm-up" had arrived. I put the phone on my desk, watching the screen. I knew he wouldn't text. He would call.

And he called.

Nishaan P1: VICTOR - The WarmupThe Fifth Call: Rules of Engagement

The phone rang for the fifth time, cutting through the tense silence of John's secured office. He answered immediately, the sound of Ken's voice a chilling mix of familiarity and malice.

"Hello, my love, How are you doing?" Ken's voice was smooth, a stark contrast to the coiled anxiety tightening in John's chest.

John bypassed the pleasantries, his patience worn thin. "Ken, just tell me what to do. Stop with the games."

"John," Ken's tone hardened slightly, a subtle but effective reassertion of dominance, "I have to make the rules about time and speed, not you. Remember who is in control here."

John swallowed his retort. "Okay, tell me what the game is."

A soft, almost thoughtful 'Hmm, okay,' came from the other end. "Again, I'm saying, this is not a real game; this is just a warm-up level. Are you game ready?"

"Yes, I am ready," John confirmed, his voice firm despite the underlying dread.

"Good. Do you know anything about the game Sudoku?"

John's eyes narrowed in disbelief. "Yes, I know, and don't tell me we are playing Sudoku now."

"I'm afraid to say yes. We are playing Sudoku." Ken's amusement was palpable.

"Seriously?" John spat out a harsh laugh. "Is this your teaser? A grid puzzle? Then what is the main level? Is it carrom, ludo, or chess? You've orchestrated this entire nightmare for Sudoku?"

"Thinking about Sudoku is an easy game for you, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is," John admitted, his earlier confidence in his puzzle-solving ability momentarily returning.

"Okay, let's start the game. And the rules are very specific, John. Listen closely."

THE WARM-UP RULES:

YOU HAVE TO FINISH THIS IN 15 MINUTES from the moment the puzzle is sent.

3 MISTAKES ARE ALLOWED, BUT YOU HAVE TO CORRECT THEM AND

SUBMIT. Submission must be of a perfect, corrected grid.

DON'T TAKE THE HELP OF ANYONE. This must be your solo effort.

John scoffed, the simplicity of the task almost insulting. "Easy, Ken. I will finish it in just 3 minutes. You underestimate me."

"Let's see, John," Ken's tone dropped, the levity instantly gone, replaced by an icy threat. "And if you lose, if you fail to complete this simple Sudoku in the allotted time, I will kill 200 people at once."The Price of Failure

The casual brutality of the statement hit John like a physical blow. "What? Are you kidding? You'll kill 200 people over a puzzle?"

"No, as I already told you, this isn't fun anymore. This is the new reality. I'm going to kill 200 people if you lose this level. And I think I already mentioned that it is a teaser. The mail with the Sudoku game (a standard 9 x 9 grid) is sent. And your time starts in 2 minutes. All the best, my love."

And with that chilling sign-off, Ken ended the call.

John stared at his phone, his mind reeling. 200 lives. He immediately opened his email. There it was—the first email, the first level. The stakes were terrifyingly real.

200 lives. I have to complete it. The Clock Ticks

The pressure immediately became a crushing weight, driving him crazy. He clicked on the image of the grid, the numbers swimming before his eyes. He wasn't even able to complete the first 3x3 box.

Technically, Ken had given him 17 minutes total—the 15-minute solving window plus the two-minute buffer before the timer officially started. He looked at his watch, the seconds ticking away. He had already wasted five minutes simply thinking about those 200 unknown people. Five minutes lost to the paralyzing reality of Ken's threat.

I have to solve this Sudoku... But his brain, usually so sharp and analytical, was refusing to cooperate. Every logical pathway was jammed by adrenaline and panic. I think I'm being too frustrated... I have to calm down first... no, no, no. I don't even have time to settle.

Ken had accomplished his goal: he had turned John's confident mind into a mess. Five minutes ago, John had been completely confident about this game. Now, he was a wreck.

Shut up... complete this game... He forced himself to breathe, to focus on the numbers, treating the grid not as a life-or-death scenario, but as a pure problem. He started penciling in possibilities, erasing, correcting, pushing the panic back.

Suddenly, a digital voice—Robin, the AI running his secure system, announced the time.

"Robin: More 5 minutes left."

No, no, no, the time is moving too fast... The panic surged again. He worked with frantic, desperate speed, his pen flying across the virtual grid. I have to complete this...A Fatal Delay

Finally, the last number was placed. He scanned the rows, columns, and boxes one final time. Every number was correct, the solution was perfect.

"Finally, I completed this game... Yeah, no errors, no mistakes. I finished it..." A wave of dizzying relief washed over him.

But before he could register the success, Robin's synthesized voice delivered the devastating news.

"But, sir, you're 10 seconds late."

Oh sh*t.

The world seemed to tilt. Ten seconds. A mere ten seconds past the 15-minute mark. What would Ken do now? John collapsed back in his chair, the adrenaline draining away, leaving him hollow.

Let's wait for the call. He tried to rationalize, to cling to a shred of hope. Maybe he will excuse those 10 seconds... this is just warming up, right... he won't kill anyone...

But in the pit of his stomach, he knew Ken would show no mercy. The whole point of the 'warm-up' was to establish the zero-tolerance policy. He had failed, and 200 lives were now forfeit. All because of a 10-second delay. He waited for the next call, waited for the executioner to confirm the sentence.

The Sixth Call: The Price of Failure

The phone blared for the 6th Call. I felt a knot tighten in my stomach. This wasn't a game; it was a deadly negotiation, and I had just lost the opening round.

"He is calling me," I muttered, my voice tight. I looked at Robin, the anxiety in my eyes mirroring his. "Robin, you answer this one."

"Okay, Sir," he replied, his voice a low, steady rumble of apprehension as he took the device.

(Robin answered the call...)

"Hello..." Robin's voice was cautious, a stark contrast to Ken's abrasive tone.

"Hey Robin," Ken's voice, devoid of warmth and laced with mocking disappointment, cut through the line. "Why did you answer the call? What happened to John... Did he complete the game in time? Give him the phone... I want to talk to him."

Robin's gaze met mine—a silent apology for the task I'd forced upon him. He quickly held the phone out.

(Robin gave me the Phone...)

"Hello Ken..."

"Hey John, what happened, baby? Did you complete the game in time?" Ken's patronizing use of 'baby' sent a spike of anger through me.

I swallowed my frustration. "Yes, Ken, I completed it..."

"Seriously, you're lying to me..."

I couldn't hold back the truth, not when lives were at stake. "No, Ken, don't do anyone any... Yes, it took 10 seconds, but I finished it. And this is only a warm-up, right...? Please excuse this..." My plea was weak, a desperate hope that he'd respect the 'warm-up' clause.

The response was a slow, malicious exhale on the other end of the line. "Please ahh..! In the previous call, someone was very overconfident... sorry, confident... What happened to that confidence now?" His sarcasm was a hammer blow. "Someone took Sudoku very lightly; what happened now?"

"Sorry, Ken," I conceded, my voice flat with defeat. "Just tell me... what are you going to do now..."

A cruel laugh. "I will give you another hour..."

A flicker of relief ignited in me. "To play a game..."

"No," he stated, the word a definitive, icy knife. "To save those 200 people... a clue to find them. I'm giving this chance only because this is a warm-up game..." The concession was minimal, but the stakes were astronomical.

"Okay, what's the clue..."

NISHAAN P1:VICTOR

The clue was delivered with a chilling detachment: "The clue is 'MK492580' and bye, my friend..."

And he ended the call, leaving a vacuum of silence and a cryptic code hanging in the air.-----

Chapter 15: The Flight

The Hunt for MK492580

My mind raced, scrambling for a logical path. "Then I started to think about this clue—what is this? An address? Or account number? Guys, quick! We have to solve this riddle in time."

Robin, ever the pragmatist, offered his analysis. "Sir, I don't think it was a riddle. He gave us a straight clue."

"Yes, yes... Just browse MK492580; maybe we get some leads to start our investigation. We have only one hour, guys... please be quick..."

Robin was already typing, his fingers a blur across the keyboard. Within seconds, his face grew taut.

"Sir, I found 3 results..."

"What are those? Robin," I demanded, leaning over his shoulder.

"The first one is the Demat account number of XXXXXX, and the second one is a gun that is going to be made." He paused, his eyes widening slightly.

"What is the third one?"

"The third one is a flight number, sir. This flight is en route with 190 passengers and 10 staff."

The blood ran cold in my veins. "This is the one," I stated, the realization a punch to the gut. "Robin is saying this. Maybe he implanted a bomb, or he failed its engine..."

"But sir."

"But what? Robin..."

"This flight is from New Delhi to America... Now It is 6 hours away from Los Angeles..."

"What? What do you mean?" I felt a sickening lurch of confusion.

"This flight started before 18 hours, but he started the game just an hour later."

"No, Robin, he started yesterday after lunch at the forest... He started it the minute he told me, 'Let's go!' We have to contact that flight..."

We rushed to the airport, pulling every string we had to reach the relevant authorities. We finally connected with the flight control and managed to speak to the pilots and staff. "They said everything is fine in their..." The report was maddeningly normal.

Robin, however, remained skeptical. "Robin kept saying that we were on the wrong route, but I had a hard time feeling it."-----

Chapter 16: The Crash

As I stood there, lost in a daze, trying to reconcile the terror of the clue with the mundane reports from the cockpit, my phone started ringing again... Ken was calling me.

I answered the call, my voice raw.

"Ken, is MK492580 a flight number..."

"John, you're a genius... Yes, it is." The congratulation was a mockery.

"What are you doing to those people? This flight has already taken off; the journey will take six hours; no, no, no. more 5 hours 2 minutes..." I was counting down the time he had given me.

"In 2 minutes, all the people on the flight are going to die. What did you do?" I was shouting now, the sound echoing in the sterile airport hallway.

Ken was calm, enjoying every second of my breakdown. "Just some maths and a program..."

"What are you talking about, Ken?"

"I calculated the amount of fuel it takes from Delhi to America... You won't believe it. That's a high amount..."

"So, what did you do?"

His answer was a masterpiece of cold, calculated evil. "I programmed their controls to show a full tank. When they have only half a tank of fuel... First, I filled a half tank with fuel, then they took off and refueled at Dubai, again with a half tank, but they assumed it was a full tank. That's it... A simple plan. In 50 seconds, they will run out of fuel, and the plane will crash."

"No, I have to inform them..." I screamed, already turning to run back toward the control tower.

"Go, you have only 10 seconds..."

The countdown began, each number a bullet in my heart.

"10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 and Boommmmm"

The sound wasn't a physical explosion, but the sonic echo of 200 lives extinguished in an instant. I dropped the phone.

"Noooooooooooo...." My knees hit the floor. "This is pure..."

"Pure what.... Psycho behaviour..." Ken's voice, somehow still coming from the dropped phone, was utterly delighted.

"Yes... you are a psycho..."

"Thank you..."-----The Final Vow

I picked up the phone, fueled by a terrifying, cold resolve. "Ken, what if I completed the game in time..."

"Then what? The same flight crash is known as a regular crash... and you won't feel any guilt about this. That's it..." He had planned the catastrophe regardless. The game was merely a show, a sadistic parlor trick to inflict maximum emotional damage.

"Ken, I don't know if I will win or lose in this bloody game... but I will kill you for sure... and that's the only thing I'm not going to regret in my life..." It was not a threat; it was a promise sealed in the blood of 200 innocents.

"Hahaha," Ken laughed, a sound of pure, unadulterated evil.

(Call Ended)

The cold, sterile air of the control room did nothing to soothe the inferno of guilt raging within me. I pushed open the heavy door, the sound a dull thud against the oppressive silence. Two hundred lives. Two hundred people dead because of my arrogance, my fatal misjudgment of Ken. The weight of it was a physical burden, making every step an act of sheer will.

I found Robin waiting, his young face etched with worry, a stark contrast to his usual unflappable demeanor. He didn't offer comfort, just a direct, professional query.

"Sir, what are we going to do now?"

My voice was a raw, strained whisper. "We have to wait for Level One." The protocol. The agonizing, slow-moving chain of command.

Robin's gaze sharpened, his focus laser-like. "Sir, I am talking about the plane. The one we have to save. The two hundred people whose lives are still in the air."

My mind, still reeling from Ken's first lie, lurched. "What? The plane is still there?" I'd been so certain Ken had crashed it immediately after his call.

A surge of relief, weak but present, washed over me as Robin confirmed. "Yes, sir, it will take approximately five more hours to reach its destination. And everything is cool... as of now."

"The fuel...?" I pressed, the question a reflex, a desperate search for the next hidden lie.

"Yes, they checked it manually. It's fine; communications are working properly. Enough oxygen... Everything is fine, sir. Ken lied about the immediate crash."

But Ken... he never lies without a reason. "But Ken... he never lies without a payoff."

Robin, ever the pragmatist, offered a chilling possibility. "Maybe he pranked you, sir. Got you to cancel the mission unnecessarily."

"No, no, no," I shook my head vehemently. "You go and check those guns. The prototype. Find out what's real and what's a setup."

"Okay, sir, I'm going now," he said, turning crisply on his heel and heading toward the armory archives.-----

Chapter 17: The Truth

The silence in the control room was broken only by the rhythmic hum of the air conditioning and the crackle of a headset. I was running diagnostics on the plane's telemetry when Robin's voice, clipped and urgent, came over the internal communications line.

"Sir, I have the report on the prototype gun. Only one piece was ever manufactured, and that piece is on that same flight. Flight MK482580."

My blood ran cold. "What?"

"Yes, sir," Robin continued, his voice tight with discovery. "The sample piece of the VICTOR prototype gun, along with a full two-hundred-bullet magazine, is on its way to America."

"This is an insane robbery!" I slammed my fist on the console. "Who is taking that gun? Why is he taking it on a commercial flight?"

"Sir, it's Hussain, the renowned sniper. He is taking it to his clients in Los Angeles. It was disguised as an innocuous cargo shipment."

"The sniper," I repeated, the pieces of Ken's elaborate game finally starting to click into place. "What the hell... Check his details! Every activity, every communication before the journey. I want to know who is pulling his strings!"

"Yes, sir, I'm on it. Starting a deep-dive analysis now."-----

Chapter 18: The Final Trap

The console screen flashed, disrupting the tense quiet. The caller ID glowed: KEN.

A knot of pure dread tightened in my gut. I answered, my hand steady despite the tremor running through my nerves. He was laughing again—a soft, triumphant chuckle that held a terrifying amusement.

"I got another call from Ken..."

"I answered... He is laughing again."

"Why are you laughing, Ken?" I demanded, my voice low and dangerous.

"According to me, by this time you know my plan. At least you guessed it right," his voice was smooth, like silk wrapped around a razor.

"You lied to me before. You made me believe the plane had crashed hours ago," I accused.

"Yes... but you still got a chance to save those people. A final, beautiful chance."

"What's your plan?"

"What's your guess?" he countered, relishing the torment.

I pieced together the facts: the prototype gun, the notorious sniper, the five-hour flight time, the initial lie. "You hacked Hussain, and blackmailed him into killing everyone on that flight."

"Yes... but I also blackmailed the cargo men and the pilots," Ken's voice turned chillingly mechanical as he laid out his masterpiece of terror. "In about two minutes, the cargo men will hand the gun to Hussain. The pilots will parachute from the plane. Hussain kills the cargo men, the staff, and the people, and then he will also jump off the plane with a parachute bag..."

My heart stopped. I knew the prototype was the real target, not a kill order. Ken's smile was audible. "But there are no parachutes in the parachute bag... and the plane is going to crash land..."

"You got it, love. That makes my count two hundred," Ken purred, the sound of ultimate victory.

"I won't let this happen!" I screamed into the phone.

"Hooo... but sorry, you are late. By this time, the cargo men will have already handed the gun to my sniper, and the pilots will be jumping off the plane."-----The Last Five Minutes

"No! No! No!"

I tore off the headset and spun to the communications officer. "Heyyyy, connect to the flight. MK482580! Full priority!"

"Sir, no one is responding," the officer reported, his fingers flying across the console. "The plane is on autopilot. The pilots' last message was a generic sign-off."

"Can autopilot land the plane?" Hope, fragile and desperate, flared.

"Yes, sir, but... It's not guaranteed," the officer hesitated.

"But what?"

"Not every time... There is a high chance of a crash landing, especially without manual oversight for the final descent."

"Try to connect with the staff! Anyone! Cabin crew!"

"No response, sir. All channels are dead."

My gaze snapped to the flight trajectory timer. "How much time is left for landing?"

"Five more minutes, sir... five minutes to the runway at LAX."

"Can you get me a view of anything from the passenger compartment? Any cameras in their possession? Anything!"

"No, no sir, I'm so... sorry. There are no internal feeds on that model."

I snatched the phone back. "Ken, are you still there?"

"Yes, my love... enjoying the countdown," he drawled.

NISHAAN P1:VICTOR

"Tell me, you lied again. Tell me the chute bags are real," I pleaded, shedding my professionalism for raw, emotional bargaining.

"No, not this time," he said, and the finality in his voice was absolute.

A primal scream tore from my throat. "Aaaahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

(Call ended...)-----

Chapter 19: Resignation

The control room was a tomb. The air tasted of ash. Every eye was on the clock.

Then, a voice, calm and detached, cut through the tension.

A man in the Control Center announced: "Sir, the plane has landed. LAX confirms the landing."

"Send someone to check it," I ordered, my voice hollow. "Check the cabin. Check the cockpit. Check the cargo hold. Now."

"Yes, sir. Teams are being deployed."

A few moments later, the same officer, his face a mask of confusion, relayed the first ground report.

"Sir, we got some information from the LA airport..."

"What is that?" I braced myself for a scene of carnage.

"There are no passengers on that plane... it's empty... The cabin is deserted."

"What?" The shock was immense. Ken's plan couldn't have been a simple escape.

"We assume that... Everyone escaped using parachutes... The cabin doors were found ajar."

"No, no, no," I corrected, a sickening certainty dawning. "Send a helicopter and check the way along the flight path. There are no parachutes installed in that plane. All of them are empty backpacks. Ken's last lie was his best. He made them believe they had a chance."

"Oh shit... I will inform them to check the surrounding area immediately. Below the flight path."

Some more moments later... the final, crushing report came in.

"Sir, they found them... they are dead...all of them. They hit the ground and became pieces. The pilots, the cargo men, Hussain the sniper, and every single passenger."

My head fell into my hands. "Man! Oh! Man... he made an international mess now..." Ken's victory was complete. Two hundred people died believing they were moments from safety, betrayed by the promise of an empty backpack. The world was about to wake up to his cold-blooded genius.

The grim news filtered through, heavier than the midday air. "There are more deaths, sir. Some of them hit people, and they are severely injured, and some are dead. Some bodies were found in the ocean." The sheer scale of the incident was expanding, turning a potential case into a full-blown crisis, with the sea itself swallowing the evidence.

My voice, firm despite the internal turmoil, cut through the silence. "Contact their families and complete all formalities. And don't leak to the media that this incident is connected to the NISHAAN case..." We had to control the narrative, maintain the fragile secrecy surrounding the deeper conspiracy.

But the world, as it so often does, moved faster than our attempts at containment. "Sir, it's too late. Already someone released your whole conversation on the internet..."

"As expected..." The words were a bitter confirmation of my sinking suspicion. The adversary wasn't just playing a game; he was orchestrating a public spectacle, using our own conversations against us. I wasted no time. A quick, decisive phone call to Robin. My instructions were clear: trace the upload details, and meet me at the office immediately.

I found myself trapped again in the claustrophobic chamber of my questionable thoughts. The central mystery of the NISHAAN case now coalesced into a single, perplexing question: why me? I knew the perpetrator, this elusive mastermind, didn't seem to have a clear political or financial motive—he seemed to be operating purely for the thrill, the game. Yet, his every move was directed at me. Why is he interested in me? A new line of inquiry opened up, one I should have pursued sooner: Why don't I inquire about this case from this angle? Is there any connection between us?

A weary premonition settled over me. The trace details I'd asked Robin to retrieve would inevitably lead back to the same dead end, a mocking signature: "my computer is used." I was bored of these psychological shocks, this predictable taunt. He had become boringly repetitive in his method, but the consequences were anything but. He was making a mess bigger and bigger every day. Huge is a better word for this unfolding disaster.

Ahhh... A sudden, almost absurd thought broke the tension. I want to eat biryani. The craving was intense, a desperate anchor to normalcy. I had to ask Robin to cook

it. He had made that truly awesome pasta the other day; surely he could prepare the best biryani too. And Sarah... The memory of her flashed, an unrelated, painful shard of my personal life. What happened to her? I never called her. She broke up with me the minute I saw her.

"Oh, where are my thoughts going... focus on this case..." I mentally slapped myself, dragging my attention back to the grim reality.

Just then, the office door swung open, and Robin entered. In his hand, he carried a familiar rectangular shape. And yes, I was absolutely right—it was a lunch box. And the aroma that wafted from it... was indisputably biryani. "hahaha... Maybe we have a connection like telepathy," I mused, a genuine, albeit weary, smile touching my lips.

"Hey Robin, thanks for lunch..."

Robin looked confused. "Sir, this is yesterday's lunch box; we forgot it here."

My momentary illusion shattered. "Oh, I thought you made biryani and got it for me..."

"What happened to you, sir? You know that I went to that gun-making place..." He was referring to the dangerous fieldwork he'd just returned from, contrasting it with my almost childlike fixation on food.

"I don't know, Robin, but I'm feeling dizzy and having unusual thoughts, and I can't focus on this case." The confession was harder than I expected. The psychological pressure had finally breached my defenses.

"Sir, I think you have to see a doctor," he stated, his concern replacing his confusion.

"Yes, I have to..." The decision was made. "Search for a good psychiatrist and text me the details; I'm going to rest my eyes." I needed a reset. The case could not afford a compromised mind at the helm.

I left my office, drove to the nearest hotel, rented a room, and bought some sleeping pills. I craved oblivion. And I slept... for a solid twelve hours.

After 12 hours of sleep, I woke up feeling somewhat tethered to reality again. I got a text from Robin with the shrink's details. I couldn't risk my mental health, not now. I woke up, freshened up, and vacated the hotel room.

Strange was the silence. I didn't get any call or text from Ken, my commanding officer. It felt like an ominous, temporary peace—like it was over.

I drove my Jeep to the psychiatrist's office. Robin, the ever-reliable good boy, had already taken care of the logistics, securing an appointment in my name. I went straight in.

The session was an exhausting two hours of talking, talking, and talking. The conclusion was delivered with a heavy diagnosis: I had something connected to depression. "From now on, I'm not recommended to think logically, it's not good for my health and blah blah blah..."

She told me so many things, couched in academic jargon, that I found myself unable to concentrate. My attention span, already fragmented, kept slipping. Robin, sensing this, entered and sat with me through the final part of the session. Then, she simplified the diagnosis for him, stating plainly that I was "not fit for intelligence work." In simple words, why didn't she tell me the same way then? The frustration was immediate. Why did she use so many big words when talking with me? argh... I think she needs a shrink too.

Robin gently took me out of that place. He drove my Jeep to a drug store, bought the prescribed medication, and took me home. Again, I took the drugs and slept. Time dissolved. I don't know how many hours passed. I woke up, took my medication and food, and slept again. I did this cycle like a zillion times, losing track of the days.

Finally, I felt completely normal. Robin informed me it had been a full week since I'd been in that state. The silence from Ken persisted, which Robin surmised meant he knew I was sick. Robin had informed the higher officer of my situation, and he was told to meet him when I was ready. I felt ready.

I woke up, refreshed, and went to my office. Robin drove me there, as he always did, a silent, supportive presence.

When I opened my office door, my officer was already there, waiting. He looked at me, his face grave. "How are you?"

"Fine, sir," I replied, my voice steady.

He leaned back, his eyes scrutinizing me. "Robin said, 'You're mentally not well, that you are depressed with some game...'" His tone suggested that "some game" was a vast understatement.

"Yes sir," I repeated, the words feeling like ash on my tongue. "The game is too hard to play, and the results are not in my hands. It's a rigged gamble with human lives, and the house always wins. I'm playing that wretched game solely as a desperate attempt to escape my all-consuming guilt, not to actually stop this monstrous crime Ken calls 'NISHAAN.' The stakes are impossibly high and the outcomes are equally horrific. If I somehow win this impossible challenge, there is going to be a mass death of people— collateral damage Ken has already factored in. If I lose, the same number of people, perhaps even more, are going to die, and their blood will be on my hands, a direct consequence of my failure and in my name."

I ran a hand over my tired face, the tremor in my fingers betraying the calm I tried to project. "Why am I playing with him at all? This is pure, unadulterated madness; a self-destructive cycle. I can escape guilt by just... ignoring it, by walking away from the twisted chess board he's set up."

Superintendent Miller stared at me, his face a mask of shock and disbelief that quickly hardened into anger. "John, what in God's name are you talking about? Are you seriously going to drop this case? Have you forgotten the pattern? Have you forgotten his threat? He will kill the officer who takes up this case, who steps into your place. Everyone is expendable to him... except you, the only person he actually wants to play with. This isn't just a case, John, it's a siege."

I met his gaze, the decision already made and settling in my stomach like a cold, heavy stone. "I'm resigning from the post, sir. Effective immediately."

Miller slammed his hand down on the desk, the sound echoing sharply in the small office. "What?! Are you insane? He's about to start a new game, the biggest one yet, and we have a chance—a real chance—to finally catch him or at least stop him before the bodies start piling up! This is our best shot, John!"

"What if we lose, sir?" I countered, my voice low but steady, cutting through his outburst. The room fell silent, the weight of the question palpable.

Miller opened his mouth, then paused, his usual assuredness crumbling. "Then..."

"Don't bother to finish that sentence, sir; I'm resigning," I insisted, gathering the last of my resolve. "He won't play with anyone but me. He has made that abundantly clear. I am the key to his sick amusement. So, by removing myself, all you get now are random, unconnected accidents, crimes that are easy to close. No more add-ups to the NISHAAN case. No more mass casualty events tied to a 'game.' You shut down his arena, and he packs up his toys, forced to go back to being a common killer. You save lives by letting me walk away."

I reached for my phone, a tactical move I knew Ken would be anticipating. I put it on speaker, just loud enough for Miller to hear, then spoke directly to the air, to the digital ghost I knew was listening. "Ken, I know you're listening to this. I'm going to quit the department. I'm done. That means no more games, no more stakes, and no more manufactured guilt for me to 'escape.' You have your fun with whatever petty crimes you commit next, and I will have mine—which involves a quiet life without your shadow over it."

Without waiting for Miller's frantic protests or the sound of Ken's disappointed sigh (which I could almost hear in my head), I disconnected the line, picked up the last of my belongings—my worn leather jacket and the file box containing a lifetime of service—and walked out. I didn't look back. I paused only long enough to clap Robin, my loyal desk sergeant, on the shoulder and offer a simple, heartfelt, "Take care, Robin. Watch your back." Then, I drove directly to Sarah's apartment.

She was there, thank God. She took one look at my haggard face and the box in my hands, and she knew. She didn't ask questions or demand explanations. She simply guided me toward the bedroom, her voice soft. "Just take a rest, John. You look like you haven't slept in a week."

And for the first time in what felt like an eternity, I slept. Deeply. Fully. Without the need for a cocktail of over-the-counter sleep aids or a bottle of cheap scotch.

I woke up hours later, feeling a deep ache of emotional exhaustion, but also a sliver of peace. I am feeling guilty for resigning from my job, for abandoning my post and leaving the force to deal with the fallout. But that guilt is a dull, manageable throb compared to the sharp, excruciating pain of knowing that innocent people would have continued dying in my hands, as a consequence of my choices in Ken's game. This guilt is less. This guilt I can live with.

NISHAAN P1:VICTOR

To be continued in PART-2 BRO'KEN



PART 2 - BRO'KEN