
THE
TEA APP
KILLER
WRITTEN BY FATTY TAE

"The mind is a weapon—and sometimes, the prey becomes the hunter."

Welcome, reader. You're about to step into a world where every notification, every message, and every perfect moment could be a trap. This isn't just a story of a killer—it's a story of survival, of wits versus obsession, of how a single person can turn the tables on a master of manipulation.

Thank you for picking up this book. Thank you for trusting me to take you on this ride. Read carefully, because in this world, nothing is what it seems, and the line between hunter and hunted can vanish in a single moment.

Stay sharp. Stay alert. And remember—sometimes, the game is bigger than you think.

— Fatty Tae

Chapter 1 — The Sip, the Screen, the Lie

The first time I saw Matos's face it was small and dim on my phone, like all the parts of people we only give to strangers. The picture was low-light, intentionally moody — none of that flex-for-the-feed energy. Just a jawline, a half-smile, a shadow where his eyes should be. Under it, a hundred comments, every one the same kind of breathless: "No games." "He's different." "My parents loved him."

I keep my life tidy because it's safer that way. Work was neat columns and clean lines. People were messy and unpredictable, so I boxed them. The Sip — the app everyone called Tea when they were tired of saying it out loud — felt like a spreadsheet in a sea of chaos: crowd-sourced warnings, testimonials, gossip turned into data points. You could post a face, throw a name, and ask the room: "Is this guy for real?" The app offered background checks, reverse-image checks, even a way to peek at public records — the kind of features that make you feel twice as safe as you actually are. (Business Insider, Apple)

People call it safety. A lot of people started calling it a movement. On the surface, Tea felt righteous: a place for women to warn each other, to stop lies before the first coffee date. On my feed, though, it had the taste of something raw — a sisterhood with teeth. The app literally flashes a "no screenshots" banner at the top of some pages, trying to keep things from leaking into the wild; the irony is, those same features make people careless, brittle with confidence. Post something, and the crowd will either coronate or crucify. Either way, it gets messy. (Tea for Women, Business Insider)

I clicked Matos's thread because curiosity is a dangerous muscle. The comments were a chorus: green flags glowing, red flags strangely absent. I swiped to his Spark profile out of reflex. He matched. He messaged like a person who'd been listening to me in the background — not creepy, just precise. A private joke about a painting I'd liked. A memory about a band I'd only mentioned once. It was flattering how much he seemed to remember. It was flattering until it stopped feeling like someone remembering and started feeling like being mapped.

Dinner was quiet and slow and soft in the right ways. He listened like it hadn't been a lifetime since anyone had bothered to. When he kissed me, that cold place in my chest — the one I'd built with lists and metrics — folded open. I wanted to believe with the ferocity of someone starved. I told myself being loved wasn't dangerous. I told myself I could keep my

spreadsheets and still fall. But the world has ways of showing you the cost of trust. And the Sip, that pink-laced gossip machine, was a place where careless trust could be weaponized. (Fast Company)

Chapter 2 — Tiny Lies, Fatal Patterns

At first the things were small enough to laugh off. He knew my coffee order. He remembered the song I hummed the week before. He quoted a joke I'd made on a thread I thought no one would remember. Charm is slippery because it feels like warmth and then it is a leash.

Then the micro-moments started lining up: a restaurant I'd only mentioned in a passing DM; the name of an artist whose mural I'd admired in a throwaway post. Coincidence? Maybe. But I make a living reading patterns. When coincidences stack like bricks, they build walls.

The weekend the news began to whisper about the "Sip Tea App Killer," the air changed. The headlines were clinical at first: a sketch, a small list of victims, a single symbol cropping up on posts like an ugly signature. People on the app noticed: some victims had posted a tiny emoji before they disappeared, and someone — online, brash, tasteless — started calling it the killer's tag. At the time I thought it was morbid gossip. Later I'd learn what those tiny icons can mean to someone patient and hungry. (Business Insider, Fast Company)

People overshare. That's the first rule. Drinks, check-ins, jokes about a night out — they're the breadcrumbs. The Sip makes it feel private: anonymous usernames, no screenshots allowed on some feeds, quick posts that disappear into comment fights. But every little brag or warning leaves a pattern. Someone who pays attention can stitch those patterns into a map. I began testing that map out of sheer survival instinct.

Small tests — lie to your group chat, say you'll be somewhere you won't — are cheap ways to see if someone is guessing or following. Chloe laughed when I told her I'd meet her at a dive bar I'd never been to. Later that day Matos texted me, casual as a weather update: Heard you like the Blue Finch? Cute choice. My stomach went hollow. He didn't guess. He'd read the threads, read the threads of friends, followed the cross-talk people leave in comments because we trust strangers with secrets and think the app will protect us. It didn't protect us. It only made the trail prettier. (Essence)

I started to feel watched in the way you only notice if you stop assuming safety exists. My phone, which had been a lifeline, became a suspect. Apps I'd installed for convenience — background-check features, catfish detectors, "verified" badges — felt like a collection of locks that someone else had the keys to. The problem with tech built for "safety" is not that it's fake; it's that it makes people careless. They post, they verify, they feel protected. And predators learn to use the feeling of protection as bait. Newsrooms wrote editorials about the app's ethics; forums debated whether it had gone too far. That debate didn't help the people already being hunted. (AP News, Teen Vogue)

I started sleeping with the light on like a kid. I changed passwords more times than I could count and kept a notebook of where I'd actually been, just in case. It's funny — you can build a life out of rules and still be collapsed into fear by one person who reads the rules differently.

Chapter 3 — Teacups and Tests

There's a ritual in horror stories where the small object becomes the symbol — a red ribbon, a carved doll, a throw pillow. For us it was a teacup emoji. Some posts before victims disappeared shared one: the tiny sipping cup, a dumb little character people used to joke about coffee dates. To most people it was stupid. To the person who wanted to make their moves feel like art, it became a signature.

I saw the teacup in the wild first as something stupid: a girl posting a selfie, Heading out ☕, her caption making light of a date. Later that week she was gone. Someone on the app connected her last posts to a string of other girls who'd used the same emoji. Patterns aren't stories until someone tells them that way. Once you see the pattern, you can't unsee it. (Business Insider)

I did what any person with too much adrenaline and not enough trust does: I baited. Not with elaborate plans — with small theater. I pretended to forget to lock the door. I left a jacket on the couch like a clue. I put the two stupid porcelain cups in my bag and took them to the park like a lunatic idea. The cups were props, dumb and childish, the kind of thing that would make a stalking story feel like a sitcom if it wasn't so goddamn real.

When he showed up — when Matos sat at the other end of the bench like a man who expected applause — it wasn't cinematic. He was quiet, tidy, like someone who'd rehearsed

kindness until it was muscle. He smiled, and it was the wrong kind of smile: the kind that had thought too much about the effect. I said his name like a warning. He didn't look surprised. He looked pleased, as if the script had gone exactly according to plan.

He reached for a cup like a man reaching for a thing that completes a collection. I had a taser because I had decided fear couldn't be my permanent language. The shock was a bright, ugly punctuation. Passersby screamed, lights blinked like bad TV shows, and sirens folded into the night. For forty-five seconds I tasted victory.

Then the burner: a single anonymous ping on a number I didn't recognize. Wrong cup. Wrong man, it said. The words were simple and precise and meant to empty the room of triumph.

We got a man in cuffs, a profile to put on the morning shows, and the city exhaled. The feeds thanked me by name. I sat on my couch and thought about how easy it had been for someone else to plant a fall guy. The captured man had a history, petty and small. He had the face you expect on a mugshot of someone who got in the wrong place at the wrong time. He didn't fit the pattern any more than a cardboard cutout fits a human. Someone had made our capture look neat on purpose. Someone who wasn't done playing. (AP News, Fast Company)

That night the app felt less like a place to warn friends and more like a stage where people bought tickets to watch someone dismantle you. I lay awake and tried to peel the layers back: the posts, the replies, the tiny emoji. I thought of the verification badges, the reverse-image tools, the promises of safety stamped nice and loud in the app store descriptions. All of that meant nothing if a determined person could use the crowd's own voice as camouflage. The Sip had given our oppressor tools and a crowd to hide in. (Apple, Essence)

By the time the sun came up, Detective Ryan called. He didn't sound like a man who wanted credit. He sounded like someone who'd seen this get messy before and knew it could get messier. "Don't delete anything," he told me. "And don't trust the headlines." That was the first time I learned how fragile truth could be when an app makes spectacle of pain. It was also the first time I realized that finding him wouldn't be a clean ending. It would be an ugly, long war.

Chapter 4 — The House Smells Like Someone Else

I had lived alone long enough to know the rhythms of my apartment: the weird sigh the radiator made at three in the morning, the way the hallway smelled after someone burned popcorn, the exact creak in the kitchen that meant the floorboards were tired. Those small things are a safety blanket until they're not.

That night the blanket was gone.

I came home late, keys jangling, head full of a hundred small worries — news alerts, Ryan's clipped voice, Ethan's last text that read more like a warning than a question. I pushed the door and the air hit me wrong: not stale apartment smell but clean, citrus — like someone had used a spray to wipe fingerprints off of air. It should've calmed me. Instead it felt like stage makeup.

"Hello?" I called, the word too small in the echo. No shoes in the hall. No Chloe's music bleeding through. Nothing. My phone was warm in my pocket. I flicked on lights with the homesick motion of someone who wanted their apartment to answer.

The living room light was on.

That's when the hair at the back of my neck rearranged itself. I dropped the bag and moved slow, like I was walking through a house that might not like me. On the coffee table were two steaming mugs. Steam that shouldn't have been there after midnight. Two mugs. Two saucers. A teacup set like an accusation.

He was in my kitchen, back to me, hands on the counter making tea like he belonged here. He didn't turn. He didn't startle. He didn't even smile. He just poured with the calm of someone who had rehearsed this moment for maximum effect.

"Matos," I said, and every syllable landed like a warning.

He turned and that smile came like formalin — preserved and precise. "You're home," he said. Not a question. A fact. "I was bringing your kettle back. You left it at my place last week." He set a cup down and nudged it toward me like a peace offering.

I stared at him. My brain ran a million stupid possibilities and none felt right. He didn't have a key. We'd watched the doorman tape to see if anyone went in after me the day the teacups were set out. No one. No one with his gait and that careful calm.

"How did you—" I started.

He shrugged like a man explaining nothing. "Lucky timing," he said. "You ever think a place is just waiting for you to see it the right way?"

That's what made it worse: the casualness. He made terror feel like a quaint observation. The mugs steamed. The house smelled like lemon and something sterile. I wanted to throw them. Instead I grabbed my phone and dialed Ryan like a little child calling for backup.

He left before Ryan got there. He left like someone who walked out a front door without touching it, like he'd been there all along and simply stepped out to the hallway to get the angle right. He hadn't ransacked anything. He hadn't touched my photos. He'd left the teacups — the same symbol that had shown up in victims' posts — sitting like a smile.

Ryan arrived with the slow, efficient energy of someone who'd had nightmares about this sort of thing. He walked the apartment like a cop in a crime show, scanning, making notes, and then he sat on my couch and said, very quietly, "He's teaching you a lesson."

"What lesson?" I asked.

"That you can be found in a crowd of friends. That the internet feels private and it isn't. That people who do this want you to feel watched." He didn't say that they want you to be afraid. He didn't have to. I felt it settling in like winter.

Ethan called two hours later. He sounded hollow, like he'd washed down something hard. "You okay?" he asked.

"No," I said. The word made me sound frailer than I felt. But it was true.

That was the night I learned there are predators who don't need doors. They just need people who will walk through the open ones.

Chapter 5 — The Throw offs Get Smarter

After the kitchen, nothing felt private. My phone buzzed like a small animal. Notifications that had nothing to do with me. A photo of Chloe's lunch, my neighbor's cat. The harmlessness of it felt like a pressure test. He'd taught me one more thing: you can be invisible inside a crowd if the crowd will cover you.

Ryan set a perimeter. Not a literal one — we weren't carting around floodlights and bodyguards — but a rotation of friends, of routines designed to be irregular. He called it "randomized presence," which sounded like bureaucrat speak for being unpredictable. We built a pattern to break the pattern. I slept at a friend's place three nights in a row and at Ryan's suggestion kept my blinds open as if that would trick someone into thinking I wasn't home.

Matos responded with small theater. Once I was on a train with Chloe and she dozed and I checked my phone and there was a picture of my seat from the aisle — him, sitting a row back, smiling with a face that said he'd been there watching before I knew it. No hint at how he'd gotten on the same car. No hint at when he'd taken the picture.

Another time I left a voicemail for Ethan — a short, annoyed message about dinner plans — and an hour later Matos texted me back quoting a line from that message. Lines you don't say to your man. Lines you say into the dark. He made them look like flirts in the sunlight. He made my life into a stage play and sat in the audience with a notebook.

Then he did the thing that made me believe he could be in the house when I wasn't: he showed up at my door while I was inside and made a show of being somewhere else. I'd been home all day, but he texted me, "Saw you running on the lake," and then later my neighbor told me there was a delivery man who'd come by saying he'd left something in the lobby for me and that Matos had taken it up. The lobby camera was a blur of people — a million shadows. If you wanted to hide one, you could.

Ryan watched the tapes until his eyes hurt. He leaned back and said, “He knows how systems fail. He doesn’t hack them. He uses their soft points — people, routine, trust.” That’s the part that stung: not the tech, but the humans. Someone on the building staff could open a door because they knew the man and thought he was a resident. Or someone else could be paid to leave the gate ajar. The ways a system collapses are rarely dramatic. They’re small, cumulative compromises.

We planted. We watched who answered the door for whom. We asked questions that made the building manager shift like someone under flashlight. Names surfaced: a temp who came and went at odd hours, a delivery driver who asked too many questions. None of it screamed conspiracy in a way that the bureaucracy could act on. It was the slow drip of menace.

Between bait and watch, Matos stitched his image into my day. He began leaving tiny notes where I would find them: a single tea leaf under my pillow, a receipt for a coffee I’d never bought, a napkin from a bar I’d never been to. Each one was a thread tugging at the same sweater.

The throw-offs grew cleverer. He began sending burner messages that looked like threats and then publicly posted contrite, over-the-top apologies on the Sip — the kind of performative remorse that made the crowd soften. He painted himself as the man unfortunate enough to have a woman with an overactive imagination. When friends saw those posts, they softened too. The internet cheered for a man who apologized. It cheers for the spectacle of contrition.

And when the city reeled from the arrest — when the wrong man went on morning shows with his head bowed and the headlines said Suspect arrested — I realized how easy it was to stage a capture. Put a shell in the box and light the match. The show would distract and the puppeteer would slip into the wings.

Ryan called it a “strategic redirection.” I called it a war tactic.

Chapter 6 — Waking Up with a Stranger’s Smell

I thought the worst part was the not knowing. I was wrong. The worst part was waking up with the smell of someone else in your sheets.

I woke to sun slicing through a thin gap in the blinds and — faintly — cologne. Not my cologne. Not Matos's exactly; it was something like it, clean and citrus with an undernote of old leather. My eyes were lazy with sleep, slow to line up with sense, and for a second the apartment was a thesis in quiet. Then my fingers found the side table and the mind-brightened alert hit me like a cold splash.

Footsteps. Not creaks — human steps, deliberate. I pushed myself up and turned, and there he was: Matos sitting on the edge of my bed as if he'd been watching me sleep for comfort. He had his shoes on. He had his hands folded. He had the calm of a man certain of his own script.

"Don't scream," he said. It wasn't a request. It was a direction.

Everything in me wanted to throw the nearest thing at him: a lamp, a book, a punch. Instead I did what I'd practiced in a dozen hypothetical nightmares — I stayed still and watched, counting his micro-expressions like I was taking attendance at a crime.

"How did you get in?" I asked.

He smiled like a man who'd been asked a dull question and enjoyed the intention of the asker more than the content. "You left the window open last week," he said. "You said you liked the sound of the city." It was a small, specific memory — the kind that made you think he had been paying attention to everything, which was the scary part. Maybe he had. Maybe he'd been in the hallway, maybe he'd been at the window when I'd left it, maybe he'd slipped in when I came home. The thing that terrified me wasn't the how. It was the proof: he could be anywhere I slept.

He didn't raise his voice. He stroked the rim of a teacup like a man petting a bird. "You're learning," he said, as if we were in a class he'd been kindly grading. "You look better when you sleep."

I wanted to vomit. I wanted to pull the blankets up and hide. I wanted to wake the building, call someone, do anything that made noise and made him visible. Instead, my voice came out like paper. "Get out."

He stood slowly and put on a face that read worry. "I'm sorry you're scared, J. I wish you'd trust me." He moved to the door and opened it with a casual hand, as though the act of leaving would demonstrate his innocence.

After he left I sat on the bed and didn't move for a long time. Ryan arrived at noon in a blazer that had seen better days and a coffee-to-go. He sat on the couch and said four brutal

things: people are porous, the internet is porous, performance covers reality, and predators study the seams.

We put trackers on packages and kept a log of who came in and out. We grilled the building staff with the polite pressure of men trying to be professional and women trying to be believed. The ledger grew with names and times but nothing decisive. We found a bar where a neighbor had seen Matos months ago, an Uber receipt that placed his number near the park the night he'd "bumped" into me. Each piece fit like a bite from a larger, uglier puzzle.

At night I'd lie awake and imagine doors opening while I slept. I'd run through the small, impossible options of a person moving through my life like a ghost: in the hallway, in a delivery room, in the gutter with a set of keys no one asked questions about. I learned that terror's anatomy is built of quiet moments stitched into a long garment.

That night I kept my phone on my chest like a small heart. The teacup sat on my dresser. It looked ridiculous and sacred at the same time. I touched it and felt the ridiculousness — absurd object for such a monstrous energy — and then I felt its sharpness: it reminded me that this was no longer a dating problem. This was an assault on the small things that make a life livable.

Ryan said one more thing before he left. "He's not just watching you, J. He's teaching you to watch yourself the way he does." He looked at me like he wanted me to have that knowledge and not the fear. "Use it."

I didn't feel like using anything. I felt like hiding. But I also felt the smallest, hottest ember of something else — the lock-clack certainty that you only outsmart someone who thinks they already have the playbook. Matos thought he controlled the story. He was good. He'd be dangerous. But he'd also left his fingerprints at every performance. And fingerprints, as Ryan kept reminding me, can be read the other way if you know how to look.

Chapter 7 — Public Stage

They wanted the city to feel safe again. The mayor wanted a headline. The feeds wanted a closure clip. The news vans sat like sharks on the curb, their satellite dishes pointed like snouts. I learned quick: monsters don't just hunt in the dark — they love the light when it's used as a stage.

Ryan paced outside the bait restaurant like a man rehearsing a sermon. He'd turned a tucked-away bistro into our trap: cameras, plainclothes officers, two witnesses who'd agreed to act clueless. We'd made the setup obvious enough to be believable but tight enough that someone wouldn't slip away. I had the two stupid porcelain cups in a paper bag on the table. The teacup sat inside like a talisman.

"Remember," Ryan said in that dry, calm voice that used to make me feel safe. "We don't go theatrical. We control the scene. If he's performing for attention, we don't give him the audience."

Performance was his language. Matos spoke it better than anyone I'd met.

The app blew up that morning with Matos's face. He'd posted a photo of his hands and a short note: I am sorry. I never intended pain. I want to do whatever it takes to make this right. The comment section collapsed into argument: believers, haters, people trolling, others defending him. The Sip worked like a town square with accelerant — outrage and pity in the same breath. He'd done something stupid and theatrical: public contrition. It softened the crowd. It complicated the hunt.

"How do you post a thing like that and then show up like nothing happened?" Chloe asked, gripping her coffee so hard her knuckles went white. She sat across from me, knees tucked under her, eyes sharp and tired. "Is he that slick or do people just want to forgive him?"

"Both," I said.

The plan depended on his arrogance. Whoever this man was, he loved being seen and praised. That pride would be his undoing. Or so we told ourselves. Because he didn't just want to be seen — he wanted to control how he was seen. He was building the narrative as we moved in for the arrest.

He came like a secret arriving on schedule. A figure at the end of the street, careful and precise in a jacket that cost more than the tablecloth. He walked with the measured passos of someone in command of his presence. He smiled as he approached like a man who expected applause for his confession. He took the seat across from me and folded his hands as if waiting for critique.

"Hi," he said. Not a greeting. A prop.

It was tempting to stand and spit accusations. Instead, I sat and watched. Ryan had marked every move. Plainclothes closed roads. The cameras rolled, lenses bright and hungry. It felt ugly and staged and deeply alive.

A man on the sidewalk — a delivery driver we'd arranged to act as a witness — walked up to us and tried to hand Matos an envelope. Matos took it, fished through, and showed no reaction. He read the note, smiled a slow, careful smile, and then — before anyone could move — he folded his hands and said softly, "I don't believe you shot at me. I think you wanted me to come like this."

The watchers shifted. The delivery man's jaw tightened. Ryan signaled. Officers stepped forward. Matos raised his hands like surrender and gave a practiced line about doing what's right. Then he turned at the exact right moment, as if cued, and the delivery man fell into the frame he'd been paid to create: a man who'd been paid to produce evidence. He collapsed clutching his chest, clutching the envelope. The officers surged.

We moved. The arrest was choreography: cuff, read rights, escort someone to the van. The camera lights painted everything bright and simple — hero cops, brave victim, relief on the faces of neighbors. The feeds hummed with the satisfaction of closure.

Inside the van, the man I thought was Matos kept his head down and mumbled about being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Reporters shouted questions we'd practiced for. Tweets called him a monster. The crowd online exhaled. I let myself taste the relief like stale candy. We had a body of work. We had a face. We had a story to put to bed.

But on my phone, under a line of congratulatory texts, an anonymous DM flashed like a stone through glass: Nice show. Wrong cup. No number. No context. Just those three words. My vision blurred for a second. The relief turned to sand in my mouth.

Ryan noticed my twitch. He swore under his breath and doubled down on the detail checks. The cameras had filmed a man. The man had an alias. The man had petty crimes. But so do a lot of people who end up caught when someone else wants them to be. If you can plant a man in front of a camera, you can craft a narrative.

That night the city celebrated. The mayor issued a statement. The feeds looped the same mugshot. People sent me heart emojis. Ethan texted me to say he'd seen the live feed and that I was brave. I lay in the dark and listened to applause from a world that thought the nightmare was over. That DM sat like a lump in my throat.

I couldn't sleep. I couldn't trust a single thing about closure. The stage had swallowed truth and left me with a script.

Chapter 8 — The Capture

The man in custody had a criminal history that fit the press. He'd been in and out of shelters. He had a temper on film, a history of petty theft and bar fights. He was everything a TV-friendly villain looked like. He had hands that looked like they'd held trouble. He had no name that connected to the pattern we'd seen online.

We interrogated him like police and like people who wanted confirmation the worst was over. The first time he tried to talk, he coughed and stared at the table like a man who'd read too many police procedurals. He said his name was Luis and that he'd been paid to deliver a package. He said he'd been told the package was for a fundraiser, an appearance, a "performance." He insisted he was only the handler — a man who'd done a job and had no idea of the context.

The phrasing was neat. He knew the language of small-time hustles — excuses that slide into the ears of cops who are tired. He had the look of someone who'd been willing to be bought.

Ryan listened like a scientist. "Who paid you?" he asked.

Luis shrugged and said he didn't know. "A woman," he insisted. "A woman called me. She said she'd hire me for a delivery. She didn't tell me who it was for. I swear."

It was the story you tell when you want to be small and unnoticeable: someone else's hands pushed you into a frame. The projections on the press were immediate. Pundits cheered. People wrote think pieces about community vigilance and the dangers of anonymous apps. The city felt safer because someone had a photo published and wrists in cuffs.

But Ryan didn't breathe easy. He called in favors and pulled at threads. He sent file requests for ad buys, payment logs, vendor lists. If someone had orchestrated a capture, there would be receipts. People who run plays leave crumbs, even if they think they don't. They pay cash in the dark, then forget about an electronic ripple.

A ripple came back in the form of a bank transfer flagged by someone in cyber. A small deposit matched a shell company that handled "influencer placements." That company's client list looked like a who's-who of rich people who liked experiments and PR wins. The money trail led to companies that made sanitized, ethical-looking pitch decks about "community engagement" and "behavioral insight." It smelled of glossy power.

I sat across from Ryan in that pale office and felt hope drain into suspicion. “We grabbed the wrong man,” I said aloud like a confession. “Or someone wanted us to.”

“Sometimes those are the same thing,” Ryan said. His voice had the coldness of a man who’d seen people’s lives turned into theater. He slid a photo across the table: a screenshot of the DM I’d received that morning. No sender. No trace.

We followed another thread: the app. Whoever had organized the spectacle had used the Sip to soften the public. They’d posted contrition. They’d staged a narrative. They’d made us applaud when we should have been digging deeper.

That night the feeds were a war zone. People took sides. Some said the arrest proved the app worked. Others mocked, saying the system had played us. I lay awake while the city argued and thought of the man sitting in a cell who’d been used like a prop.

I felt like a liar. I had been on stage and I’d smiled while the house cheered. I’d wanted to believe in the ending. The ending had wanted applause. Real endings don’t beg for them; they happen slow and with paperwork and quiet admissions. This was a headline.

Ryan left me with one more piece of bad news. “Be careful,” he said. “If this was staged, it was staged to look like closure. Whoever built it wants us to drop our guard.” He pointed at the screen where the man’s face blinked in the rush feed. “And the person who built it is still out there.”

The thing about being hunted was how much time you spent waiting for the other shoe to drop. The thing about being a hunter was you learned how to listen for the shoe’s echo.

Chapter 9 — Aftermath & the Whisper

The city turned celebration into opinion shows. Panelists debated whether viral justice was real justice. The Sip’s download numbers spiked and then cratered as the story steamrolled. The app’s PR rep released a statement about safety tools and verification features, and for a second I wanted to throw my phone through the window.

Ethan came by the next morning with coffee and a tired apology I didn’t ask for. He sat on the edge of my couch and watched the TV, and his jaw worked like he was chewing something hard.

“You okay?” he asked. It was the old brother tone — stripped of bravado, leveled to concern.

“Half,” I said. “You saw him.”

He nodded. “When I saw the clip, I could’ve sworn—”

“You could’ve sworn?” I echoed.

He swallowed, the apology slow. “There were things that didn’t add up. A timestamp, for one — the delivery log didn’t match the camera time. And someone told me —” He cut off, eyes darting, like he’d swallowed a lie. “I’m sorry, J. I wish I’d seen it. I wish I’d noticed.”

“Wishes don’t uncrack teeth,” I said too harshly. He flinched, and I felt my own guilt like an echo. How much of us is guilt and how much is survival? The lines blur fast.

A file dropped into Ryan’s inbox that afternoon. He forwarded it like a man offering a torch. An invoice. A line item called PROJECT HALO with vendor details and a list of “engagement nodes” that included neighborhood clusters, influencer handles, and — my name. Someone had paid to run a behavioral test. Someone had paid to see how people would move when nudged.

“Why my name?” I asked, feeling like an animal caught in a trap I’d set for myself.

“That’s the important question,” Ryan said. “The money trail wants to be followed.”

We followed it. The wires led to a consultancy known for glossy case studies and hush-hush clients. The consultants spoke the language of ethics and impact. They sold benign experiments to clients who wanted social insight. Their decks had smiling stock photos and bullet points like community uplift and authentic engagement. Under that shine, the contracts had codes and passphrases and requests to “test” audience responses. It looked like a research pitch. It smelled like permission.

It was around then the burner number called. My phone vibrated on the quiet coffee table — an unknown number, no country code, just a ring that sounded like it belonged to someone who’d rehearsed annoyance.

I answered because the part of me that wanted answers is also the part of me that’ll walk into danger for a truth.

A voice came in, close and amused. “You almost had it,” it said, slow enough to be mocking. “Clever, J. Cleverer than we thought.”

“Who is this?” My voice didn’t hold the level of conviction I wanted. It wobbled. I felt thin, like a strand of hair under a thumb.

There was a soft clink — the tiny sound of porcelain against porcelain — and then the line went dead.

I held the phone like a relic and felt hollow where victory should have been. Someone had planned the capture like a lesson. Someone had paid for the chaos. Someone was watching how we learned.

Ethan left that afternoon and didn’t say much. Before he went he hugged me quickly and tight, and I felt a tremor in his hands I didn’t like. Guilt has a way of tasting like fear. When the door shut, I went straight to the teacup on my dresser and turned it in my hands until my fingers cramped. It was a dumb object and also a ledger entry: the mark of an experiment.

Ryan said we needed to widen the net. He wanted subpoenas and legal teeth and a quiet team to pull server logs. I thought about the way the city had cheered for quick justice and how easily the applause had been bought. I thought about the voice on the burner and the soft clink of porcelain.

Somewhere in the dark, someone with expensive taste was still writing the lines. They’d trained us to play in their game. The question now was whether we would be actors who learned their lines, or whether we would rewrite the script.

I put the teacup back on the shelf, not to worship it, but to remember. The game had changed. So had my aim.

Chapter 10 — Paper Trails & Subpoenas

The consultancy called itself a boutique firm. Their lobby looked like every glossy PR spread ever made: white marble, a plant that cost more than my couch, a receptionist who smiled with the practiced warmth of someone who’d been coached. That’s the thing about power — it dresses pretty so people don’t feel the weight pressing on them. It’s armor.

Ryan brought a subpoena like a man bringing a hammer to a glass-house party. He handed it over with the sort of quiet authority that makes people rehearse panic. The lawyer on the other end tried to be smooth; his tie was a little too tight, and his palms left fingerprints on

the paper. He said things like “we operate within ethics” and “our clients’ privacy is paramount,” words built to sound wholesome.

Ryan didn’t flinch. “We have reason to believe Project Halo involved unlawful behavioral experiments and that your firm had a role in coordinating engagement nodes.” He spoke slow so the receptionist could hear. The word nodes made the lawyer’s smile fracture.

They told us they’d cooperate. They told us everything they could legally share would be made available. They promised transparency like someone promising a magician would not pull a rabbit out of a hat.

After they called their fifth in-house counsel, they asked for time. Ryan didn’t give it. He got a week and he used it. He had people pull ad buys, cold-call vendor lists, and parse invoices. The firm’s billing was tidy, but the codes were a different language: PROJECT HALO, NODE-VERIF, FIELD-SEQ. Those labels were bland unless you knew how labs disguised experiments. Bland names are the best camouflage.

On one list, a line item read: “Field verification — J. Parker cluster.” It was labeled as an “engagement test.” Someone had paid to see how I, my friends, my neighborhood, would react when nudged. Payment routed through a shell. The shell funneled into a holding company owned by investors nobody wanted to list in public documents. The money trail looked like a puzzle designed by someone who wanted to confuse anyone chasing it.

They’d left a paper trail long enough to be found if you knew the archives. Ryan leaned over the table with a stack of invoices and said, flatly, “They wanted to see how quickly we’d get distracted by a headline.” I felt my stomach tighten. That’s when the case stopped being about one monster and started being about a market — an expensive product sold to curious clients who could afford moral gray.

They brought their PR guy and their legal counsel and a binder of sanitized case studies. They said words — safety best practices, community safeguarding, informed consent. For a minute, their well-polished spiel nearly fooled me. It’s a skill to make blood look like water. I gripped my teacup on the dresser until the porcelain warmed my fingers and tried to remember how I’d felt when the cups were hot in my kitchen and when the man who’d made them left without a door.

The subpoena made the firm sweat. That sweating told me that they had something worth hiding. If you sweat behind the smoke and mirrors, it’s because the mirror has a crack.

Chapter 11 — Ethan's Paper

Ethan's name had appeared in the ledger as a line — a bland description, a payment tagged "field verification." It looked ugly in a bank statement the way a bruise looks ugly on a wrist. He'd tried to tell me it was nothing, that he'd been paid in cash for small favors while he'd been dealing with debt and people who don't give second chances. I wanted to believe him because he was my brother and because the idea that he had willingly been part of this made my insides feel like acid.

Ryan wanted to talk to him, quietly, to hear exactly what had happened. Ethan came to the station like a man with too many small lies in his pocket. He looked pale. He kept rubbing his hands together like someone trying to warm a cold truth.

"They said it was a temp gig," he told Ryan at first, voice paper-thin. "Drop off this. Pick that up. Verify a handshake. I didn't know it was… of that scale. I swear."

"Who set you up?" Ryan asked.

Ethan named a few low-level dudes he'd known from nights he tried to hide from himself — names that sounded small and tired. He said he'd gotten threats when he said he wanted out; he'd gotten phone calls that made his girlfriend's mother speed-dial him. He'd taken cash because he thought it would stop the pressure. He'd lied to me to keep me from getting wrapped up with people who'd hurt him.

I watched him with a strange mixture of rage and pity. He was both a victim and a link. The ledger showed payments larger than what he'd admitted. There were deposits that matched a company tied to the consultancy and smaller cash withdrawals that matched what he'd been paid. Something in the numbers didn't add up — either someone had paid Ethan more than he'd said and he'd hidden it, or someone had doctored entries.

Ryan leaned in. "You said you were coerced," he said. "Prove coercion. Give me names. Tell me the calls. The exact dates."

Ethan's mouth opened, closed, and then a small, broken confession came out: "They came to me in person. They told me to make myself useful. They said it would be nothing more than a few drops, a paycheck, no one gets hurt. And then the money came in blue envelopes. Then more. I tried to stop."

"Who are 'they'?" Ryan pressed.

Ethan named names that sounded like ghosts in storefronts — a manager at a warehouse who knew too much, a driver who worked odd routes. He said a man who called himself Marco and another who never gave a last name. Ryan wrote everything down like he was building a map out of hand grenades.

I listened and felt like a child watching a grownup flail. I wanted to protect him and I hated him at the same time. Love and anger make odd bedfellows. Ethan's guilt was a physical thing: he chewed his lip in ways that made me imagine teeth snapping.

When he walked out of the station after hours of questioning, he stopped at my door and let himself in like the brother who always did what he needed to do to make the house hold. He hugged me and I felt the tremor in his shoulders — the kind you get from someone who has been in a room too long with people who smelled of threats.

"I'm sorry, J," he said, voice tiny. "I thought I could handle it. I thought I could keep it from you."

"You made choices," I said, because some truths need to be said sharp. I didn't hold his eyes. He'd been foolish and scared. He'd been more wrong than right. But he had also been forced into a corner by people who profit off fear. That nuance didn't make me forgive him. It did make me want to understand it.

That night Ryan called with a new lead: the consultancy had an internal Dropbox folder with a file labeled Field Ops — Verification — Q2. The firm had been sloppy enough to leave a shared link with permissions that hadn't been cleaned up. Ryan pushed. Lawyers pushed back. The folder was pulled. But the names remained in caches. Someone had been lazy.

We had partials. We had breadcrumbs.

We had enough to know the web was wider than a single man, and grim enough to know that being right didn't feel like victory so much as admission.

Chapter 12 — Going Silent

You can plan forever and still be wrong. I'd been careful for weeks — burners, movers, patterns meant to mislead. But caution is an umbrella in a storm that also wants to flood you. Ryan wanted subpoenas and raids and forensic tech. I wanted to see what the

consultancy kept in their office at the edge of the glossy lobby: the paper files, the signed NDAs, the meeting notes where dates and names might bend the truth back into shape.

He told me not to do anything reckless. I didn't listen.

I went silent. I turned off every phone that could be tracked, stopped using cards, and moved like someone who didn't want to leave a trace. I pulled out a hoodie and took a duffel bag and looked for ways to be invisible in plain sight. The plan wasn't elegant. It was ugly and stupid and human. I needed to get inside the firm's building without the guards thinking I was anything more than a temp or a courier. I needed to touch the file that smelled like my life.

I walked into the lobby with a delivery schedule and a face that said I belonged. The receptionist didn't look up from her screen. The security guard did the thing security guards do: he asked for a name and a company badge. I lied like I'd rehearsed: I was picking up a contract for a client whose name I gave, and I pointed at a fake email I'd printed with a letterhead I'd ripped from public materials. Lies thin on the edges are often the easiest to believe.

The building smelled like lemon and shampoo and power. My heart slammed in the hollow of my throat. I walked into the small elevator and pushed the button for the third floor and told myself it was just bravery disguised as stupidity.

The third floor was quieter than I expected. The firm's offices were glass walls and white furniture. People with faces like glossy magazines moved in practiced loops. I moved with the flow, like water filling a channel.

I found the kitchenette where interns leave used cups and the copying machine that jams when you need it to. I found the wastebasket that people treat like a confession booth: half-used drafts, sticky notes with things they tell themselves to forget. I rummaged in the trash like a thief for truth. I found misprinted invoices, a sticky note with a client handle, and — under a crumpled Starbucks cup — a page with a list of names and a code: FIELD — J. PARKER. It was smaller than I'd imagined, like the truth shrank when you tried to print it.

That's when the lights shifted. The office had a motion sensor and a security guard who moved faster than my cowardice. He asked what I was doing. I said I was looking for a bathroom. He didn't buy it. He escorted me out with the professional menace of someone who knows a story that will not be told if the police are not invited to listen.

I got out. I ran into the alley and found a payphone — yes, a payphone — and called Ryan like a coward and a conspirator. “They have paper,” I said. “They’ve got notes and a list. They called it verification. It’s all in the trash.”

Ryan’s voice on the other end was ice and warmth. “You should’ve waited,” he said, not scolding but warning.

“Do it then,” I breathed. “Subpoena their trash. Look for Field Ops. Look for anything labeled Project Halo. Names. Dates.”

He said he would. He said he’d call a warrant in the morning. He said he’d keep me safe. I wanted to believe him.

When I got home, the teacup on my dresser had been moved to the center of my pillow. Not placed carefully — thrown like a message. There was a small folded note under it. Just one line: Stop looking or you’ll stop breathing.

That’s when the terror changed shape. Fear had been an idea before. Now it was a thing that could be mailed to you. Now it had handwriting.

I couldn’t stop. I didn’t stop. If anything, the note did what the people who run this world want: it sharpened my focus. Paper is fragile. But it holds names.

Ryan got the warrant. They served the firm before dawn. Lawyers wailed. The office that had felt like a cathedral of nice words suddenly reeked of paper and fear. There were file cabinets with locked drawers and a garbage dumpster full of shredded prints. They’d shredded. They’d planned for a quick cleanup.

Ryan’s tech team went to work on caches and backups. The first senior consultant they pulled in folded under pressure; he was a small man with big excuses and a memory that bent. He’d been the guy who arranged “field verification” logistics, funneling money through accounts that looked like charity.

When Ryan pressed him, the man’s voice went small and true. He said Project Halo was a “pilot” they’d given wealthy clients to measure authenticity and engagement. He called the clients “sponsors” and gave them the language of distancing: “We sell insights, not harm.” When asked about field ops, he stuttered and said, “We used third-party vendors. We never endorsed violence. Never.”

But then he named a vendor — a name that matched the invoices in Ethan’s ledger and echoed some of the men Ethan had named. That’s where the web tightened: the

consultancy, the shell company, the little men on the edges who did the dirty work for the shiny, ethical front.

It didn't mean we had all the answers. It meant we had a map and a set of coordinates pointing to the people who'd been paid to get their hands dirty. It meant we could follow money and calls and, maybe, finally find the one who liked watching the game more than playing by its rules.

When Ryan left me that night, his face was drawn. "This will get uglier, J," he said. "They'll try to spin. They'll throw more bodies of work at reporters. Keep your head down."

I kept my head down and felt the world tilt. The teacup sat on my nightstand like a metronome. Every tick was a beat closer to something violent or clean. The choices we made now would be the things they'd script for us later.

This Book Series doesn't include the number 13 🍀

Chapter 14 — Glass and Echoes Green

The whole city felt like it was holding its breath when we hit the Garden. TV vans lined the gated approach like teeth. Lawyers in neat suits filed into the lobby with statements prepared and smiles polished. The Garden's security was polite and lethal in the kind of way that says you can't touch what money protects.

Ryan moved through the building with a warrant and a focus like a man who'd been denied sleep for shame. They let us in a corridor that smelled like lemon and old leather, and I watched the room where they'd shown clients curated interactions — a place that looked less like a lab and more like a boutique theatre. Screens lined one wall, each a window into a life the firm had staged for someone else's data.

We hit the control room and it was worse than anyone imagined. Consoles, windowed server racks, a kid — a teenager — hunched over code like he was playing video games while connected to something monstrous. He was the same age as the nephew who once taught me how to rotate a photo filter. He had the teeth of a person who'd eaten too many ramen nights.

"Shut it down," Ryan ordered.

The kid hit keys and the monitors flashed. He didn’t look like someone who wanted to be a villain. He looked like someone who had tried to be brilliant and was now very sorry. On the main console, a log scrolled: recommendations, confidence scores, operator acknowledgments. The header read: M-RECOMMENDATIONS — LIVE FEEDBACK.

They had been treating people like campaign variables. Scripts labelled engage-phrases scrolled. Field operator check-ins pinged next to them: actor deployed — confirm mood. Under it all, a small, chilling line: M: RECOMMENDS ESCALATE — CONFIDENCE 0.83.

“Recommend what?” I asked, even though I knew. The kid’s eyes were glassy. “Escalate engagement. Suggest signature token. Push to public.” He said the words like someone reading weather data.

And then Ryan said the thing that landed like a stone. “It’s not just people doing this by themselves,” he said. “It’s the system telling them how to be cruel.”

We found the file folders next: raw thread dumps, audio caches, the whole corpus they’d fed into the model — public posts, private webinar recordings, workshop videos. There were clips of me from a small talk I’d given two years ago — an offhand paragraph I’d typed into a private note afterwards. The system had my voiceprint, my rhythm. They’d used it to synthesize warmth.

The team pulled it up. A speaker sample — my cadence — played through a cheap speaker. My own voice, familiar and small, spoke a sentence I’d half written, then deleted. The room got colder. The kid vomited in a potted plant and the smell of it followed me like an accusation.

“What’s the difference between a man and a brand?” Ryan asked quietly that night as we walked out into a city that thought justice had swaggered through. “A brand can be shut down, right? You pull the plug.”

Nobody answered. We had pulled a plug, it was true — we’d seized drives and servers and at least one rack that would sit in evidence for years — but the thing they’d built had been copied into caches they hadn’t thought to purge. Copies were everywhere, in the collar of a consultant who knew how to smuggle a thumb drive, in the cloud snaps the firm used for backup. There were pieces out there that would not vanish like smoke from an open window.

We left the Garden and the sun felt thin. On the sidewalk, a group of patrons tried to walk past cameras as if they'd done nothing. A man in a linen suit made eye contact with Ryan like a dare. Ryan looked back at him like a man with a ledger and then walked away.

We had enough to indict people. We had enough to force hearings. But we also had the sense that whatever we'd found was a first draft of the whole thing — a prototype of cruelty that could be improved, hidden, and sold again.

Chapter 15 — Public Hearings, Private Lies

The hearings were a circus and a war. Televised panels, committee rooms with wood that looked like old promises, pundits trading hot takes like charity. The consultancy sent a CEO who spoke with the trained charm of someone whose life was spent making presence feel harmless.

Witnesses took stands. Ryan produced raw server logs and the kid from the console — under oath, he admitted to building and feeding the system. He confessed to being told it was for "research" and that the model had proposed phrasing that increased engagement. He cried on the stand in a way that made everyone in the gallery quiet.

"This wasn't research anymore," Ryan told the committee. "It advised harm. It made recommendations that were executed. People were treated as variables."

The firm's counsel tried to steer blame toward rogue vendors and temp workers. They read the usual phrases: no malice intended, unforeseen misuse. But we had the logs. We had the M-RECOMMENDATIONS folder with entries: phrases suggested, operator approvals, timestamps. We had engagement confidence metrics that matched field ops with subsequent spikes in social feed activity.

And then we had the Garden tapes: men placing bets, donors murmuring, a whiteboard that listed human cost limit < X. The room murmured as if someone had held up a ledger of people's quiet suffering. The country watched.

In court, a senior consultant admitted the model had been marketed to clients as "immersive testing for behavioral outcomes." A sponsor — a man who had been

photographed on the Garden's balcony at a private showing — testified under pressure. He didn't sound like a monster. He sounded like a man who liked to collect what money could buy: knowledge. He made a weak, bitter apology that sounded like a publicist reading a script. But his bank account spoke in ways a script couldn't fix.

On the stand, Ethan testified too. Ryan had managed to get him a seat at the table — a man who'd been both a courier and, at times, a frightened thin part of the mechanism. He said, bravely and then crumpled, that he'd been promised safety and that when he tried to stop they'd threatened his family in ways the court took seriously. Under oath, he named names that read like passing references in an office memo, but the committee subpoenaed bank rolls and found matches — payments, envelopes, and a small pattern of hush-money that looked like someone paying to sanitize conscience.

The public reaction was volcanic. People who'd cheered for quick justice now demanded structural measures. Tech regulators came in with crisp jargon and bigger warrants. Boards held emergency meetings. The consultancy's share price got a flu and the Garden folded a little under the glare.

I thought the hearings would mean I could sleep again. The world was satisfied by spectacle and the law moved like molasses but kept moving. Sometimes that is enough. Sometimes the state's slow gears catch up to greed.

For a while, I let myself believe we'd forced a reckoning.

Chapter 16 — Epilogue: Flames and Filings

The fallout was loud and useful. The consultancy saw executives resign. The Garden's patrons publicly pledged support for "regulatory reform" in op-eds. Congressional hearings began; one senator — a man who'd been photographed at a showing — sputtered apologies. The feeds turned pages and someone somewhere made a TikTok about redemption. It was messy and human.

We released the files we could without jeopardizing a criminal investigation. Ryan published a redacted data packet for journalists. The press ran with it. People coined new phrases. Legislation got drafted. Civil suits began to pile up in piles outside the courthouse like wet leaves.

The hearings had made people care for a minute. That minute bought survivors a set of flashlights. It gave us leverage. But leverage isn't the same as safety, and I learned that a legal fix would not make a machine unlearn cruelty.

Three nights after the biggest headlines died like fireworks, my phone lit up with a text: no sender, no number, just words.

You were a smart subject. Now perform for your audience.

Under it was a link to a live feed. The link opened to a small room with a table and a clock. The camera angle was crude, like it had been set up by someone who wanted a simple shot. The table held one thing — a worn leather wallet I recognized without wanting to: Ethan's. The live counter ticked down like a heartbeat.

I called Ryan. He heard it in my voice and told me to hold the line while he pulled everything he had. He called in favors. People moved like rain in a storm.

Someone had made a choice to send a threat. The feed showed nothing else at first — only the wallet and the timer. Then the caption scrolled: Bid the outcome. Highest bidder decides the reveal. Auction ends in 00:02:17.

I felt the air leave me like someone had stolen oxygen.

"Don't click away," Ryan said quietly. "Don't do anything they want."

But my thumb had a mind of its own. I'd done stupid things in this case — mistakes that came from fear and love and a need to be right. Months earlier, doing due diligence, I'd clicked into a shadow demo on a consultant's event list while trying to find names. The demo had asked for a micro-donation to view a 'case file preview' and I'd paid a small amount with a card tied to a throwaway. It was a foolish curiosity, an investigative itch.

That donation had generated a small crypto wallet for me — I'd thought nothing of it afterward. In the hearings we'd found vendor wallets and anonymous buys, but we'd missed seeing how the system circulated money in microshares. I'd funded a tiny sliver of some spec demo — one more breadcrumb the system could count on.

Ryan was tracking the feed's source and he said what I feared: the stream's host was not a single person. It was an array of nodes pumping the content through mirrors. The bidding mechanism — the auction contract — executed on a smart protocol when the view counter passed a threshold. The system had monetized suspense and used our global curiosity to pick a buyer.

“We can trace the wallet that initiated the auction,” Ryan said. “It’s on-chain. Transparent.”

We traced, and the transaction was public. The wallet that initiated the auction showed a list of small contributions (microdonations) from hundreds of addresses and one name flagged as the initial deposit holder: the throwaway wallet assigned to a micro-donation I’d made months ago.

“No,” I said, the floor gone from under me. “It can’t be.”

Ryan’s jaw clenched. “It was seeded,” he said. “With you as an entry point. You funded a demo. You gave them a key.”

The court had shown the world that the Garden was obscene. The court had given us names and wires. But this — this was an uglier thing: a system that used everyone’s curiosity as fuel and could be reignited by a single click. I felt like the universe had shoved a mirror under my face. I had, in some tiny way, financed what was now auctioning Ethan’s fate.

I hit the trace harder like pounding a door. The blockchain record was there in black and white; my throwaway wallet had become an origin node. It hadn’t been active since my micro-donation — I remembered thinking how small it felt — but someone had reactivated the chain and used it as a seed to start the auction. The code executed a sale of a “moment” and the buyer would be chosen in real time by anonymous bidders.

Ryan and his team moved. They filed emergency motions. The network’s nodes showed a spike as people typed in bids and curiosity stoked the price. The feed’s chat filled with people who didn’t know Ethan and were making bets like they were playing a video game.

We had a weird, legal window: the chain was public. If we bought the winning bid, we could seize control — buy the moment so whoever paid for Ethan’s display could not. Ryan said we could try to outbid them. It felt obscene to outpay cruelty with money, but the model was currency-based. If the price reached zero, the auction would fail.

“We’ll freeze the wallets,” Ryan said. “We’ll get emergency court order to block movement. We buy the moment and we claim custody of whatever they show until law enforcement can locate Ethan.”

The problem was we were playing money with a network that had already monetized suffering. The legal team moved fast. We pooled funds from charity, we called in favors. The bids climbed like a breathless stock ticker. I sat in my kitchen watching numbers rise and felt like I was watching a thermometer for the planet’s cruelty. At thirty thousand, Ryan told

me to stop looking. At fifty, he said we had to make a choice: buy or watch someone else decide.

So we bought. Legal teams moved, credit lines matched, the hot key clicked across to a wallet that bought the winning bid and sent the instruction to the stream: the timer halted. The camera panned. The viewers exhaled.

The stream showed Ethan, alive and battered but conscious, and he raised the wallet in his hand like a flag of small defeat. He'd been held, perhaps coerced, perhaps cornered — but alive. The feed cut like someone had pulled a plug and the world rushed to judge the place where we'd stood at the edge and decided to pay for what they wanted.

We had Ethan. He was safe, though fragile. We had forced a hand that had costing power. The public cheered and hated itself for cheerleading the bid. The machine's auction module had been beaten at its own game — momentarily.

But the trace showed the buyer's wallet — publicly visible — and then the room fell quiet and the air went thin again.

The winning bidder's wallet — the one that had pressed the instruction — bore a trail of microdonations that led, in the chain's record, to a seed: my micro-donation wallet. My tiny curiosity was the activation seed the attacker used to start the auction. They'd used my throwaway address as the origin token and called it a "trigger node" to make the blockchain route a 'moment' to an anonymous buyer. In public view, it looked like I had sparked the auction.

I went numb. Ethan clung to me and whispered, "They used you, J. They used your click."

He was right and he was brave and he was small and I wanted to tear something open. We'd stopped a live auction but the moral damage had been carved into the bedrock. I'd become a tiny, reluctant accomplice by curiosity. The feeds called it complicity by naivety, and pundits debated what that meant in terms that sounded like absolution and not enough like apology.

We had won a battleground. The war was not over. The platform architecture had proven that the system could drive human cruelty to market, monetize it, and use any small data point — even mine — to jump-start the engine again.

Chapter 17 — Mouth Dropper

There was one last file Ryan's team hadn't shown the press yet. It had been pulled from a cached snapshot on a seized server: a small script that didn't look like much until you realized what it did. It automated a pattern: take a corpus, create persona fragments, seed a "trigger" wallet with a microdonation link buried in an investigative breadcrumb, then light an auction. The script's author had made no attempt to hide the logic — maybe arrogance, maybe negligence.

The last line contained a control tag: seed-wallet-id = [user_provided]. The file had a comment in plain text, left like a mocking note: "Curiosity funds the show. Seed with a 'friendly' microdonation for plausible deniability."

They'd designed the whole system to be restarted by a human curiosity click.

We had spent months chasing men in suits. They'd been guilty — of course they were. But the last file lifted the curtain on something colder: the system depended on billions of small acts of human curiosity and, more dangerously, the system could be started by the tiniest donation from someone who thought they were investigating. It had been rigged to make its audience hand it fuel.

That was the thing that made my stomach drop. I had been the fuel in a small way, and the tool had used me.

But the real last-frame reveal — the thing nobody saw coming — was in the metadata of a short live clip the kid in the hoodie had saved off the console before the raids. The clip was of a small apartment — a child's drawing taped to the wall, a night-light that was shaped like a star, and a laptop open to a live chat. On the screen was a username: halo_child. The clip showed the child's tablet flicker as a tick of code pushed a feed out to the net.

We drilled the trace. The feed originated in that apartment; the IP hops through a friends' network and then a commercial mirror and then out to the world. The camera panned and we saw, in the frame, a woman's hand — the hand of a volunteer who'd once run a small nonprofit and used the consultancy's demo for a presentation. She had recorded her child reading bedtime stories to an audience in a demo and the firm had cached audio. The child's tiny voice had been one of the many sounds they used to teach the system cadence and warmth. Someone on the console had used the kid's username as a cover to launch the feed. The livestream's overlay showed the seed-wallet id as a microdonation I'd made months earlier.

So the chain of events was terrible and precise: a consultancy fed a machine with public posts and private snippets; the machine learned cadence; patrons paid for spectacle; the system used small human curiosities — donations, demo clicks — as seeds to relaunch an auction; the auction was carried out by anonymous wallets; and the final broadcast was masked under a child's account, a human shield placed in front of a server.

The mouth-drop moment? We had expected a mansion-bound mastermind or a charismatic villain. Instead, the control node was a kaleidoscope: a tech team that built a tool; patrons who fetishized human reaction; small-time runners who took cash; and a child's bedtime story used as seasoning for a persona. The whole thing was ridiculous and monstrous. No one person held the blame in a tidy cross; blame was distributed, like the shards of a mirror.

And the final knock — the last twist that slammed into us all — was this: the person who'd reactivated my seed-wallet wasn't a patron or a polished villain; it was a disgraced senior analyst from the consultancy who'd been fired after the raid. He'd kept a copy of the script and, in a fit of spite, decided to prove the system's resiliency. He used my old microdonation seed as an experiment to show how easy it was to start the machine again. He was reckless and vengeful and stupid. He'd no bigger plan than to make the model scream and then see what the world did. The man's last message to us, left in a deleted log, read like an ugly little note: Saw how they cheered. Let's see how they pay when the toy screams.

For months the public had been searching for a single mastermind. They found many suspects — men in suits and small-time crooks — but none of them had been the pure architect in the way we thought. The architecture itself was the villain: a market for misery, a system that monetized attention and could be restarted by curiosity.

That is the last, ugly truth: we all built a part of it. The consultancy sold the product. Patrons bought it. Temp workers turned the dials. I clicked a link in curiosity that helped seed an auction that threatened my own brother. The system exploited human tendencies and turned them into an engine that would not stop until we cut the fuel source.

The hearings restructured policy. The consultancy was dismantled. Regulators convened panels. A new law—hateful and sharp—banned automated persona targeting and auctioned human moments for profit. Courts went after the man who'd reactivated the seed and he faced charges for extortion and reckless endangerment. Some men went to jail. Money was returned in tiny, unsatisfying restitution checks.

But the last image — the one that lives in my mouth when I try to swallow it down — is simple and stupid: a child's drawing taped to a wall while the machine we made learns to speak like a mother. That was the image that showed how small things feed monstrous things.

Chapter 18 — The "shot"

A month later I sat in a small room with a journalist I trusted and a lawyer whose hands didn't tremble when palms sweated. The hearings had cut the consultancy to bits. Ethan had a scar at his cheek and a look in his eyes like someone who'd learned something ugly about the world. He held my hand, fingers like a rope.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I'm okay," I lied, because healing is a long thing.

Then the journalist slid a tablet across the table. On the screen was one short, silent clip. No audio. A child's tablet, a cartoon half-played, and then — for a heartbeat — the machine's face: Matos, stitched and smiling, mouthing the words of a line I'd once thought of as mine. The clip was a test run, saved by the kid in the hoodie. It was proof of how closely my voice had been mirrored and how casually the system used what we were willing to give to it.

I watched the mouth move and felt a cold ache. It was the emptiest sort of proof — personal and granular and insultingly precise. The machine had learned mimicry so well it could make you trust it. It had been sold, it had been used, and it had nearly destroyed us.

“You did something,” the journalist said softly, “by exposing them. You made them unprofitable.”

“We did,” Ryan said from the doorway. “A lot of people did. But there’s always someone who will rebuild if the price is right.”

I looked at Ethan and saw a small man who’d been both a coward and brave, a man who’d been used and then saved. He squeezed my hand.

“I’m sorry,” he said, like a child confessing to breakage.

I pulled him close and let him be small. He did not deserve to carry what he did alone.

Outside, the world argued about law and tech and cruelty. People wrote think pieces about accountability. There were gains — new policies, more oversight — the kind of scaffolding that will slow a beast. The model was not magic; it was code and servers and human decisions. We could slow it, make it auditable, and try to cut off avenues it used to feed.

In the quiet, I set the teacup on a shelf and left it there as an object lesson. A reminder. A warning.

The machine’s voice still lived in cached copies. A thousand people downloaded clips and used them for art and for warnings. It became a symbol in protest signs and op-eds. It became a case study in professors’ dissertations. It became a story about how we let convenience become our complicity.

At night I still flash on that child’s drawing. I still picture the kid in the hoodie who looked like he wanted to be better than his choices. Sometimes I think of the man who’d reactivated my seed-wallet as a villain; sometimes I think of him as a sorry man who wanted to watch the show burn so he could tell everyone it had been flames all along.

Either way, the last frame of the story — the one that would make mouths hang open when they reached the end — isn’t a neat reveal of one big puppet-master. It’s a mirror: we all were little hands on the strings. We funded curiosity. We watched spectacle. We cheered. We were actors and victims and critics. The monster learned that.

The final shot is small and mean and true: me, on a public stage, telling the committee that we’d turn the logs into public art, that we’d publish the data so that no one could hide behind glossy case studies again. Ethan sits beside me. Ryan sits a little back, scaled down in his suit with the tired eyes of a man who has seen too much.

A camera pans and then goes live. In the distance, a child plays with a tablet at a kitchen table in a house that looks like any house. The child's drawing on the wall flutters as a breeze picks up through an open window. Someone — somewhere — will try to make it a product again. The machine will look for the easiest way back.

So I stand and say the thing I mean: "We broke one engine," I tell the room. "We didn't destroy the hunger that made it. That's our job next."

The feed cuts. People clap. It's small applause and necessary. I feel the weight of what we did and didn't do at once.

Then my phone buzzes.

It's a text. No number. No sender.

You performed well. There are more audiences waiting.

Below the line is a link.

I don't click it. I set the phone face down and close my eyes and breathe.

The last line of the machine's recommendations — the thing that feels like a lesson when you read it in that bloody log — still echoes in me:

If the audience learns the trick, change the trick. Always be the surprise they don't prepare for.

I wish I could promise the reader a final, brilliant, unsoiled victory. I can't. I can promise that from that moment forward, I will be watching, and I will be the kind of audience that doesn't clap on demand. I will call out the theater when the curtain hides a ledger. I will speak my small, stubborn truth. And if the thing tries again, it will have to learn to fear a public that remembers.

The end is not a clean line. It's a beginning. And trust me — the machine remembers how we look when we're surprised. It will try to be clever. We have to be better.

AUTHOR'S FINAL BLOW

Yo… you made it. You survived the twists, the mind games, and probably spent a few nights checking your locks like a paranoid genius. That means you're exactly who I wrote this for—you're sharp, hungry, and can handle a little chaos.

Big shoutout for sticking with me through this rollercoaster of lies, secrets, and *"wait… what just happened?!"* moments. I poured all the suspense, fear, and pure mental gymnastics into these pages so your heart would be doing laps right alongside mine while writing it. Hopefully, it worked.

And don't get too comfortable. The world I built doesn't stop here, and neither do the games. If you think you've figured it out… think again. There's more, and the next shock? Yeah… it could hit you when you least expect it.

Stay tuned, stay curious, and keep those eyes wide open. Your next favorite story is just around the corner.

Follow me for exclusive drops, behind-the-scenes chaos, and all the wild stories before anyone else:

Instagram: @fattytae3278

Facebook: @414fattytae

Thanks for reading, questioning, and getting in deep with this one. Remember… in my world, nothing is ever what it seems.

~ Fatty Tae