

# Vengeful

*A novella*

*by*

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*Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies.*

*– Aristotle*

*“Yet each man kills the thing he loves*

*By each let this be heard*

*Some do it with a bitter look*

*Some with a flattering word*

*The coward does it with a kiss*

*The brave man with a sword”*

*– Oscar Wilde, The Ballad of Reading Gaol*

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## First

A *gun*, she jotted down thoughtfully. Maybe she should consider a gun, shot at point-blank range. *Click. Pew. Pew.* With a silencer it'd sound like a fist through a pile of snow or a pup dropped on a pillow. She'd use a small revolver, womanly and petite, that she could hide in her purse. A Lady Smith or a Ruger LC9. Not purple or pink, but still quite fancy.

She closed her eyes and imagined it—pieces of his despicable brain, squishy and moist, splattered all over the wall like translucent jelly. She pictured his limp body sprawled on the slick, concrete floor, arms twitching, head rolling from side to side. Helpless. Beaten. She shuddered with delight.

Looking furtively around, she wondered, could these people read her thoughts? Could he? She heard the muted *tap tap* of keyboards around her, the sudden giggle and stray comment, an acoustic medley of phone calls, footsteps, and gently sifted coffee cups. She craned her neck to take a peek into his cubicle. The door of his cabin was open, as always.

“Two right, two left, and I can see your fat head.” How they'd laughed when she'd said that.

“It rhymes,” he'd said. “You're so smart. And that's why I love you.”

Because she could rhyme. And she could cook. And she was pretty. And smart. And funny. She was everything he was seeking.

She was, of course, none of them now.

*Bang. Bang.* No silencer. She wanted the racket. She wanted him to hear it, feel her fury in that noise. With eyes narrowed, she'd clasp both hands on the revolver and fire, killing him in cold blood or warm blood, it was quite confusing. There would be two bullets, not one. One in his head and one in his heart. She would stand by and watch the blood gush out of him. Splattered on her, around her.

She closed her eyes and savored the look of sudden shock on his face, eyes wide open, staring into space. She imagined his floppy hair matted with blood, hair he was so proud of, that she used to ruffle lovingly, now red, sticky, and clotted.

She licked her lips.

"You are obsessed with him, Mia."

She jumped, realizing she'd been staring and stammered, "I was . . . I was . . . just thinking."

"What's that?" Daphne asked, leaning closer.

"Nothing." Mia pushed the sheet of paper under her desktop's keyboard.

"You were writing something."

"It's nothing important."

Daphne sighed. "I've been by your side for ten minutes and you haven't even noticed. You had this glazed expression on your face and a mysterious smile. Quite a spectacle." She jerked a thumb toward his cubicle. "You've got to let go of him, you know. It has been two months now."

"Yeah, I know."

"He doesn't even notice you anymore."

"Yeah, I know."

“That’s what you say each time,” Daphne remarked. “And then you do nothing.”

“It hurts,” Mia said softly. She moved her fingers over the keyboard and removed a speck of dust. “It hurts so much,” she said.

“I know. But you’ve got to let it go.” Settling down next to her, Daphne whispered, “I hear he’s already going out with someone else. Some new, young chick.”

Her heart constricted painfully. She mumbled, “Long hair, short skirt. Pretty, young thing.”

“So, you’ve noticed.”

Mia nodded, “They’re not trying to hide it very much.”

Thursday, the week before, she’d stumbled into the foyer and into the lift to find them standing inside, Shashank and his new muse, next to each other, like an origami paper display. They’d stared in mild amusement as she ran in, hands waving, calling out, hoping whoever was inside would be kind enough to hold the doors apart till she’d reached it. She had not realized it was them until the doors closed and she was trapped inside.

There they’d stood, at the far back, looking her down and up—Shashank with an amused grin laced with faint contempt, and the newbie, her crimson lips curled into a tentative smile.

“Sorry, sorry,” Mia had wheezed, pulling her handbag close and adjusting her skirt down. “That darn traffic. I am so late.”

Indistinct bobbing of heads.

She’d nodded at Shashank, feeling awkward but bludgeoning through. “Hi, Shank. Haven’t seen you in a while.”

He'd shrugged. "I'm always around."

"How's work going?"

"Going good." At least he had spoken to her. *That must mean something*, Mia had thought.

"What's keeping you busy these days?" she'd asked.

"We've been recruiting like crazy," he'd replied, self-consciously brushing back his hair. "Not just for our team but others, as well."

"Thought as much. There's a new face on the floor every day."

She'd seen it then. A shy, oblique glance. Just a little, about twenty degrees to the side. A slight twist of the neck and quickly back. Sign of a shared secret, an implicit understanding, ringing with suggestion.

Not a secret for her, though. Hadn't she been where this crimson-lipped chick was just a few months ago? Her and Shashank. Thinner, younger, prettier, this one might be, but Mia had been there. And another—oh, yes, it had been Daphne, but Mia hadn't known her very well then—and she'd asked, *So do you two work together?*

*No!* They'd spoken at the same time. She'd looked up at him bashfully and blushed.

There had been no need to say more.

That love, that diffidence, that adoration had all but congealed to loathing now at the bottom of her heart.

Daphne was speaking again. "Staring at him won't help."

"I know," she muttered. "What does one do?"

"Be like me. Never fall in love."



“Never fall in love. Never have friends. That’s you. Running the world’s loners’ club.”

“I have you.”

“So help me.”

Daphne flicked back some hair from her forehead. “It’ll take awhile to get over,” she said. “Breakups are not easy.”

“Thank you!”

“Have you picked up your things from his place?”

“Not yet.”

“You should. That gives closure.”

“I will soon. I have to, I know.”

“He started seeing her while he was with you, did you know that?”

Mia nodded slowly.

Daphne picked up the pen she had dropped and placed it back on the table. Getting up she took a long, languid stretch, unmindful of neighboring eyes and declared, “It’s a pity it didn’t work out between you two. You’ve been together for what, six months?”

“That’s right,” Mia said.

Mia hadn’t been planning on falling in love and having her heart broken. Nearing thirty, she had been depending on her old parents to find her the right match, some appropriate, high-earning, foreign-educated, smooth-talking, yet true-to-his-Indian-roots investment banker. They had been trying for a while, and Mia had only recently stopped enjoying the process of arranged dating with its awkward small talk and subtle boasts.

Thenceforth she'd begun scouting in her office for an eligible match. The second floor, where she'd worked for a while as a trainee in the Customer Relations department yielded very little result, inundated by women as it was. Soon bored, she had asked for a transfer to the Accounts department on the third floor, and given her educational qualification and work performance, she'd gotten it. And her life had taken an exciting turn.

With a move from the second to the third floor, her parking spot had changed, too, and that's where she'd met him first, even before she'd seen him on the floor. Six foot two, long face, long legs, strong chin, a head full of wayward hair, face full of supercilious smiles, Shashank Rakshit had been parking the Audi A4 in his designated spot when she brushed past with her Honda Activa, scraping the glossy metal of his car.

*"What the hell!" he yelled. She stopped ahead.*

*"Why are you parked there?" she yelled back. She knew the rules all right.*

*Scream before the other did and confuse everyone as to the identity of the injured party.*

*He jumped out and walked to her car, his legs swimming in the dank parking lot air. Leaning over to her window, he tapped on it. Very reluctantly, she rolled it down.*

*"You'll pay for it. I know who you are," he said.*

*She stared at those liquid brown eyes, his mafia-like threat ringing in her ears.*

*"What do you mean? Very powerful, are we?" Mia retorted.*

*"Mia Singh." He grinned. "I know who you are."*

*Shit!*

*"So?" she asked, her voice shaking.*

*“Even if you don’t pay, I can get it taken from your salary, you know.” His grin widened, square white teeth inside a strong jaw. “I’m the head of Human Resources.”*

She’d gotten off lightly that day, not having to pay for the dent, and nothing out of her payroll, either; she’d checked every month. But they’d begun to notice each other. After a few tentative corridor smiles and water cooler small talk, they’d eaten together in the canteen once and then had started to go out.

Six months—four of which she had been convinced she’d found the father of her babies.

“He was always bad news,” Daphne declared. A self-satisfied nod later—“I’d told you.”

“Did you know any of the women he dated before?” Mia asked, subdued.

Daphne shook her head, “Not really. He’s secretive. At least he used to be. But I do know one before you.”

“Who?”

“Do you know Vaidehi from Transport? The one that makes the rosters?”

“That short chick with a mass of curls? Yeah, I know her,” Mia said. “He was involved with her?”

“Yup, that wasn’t for long, though. As long as you and him maybe. Six months or so. Only difference is that she hadn’t moved in with him.”

“Yeah, that sucks. Should’ve taken it slower.”

“She was a bigger mess than you, in any case,” Daphne said. “Didn’t show up in the office for days. Her colleagues got so worried they went to her apartment to make sure she hadn’t offed herself.”

“Why would she do something like that?” Mia scoffed.

Daphne said reproachfully, “Not everyone is as forward as you, Mia Madam. She belonged to a conservative Brahmin family. And the things Shashank does, you know right? You’ve told me so yourself.”

“Her colleagues knew about that!” Mia said, trying to obliterate the lurid images that had surfaced in her memory.

“Nah, but they could see something was wrong with her,” Daphne said.

“And how do *you* know so much?”

“I talked to Vaidehi,” Daphne said. “I found her crying in the mailroom one day and she told me.”

“Just like that?”

“I’d caught her in a weak moment,” Daphne said. “And she was grateful to be heard.”

“She should’ve gone to therapy,” Mia muttered.

“Again, Madam, she’d neither the money nor the means. Unlike you.”

Mia was distracted for a minute by a loud celebratory yell that emerged from one end of the office. Several heads rose and there were high fives—a commemoration of correctly predicting the outcome of last night’s cricket match, Mia surmised.

She directed her attention back to Daphne and mused at what an oddball she was. Scatterbrained, nosy, alternately garrulous and sullen, it’d seem as though she also took great care to look her part. Her long, flat hair was tied loosely back from her wide face, her eyes were unblinking, her lips slightly agape, as if in anticipation of chancing upon something stirring. The boxy Chinese collar blouse, which she so preferred and owned in