

Vengeful

a novella

by Smita Bhattacharya

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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.”

“And you,” Mia retorted, eyebrows raised. She knew that Daphne belonged to an affluent family, part of whose wealth came from dubious means, or so it was rumored. Daphne had obliquely confirmed the rumor herself, with some sort of flippant pride. *My dad knows some people, it’s true.*

They were 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 several colors, was lilac today, flapping loosely over her capacious black polyester trousers. Her ears were puttylike and droopy, somewhat like that of a baby elephant, Mia thought. In fact, she did not look very unlike a baby elephant, Mia concluded, feeling at the same time pleased and ashamed of her astute observations.

Oblivious to what was going on in Mia's head, Daphne said, "She took a long time to get over it." She then added smugly, "I'd warned you about him."

"Only too late!"

"Even so."

Mia wished Daphne would leave so she could get back to the comfort of her thoughts.

"I thought he could change," Mia said, feeling lame. How many times had she made fun of girlfriends who told her that before? "Damn! I wish I'd known about him sooner."

"Nothing would've changed. You were smitten."

Bitch.

"He's grown worse with each new one." Daphne got to her feet. Turning around, she added, "Hope this new one fares better."

Six months together. Love. Pain. Love. Pain. Love. Pain.

And now, it was only that.

Pain.

Second

A *knife*, she jotted down next. A sharp butcher's knife, the kind she'd seen on cookery shows, its jagged ends sawing through fruits plump with juice, sliced to perfection, not a single piece astray. She tried to recall what other kinds of knives there were. There was a different kind used to cut through raw meat, and sometimes chefs used a chopping block. A butcher's block, it was called. She had one at home, a remnant of her mother's visit from over three years ago. She never visited anymore.

Mia pictured his head on the coarse surface, his body struggling as she held him down . . . Damn, he was squirming too much . . . and he was way too strong . . .

Or she could slash his ugly wrists and then plunge the knife into his heart . . . slowly watch him die . . . begging for sweet mercy . . .

A guillotine! That sounded like an idea, she sighed. It was impractical, but oh so appropriate.

She'd seen them together again, Shashank and Surabhi, eating in the canteen one day, sitting alongside with their shoulders touching, sneaking food from the other's plates. The girl had been laughing at something he'd said—which was never very funny, Mia thought now—and nudged him to stop.

Stop now, Shank. Stop making me laugh.

Enough! I'll choke on my food. Will you like that? If I am gone, will you like that? Will you find someone else to love you and feed you and take you to bed? Will you? Will you? Will you?

She hated that voice in her head. She hated it. Hated it. Hated him.

"I hear he's going to Europe for a company-sponsored trip," Daphne remarked, unwrapping her sandwich.

"Oh yeah?"

"Luck is his second name, huh?"

"Hmm," Mia said, feigning disinterest. "Where's he going?"

"Prague, I think. I also hear a few team members will join him."

"Uh . . . huh."

"Including Surabhi."

Mia winced. She imagined the knife flipping around and gnawing into her heart, turning slowly, grating on her like a slow, rusty wheel, hurting her till she closed her eyes in pain.

She thought of that humid summer day when they'd skipped the office and booked a suite in the Taj Hotel. They'd stayed the night.

"Paris?" He grinned into her ear. "For honeymoon?"

"No, Prague," she replied. "More exclusive. And I've been to Paris."

"I've been to neither." His lips grazed her ear. "You're so awesome."

She giggled into the pillow while he traced his fingers along the small of her back.

"So, Prague it is."

She turned around and looked at him, head propped on one hand. "You're thinking about it?"

“I think—” he paused “—it’s about time. You make me feel . . . make me feel”—it seemed he was trying to grasp the words—“like I’m at home. Complete.”

She giggled again, silly, demure, freshly in love.

“Do you think we should start telling people about us?” she asked.

He hesitated. “We’re happy. That’s what matters. Other people . . . well, they complicate things.”

“I’d like to,” Mia said softly.

“Soon, Mee Mee, soon. We’ll do it in a big way. It’s gonna be everything you’ve ever dreamed.”

A sweet-smelling, wholesome joy filled her heart. They breathed together in tandem, lost in thought.

“Daphne says you can never change,” she said after a while.

“Who?”

“Daphne, that girl in accounts. She’s the only one I know on the floor now, a friendly chick.”

“I thought you didn’t know anyone yet.”

“She hangs around sometimes. We don’t talk all that much.”

“What has she told you about me?” He made a face of mock disdain and Mia laughed.

“Nothing like that,” she said. “Just that good-looking men like you are usually not the honest kind.”

“What else?”

“That you’ve been with other women before. Some in our office even.”

“And . . . ?”

“That you’d soon move on to someone else,” Mia murmured. “She says this, not me. She’s quite the disgruntled, cynical type.”

He kissed her nose and looked her in the eye.

“And what do you think?”

“You promise to look at no one else for the rest of your life?”

“I promise.”

She lay down next to him with a sigh, content and happy, his arms covering her in an embrace, all encompassing. It was overwhelming, the love she felt for him, and every part of her body ached within its tight confines, screaming to fly.

Fucking naive love.

Third

Poison, she added third on the list. That which kills slowly. Which ones did she know of? Cyanide and Arsenic. Most people used those. No, those were too risky and too obvious. Sleeping pills? But one needed to take a lot of them and were they even available over the counter? She had no idea. Who could she ask? There must be other sorts of poisons.

Belladonna! Hadn't she read about that somewhere? No, she'd seen it in one of the *CSI* episodes. It had many fancy names—deadly nightshade, devil's berries, death cherries, the star of the poison plants. It caused hallucinations and slowed the pulse when taken in excess. She remembered the victim in that episode as clear as memories of her flat tire that morning: burgundy lips open wide and pupils dilated like a stupefied Barbie. Seductive even in death.

She would arrive earlier than everyone else each morning, sneak into his office when the cleaning staff opened it and pour a few drops into his coffee cup, the one with the smiling, color-changing Garfield that he always kept on the edge of his table. And each time he drank his coffee, he would die a little, bit by bit, sip by sip.

But what if he noticed those drops and realized it was more than just water? What if the cleaning crew decided to wash the cup themselves, to ensure everything in the room was spick-and-span when he arrived?

Damn! Too many ifs and buts. Nothing was working.

"How many months has it been between them?" Daphne asked, popping up beside her.

Mia folded her list into four even squares and tucked it inside her top desk drawer.

"He's getting more blatant by the day. Doesn't even bother to hide his girl anymore." Daphne remarked.

"Who?" Mia asked, distractedly.

"Come on, Mia!"

"What?"

Daphne turned to her. "Don't pretend now. Shank and Su. I caught her yesterday at the lobby and asked her if she was all packed and ready to go. She said, 'What is there to pack?'"

"Yeah, so?"

"That was rude, don't you think? You think she doesn't like me?"

"Yeah, maybe. You can be quite brusque."

Daphne scowled. "Or maybe she knows I'm your friend and actually dislikes you."

"Why do you care if she likes you or not?"

"It's just gossip, man!" Daphne exclaimed. "What's with you? You need a whiskey or two to calm down a notch."

"I don't drink whiskey," Mia said, emptying the remainder of her coffee into the bin. "Anyway, who cares what's going on between them?" she murmured. "He left me. That's what matters."

"Three months they've been seeing each other," Daphne said thoughtfully. "Not too long."

"Long enough," Mia replied.

Mia had seen signs of it already. The sullen silences, the puffy eyes, the bruises on her arms. The obsessive chewing on her lower lip when she was with him. Whenever Mia observed her, Surabhi would glare at him as he flirted with a new set of girls, the year's intake of college graduates.

It's easy to know when you're in the first flush of love. Your heart beats faster at his sight, you spend sleepless nights dreaming of being together, wondering what you'd say when you met him the next day, what you'd wear, how maybe you'd touch, how maybe you'd kiss. The stolen glances, the empty flattery, the meaningless gifts, the endless euphoria, the blood throbbing in your veins, slowly wearing away the delicate edges, and you'd wonder if you'd survive this and marvel why you didn't want to.

But it's hard to know when it stops.

* * *

That night at her apartment, everything came to a standstill when love stopped. The air around her grew still, her voice rose in panic, her mouth opened wide to let out gasps of labored breath. It was just him and her, as if suspended on a stage with blinding lights, like actors in a play confused about their lines.

"Can you really stop loving?" Mia screamed at him. "How is that even possible?"

"I don't know. I can't explain it." He seemed sorry, contrite even. "I just don't feel it anymore."

"We made plans to marry. You said you loved me!" She shook him hard. "Are you listening to me?"

He rose as if to leave. "We should talk about it when you are calmer."

She looked up at him, the beautiful arched nose, the eyes that were wide set yet curiously shifty, and the beefy jaw. She took in all this and her shoulders heaved, overcome by sorrow. The tears came.

He stood by awkwardly while she wept.

"It's that new girl, isn't it? The one you spend all your time with now?"

"No, Mia. She's only a member of my team."

"Yeah, sure."

"Sometimes people are just not meant to be. And lately, we've been fighting so much . . ." he trailed off.

She looked up sharply. "Have we? What about?"

He shifted his weight. "Like last Saturday, when you did not want to go watch the match at the bar—"

"I did not want to go because I hate football and we've been watching too much of it recently. But you went anyway," she said. "And you weren't alone, were you?"

"I was with friends."

"I know all your friends," she said softly. "No, I remember now. I heard her voice." Mia smiled, feeling deliciously foolish, marveling at her profound loss of sensibility. "I heard her."

"She wasn't there," he said.

"And to think I trusted you so much," she murmured, wiping her cheek. "Despite . . ." She raised her arms and her sleeves fell back. Three round purple bruises showed up like thick wristlets.

"You enjoyed it while we were at it," Shashank commented, his tone dry.

"You enjoyed it. I played along 'cause I loved you and didn't want to annoy you," she snapped. "And that's how we've always been." A sob escaped her.

He said uneasily, "Listen, Mia, don't play the victim now. I don't want to talk about this anymore. It's not like we've been seeing each other for very long."

"We haven't," she said softly, misery nudging her toward numbness.

"Let's move on."

"Yeah." Mia nodded. "We should."

"We had it good, but it wasn't meant to last." He stopped. "Are you"—he seemed confused—"you are okay with this?"

"Yeah, it is what it is," she said. "You don't care for me anymore, and I've got to move on."

"Oh," he murmured. "Well . . . I guess . . . thank you for understanding." He considered her for a minute. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah." She nodded again. "Why? Are you not?"

"Um . . . no I'm good," he said quickly.

"So am I."

"I'll leave, then." He paused near the door. "Good-bye."

"Yeah, okay," she said, looking away, her insides cold.

She stared at his retreating back and felt the life seep out of her body.

* * *

"There's something wrong with her," Daphne was saying.

"Now you're just humoring me," Mia said.

"No, really! Haven't you seen it?"

"What?"

"The extremes she goes through when they are together? Sometimes she's all happy and giggly, and the next moment she's sullen and withdrawn."

"Women! What do you know?"

"Ah, but she doesn't seem like your usual type—the boundaries of her emotions seem stretched on either side, if you know what I mean," Daphne said. "Always that extra bit of emotion as a topping over what normal people like you and I might feel, for example."

Rat poison. Easy to get ahold of and inexpensive. No one would question it getting into his food, and it could be ruled an accident. Why? His new girlfriend could've put it there!

Mia sighed. “He does drive people to extremes,” she said.

“On Monday, she attacked the pasta on her plate like she was murdering it. He was explaining something to her, all calm and sedate, but she was having none of it.” Daphne shrugged. “His fabled charm is losing its edge, it seems.”

“Are you writing a thesis on him?” Mia snapped. “Why do you talk so much about him all the time?” *And why to me?* she wanted to add, as if Daphne was taking particular pleasure in raking up her pain.

“But, Mia, he’s an interesting case study,” Daphne protested. “His carrying-on brings some color into my dull life.”

“Aren’t there any others like him on this floor? In this office?”

Daphne shook her head. “Nah, not even close.”

But Mia was feeling combative. “Make a few friends,” she said. “They call you ‘Lonely D’ on this floor. Do you know that?”

“What?!” Daphne stiffened in her chair.

Mia bit her lip. “Hey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

Daphne rose to leave.

“Don’t go,” Mia implored.

“They don’t call me that,” Daphne said softly.

Mia was quiet.

“I don’t talk to many people,” she said. “But I talk to you, and I like you.”

“I like you, too,” Mia said, feeling sorry. Daphne had been the first to make her feel welcome on the floor and the only one who’d helped appease her post-breakup agony. It was only recently that Mia had started to know a few more around the water cooler, the smoking area, and those that hung around in the fire escape corridor. And one day, just as she was leaving with her bottle filled from the cooler, she’d overheard one of them say, *Pudgy M and Lonely D—what a pair they make.*

She’d merely passed over the hurt that she’d felt toward Daphne.

“Sorry, Daph,” Mia said. “Please forget what I said.”

“I forgive you this time, but don’t do that again.”

“Yeah, sorry.”

Daphne sat down and they stayed quiet for a minute, looking at nothing, thinking of a lot.

“Something is wrong with her, you think?” Daphne started again and Mia sighed inwardly.

“He’s getting tired of her,” Mia said, playing to her audience.

“Was it better with you?”

“I thought we were madly in love till the very last day when he broke it off.”

“Really?”

“The good times we’ve had—drinking, smoking up, chatting till late in the night . . .” Mia pursed her lips to quell the jumble of feelings that rose inside her. “Out on the balcony . . . him on the ledge . . . too small for him, and I’ve told him so many times. But he doesn’t care. Wouldn’t drink anywhere else. Just does what he likes, that man.”

“Don’t think you’re anything special. He probably has the same routine with all his women. And now also with Surabhi.”

“Yeah,” Mia said softly. “But it felt pretty good back then.”

“Okay. These are the happy stories. I get it. But what about the times when he hurt you? I mean *physically* hurt you.”

“Despite that,” she murmured. “He made even that feel worthwhile.”

Daphne rolled her eyes.

“In Surabhi’s case, there’s something odd going on, something I can’t quite put a finger on,” she said.

“She’s young and in love,” Mia said mildly. “Like I used to be.”

“But they’re fighting!”

“Yeah, that’s normal when you’re a couple,” Mia said. “Not a deal breaker.”

She’d heard them once, stomping inside the ladies washroom, fighting furiously in undertones. She’d only heard Surabhi at first, and wondered who she was arguing with till his voice rose and she’d realized that it was a man, and then when it was louder, that it was him!

She reached for the latch of her bathroom stall in panic, testing to see if it was locked, hoping they wouldn’t know she was inside. She prayed that someone would come in and drive them away.

And all the while her ears strained to hear what they were saying.

“Gifts? I don’t care for your cheap gifts. For every trinket you’ve given me, I’ve given you so much more!” Surabhi screamed.

“Stop complaining, woman,” he snapped. “I don’t even know what you want from me.”

“Don’t go around flirting with every piece of flesh you see,” she hissed. “You dirty man!”

“Are we married?” he asked. “I’m not bound to you.”

“You treat me like such shit,” she screamed. “I hate you!”

Then something bumped hard against a wall, and Mia jumped. Shrinking back, she held her breath till she heard them run outside. When she finished and walked out, they were gone, leaving the main door open and the door’s knob broken.

“She’s only a child,” Daphne said. “Low on maturity.”

“Uh-huh. Not low on romance, it would seem,” Mia said, feeling bitter.

“That guy,” Daphne said. “He can drive anyone nuts. A rotten apple.”

A rotting apple wrecks everything it touches, even the purest. No matter how much you keep away the decay, it catches, latches on, and then it spreads.

Fourth

Death by strangulation. Could she manage that? She was short and had put on some weight in the past months. He, on the other hand, was over six feet tall, strong and athletic. Maybe she could drug him before. He liked his weed, didn't he? Some weed, some cajoling, and then a nylon rope around his narrow throat. She used to work out regularly. There were some muscles in her, so she was sure she could choke the very life out of him. She'd choke him tighter and tighter as his arms flayed and his legs thrashed and his eyes begged for mercy.

Or a swift karate chop to his neck. Target the solar plexus, *bam, wham*, down and out. That'd be clean and quick, though fraught with risks. What if he was alert enough to give one or two chops back? She wouldn't survive it.

"It's more humiliating than painful," Mia explained to Daphne. "I mean, we were like the ideal couple. And now I feel like a failure."

Daphne clucked. "Hard luck, babe."

"I know he was seeing some other chick before me. I thought, *Wow! He likes me more than that one and it's like we are made for each other. Meant to be.*"

"I always knew he was a good-for-nothing."

"You said once that we looked good together."

"People only hear what they want to hear when in love."

"You lied?"

Daphne shrugged. It could've meant anything.

"Come on, Daphne. You're supposed to be supportive."

"I'm being so!"

"How? I don't see it."

"I'm telling you to give it some time," she said softly. "This will pass."

"But I don't want it to. I want him to love me."

"Now you're whining," Daphne said wryly. "It's seeing him with that girl that's hurting you more."

"I don't know. It's just so hard."

"Give it time."

Four months. Five months. Six months.

"It still hurts as much, Daph."

"I know, darling. I know."

"What do I do?"

"For one, don't make friends with your rival." Daphne raised an eyebrow. "How's that working out for you?"

There was something portentous in the question, Mia was certain, although she couldn't quite put her finger on it. Her mind drifted to what Daphne was referring to—the curious incidents of the past few weeks.

Despite her ardent prayers and best efforts, Mia had bumped into either Shashank or Surabhi at least once each day, often more than once, sometimes together, sometimes alone. Mostly she avoided them by the usual methods of ducking behind pillars or slowing down her steps to go another route, pretending she was planning to go there anyway. Shashank ignored her for the most part, staring past her unless his eyes locked with hers, in which case she was granted a generous dose of his supercilious sunshine. Mia rarely made efforts to avoid Surabhi unless Surabhi was with Shashank, and when their lone paths did cross, she walked past her as if skirting an invisible ticking time bomb.

Mia often wondered if she should request a shift to another department so she could leave this floor altogether. But that wouldn't be feasible at this point in time, not so soon after she'd moved to the Accounting department. She could leave the company altogether, but that would trigger the periodic tirade from her parents on how irresponsible she was, followed by unending nagging to get serious about her life, which usually meant get serious about marriage.

In the past month or two, though, Mia had run into Surabhi in unusual circumstances, those that she couldn't have walked out of without seeming like a fool or some sort of a loser. She found herself savoring those happenstances, looking at them as some sort of tenuous connections back to Shashank.

The first time they'd met was innocent enough.

They arrived simultaneously to pick up their printouts from the printer one evening. Mia arrived first and was sifting her papers, when Surabhi approached a few seconds later. Mia knew who it was without even turning her head; her presence in Mia's life was like a persistence dust crumb in the eye, irritating and hard to shake off.

Something made Mia nod at her boldly. "Hey."

Surabhi smiled back. "Hi," she said. Her skin was dewy fresh, her eyes free of any kohl, and her lips wore a thick cover of lipstick. She was wearing a blue shift dress with a black cardigan, plain Oxfords on her feet.

"How was your time in Paris?" Mia asked.

"It was Prague," she said. "And it was good. It's a pretty city."

"Did you go around much?"

"Not much. Just about. We've management games and stuff going on."

Mia had finished counting and checking the papers. She tapped them on the table to even out the sides and put the stack into a file. "I'll get going before it is too late and the traffic hits."

"Where to?" Surabhi asked.

"Hill Road, Bandra," I said. "I live there."

"Wonderful," she said. "I don't live very far. We could meet sometime."

Mia nodded politely and stepped away.

Later, it had been difficult for Mia to rationalize why she'd behaved the way she did. She'd chatted like they were old friends, as if resuming a line of conversation they had discarded years ago and picked up effortlessly when they met again later. Mia had daydreamed of quite the reverse happening; an explosive skirmish that involved rotten egg throwing, hair tearing, grime smearing, and hurling of the choicest of abuses. She must have a list of those somewhere, too.

But she'd realized that Surabhi perhaps had no idea who she was. No one in the office knew. Some had guessed, like Daphne, but no one knew for sure. And this one was fairly new to the office.

The second time they met, though, was not so innocent. Mia was inclined to think it was her sudden insatiable craving for a stab of nicotine that was the offender, not her. The encounter had been almost surreal, as if she'd dreamed it and it hadn't actually happened. No one would've believed her if she'd told them because she herself barely believed it.

But it had happened . . .

The smoking area in their office was on the first floor in an abandoned car park that had been shut down for renovation, but hadn't seen a workman or paint or a drill after that decision was made. After a year of disuse, the Administration department decided to let smokers use it for their pleasure, fed up with their constant carping on having to walk all the way to the ground floor for a smoke. The smokers, in turn, celebrated the one-floor-up move as a momentous victory and granted the Administration department some much-needed praise and letters of appreciation. A win-win both ways.

The erstwhile car lot had a wide-open gap that ran along its length on both sides. Apart from the bright sunshine that coursed inside in neat, angular streaks, the space was expansive and dreary, fading parking spot etchings on thick pillars and a layer of dust where human feet had not been. Someone had tried to brighten up the place with a few potted plants, most of which now seemed to be breathing their last.

As Mia entered, she glanced around and saw that she had come way too early. The only other person there was a petite, pixie-like girl in a far corner, half-hidden by a pillar. She was facing away, looking down through the opening, her feet tapping absently on the floor. She had one hand folded across her stomach and the other held a just-lit cigarette.

Mia exhaled in relief. "Can I borrow one?" she called out. Mia had stopped smoking a long time ago, but Shashank had put the habit back in her to some extent during the time they were dating and overwhelmingly now after their breakup.

Startled, the girl spun around and moved away from the shadows of the pillar. Mia's heart lurched. It was Surabhi. This time Mia's talent for surreptitious detection had failed her.

"Oh!" Mia mumbled. "Sorry. I mistook you for someone else." She turned to go. Unprepared and mortified, she wasn't feeling so bold anymore.

"I've one extra," Surabhi said quickly. "You can take it."

Mia paused. She needed that cigarette. She turned. "Are you sure?" she asked.

"Yes, of course, come on." Surabhi beckoned with her arms.

Mia waited for a minute, mediating in an internal skirmish of sensibilities, ultimately conceding. She stepped inside and walked toward Surabhi. As she came closer, she realized to her surprise that Surabhi had been crying. Her eyes were puffy and red, their rims a milky white. She saw Mia's stare, and she lowered her face, focusing instead on her purse as she dug out a Marlboro Slim and a lighter.

"Thank you," Mia mumbled, embarrassed, taking the cigarette from her.

"No problem," Surabhi said. "I shouldn't be smoking three of them anyway."

"You were planning to smoke three?" Mia asked, shocked.

“Bad day,” she murmured, staring ahead, absorbed, unmoving.

“Oh,” Mia said. A gleeful squeak popped at the bottom of her heart, which she quickly punched down, feeling guilty. “I’m sorry.”

Surabhi did not reply. She dragged a few puffs and trained her eyes on a gaggle of schoolgirls on the road below, laughing, giggling, and chasing one another, their red-and-purple checkered skirts swinging round them.

“It’s only eight thirty,” Mia said, tearing her eyes away. “Are you usually in the office this early?” She was feeling more at ease with every inhale of the Marlboro, and she thought to herself, there’s no reason to make this encounter less than pleasant. She could learn more about her nemesis. Who knows how it might help her one day? Don’t they say to keep your enemies closer than your friends?

“Sometimes on a bad day, I come in early just so I can smoke here in peace.” Surabhi answered, tapping ash onto the floor. “I got back into the habit again recently. I had sworn off it for many years.”

Me too! Mia wanted to exclaim but bit her lip just in time.

“We spoke once by the printer,” Mia said. “You remember?”

“Yup, you asked me about Prague.”

“Yeah.”

Puff. Puff. Silent puff.

“I know you dated him,” Surabhi said so quietly that Mia wondered if her overactive and presently flustered brain had imagined it.

“What?” Mia coughed. “Sorry, I . . .”

“I know,” Surabhi said, her lips curled in what looked like a smile. Her face was turned away from Mia, her eyes watching the road below, her small, fair, freckled face drenched in the morning sun. “I know he dated a lot. I know you dated him.”

Mia fidgeted. Should she leave now? Would it make her look like an idiot? Definitely, she decided, and a weakling, too. Not in front of this new chick, her bête noire. No way!

She searched her brain for something to say, anything to say.

“Do you know everyone who goes on management outings?” Surabhi asked, the edges of her smile turning into something macabre. “There are six thousand employees in our company.”

Mia’s heart had begun to thud painfully.

Surabhi turned to look her full in the face, the first time since Mia had walked in. “You can see I’ve been crying, no?” she asked.

Mia watched her, eyes red, face pale, lips bitten to a bruise. She waited.

“You know why, no?”

“Why what?” Mia forced out the words.

“Why I’ve been crying. You suspect.”

“No, I don’t,” Mia protested, trying to sound confused and offended at the same time.

“You know. You dated him,” Surabhi stated, her eyes flashing as if challenging Mia to deny it. “You know,” she repeated, nodding as if agreeing with herself.

“Dated who?” Mia heard how foolish that sounded and cast her eyes down.

“Stop pretending. I know about you and Shashank,” Surabhi said. “I’m not a fool.”

So that was the reason Surabhi was being nice to her? It was not some kind of smoker's camaraderie or being a good colleague but an exercise in establishing superiority. Mia realized that if she stayed, she was going to be at a disadvantage throughout this conversation. This girl . . . there was something off-kilter about her, something not quite right. Surabhi was hardly the guileless, youthful, veritable babe in the woods she'd imagined her to be.

"I . . . was not even sure you knew my name," Mia said after a second or two of confounded silence. "How did you know?"

"It was obvious from the way you looked at him." Her face twitched. "And I looked you up."

"Did Shashank . . ."

"You wish."

Mia scowled. She put out her smoke quickly and muttered, "Thanks for the cigarette. Got to go now." Her stomach churned like it did every time before a plane landed, as she sat dreading the collision of wheels with the tarmac, anticipating bile rising to her throat.

"No, don't." Surabhi took a step forward, one arm extended, looking contrite. "I'm sorry, Mia. I didn't mean to snap. I just don't feel"—she rubbed her forehead—"too well."

"I think I should go. This is awkward," Mia replied quietly.

"Here." Surabhi smiled, opened her purse, and fished out another cigarette. "Take this as peace offering."

Mia gave her a hesitant smile. "You don't have to do this."

Surabhi waved it. "Don't take it if you don't want to. But please stay."

Mia took the cigarette. "I really wish you well. You and Shashank, I mean. I hope your relationship works out."

"You're not jealous?" Surabhi asked.

Mia battled to keep her face expressionless when she said, "I used to feel shitty, but I'm getting over it, one day at a time."

Surabhi nodded. "Maybe I'm being as foolish as you were. I think he can change. I know he's dated a lot. People speak . . ." her voice trailed, lost in a realm of misgivings.

"I've heard of his past liaisons," Mia said. "Unfortunately for me, it was too late."

"He got one of them pregnant, too," Surabhi said softly.

"What?!"

"And asked her to get an abortion, which she did."

"Where did you hear this?" Mia asked, astonished.

"He told me," Surabhi said. "He feels guilty about that one and has taken great care since." She gave an unhappy giggle.

Mia was silent, her thoughts with the Transport girl, the sad-faced, curly-haired, eager-to-please, diminutive-as-a-mouse Vaidehi. She had an immediate urge to call Daphne to confirm that this was indeed true.

"And I get so jealous," Surabhi muttered. "So insanely, murderously jealous."

Her voice was drowned by the delighted shouts of girls below who had discovered a puppy and were taking turns cuddling it.

“They seem happy,” Surabhi murmured, looking down. “Have you wondered what it’d be like to fall from here?”

“It’s only one floor.” Mia scoffed. “You’ll get a scratch or two, nothing more.” She stopped. Surabhi’s face had taken on an odd luster, her countenance sadly contemplative.

“Are you having some trouble?” Mia asked softly. “I can see the bruises. And you’ve been crying.”

“It happened to you, too,” Surabhi said. “You know.”

There was no point denying it anymore and there was nothing to explain. So Mia said simply, “Yeah.”

When Surabhi spoke next, she was so quiet that Mia had to strain to catch the words.

“I want to leave him. But I’m in love with him.”

Mia’s shoulders slumped.

“You know he’s not an easy guy to love, but I still do,” Surabhi said.

“Leave him before it gets unbearable,” Mia said. She examined her intentions and realized she had spoken out of goodwill and not jealousy. “You’ll find it hard to live with yourself otherwise. Leave while you still own your dignity.”

“I can’t leave. Maybe only when I’m dead, or he is.” She laughed. A crazy, crazy laugh. “You know what it’s like, right?”

Mia looked at her, and a wall inside her collapsed. Surabhi was going through what Mia had gone through with Shashank, and she’d probably sought out her company to share some of the confusion and pain she felt. She couldn’t have done that with anybody else, no one would’ve understood.

In that laden moment, numbed by the harsh, hypnotic glare of a full-blown sun, the mute appeal in her eyes, the succor of joint kinship, Mia felt evangelic, almost godlike. She wanted to reach out to help this poor lovelorn girl, to help her have what she couldn’t, comfort her along the way and pray that she didn’t fall on her face, like Mia had.

Mia had kicked herself for the thought later and had wisely kept it—and most of the conversation—away from Daphne, who was now asking incredulously, “You talked about dogs?”

“Yeah, she said they were planning to buy one.”

“Buying a dog together! He’s getting serious on this one, you think?”

“Or trying to save the relationship,” Mia shrugged. “She did not seem half-bad.”

“What kind of dog?”

“A spaniel.”

Daphne looked at her in horror. “And then?”

“That’s all. Then we talked a bit about work till we returned to our seats.”

“Some sisterhood! Do you guys plan to go out more often now, perhaps to dinner and movie once a week?”

“Don’t be silly, Daphne. We only talked twice. Now we acknowledge each other, smile, and say hi. That’s all.”

“I don’t like it,” Daphne said. “She’s with him now, after he dumped you. DUMPED you! You must feel bad about it!”

“You have to be bigger than your emotions,” Mia said, that feeling of benevolence surging in her again. A strange calm was settling in her body, and she wondered if making peace with the enemy really worked. This was good, this was working. Maybe she should go and talk to Shashank now.

“Should I?” she mused aloud.

“What?” Daphne asked, startled.

“Talk to Shashank and make peace,” Mia said. “I need to go to his house to pick up some of my things anyway.”

Daphne’s face brightened. “How many times have I told you to do that? That’s so important for closure. Leave nothing behind.”

“I have to talk to him, though. What do I say?”

“I’ll coach you there. I’ll tell you what to do,” Daphne said, excited.

“Yeah, okay. I’ll go to his place this weekend.”

“No! The weekend is no good. You will want to stay on and then one thing will lead to another. Surabhi will be around then, too. Why complicate matters?” Daphne said. “Go on a weekday, later, during the night. Stay on for a drink or two, if he asks, and then quickly leave. I think this Thursday is good.”

“Too soon,” Mia complained. “I’ll go next week. I need to think about it a bit.”

“What’s there to think about? Go and get it done. It’s about time.”

“But . . .”

“This Thursday!”

Mia gave up. “As you say, madam.”

“Good.” Daphne sighed. “After months of convincing you to do it. Now finally! You’ll see what good it’ll do you.”

But Mia was lost in her thoughts. “That poor girl Surabhi. So much in love, yet doesn’t know how to save it. She wants to real bad, I can see that. Just like I’d wanted to.”

Love and disappointment. Strange bedfellows.

One Day After

It was happening in slow motion.

They moved around her, slowly at first. Round and round, round and round, quickening pace, then going faster and faster, rapidly gaining speed. She stood at the center, numb and unmoving, while the tables, the chairs, the computers, and paraphernalia swam around. She held on to her desk and closed her eyes to steady herself. Gulped hard to get rid of the nausea. Once. Twice. Thrice. She willed them to stop. Willed hard.

Stop!

She opened her eyes. They'd stopped moving.

People began moving then. Walking past her, huddled together, talking in hushed tones, almost reverential. She imagined them looking at her, shaking their conjoined heads in wonder, clucking their tongues in pity. *Man, did she do it? Is she the one?*

Had she done it? Her memory was failing her.

"They want to talk to you," Daphne declared, walking to her cubicle.

Mia looked at her, bleary eyed. "Who?"

"The cops, who else?"

"They're here already?"

"Well, what can I say? Management wants to end the employee involvement as soon as possible. It does not reflect very well on the company apparently. And we need to get rid of the media, too. They are thronging the place."

"Did you talk to them?"

"The media?"

"No, the cops."

"Yes, just now. I thought they might be interrogating alphabetically, but it seems to be by employee ID. Whatever."

"What are they asking?"

"They want to get a general picture, at least that's what I thought. Did you know him? What was he like? What was he doing yesterday? Along those lines."

"You told them about me?" she asked dully.

"Well," she said, "I told them what a serial womanizer he was." She paused. "But not about you specifically."

"They will know soon enough," Mia whispered.

"Mia, keep to the facts. Don't lie."

"I didn't do anything."

"But you were there."

A groan escaped her. "Damn that day! You picked it, that cursed Thursday!"

"Sorry, I just . . ." Daphne placed a tentative arm on her shoulder. "Go on, it will be okay. Just tell them exactly what you saw."

"They will think I'm a suspect."

“Why?” Daphne asked. “They’re not fools. They’ll find the actual person who did this soon enough. Or did he fall?”

Mia shook her head. “It was dark, and it happened so fast.” Her voice shook. “I’m not sure if I didn’t somehow . . .”

It was burned into her memory, that fateful night, each minute falling into place like the flapping pages of a flipbook. She’d played it in her head several times, trying to figure out what had really happened, wondering if she could’ve stopped the sequence of events that followed if only she had done something differently. She felt like an outsider each time, watching a play, puppets reciting a script written by someone else, playing predestined parts.

It’d started in the parking lot.

Shashank had been smoking next to his Audi. She’d seen him from a distance and decided it was as good of a place as any to tell him that she wanted her stuff back. She’d had been planning to call him earlier, but this was better.

He spotted her before she could speak. “Hi, Mia,” he waved.

She walked briskly toward him.

“Smoke?” he offered. Mia shook her head as she slowed her pace.

Putting out his cigarette, he smiled. “So, what’s up?”

She flashed him an icy half smile and said, “Glad to have found you here—” she paused “—alone.”

His smile broadened, “You wanted to see me alone?”

“I need my stuff back.”

“Your things from my home?” he asked, sounding disappointed.

“Yeah.”

“Come over this weekend. We’ll roll a joint, have a drink or two, just like old times.”

“I don’t think so.” She couldn’t avoid the scorn that crept into her voice. “I’d prefer to come today. Will you be in?”

“Yup. After nine, though. I’ve another meeting before.”

“Yeah, okay.” She turned to leave.

“Mia.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve been a pig,” he said.

Mia did not reply.

“Can you forgive me?”

“Does it matter?”

“I don’t know. Maybe if you did . . .” He trailed off uncertainly.

“Then what?”

No one spoke for a moment.

“Surabhi is not bad. I like her,” she said finally.

He gave a short, coarse laugh.

“I like her, too.”

She felt empty and a bit sad. She realized she hadn't been waiting for him to come back to her or confess his love or apologize. She'd just wanted to know that she wasn't the one at fault. She'd only wanted to know that he hadn't been capable of loving. Not her, not anyone.

But that might never happen. Surabhi and him, they might still rub it in her face.

"Got to go. See you in a few hours," she said.

"Looking forward, Mee Mee. I'll be waiting."

She cringed at that term of endearment, now gnawing.

Their last night together, and then never again.

She took some care to dress that night. Distressed jeans, a long white shirt and multilayered beads that hung low to her navel. She took off the necklace as an afterthought, unwilling to give the impression that she'd picked out jewelry for the occasion. She tied her hair back high and tight, and applied a thin smear of pink to her lips. She looked back at her reflection in the mirror with some satisfaction, smartly turned out yet not as if for a date night. It was important he knew how over him she really was.

She checked her phone. He'd messaged once: I'm home. Getting your things together.

Daphne's message was next. Go a little late. Make the asshole wait.

So Mia took her time with the drive, stopping for short breaks, slowing down for the pedestrians, going through what she was going to say to him tonight. She'd never had the chance to say a graceful good-bye, something that would punch him in the stomach and also make him feel some sorrow for letting her go. Daphne had coached her somewhat, and she'd added her own embellishments. She hoped she would be able to get it all out. Not break down crying or stomp off in anger.

Her nerves tingled with anticipation, anxiety, and some fear.

She started humming to herself, trying to calm her thudding heart.

When it was ten past ten, she turned onto the street where his apartment was, a line of six dilapidated buildings, sixteen flats in each. The apartment block was over fifty years old, ungainly gray paint concealing cracks in its white walls, dull maroon in its trimmings. Each flat had a balcony packed with drying clothes and potted plants, its white-and-maroon rickety balustrade melding snugly with the walls. It had always seemed like a living, breathing creature to her, much like an aging madam losing the battle to stay desirable to her patrons.

She parked her car beneath the only functioning street light and waited, her face glowing with an orange-yellow incandescence. Her fingers tightened on the steering wheel, and she turned to look at his apartment. Third building, eighth floor, on the right. The one with the blue curtains with bright-yellow sunflowers on them.

She sighed. Such lousy taste.

As soon as she got out of the car, she felt a shiver, a foreboding. She'd later learn that she ought to have trusted her instinct more than she did, started the car, turned around, and left as quickly as she could. But she did not do it and the alternative showed up as regret whenever she'd think back to that night, which was often.

Instead, she got off, walked unhurriedly to his building, and climbed up the rickety, chipped stairs, careful not to slip. Even at his doorstep when she rang the bell, she thought there was still

time to run, run before he came to the door, opened it. And when he did he said, "Hello. Good to see you, Mia. Come on in," and her feet willingly followed him inside.

She'd shut the door behind her, not him. And there had been so many opportunities to leave. And now there was this man staring her down, asking her uncomfortable questions. A natty, sharp-looking, well-spoken inspector, not any garrulous, groin-scratching *hawaldar*.

"So, Miss Mia, you went to meet him yesterday?" he asked.

Mia stared hard at her broken toenail. How did she break that thing? Another few months to grow that out.

"Yes," she said softly. "I had to pick something up."

"What time was it?"

"Quarter past ten."

"Was he fine when you left?"

Mia nodded.

"What did you have to pick up?"

"Office things."

"What kind?"

"Work papers."

"Did you work in the same department?"

"No, but he was in HR and we worked together in a lot of areas."

"Hmm, okay. What time did you leave?"

She made a mental calculation. "Half past ten," she said finally.

"How well did you know him?" the inspector asked.

"Somewhat."

"How much is 'somewhat'?"

Mia did not respond.

"Miss Mia, *humein sab maloom hai*. We know about your past relations with him."

It struck her almost like a physical blow. "What?! Who told you?"

"We can't say," the inspector murmured.

Mia moved in her chair, trying to hold on to its edges to steady herself. They knew. Now they knew, she thought in rising distress.

"We know you two dated . . . and—" the inspector coughed politely "—and then . . . did not."

"His death was an accident," she said, her voice staccato.

"How do you know?"

"He fell off his balcony, right?" she said. "Everyone knows."

"*Kuch bol nahi sakte*," he murmured, leaning slightly toward her. "We cannot rule out murder yet."

He stood staring at her while she studied the floor with interest.

"We can get a recording of your phone conversations and messages. It will save you a lot of trouble if you told us everything right now," he said. "Why not start with last night?"

"He asked me to come over and collect some of my stuff that was in his apartment. That's why I went."

“How was he?” he asked. “Did he seem normal to you?”

* * *

He took his time to open the door, and Mia grew impatient waiting outside. She tapped on the doorframe to vent her irritation, then twisted around to admire the neighbor’s ornate door, then looked out at the haze of distant smoke and traffic lights from between the tapestried meshes of the corridor walls. She heard faint strains of music from inside Shashank’s apartment, the Beatles, she thought at first, but it turned out to be James Blunt when he did finally open the door. By that time she had acquired a pressing need to use the washroom.

He peered out cautiously, opening the door wider only after he’d had a good look at her. “Hello. Good to see you, Mia. Come on in,” he said.

“What took you so long?” she complained.

“How long have you been waiting?” he asked. Immediately she smelt the burned metal on his breath, saw wisps of dark ash on his green kurta. He couldn’t stand still, swaying back and forth instead, wouldn’t look her in the eyes, and licked his lips nervously.

She took a step back. “You—” she started. “What’s wrong?”

His eyes were red and unfocused, lips agape.

A soft bell hooted at the back of her head.

“Started the party without you,” he said uneasily. He tried to laugh, but it ended in a gargle.

“On your own?” Mia leaned to one side and waved in front of her nose. The smell inside was making her gag.

They’d smoked weed many times when they were together. He got ahold of it through some tenuous underworld acquaintance introduced by a former girlfriend, he’d said, and his house always had stashes stored away. Mia had protested in the beginning when he’d asked her to join him and did it later only so that he wouldn’t think her a spoilsport. In all those times he had been stable, in control even, and she had been all over the place, disoriented, forgetting time.

He used to love seeing her go awry. He loved to watch.

But today was different.

“Did you smoke up?” she asked him as he stepped aside to let her pass. “And why does this place look like someone ransacked it?”

Newspapers, magazines, and CDs were everywhere. Books and clothes were strewn on the sofa and on the floor. She stepped over them to make her way to a clean spot.

“Give me my stuff and I’ll be on my way,” Mia said.

“Why?” He rocked on his feet.

Mia had an impulse to reach out and steady him, but she tensed her knuckles and looked away. “What do you mean why?”

“What’s the hurry?”

“What do you want to do?”

He did not reply. For a few minutes, he stood unnaturally still. Mia watched him.

“Was someone here?” she asked pointing to the two glasses of whiskey, one half-full and the other empty with a rock of ice inside, rapidly melting. A nearly empty bottle of the Famous Grouse stood beside.

“A friend,” he murmured. “We were drinking outside . . . on the balcony.”

“And he left?”

Shashank nodded. “You were coming.” Matter-of-fact, as if nothing was more important. “Do you want something to eat or drink?” he asked.

“I need to use the bathroom,” Mia said. “Okay?”

Shashank shrugged, pouring the ice and whiskey from the other glass into his. “You know where it is.”

Mia rose quickly and walked to the bathroom, the second door along the corridor. The light was broken and she swore under her breath. The bell at the back of her head began whistling distinctly.

* * *

“I wasn’t there long,” Mia said to the inspector.

“Were you planning to get married?”

Marriage by a beach in Goa. Honeymoon in Prague. A four-bedroom apartment in the Mumbai suburbs. A summer house by the sea in Alibaug. Three children, one each year in succession. And a lifetime of togetherness.

She giggled.

“Is something funny?”

She shook her head.

“Shaadi karne wale thay tum dono?”

“*Kya farak padtha hai?* What does it matter if we were planning to get married? It was a long time ago.”

“Were you jealous he was going out with someone else?”

“It happens,” she said.

“What can you tell me about his new girlfriend?”

She glanced at the man, uncomfortably close now, his musty cologne washing down her face.

“I don’t know her very much. We barely speak.” She steadied her breath, which had become labored and shallow, when a thought struck her. “Have you questioned her?”

“Yes. She told us a lot about you.”

“About me?” She sat up in her chair. “What about me?”

“She told us about your relations with him. That you were jealous of her.”

“She said that?!” Mia’s head reeled, her jaw tightened with rage. She’d been wrong about that girl; all that show of sisterhood was for naught, the double-crossing bitch!

“You should tell us about her,” Inspector Uday suggested.

Mia spoke rapidly, spewing venom. “You should question her. She wasn’t happy with him or the relationship. Tried to kill herself, too. Wouldn’t put this past her, throwing him off the balcony. Just a few days ago, we were smoking down on the first floor . . .”

“Do you smoke?” the inspector asked, his eyebrows raised.

“Why? You think women should not?” Mia asked, irritated.

“Answer the question, please.”

“Yes, I do,” Mia replied, her gaze shifting.

“What brand?”

“Nothing in particular. I don’t smoke much these days.”

“And Miss Surabhi?”

“Surabhi smokes Marlboro Slim.”

The inspector paused. Mia waited.

“And you said their relations were not good?”

“No,” Mia said. She’d calmed down from a minute ago and was feeling rather guilty of having said all that, but she had to plough on. “Shashank used to hurt her and she’d bruises all over. He can be quite rough, you know, when . . .” Mia blushed, unable to say it out loud to the somber man leaning in front of her.

“Go on,” the man prodded.

“And then you want to kill him. You have to understand how bad it can get,” Mia said, subdued.

“You wanted to kill him?”

“I didn’t. Surabhi might have felt like that. That’s what I’m saying.”

“She wanted to kill him?”

Mia was annoyed and tired. She spoke slowly, trying and almost succeeding to keep the edge out of her voice. “Listen. This is how it was. We were dating for a while. We loved each other and thought we’d get married. But you know how these things are. We were not made for each other. We had to let it go.”

His words. These were his words. She wanted to laugh, but it came out as a choked sob.

“Are you all right?” the inspector asked.

Mia looked up and tried to smile. “Yes, yes,” she said. “Only I’m very tired. If it’s not a problem, and if there are no more questions for now, can we talk later?” She made a move to stand.

“What about Miss Surabhi? You think she’s guilty?”

Their eyes met.

Mia hesitated a moment, then replied, “I don’t know. You’ll have to question her again. I’m sorry, I really need to go. I’ll faint if I stay any longer.”

Inspector Uday took a reluctant step back and said solemnly, “We will call you again soon. You may leave now.”

She walked out quickly, leaving the darkness behind in what used to be the floor’s game room, now clammy with misgivings and nervous defiance.



Through whispers in the corridor, Mia learned of Surabhi's interrogation. While some of it might have been true, she couldn't be sure the rest hadn't been fabricated.

She overheard two girls talking.

"Surabhi is heartbroken," the first one said. "Or at least she's pretending to be."

She explained how Surabhi had taken a temporary leave of absence from work and the police had to question her at her home. Her roommate was taking care of her, and also answered most of their questions for her. Surabhi had turned mute; she wouldn't answer anything. Instead, she stared ahead blankly, her eyes glossed with a permanent film of tears. She wouldn't eat, either, and once or twice her roommate had to force-feed some juice into her mouth, which she instantly spit out.

"Poor girl," the second murmured.

"It could be pretense," the first said knowingly. "To throw the police off her track. Remember how much trouble she and Shashank had been having over the past few weeks?"

They discussed the frequent fights they'd witnessed, often in the office, inside his cabin, the sullen face, and the pink eyes afterward. Surabhi had tried to cut herself once in anger when he wouldn't return her calls. They agreed that the two made a very volatile couple, and she had always been peculiar in her ways.

"That's not reason enough to throw somebody off a balcony, though!" the second exclaimed.

"She had the temper and the opportunity. If anyone could do it, it was her. That's what the police also believes," the first remarked.

"You never know, it could still be an accident."

"If it wasn't then . . . That's what I'm saying."

"I can't believe she'd do something like this."

"They asked her for an alibi for last night—where she was, with who, doing what, that sort of thing. She wouldn't speak. She wouldn't tell them. They found her belongings in his house, of course—some clothes, books, jewelry, a picture. One freshly burned cigarette, which made them think she'd been there at his place a few hours earlier."

"How would she throw him off the balcony, though? She's so small," the second protested.

"He was drugged. That's what I hear," the first said.

"Damn! Smart girl! I wish I'd her kind of brains when I broke up with my ex. I seriously wanted to kill him for a long, long time."

"What's he doing now? Vikram, that's his name right?" the first asked with a smirk.

"Haan, Vikram," the second replied, "The bastard married soon afterward. Had a kid, too. A girl! Within the year!"

"You couldn't kill him *na*, with a child and all."

"That wouldn't have stopped me. I just didn't know how."

"Are you saying that Surabhi did the right thing?" the first asked, surprised.

"No! But you know how rough breakups can be—sometimes you lose perspective. This Shashank Rakshit was no good anyway, a total scoundrel. He was lucky he was head of the HR

department. Otherwise, someone would've reported him for sure. Rumor has it that he's slept with several women and he liked to play it rough, making them do things that normal people like you and me would never agree to."

"Why'd the girls do it, then?" the first asked, one eyebrow up.

"They were not sensible like us *na*. And you'd met him, he'd a way with words and that cute dimple of his! Tall and good looking, too. I can imagine girls falling for him. He's the reason I'm doing this job for this shitty salary. Persuaded me to take it up by promising the moon and the sun, neither of which shone again in my life."

They tittered.

"Did you see his picture in the newspaper today?" the first asked.

"Yes, that was grotesque!" The second shook her head sorrowfully.

"We shouldn't be talking about him that way."

"So, tell me, what else is on with the investigation?"

"This is how much Constable Mhatre would talk," the first said, "They'll be questioning Surabhi again and will possibly question the roommate, too. She apparently told the police that Surabhi was out all evening and wouldn't return her calls. Surabhi had been crying a lot in the past few weeks. She was clearly in a disturbed frame of mind."

"Not a very good roommate, is she? Telling all this to the police," the second said disparagingly.

"Remember, she had to take care of her after that incident with cutting her wrist. She must be fed up," said the first.

"Young girls these days—so stupid in love."

"I heard the story, you know—about Surabhi's suicide attempt. She'd cut her wrist and lay bleeding in the hall of her apartment, all dramatic and actress-like. Crying, shrieking, and delirious. Her roommate had to rush her to the hospital. It was in the nick of time, too. She'd lost a lot of blood," the first said.

"Oh, but she survived."

"Shashank gave her a few days off and then, after that, suggested that she resign."

"Damn! Men!"

"Yeah."

"That'd made me very angry, too. Vikram was a bastard but sort of sympathetic till the end," the second muttered.

"You're married now. Stop talking about him," the first scolded.

"An ex is an ex, right? They're like a supernova or a starburst—once-in-a-lifetime occurrence. Unfulfilling, yet memorable. Or perhaps that's why they're memorable. We yearn more for what we cannot have."

"And never value what we do have. Like a job, for instance. We should get back to work," the first sighed.

"There's so much excitement, it's so hard to focus. Let me know what else the constable says," the second said.

"Yeah, yeah. Have to sweet-talk him into it. They'll be questioning her again tomorrow. And some others."

“Like who? Pudgy M?” the second guffawed.

“Yeah, she thinks we don’t know about her and Shashank. As if we are fools.”

“They were not so open about their goings-on, right? Unlike Shashank and Surabhi.”

“Nah, but we’re not fools, right?”

“That we’re not.”

“And neither are the police.”

“So she’s to be questioned?”

“Yup. Should’ve happened already. Okay, let’s get going now. I’ve to send some files to the Bangalore office. I’ll give another update during our three p.m. break. Ask Anna to join. What has she been doing buried in her desk all morning? This is right up her alley.”

“Such a shocking incident, and in our office, too!”

As their words faded along with their footsteps, Mia emerged from behind the door that led to the fire escape. It had been hot, standing there hiding, her ear to the door, but it’d been worth it. She’d planned this, running down ahead of this group of girls from her department who she knew to be infamous gossipmongers. If only she talked to more people in the office, she wouldn’t have had to employ such devious means.

She wished she could’ve heard what they thought of her, how much they knew about her affair with Shashank, whether they suspected her as much as they did Surabhi, and she wondered why they still called her Pudgy M when she’d lost a kilo or two in the past weeks.

But the covert expedition hadn’t been totally unsuccessful. She’d learned something crucial.

The police strongly suspected Surabhi, and that was good thing. Mia was certain Surabhi had been in the apartment before she had, and she was the one who’d ransacked the place in a fit of anger that was her wont. She wouldn’t have a viable alibi, then. *Wonderful!* They’d have to know Surabhi had somehow orchestrated his death. Mia wasn’t clear how but she was certain that Surabhi had had an important part to play. And once they’d discovered that, established that without a morsel of doubt, Mia would be in the clear.

She should’ve been relieved and sprinting with joy, but her heart was heavy when she snuck out into the corridor and trudged up the stairs, dragging her feet.

Two Days After

She didn't want to go to the office, but Daphne messaged to say she wanted to talk.

"What is it?" Mia asked, walking into the lobby. Daphne was leaning on one wall reading a newspaper.

She straightened up and tucked the paper under one arm. "Did the cops call you again?" she asked.

"You should put that back. That's office property."

"Who cares, it's only a newspaper," Daphne said. "Tell me, did they call you again?"

Mia clutched her bag tight and said, "Yeah, I'm going there the day after tomorrow."

"They called me in today, to the Prachim police station," Daphne said. She paused to take a deep breath. "Do you know why?"

Mia was surprised. "Haven't you already been questioned once?"

"Yes, that's why I'm asking," Daphne hissed. "Why are they calling me again? Did you tell them anything?"

"About what?" Mia asked, feeling a flash of anxiety. Daphne looked pale enough to faint. "Daphne, it's all right. This must be routine follow-up questioning or something."

"Someone must have said something." She wrung her hands nervously. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were brighter, glistening. "But what about?" she moaned. "It can't be!"

A few employees walking past threw them curious glances.

Mia extended a hand to comfort her. "Shh," she said softly. "Calm down. Do you need me to come with you?"

Mia regretted her offer as soon as she'd made it. She had passed the Prachim station several times on her way to and from work. A cursory glance, a casual taking-in of the grime and chaos was enough to make her cringe each time, pitying instead the rotund policemen and beige sporting *hawaldars* standing in various poses of relaxation, smoking a *bidi* or having a chai, like graffiti on the old, decrepit edifice behind. Sometimes one of them would lead an offender, his scrawny hands begging distressingly, or a wailing woman, her sari unraveling near the police van while they were dragging her inside. That "inside" was like a black hole; she had only seen people going in or being pulled inside. Never coming out.

She shuddered.

Why would she want to voluntarily subject herself to it two days in a row?

Perhaps to make her appear less guilty.

But she wasn't guilty, dammit!

Perhaps her not being afraid to go there would show she wasn't afraid of them. And that was because she wasn't guilty.

While thoughts chased one another in her mind, Daphne had been speaking.

"What?" Mia interrupted. "Sorry, I wasn't listening."

"It's okay, I will be okay," Daphne mumbled. "If I need you, I'll call."

"Yeah, do that." Mia squeezed her elbow. "Cheer up now. It may just be fun."

“Yeah, like your last moments with Shashank?”

Ouch.

“You don’t have to bite, Daph,” Mia retorted. “I’m only trying to be comforting.”

“Paying for your mistakes, I am.” Daphne sniffed.

“For heaven’s sake, girl, I did nothing to him,” Mia exclaimed. “They should be questioning Surabhi, not you or me. Are they doing that or no?”

“They were supposed to. But she fainted on her way to the police station and had to be hospitalized.”

“Damn! That girl is such a good actress. This way they’ll think she’s all dainty-fainty and never question her at all.”

“She may not be guilty,” Daphne muttered. “She probably is not.”

Mia looked at Daphne in surprise. “You think she’s innocent but that I could’ve killed him?”

“I never said that.” Daphne sniffed. “She seems heartbroken. I don’t know . . .” She squirmed. “I just want this over with.”

“Why aren’t they questioning the other women he was with?”

Daphne was mystified. “Like who?”

“That Vaidehi for instance,” Mia said, her voice a conspiratorial whisper. “Did you know he got her pregnant?”

“What?” Daphne was stunned. “Who told you that?”

“I hear gossip, too,” Mia said. “Someone told me.”

“Who?”

“Just someone,” Mia said. “What does it matter? The fact is that they should question everyone. Especially Surabhi.”

Daphne shook her head and wrung her hands in agony. “I don’t know what I’m going to do, what I’m going to say. What do they need me for?”

Mia came close and placed a gentle hand on her elbow. “It’ll be okay. Routine questioning, I’m sure. Take it easy.” Which was far from what Mia was feeling right then.

Daphne nodded but wouldn’t look at her.

She left office that day without saying good-bye.

* * *

Mia had taken her time in the bathroom despite the darkness and a spluttering bulb. She had wiped her face, washed her hands, flushed twice, and straightened her shirt carefully. She remembered spending a long time looking around at the almost-bare bathroom, surveying the toiletries in the closet over the sink—a shaving kit, a comb, a roll of cotton, bandages, a packet of condoms.

She picked up the packet and tossed it into the bin. A trickle of delight warmed her for a second.

When she was back, she saw that he had filled two glasses with whiskey and the bottle of the Famous Grouse was empty.

"I don't drink whiskey," she said. "Give me my stuff and I'll be on my way."

"Stuff? Do you mean your vodka?"

"No, my things."

"Stay for a while," he said. "Drink this. It's not bad. Better than any flavor of vodka."

It was eleven already. "I want to be on my way. It's late and—" she paused "—not safe for me to travel back alone."

"I'll drop you home," he said.

Despite the grim situation, her nervousness, the rising alarm in her head, the messy floor under her feet, and the discomfort of being in the dank smokehouse, she laughed.

He stared at her, eyes watery, lips loose. "What?" he asked, confused. He had forgotten what he'd said. He seemed to have forgotten she was there or maybe even who she was.

"Shashank, what's the matter?" she asked softly.

"Mia"—he looked at her with renewed interest—"shall we go to the balcony one last time before you leave? Toast to our friendship."

The alarm bells were now jangling.

"We are not friends," Mia said.

"Please. One last time." He had been standing all the while, gently rocking back and forth, sweating despite the AC on full blast, moving his hand distractedly over his hair, alternately pursing and licking his lips.

"But . . ." Mia began.

"I have your things ready," Shashank said. "Have a drink with me. I was going to anyway, but it's no fun alone."

"I don't think so." Uncertain, wavering.

"Come on. One last time. I've been challenged to finish the bottle today." Wet, crooked grin.

"But . . ."

"Mia, come on."

He had always been this way, a master manipulator. And she had always been this way, easily led. Or perhaps, he had sensed her acquiescence from the very start, tacit and guilty.

"At least wear your slippers," Mia said as she watched Shashank take a step toward the balcony. She knew he liked his feet in slippers always and hated to be without them.

"Can't seem to find the other," he murmured, looking around vaguely.

"So, you're going to wear one and not wear the other?" Mia asked, fondness creeping into her voice, despite herself.

Shashank shrugged and dragged his feet to the door. "Can't find the other," he said faintly and scratched his head. "Don't have a smoke for you, either," he mumbled, stopping for a minute to check his pockets.

"That's okay. I've one," Mia said.

"Come on, then," Shashank said, walking away.

Holding her warm glass of whiskey, she followed him to the balcony, brushing aside the flimsy polyester curtain, walking past the array of dying plants, to his favorite place at the

corner of the balcony. The twelve-foot-long by three-foot-wide ledge in the front could only be reached by squeezing through the broken railings or scaling it.

Shashank climbed over the railing inelegantly, settled on the ledge cross-legged, and said, "Did you miss me?"

"Don't sit there, Shashank. It's not safe," she said.

"It's only eight floors," he said. "And the world looks great from out here. Why don't you join me?"

"No, thank you. It's too small for the both of us."

He laughed. That strange eerie, gargling sound.

She peered down from the balustrade. The road was empty below, except a few stray cars, including hers under the streetlight. A dog roamed the street and a horn sounded from a far distance. The night sky was paler than usual. There was a star or two twinkling, or it could've been a faraway plane.

He was talking, slurring, wavering.

She remembered it like a morning dream, rapidly losing its edge as sleep wore off.

* * *

Mia tried calling Daphne a couple of times but all she got was a dead tone. She grew worried when Daphne did not pick up her call the next morning or that evening. She hadn't shown up in the office, either.

Mia sat on her bed and wondered at this, petrified at what awaited her at the police station.

Three Days After

It was close to midnight when Daphne returned her call.

“Daphne!”

“I called to say I’m fine and wish you luck for tomorrow’s chat with the police.”

The chill was back in her spine. Her voice . . . Something was not right.

“Daph, what do you mean?” Mia said. “Are you all right? How did it go?”

She gave a small laugh. “Not as bad as I’d thought.”

The chill climbed a few inches.

“So, how was it?” Mia whispered.

“It was very hot. Be sure to wear loose-fitting cotton clothes. It gets clammy real fast.”

“Yeah, thanks for the tip,” she said tightly. “What did they ask you?”

“If I knew him well, for how long, who he was dating now.”

“Do they suspect Surabhi?”

“They haven’t questioned her as far as I know, but she has a strong alibi.”

“What? How?” Mia asked, her voice a whisper, her heart plummeting.

“She was with a friend in the suburbs, apparently an ex-boyfriend. He came forward and told the police.”

“He’s lying!”

“No, he’s not. The bar they were at, many remember her. She was crying and threw a few things around while he tried to calm her. They were there all evening, till late at night.”

“Starting when?”

“Around eight, I think.”

“Did Constable Mhatre tell you all this?” Mia asked, gritting her teeth.

“Who? Yes, him. Yes. How did you know?” Daphne asked, surprised.

Mia closed her eyes in exasperation. “What else did the inspector ask you?”

“How long had I been working there, if I knew you well, how long had you and Shashank been dating, et cetera, et cetera.”

The chill clamped down her spine, and she felt like she was sinking into the bed, heavy, wet.

When she found her voice again, she spoke. “They think I’m guilty? Even now?”

“I got that drift, yes.”

“They don’t suspect anyone else? Not Surabhi, not that Vaidehi?” Mia rubbed her temples, which had begun to throb. “Why only me?”

“You were with him that night.”

“But I didn’t kill him!”

“Don’t worry,” Daphne soothed. “I tried my best to divert their suspicion.”

“How?” Mia asked wearily.

“I told them you were seeing each other and all, they already seemed to know it, but you were over him. And the last day that you went to see him, you told me that he was drunk and looked sick but was fine when you left.”

“Why did you have to tell them that?” Mia hissed. “Why refer to me at all?”
“They were asking, Mia,” Daphne protested. “I can’t be lying, right? They had my call log.”
“I got a missed call from you and—”
“You called me back.”
“Daph, what exactly did you tell them?” Mia asked, impatience in her voice.
“That you called me when you left.”
“Left his house? At twelve thirty?”
“Yes.” Daphne sounded puzzled. “They had my call log, I told you.”
“I heard that the first time,” Mia snapped. “I could’ve called from anywhere, right?”
“Why are you angry? I couldn’t lie to them!”
Stupid woman! Now they knew she’d lied.
“They must have your call log, too,” Daphne said.
“What do I do now?” Mia cried.
“Tell them the truth,” Daphne said.
“The truth makes me look awfully guilty, Daph.” A sob escaped her. “What do I do?”
“Tell them the truth, plain and simple. What you saw, what you did, what happened. At best, it’d be circumstantial evidence.”

* * *

She watched as he moved closer and closer to the edge, grinning like an idiot, incoherent. She should’ve spread her arms to steady him, to force him to get up from there and come inside, rebuke him, and walk him back to the hall. But she did nothing of the sort. She just stood there and watched in mute fascination when he finally fell.

He tumbled sideways, like the pop of a champagne cork, no scramble, nothing messy. A clean, crisp crack and fall. She stood rooted to the spot as he plunged down the eight floors.

“No one can die from a fall this shallow,” he’d laughed when she’d warned him once before. She half hoped that he wasn’t dead when she looked down from the balustrade. But there he was, that pale burly body, the strong, square jaw, that mass of curly hair.

Their eyes had met. For that tantalizing brief second, in the fore of an infinite inky-blue sky, underneath brief sparks from elusive stars, their eyes, like two blunt hooks had clasped for one second before he fell, plunging down eight floors of nothingness. His arms were unmoving by his side, turned down like a pair of broken wings. His feet looked fractured, a split rubber band. His face, a pale blob of custard, had a thin, befuddled smile on it.

She remembered feeling some pity. No affection, only that. She’d felt such intense moments of euphoria with him, it was hard to accept later that their heady love had come to this.

Without the force of will and resolve, the tide of love turns, quick and sour.

She’d heard the commotion next, followed by seeing the switching-on of lights, the yells, the scamper of feet down the stairs to help the man on the road below, already dead.

For those few minutes, as he'd plunged down eight floors, she'd hoped he remembered, too, in clear, distinct little details, why it had come to this. How they had been. What she meant to him and he to her.

They say your life flashes before your eyes just before you die. And it was her he had seen last.

Four Days After

It is possible that out of desperation or loneliness, Shashank Rakshit voluntarily climbed over the balustrade to end his life. His girlfriend refused to comment on allegations of trouble in their relationship. The police are investigating the possible involvement of an ex-girlfriend.

Mia chuckled and closed the webpage on her phone. News articles could be so melodramatic, especially the regional ones, which relied primarily on the popularity of sordid crimes, Bollywood gossip, and local political shenanigans.

“Another joke. Something you are finding funny again,” Inspector Uday said. “The thing is—” he paused to add menace “—will you be finding jail as funny?”

Mia shut up.

“Why did you not report his death?” He was sitting across from her, elbows resting on the rickety wooden table, which was about four feet long, two feet wide, its surface replete with nib marks, knife etches, and several stains of questionable origins. A clock ticked near one of his elbows, a battered register wrapped in brown paper lay near the other. A landline and a mobile phone rested next to each other in a far corner, a newly sharpened pencil and an eraser next to them.

Beside Inspector Uday was a scrawny *hawaldar* in his beige finery, grim faced and focused on the ongoing proceedings. His fingers clasped the top of a wooden *lathi* that he’d placed between his feet, and he hardly moved, rheumy eyes alternating between his boss and his current target. As an antithesis to him, standing alongside was a lady constable, neatly dressed in the customary sand-colored sari with indigo trim, participating in the interrogation now and then with a punctuating *um* or *ah*, but largely only interested in the goings-on in the rest of the police *chowki*.

And there was a lot going on there. Sometimes there was a yell or two in the background, followed by running or the dragging of feet. Another time, there was a bang and what sounded like toppling over of a large number of very heavy things. The lot of the constables in the *chowki* argued, laughed, belched, and generally made themselves comfortable and at home. The place stank of old sweat and fried rice, which permeated the place like a friendly ghost, showing up about the edges of one’s senses when least expected.

Amid the loud whirring of the portable floor fan next to her and the suggestive silences between questions that Inspector Uday effected, Mia hardly heard anything else. She sat with her hands wrapped tightly around her chest, lips pursed, determined to be as stoic and impenetrable as she could.

“I wasn’t there,” she muttered, knowing full well that it was a show of futile defiance.

“Miss Mia, we talked to Miss Daphne. She told us many things. Please do not lie to us.”

Mia swallowed. She had been preparing her script carefully, what she was going to say when quizzed about her whereabouts. But the words were lost in some remote recess of her brain. She couldn’t find them, hard as she searched.

“We found your whiskey glass,” Inspector Uday said.

“But—” Mia sat up. “That wasn’t me. Someone else had been drinking before me.”

“So, if we look we won’t find your prints on it?”

Mia took a deep breath. Shashank had washed the glass before he had filled it. She remembered the little drops of water clinging to its sides. She had wiped her hands on her jeans to get rid of them.

“I don’t even like whiskey,” she mumbled.

The inspector waved away her protestations. “The victim, Mr. Shashank, fell with one slipper only. The other one was some distance away on the balcony.”

Lady Constable Vrinda nodded with a loud *ah*, and Mia winced.

“It doesn’t look like suicide. It definitely looks like murder,” he concluded.

“But . . .” Mia was feeling dizzy. “He fell! I know he fell.”

“How was his slipper so far away, then?”

“Maybe couldn’t find the other one.”

“No one walks around with one slipper.”

“He couldn’t find the other one!” Mia insisted, her voice rising.

“Ah! So you were there.” The inspector smacked the tabletop, his eyes widening in a show of mock comprehension.

Mia jerked her head back, pursed her lips, and looked away.

“Tell us what you know,” Inspector Uday said. “And please speak the truth.”

She considered him for a long minute, then spoke. “I arrived around ten. I left soon enough. I didn’t see much. I didn’t do anything. He was fine when I left.” Mia licked her lips and gulped in some air. It was getting sticky under the sleeves of her modest *salwar kameez*. She moved her *dupatta* to one side and made an effort to slow down her breath. The chipped white blades of the floor fan continued its furious battle against the raging heat.

“Neighbors saw you leave. We showed your picture around.”

“I left before anything happened.”

“Not what the old lady said.”

“Which old lady?”

“The one who saw you.”

Damn!

“Why would I want to kill him?” Mia asked, hugging herself tighter.

“He broke your heart. Promised marriage and did not follow through.”

Mia chuckled disconsolately. “Half the men of this world would be dead if that were reason enough to kill.”

“It could be for you.”

“Come on.” Mia leaned back, a whiff of damp air moving with her. Pasty bits of hair stuck to her forehead. A single trickle of sweat ran down her back. She wiped her face and neck with the edges of her *dupatta* and felt dowdy, what she would’ve, in happier times, termed as a definite “low class.”

Hawaldar Sawant leaned to pass the inspector a thick docket with a pale-green cover, about five inches thick. The inspector unzipped it slowly.

“Do you know what’s inside?” he asked, his eyes on the docket.

Mia was curious. She shook her head.

“It seems like your friend Shashank liked to keep trophies.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Photographs.”

She relaxed. “Oh! You mean the photo of him and Surabhi? His current girlfriend? Did you take it from his house? Did you find other incriminating ones? She’s who you should be questioning, not me, fabricating that story about her ex and all. All lies.”

That night—she’d seen that photo. She’d run out from the balcony, into the hall, and there it was, on top of the mantelpiece, perched next to an empty metal vase. It was a picture of Shashank and Surabhi eating together at a mall, clinging to each other, posing for the camera with bright smiles. The photo was meant to be artistic; it had been retouched to black-and-white and was framed in antique wood.

Even in that moment of panic and daze, the image had stung her like a blade, and her feet had slowed down for a second. Then she’d turned around and sprinted, to get away as quickly as she could—

She ran up to the terrace. She knew it was connected to the buildings next door on both sides and could provide an easy escape. She prayed that no one was up there, either to witness or to halt her bolt. Her breath grew shallow and labored as she ran, sweat gathering on her brow, hair sticking to her ears and forehead like unctuous noodles. Her shirt flapped around her waist and she had an impulse to take it off. She ran and ran for dear life, to put distance between herself and the nightmare she’d just witnessed.

When she reached the exit of the left adjoining building, she waited to check if there was sound from the floors below—either a whisper or a footstep. She waited for a few minutes in the shadows to make sure she would be alone. When she heard nothing, she dashed down the stairs, feet scampering, and nearly tripping over the broken edges several times.

Her luck gave way on the third floor when she collided with an old man and his wife in the corridor. She muttered her apologies and slowed down her sprint, pretending to be only curious to see what the commotion was all about, as they were. She recalled even turning to flash them a nervous smile. Damn! She had given the old lady a clear look at her face.

She walked slowly down the stairs, focusing on her breath, wiping away sweat, trying hard to hear what the couple behind her was whispering. The three flights down to the landing was a mounting nightmare, and by the time they reached it, Mia had scrunched her palms raw. Her head had begun to pound.

Neighbors were out on the street, surrounding the body, a fortress of curious murmurs. She shouldered past the three-person-wide circle, ducking others who were quickly moving in, and ran straight to her parked car.

People rarely talked to one another on this street, like most of the city. She had little fear that she’d be found out. Why wouldn’t they think she was one the tenants?

She had hoped, she had prayed. And it hadn’t been enough.

Had she felt sad when she walked away, leaving his body behind her? No, not then. She hadn't. She had only been terrified. She had cursed her luck. What had driven her to be there, talking to him, staying for a drink, and then finally seeing him fall like that?

Oh sweet Lord! What had just happened?

She had shivered and cried all night, fear and fretfulness rising inside her with every passing hour like floodwater, intending, she was sure, to drag her within. It was an accident, she told herself again and again. It was a bloody freaking accident. She had nothing to do with it. He fell, fell, FELL. On his own. She was there by accident. He fell by accident.

ACCIDENT.

She'd told herself this again and again.

An accident. An accident. An accident.

She'd closed her eyes and willed it away. Shut it tight, praying and praying.

But it had crept up. She'd willed it away, but it crept up anyway.

She'd played the scene in her head repeatedly. First, how she stood by as he talked. Her dumb, silent self, that watched him babble, half-coherent, muddled.

Her list had run through her mind then. This wasn't one of the ways she had devised, but it would have been easy enough to lean forward and give him a little push. Just one tiny little push. For all that he had done to her, a response to his cockiness, his sense of entitlement, for the humiliation she had to face in the aftermath of their breakup.

He had smirked at her. He'd said something, seated cross-legged on the broken ledge, veering dangerously close to the edge, hands caressing his glass, eyes melting into the shadows. He'd said something and smirked.

Still miss me?

Just a little push, a tiny nudge.

The fumes from the cigarettes smoked in the past hours had charged the air with something rancid, filling her mouth with grit, making her eyes water. Her head had been woozy. Had she perhaps . . . ?

No. No!

It was an accident!

She forgot what he'd said afterward, toward the end. He was saying . . . something about how everyone missed him . . . how he had been with so many women . . . they never gave up on him . . . something about . . .

"Do you see this?" Inspector Uday was gently easing out the contents of the docket. He spread around, in a neat ellipse, ten glossy eight-by-ten-inch photographs, most with foliage in the background, a smiling, pleased Shashank in the front, hugging an equally delighted—

Mia bowed her head and spread the photos gingerly with her fingers. It was Shashank with a woman in every photo. Some were vaguely familiar.

"That's us," Mia said, pointing to a photo, third from her right. Her heart grew heavy as she ran one finger over it. It was a good photo, a happy photo. Shashank was pulling her ear and looked straight into the camera. She had her tongue out and her eyes were narrow slits. *Pose like a tap*, he'd said. *When I pull your ear, get your tongue out. Yes, like that.* A cute picture it had seemed then; two people having this much fun could hardly not be made for each other.

“We know. We saw,” Inspector Uday said.

“Huh?” Mia asked, woken from her wistful reverie.

“Your picture.” He gestured toward the photo.

“But there are at least ten women here. Why aren’t you questioning the others?”

“We questioned a few of them. And, Miss Mia, you were the only one with him that day.”

Mia was barely listening to him, her fingers running from one photo to another.

“Miss Mia.”

Her eyes moved from picture to picture, between grins, yelps, cheers, and beaming faces, feeling twangs of jealousy, kicking herself for how foolish she had been.

“Miss Mia,” Inspector Uday repeated, now impatient.

“Wait,” she murmured, her eyes intent, moving from picture to picture, till she saw—

“Daphne! That’s Daphne.”

She pointed to the photo. Her finger shivered, a pale white streak on a mass of glistening pixels.

It was the two of them—Daphne and Shashank. Mia squinted to see better, to make sure, to confirm.

Yes! It was them! On a beach, perhaps in Goa, dirty sand, towel-covered deck chairs, some lounging bodies in them, a few higgledy-piggledy shacks in the far distance. Mia looked closely at the two obviously very much in love couple. Daphne’s hair was wavy and lustrous, held back by a bandana, a crazy, wide smile stuck on her face, tan plump cheeks the color of cola. Shashank was on her right, holding her shoulder tight with one hand and displaying a cheery thumbs-up with the other. Both wore oversized maroon sunglasses, and matching checkered shirts, and were happily poised on the bottom right of the photo, a picket fence of midafternoon shadows behind them.

This damn happy picture. They were on a holiday! In all the time that Mia was with Shashank, there had never been a time when he’d suggested it and he’d shown a definite aversion whenever she brought it up.

Mia peered closer, running her finger through the contours of their faces. This must have been taken at least a year or two ago. They looked younger somehow. Shashank had glasses on, not the lenses he usually wore, and there was a two-day stubble on his face. Ruggedly handsome, but Mia knew he preferred to be clean-shaven.

As for Daphne, she looked well groomed and lovely, not the frumpy thing Mia knew. Her face was clearer, too—Mia groped for the word—fresher, burden free, she thought, no signs of stress or wrinkles or any of the tartness she wore all the time now.

They looked so happy together.

A needle turned inside her chest.

She hadn’t guessed. That bitch!

“Miss Mia, that’s you.” The lady constable pointed to the discarded picture.

“No, no, you don’t understand,” Mia said softly, “That’s Daphne. Daphne!” She pointed at the photo emphatically. “You need to see. That’s my colleague Daphne.”

The trio looked at her.

“What is she doing in a photo with him?” Mia murmured. “She never told me that she knew him.” She was growing cold by the minute, despite the stifling heat around her. That overfriendliness, that hanging around her desk all the time, that constant chatter about Shashank—it had all been a show.

“They worked together. You all worked together.”

“They were dating!” Mia cried.

“He dated many women from your office.” Inspector Uday pointed to the photos. “See? Many from your office.”

“Why don’t you understand? They were dating and she never told me.” Blood roared in her ears as she stared at the picture.

“You seem to be in a habit of doing this,” Inspector Uday said quietly.

“What?” Mia asked in a daze. “What are you saying?”

“That cigarette we found in Shashank sir’s apartment . . .”

Mia shifted her gaze.

“Miss Surabhi loaned it to you. You never told us. You wanted to make it look like she murdered him. You made us think she smoked it.”

“I was only answering your questions. I didn’t know of the cigarette. I only—”

“And now you say Miss Daphne killed him?” the inspector interrupted impatiently.

“You’re not listening. You’ve got to listen to me!” Mia was shaking, trying in vain to keep her voice from turning into a shriek. “Daphne did it. She really did it.”

“She has an alibi,” Inspector Uday said, leaning back in his chair.

“Who?”

“We can’t tell you that,” he murmured.

They were both startled when the lady constable spoke up. “She was with a doctor many kilometers away. *Pagal hai woh.*” She tapped the side of her head with her knuckles, “she has mental problems.”

“Vrinda!” the inspector barked. “You’ve been blabbing too much to people. You and that Mhatre. Keep quiet!”

Vrinda scowled and turned her focus back to the wall ahead.

“What’s she saying?” Mia asked, confused. “Is she talking of Daphne?”

Inspector Uday looked at Mia. “Your colleague was in therapy on the other side of town till ten p.m. Her family doctor confirmed it’s true. She couldn’t have been at the scene of the murder, given traffic that day.”

“Therapy for what?”

“She’d a nervous breakdown last year, too much work she said. Her father had a heart attack and also this affair with Shashank sir had gone bad. She had one abortion—”

“Looney D,” Mia whispered, a sudden realization washing over her.

They called her *Looney* and not *Lonely*. Mia had misheard. And she was the one who’d had the abortion, not Vaidehi. She’d missed all that. She’d missed all the clues. She’d been oh so ever so completely fooled.

She wanted to stand up and clap. Clap and clap and clap her hands. Clap them nice and loud. And with each clap, she wanted to expound on the great deception she had been party to, a victim of, how she'd gotten totally and completely taken in.

"So, looks like everyone has an alibi but you," the inspector was saying. "Is there someone else you want to accuse?"

"It's Daphne," Mia said quietly. "You must question her. She's framing me."

"Not Miss Surabhi?" Inspector Uday mocked.

Mia cried, "Daphne! It's Daphne!"

"She has an alibi."

"You're getting it all wrong."

The inspector breathed out slowly and said, "We found the list."

Mia's head snapped up. "What list?"

He took out a long sheet of A4 paper with scribbled letters. Without even looking, she knew what it was.

"Number one—gun," the Inspector droned, "Number two—knife. Number three—a rope. Number four, uh, bellidina—?"

"Belladonna." Mia corrected automatically.

"Ah! So you know."

"I didn't write that," Mia said, her face stony.

"Is this not your handwriting?" Inspector Uday flapped the sheet of paper in front of her. "Not yours?"

She stared at the sheet of paper as places, words, and stories began shifting in her head, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that had been fitted wrong.

"This was written in jest. She must've taken it out of my drawer," Mia said.

"Who is *she*?"

"Daphne!" she said. "Didn't she give this to you?"

"This is evidence. We could've searched your table, your drawers, and your things."

"But did you?"

"Answer my question first. Did you write this or no?"

"No. You're not listening," Mia whispered, tapping on the table. "It was Daphne. She was planning this all along."

"What about the traces of Rohypnol we found in his blood?" the inspector asked.

"What's that?" Mia was mystified.

"The date rape drug. It leads to loss of muscle control, confusion, and amnesia. Miss Daphne said you talked about it and knew where you could get some."

"And do what with it?" The muddle in her mind thickened.

"You used to drink together in the balcony; Shashank sir sitting outside and you inside. We found some very questionable cracks in the ledge; small chunks of broken cement had rolled out from them. With him unstable, it was only a matter of time before he stumbled . . . and anyway, a little more Rohypnol and whiskey and he could've died from overdose."

"And where would I get hold of this Rohy . . . whatever this thing is, from?"

"Isn't your family into pharmaceuticals?"

“My father is a chemical engineer.”

“Easy enough then.” The inspector shrugged and leaned back, self-satisfied.

“I’ve no idea what you are talking about,” Mia screamed. “Listen to me. You need to question her. Daphne! She’s been playing me all this while.”

Her heart was palpitating wildly. She had to hold on to the edges of the table to steady the nausea she was feeling.

“We found it in his glass of whiskey. The whiskey you were drinking together. Only in his glass, not yours.”

“But I don’t even—”

“You searched his house to find these photos”—Inspector Uday pointed to the pictures on the table—“But you did not find them. The docket was inside his mattress.”

“Inspector, I did not even know these existed till today,” she cried. “I swear! I’d just gone to collect my things. Why would I want to kill him?”

They stared at her silently, three grim, knowing faces.

At long last, Inspector Uday took in a deep breath and said, “Do you want to tell us the truth or no?”

Her head fell back, and her hands dropped to the sides. She closed her eyes as the heat pressed down like a warm sponge, its coarse humidity stifling her.

As she moved between consciousness and delirium, she thought back on the past few days. How daft she had been, how easily taken in by the soothing talk of a vitriolic mind. While Mia had actually been nursing a broken heart, writing down her feelings to get rid of them, seeking a sympathetic ear to pour out her feelings, Daphne had been plotting with deceptive guile, roiling similar feelings in her heart for over a year, till they grew nastier with every passing day, and she waited patiently till Mia was ready, channeling her pain into something . . .

Mia giggled.

All that time when she was making that list, it had escaped her.

Number five—death by proxy was the best way yet.



Thank you for reading. I hope you loved the story of Mia. It's the sort of experience all of us go through, but the ending is what we secretly desire and can never achieve. That's the intent of all my writing, to talk about the unmentionable inner yearning, the dark place in our mind.

My latest book *Dead to Them* is available for purchase now at [Amazon](#). It's a suspense thriller with a great twist, and one I'd guarantee you'll love. Pick it up!

I'd love to hear back from you. Write to me at thewordsmita@gmail.com. Visit www.smitabhattacharya.com to know more about me and my writing.

You're AweSome!