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**Opening Extract from...**

# Vendetta

Written by Dreda Say Mitchell

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# Vendetta

*Dreda Say Mitchell*

HODDER

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‘If you seek revenge, dig two graves.’
*Chinese proverb*

# one

**7 a.m.**

*Pain.*

*Darkness.*

Mac woke up in a place he couldn't remember. Black surrounded him, hot pain danced in his body. The pain brutally cut away inside his brain. A nasty taste sat at the back of his throat, metallic mixed with the flavour of death. He was on his back, lying on what he didn't know. He was still in his clothes. Navy T-shirt, washed-out black jeans, military-style lace-ups. Laid out like a corpse ready to be put six feet under.

*Where am I?*

His gaze darted around. Abruptly his eyelids snapped down in a protective, reflex motion as something bright hit the room. Cautiously he reopened his eyes. Realised what the brightness was – light coming in from somewhere outside. Just a sliver creeping through a crack in a curtain that was dark with dirt rather than its natural colour.

*Curtains meant a window.*

*A window meant a room.*

*But a room where?*

There was softness under his head. The fingers of his right hand felt what lay beside him. Waves of material.

*Softness.*

*Material.*

*Lying down.*

He figured out what he was laid out on – a bed.

*My bed?*

*Am I back home?*

No, his bed was harder. The mattress he was on was soft, as if sagging with the memory of too many bodies. Mac tried to lift his head, but it wouldn't budge, glued to the pillow beneath it. He raised his hand. Felt the pillow. Something sticky. Something wet. That scared him. Shook him up. Something wasn't right here, just wasn't right. Had to get up. He counted in his head, pulling in shots of deep air at the same time.

*One. Two. Three.*

Tried to move his head again. It wouldn't budge. His mind went into an automatic three-count again.

One. Two. Three.

Teeth clenched tight, neck muscles straining, he ignored the pain as he finally heaved his head up. Swung his legs over the side. Dizziness blurred his vision. His fingers dug into the bed as he fought to see clearly again. The room came back into focus. He touched his fingers to the left side of his head. Felt the skin. Uneven layer on the outside, mushy crater on the inside. The crater didn't feel big. He pulled his fingers to his face and sucked in his breath. Reddish-brown, scabby blood.

*Did I fall?*

*Hit my head?*

The skin on his forehead screwed up as he fought hard to remember.

*Where am I?*

*WHERE THE HELL AM I?*

He eased up, the pain wrapping tight around his throat. He

stumbled over to the curtain. Pulled it back. Light flooded the room. Morning light? Afternoon? He checked his watch.

7:02 a.m.

*11*. The number flashed abruptly in his mind.

*Was something happening at eleven tonight?*

He turned back to the room and faced total chaos. Overturned chairs. A sideboard pulled away from the wall. A wardrobe with its doors hanging open, like gaping jaws trying to scream. And blood. Blood everywhere. On the 70s-style wallpaper. The shabby carpet. A scarlet smear, lipstick-style, across the cracked dressing table mirror.

*What the hell happened here?*

He spotted his rucksack and hooded denim jacket. Started moving, but did it too quickly and toppled straight over. Landed on his knees, the pain slashing every nerve end in his body. He stayed like that, winded, drawing the stale air into his lungs. Then he crawled over to a chair lying on its side. Set it on its legs. Used it to struggle to his feet. Mac took his time as he put one foot ahead of the other. Reached his bag and jacket. Started with the jacket. Checked the pockets.

Wallet with cards.

Mobile.

Passport.

Two e-tickets for a flight to Cambodia.

*Cambodia? Why am I going there?*

He looked at the name on the first ticket. His own, John MacDonagh.

Checked the other ticket. Woman's name. Elena Romanov.

*Elena*.

Like a slap to the face, Mac remembered what he was doing here. Where *here* was.

Hotel room.

Room 19.

He'd told Elena to meet him here at nine. But nine in the evening. So if it was light now, a whole night had come and gone. So where was Elena?

'Elena?' he yelled.

Images of what he could remember flashed through his head. Downing the dregs of a whiskey in the hole-in-the-wall bar downstairs; taking the stairs instead of the lift to the third floor; opening the door to the room. And . . . nothing. He couldn't remember anything after that.

'Elena,' he screamed out again, the same time he noticed her bag peeping out of the wardrobe. The contents of the bling, red fake Gucci handbag were scattered over the wardrobe floor. With his mobile in his hand, Mac staggered towards it.

Empty purse.

Make-up.

Keys.

No mobile.

No Elena.

The pain came roaring back, so hard he thought his head was being severed from the rest of his body. He needed to find out what damage had been done to his head, so he swayed towards the bathroom. Thrust back the partially opened door. Flinched as the light beaming from the bare electric bulb caught his bloodshot eyes. It didn't look like the other room. Tidy, ordered, except for the blue shower curtain that was pulled around the bathtub. He headed for the sink. Stared at the wound in his head in the cabinet mirror. It was crusted with blood that had leaked and matted against his hair and cheek.

He rested his mobile on the shelf above the sink, next to a discarded shower cap. The veins in his forearm bulged as he twisted the tap. Splashed cool water over his face. Pulled the towel from the rail. Tore off a strip. Wrapped it around the

wound. Then he eased on the shower cap to keep his makeshift bandage in place. He went back to the main room as he rang Elena's number.

Waited.

The dialling tone echoed in his ears. It rang. And rang. Then voicemail:

'*I'm not around at the moment. But I'll get back to you as soon as I . . .*'

He clicked off. Tried again. This time he noticed something strange about the sound coming through the phone. It had an echo like it was . . . He pulled the phone back from his face. Listened. He was right, it was coming from somewhere in the hotel room. He moved towards the wardrobe where he'd found her bag but the ringing got fainter. He headed towards the bathroom. The sound got louder. He stepped back inside the chilled room as the ring bounced loud and clear against the walls. Mac rushed towards the shower curtain around the bath. Loud ring.

Reached the outside of the shower curtain as the call went to voicemail. As Elena's sweet voice pulsed in his ear.

'*I'm not around at the moment . . .*'

His hand reached for the curtain.

'*But I'll get back to you as soon as I can . . .*'

His palm caught the material.

'*Please leave a message.*'

Swept it back.

The mobile slipped from his fingers. Instinctively Mac recoiled. There was something in the bath that he wasn't expecting to see. A body. Slumped over at the waist. Head snapped forward. Dark, neck-length hair, toned even darker in patches by something matting it together. He knew what that something was. Blood. What kept him rooted still wasn't the body; wasn't the blood-gelled hair. It was the tiled walls. White

tiles coloured with the scattered debris of human offal. Brains. There was no smell, but his nostrils twitched with an imagined gut-churning stench.

His mind started spinning again. What the heck was he doing in a dead-beat hotel with a dead body? Should only have been him and Elena . . . Elena. Mac's gaze slammed away from the tiles back to the body. The blood iced over in his veins.

*No.*

*No.*

*No.*

Couldn't be . . . He wouldn't allow it to be . . . He reached for the body . . . stopped before he touched it. He couldn't leave any fingerprints. Instead he tucked one hand into the bottom of his T-shirt. Reached over with his covered hand and touched the shoulder of the body. Pushed back. The body slammed backwards. Mac gagged at what he saw – a bloody mess where a face had once been. No eyes, no nose, no mouth, no . . . nothing. The hair was a woman's, the clothing was a woman's. The trousers were . . . Mac reared back when he saw the mobile phone lying between the legs. Elena's mobile, in its distinctive lilac protective case with the bunny ears, soaked in blood.

But that can't be Elena. He shook his head. It couldn't be . . . But the body's left arm proved him wrong. Just above the left wrist was a small red star tattoo that he'd only ever seen on Elena. The left hand rested flat against the stomach. And at the wrist was the bracelet she always wore, with its fine, delicate gold links and tiny bunny-rabbit charm.

'No . . .' He let out an agonised whisper as he sagged to his knees by the tub, crippled by the thought of another death that had devastated his life. His right knee hit the edge of something hard on the floor. Mac looked down. A

gun. *His* gun. His Luger P8. Mac picked it up. An automatic reflex, he sniffed the barrel, confirming what he already suspected, that it had recently been fired. Had he done this? Had he killed her?

The sound of sirens ripped up the air outside the hotel.

# two

Mac rushed to the bedroom window. Peeped outside. Police were gathering on the pavement and more cars were pulling up. Men in uniform looking upwards. Whispering to each other. He had no idea why. But he knew he had to go. Now. Make it downstairs before the cops got inside the hotel. He glanced over at Elena's bloody body. God, he wanted to take her with him, but he couldn't. But he could take one thing. He ran back to her body. Tucked both hands under his T-shirt again. Unclipped the bracelet from her wrist. Dropped it into his pocket.

Ran into the main room. Scooped up Elena's handbag and belongings and dumped them into his rucksack. Shoved on his denim jacket and grabbed up his bag in one smooth move. Flicked the jacket's hood over his head to hide the shower cap. Breathing hard, he opened the door. Sweat pooled down his face as he checked the corridor. Not a soul in sight. He left the room. Made his way to the top of the stairwell. Peered over the rail. It was a dizzy, three-floor drop, but if he leaned over, he could just catch the goings-on at reception. Not a soul in sight again. Most importantly, no cops.

Mac began to walk downstairs as casually as he could. He hit the second floor. The first floor. Was halfway down the final set of stairs when he heard the doors to the hotel swing open and footsteps below. Mac twisted around. Crept back up the stairs. The voices could be heard clearly above.

'Good morning. We're the police . . .' There was a brief pause while ID was no doubt being shown. 'We've had a phone call this morning from one of your guests. She says she heard a commotion in a neighbouring room last night, room 19 . . .'

Mac could almost hear the shrug of shoulders from the receptionist. The cop went on. 'And when she left this morning, she found what she thought looked like a bloody footprint outside the room. She says she alerted you but you didn't seem very interested. We'd like to have a look at this room, please.'

Mac tensed. How the hell was he going to get out of this?

The receptionist asked, in a foreign accent, bored, as if she'd been asked this question too many times in the past, 'Commotion? Blood? This is just silliness. Have you got a warrant?'

'No, we haven't got a warrant – are you saying we need one? That you're not willing to help? Are you sure about that . . . ?'

Silence. Then the cop continued, 'OK – have you got a key for room 19?'

Mac thought fast. Safest thing to do was to carry on as if nothing was happening. Walk down the stairs, out through reception, past the cops all nice and innocent. He hitched the handle of his rucksack higher on his shoulder as he pulled himself off the wall. Took two steps to reach the top of the stairs. Stopped. Then he took the first stair; already he looked like a fugitive. He had a clear view of the people below. Three cops. All male. Two uniforms, the other plainclothes. Female receptionist next to them with a half-gone ciggie between her fingers. She moved, accompanied by two of the policemen.

They turned towards the stairs.

Mac took the next step.

They reached the bottom of the staircase.

Mac's foot hovered over the next step. He let it fall.

The receptionist climbed up ahead of the police, smoke drifting out of her mouth.

Mac watched the top of her bleached blonde hair as he took a step. Then another.

The tops of the cops' heads came into view. They were both looking down so they hadn't spotted him yet.

The cigarette smoke floated up towards Mac. Stung the inside of his nose.

Just one more step and the receptionist would definitely see him.

One of the policemen abruptly stopped. Crouched down to inspect something. 'This could be blood'. Turned his head and called out to the uniformed cop left in the reception, 'Make sure no one leaves the building . . .'

Mac rapidly retraced his steps towards the higher floors. Kept going. And going. Adrenalin and his head wound made him giddy. He reached the top floor. And froze. Waited to hear footsteps. Then he heard them, somewhere not too far below. Mac kicked back into gear. Knocked on the door of the first room he came to.

'Room service,' he said in a low voice.

No response. He tried the handle. *Shit.* Locked.

He kept up the pattern of 'room service', shoving down the handle of each room he came to. But they were all locked. It was going to be game over if he didn't get into one of these rooms soon.

There was one room left. Room 28. The door was flung open after he called out 'room service'. In the doorway stood a woman, middle-aged, with hair a sleek black that matched her spikey false eyelashes, body-hugging leather top and trousers, and hands jammed, fuck-you style, on her hips. Before he could speak she spat out, 'Room service? In this fleapit? Piss off mate, I've got work to do.'

She slammed the door in his face.

Below there was the sound of a key turning in a lock and the sound of heavy feet filing into room 19.

It was too late now for Mac to go downstairs; there was nowhere to hide upstairs. He looked upwards. Ran his gaze along the ceiling. There had to be an attic somewhere. Even a skylight. But where? Where?

He went to tap on the door of Room 28 again but thought better of it. Instead he tried the handle. In her eagerness to get back to work, the woman had left it unlocked. The woman looked round in shock when Mac entered. She opened her mouth but it snapped shut when Mac flipped his jacket back, displaying his Luger. She backed into the room while he clipped the door shut with the heel of his boot. 'I'll be in and out of here quickly so that you can get on with your business.'

Her business was an overweight man, spreadeagled and tied to the posts of the bed with a Union Jack-patterned hood over his head. He looked back at the woman and saw what he should have seen the first time he clapped eyes on her – the hard face of a woman who'd been turning tricks for a long time.

She hissed at him, 'What do you want?'

'I want to know how to get into the attic.'

'The *attic?* Look mate, if you're looking for money or drugs, I can't help.'

Mac walked towards her, but she stood her ground. But instead of stopping when he reached her he carried straight on past. Didn't stop until he reached the bed. She let out a gasp when he pulled out the gun and aimed it at the head of the hooded man.

'A dead punter is bad for your business. And your DNA will be all over the body, condoms or no condoms . . .' Mac shook slightly as his own words echoed around his head.

The man on the bed began bucking against his bonds, making muffled sounds.

'You know this hotel, so stop dicking me around and tell me where the attic is.'

She looked at the Luger. Looked at her customer. Back at Mac. 'There's a storeroom at the end of the corridor. You can get up to the attic through that. I've seen the owner doing it.'

'Get his wallet,' Mac said, gun still fixed on the other man.

The prostitute rushed over to the man's clothing on the seat of a chair and rifled through his jacket. She handed Mac a tan-coloured wallet.

Mac shoved the wallet into his pocket and said to the man, 'If the cops come knocking, you say nothing. You might think that you can make a deal with them so that nice wife of yours at home won't find out about your out-of-office-hours activities.' He didn't need to ask if the man had a woman waiting for him at home; his type always did. 'But I've got your wallet, which means I've got your name, which means I can find out where you live. If I get to hear you've been opening your mouth, one morning your wife's going to get a small package. Inside that package will be your wallet with a little note about what you've been doing when you said you were working hard to support your family.'

Without another word, Mac headed for the door. As he opened it, the woman called out, 'Hang on, you can't take his wallet, I haven't been paid yet . . .'

Mac put the gun away. Closed the door. The storeroom door was white and flush with the wall, explaining how Mac had missed it earlier. But now he had no problem prising it open and switching on the light. Small, littered with paint pots, old carpet and mattresses. And resting against the wall was a step-ladder, which led up to a trapdoor with access to the attic. He closed the door behind him. Climbed up the ladder, his bag

bumping against his back. As he went up and opened the attic door, he heard voices and footsteps in the corridor outside.

'Get everyone out of these rooms and make them assemble downstairs.'

'Yes sir.'

'And you – are there any other rooms up here?'

The receptionist's voice told him, 'Yeah – there's a storeroom and an attic upstairs, but we don't use them much.'

Mac scrambled up into the attic. Pushed inside. Caught the trapdoor and gently eased it back into place so it made no sound. The place was dark, so Mac used the torch on his mobile to check out the space. He found an old tea chest that he moved over the trapdoor so that it couldn't be opened from below and then he examined the roof. No skylight. He was trapped. And now he could hear voices below him in the storeroom.

Mac carefully examined the roof, through which he could see occasional chinks of sunlight. He reeled back in surprise when he kicked over a bucket that had been catching rainwater and sent a couple of gallons of water spilling out over the floor. Down below he could hear the voices of the police becoming more urgent. Standing on the sodden floorboards, with the silence of a thief, Mac began tearing away at the damp and moulding lining of the roof where the rotting wood strained under the weight of the slates above. Someone started pushing and then banging against the other side of the attic door.

# three

It was only a matter of time before they got in. Mac kept tearing and pulling until he was through to the cracked and loose slates themselves. Pulled them off. Laid them to one side, one on top of the other. Flushes of fresh air blew into the musty attic and oblongs of daylight began to appear.

Behind Mac, the noise against the door stopped.

Silence.

*Bang*. The battering against the door started up again, stronger this time. A brief shaft of light from below appeared before the tea chest forced the door back down. Mac threw his bag out onto the roof. Gathered together the slates and put them on the roof, outside the hole he'd made. The attic shook as the police kept up the pressure, trying to force the trapdoor. Mac arranged paint pots on top of each other and used them as steps to climb up through his newly created exit.

Gusts of wind, after the rank air in the attic, caught Mac like a stiff drink. He gasped slightly as he carefully sat down on the unsteady roof. Then he put back the slates, using the sodden moss lying around to hold them steady and fill in the gaps through which daylight shone. As the last slate fell into place, the noise from the attempt to break into the attic below faded and became muffled. Mac crouched on the roof, which was littered with bits of pottery, weeds, old TV aerials and bird droppings. He clung to the hope that the frantic activity on the

street below would mean no one would look up – in the same way he clung to the tiles.

He knew this street. He'd made it his business to check all streets and buildings before he used them, in case of an emergency, and this was just such an emergency. As carefully as he could, swaying sometimes in the wind, he began to thread his way over the roof. But should he look up or look down? He kept his head down, watching for loose or broken tiles, of which there were many. From time to time a piece of slate would come loose and tumble over the guttering before cracking in the courtyards below, but with the pulse of traffic, shouting and voices on the street where Elena's murder had taken place, the crashing slates went unnoticed. He was a good thirty-five to forty feet from ground level. He knew the rule. Don't look down. But he broke the rule, as people always do. He felt the long drop below deep in his stomach. Fall from this height and he was a dead man.

Mac stayed steady, keeping a sure foot, with only pigeons perched on chimney stacks to witness his escape. He crossed five roofs until he reached another building. No skylight, so he moved on to his next target. Two roofs further down the street. He kept moving until he finally saw the outline of a skylight.

And that's when Mac really should've been looking up, because two pigeons flew out of nowhere near his head. He arched back. Tried to control the wobble in his legs. His feet slipped away from under him. His body slid down the roof towards the concrete back yard below.

# four

A nail tore through the flesh of his hand. Mac's head bent back at the pain. Desperately he tried to grab hold of anything that might break his fall, but it was like catching an eel. His head caught the metal guttering; with a supreme effort, he tried to jam his foot under the eaves while using a flailing arm to hook his elbow onto a rusty aerial that had fallen from a chimney and was hanging from black wiring looped over one of the stacks. Feet dangling, he broke his fall. He looked down at the dizzy drop to the bone-shatteringly hard ground below. He swung his legs up. Got back into position. With bloodied and bruised hands he crawled towards the skylight.

Peered in through the dirty, smeared and opaque glass – a landing with no one on it. He fished around in his bag and found a nail file among Elena's stash of make-up. Used it to scrape away the wood round the lock, which, like most of the fittings on this street's buildings, was rotten and decayed. He applied pressure. The skylight lifted up. Mac leaned in head first and listened. No one around. He dropped his bag onto the well-trodden carpet below. Lowered himself. He hung suspended, the tendons in his arms so stretched he thought they would snap. Let go. Dropped into a neat body roll. Wiped his hands and knew that his calculation had been correct. This was another one of the street's seedy hotels.

He picked himself and the bag up and walked smartly down

the stairs to reception. The area was empty. Mac banged the bell and two people emerged from the doorstep out front where they'd been watching the police at work and wondering what all the fuss was about.

One spun slowly round in a wheelchair. A bony, older woman, with the last remnants of beauty fading from her skin, her eyes hidden behind a pair of Catwoman-style sunglasses.

'Can I help you?' she asked, wheeling herself towards the back of the reception desk.

'I'd like a room please.'

He could see she was baffled as to how he'd appeared in her reception without her noticing, but she kept those types of questions to herself.

Instead she asked, 'How long for?'

'One night should be enough. And can I have a room facing the street?'

'Facing the street?'

Mac looked away from her face; even though he couldn't see her eyes, that stare of hers seemed to know too much.

'Yeah, I'm afraid it's a tic of mine. I have to be facing the street . . .'

The woman asked no more questions. Mac paid in cash. She made him sign the register. Passed him an old-style key. Room 26.

# five

**7:36 a.m.**

Door closed behind him, the first thing Mac did was to put the TV on. He wasn't even aware of doing it, just one of those automatic survival reflexes he had when entering a hotel room. One of the top ten rules of his job was to make sure the world never heard what you were doing by masking your activities with noise. He hiked the volume up slightly. The TV was showing a documentary, *It Happened in 1979*, and on the screen were Russian tanks grinding through mountains, unhappy soldiers mounted on the back as they invaded Afghanistan.

That's when Mac felt the tremors in his body. The blood and bones shaking in his legs. Suddenly the room around him hazed over. His vision blurred. He blinked. Blinked. But that made it worse as the room around him moved, swayed. Or was it him that was tilting?

Blink.

Blink.

He could barely see. Not now. He had too much of the present to torture him. He didn't need the past as well. No . . .

Flash.

*The Luger was in his hand. Primed, loaded, his finger a hair's breadth from kicking back the trigger. And there she was, looking up at him from the bath. Elena. Her eyes, usually*

*so soft, bulged with hard fear. Her mouth moved with words he couldn't hear. The air froze around him. He levelled the 9 mm at her face. Elena's mouth widened, stayed open, with the bellow of a scream he wouldn't let reach his ears. His finger jacked back . . .*

Mac's mind came crashing back into the hotel room. He was no longer standing, but backed up against the wall, on his haunches, in the pose of a dog that had been beaten down. His breathing spurted out, echoes of the horror of the flashback. But was it a flashback? Could he believe what his mind was telling him? He'd suffered too many false flashbacks this past year to trust what his mind told him. Had he murdered Elena? That had been *his* gun near her body.

*Elena's dead. Elena's dead. And you killed her.*