

It was 5:45 p.m. when I stepped into St. Paul's Church. The Sunday evening mass was wrapping up, murmurs of prayer melting into the fading incense. Rows of bowed heads straightened as the congregation returned to their pews after Communion.

"May the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all," said Reverend Father Benedict from the altar.

"And with your spirit," came the unified reply, like breath released in relief.

"Go forth, the mass has ended," Father Benedict said, giving a gentle nod, stepped down from the dais, and disappeared into the sacristy. One by one, worshippers crossed themselves and drifted toward the exit, returning to the noise and dust of Mahim.

I didn't linger. I moved past the altar, past the saints with stone eyes, heading straight for the chapel. I was looking for Father Benedict. Today wasn't just another Sunday.

Zachariah was returning to India.

And I was done waiting.

This was the day I would bury him. Not with prayer, not with pity but with everything he deserved. For what he did to my family. For what he turned me into.

"Good evening, my son," Father Benedict said softly, setting aside his Bible as I entered the dim chapel.

"Evening, Father," I replied, voice low.

"I need to make a confession."

He studied me for a moment. Then simply nodded and led the way toward the confessional, a narrow booth, dim and quiet, built for unburdening.

He entered, took his seat behind the screen. I knelt.

"Speak, my son," he said. "Unburden your heart."

I closed my eyes. My hands trembled slightly.

"Father... I have sinned."

The words tasted like iron.

"I've hurt people. Knowingly. Unknowingly. And in the days to come... I will do something terrible. Something I'm not sure even the Lord could forgive."

There was silence. Then his voice, calm and sure.

“Romans 6:23 reminds us that the wages of sin is death. But the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus.”

A pause.

“Justice comes to all, eventually. But you, my son... you still have a choice. Step away from the path of darkness. Walk in the light.”

I nodded. More to myself than him.

“Thank you, Father Benedict.”

I rose and left the booth.

Outside, the church had emptied. A few pigeons fluttered from the bell tower. The last of the parishioners shuffled toward the road, folding umbrellas, unlocking scooters.

Abraham Zachariah.. once the people’s hero, now just a man returning from exile, was due to land in less than two hours.

They called him a visionary. Said he transformed Lasoonwadi’s slums. Built jobs. Build hope.

He built nothing for me. In fact he destroyed my life, my happiness, my nest..

I stepped out into the golden dusk, my fists tight, my pulse steady.

My resolve burned quiet and clear.

“Zachariah... back in town. Don’t miss this chance, Aaron!”

Firoz’s message blinked on my screen, electric and final. My thumb hovered, then locked the phone. I stepped off the church stairs and into the fading light.

A soft touch on my wrist stopped me.

Lina.

Her fingers brushed mine, tentative, deliberate, like she was holding me back with nothing but skin and silence. Her eyes said everything. Worry, warmth, maybe even goodbye.

I sat down on the steps, watching children scurry past, laughing as they headed late to catechism. A bell rang distantly. Dust shimmered in the sunbeams.

"This place," I murmured, more to the wind than to her, "always feels like home."

Lina sat beside me, adjusting her dupatta, her hands fidgeting in her lap. There was something quieter about her today. Still, but not calm.

"God is the only true power," I said, pointing to the sky.

Clouds loomed low, and the last light was being swallowed by the coming dusk. She followed my gaze but didn't speak.

I turned to her. "Today... it ends."

I smiled, crooked, tired, and ruffled her hair. For once, I didn't care who saw.

"Zachariah's flight is landing soon," I said, standing. "He's finished."

Lina rose with me.

Another buzz.

"Reaching airport in 30. Don't be late."

I pocketed the phone.

"Time to move," I muttered. "Or Firoz's gonna skin me alive."

Lina's eyes searched mine. Not pleading. She suddenly wrapped her arms around me, held me like she wanted to stitch our bodies together. She shook. Her tears wet my shirt.

"Don't worry," I whispered. "I'll come back."

I hesitated, then added, "I don't have much time left. But before I go... I'm finishing Zachariah."

Before I could say more, her hand covered my mouth.

She knew the cost. Not of murder. But of losing me.

I wiped her tears and hailed a cab.

"Lasoonwadi?" I called. The driver didn't even glance. He sped off.

No one wanted to risk that part of Mahim. Not after dark. Not ever.

Another slowed.

"Mahim chalo!" I barked.

The driver hesitated, then gave a short nod.

Lina clutched my hand in the cab, not like a girlfriend. Like someone clinging to the edge of a cliff. She didn't blink. Didn't cry.

But her grip was a scream.

I didn't speak. I didn't know how.

The scent of salt and sewage hit us before the cab even stopped. Lasoonwadi. Still standing. Still rotten.

My phone buzzed.

"Flight delayed. Landing in 10. Where are you?"

Lina yanked my arm.

"Lina?" I said, confused. "What the hell...let go."

I resisted. She pulled harder.

"Lina. Let me go!"

I snapped. Too loud. Too sharp.

She didn't flinch. Just kept dragging me past the corner gang whistling through stained teeth.

"Bas kya, Aaron bhai!" one sneered.

I turned, fire in my eyes. Lina squeezed my hand tight and pulled me onward.

We climbed the filthy stairwell. Moldy walls. Betel-stained floors.

Room 204. She fumbled for keys. Click. The door opened.

She shoved me inside.

"What is wrong with you?" I asked, trying to leave.

She blocked me.

"Lina, move!"

She didn't.

I lost it.

"Let me go, bitch!" I shouted, and shoved her aside.

She hit the floor hard. Her sob was low, cracked. Then she crawled to me and clutched my feet. Her tears wet my ankles. Her whole body shook.

She wasn't stopping me from killing Zachariah.

She was trying to stop me from killing myself.

But I didn't care.

I kicked her away.

Hard. And ran.

Down the stairs. Into the streets. Toward the airport.

That's when it hit me.

Not guilt. Not fear. Something worse.

She had loved me more than anyone ever had. And I had become someone she didn't even recognize.

I stopped. I turned.

And I ran back.

I burst into the apartment. Quiet.

Lina sat curled in the corner, her face buried in her arms. Her body trembled with every breath.

I walked over and sat beside her.

Another message.

"You reached? Call me ASAP."

I ignored Firoz's texts..

"Lina... I'm sorry," I said, my voice barely a whisper.

She didn't look up.

We sat there in silence.

And for the first time in months, I wanted revenge to wait.

She didn't speak. Didn't even cry. She just stood and walked into the bedroom, shut the door behind her like she was locking something away.

I followed.

She lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Still trembling, but silent now. Her eyes were dry, but distant. A storm held behind them.

I sat beside her. Reached out.

"Lina... please."

She turned her face away.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I didn't mean that"

She reached for a scarf. Silently held it up, motioning for me to close my eyes.

"What are you doing?" I asked, half-laughing.

"Shhh," she whispered. Her breath brushed my ear.

I obeyed.

In darkness, her touch found me. Her kiss was slow, trembling, sure.

We moved with months of silence behind us. She kissed like she was remembering a language she'd forgotten. I kissed like I was trying to learn it.

I undressed her and I wildly mapped my fingers on her back. She turned and slept facing the ceiling fan exhibiting her succulent breasts. Her enormous breasts, full, round, soft, tender were ready to explode its secret energy. Her bosom brushed my chest giving me goose bumps all over my body. I felt a sudden quiver on my body as she kissed me voraciously. I kissed her everywhere, every inch of her body.

I ran my fingertips along the length of her body, through her spine, then through her thighs and then her feet. I tortured her bosoms until she moaned. I meticulously put my arms around her neck and kissed her once again. She was panting heavily. With a flit movement, we swirled our bodies together. She could feel me in as I brushed my front against hers. The joy and pain got replaced by long moans.

When it was over, we lay together. Still. Warm.

"You're beautiful," I whispered. "A Princess. No, a Queen, or maybe a Goddess or something more."

I touched her face.

"There's just one reason I ever hated God," I said.

Her eyes narrowed.

"Relax," I chuckled. "I'm not gonna curse Him."

She waited.

"I just... wish I could hear your voice. Just once."

She smiled. Blinked. Slowly. Like she was hiding a world behind her eyes.

She kissed my nose, then curled against my chest.

I played with her hair until she slept.

My phone buzzed again.

Firoz – 13 missed calls.

I ignored them.

Lina breathed softly. Peaceful. Like she hadn't just held me from the edge.

Like I hadn't almost left her behind.

Eight months ago, she was a stranger.

Now... she was the only soul that knew the wreckage inside me.

It was March. The month when India gently shrugged off its winter and welcomed summer with open arms and a restless sun. That was also the month Zachariah, India's ambassador to Turkey chose to return for an extended vacation. A high-profile visit. A red carpet welcome.

A perfect window to strike.

I had already been tipped off. Firoz, however, had to rush to Lucknow for some urgent business, leaving me with the full weight of our plan. The plan to end Zachariah. The plan I had spent months obsessing over.

That evening, I arrived at Worli by 5 p.m. The buzz in the air wasn't for politics, it was for football. Manchester United, the legendary English club, was inaugurating their first merchandise store in India. The ceremony was a high-profile affair, swarming with cameras, sponsors, and fans. And the chief guest?

None other than Abraham Zachariah.

He stood behind a podium, shaking hands, posing for cameras, grinning in his crisp suit as though he hadn't destroyed lives. As if he hadn't wrecked mine.

I wore a Manchester United jersey Number 7 - David Beckham just like every other fan in the crowd. But unlike them, I had a loaded pistol hidden beneath mine.

"Kill Zachariah." The words echoed in my mind like a chorus on loop. My breathing steadied. My heartbeat didn't.

I scanned the crowd. No one recognized me, not with this beard, not with this altered look. I stayed close to the outer edge of the event, keeping to the shadows, eyes trained on Zachariah. Waiting. Watching. Timing.

And then... she appeared.

Walking towards me like she had emerged from a different world.

Draped in a soft pink kurti, cloaked in a white shawl, she seemed lost in her own thoughts. Her slender frame, luminous skin, those piercing, unreadable eyes, they pulled my gaze like a magnet. Her lashes curled like poetry, and her lips, full and red, framed a face that would put the gods to shame. A single mole beneath her lip added an inexplicable allure.

She walked past, calm and composed. And then she smiled at me.

Just a passing smile. But it left a dent in my memory.

Why did she smile at me? For a fleeting moment, I forgot everything, even Zachariah. Her presence completely disarmed me.

And then—a THUD.

She collapsed on the pavement.

I rushed forward instinctively. In seconds, I had scooped her up into my arms, her head limp against my shoulder. Her skin was warm, her breath shallow. But no one around us moved. People stared. Some even walked past.

That's Mumbai for you. A city that runs faster than its people can feel.

I flagged down a rickshaw and rushed her to a nearby hospital. The fluorescent lights and antiseptic smell brought me back to focus. She lay on the bed like a porcelain doll, unmoving, silent, but heartbreakingly beautiful.

I tried calling Firoz again. Fifteen missed calls from him, and still no answer from my end.

The doctor told me she was severely anaemic. Her haemoglobin levels were dangerously low. He handed me a prescription and said, "She'll need someone to take care of her."

I almost laughed. How was I supposed to tell him I didn't even know her name?

Moments later, she stirred.

Her eyelids fluttered open slowly, revealing those same deep, soul-cracking eyes.

"Hey... you okay?" I asked softly.

She nodded faintly.

"What's your name?" Silence.

"Where do you live?"

"Can I drop you home?"

"Your father's number?"

"Anything?"

"You've got to speak. Just say something."

Nothing.

Her silence was like a wall. Solid. Unmoving. Agonizing.

My frustration got the better of me.

"Talk, dammit!"

Tears welled up in her eyes.

And then, like a punch to the chest, it hit me.

She couldn't speak. She was mute.

Suddenly, the same God I had admired for creating her beauty became the one I wanted to blame..for giving her such grace, and yet taking away her voice.

"I'm Aaron... Aaron D'Souza," I said, trying to steady myself.

"I... I'm heading home now."

As I turned to leave, she grabbed my hand.

She didn't want me to go.

"Do you want to come with me?" I asked.

She nodded.

That night, I took her home. She didn't speak a word, but in silence, she said everything.

In the days that followed, she began to stitch herself into my life—quietly, softly. She cooked with care, often reminding me of Ma. She cleaned, tended to the house, filled every empty corner with unspoken comfort. She didn't need words.

She became Lina. Named after the one woman who once made me believe love wasn't a lie—my mother.

I didn't know her past. I had no clue what had brought her to that street in Worli. All I knew was this: she belonged here now.

When Firoz returned and met her, his eyes almost popped out of his skull.

"You? In love? With... a woman?"

I chuckled. He didn't get it. Lina wasn't just some woman. She was the storm that calmed me.

She never spoke. Yet she understood me better than anyone ever had.

I swore to protect her, to shield her from every pain, to fill her life with dreams even if it meant forgetting my own.

Even if it meant... putting revenge on pause.

The 8 a.m. alarm shrieked like a bomb drill.

I smashed it silent, rubbed my face, and sat up.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

Someone was assaulting the front door like it owed them money.

I didn't need to guess.

Firoz.

"Aaron!" he bellowed. "OPEN THE DAMN DOOR MOTHERFUCKER!"

I looked at Lina, still curled beside me. Her eyes opened instantly, already alert.

"Get dressed," I muttered. "Now."

She nodded, already moving.

I threw on a shirt and opened the door.

Firoz shoved me against the wall before I could speak. His breath reeked of fury and cigarette ash.

"Where the hell were you last night?!"

His punch came fast, straight to the jaw. I hit the floor, ears ringing.

Lina ran in. She didn't cry. Didn't scream. She just stood between us, palms pressed together, pleading.

Firoz looked at her like she was a curse.

"There she is," he spat. "The quiet bitch that muzzled the beast"

I stood, my jaw throbbing. "Hey. Watch your mouth."

He slapped me again.

Lina flinched, but didn't move. She stood firm.

I straightened. "She's not just a woman. She's someone who gives a damn about me. More than you ever did."

Firoz's mouth twisted. Then, mercifully, Krishna entered, balancing three glasses of chai on a steel tray like he was carrying a peace treaty.

"Special cutting chai," he declared. "Before someone ends up in a morgue."

I took a glass. Sipped. Burned my tongue. Perfect.

Firoz dropped onto the couch beside me and exhaled.

"You know I love you like a brother, right?" he said.

"Brothers don't punch each other over women."

"I didn't hit you for her," he muttered. "I hit you because you forgot who the hell you are."

He turned to Lina. "Zachariah. He's not just some politician."

Lina sat between us, listening.

Firoz leaned forward.

"Zachariah, the golden boy of slum redevelopment. Hero of the '90s. The press worshipped him."

Lina's eyes stayed locked on his.

"In '92, the government launched a program to convert Mumbai's slums into high-rise apartments. Noble goal. Zachariah was Housing Minister. ₹500 crores sanctioned."

I picked it up. "I was ten. Firoz was fifteen. Lasoonwadi was our home."

Firoz nodded. "Zachariah partnered with Johar Builders. He paid off inspectors, hired local thugs to harass residents into fleeing. No compensation. No rehousing. Just 'get out'... or burn."

Lina's hand found mine. Gently. Wordlessly.

"He embezzled ₹150 crores," I added, "and siphoned the rest."

"But then came the fire," Firoz said. "Planned. Deliberate. They called it a gas leak."

Lina blinked. Her fingers tensed around mine.

"I lost my parents that night," I said. "My brothers. My sister. All of them."

Firoz looked at me. "And I lost mine years before. Your family took me in. I had a home. Briefly."

Lina wiped her eyes, even though no tears fell. Her face was carved from silence.

"The fire turned us into ghosts," Firoz muttered. "The government launched the Justice Garware Commission. Exposed everything."

"But nothing happened," I said bitterly. "Zachariah skated free. No charges. No prison. Power paid for silence."

Firoz turned to Lina. "Now he's back. Back in the city. Back from exile. And this time... we finish it."

He leaned in closer.

"Tell me, Lina. Are we wrong?"

She didn't answer. But her eyes... they looked older.

Firoz leaned back. "The world doesn't care about what's right. It only asks what you're willing to live with."

Just then, Krishna returned breathless, holding the day's Times of India like it was a bombshell.

"Bhai log," he panted. "Read this."

Front page. Red headline.

"OPERATION ASHFALL EXPOSED"

Undercover Mumbai Police mission targeting underworld hot zones - Mahim, Saki Naka, Lasoonwadi leaked to the media. Suspected informant: Agent codename 'HELA'. Identity unknown.

I froze.

"Operation Euphoria?" I said slowly.

"Looks like they're cleaning the house," Firoz muttered, scanning the article. "One by one."

"Who the hell is Agent HELA?" I asked, remembering that Hela was the Norse goddess of death.

"Whoever they are," Firoz said, "they're playing both sides. And actually playing it smart."

Lina stared at the newspaper.

And then, a smile.

Subtle. Barely there. But unmistakable.

Was it pride?

Was it fear?

I couldn't tell.

It didn't matter.

I stood, heart hammering.

"I don't care who's watching. I don't care if it's God, the cops, or Agent HELA."

I looked Firoz in the eye.

"Zachariah must die."

Days passed.

The city moved on.

Then one Friday morning, Firoz crashed through my front door like a cyclone.

“Aaron!” he yelled. “Open up!”

I barely turned the knob before he shoved his way in, wild-eyed and panting.

“Zachariah is dead.”

I blinked. “What?”

“Dead. Gone. Murdered. In his Powai flat. Lobo too.”

I staggered backward. Turned on the TV.

Every channel screamed the same headline:

FORMER UNION MINISTER ABRAHAM ZACHARIAH ASSASSINATED IN HIS RESIDENCE.

No Joy . No vindication. Just... confusion.

“It was you, right?” Firoz questioned.

“I didn’t kill him,” I said quietly. “You know that. We planned it. But we never...”

Firoz just smiled. Like he knew something I didn’t.

“You sure?” he asked.

“Don’t mess with me, Firoz! You know I didn’t do it. Lina knows I didn’t”

Lina entered the room like smoke. Silent. Calm.

I turned to her. “Tell him.”

She said nothing.

Another headline flashed.

SUSPECTS: SALEM MIYA, FIROZ SHEIKH, AARON D'SOUZA.

My gut twisted.

“They’ll come for me,” I muttered. “I won’t drag her into this.”

I turned to Lina, urgently.

"Pack your bags. We're leaving."

At CST, I bought her a one-way ticket to the Nagercoil Express, somewhere far away where no one could reach her.

"I never believed in love," I told her. "Not until you."

I kissed her forehead. Walked away before she could break me.

As I stepped back into Lasoonwadi. Sirens.

Mumbai Police. They were waiting.

Cuffs. Cold. Final.

Firoz stood beside me in the courtroom. Wrists bound. Faces unreadable.

The judge entered. Justice Radhakrishnan. Sharp. Impatient.

Then

"As per intelligence from Agent HELA, Aaron D'Souza and Firoz Sheikh are cleared of all charges. This court finds them innocent."

The air left my lungs.

"What?"

"Case dismissed," the judge said.

Firoz nudged me.

I turned.

At the back of the room, flanked by officers, stood Lina.

But she wasn't Lina anymore.

She was regal. Poised. Dressed in black. Her silence is now replaced by presence.

And then, she spoke.

"You both okay?"

Her voice. Soft. Controlled.

Not a whisper.

Not a gesture.

Words.

I couldn't breathe.

"You're... Agent HELA?" I asked.

She nodded. "Leah Zachariah."

The name detonated in my skull.

"Zachariah was your father?"

"Yes."

My stomach dropped.

"You played me."

"I did what I had to," she said. "But I meant every moment."

"You protected him."

"I tried. But I failed."

"You could've turned me in."

"I didn't."

"Why?"

She stepped closer. Her voice trembled. "Because I wanted to give you the one thing you said you always wanted."

I stared at her.

"You said... hearing me speak would be the greatest gift."

I swallowed.

"Well," she said softly, "here I am. Speaking."

My chest cracked. "I don't get it!"

"You'll eventually."

That night, we met again. Somewhere quiet. Somewhere private.

She wore black. Lipstick red. Eyes unreadable.

"Ready for your surprise?" she asked.

"I guess so."

She blindfolded me. Like before. The last time she did this, I felt ecstasy. This time.. It was different.

Her breath brushed my ear.

"Open your eyes, Aaron."

I did.

Two guns.

One pointed by Firoz.

One by her.

"What is this?" I choked.

"You're under arrest," Firoz said.

"Is this a joke?"

Leah..Lina..never flinched. "You killed my father."

"He destroyed everything!"

"You confessed."

"Because it was true!"

Firoz lowered his gun. "I was undercover too. But she—she stopped your plans every time."

I shook. "I loved you."

"You loved a lie."

"Then why defend me in court?"

Leah's voice cracked. "Because I wanted to be the one who ends it."

Tears shimmered, but her grip held.

"Goodbye, Aaron," she whispered.

She pulled the trigger.

One shot.

Burning. White-hot. Brutal. Through my chest. I collapsed.

My vision blurred as I stared at the woman who once slept in my arms. The woman who gave me love. And now punishment.

Her face was the last thing I saw... tear-streaked, furious, beautiful.

And then...

Father Benedict's words came flooding back:

"The wages of sin is death."

Not fear.

Not regret.

Just silence.

Not hers.

But mine.

I had never feared dying.

But I hadn't imagined dying like this.

Not by her hands.

Not after tasting her love.

As my breath faded, I realized something.

It wasn't her silence that haunted me. It was the silence I had created inside myself... when I first chose revenge over redemption.

And now?

Now, silence had come to take me home to unite with my family that once Zachariah killed.

The voice of silence turned out to be powerful.

The voice came through the boy's wireless headphones as he adjusted the incline on the treadmill. A woman's voice. Calm, clean, haunting.

He was about seventeen. Hoodie soaked with sweat, face flushed from the last set of squats. But now he had stopped running. He wasn't even breathing hard anymore.

He was listening.

"I watched him die," said the voice. "And I didn't feel victorious. I just felt... empty."

Her words floated in his ears as the gym lights flickered slightly in the dusty ceiling. Somewhere, someone dropped a barbell. Someone else grunted. But the boy was locked in.

"I remember the fire," the woman went on. "The screaming. The silence that followed. The rise of a man who remade himself from ash - Aaron D'Souza."

She wasn't reading from a script. She didn't need to.

"I loved him," she said.

The boy stopped the treadmill. Stepped off. Sat down on the mat and pulled his knees up to his chest.

"He made me believe vengeance and love could live inside the same heart. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe they just... burn each other out."

He reached for his water bottle but didn't drink. The voice kept going.

"I visit Lasoonwadi sometimes," she said. "Not to mourn. To remember. To walk the ground where it all began. Where my father once reigned. Where Aaron once dreamed. Where I ended it."

Her tone didn't change, but something in it cracked faintly like glass under a quiet strain.

"I still remember how he laughed. That smirk when he thought he had a plan. The way he ran his fingers through his hair when he lied. The first time I blindfolded him... for love. And the last time... for justice."

A pause. Just long enough for the boy to hear his own heartbeat.

"I don't know which haunts me more."

The voice exhaled, gently now.

"Firoz left Mumbai after the trial. Said he'd had enough blood for one life. Last I heard, he's running a shack in Goa, drinking masala chai and quoting Ghalib to strangers."

The boy gave a small smile, as if that somehow made sense.

"As for me... I stayed. Because this city always needs one more shadow in the system. One more woman watching from the corners."

Her voice grew softer.

"Maybe I stayed because I still haven't forgiven myself."

The boy's headphones crackled faintly as the podcast shifted tone.

"Some nights, I hear him," she continued. "His voice."

She didn't mimic it. She didn't have to.

'If our love is true, we'll meet again... no matter what befalls.'

The boy whispered it under his breath as she said it.

He closed his eyes.

The gym didn't exist for a moment. Only her voice.

"I wonder if he would've forgiven me," she said, like she was talking to herself now. "Or if I killed the only person who ever truly saw me."

Another silence.

And then she said:

"I went back to the church. Where it began for him. Sat in the pew, at the back. Alone. The candles flickered. I whispered the prayer he never finished."

The boy mouthed it with her as her voice filled his skull.

"May the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you..."

She paused.

"...and with your spirit, Aaron."

The outro music began faintly in his ears. But he didn't hear it.

He just sat there. Quiet. There, in a cheap gym in the middle of a city that had no time for reflection, a boy held a silence that wasn't his...

...and understood, just for a moment, what it meant to carry someone else's ghost.