## **Larceny of Love**

The feeble flicker of a lone streetlamp struggled against the thick darkness that engulfed the narrow alleys of the *Baloch Goth,* the infamous slum of Karachi. The moon hid behind the clouds, too afraid to witness the horrors that took place right under her luminous glow. Ramshackle houses, their walls patched with corrugated metal and crumbling brick, loomed over the uneven pathways of the illegal settlement of numerous squatters. Stray dogs scavenged for scraps amidst the piles of rubbish, their plaintive barks echoing through the labyrinthine streets.

The distant sound of the *muezzin's* call to prayer mingled with the occasional honking of *rickshaws*, creating a cacophony that underscored the eerie silence of the night. Sewage trickled sluggishly along the edges of the unpaved roads, emitting a foul odor that permeated the air. In a cramped and dilapidated two-room dwelling, Zareena laid on a threadbare mattress, her labored breaths barely audible over the symphony of urban decay outside. The walls, stained with dampness and neglect, seemed to close in around her as she struggled through the pains of labor. Sweat dripped down her brow, mixing with tears of exhaustion and apprehension as she fought to stifle her cries of agony, mindful of the thin walls that separated her from her neighbors. Each contraction felt like a cruel reminder of the harsh realities of her life in the slums, where even a scream was a luxury, she couldn't afford.

“If you let out as much as a whimper, I’ll make sure to cut your throat before it can happen again,” the towering body of the man standing beside her, gritted through his *paan-stained* teeth, as he glared down at her.

Zareena stared at him through her blurred vision, warm tears pooling in her eyes as she looked at the man she called her husband. His grey eyes, that she had grown fond of over the years, held no affection for her whatsoever. She knew he married her only to have someone to cook and clean for him. Someone to earn their, and even his, keep in the household. It was something he had made abundantly clear when he had asked her for an unreasonable amount of *jahez*. Someone he could use to gratify his primal needs as the rugged and brutal man that he was. She never really understood why she still grew fond of this man, who never once offered an ounce of affection to her.

"Please Shahbaz… just let me to go to the hospital. I cannot do this at home," she pleaded, her voice strained with agony of staying quiet.

He scoffed in response, almost in disbelief that she would even mention something so ridiculous. He grabbed the fabric of his *shalwar*, arranging the falls of a trouser that she had sewed for him on his birthday and while maintaining his icy glare, he slowly knelt closer to her face.

“Over my dead body, you *kutti*.”

Zareena felt another contraction coming through as her body jolted with pain, her insides forcing their way out of her. She brought her hand up to her mouth as she bit into her lip, praying it would be enough to contain the shrieks her vocal cords wanted to release. Her husband stood up and went to stand by the window, leaving her alone in her pain, his silhouette a menacing figure against the night. His eyes were cold, devoid of any pity that perhaps even a stranger might have in the situation.

"You should have thought about these consequences before fucking that *chutiya*. In no way shall the world know that my wife is a *randi*. In no way shall my wife go to the hospital filled with even more men," he spoke, his tone laced with an unsettling calmness.

She grimaced at the words, despite having heard them one too many times before. Somehow, they hurt her more than the brutal contraction that had just ripped through her body. Turning her head slightly, her gaze met his dark figure, and she suddenly remembered the first time she had had a lucid dream. She shuddered remembering the way her body tensed up, unable to move despite wanting to flee with all her willpower. The hopelessness of being stuck and the anxiety of having to give up control of something she should’ve had the right over, made her want to wail in despair.

“I… I didn’t do it… he forced me, Shahbaz…” her voice cracked under the weight of not being believed.

“Stop lying to me or I will kill you before you can see another sunrise!”

A mangled sob escaped her lips, knowing there was no point in trying to make him believe her. Her drenched *shalwar* and *kameez* clung onto her figure, partially in sweat and because her water had broken. She wondered if it was the walls that were closing in on her, or her own clothes that suffocated her. Perhaps it was the fabric stretched against her body, since he refused to let her buy anything new, whilst ridiculing her for the weight she had gained during her pregnancy. He didn’t even care about the bruises he left on her sore body as he relentlessly raped her, often going for multiple rounds in one night.

“Shahbaz, I promise you, the doula cannot help me. Please, I will go in the dark of the night and return before the sun comes up. Only women will be at the hospital. Nobody will know, I promise you, nobody will find out,” she begged him.

“Consider yourself lucky that I have even called the doula for you. You will be giving birth here at home like every woman of our colony has.”

But Zareena knew better, though she couldn’t tell him about it. Six months ago, when she had snuck out early on for a secret checkup and found out that she was pregnant, her soul shattered. She knew that Shahbaz was infertile, and the baby could never be his, which only made her spiral further as flashbacks of the traumatic night his brother snuck into her room flooded her mind.

“Please, tell me how I can get rid of this child,” she had begged the doctor to help but to no avail.

“*Beta*, it is a huge sin to treat the blessing that Allah has sent your way like this! Go home and tell your husband, he will surely be happy.”

Zareena thought that perhaps playing the fool might benefit her for once. Just maybe luck would be on her side, and she could have the family she prayed five times a day for. She remembered every second of that day she told Shahbaz like it was yesterday. The way his nose flared in disbelief, his eyes widening in anger and how her ears rang as his rugged palm met her face, creating a deafening sound. She remembered the way her body ached as he kicked her and wondered if this was how she might end up losing the little soul inside of her. God knew she had already lost hers the day she married him. Unfortunately, the fetus took after its mother, stubbornly resilient and persistent in the hope of clinging onto life.

As Zareena felt another contraction coming, she tried to distract herself by remembering the second time she snuck out for her another checkup that her younger sister forced her to go to.

“I can’t believe you were finally able to conceive! I cannot wait to be a *khala*!” her younger sister squealed in excitement and obliviousness to how grim the situation was as they had made their way to the hospital.

“Don’t tell Shahbaz, okay? You know how he is…” Zareena smiled weakly at her sibling, praying that she would be protected from the life that Zareena was forced to live.

“Yeah, he is an odd man… I thought he would be happy to finally have a child.”

Zareena always did find all of it to be rather odd. How Shahbaz knew that it was his brother who had raped her? Why did he never come to her aid when he was in the same house? How deeply could he have slept to not hear her screams?

“I would highly suggest you go for a C-section, Zareena. Your baby is in a breech position, which makes normal birth rather difficult. You can go to certain hospitals which will charge you much less once you tell them about your financial circumstances,” the doctor had explained to her and once again Zareena felt her world fall apart.

“C-section? What is that? I cannot give birth in hospital where there are other men! That is *haram*!” Zareena shrieked in response and the nurse standing behind the doctor chuckled, earning a glare from the petrified patient.

“Do not worry, only female doctors will be assisting your birth. And C-section is where we surgically take the baby out by making an incision on your lower belly as it is difficult to push the baby out while he is in a breech position,” the doctor explained calmly.

But Zareena was anything but calm, as she had stared at the nurse in horror upon hearing the process. She had always heard how dangerous and painful the process of childbirth was, but it never occurred to her that it could somehow become scarier. She slowly nodded as the doctor continued her explanation about the process, but Zareena had zoned out knowing that eventually she would find herself confined within the four walls of her house, trying to push the little life that filled her body.

And here she was, knowing that something was wrong, deep in her bones. She knew the doula Shahbaz had arranged for, couldn’t help her much but just maybe she might make it through. Hope truly was a dangerous thing to have, always brutally forcing its way into the darkest of situations, often to no avail. It wasn’t like she had many options either. The contractions were coming faster now, each one more excruciating than the last. She clutched at her swollen belly, praying for the pain to subside.

As the hours dragged on, Zareena's strength waned, her cries of anguish drowned out by the suffocating silence of the room. Shahbaz hovered nearby, a silent sentinel watching as his wife's life hanging by the thread with each passing moment, disgustingly nonchalant about it. Within the hour the doula arrived, as quietly as the night was. She was an old woman in her 70s, hunched permanently with a prim look her face. She squatted down beside Zareena’s frail body and placed her hands on her belly, pushing it to assess the baby’s position. Zareena felt her body jolt once again, as the doula tutted in disappointment, knowing that this birth just might be the end of the woman in front of her.

“You will have to push much harder… I will try and pull out the baby once I see it coming out. Take your *shalwar* off,” she instructed Zareena, who in that moment, wished nothing more but to simply just let go and slip away blissfully. She felt her eyes grow heavy as the splitting headache that had plagued her spread all over her body.

“Do not close your eyes! Push, Zareena. Or this child will not make it!” The doula hissed at her and that must have struck a chord because Zareena’s eyes flew open, meeting the dusty fan on her ceiling that couldn’t work due to load-shedding in her colony.

*Did she want her child to make it? To be cursed with a life like hers, or worse?*

Zareena didn’t realize she was weeping until the doula placed a wrinkly hand on her cheek and wiped her tears away. It was the most amount of affection she had received in months and was enough to break her apart completely. She looked at the old woman through her welled up eyes as she wondered what sin she was getting punished for.

“Please *Amma*, tell him I can’t do this here…” Zareena whispered in vain, trying one last time.

“Will it be of any use, *mera bacha?* Just push,” the old lady replied and pressed down on the upper side of her belly, assisting her in the task Zareena’s frail body couldn’t do anymore.

And then, in a cruel twist of fate, the final contraction came, ripping through Zareena's fragile body like a jagged blade. She screamed, a primal sound of torment and despair that shattered the stillness of the night as she felt a huge weight exit her body and another tiny cry joined hers.

Shahbaz stood frozen, his face a mask of shock and disbelief as he watched his wife bleed out before his very eyes. For the briefest of moments, a flicker of remorse flashed across his features, but it was quickly extinguished by the weight of his own selfish desires. The doula's eyes widened in alarm as she saw the blood pooling beneath Zareena's quivering form. With trembling hands, she tried to staunch the flow, but she knew it was not going to help much.

“Please, I want to hold my child…” Zareena whispered, and the older lady shifted in the space between Zareena’s legs, trying to mask the horror on her face upon the sight.

Pulling out a sharp pair of scissors from her battered purse, she cut the umbilical cord and tied it tightly before wrapping the baby in a sheet.

“You have a beautiful son…” the doula announced, and Zareena sighed in relief, holding the baby close to her chest. A son meant that he was already born with rights that she could never have dreamed of having to begin with.

“*Assalam-alaikum, meri jaan.”*

Her voice was crushed under the loud cries of the baby, something she was used to receiving from the male figures of her life. She did not have the energy to speak louder anyways as it ebbed away with each passing moment, her breaths becoming shallower, her pulse weakening. She could feel the older woman’s hands pressing a mangled sheet against her torn opening, but oddly enough her body was too numb to process the sting that ran through it.

The room grew hazy, the edges of her vision blurring as darkness encroached from all sides. She closed her eyes and clutched her baby blindly, her fingers grasping onto his small body, the remaining soul in her body to hold onto. Perhaps this was karma finally making its way back to her for when she did the exact same thing to her mother nineteen years ago. But her mother had to know she didn’t mean to hurt her, right?

She pressed a small kiss against the bloodied head and suddenly she couldn’t feel any more pain, finally cracking the smallest of smiles. And then, with a shuddering breath, Zareena's body went limp, her eyes closing for the last time as she surrendered to the darkness that enveloped her. The room fell silent save for the soft whimpering of the newborn, a haunting echo of the life that had been lost in the quiet suburban neighborhood of Baloch Goth.

But Shahbaz remained unmoved, his gaze fixed on the lifeless form of his wife. He had gotten what he wanted, a son to carry on his legacy. From the last hour, he finally moved closer to his wife’s lifeless body and stared at her chest, silently hoping to catch it rising and falling as it had been for the past three years of their marriage.

“She is dead,” the doula announced, her voice laced with contempt for the man standing nearby, looking at him from the corner of her eye.

There were no expressions on his face at this point, not one. He wondered if the little child he might just raise as his own, was worth it. He was his own blood at the end of the day now, wasn’t he? The darkness of the night gently slipped away as Shahbaz bent down to pick the child in his arms, making sure not to touch Zareena in the slightest. Picking up the child, he brought him closer to his face and stared at the innocent face, unaware of the life he had taken mere seconds before.

“That’s my son.”