

TIED
TO
DECEIT

NEENA H. BRAR



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*For my parents,
who saw a dream for me and held fast to it.*

*There is a Smile of Love
And there is a Smile of Deceit
And there is a Smile of Smiles
In which these two Smiles meet*

—The Smile, William Blake

BOOK 1

*“God has given you one face, and you
make yourselves another.”*

—*Hamlet*, William Shakespeare

Chapter 1

“Remembering is only a new form of suffering.”

—Charles Baudelaire

On the evening of Monday, 4 August, nine days before the killing, Gayatri Bhardwaj had interrupted her philandering husband’s secret rendezvous with a woman half his age. The murder was approaching its first anniversary, in four days’ time, and now Gayatri regretfully understood that her seemingly accidental discovery of her husband’s adultery had in fact been a calculated act – efficiently planned and effectively carried out. This event designed by the astute perpetrator, had set the stage for the murder.

That day had been an ordinary monsoon day in the hill town of Sanover, which is enclosed by the spectacular Himalayas and the dense forest of *deodar* and blue pine all around. The town, despite having all the comforts of the present day, still possessed the old-world charm; it was a place still largely unaffected by modern life, people’s faith was simple, beliefs primitive, and traditions hard to comprehend. It stayed quiet for most of the time during the year, except for the winter months when its peace vanished and it was

transformed into a bustling hub for tourists from all around the country and abroad.

On a clear summer night, one could see nearby cities' lights in the distance. The main market lay in the center of the town and was easily accessible from every part. There were paved streets with houses on both sides, where women sat behind their windows or on the front steps to watch neighbours and strangers. Stray dogs roamed around looking for food during the day and guarded the streets at nights. Children marched the narrow alleys in the mornings, their backs bent with heavy school bags, and played cricket in the evenings.

The night before, it had rained heavily. Gayatri Bhardwaj, unable to sleep, had spent the night tossing and turning in her bed, listening to torrents of rain, while the wild wind howled through the vast woods, and envying her husband of twenty-four years for sleeping unperturbedly throughout the storm. If she could have foreseen the future, she would have intertwined that night with the impending catastrophes in her life.

A heavy mist hung around the distant Himalayas in the early morning light. Occasionally, the clouds lifted sufficiently to expose the lush green peaks of the mountains in the distance.

Dr. Rajinder Bhardwaj's family had generations of aristocracy behind them and abundant money. Dr. Bhardwaj's great-grandfather had laid the foundations of his two-hundred-year-old house when he had bought the land and the surrounding forest. His successors had built a *haveli* there, which had been reconstructed by Dr. Bhardwaj's father, and later Dr. Bhardwaj had added one more storey to it. It stood in four acres on the outskirts of Sanover, overlooking lush mountains and surrounded on one side by the intimidating *deodars*, and on the other side by the sturdy pines which had a bluish hue from a distance, especially on a windy day when the breeze upturned their spines.

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Dr. Rajinder Bhardwaj, the owner and the head physician at Lifeline Hospital, Sanover, had showered after his brisk morning walk and joined his wife for an early morning tea. Gayatri Bhardwaj sat with her second cup of ginger tea on her favourite old, worn, woven chair on the verandah which overlooked their front garden: a tapestry of blooming carnations, marigolds, roses, and chrysanthemums. She longed for a clear, bright day and the dazzling blue sky of summer.

It was her favourite spot to sit in the mornings; a place from where she could witness the brilliant dawn streaking half of the sky coral; raindrops soaking everything wet during the monsoon; specks of silvery snow falling from the sky during winter. She could take in everything from the serene mountain peaks and the forest to their house—its roof, windowpanes, and the pebbled driveway that snaked its way criss-cross toward the outside big iron gate. She would sit there until Dr. Bhardwaj joined her after his daily ritual of a brisk morning walk.

They had done this for years despite the changing seasons and the changing equation of their marital relationship. They had spent endless mornings of their initial married years there, when their hearts were still giddy with the feeling of young love, and they would talk about everything and nothing. She'd been a bride at barely twenty, young and naive. He'd been ten years her senior, already on the way to establishing himself as a successful physician, the younger son of a landlord aristocratic family with old wealth. He had swept her off her feet then, and was all charm and charisma but then the magic slowly diminished and finally died due to his secret betrayals over time. Thousands of little resentments had replaced the early warmth. But their hearts, although heavy with bitterness and anger at the failed expectations, had gotten used to the solace of each other's company that often comes with years of living together, and they never stopped performing this morning ritual of their married life.

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Their morning on that day did not differ from their usual mornings. They had sat together in customary silence sipping their hot tea, marvelling at the brilliance of the monsoon foliage in the distance until the morning paper arrived. He started reading the news while she quietly watched his profile.

Now a year later, she remembered looking at him and thinking how he had shrunk an inch or two with age, but otherwise he looked the same as he always did except for the shock of his thick, close-cropped hair that had turned white, how his face was still handsome despite somewhat irregular features: a nose too big and thin lips getting thinner with age. She had marvelled at his vitality, his youthful appearance, and the fact that he had changed little despite the passing years. He looked forty-five, her age; a full ten years younger than his actual fifty-five. She remembered secretly envying him for that. He was one of those men who had the advantage of aging slowly.

At the time, of course, their morning chitchat was both ordinary and rather dull.

“You seem quiet today, and beat,” he remarked sipping his lemon tea.

Like his fellow peers, he had little or no clue about what went on in his wife’s mind most of the time and he mostly, if not entirely, put his faith in her verbal replies alone.

His voice brought her out of her thoughts. She replied, “I could not sleep well because of the storm.”

“Hmmm.” Satisfied, he was lost in his newspaper again.

Sometimes, he suspected his wife of turning a blind eye to his infidelities, but mostly he assumed her to be blissfully ignorant of his consecutive casual affairs that had occurred during the last two decades.

His tea finished and his newspaper read, Dr. Bhardwaj, unaware of the impending catastrophe that would fall later that day, left for the hospital.

Gayatri Bhardwaj had a busy day ahead. She had a wedding to attend in two hours, and later in the evening one of her

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friends who had recently opened her designer-clothing store in Shimla had invited her for the store's inauguration ceremony.

She had attended the wedding, which was a grand affair as it was the wedding of one of her close friends, Mrs. Tandon's only son, who had returned from London after finishing his business degree. She had spent only an hour at the venue, owing to her splitting headache, and had returned home. In the afternoon, she sat down to go through the day's mail. Among the usual envelopes, there was another anonymous letter. She remembered eyeing it with dread and reading it. She still had it in her hands when suddenly Rudra had approached her.

Now almost a year later, on Thursday, 31 July 1975, the memory of that morning lay buried in her mind after the crucial events that followed, but gradually the images resurfaced in her mind, bringing with them a terrible sense of foreboding and unease, and altering her perception of what had since happened.

The dim and blurred image of Rudra walking toward her became clear in her mind. She saw him striding toward her in his faded blue jeans and plain white shirt, silhouetted against the misty backdrop of that monsoon afternoon carrying a foreboding aura around him. With the smug face and insolent look he habitually wore when near her, he had asked for the keys to her and her husband's villa in New Kanauji which they had bought last year before *Diwali*. She went to the villa herself, the action that Rudra's arrogance had prompted and which she had regretted later. He had merely shrugged his shoulders and left then. The visual image of that event brought a sorry smile to her face.

It was an ordinary white envelope that arrived with the usual post on the afternoon of Monday, 4 August 1974. It had Mrs. Gayatri Bhardwaj written in plain black letters at the top

right corner, under which the word 'urgent' was inscribed in large bold letters in red, clearly to generate curiosity, and it proved to be the case, as it caught Gayatri Bhardwaj's attention at once, when she saw it among the pile of junk letters. Eyeing it suspiciously, she sliced it open. Inside the envelope there was a pink piece of paper, neatly folded.

The note was sloppy with the writing all pouring into the right side of the page. The writing was childish, and the words badly spelled. The sender had written to say that at around six in the evening, Dr. Bhardwaj would meet someone at their villa in New Kanauji to have one of his usual relaxed evenings and, for a change, Mrs. Bhardwaj should surprise him by making an unannounced arrival there. The message was subtle, but in no way inconspicuous. She checked the time on her wristwatch, which was an exquisite affair of twenty-two-carat gold and tiny sparkling diamonds. It was a quarter to three in the afternoon.

She read the note a few times, wondering about the person who had written it. The sloppiness and the uneven childish scrawl seemed to be a conscious attempt to disguise the identity of the sender, but the infantile scribbles were at odds with the wording, which was anything but uneducated. The sender could've engineered the contrast on purpose, mused Gayatri, but for what purpose she couldn't fathom. Using illiterate phrasing would have been a simple way to cover the sender's tracks, if he or she was an educated, bright person, but the sender hadn't done that. It could be someone from the hospital, thought Gayatri. She scrutinized the envelope carefully. There was no stamp and no return address written anywhere to suggest the identity of the sender. One thing was for sure, she thought, the envelope had been hand delivered, and the sender knew what time the post was collected from the letter box on the main gate. The way the envelope had Gayatri's name written on it, instead of the full address, pointed to someone who knew the Bhardwaj household's

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usual routine well, and who was sure that the envelope would reach Gayatri's hands instead of Dr. Bhardwaj's.

Could the sender have assumed, thought Gayatri, that she had been living entirely in oblivion, unaware of her husband's philandering? But then she had always kept up the facade of being happily married. They both had kept up their own facades: Dr. Bhardwaj to suit his purposes, and her to get through life and to feel in control. She understood his need for disguise, as she hid behind a disguise too: the disguise of a cool, poised exterior. The woman underneath, she knew, was afraid of losing control. They both had worn their masks for so long that their veiled sides had mingled with the real ones. Did the sender know, and wanted to see their masks coming off, wondered Gayatri?

The note wasn't the first of its kind. She had received three other letters in the past two months. However, those notes had no such explicit information about Dr. Bhardwaj's clandestine meetings. This time, perhaps someone was eager to see Dr. Bhardwaj in a tight spot, or else it could be someone who wanted to see her in distress, she concluded. The thought that it could be a well-wisher didn't cross her mind. She was too cynical to expect kindness for free. For a moment, she felt tempted to check on her husband but then brushed the thought aside. Whoever the sender was, whatever purpose it served them, Gayatri had no intention of gratifying them, and giving them the satisfaction they had anticipated.

She never had any illusions about her husband's philandering. Having been his wife for over two decades, she knew him inside and out. After spending the first four years of their marriage in happy ignorance and bliss, when the first glow of romance had worn off, Gayatri had understood that the word 'loyalty' did not mean unswerving devotion in Dr. Bhardwaj's opinion. He had an undying aptitude for seducing the prettiest and the most gullible of the young female staff. Despite being a curious woman, she had purposely avoided prying on him. The realization was just a matter of awakening

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to the truth which the mind already knew. The realization that he had not been entirely faithful to her gradually dawned on her, but she had no intention of agonizing over it. She understood that the unbridled truth could be harsh and painful, and she wasn't a worshipper of it anyway.

She knew the women he cheated with were a mere relief for his boredom. They were just sexual objects in his eyes, a means to indulge his puffed-up male ego. He was not bothered about their individuality, as they were all the same for him. She knew at the end of the day he had no desire for burning passion. Instead, he needed to come home to that which was familiar and secure.

After spending the next ten years in constant hope and despair, she had learned she was not destined for motherhood. But Gayatri was a woman of great practicality and little emotion. The things that perturbed average women barely touched her. A child might have evoked underlying gentleness and sensitivity in her, but a child she could not conceive. Inwardly, she compensated for her barrenness by ignoring her husband's intermittent flings. Without comprehending the need for emotional depth in her marriage, she attended to her wifely duties.

She appreciated the power of money, for she had come from a family of lesser means. A thousand things kept her busy. She was engaged in activities that a woman of complex emotions and fragile feelings would have considered futile in her situation. She was actively involved in running NGOs, attended various charities, sat on the committees of prestigious family-administered schools and a college for girls, and attended administrative meetings at the Lifeline Hospital. She loved the power of her husband's money and the status it had given her.

During all those years, the thought of adopting a child never crossed their minds. They both belonged to a generation that found adopting outside their extended family obnoxious. Gayatri could not imagine herself loving and

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raising someone else's child as her own. As far as Dr. Bhardwaj was concerned, he considered Rudra Bhardwaj—son of his late elder brother—his heir, and knew he would carry their Bhardwaj family name ahead.

Rudra was already a grown man by the time he became part of his uncle's family. The affection that came easily to Dr. Bhardwaj, Gayatri could not develop. She knew her husband saw him as his heir, but then there was her own paternal family—her nephews and nieces—and she had no intention of letting everything they owned go to Rudra alone.

Gayatri still had the letter in her hand when Rudra approached her. It was unusual for him to come to see her alone. She folded the letter calmly and slid it back inside the envelope.

Without preamble, he said, "*Chachi*, I want the keys to the Kanauji villa for a few days."

"Why? Subhadra already getting on your nerves?" she couldn't help but taunt him. It didn't help that she was currently in a bad mood; she had never liked him.

A hint of anger flashed in his dark-brown eyes, but when he spoke his tone was unruffled. "Mothers tend to, although I get along fine with Mummy. You're not a mother, but you have a mother, so you know that."

The cruelty underneath his words hit her hard. He had touched a raw spot. She looked at him and saw in his eyes the persistent gleam of amused mockery.

"I need the place for myself. You have to wait until next week if you want the keys," she said in a rigid tone.

"How about just for tonight?"

"Next week," she said in a flat tone.

He shrugged. "Well, as you wish." He turned and left.

His coolness enraged Gayatri. She felt a strong urge to hurt someone. Still reeling with anger, she looked at the envelope in her hands and decided to go to the villa that evening.

This offhand decision of Gayatri had set things in motion for the murder and all the unfortunate happenings afterwards.

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She had acted in rage prompted by her own hatred for him. Had she been a different person, more tolerant and kinder, things might have been different. She could have tried harder to accept Rudra as her own, stayed unaffected by his haughtiness, and chosen not to go to the villa that day—avoiding the embarrassing confrontation.

Chapter 2

*“Doubt is an uncomfortable condition,
but certainty is a ridiculous one.”*

—Voltaire

Every time there was a woman, Gayatri had known instinctively—but that was a thing of the past; the time when she still cared. It was as much Gayatri’s natural instinctiveness, as Dr. Bhardwaj’s obvious guilt. At those times, he would look energetic, somehow more vigorous, and youthful. He would be charming, caring, and attentive to her needs. The pattern never varied, and would make her suspicious. She would look for signs of his deceptions, instead of prying, which scared her as she could cause untold and grave hurt to herself. She would indulge in imaginary situations where she caught him red-handed, and he refused to let the other woman go. The fear she could lose everything to some unknown, insignificant rival would agonize her for months.

But all of that misery was a thing of the past. She only cared about their reputation, status, and family name. He could die tomorrow as far as she was concerned, provided he died respectfully.

On the way to the villa, she kept wondering about the woman with whom he was involved nowadays. She couldn't be from Sanover, Gayatri told herself, where one's business was everyone's business. She knew he had his reputation and his status to keep intact. He had always been careful in the past, but if he wasn't this time . . . the thought made her shudder.

Although she had somewhat expected it, finding her husband's car on the porch surprised her. It was past six in the evening. Despite being aware of her husband's nature, she had half convinced herself that the note was a lie. She tried to push the door open, but it was locked from inside. That was when she knew with absolute certainty what was awaiting her. She thought about turning back, but her hands already refused to take command from her brain and she fumbled inside her purse to find the keys. Without a thought, she impulsively turned the key in the lock, shut the door behind her, and scanned the pale-white gallery and rooms beyond. She walked toward the smaller bedroom on her right, the only room with the door closed, paused for a fraction of a second, and pushed the door open.

She saw him first, and their eyes met. She saw a look of incredulity pass over his face, followed by shock mingled with shame and fear.

Then she noticed the woman, a creamy-white face framed with black curls, from which a pair of heavy-lidded charcoal eyes lazily stared at her. The room smelled of raw, savage sex—the unmistakable smell of passion mingled with body sweat. Gayatri stood there taking in the sight of the wrinkled bed cover, their clothes lying in a pile on the adjacent chair, and one flowered pillow in winter grey on the floor—part of a set she remembered buying from the handloom khadi bhandar last spring. Next to the pillow was her husband's hastily discarded white shirt, one of many she had seen Leela kaki carefully iron each morning with precision and tenderness, instinctive to a servant who had lived and served

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long enough to become a part of the master's family. The orange glow of the fading evening sun seeped in from the thin partition of the drawn curtain.

The air felt heavy with their collective breathing. Gayatri was aware of the silence that had fallen in the room. The woman looked so young, lying there, naked and uninhibited. Her husband had pushed himself out of the bed and started pulling on his pants. Gayatri was aware of him, shamefaced and embarrassed, as he clumsily put on his shirt.

Gayatri stood frozen, transfixed by the unsurprised stare of the woman's heavily kohl-lined eyes. There was something about her, in the shape of her face, that made Gayatri realize that she had seen her somewhere, but she couldn't remember where. As the woman sat there, her beauty—exotic and absolute—disgusted Gayatri. Aware of her husband, who had finished dressing, walking toward her, she felt a wave of nausea and dizziness pass over her. She stumbled forward but steadied herself in time to push her husband's approaching hand away weakly.

A sense of recognition rippled through Gayatri's mind; with her eyes closed she tried to remember the woman's name. She was sure she had met her somewhere, but she could not remember when and where. She tried to think. Could she have met her through her family-run NGO for women, Aasra? He could not have lowered himself to that level. Those women were all from the lower section of society, at the bottom of the social ladder. Could he have found one among them to take to his bed? She opened her eyes and stared at the girl's face again. It came to her then. She was Devika, Devika Singh, an employee at her husband's hospital. After realizing she wasn't from Aasra, Gayatri gave a sigh of relief and laughed inwardly at her prejudiced vanity which she still wasn't ready to give up.

Her husband mumbled something that she could not understand in her reverie; she saw the woman stirring in the bed, leaning sideways to pick up her *kurta* from the chair, her

breasts as full and heavy as a new mother's. Instead of putting on her *kurta*, she got out of bed, stood there unembarrassed, her gaze still intent on Gayatri's face, her body slightly bent in a provocative position as if in exhibition. She lazily got her other clothes from the chair as well, and started putting them on, finally. Gayatri stood there in a trance, taking everything in as if something unreal was happening and was unfolding gradually.

Finally dressed in a yellow *churidar*, a short, fitted *kurta*, and double-died matching *dupatta*, she took a few steps toward Gayatri and stood facing her. A whiff of lavender blossoms mixed with something lemony caught Gayatri—her scent.

She spoke to Gayatri directly, "It is good you have seen us together. He was about to tell you anyways. Right, Rajinder?" With a hint of half-sarcasm and half-humour, she turned to face Dr. Bhardwaj.

Gayatri, still dazed with shock, looked at her husband, whose face had turned ashen white. She saw a look, familiar and long-forgotten, pass over his face: a look of pain, of agony, and of mournful acceptance of loss, from after she had lost their third and consecutively last unborn child in her womb. The memory, faded and buried long ago, brought back all the pain, agony, and misery of the past she had buried deep somewhere inside her heart. Her wound, old but raw underneath, throbbed with the pain of the resurfaced memories. She did not want to think about that now.

"There is nothing to tell, nothing important that she needs to know." She heard him addressing the woman, his voice formal, devoid of emotions, but his face still bore the same expression of pain.

"Really? Whatever we had was never important to you? You could not keep your hands away from me during all this time." A chilling harshness had crept into Devika's voice. "You thought I had no clue. I saw through your disguise long ago. Why do you think I accepted all the fineries? Not as gifts. You owed them to me. I am sure you are not dumb enough

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to believe I have been sharing your bed for the sake of my pleasure.”

“I would like you to leave,” he said in a firm voice.

The dark eyes burned with hate. When Devika spoke, her tone was threatening.

“As if I care to stay, but there is one thing left . . .”

She looked at Dr. Bhardwaj with such hatred he flinched instinctively.

“I am carrying your child. Let me know what to do about that.” She almost whispered the last line. Without bothering to wait for his reply, she stormed out—slamming the door so hard that the tapestry fell off the wall.

Too numb to speak until now, Devika’s last few words brought Gayatri out of her stupor. She looked at him and said, “I would have thought you’d have had more pride than to get involved with a woman like her.”

“It was not important, Gayatri. It was nothing.”

“Hasn’t my life been burdened enough with past miseries, Raj? Why did you have to do this?”

“I know I made a mistake. I never wanted to hurt you, but she would not leave me alone.”

He sat slumped in the chair, staring at the floor.

“Really, Raj? Were you born yesterday? For God’s sake, she is nobody. Women like her come to Aasra every day. Let me spell it out for you, goddamnit, A-A-S-R-A. Do you have any idea what kind of homes these women come from? Don’t try to defend your lies, Raj, not now.”

“Don’t be such a stuck-up, Gayatri. And she’s not from Aasra. Don’t talk like that. It doesn’t suit you.”

“Talk like what? What about you, Mr. Righteous? You dared to bring her here, in my home, in my bed, for God’s sake.” A note of hysteria had crept into her voice.

He stayed quiet, which angered her more. “You bought this villa so you could have a place to entertain yourself. How long has all this been going on? Tell me. Weeks? Months? Years? Is she the only one or are there others?” she shrieked.

“Gayatri, please calm down. Believe me. It happened a few times only. I must have been mad to fall into her trap.”

“Don’t you dare tell me that she trapped you—I never imagined you would stoop that low! An everyday tramp like her, and you brought her here in this house, in my bedroom.”

She paced around the room in a manic frenzy.

“Imagine a headline in tomorrow’s paper: ‘Doctor Rajinder Bhardwaj, a Doon School graduate, caught fornicating with a commonplace whore.’ God! You would be a legend in the history of Sanover.”

Dr. Bhardwaj tried to hold her hand, but she pushed him with such vehemence that he withdrew his hand on impulse.

“And what are you going to do now? You will be a father,” she said, laughing bitterly. She kneeled on the floor. “I imagine my respected father-in-law will be brimming with happiness now, sitting there in heaven. He must be proud of his capable son, Doctor Rajinder Bhardwaj who will soon father a bastard, a bastard, with a whore. My father-in-law, who had disowned his other son for marrying a girl from another caste.”

She slumped down on the floor and covered her face with her hands. The humiliation had brought out all her smouldering anger. She had stopped caring about other women in his life a long time ago, but the thought of another woman carrying his child enraged her. She had ignored his unfaithfulness. Today’s confrontation brought out all the anger she had buried deep inside her heart. She always considered herself to be in control of her emotions, but she was wrong. She hated herself now for being so weak and helpless and for behaving like a petty lower-class woman.

He leaned toward her and tried to take her in his arms, but she pushed him away again.

Crying softly, she said, “Please go away. Leave me alone. I want to be alone.”

She covered her face again and heard him close the door. She went across to the window, stood looking out onto the

empty road, and watched him walk to his car. He looked diminished, beaten and old. Was he hurting as much as she was? Was he grieving the loss of their unborn children or the child that Devika was carrying, the child who could never become part of his life? Was he sorry that he had to let that woman go?

Time heals everything, that's what everyone says. Wounds heal and leave only scars behind. But some wounds run too deep to heal, and pierce the deepest layers of one's soul. They stay there unhealed and ready to ooze blood at the first sign of grief. The hurt she felt today unlocked old wounds. The memory of the morning when she had lost her last unborn child came to her. Strangely, the only thing she remembered was the hospital bed, the room, the distinctive hospital smell of that day. The vivid details of that morning, of those days, weeks, and months afterwards did not come to her. Her mind acknowledged there was a horrible pain, an agonizing affliction, an ache in her heart for months; throbbing and unbearable at the beginning, but dulling gradually with time—yet it never went away completely. Although she couldn't recall the exact intensity of her grief, the knowledge that this sorrow had shadowed her life at that time was sorted, documented, and locked up somewhere in her mind's registry with other memories. The mere fact she had suffered that immense loss intensified her existing anguish. She grieved for her past miseries, which seemed extensive compared to her present heartache. And when there were no tears left, she wondered how the sheer despair never failed to surprise her each time she encountered it, and how it felt so raw and shocking.

She could not get Devika's words out of her mind. Was she lying about the child? If not, what was her plan? Her heart thumped in her chest. She felt anguish thinking about what it could do to her life—their life, their reputation, their prestige. All she wanted was to lose herself in oblivion, forget everything, but she knew she couldn't afford to mull over his

shame and her desolation when the timing was so crucial. Devika couldn't be allowed to give birth to her husband's bastard.

She knew something had to be done to stop Devika. She had to know how far along Devika was in her pregnancy. The desperate time called for desperate measures, she knew, and she also knew she had to get herself ready for that.

She walked outside, locking the door behind her, and strode out to her car with determined steps.