

## CHAPTER ONE



'RELIGION IS FOR those who believe in hell, spirituality is for those who have already been there.' Shyama had to squint slightly to read the laminated sticker on the side of the receptionist's computer. It must be the light, she consoled herself. She shifted slightly in the queue, catching a whiff of perfume from the woman in front of her – something woody and expensive, blended with a scent she recognized intimately, a musky aroma with a bitter undertone: the familiar smell of desperation. The woman exchanged a few hushed words with the receptionist and then took a seat on a faded chintzy sofa, giving Shyama a better look at the owner of the computer.

A new girl. She was young – too young, Shyama felt, for a place like this, a discreet Harley Street address where women under the age of thirty-five ought to be banned. With a faint nod, Shyama handed over her appointment card and stole a longer look at her. Sun, sin and saturated fats had not yet pinched the skin around her eyes or spider-legged their way around her smiling mouth. She was a natural redhead, with that translucent paleness and a smattering of tiny freckles, dusting on a freshly baked cupcake. How could this snip of a girl have ever had a glimpse of hell, as her sticker proclaimed? Then Shyama spotted her earrings: silver discs with the Hindu symbol 'Om' engraved on the surface.

‘Do take a seat, Mrs Shaw,’ the young girl said. ‘Mr Lalani won’t be long.’

There was a moment’s hesitation while Shyama considered commenting on those earrings. But that would spark a conversation about where Shyama came from and yes, she was Hindu, but no, born here, and no, she hadn’t been to half the ancient sites that Miss Cupcake had visited, and yes, isn’t it humbling that the Indian poor have so little yet they would give you their last piece of chapatti and, despite living knee-deep in refuse, how on earth do they always seem so happy? Then there would be some more chat about the charming guest-house the receptionist had found in Goa or the unbelievable guide who had practically saved her life in the teeming, chanting crowds of Haridwar, or that moment when she had watched the monsoon clouds rolling in over Mumbai bay, dark clots curdling the horizon, the air turning metallic and tart to the tongue.

Shyama had done all those things, many years ago, before motherhood and divorce and laughter lines – though frankly, when she looked at herself in a magnifying mirror nowadays she wondered if anything could have really been that funny.

They could have swapped life-changing anecdotes, Shyama knowing she would always be able to trump the earrings simply by pointing to her skin. ‘The real deal, see?’ Though she knew she wasn’t. She hadn’t been to India for years. The only branch of the family she had ever been close to were now not speaking to her, and it seemed highly unlikely that she would be going there in the foreseeable future because every penny of her savings had gone on this clinic. The clinic where the redhead with the Om earrings was now staring at her.

Shyama flashed her a warm smile, wanting to reassure her that she wasn’t one of those bitter women who would give

her a hard time simply because she had youth and insouciance on her side – no sir, not she – and she sat down heavily on a squishy armchair, trying to steady her nerves.

She started as a metallic ping announced that a text from Toby had just arrived. ‘U OK? Phone on vibrate next to my heart . . .’ She knew the dots denoted irony. They did a lot of that: self-conscious romantic declarations, inviting each other to join in and trample on the sentiment before it embarrassed them both. It was cute, it was becoming habit, maybe she should worry about that. There might come a point where one of them would need to say something heartfelt and sincere without being laughed at. She texted back, ‘Glad phone vibrating next to heart and not in trouser pocket as usual. Not gone in yet . . .’ It was only after she had sent the text that she realized she’d ended with dots too. Surely he would know that they denoted a resigned sigh, rather than an invitation to let the joshing begin. Oh well, it was a test. If Toby misunderstood and texted back with some quip, she would know that they weren’t really suited and that it wasn’t worth carrying on with any of this time-consuming, expensive grappling with Nature. Best to walk away with a sad smile and a good-luck-with-the-rest-of-your-life kind of wave. Then she could just let go. Let the belly sag and the grey show through, and blow the gym membership on vodka and full-sleeve tops to cover up the incoming bingo wings.

A text from Toby. A single unironic X.

‘Mr Lalani will see you now.’

Shyama stood up at exactly the same time as the woman who had come in before her. Smart suit, perfect hair, pencil-thin, one arched eyebrow raised like a bow.

‘Mrs Bindman? Do go through.’

The eyebrow pinged off an invisible arrow of victory and Shyama sat back down, repressing an urge to bang her heels against the chair like a truculent toddler. There was so much waiting in this game and yet so little time to play with. Her life was punctuated with mocking end-of-sentence dots. All those years spent avoiding getting pregnant, all those hours of sitting on cold plastic toilet seats in student digs/shared houses/first flats, praying for the banner of blood to declare that war was over, that your life would go on as before. And then the later years, spent in nicer houses on a better class of loo seat – reclaimed teak or cheekily self-conscious seats like the plastic one with a barbed-wire pattern inside (her daughter’s choice, of course) – still waiting. But this time praying for the blood not to come, for a satisfied silence that would tell Shyama her old life was most definitely over as, inside her, a new one had just begun.

On impulse she dialled Lydia’s number, exhaling in relief as she heard her friend’s voice.

‘Any news?’

‘I haven’t gone in yet,’ Shyama whispered, getting up and going out to the corridor so she could talk at normal volume.

‘You just caught me between my 11 o’clock bulimic and my midday self-harmer. Great timing.’ Lydia’s cool, measured voice felt like balm.

Shyama’s shoulders dropped an inch. ‘Think I need a free session on your psycho-couch right now.’

‘That’s what last night was for. Therapy without the lying-down-and-box-of-tissues bit. And as I told you then—’

‘I know.’ Shyama sighed. ‘*Que sera sera* and all that. Out of my hands. It sounds more palatable in Spanish somehow.’

‘Oh, hang on a minute, Shyams. Got another call coming through . . . stay there . . .’

Before she could tell her that they could talk later, Shyama was put on hold. She looked across the corridor at her fellow patients, absorbed in old copies of *Country Life*. They were all, as the French so politely put it, women *d'un certain âge*, maturing like fine wine or expensive cheese, ripening into what might be regarded in some cultures as their prime years, when the children had flown the nest, the husband had mellowed, and the time left was spent in contemplation, relaxation and generally being revered. She, Lydia and Priya had talked about this very subject last night at their local tapas bar, the three of them hooting gales of garlicky laughter.

Lydia had started it. 'Did you know that some Native American tribes actually used to hold menopause ceremonies? A sort of party to celebrate the end of the slog of childbearing?'

'A party?' Priya said doubtfully, wrinkling her perfectly pert nose. 'Must have been a laugh a minute.'

'Oh, I can see that,' Shyama chipped in. 'Dancing round a bonfire of all your old maxi pads. Bring your own hot flush.'

Priya snorted a considerable amount of white wine out of both nostrils, grabbing a serviette to mask her splutters. She looked a decade younger than Shyama, though she wasn't. She managed a huge office, two children, a husband and ageing in-laws who lived with her, batch-cooked gourmet Indian meals and froze them in labelled Tupperware, and always wore four-inch heels. She would have made Shyama feel resentfully inadequate if it wasn't for her expansive generosity and her frank admission of several business-trip affairs.

'A little respect, please, for the wise women who came before us,' Lydia intoned, mock seriously. 'Apparently feathers and drums featured heavily, plus some spirited dancing and the imbibing of naturally sourced hallucinogenics. The point was, they

didn't see the menopause as this terrible curse, they welcomed it, celebrated it. Because it meant you were passing into your next and maybe most important phase of life – the powerful matriarchal elder, the badly behaved granny, take your pick.'

'Dress it up how you want, honey.' Priya was filling her glass again. 'No amount of druggy dancing is going to make me feel any better about intimate dryness.'

'They saw it as a beginning, not an end. Imagine, a whole tribe of cackling, don't-give-a-toss hags proudly sailing their bodies into old age. Who's up for it?'

They had decided they would do just that, once that hormonal watershed had been crossed. Find a leafy spot on Wanstead Flats, gather a tribe of fellow crones – the three of them plus a few of the game birds from their Bodyzone class – choose a full-moon night and chant defiantly at the skies, 'What do we want? Respect! Adoration! Our right to exist as non-fertile yet useful attractive women! When do we want it? As soon as someone notices us, thanks awfully, sorry to bother you.' Or something a little more snappy.

But it wouldn't be like that, Shyama realized now, the phone still to her ear, humming with electronic silence. It would rain, someone would tread in dog poo, they would have to fight for a spot amongst the cottagers and illicit couplings, and after two minutes of embarrassed mumbling, Lydia would suggest they repair to a nearby wine bar where they would crack self-deprecating jokes about their changing bodies over a shared bag of low-fat crisps. Besides, nowadays no one had to have a real menopause. You could just ignore it, take the drugs which keep a woman's body in a permanent state of faux fertility and parade around in hot chick's clothing, long after the eggs had left the building. A whole phase of life wiped away, glossed over,

hushed up, for as long as you could get away with it. And given how society treated older women, why the hell not?

‘Shyams? Still there?’

‘Lyd – I think I’m next . . .’

Shyama stood aside as Mrs Bindman exited the consulting room. Shyama noticed that her skirt was slightly askew, a child-like muss of hair at the back of her head confirming a session on Mr Lalani’s examination couch. Oh, but the smile she carried, softening every angle and crisp crease of her. It must have been a good-news day.

‘Got clients up until five, then I’m all yours,’ Lydia got in quickly.

Shyama muttered a brief goodbye and returned to the desk, where she waited until the receptionist looked up brightly.

‘Do go in, Mrs Shaw, and so sorry for the wait.’ And then more softly, ‘It was a bit of an emergency appointment, thank you for being so patient.’

Shyama forgave most things when accompanied by impeccable manners. She hesitated, then said, ‘I always thought hell would turn out to be some kind of waiting room. Sort of weird that this is in here.’

The receptionist looked confused.

‘Your sticker?’

‘Oh, that!’ The receptionist laughed, and it really did sound as if Tinkerbell had fallen down a small flight of steps. ‘That’s not mine. I’m just filling in for Joyce. She’s off sick.’

Shyama had never known Joyce’s name but remembered the middle-aged, comfy woman who usually greeted her with a doleful smile.

‘I just thought . . . your earrings.’

‘Oh, these!’ The receptionist briefly touched one of the

engraved silver discs. 'My boyfriend got them in Camden. Pretty pattern, isn't it?'

'Mmm. Anyway, sorry to hear Joyce's off. I'll discuss my spooky-sticker theory with her when she's back.'

The receptionist hesitated, then lowered her voice. 'I don't think she'll be coming back. Poor Joyce. Who'd have thought it?'

Shyama battled with an image of matronly, sad-eyed Joyce standing on a pile of self-help books whilst looping a dressing-gown cord around her neck, all the way down the corridor and into the hushed beige of Mr Lalani's private consulting room.

'I wish I could give you more encouraging news, but I want to be completely honest with you, Mrs Shaw.'

Mr Lalani held her gaze; he really was absurdly good-looking with his mane of salt-and-pepper hair and limpid brown eyes – Omar Sharif in *Doctor Zhivago* but with better teeth.

'No. I mean, yes, I appreciate that.'

She always put on nice underwear for her visits here, pathetic as that was. Like the old joke about the busy mum who gives herself a quick wipe with a flannel before her gynae appointment; once she's on the couch, her doctor clears his throat (why are they usually men?) and tells her, 'You really didn't need to go to so much effort.' She has used the very flannel her four-year-old employed to wash her doll that morning with glitter soap. It was amusing the first time Shyama heard it. She had heard it several times now, attributed to different people, some of them famous. One of the urban myths that she and her fellow travellers shared in their many waiting rooms. Except she wasn't one of them any more.

'Mrs Shaw? Can I get you some water, perhaps?'



‘No. Really, I’m fine. I’m just . . . surprised. Because, well, I’ve managed one before, haven’t I? A child, I mean.’

‘Yes, of course. And I hope that’s some comfort, though I know this isn’t what you wanted to hear. But you had your daughter nineteen years ago. Your body was very different then. And, of course, I am pretty certain at that point you did not have the problems that . . .’

Mr Lalani became pleasant background noise, though Shyama remembered to nod knowingly as she caught the odd word drifting by – ‘Laparoscopy . . . endometriosis . . . ICSI . . . IUI . . . IVF . . .’ – soothing as a mantra in their familiarity. She had a strange and not unpleasant sensation of floating above her body, looking down at the smartish, attractive-ish woman in her casual yet edgy outfit, looking rather good for forty-eight (because of her Asian genes, you know – black don’t crack, brown don’t frown) and feeling surprisingly calm. Ridiculous to expect there wouldn’t be some issues at her age; women half her age had issues. There were plenty of other options, surely?

‘. . . very few other options available, I’m afraid.’

Shyama blinked, came back to earth with an uncomfortable lurch. ‘What? Sorry, I missed that last . . . paragraph, actually.’

Mr Lalani’s eyes softened. Only on men could wrinkles look empathetic. ‘I’m sorry if I’m not being clear. Let me discard the jargon for a moment.’

His archaic use of language and impeccable grammar hinted at expensive foreign schooling. She had been seeing him for over a year, the third expert during two years of trying, and still knew nothing about his life. The discreet gold band confirmed a wife, presumably a family. How many children had he fathered, or helped create? How many women had sat here in this chair and received his judgement like a benediction or a curse?

‘. . . very little point in pursuing IVF or any other kind of assisted reproduction. Even seeking donor eggs would not solve the issue of your inhospitable womb and the dangers of attempting to carry a child yourself.’

An inhospitable womb! There, she had been looking for a title for her autobiography. It was a game she played with her girlfriends; every so often, usually when one of them was going through a particularly challenging life phase – rebellious children, a recalcitrant partner, money slipping through their fingers like mercury. So far her favourite title had come from Priya, who had proffered *In These Shoes?* Later on, Shyama found out that ‘In These Shoes’ was the title of a song, but still, coming from Priya at that moment, it had seemed like poetry.

‘Of course, it is always your choice. You can get a second opinion, many women do. But the medical facts remain as they are. I am sorry.’

‘So it’s me, then?’ Shyama exhaled. ‘I mean, I know Toby has passed all his tests with flying colours. Well, he would, wouldn’t he? Thirty-four-year-old men, that’s their prime, isn’t it? And he loves red meat, though we try and limit the lamb chops to once a week. Or is it zinc you have to eat? Is that in eggs? Eggs have good cholesterol now, don’t they? And after all the warnings they gave us . . . so doctors can be wrong. You just find out way after the event, usually.’

Mr Lalani let the silence settle, mote by mote, like fine dust. He had been here many times before. He knew not to argue or oversympathize. He knew it is always best to let the woman – and it is almost invariably the woman – talk and cry and vent her rage at the world, at Nature who has betrayed her. At forty-eight, the betrayal was almost inevitable. Not that he would ever say that out loud.