



Priya Gupta didn't believe in Fate or destiny or soulmates.

Definitely not!

At school, while the other girls sobbed their way through the final scenes of *Romeo and Juliet*, Priya had simply made neat notes in the margin of her set text and wrinkled her nose with scorn. Star-crossed lovers? Fortune written in the heavens? What a load of old nonsense! Everyone knew that the only luck was the luck you made yourself and the only way to shape your future was to go out and grab it with both hands. Sitting and waiting for things to happen to you was just ridiculous! If Priya's grandfather had thought that way the Guptas would still be living in the Punjab eking a living from the land and her father would never have become a respected academic. So when her classmates had crowded round the latest copy of *Just 17* clamouring to hear their stars Priya had simply ignored them and buried her nose in her text books. She didn't need Mystic Meg to tell her that if she studied hard she'd pass her exams with flying colours and win her longed-for place at Oxford.

No, as far as Priya was concerned the only future was the future you made yourself. Anything else was just nonsense, a way of getting the gullible to part with their cash, which was why she couldn't understand why the other girls at her friend Zoe's hen night were all so excited at the idea of having their fortunes told. Personally Priya hated the idea of Fate; she much preferred surprises and choices. She also hated superstition and spooky stuff, preferring to anchor herself with facts and figures. Some people might have described Priya as a control freak but that, as far as she was concerned, was their problem. She preferred the description *well organised*.

Priya hadn't needed psychic skills to know she'd graduate from Magdalen with a first class degree. Just like she knew getting her job at the BBC was the result of her hard work and planning rather than some vague celestial design. She'd ignored all the voices saying it was impossible for a woman, especially a young British Asian woman, to succeed as a journalist and documentary maker, knowing hard work and a good dollop of talent were all it took and that she had plenty to offer of both. If she'd believed for a second that Fate existed and her path was already mapped out she'd have given in, concentrated instead on the law degree that her parents had set their hearts on, and not have had a shelf crammed with awards for her documentaries.

No, Priya Gupta was living proof that people made their own futures. Fate, fortune and psychics with crystal balls were only there to hoodwink the credulous and make money. There was no such thing as Fate. She'd proved that already.

‘It’s all a con anyway,’ she said firmly as Zoe’s sister, Libby, sloshed more Chardonnay into her glass. ‘Honestly, girls, I bet I’m as psychic as she is.’

‘She’s supposed to be really good,’ said Libby, busily topping up more glasses. ‘That’s why I booked her. My friend, Rachel, had a reading last week and apparently this woman knew everything about her. Rachel said it was incredible.’

‘It’s called cold reading,’ said Priya, tossing her razor-sharp bob and raising her neat eyebrows. ‘One of my colleagues did a documentary about psychics and apparently they all do it. They analyse body language and clothing and then make really vague comments which could apply to anyone. It’s all total hokum but it really convinces a lot of people.’

‘God, it must be hard work being so cynical,’ sighed Libby.

Priya wasn’t cynical, she just liked to get to the bottom of things and ensure that the truth was told – qualities that made her remarkably successful as a documentary maker – but she understood that, to Libby, she must seem like a real killjoy.

‘I’m realistic, that’s all,’ she shrugged. ‘Maybe it’s the journalist in me.’

‘Well, put your journalistic instincts into gear now,’ said Fern, a small slim college friend of Zoe’s, whose merry, freckled face and tumbling golden curls made her look like a blonde imp. ‘It’s your turn.’

Sure enough Zoe was stumbling into the room, looking rather perturbed.

‘Oh no, did she get it all wrong?’ wailed Libby.

Zoe sank into a chair and curled her slender hands

around her wine glass. 'Actually she was spookily accurate about most things. I've never known anything like it.'

'See!' Libby cried, turning triumphantly to Priya. 'I told you she was good. Now it's your turn. Try to have an open mind.'

'I do have an open mind!' Priya protested, setting down her glass and tucking her dark hair behind her ears. 'I'm just a bit sceptical about psychic stuff, that's all.'

But, as she left the cosy sitting room, where the other hens were settling back down to the serious business of emptying wine bottles as fast as possible, Priya felt a little tingle of anticipation run down her spine. Was it her or did Zoe's kitchen suddenly feel cooler than usual? And was the atmosphere really super-still, as though unseen ears were straining to hear what might be said?

'For God's sake!' she said sternly to herself. 'You're being ridiculous! You don't even believe in this stuff, remember?'

So why did it feel as though a school of piranha fish were chomping away in her stomach? She couldn't be nervous at the idea of seeing some phoney psychic? It was only a bit of a giggle for the hen night. With the exception of Zoe's gloomy future sister-in-law, all the other girls were up for it.

Maybe working so hard lately has robbed me of what remained of my sense of humour, thought Priya. Not that she'd felt like laughing much lately, not since Vikram had—

Stop right there!

She shook her head as though shaking away all thoughts of Vik. She wasn't going to think about him right now or at all if she could help it. He was best left in the past, or as much in the past as he could be seeing as he was still her boss. Priya didn't need this psychic to foresee that having to take orders from her ex wouldn't make for happy working relations. To say that things were strained between them was putting it mildly.

Priya paused at the heavy curtains that divided Zoe's restored Victorian conservatory from the kitchen. Her mouth was dry. This was ridiculous! She *never* got nervous of the dark. As a kid she used to lie in bed with the curtains open and fix her eyes on the blackness of the world outside. The dark didn't frighten her the way it did her sister Neeshali. Instead Priya had longed to leap into it and find out what lay beyond. She wasn't any different now. Her documentary on immigration had won three awards and the one about people trafficking had earned a BAFTA nomination; gruelling topics that had kept her awake at night long after the film was in the can, so why was she feeling so on edge about seeing this so-called psychic?

It wasn't as if any of it was true.

So, not wanting to be a party pooper, Priya took a deep breath and stepped forward through the curtains. She just wanted this ordeal to be over as quickly as possible.

'Hello, love. I'm Angela.' A woman seated at the table beamed up at her. With her greying curls, sweater and slacks she would have looked like an ordinary mum if it hadn't been for the crystal ball and tarot deck laid

out before her. 'You must be Priya? Come and sit down and we'll begin.'

Priya took the Lloyd Loom chair set opposite Angela and folded her hands into her lap. There was no way she was going to give anything away, like a lack of engagement ring for example.

'My, you're a beautiful girl,' said Angela, with a gentle smile.

Priya mentally rolled her eyes. So Angela was going to go down the flattery route, was she? 'Thanks, but I think you'll find the dim light helps.'

The fact was that Priya was exceptionally pretty, with perfect *café au lait* skin, shoulder-length glossy black hair, high cheekbones and, most unusually for an Asian girl, eyes of hazel flecked with green. But Priya came from a background where family honour was prized far more highly than looks and worked in a male-dominated world where appearing feminine set her at a distinct disadvantage. So most of the time she just pinned her hair up, disguised her curves with well-cut suits and hid her eyes behind brainy-looking plain-glass specs. Beauty wasn't an attribute she'd ever associated with herself.

Angela shook her head. 'There's nothing wrong with being beautiful, Priya. Now, my love, you often distrust people because you feel they keep secrets, don't you?'

Here we go, thought Priya. She'll wait to see if I agree and then she'll pick up on it.

'But never mind that now,' continued Angela. 'Taking things at face value and trusting people is not a lesson that I can teach you.' She looked at Priya through thoughtful eyes. 'In fact, lovey, I don't think there's a lot

anyone can teach you. You're a young woman who likes to find things out for herself, aren't you?

'Mmm,' said Priya.

Angela sighed. 'Sweetheart, I can sense you've closed your mind to anything I might say tonight. But would you do me a favour? Just listen to what I tell you and think about it. Sometimes what Spirit tells me makes more sense later on.'

'Okay,' Priya agreed. Whatever. The sooner this was over the sooner she could get another drink.

Angela pushed her tarot cards aside and peered deeply into the crystal ball. It was opaque and milky, the glass appearing to glow in the reflected lamplight. In spite of herself Priya felt a prickle of unease.

'You work too hard,' Angela said, her eyes not leaving the crystal ball, 'but I can see that's the way you like it. It's how you define yourself. And you're successful, too.' Then she frowned. 'There's someone at work who's upset you, isn't there?'

That's a lucky guess, thought Priya. There was no way that Angela could possibly know about Vik and what he'd done. Only one person knew, her friend and colleague Ray, and she'd sworn him to secrecy.

'Your love life is a bit quiet, isn't it, my love, after a bit of a roller coaster? He really let you down, didn't he? And now, well, now you think there's no time for love.'

'I'm busy,' said Priya quickly. And I've also got my mum and three aunties on my back about finding a good Hindu boy, she added silently. Thank God that Neesh had recently got engaged and taken the heat off her for a bit. If Priya had discovered any more eligible

young Indian guys ‘accidentally’ turning up at the Gupta family home she thought she’d scream. Her mother couldn’t have been any more obvious if she’d walked round Kingston-on-Thames wearing a sandwich board declaring *I have a single daughter in her late twenties (the shame!). Please marry her!*

Angela smiled. ‘I’m sure you are, love, but some things are more important than work and sometimes work is a way of hiding from what’s really important.’

Priya snorted. Angela sounded just like her mum. *Chi, chi, Priya! This work is all very well but will it find you a husband, hmm?*

But Angela was serious. ‘Please take notice of what I’m saying, sweetheart. My guides have a message for you and they’re insisting that I pass it on.’

Suddenly the atmosphere seemed to grow heavy and Priya found she was holding her breath. It was easy to scoff at psychic stuff in broad daylight, but now that the shadows seemed to be closing in and the darkness pressing against the glass roof Priya wasn’t so certain.

‘What is it?’ she whispered. ‘What do you see?’

The psychic ripped her gaze from the crystal ball. Was it Priya’s imagination or were her pupils suddenly darker than the night sky? ‘My guides want you to know this, and they’re telling you to heed it well: *in matters of love, mother knows best.*’

‘What?’ Priya stared at her in disbelief. ‘That’s it? That’s my important message?’

‘So it would seem, love.’ Abruptly, Angela appeared to sag and her face looked haggard. ‘That’s it. There’s nothing more, I’m afraid. I can’t see anything else.’

‘In matters of love, mother knows best?’ Priya

echoed. ‘You clearly never met my mother.’ She shook her head, furious with herself for being suckered in even for a minute. How easy had she been for Angela to cold read? Take one young unmarried Asian girl, add a few cultural stereotypes and bingo! The pushy Asian mother desperate to marry off her daughter scenario. The fact that in her case this just happened to be true was totally irrelevant. Angela had just made a lucky guess.

Mother knows best, thought Priya as she headed back through the kitchen, pausing at the fridge to collect a well-deserved bottle of wine, I don’t think so! As far as she was concerned that reading just confirmed all her worst suspicions about the unscrupulous ways of so-called psychics.

Besides, her mother had adored Vik, which just showed how much she really knew about matters of love!

No, Priya decided firmly as she rejoined the hens, Angela’s spirit guides could take a hike. In matters of love *she* knew best, which was just the way she liked it.

And that was the way it was going to stay.