

*Once Upon an Un-Fairytale...***Dear Diary,**

What a sucky Sunday. Lee-sha cried and was sad and quiet all day. She's been like that since Savitri Aunty went to Pune to live with her brother. I keep saying her mother will come back but she won't believe me. She won't play with me. Not even with the Barbie and Ken dolls Daddy got us from his dentist conference in Singapore. She said 11 year-olds do not play with dolls. She won't come down the building to play either. She won't laugh at my jokes. Remember the sick little *billi* Krish found under Sood Uncle's Maruti? Lee-sha looks like that now. And Krish won't help her feel better like he helped the kitty. I yelled at him to be nice to his sister but he won't listen to me. He got angry with me and told me to butt out of his life. Vallima and Priya *didi* want me to leave him alone. They think he's sad too. I don't believe them. Krish is not sad. If he were sad he would cry and want hugs from us and not go off with his friends and play cricket all day long and smoke and have beer. He made Priya *didi* try some. I know because I was looking out of the window and saw them. I told Daddy about it. Priya *didi* is really angry with me now. She called me a big mouth with a pea brain. Remember my wish to marry Krish one day and live in a big house by a huge pond with our families? I changed my mind. I do NOT want to marry Krish anymore. I will marry a real prince who has an enormous kingdom and lives in a humungous castle with lots and lots of pretty white horses with pink bows on their tails. My prince will be very nice to me and his sister and my sister and all of our family, even to grumpy old Dadima. He will give me hundreds of gifts every day. He will not give away our pets to the watchman. That's what made Lee-sha cry today. Little Kitty had been her *billi*. And Krish is a

BIG FAT MEANIE. I hate him so much. So note this, Diary, he is NOT my prince. He is a BEAST. ☹ ☹ ☹

♥♥♥ *Dee* ♥♥♥

**Beauty Mathur: Flirting with the Fairytale.**

The bold, black caption was scrawled across Diya Mathur's burlap-clad hips gracing the cover of the latest issue of *Pomp Adore* India. The tattoo of a budding red rose teased upwards over her left hip, inking a path to the limpid oval of her bellybutton that apparently had the power to send men into fits of irrepressible psychosis. A year ago, an online tabloid had made Diya's bellybutton infamous by citing world famous men—movie stars, princes, sheikhs, Fortune 500 list-makers and the like—fought to sip champagne from it.

Krish Menon stared at the glossy image of Diya's navel for a deliberately prolonged moment and snorted when it failed to induce in him any kind of flight of fancy. Admittedly, he wasn't a movie star or a sheikh or a prince or a tycoon. That must be it, he mused, and the fact Diya was a bud and not a babe might have something to do with it too. If he jogged his memory hard enough he could almost visualize the ugly, knotty umbilicus it had once been. Diya was the first baby he'd held all by his five-year-old self. Diya's parents, good friends and neighbors to his own parents, had trusted him not to drop her on her perfectly round thirty-three centimeter head. By the time his own sister, Alisha, was born not two months later, he'd been a veteran baby handler.

Krish drew his eyes up from the fantasy button to Diya's fabulously toned, religiously worked-out abs. Above the abs, her perfect handfuls of breasts—a different tabloid had run the story and yes, the writer's completely arbitrary form of measuring had irritated Krish to no end. It still did. But, as Diya had pointed out too many times to count, his conservative attitude was

his problem, not hers. Krish pitied the man the Diva would marry and hoped the dude had nerves of steel.

Anyway, Diya's "handfuls" were flimsily covered in a swatch of burlap, artfully peeking through her explosion of black hair that spilled over peaches and cream skin. Smoky black eyes stared out of a heart-shaped face and nude-colored lips parted slightly, showcasing the tips of her twin rows of white teeth poised to take a bite out of the apple cupped in her hand. The picture merged innocence with the sensual, as if Snow White was superimposed on the biblical Eve.

Krish flipped the widely read and respected fashion magazine open to the dog-eared center where the main article ran. Cinderella laughed out of the page fortified by a mountain of shoes. On the adjacent page, Belle coyly offered a blood red rose to a starry-eyed Beast. The theme of the spread was bang on target for its model. Diya's head forever wallowed in the clouds. She skipped through life dressed in designer clothes, smiling and waving at the world with a pair of rose-tinted sunglasses perched on a slightly stubby nose. Even the cute imperfection of her nose did nothing to skew Diya Mathur's fairytale take on existence. Would the rumor that had gone viral across the media change the status quo?

Snorting doubtfully, Krish rolled the magazine close with a few deft twists of his hands and stashed the thick scroll into the Range Rover's glove compartment, just as a private jet landed smoothly on the far end of Dallas Executive Airport. He watched the grey and white plane with a capital JES embossed on its tail in—what *was* that color? Red? Pink? He shook his head, gaze riveted, as the plane sailed down the airstrip and rolled to a stop a bare dozen feet away from him.

No, not a mere fairytale, he amended. Diya's life played like a Cannes Film Festival these days, complete with palatial villas, racecars, jets, yachts and glamour-red carpets to strut on.

She'd made her mark in the fashion world and if she only stayed clear of trouble, he might even applaud her achievements to her face.

The mid-size aircraft's door pushed out and slowly dropped open in a staircase. When a bright red carpet didn't automatically spill forth, Krish curbed his disappointment. Dallas wasn't in league with the fashion capitals of the world, it seemed. Would Beauty Mathur's visit make it a contender? Whoa! He should take out a warning ad in the *Dallas Observer* come morning: *Run for cover, ye unsuspecting fools, or be made-over!*

As Krish amused himself at Diya's expense, a group of uniformed personnel walked across the tarmac, two of who had met Krish outside the glass-paneled terminal and escorted him to a parking spot on the airfield itself. They exchanged nods and smiles and some muffled, "Afternoons," with him before boarding the plane. They'd verify IDs, passports, visas and whatever else needed verification before allowing the passengers to disembark—standard procedure for private planes or so the Customs and Immigration officers had informed him.

Krish had zero experience with such travel. As Chief Financial Officer of Armadillo Farms and Foods, he enjoyed many perks and privileges, including flying business or first class across the States and sailing across the Gulf of Mexico in Danny "Dillo" Jones' boat for the annual company holiday. That was as far as his jet-setting ways went. And even those days were numbered now that the company had been sold and he debated what his next move should be.

The time was ripe with change. Armadillo was in its final stages of dissolution and assimilation within the newly expanded Wisco Organic Foods. Dillo would soon retire to his villa in the Florida Keys. As for Krish, other than moving to Wisconsin, things would be no different for him at Wisco. His financial package was more than generous. He'd be head of finance and a board member, just like with Armadillo, but with a contract binding him to them

for the next five years. It was a sound opportunity, one he deserved and worked bloody hard for. So why was his gut in a twist over it? Why did pouring all his resources into a start-up sound so much more appealing?

Krish took a long, bracing breath and pushing aside all thoughts of his foggy future, climbed out of the Rover. Bright sunlight beat down on the tarmac, making him squint through his shades. It was a pleasant Thursday afternoon, neither hot nor cold and not a cloud to be seen in the clear blue sky. A lazy end-winter Texas day he'd intended to spend on the living room couch in his UT Arlington sweatshirt and ratty shorts, flipping channels and brooding, when Kamal Mathur's morning phone call had foiled his grand plans. Kamal Uncle's request had surprised him and galvanized him into phoning Diya to arrange the how, when and where they'd rendezvous.

He'd been equally surprised at Diya's meek acceptance of her father's decree to lay low for a while instead of travelling to London or Istanbul or wherever she'd been scheduled to go next. She wasn't to step foot in Mumbai until the fiery rumors about her had turned to ash. Krish had anticipated a horrendous phone joust with a fire-breathing virago, screaming about male chauvinism and female empowerment, and frankly felt a bit letdown it hadn't come to that. After a pounding-hot shower, he'd pulled on a crisp pair of jeans and a newish navy-blue pullover, gotten in the Rover and driven to the airport.

As he waited for Diya, a trio of dull-colored chickadees playfully flew in front of the plane. Chattering energetically, they circled up and down, this way and that, and after a bit of mad spinning settled down on the jet's stair rail, like an avian welcoming committee.

The joyous chirping amplified when Beauty Mathur, brand ambassador for Jabbir Enterprises and Shipping's fashion label, Scheherazade, strolled out of the aircraft. At the exact moment, the sun chose to beam bolder and brighter and focus its golden spotlight on her.

Diya's white bolero jacket and culottes hurt Krish's eyes with their brightness, as did the bejeweled belt cinching her tiny waist. A wide-brimmed straw hat protected the top half of her face from his view and from the sun. Diya never allowed her skin to tan. The bottom half of her face curved into a stunning smile when she noticed the chickadees, and as he'd taught her when she was eight, began whistling to them.

Krish felt his own face split into a grin at the familiar Cinderella phenomenon and was about to call out to her when a man joined her on the landing. He was tall, dressed in white linen pants and short-sleeved shirt, in a style Diya would call casual-chic. His olive-skinned, overly handsome face creased into laughter at the cooing going on between the woman and birds. He slid an arm around Diya's waist and she turned to him, smiling widely. He leaned into her, murmuring something into her ear and then he kissed her upturned cheek.

Krish froze. His hands curled by his thighs as he watched the humans cootchie-coo. Shit, he thought. The rumor could not be true. Could it? He swallowed the lump of spit that pooled in his mouth. Kamal Uncle was right. Someone needed to drill some sense into her and it looked as if he'd been drafted for the task.

"No circumspection even now, Diya?" Krish growled, striding towards the jet.

She stiffened the minute their eyes met and he felt his own jaw tighten in response. He didn't understand why she reacted to him in this way. She'd refused his proposal. *She* had not wanted *him* for a husband. If anyone should be offended, it was he, not the other way around.

“And a nice, polite hello to you too, Beast,” said Diya. And with a frosty smile started down the stairs on a pair of shiny white stilettos like she hadn’t a care in the world.

She called him Beast whenever he growled his disapproval at her, which was pretty much all the time in recent years. She’d developed a knack for irritating him, sometimes for no apparent reason. At least this time he had a solid reason for being pissed. He bit back a string of curses he wanted to sting her with and kept his focus divided equally between her and the man following her down the steps. Krish reached them just as they stepped onto the tarmac.

Diya swished a hand elegantly between them all. “Krish meet Hasaan Jabbir, the genie behind Scheherazade.”

Krish had seen enough pictures of Hasaan and Diya over the last few months to recognize the billionaire Anglo-Saudi shipping mogul and international playboy, even without the introduction. The Jabbir family held several and diverse business interests all over the world, including their latest fashion venture, the House of Scheherazade.

“Hasaan, this is Krish Menon, a friend,” Diya paused and a slow smile melted her haughty expression. “A good friend,” she added before throwing her arms around him for a quick hug. Just as quickly, she stepped back, holding on to her hat and giggled nervously.

Krish itched to draw her back into his arms, but shook hands with the sheikh instead.

“*Merhaba* Krish,” greeted Hasaan in a lilting Arabic accent. “Sherry...sorry, Diya speaks of you often and very highly. Many thanks for your offer to meet us on such short notice. We seem to have a mess on our hands.”

Hasaan was very good-looking, way too smooth, too damn much of everything for Krish’s peace of mind. But the hell of it was he sounded absolutely sincere. Krish reined in the urge to punch his smiley face.

“Is that what a pregnancy is called in your world? A mess?” Krish drawled. If he couldn’t punch the man, he would verbally eviscerate his scruples—the lack of them.

Not that Krish believed, even for a microsecond, that Diya was fool enough to get pregnant, even accidentally, and definitely not with a man so unsteady in his affections. But the world believed she was and neither Diya nor Scheherazade’s publicists were denying the rumors. The question was why?

“Krish.” Diya’s eyes narrowed in warning.

She knew him well enough to know he was on the verge of losing his temper. Hasaan, who didn’t know him at all but had to know the ways of men, smiled crookedly and braced himself to take a hit. Diya stepped between them, whipping a glare at each of them. Krish kept his eyes on Hasaan. Even the reverse progression of the Border Security officers out of the plane, four of them carrying three gigantic pink trunks and a pink carry-on, did not distract him.

Hasaan broke eye contact first. “Sherry will explain it all, Krish. I apologize for my rudeness but I really must be on my way.” He nodded at the plane. “I need to get back before all hell breaks loose.”

That statement did distract Krish. There was more trouble brewing?

In a peculiarly humble move, Hasaan bowed, raising Diya’s hand to his lips. “*Shukran*, a thousand times *shukran*, my friend. Until we meet again. *Khuda hafiz*.”

Diya hugged and kissed Hasaan’s cheeks three times in Euro style. “*Al’afw*, Hasaan. There are no thanks between friends and please stop worrying, okay? And keep an open mind. Everything will be fine. Allah will make it so, you’ll see. *Khuda hafiz*.”

When the thank-yous, your-welcomes and god-keep-yous were done and Hasaan disappeared into the plane, Krish finally let his fists unclench.

“We already passed immigration in Miami,” said Diya as they walked to the Rover. Correction, he walked, she sauntered as if on an outing at the Hanging Gardens. “Hasaan prefers to use his diplomatic passport while travelling in the US...it’s why we got the VIP treatment.”

Krish grunted at the tidbit on the lifestyles of the mighty rich and hurried forward to help the officers’ load the luggage into the Rover. He’d flattened the backseat to make room, and even then the three pink trunks were a tight fit. Diya would have to manage the hand luggage on her lap like a plebian on the drive home.

He was shocked when Diya did exactly that with one glance at the car’s trunk, without a complaint or pout. Krish mentally applauded the humbled version of the Diva, and turned to the airport personnel, thanking them for their help. He made sure nothing else needed to be done like tips or fees or signatures of any kind. There wasn’t, as Hasaan seemed to have taken care of it all.

Krish cast one last look at the plane as its engines throttled to life and the stairs folded up and in as the door shut. The jet whaled into a U-turn and set off down the runway. The chickadees had flown, the baggage loaded. He paused by the Rover, hand on its handle, thinking what a versatile word baggage was. It applied to the woman, her luggage and the situation she was in collectively.

He opened door and got behind the wheel. The interior of the car smelled of Scheherazade, the perfume Diya was being paid a bomb to advertise. Not at all a bad scent—strong, exotic with just a hint of jasmine. Diya had removed her hat and was fussing with her hair, gathering the bounty into a ball behind her head. She’d removed her jacket and the neon pink of her silk blouse made Krish want to scratch at his eyeballs.

“Ready?” he asked, twisting the key in the ignition. KRLD came on, announcing the local weather report. Hailstorm expected tonight and over the weekend. And because he was still

annoyed with her, or rather, annoyed that she could so easily screw his guts into a muddy puddle, he put on his characteristic honorary brother sneer.

“The plastic bags are in the side pocket.” She frowned, so he elaborated, “For the morning sickness or afternoon sickness, Dee-Dumbs.”

Diya’s rosebud-shaped mouth stretched flat in a stony smile. Instead of socking his smart mouth with a fist—she’d stopped retaliating in that manner years ago—she fished out a pair of diamond-studded sunglasses from her bag and slid them on.

“By the way,” she said, carelessly tossing a heart-shaped box of baklava onto his lap.

He loved baklava. Mere words of thanks or apology wouldn’t do, thought Krish.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Beast.”

No, they wouldn’t do at all.