

## Once Upon an Un-Fairy Tale ...

Dear Diary,

What a sucky Sunday. Leesha cried and was sad and quiet all day. She's been like that since Savitri Aunty went to Pune to live with her brother after the big fight with Chandra Uncle. My mother says Savitri Aunty will come back soon, but Leesha doesn't believe it. She misses her *amma* like crazy. So much so that she won't even play with me. Not even the Asian Barbie and Ken dolls that Daddy got us from his dentist conference in Singapore tempt her. She said we were too old to play with dolls.

We are eleven! How is that old?

She won't come down to the building playground either. And she won't laugh at my jokes.

Remember the sick little *billi* Krish found under a Maruti in the building parking lot? Leesha looks like that. And Krish won't help her feel better like he helped the kitty cat. 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* smoke and drink beer. I saw them do it from my bedroom window. (I was not spying on them!) I told Daddy about it. And, now, my sister is angry with me. She said I was 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 both our families? I've changed my mind. I do NOT want to marry him anymore. I will marry a real prince, like William or Harry. Someone who has an enormous kingdom and lives in a humungous castle full 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 the cat to the watchman. That's what made Leesha cry today. Little Kitty had been her *billi*.

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

♥♥♥ Dee ♥♥♥

## 1

**Beauty Mathur: Flirting with the Fairy Tale**

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

Krish Menon stared at the glossy image of Diya's navel for a prolonged moment and snorted when it failed to induce any kind of madness in him. Admittedly, he wasn't a movie star or a sheikh or a prince or a tycoon or prone to flights of fancy.

*That must be it,* he mused.

And the fact that Diya was his buddy and an honorary sister might have something to do with it, too. If he jogged his memory back twenty-nine years, he could almost visualize the red-faced, snotty newborn she had been with the black thread poking out of her belly instead of a navel. The cut umbilical cord had grossed him out but had also fascinated him as he'd watched Lubna Aunty massage Baby Diya one morning. He'd been a fount of questions about it and about infants, he remembered. Diya was the first baby he'd held in his five-year-old arms. 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 Diya's belly button, lingering on her toned and religiously worked-out abs for a few seconds before coming to rest on her "perfect handfuls of breasts." A different tabloid had run that headline, and the writer's completely arbitrary form of measuring female anatomy had irritated Krish to no end. It still did. But, as Diya had pointed out too many times to count, his outdated and conservative attitude was his problem and not hers.

Krish pitied the man Diya the Diva would eventually choose to marry and hoped the dude had nerves of steel. He'd need them if he had to see his wife's near-naked torso splashed across billboards and magazines on a daily basis.

In *Pomp Adore*, Diya's "handfuls" were artfully covered in a swatch of burlap and were peeking through an explosion of dark hair that spilled over her shapely shoulders and torso. Her peaches-and-cream skin had been either Photoshopped or spray-painted to a lovely golden hue. Smoky black eyes stared out of a heart-shaped face, and nude-colored, fleshy lips were parted slightly, showcasing the twin rows of white teeth poised to take a bite out of the apple cupped in one hand. The picture was the perfect blend of innocence and sensuality, as if Snow White were superimposed on the biblical Eve.

Krish flipped open the widely read and respected fashion magazine to its 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's fairy-tale take on existence.

Would the rumor that had gone viral across the media this week change the status quo?

He snorted again, underscoring his doubt at the thought. Rolling the magazine closed with a few deft twists of his hands, he stashed the thick scroll into the Range Rover's glove compartment just as a private jet landed on the runway of Dallas Executive Airport. The gray-and-white plane had a capital JES embossed on its tail in red. Or was that pink? He couldn't tell the colors apart. The plane sailed down the airstrip and rolled to a stop barely a dozen feet away from the car.

*No, not a mere fairy tale,* he amended with a heavy sigh.

Diya's life played like a Cannes Film Festival these days, complete with palatial villas, race cars, jets, yachts, and glamour-red carpets to strut on. She'd made her mark in the fashion world just as she'd claimed she would. If she only stayed clear of trouble, he might even applaud her achievements to her face.

The door of the midsized aircraft pushed out and dropped open as a staircase. When a bright red carpet didn't spontaneously spill forth, Krish curbed his disappointment. Dallas, it was apparent, wasn't in league with the fashion capitals of the world. But would Beauty Mathur's visit turn it into a contender? Whoa! Now, that would be something. Maybe he should splurge for a warning ad in the *Dallas Observer*. *Run for cover, ye unsuspecting fools! Or be made over!*

While Krish amused himself at Diya's expense, a group of uniformed personnel—the same people who'd met him outside the glass-paneled terminal and escorted him to his parking spot on the airfield—came out of the building

again and made their way across the tarmac. They threw an assortment of smiles, nods, and waves his way before boarding the plane where they'd verify passenger IDs, passports, visas, and whatever else needed verification before allowing the passengers to disembark—standard procedure for private planes and VIPs, or so the Immigration and Customs officers had informed him.

It was a whole other level of luxury travel.

As chief financial officer of Armadillo Farms and Foods, he enjoyed many perks and privileges, including flying business or first class across North America and sailing across the Gulf of Mexico in Danny “Dillo” Jones’s boat for the annual company holiday. That was as far as his jet-setting experiences went. And even those days were numbered now that the company had been sold.

Armadillo was in its final stages of dissolution and assimilation within the newly expanded Wisco Organic Foods. Dillo was set to retire to his villa in the Florida Keys and spend the rest of his days sunning, sailing, and fishing. But, at thirty-five, Krish wasn’t quite ready for beach life yet.

The plan: the offer was for Krish to move to Wisconsin and continue working for Wisco. He’d be the head of finance and a board member, just like he’d been at Armadillo, except with a contract binding him to Wisco for the next five years. His financial package would more than compensate for the lock-in term. It was a sound opportunity—one he deserved because he had worked damn hard for it. So, why was his gut in a twist over it? Why did pouring all of his resources into a start-up sound so much more appealing? Not to mention, exciting?

Krish took a long, bracing breath, and pushing aside all thoughts of his foggy future, he climbed out of the Rover. Bright sunlight beat down on the tarmac, making him squint through his aviator shades. It was a pleasant Thursday afternoon in February, neither hot nor cold and not a cloud to be seen in the clear blue sky. A lazy winter day he’d intended to spend on the living room couch in his UT Arlington sweatshirt and ratty shorts, flipping channels and brooding about his future, when a phone call from Kamal Mathur had foiled his grand plans. In turn, Kamal Uncle’s call had galvanized him to phone Diya, who was in Miami. He’d invited her to Dallas for a visit—insisted she come—and over a few texts, they’d sorted out the how, when, and where they would rendezvous.

He was surprised that Diya had accepted her father’s decree to lie low in Dallas for a while instead of traveling to London or Istanbul or wherever she’d been scheduled to go next. Kamal Uncle didn’t want her to step foot in Mumbai, not until the fiery rumors about her turned to ash. Krish had anticipated a horrendous phone joust with a fire-breathing virago, an argument about male chauvinism and female independence, and frankly, he felt a bit let down 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 to pick her up.

As he waited for Diya to disembark, a trio of spotted-brown chickadees flew in front of the plane. Tweeting, they spun playfully about before settling down on the stair rail like an avian welcome committee. The joyous chirping amplified when Beauty Mathur—brand ambassador of Jabbir Enterprises and Shipping’s fashion label, Scheherazade—strolled out of the aircraft. At the exact moment, the sun chose to beam brighter and focus its golden spotlight on her.

The brightness reflected off Diya’s white bolero jacket and denim shorts hurt Krish’s eyes, 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 didn’t allow her skin to tan ever. 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, she began whistling to them.

Krish’s own face split into a grin at the familiar Cinderella phenomenon. But, before he could call out to her or raise his hand to catch her attention, a tall man in white linen pants and a short-sleeved linen shirt joined her on the landing. His overly handsome olive-skinned face creased into laughter at the cooing going on between the woman and the birds. He slid an arm around Diya’s waist with ease, and she turned to him, giving him a radiant smile. The man leaned into her, murmuring in her ear, and then he kissed her upturned cheek.

Krish had seen enough media coverage of Diya and Hasaan Jabbir over the last few months to recognize the billionaire Anglo-Saudi shipping mogul and international playboy at first glance. Not only that, the Jabbir family held several diverse business interests all over the world—including their latest fashion venture, the House of Scheherazade—and were frequently in the news.

Hands curling into fists, Krish watched and wondered about the relationship between Diya and her boss. *Is the rumor true then?*

He swallowed the lump of spit that had lodged itself in his throat. No, it couldn’t be. Diya wasn’t that stupid. But Kamal Uncle was right. Someone needed to drill some sense into her, and it looked like he’d been drafted for the task.

“Watch your step, Diya.” Krish moved, striding toward the plane.

With luck, she’d heed the warning, both literally and figuratively.

Her whole posture went rigid when she finally noticed him, and Krish felt his own jaw tighten in response.

He didn't understand why she reacted to him in that way. *She* had refused his proposal. *She* had rejected him as a suitor. If anyone should be offended, it was him. Not the other way around. But had anything about her made sense to him ever?

"And a nice, polite hello to you, too, Beast," Diya said with a frosty smile. Then, she started down the stairs on a pair of glittery white stilettos, as if she hadn't a care in the world.

She called him Beast whenever he snarled at her in disapproval, which was pretty much constantly in recent years. She had a knack for getting under his skin, sometimes for no apparent reason. Biting back a slew of harsh words that wanted to leap out of his mouth, he kept his focus on the man following Diya down the steps. Krish reached them just as they stepped onto the tarmac.

Diya waved a hand between them. "Krish, meet Hasaan Jabbir, the genie behind Scheherazade. Hasaan, this is Krish Menon, the friend I told you about." She paused for a heartbeat, and then a slow smile melted the haughty expression off her face as they stared at each other. Krish felt an answering grin tug at his lips. "One of my closest childhood friends," she added before throwing her arms around him for a bear hug. Just as abruptly, she unhugged him and stepped back, giggling as she readjusted her hat on her head, which had gone askew.

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

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

Hasaan was too 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.

"Interesting terminology. Is that what you call a pregnancy in your world? A mess?" If he couldn't punch the man, he'd at least verbally eviscerate his scruples—or the lack of them.

Not that he believed that Diya was foolish enough to get pregnant—even accidentally—and definitely not with a man who was reputed to be 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 by planting his feet a little wider.

Diya stepped between them, skewering each of them with a glare. Krish kept his eyes on Hasaan. Even the reverse progression of the Border Security officers coming out of the plane, four of them carrying three gigantic pink trunks and a pink carry-on, did not distract him.

His eyes dropped to Hasaan's chest where Diya's hand rested. *Are they a couple?*

"You are right to worry, Krish. I apologize for my rudeness for leaving Diya to explain the situation alone. But I must be on my way." Hasaan nodded at the plane, and Diya dropped her hand. "I need to get back before all hell breaks loose."

*There is more trouble brewing? Damn it, what has Diya gotten herself into?*

In a peculiarly humble move, Hasaan bowed and raised Diya's hand to his lips. "A thousand *shukrans*, my friend. I will not forget your support. *Khuda hafiz* ... until we meet again."

Diya hugged Hasaan and kissed his cheeks three times, like they did in Europe. "*Al'afw*. There are no thanks between friends. And please stop worrying. Everything will be fine. Allah will make it so; you'll see. Just keep an open mind, all right? *Khuda hafiz*."

When the thank-yous, you're-welcomes, and god-keep-yous were done and Hasaan disappeared into the plane, Krish finally allowed himself to relax, though the tangle in his head remained. He wanted to bombard Diya with questions, but he'd wait for her explanation first.

"It's cooler here than in Miami," she remarked as they walked to the Rover. Correction: he walked, and Diya sauntered as if she was strolling down a runway, which—ha—she was, wasn't she? "Thank God we didn't have to go through immigration or baggage claim. Hasaan uses his diplomatic passport while traveling in the US ... for political reasons ... so we get the VIP treatment."

Krish grunted at the unwanted glimpse into the lifestyles of the rich and mighty and hurried forward to help the officers load the luggage into the Rover. He'd flattened the backseat already, and even then, the gigantic pink trunks were a tight fit. Diya would have to sit with the hand baggage on her lap like a plebeian on the drive home.

*Baggage*. Such a versatile word. It collectively applied to the woman, her luggage, and the situation she was in.

Krish silently berated himself for his uncharitable thoughts, especially when Diya slid into the front passenger seat and settled the carry-on on her lap without being prompted and without a pout. Sighing, he turned to the officers and thanked them, making sure nothing else needed to be done, like tips or fees or signatures of any kind.

There wasn't. Hasaan seemed to have taken care of everything. Krish cast a last glance at the plane as it whaled down the runway and cast off into the sky, taking Hasaan with it.

The chickadees had flown away, too. The baggage had been loaded. It was time to go home.

Krish got behind the wheel. The car's interior was drenched in Scheherazade now—the perfume Diya was being paid a bomb to endorse. Not a bad scent. It was strong, exotic with just a hint of jasmine. Just like its endorser.

Her hat had disappeared, and she was fussing with her hair, gathering it into a ball behind her head. She'd removed her jacket, and the neon pink of her shimmering blouse made Krish want to scratch at his eyeballs.

"Buckle up," he instructed gruffly and twisted 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 twist his guts into a muddy puddle—he put on his characteristic honorary-older-brother sneer.

"The plastic bags are in the side pocket," he said, making her frown in confusion. "For the morning sickness or afternoon sickness, Dee-Dumbs."

Diya's rosebud lips stretched flat in displeasure. But, instead of socking his smart-aleck 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. They covered nearly half of her face; the frames were that huge. Then, she pulled out a heart-shaped box of baklava from her bag and tossed it in his lap. He loved baklava. She'd remembered.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Beast," she said tonelessly, making Krish feel about two feet tall.

*Mere words of thanks or apology wouldn't do this time, he thought. Nope, it wouldn't do at all.*