

2

Bootie Mathur: Fairy Tale or Flirty Tale?

The digitally manipulated picture beneath the pun-riddled headline was hideous. Her pose and the burlap sarong were the only two things true to the *Pomp Adore* cover. In the pic, her hair looked unwashed and unkempt, her eyes wild and scary. Her blood-red lips were peeled apart in a facsimile of vampire fangs that were about to rip into the bow-tied, fungus-ridden bootie in her hand. Her abdomen was no longer defined but distended from an advanced pregnancy. The rose tattoo had been expanded, colored fully black, and its thorns seemed to be digging viciously into the green-veined skin of her stomach.

Diya Mathur swallowed the panic that had been threatening to choke her ever since she'd lost her mind and completely demolished her already-notorious reputation to save a dude in distress. What had she been thinking? Hasaan didn't need her to be his knight in shining armor. He was more than capable of saving his own skin. But no, her quixotic goodwill had reared its pretty little head—all wobbly because of a teensy bit of guilt since she *was* partly to blame for the fiasco—and thrown itself in front of the mega merger about to put a speed bump on Hasaan's carefree bachelor life. But even knowing she'd done the right thing didn't stop Diya's stomach from churning like the giant cement mixer she spotted on a construction site on the road. She prayed she wouldn't really have to use the stupid vomit bags the Beast had referred to as a joke.

"*Fairy tales are going to ruin this child.*" Dadima had predicted Diya's fate in a dour tone and with a dire shake of her unnaturally black head.

Diya had been six years old then and had refused to change out of her glittery-blue Sleeping Beauty costume until Prince Charming arrived at her doorstep, bearing new clothes for their wedding.

Diya hadn't believed her cantankerous old grandmother then, and she wouldn't believe it now, even with the *stone the pregnant infidel to death* threats looming over her head. Fairy tales were her lucky charms, her survival mantras. They could never harm her. In fact, they helped her put life in its proper perspective.

Example: her Sleeping Beauty phase, which she'd pretty much spent in a haze of denial, waiting for Prince Charming—aka the Beast—to grow up. The phase had ended the night of her twenty-first birthday when she realized the magnitude of her self-delusion. Soon after the figurative eye-opening event, she'd announced her ambition to be a fashion model to the world, starting with her best friend, Alisha Menon—sorry, Chawla now that Leesha was married to Mr. Hunk Charming, Aryan Chawla. Anyway, Diya had whispered her plans in Leesha's ear because she was mortally afraid of what her dentist parents, Kamal and Lubna Mathur, and gynecologist sister, Priya Shroff née Mathur, would say about yet another vocation switch—her one hundred and eighth one. Soon-to-be advocate Leesha hadn't laughed at Diya's proclamation or acknowledged it. She'd simply disconnected the phone.

Not at all put off by her BFF's rudeness, Diya had forged full-speed ahead with her new plans and more or less parked her size-two bottom at Mumbai's Lips Inc. modeling agency until they took notice of her. It hadn't taken them long to notice. What was there not to notice about five feet nine inches of sleek limbs, flawless skin, and attractive features? Diya knew what she looked like. She also knew there wasn't a man, woman, child, or animal in the world who overlooked her. Not even the Beast—though the poor knave tried hard to. Anyway, Rocky Currimbhoy, cofounder of Lips Inc. agency, had rocket-launched her career in a matter of weeks, much like Cinderella's fairy godmother swirling a magic wand about and transforming a dowdy cinder-sweeper into the belle of the ballroom. Not that there was any dowdiness in Diya—not even back then. Just a bit of naïveté that had been scrubbed off since.

Fast-forward eight years, and Beauty Mathur honest-to-goodness loved to strike a pose. Any pose. Even ones that made her muscles scream in protest or blood rush to the brain, causing a migraine. Her super-busy model's life suited her perfectly unlike some of the other vocations she'd tried—and failed at—in her many years of adulting. Beauty was her thing. Fashion was her passion. And she was incredibly good at it. If she wasn't, Hasaan Jabbar would never have pursued her for Scheherazade.

For years, she'd been a Rapunzel trapped in the tower of professional ignominy, surrounded by an impossible wall of overachievers—case in point, the Beast on her left. But, unlike the incarcerated, long-haired princess, Diya had quit waiting for a princely rescue. She'd climbed down from the tower herself, waved her tresses about, and changed the course of her life.

It had been either that or agree to enforced domesticity with one of the truly blah men her family had paraded in front of her like a clichéd bachelorette reality show.

An arranged marriage was a fate worse than death. *A fate soon-to-be realized for poor Hasaan*, Diya thought mournfully. For her, too, if her "situation" didn't get sorted out soon and to her family's satisfaction.

Her father had called last night, yelling his head off at her gullibility. When she'd tried to explain her knightly reasons, instead of being pacified and calling her a hero, he'd started up his usual matrimonial threats and parental blackmail. And, this time, her mother and sister had chimed in like a couple of chorus girls, taking his side. The sparkly fairy tale was rapidly losing its glamour. Not for her, but for them.

Dear busy gods in heaven, are any of you listening? Help me out of this. Please!

"Stop browsing all the rubbish, Diya. You'll give yourself an ulcer," Krish said, maneuvering the SUV through a light patch of traffic.

Leesha and Hasaan had said the same thing. *"Haters will hate. Ignore them."*

But she was a people person, a crowd-pleaser, and it was hard to ignore trolls. Hard not to be the darling of the crowd.

With a last pout at the nightmare version of herself, Diya closed the pink leather cover over the tablet and slid the device back into her rose-pink handbag. Then, she forced herself to look at the Beast.

It was both a shock and a relief that he was behaving like a gentleman—mostly. Apart from the couple of mildly sarcastic comments he'd made in front of Hasaan and calling her Dee-Dumbs—which might have started off as a pejorative but had long ago morphed into his special nickname for her—he'd been courteous though broody. But that was Krish. He was a natural-born brooder. He brooded on a daily basis with no provocation whatsoever.

He dropped his hand to the console between them when they stalled at a red light, fiddling with the buttons to change the music station and turn the volume down. He had broad, capable-looking hands, the backs lightly dusted with dark hair. A sexy little vein pushed up from the middle knuckle of his right hand and ran all the way up his arm, which was bare beneath his pushed-up sleeve. Diya dragged her eyes away from the flexed strength of his forearm to his face.

"Talk to me." His laser-beam stare pierced her through the barrier of his prescription sunglasses, making her nerves tingle.

Krish was nearly blind without his glasses. These were aviator-style, and they sat well on his broad-boned face. Even through the dark green glass, she could make out the general shape of his eyes, and her memory filled in the rest. Krish had the Menon eyes, large and brown and soulful with thick but short, no-nonsense eyelashes. She used to nag him to get corrective eye surgery done or get prescription contacts at least. He'd ignored the advice, just like he ignored every fashion tip she gave him. Totally his loss, in her humble opinion. As Diya stared without speaking, his unruly eyebrows rose above the thin metal frames in askance.

Then, the light turned green, and the traffic began to move. With a frustrated sound, Krish turned his attention back to the road, giving Diya a longer opportunity to gather her thoughts and study his profile.

Everything about the Beast was dark and mysterious. His skin tone was just a shade darker than his mother's and sister's and several shades darker than hers and yet, surprisingly, well hydrated and blemish-free. He had a noble-sized nose and a stubborn jawline that she found super sexy. Even so, no one in the fashion world would call Krish Menon good-looking. They would vote him as average or having a face infused with character—which was a polite way of saying he was nothing much to look at. But did that stop the shivers of undiluted attraction from rippling through her whenever he was in close proximity?

Krish had no clue that he affected her this way. Thank heavens he lived thousands of miles away, or her retarded shivering would give her away for sure. No one in either of their families suspected she still hadn't gotten over the crush she'd had on him since forever. If they found out, they would pity her. If Krish found out, it would make things even more awkward between them than it already was. Worse, he'd think it was his duty to see her happily settled in a relationship, and like he'd done once before at her father's behest, he would either propose to her himself or start introducing her to his eligible friends.

It might come to that anyway what with the marriage madness afflicting her father. Daddy was behaving as if turning thirty—which she would in August—without a husband and toddler to tend to was a biological crime fit for the *Record Book of Disgraced Mathurs*. It wasn't her fault she was unlucky in the love and wedded bliss departments. Unlike her parents, her sister, and her BFF, some people like Hasaan and herself ...

"Diya?" Krish prodded again, oh-so gently squeezing her hand this time.

She suppressed another shiver and sighed. *I have to tell him sometime, right?*

"It started with the purchase of the stupid bootie," she began and quickly related the whole silly story in sequence. On December 23, she and Hasaan had been spotted, buying a Christmas bootie in the Dubai Mall.

"It was the cutest baby bootie ever. It was hanging in the window display, a miniature Christmas stocking in silver and purple wool, and I just had to go in and buy it for your sister and Aryan. You know they're trying to get pregnant, and I thought the bootie would amuse them. It does. They call it their fertility charm. How was I supposed to know that some crackpot paparazzo stalker would take our photos and use them as evidence of a pregnancy?"

The stupid, incriminating photographs had triggered a collective exultation in the media who had speculated over Hasaan and her being an item ever since she signed on as Scheherazade's brand ambassador in early December. True, Hasaan and she were joined at the hip at this point—in a professional and platonic manner—but did anyone believe it? Of course not. Where was the fun in that?

Apparently, neither did Krish because he quirked a highly skeptical eyebrow at her, which she ignored.

Soon after the inciting incident, Jabbir Enterprises had begun courting Al-Hanna Shipping regarding a possible merger with the intent to consolidate two large shipping kingdoms into one massive empire. Now, that was a newsworthy story. Soon after that, Hasaan and she had begun traveling for Scheherazade's worldwide publicity tour, and the bootie/pregnancy speculation had gathered momentum again despite the PR team's succinct but solid denials of the relationship. The rumors had lost steam again when they both went back to their respective hometowns for a short break toward the end of January.

“That's when Hussein, Hasaan's older half-brother and CEO of JES, decided that the merger would benefit from a more airtight and personal fusion. And, since Hasaan isn't romantically attached to anyone currently, he was offered up as a bridegroom to one of Sheikh Al-Hanna's daughters. Naturally, Hasaan went ballistic. His mother is Italian, and he lives in Istanbul, so he's not at all conservative in his thinking. He expects ... expected to find his own bride at some point in the very distant future. Anyway, he's been rebelling ever since—and who would blame him? He's been throwing wild parties all across Europe so that his imminent fiancée—her name is Saira—and her family will see how totally unsuitable he is as a groom. It's not working.” Diya shook her head in bafflement. “The engagement is still on, which is shocking because Sheikh Al-Hanna is super old-fashioned and believes that westernized Muslims are no better than infidels.”

“A westernized Middle Eastern man. How quaint,” Krish inserted when Diya paused to catch a breath.

She ignored the droll comment. “A few weeks ago, while I was in Mumbai on break, I happened to visit Priya in her clinic. Again, how was I to know I'd meet a fan there and that she'd take my picture and post it on social media? And some stupid media-monger with nothing better to do than prowl the internet, looking for conspiracy theories, would resurrect the bootie/pregnancy gossip, link it to my visit to a gynecologist, and pronounce me 'with child' again—not by Hasaan this time, but by Aryan Rajaram Chawla!—conveniently leaving out the fact that the doctor was my sister?”

Diya fought down the urge to scream in outrage as a fresh bout of panic tried to burn a hole in her stomach. “Just because I went to a party with my best friend's husband without said best friend—who was too busy to come to the party with us, mind you—means I have to be seducing him, right? Mann was right there with us ... along with Millie and Parena and seven other friends! But, oh no, nothing is ever written about them. None of them are stuck with labels like the 'Bimbo Who Stole Her BFF's Husband.’”

Krish snorted, doubtless at the bimbo comment. “You *want* things to be written about you. You love being outrageous. So, don't complain when it happens.”

“Yes. Fine! I do like to generate oodles of press. Good press though. Not this pregnancy stuff. But I suppose I can't pick and choose what will be written about me and what won't.” Diya pouted.

Again, the Diya-Aryan linkage had unlinked as soon as she resumed the Scheherazade tour, and the Diya-Hasaan baby rumor had rekindled even though she flashed her flat belly at every opportunity and guzzled bubbly at every party. The media hadn't relented, even when Hasaan and Saira's engagement and wedding dates were announced—it was to be in six weeks in Saudi Arabia against the poor man's wishes. To drown his sorrows, Hasaan had gotten disgracefully drunk in Miami two nights ago. The smash-hit band, Bedouin D'Araba, had performed at the party. It would've been an epic end to Scheherazade's Arabian-style publicity campaign had Hasaan not misbehaved in front of certain influential people who'd promptly filled Sheikh Al-Hanna's ears about his future son-in-law's outrageous conduct.

Shifting to get more comfortable—though with the carry-on, the baklava box, and her jacket on her lap, it was impossible—Diya turned to face Krish. “Can you imagine how Sheikh Al-Hanna reacted? Do you know how conservative he is?”

“It's the second time you've mentioned it in two minutes, I'd have to be deaf and a moron not to get the message.”

“Ha-ha, Krish, you're soooo funny. *Not*. Anyway, the sheikh finally declared he would not tolerate a son-in-law who was an Amreeka kisser.”

“What?” Krish's mouth twitched. “Another one of your weird made-up terms?”

Diya sighed. “Not mine. The sheikh's. Anyone who flouts Sharia law is an Amreeka kisser.”

Krish shot her a long look, clearly trying to gauge if she was making it up.

Diya shrugged. “He won’t allow his daughters to step foot on American soil, not even for a holiday. Not his sons, mind you. They can do as they please. The world is full of sexist double standards. Too bad there isn’t a magic wand to restyle people’s minds. Anyway, the whole merger thing is up in the air now, and Hasaan is in the doghouse with his family. They’ve threatened to disown him and pull all investments from Scheherazade.”

If Hussein made good on the threat, it would not go down well for the brothers. Scheherazade was Hasaan’s baby.

Krish took an exit off Interstate 30 and drove through a picturesque residential neighborhood that meandered uphill and downhill, branching off into by-lanes or private driveways at whim. Diya didn’t recognize the Dallas suburb from her previous visit with Krish. True, it had been a few years since she last paid him a visit, and his neighborhood might have gotten an upgrade. Still, she was good with roads. Which meant he’d moved.

“Exactly what does this *Twilight* episode have to do with you and the pregnancy rumor?” asked Krish before she could ask him where they were.

Diya suppressed a sigh. The story was proving too complicated for the numbers man.

Also, she was stalling.

“Someone took photos of Hasaan and me at the Arabian Nights party—well, at the after-party—and posted them all over social media, okay?” she confessed. “The pics are kind of blurry, but it’s not impossible to guess who’s who if you know who you’re looking for. My tattoo is distinctive, and Hasaan is ... well, he’s Hasaan.” Avoiding the Beast’s beastly glare, she turned her head to stare out of the window and at the lovely, flowering lawns and the super-cute to gorgeous houses rolling past.

Why didn’t anyone tell me he’d moved?

“Again, what does it have to do with the rumor?” Stubborn and obtuse—that was Krish.

Diya huffed out a breath. “It was a smash-hit party, Beast. Most of us were wasted or naked or both.”

A long pause and then a growl. “Which category did you fall into?”

She threw him a cheeky look, which only made Krish frown even more ferociously.

“Both. But only semi of both,” she added in a rush before puffs of red-hot steam shot out of his eyes, nose, and ears.

And she’d left the party at a reasonable hour because she was exhausted from the traveling and long nights and even longer days of media pandering and mingling and schmoozing. She needed sleep more than a good time right now, but she didn’t tell him that. After all, she had her frivolous image to uphold—especially in his eyes.

“Damn it, Diya. What happened then?” He was gripping the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles had gone white and the sexy vein flat.

“I told you! The pics went viral. Add that to the already-simmering cauldron of baby rumors and interfaith trolls and ...” Diya trailed off, feeling horribly helpless again. There really was no way to control wagging tongues or idiots. “So, I told Hasaan to use the hoopla about us to his advantage ... if he wanted to get out of the marriage yet save the merger. I can’t believe his family is forcing him into marriage in this day and age.”

Who was she kidding? Across the world, marriages got arranged as much now as they had fifty years ago and for less glamorous reasons than dynastic mergers. But not in modern-thinking families.

Not in my family!

“I can’t believe Daddy thinks I’ve shamed him on purpose. I can’t believe he’s turning into an old ogre, just like his mother,” Diya burst out as Krish veered the Range Rover off Hemingway Drive and into a private driveway.

From the private diary of Princess DKM.

Read further and DIE!

I'm floating on cloud sixteen! ☺ Last night was my birthday party at Olive restaurant. OMG! The Shoe Cake!!! Chocolate and fudge on the inside and pink, blue, and silver buttercream frosting on the outside—the exact colors of my dress. So totally awesome!

The blight? Ravi. What kind of boyfriend falls ill on the most important day of his girlfriend's life? Well, ex-boyfriend now that he's proven to be a weak, sickly jerk. Obviously, he's not my prince. Imagine my horror that I almost went stag to my own party! (Maybe Leesha is right. Maybe I shouldn't brag about my In a Relationship status so much.)

I did say, almost. The Beast offered to be my birthday knave :O Go figure! (Oh, yeah. Krish's down from Dallas for a mini vacay before he takes up some fancy-schmancy internship.) Tonight, he completely reversed my opinion of him. He was by my side the whole evening and even slow-danced with me at the very end. He addressed me as Princess Diya all night long. My friends are beyond jealous because they think I have a college-age boyfriend. I love it! Who knew the Beast of Malevolence could reform into the Prince of Benevolence, even without true love's kiss?

Oh, he confuses me so. If I marry him, my initials will remain the same—DKM. How cool is that? Also, is that a sign or what?

Happy sweet 16 to me! ♥♥♥