

Bootie Mathur: Fairytale or Flirty-tale?

The photo-shopped picture beneath the headline was hideous. The pose and the burlap were the only two things true to the original Pomp Adore cover. In this 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 about to rip into the bow-tied, fungus-ridden bootie in her hand. Her abdomen was no longer defined, as she was extremely pregnant in the picture. The rose tattoo had been colored black and had vicious-looking thorns growing out of the stalk and digging maliciously into the green-veined skin of her distended stomach.

Diya Mathur swallowed the panic threatening to choke her ever since she'd lost her mind and completely demolished her already notorious reputation to save a dude in distress. That she wasn't a knight-in-shining-armor and that Hasaan was more than capable of saving his own skin was of no consequence. Her quixotic goodwill had reared up, mixed in with a teensy bit of guilt—after all, she was partly to blame for the fiasco—and thrown itself in front of the mega merger about to put a damper on Hasaan's carefree 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 by the road. She prayed she wouldn't really have to use the stupid vomit bags the Beast had planted as a joke.

Fairytales will ruin you, Dadima said in a dour tone supplemented by a dire shake of her head, when Diya was only six and had refused to wear anything but her glittery-

blue Sleeping Beauty costume forever or until Prince Charming arrived bearing new clothes. 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. Fairytales were her lucky charms, her survival mantras. They could never harm her. In fact, they helped put life in perspective.

Example: the Sleeping Beauty phase, which she'd pretty much passed in a haze of denial waiting for Prince Charming—aka the Beast—to grow up. It had ended the night of her twenty-first birthday when she'd realized the magnitude of her self-delusion. Soon after the figurative eye-opener, she'd announced to the world of her ambition to be a fashion model. Actually, she'd only announced it to her best friend, Alisha Menon—sorry, Chawla, now that Lee-sha was married to Mr. Hunk Charming, Aryan Chawla. Anyway, Diya had whispered her plans in Lee-sha's ears only because she'd been mortally afraid of what her dentist parents, Kamal and Lubna Mathur, and gynecologist sister, Priya Shroff *née* Mathur, would say about another vocation switch—her one hundred and eighth one. Soon-to-be-advocate Lee-sha hadn't laughed at the proclamation nor acknowledged it. She'd simply hung up the phone.

Not at all put off by her BFF's rudeness, Diya traipsed forth in 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 picture-perfect features? Diya knew what she looked like and knew there wasn't a man, woman, child or animal in the world who overlooked her. (Not even the Beast, though he did try, poor knave.) Anyway, Rocky Currimbhoy, co-founder of Lips Inc, had rocket-launched her career in a

matter of weeks, much like how Cinderella's fairy godmother had swirled a magic wand about and transformed the dowdy cinder-sweeper into the belle of the ballroom. Not that there'd been any dowdiness to begin with in Diya, just a bit of naiveté she'd scrubbed off since.

Fast-forward eight years and Beauty Mathur honest-to-goodness loved to strike a pose. Any pose. Even the ones that made one's muscles scream in protest or blood rush to the brain causing a migraine. Her super busy model's life suited her, incredibly perfectly, unlike some of the other vocations she'd tried—and failed at—in her many years of being an adult. Beauty was her thing. Fashion was her passion. And she was damn good at it. If she weren't, Hasaan Jabbir would never want 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, longhaired princess, Diya had quit waiting for a princely rescue. She'd scaled the wall herself, waved her tresses about and changed the course of her life.

It had been either that or enforced domestic blah with one of the 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 heroine, he'd started his matrimonial threatening and blackmailing again. And this time, her mother and sister had chimed in like some horrible

squeaky chorus. The sparkly fairytale was rapidly losing its glamour—not for her, for them.

Almighty gods in heaven! Are any of you listening? Help me out of this, please!

“Stop browsing through rubbish, Diya. You’ll give yourself an ulcer,” said Krish, without looking at her as he maneuvered the SUV through a light patch of traffic.

With a last pout at her nightmare version, Diya shut the tablet, closed its pink leather cover and slid the device back into her rose-pink handbag.

The Beast was behaving himself. It was both a shock and a relief to her. Apart from the two mildly sarcastic sentences he’d barked out in front of Hasaan, the derogatory nickname and comment about morning sickness, he’d been quiet, maybe a bit broody. But that was Krish. He was a brooder. He brooded on a daily basis with no provocation whatsoever.

He dropped his hand to the gearshift when they stalled at a signal, loosely capping the stick. His hand was broad, dark and capable-looking, the back of it lightly dusted with hair. A sexy little vein pushed up from his middle knuckle and ran all the way up his arm, bare beneath his pushed-up sleeves. Diya dragged her eyes away from the flexed bicep to his face.

“Talk to me.” His grim, laser-beam gaze made her tingle even through his shades.

The sunglasses would be prescription. He was nearly blind without them. They were aviator-style with thin metal frames and sat well on his broad-boned face. She could make out the general shape of his eyes behind the dark glass. Krish had the Menon eyes, large and brown and soulful. His eyebrows slashed, thick and straight above the metal frames and as Diya stared at him, they rose high in question. She regularly nagged him to

get Lasik done or at least wear contacts. He ignored the advice just like he ignored every other fashion tip she gave him—totally his loss in her humble opinion.

The traffic began to move and Krish turned his attention to the road with a low growl of irritation, giving Diya further opportunity to study his profile. He was a tall man. And was dark—his skin well hydrated and blemish-free. He had a really sexy jawline and a noble-sized nose. Even so, no one in the fashion world would call Krish good-looking. They would vote him as average or having a face infused with character—a really polite way of saying he was nothing much to look at. But did that stop the shivers of undiluted attraction rippling through her whenever he looked at her?

Thank heavens the Beast had no clue he affected her this way. Thank heavens he lived thousands of miles away or her retarded shivering would've surely given her away. Thank heavens no one in either of their families suspected she hadn't at all gotten over the crush she'd had on him since forever. If they found out, they would pity her. If Krish found out, he would pity her *and* it would make things even more awkward than it sometimes was between them. 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, either propose to her himself or introduce her to his wonderful and eligible friends.

It might come to that anyway, what with the marriage madness afflicting her father. Daddy behaved as if turning thirty—which she would in August—without a husband and toddler to tend 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, gently squeezing her hand this time.

She sighed. *She had to confess some time.*

“It all started with the stupid bootie,” she began and quickly laid out the whole silly story in sequence.

On December 23rd, she and Hasaan had been spotted in Dubai buying a Christmas bootie. “It was so cute, a miniature stocking in silver and purple wool for a baby. I bought it for Lee-sha and Aryan. You know they’re trying to get pregnant and I thought the bootie would amuse them. It does. They call it their little fertility charm. How was I to know some crack-pot paparazzi stalked us and would tag the bootie as evidence of me being pregnant by Hasaan?”

The photos created a collective exultation in the media because in December Hasaan and Diya had literally been joined at the hip—in a professional and platonic manner, of course, but no one had believed it. Apparently, neither did Krish because he threw her a highly suspicious eyebrow-raise, which Diya ignored.

Soon after, JES began talks of a merger with Al-Hanna Shipping to consolidate the two shipping kingdoms into one massive shipping empire. Soon after that, Hasaan and Diya began Scheherazade’s worldwide publicity tour and the bootie and pregnancy speculation made its second round in the media, despite the PR team’s succinct but solid denials of the relationship. A month later, when they both went back to their respective homes for a short break, the rumor once again lost steam.

“That’s when Hussein, Hasaan’s older half-brother and CEO of JES, informed Hasaan the merger might benefit from a more airtight and personal fusion, like Hasaan agreeing to a *nikaah*—marriage—with 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 and expects to find his own bride at some point in the very distant future. Anyway, he's been rebelling ever since. Throwing wild parties so his imminent fiancée—her name is Saira, by the way—or her family will see how totally unsuitable he is. It's not working. Which is surprising as Sheikh Al-Hanna is extremely old-fashioned and more or less hates all westernized conduct,” Diya paused her explanation to take a long overdue breath.

“A man from the Middle-East hating the West? I'm shocked,” said Krish.

Diya rolled her eyes at Krish's straight-faced drollness. “Moving on. While I was in Mumbai, I happened to go into Priya's clinic to see her. Again, how was I to know I'd meet a fan there and she'd take my picture and tweet about it? And some stupid media-monger, who has nothing better to do than prowl the Internet looking for conspiracy theories, would resurrect the bootie and link it to my visit to a gynac, conveniently leaving out the fact that the doctor is my sister and pronounce me pregnant again? Not by Hasaan this time but by Aryan Rajaram Chawla!” Diya resisted the urge to scream in outrage as a fresh bout of panic burned her stomach. “Just because I was out with my best friend's husband without said best friend, who was too busy to party with us, means I have to be seducing him, right? Mann was right there with us. Along with Millie and Pareena and seven other friends, but nooooo nothing is ever written about them. None of them are labeled the *Bimbo-who-steals-BFF's-husbands*.”

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

“I do like to generate oodles of press,” Diya admitted, grumpily. “Good press, not this pregnancy stuff, but I suppose I can’t pick and choose what’ll be written about me and what won’t.”

Again, the Diya-Aryan linkage had unlinked as soon as Diya resumed the Scheherazade tour and the Diya-Hasaan-Baby rumor rekindled even though she’d 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 got disgracefully drunk in Miami two nights ago. The smash-hit singer, Bedouin D’Araba, had performed at the party. It would’ve been an epic end to Scheherazade’s Arabian-style tour had Hasaan not misbehaved so badly with certain people who’d taken word of his outrageous conduct back to Sheikh Al-Hanna.

Juggling to hold the carry-on and the baklava box and her jacket on her lap, Diya turned to face Krish. “You know how conservative Sheikh Al-Hanna is, right?”

“*Hm.* That’s the second time you’ve mentioned it in two minutes. I’d have to be deaf and a moron not to know by now.”

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

“*What?*” His head whipped towards her for a second and back to the road.

Diya nodded in satisfaction at Krish’s response. “That’s how much he hates the West. Anyone who flouts Sharia law is an ‘*Amreeka-kisser.*’ He’s even banned his daughters from stepping foot on American soil. Not the sons, mind you,” said Diya, disgusted by the sexist attitude. “Anyway, the whole merger thing is up in the air and

poor Hasaan is in the doghouse. His family has threatened to pull funds from Scheherazade.” If they made good on the threat, it would kill him. Scheherazade was Hasaan’s baby.

They drove through a residential neighborhood and Krish slowed the car in accordance with the speed limit. The tree-lined road meandered uphill, branching off into private driveways at irregular intervals.

“Exactly what does this *Twilight* episode have to do with the pregnancy rumor?” The story was proving too much for the numbers man and he seemed genuinely baffled.

“Someone took photos of Hasaan and me at the party and posted them all over social media. They’re kind of blurry but it’s not difficult to tell who’s in them when you know what you’re looking for. My tattoo is distinctive and Hasaan is...well, he’s Hasaan,” she said, by way of explanation, distracted by the lovely, flowery houses and lots and lots of trees rolling past.

“Again, what does it have to do with the rumor?”

Diya huffed and looked at Krish. He could be so obtuse sometimes. “It was a smash-hit party, Beast. Most of us were wasted or naked or both.”

His cheek muscle twitched as he growled, “Which category did you fall into?”

She winced, imagining puffs of steam whooshing out from his eyes, nose and ears next. “The both...but only semi of the both,” she added quickly. And she’d left the party within an hour, exhausted from the travelling and long nights and even longer days of media pandering and mingling and schmoozing. She’d needed sleep more than a good time but she didn’t tell him that. After all, she had her frivolous image to uphold with the Beast.

“Goddamn it, Diya. Then what happened?” He gripped the steering wheel so tight his knuckles had gone white and the sexy vein flat.

“The pics went viral. Add them to the already simmering cauldron of baby rumors.” Diya lifted her shoulders and dropped them. There really was no way to control runaway gossip. “I told Hasaan to use the hoopla about us if he really wants to get out of the marriage but save the merger. I can’t believe what his family’s forcing him into, not in this day and age.” Who was she kidding? Marriages got arranged as much now as fifty years ago and for less glamorous reasons than dynastic mergers. But not in modern-thinking families! *Not in her family.*

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