

**TWENTY-SEVEN**



Excitement mounted as Sunday drew closer. We were playing a dangerous game. The thought of it both excited and worried us. There would be hell to pay if word went around and the instructors learned of our misadventure. Also, if the mission failed, there would be dire consequences.

Mooli looked increasingly pathetic as hours passed. He went around with a dejected expression on his face. He had never imagined that his romance would take a dangerous turn or end in such a manner. Although he was not fully convinced of Niloo's alleged evil designs, the seeds of doubt had been successfully planted.

Predictably, Maachh and Porky were the most excited of the lot. Their chests puffed with self-importance, they went over their plan repeatedly till they were satisfied.

'This is like a secret mission. I feel as though I am a part of an important espionage assignment,' Maachh declared as they prepared to leave for the adventure.

'We may have to undertake dangerous missions when we are commissioned. This episode will prepare us for future assignments,' said Porky.

'Dear pal, we are the chosen ones,' the Bong thumped his back encouragingly. 'I am confident that no one else will be able to do justice to this mission.'

Although amused at the statement, I held my tongue.

'You are absolutely right,' endorsed Zora. 'None of us are brilliant enough to carry out the task.'

'I have thought of a name,' said Porky. 'After all each mission has to have a code name. What about "Mission Blue Eyes"?''

'Very apt,' Maachh approved. 'We can refer to it as "MBE".'

'Member of British Empire,' I chuckled.

'What?'

‘Oh nothing, I like the acronym.’

‘Acro... acro-what?’ Porky looked puzzled.

‘Never mind, you were saying... ?’

‘Should I use a false moustache?’ Porky asked. ‘It looks great on me. I once used it for a play in the NDA. Besides, Niloo and Zafar will not be able to recognize me if I wore a moustache.’

‘It doesn’t matter what you wear, because Niloo doesn’t know you,’ Maachh deflated his balloon. He had been trying, for the past twenty-four hours, to be patient with his over-enthusiastic pal.

‘You’ll need a change of dress, though,’ Zora said. ‘Everyone in Dehradun can recognize a GC by his mufti. It is like screaming your identity from the rooftop.’

‘From the rooftop?’ asked Porky. ‘We are not allowed to go to the rooftop, anyway.’

‘You thickhead, it is just a metaphor.’

‘What is a metaphor?’

‘Never mind! Anyway, coming back to the subject of your clothes...’

‘Do you think I have not already thought of it? Why do you think I eat so much fish? There are more grey cells in my cranium than anyone else,’ Maachh tapped his head. ‘We will carry spare clothes in a bag. The moment we leave the academy, we will halt somewhere and change into civvies. For good measure, we’ll carry caps to hide our trademark katori cut.’

On the appointed day, Mooli informed us that he was meeting the girl at the Payal Theatre, where they planned to watch a movie. Following which they would go to a pizza joint for dinner. The guy looked absolutely deflated at the idea of the two jokers following the girl.

‘Don’t terrify her,’ he requested. ‘She is not a bad girl.’

‘We will soon know about that,’ retorted Sandy.

Zafar was not expected to join the two lovebirds that evening. His whereabouts remained as mysterious as ever.

As planned, Maachh and Porky followed Mooli to the city that Sunday. The guy met Nilofer, who was waiting outside the movie hall. She had already bought two tickets. From the corner of his eyes, the Jat watched Maachh and Porky rushing toward the ticket counter to buy tickets for themselves. The movie was not doing well and the hall was almost empty. It was for that precise reason that Nilofer had opted to watch the movie. She wanted to work her charm on the Jat.

Minutes after Mooli had settled down with Nilofer, the jokers occupied the seats directly behind them.

The lover boy, who was acutely aware of their presence, was a bundle of nerves. Watched by Maachh and Porky, the anxious Jat maintained a stiff posture even when the girl snuggled up to him. Nilofer, oblivious, remained her usual chatty self. She giggled and commented on whatever was happening on the big screen. It was a light, romantic movie, and she seemed to enjoy every bit of it.

When the movie ended, Mooli and the girl made their way to a food joint, trailed by the two bumbling sleuths. For the poor Jat, it was an ordeal to get through the meal. He felt as though a thousand arrows had pierced his throat. He swallowed, sputtered, sighed, and gulped all through the meal. His discomfort did not escape Niloo's attention.

‘What is the problem?’ she asked. ‘You are rather preoccupied today. Haven’t you been able to manage passes to the POP?’

The Jat squirmed in his seat with an unhappy smile on his face – ‘I have a nasty headache and there is a test tomorrow. I would like to return early to my room to prepare for it, if you don’t mind.’

‘You look ill. I think you should see a doc,’ she suggested. ‘Maybe the food didn’t agree with you.’

‘Yes, you are right. I am feeling quite unwell,’ the Jat mumbled. His anxiety was strumming up all his nerves in a discordant opera. ‘I think I’ll get back to the academy and report to the MI Room. I need some medicine.’

He was impatient to make an escape.

‘You haven’t said anything about the passes,’ the girl reminded him.

‘Oh, I will manage it, don’t worry about that. You will get it a day before the POP.’

It wouldn’t hurt to lie a bit, thought Mooli.

‘You are such a darling,’ she pouted. ‘I knew you would not fail us. Zafar will be delighted to hear that the passes have been arranged. Well, I guess, you should go back and rest a bit,’ she suggested, ‘I want you to be happy and smiling when we meet again.’

Maachh and Porky who had been lurking in the background, rushed out just in time to see Mooli waving goodbye to his girlfriend.

The Jat nodded his head imperceptibly and the duo nodded back. Porky gave him a thumbs-up signal to indicate they were ready to follow the girl.

The girl hailed an autorickshaw and drove off, with Maachh and Porky following in hot pursuit. Clad in jeans, T-shirts, and caps, the two felt like heroes.

‘Follow them!’ Porky ordered the auto driver, who, having caught the whiff of an adventure, was only too happy to oblige.

Rather like a chase scene straight out of a Bollywood thriller, the two rickshaws raced through the roads of Dehradun.

Fifteen minutes later, reaching an unpretentious residential colony, Nilofer’s autorickshaw drew to a halt. She paid the driver and moved towards the gate without a backward glance. Not in her wildest dreams had she imagined that she was being followed.

Maachh and Porky got off at the end of the lane and waited till Nilofer had entered the gate. As soon as she disappeared from view, they walked up to the security guard and asked for Miss Nilofer Khan’s apartment.

The stout Gorkha looked blankly at them and shook his head while drawing on his bidi. He was reluctant to part with any information.

‘I am not supposed to entertain questions about the residents from strangers.’

‘Look we just need to know her apartment number,’ explained Maachh, patiently.

‘Why?’

‘Because she is my sister’s classmate and I want to invite her for a party at our house.’

‘Then ask your sister for her apartment number.’ The guy refused to bite the bait.

‘She has lost the address. We are not asking for state secret. We just want the apartment number of Miss Nilofer Khan.’

After a long drag at his bidi, the Gorkha finally spoke.

‘There is no one by that name in these apartments,’ he informed.

‘Maybe you didn’t notice. The woman who just entered that building is Nilofer Khan,’ Maachh informed the watchman. ‘She is a student at the girls’ college.’

‘Are you telling me or asking me?’ The fellow replied belligerently. ‘Am I the watchman or are you the Gorkha here? That woman is Mrs. Gul Mohammad, and she is not a student but a housewife.’

‘Her husband stays here, too?’

‘Where else would he stay? Do you think husbands and wives stay in different buildings?’ The Gorkha had begun to enjoy his authority over the two seemingly stupid visitors.

Maachh and Porky exchanged a meaningful glance over the watchman’s head.

‘How long have they been staying here?’

‘Where does he work? Do they have any friends in the building?’ Porky began raining questions on the Gorkha while handing him a fifty rupee note. The sight of money loosened the watchman’s tongue.

‘I don’t know much about them. They have been staying here for the past four months. No one knows much about them as they keep to themselves. Once in a

while, a few young fellows come to visit them. But why are you asking so many questions?’

The watchman was beginning to get suspicious. Feeling he had parted with enough information to justify the fifty rupees, he turned aggressive once again. He wanted to extract some more money from the two. Maachh, with his meagre resources, couldn’t afford to keep up with the Gorkha’s greed, so he decided to change his tactic. He signalled Porky to shut up.

‘I think there is a mistake. We are looking for Nilofer Khan and not for Mrs. Gul Mohammad,’ Maachh tried to placate the irritated Gorkha. ‘I think you are right. She does not stay here. Thank you for your help.’

By now the watchman had also realized that he was not going to get any more money out of the duo, so he hustled them towards the exit, saying – ‘Chalo, chalo, get going before someone sees you hanging around here.’

There was nothing to do but to withdraw.

‘No issue, brother,’ Maachh oozed charm. ‘We don’t want to get you in trouble. We will leave now.’

As they walked towards the road looking for an autorickshaw, the Bong mulled over the information they had extracted from the watchman.

‘One thing is for sure. There is something fishy about the girl. We will have to come back tomorrow and speak to a few residents, discreetly.’

‘We should steal into her apartment and search it,’ suggested Porky, enthused with the idea of playing a detective.

‘I don’t know whether we can do that. Let’s ask the others.’

The two returned to the academy, where our entire gang was waiting impatiently to hear about their adventure. Porky burst in excitedly, and began dramatizing the chase.

‘She hailed a rick and got in. Then the two of us got into another. Her rick was going very fast and ours was just behind. She turned and threw a suspicious look...’



‘Calm down, pal,’ ordered Zora. ‘Maybe Maachh can give us the real picture.’

Maachh presented a saner version of the story. Poor Mooli looked more and more deflated as he heard about Niloo’s real identity. It was evident that the simple Jat had been taken for a ride by Zafar and Nilofer, who were trying to gain an entry into the academy during the POP. The entire picture became clear as we debated the matter. It was agreed that it was a serious matter. It called for professional handling.

‘I think we should share the information with the authorities,’ suggested Zora.

‘We can tackle them ourselves,’ Porky spoke with usual bravado. ‘All we need is a little time. I still think we should rough them up.’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ chided Zora. ‘We are dealing with dangerous people. They are most likely connected with some terrorist group and we can’t tackle them ourselves.’

There was sanity in his words.

‘You have done your part and done it very well, indeed.’ Sandy praised the duo. ‘Let’s have the matter handled by the experts.’

‘I am in no doubt that Mooli will get into trouble if we tell the authorities about the girl,’ said a worried Maachh.

‘That is right, Mooli’s career is at stake,’ agreed Porky.

Mooli looked more and more miserable as the discussion continued. In the end, when everyone had finished expressing their opinion, he drew a deep breath and said: ‘I think we should share the information with Paltu. I have not done any wrong; he is bound to realize that. In any case, the security of the academy is more important than my career. At the most, I will be relegated for a term or two, but I won’t be able to forgive myself if those people gain entry into the academy with an objective of causing terror.’

Everyone agreed with him. The chap was honest and upright. It was not his fault that he fell into the trap. It could happen to anyone. Perhaps, the reason he had been baited by the girl was because he was a naive fellow and easy to entice. They wouldn’t have tried the trick on Zora, Sandy, or even on Maachh for that

matter. Nilofer had chosen well.

The next morning, Mooli sought an appointment with Paltu and made a clean breast of the entire affair. Taking note of the seriousness of the matter, Paltu reported the matter to the higher-ups without wasting any time. With that, the wheels of action were set in motion.

By ten in the morning, the GCs grouped around the notice board where a warning had been pasted against the GCs befriending strangers, especially women. Most of the cadets were confused since they had no knowledge of the goings-on. The matter became a hot topic for the rest of the day, with each cadet wondering who had crossed the line.

Verification of all the visitor's passes began in earnest. Mooli was denied an out pass till further action, not that he was willing to move out of the academy. Terrified at the thought of coming across Nilofer and Zafar, the Jat refused to leave the campus. Events were unfolding at a fast pace; too brisk for him to comprehend. He had managed to open the Pandora's Box and the worms had crawled out. The worried Mooli barely slept that night.

His eyes red and swollen, Mooli was summoned to Batty's office the next morning. The poor sod broke down in front of the officer.

'Sir, reprimand me, relegate me, punish me in whichever way you like. I deserve it for the trouble I have brought to the academy,' he cried. 'When I befriended her, I had no idea that she was connected with an anti-national group.'

To his credit, instead of scolding the remorseful chap, the officer handed him a glass of water and patted him on the back.

'I am sure, you had no bad intentions when you befriended that girl,' Batty told the distressed cadet. 'In fact, whatever has happened is for the good. Had you not come across the girl, we would not have learnt the identity of her associates. At least now we know the group that is targeting the academy. The intelligence agencies will take over now.'

Batty proceeded on a longish lecture about dealings with the fairer sex.

'The world is a difficult place, son,' he advised. 'Things are not always as simple as they seem, and since you will be an officer in the Indian army, such things

will happen. Enemies may use honey traps to seduce you. They may try to make you compromise on your values. It always pays to be cautious. We appreciate your sincerity. You have put the academy's interests above your personal ones and that is definitely commendable.' Batty tried to ease the chap's anxiety. 'Don't you worry, son! Just go back to your barracks and leave the matter to us. We will take care of it.'

Mooli saluted smartly and got up to go.

'Just one thing,' said Batty. 'We want you to get in touch with the girl on the telephone and promise to deliver the passes later in the week.' He instructed. 'Don't say anything that will rouse her suspicions. Just behave in your usual manner. We will give you the details about the venue, date, and time for the meeting. Also request her brother to be present.'

'Whatever you say, Sir.'

'Now, relax and don't worry about anything.'

That was easier said than done. The Jat confided: 'I don't know if I can speak with her on the phone after learning all about her intentions. I am not good at acting.'

'It is easy, yaar,' joked the Bong. 'All you have to do is to think of her mesmerizing eyes.'

'It is not a matter of joke.'

'I am trying to help you.'

'I don't need your help, thank you.'

Mooli walked off in a huff.

'Poor chap, he is really troubled,' said Zora. 'You shouldn't have irritated him.'

We tried to mollify the Jat. He needed our help and support.

Hours later, Batty called Mooli to his office and provided him with details about the venue and time. We rallied around him as he entered the booth to make the

call. Batty too accompanied us to the phone booth.

It was a difficult feat, but Mooli achieved a semblance of normalcy while speaking to Nilofer. With a trembling voice, which she probably mistook as a sign of his passion, he gave her the details of their rendezvous.

‘I have something important for you,’ said Mooli, trying to control his emotions. ‘I hope you will bring Zafar with you.’

‘Don’t worry, he will be there,’ she trilled. ‘So, you finally managed the passes.’

‘Hmm,’ was all the Jat managed to mutter. Lying didn’t come easy to him.

The girl, happy that the entry passes had been obtained, sent a loud kiss over the instrument, which further traumatized the guy.

The trap laid, officials waited for the finale.

Three days later, we learnt that a joint operation had been carried out by the RAW and the army intelligence. In a couple of surprise raids, they nabbed four suspected militants. The sleuths, who had been lying in wait, had a windfall when the group gathered for a meeting at the apartment where Nilofer was living with Zafar, who was her husband. Their names were neither Zafar nor Nilofer. Maps, cassette tapes, explosives, and other incriminating evidence recovered from the apartment verified what all of us had suspected – the militants were targeting the academy on the day of the POP.

Only the six of us were privy to the entire episode. The rest of the world and the other GCs learnt the details from the newspapers, which printed concise reports.

Four ISI agents have been arrested from an apartment in Dehradun. During the search, police discovered objectionable material and tapes with inflammatory speeches. Several documents and photographs with details about military establishments in the area were also seized by the authorities. It is presumed that they were targeting the IMA during the POP. The matter is under investigation.