

**THIRTY-ONE**



Although the Bong's indiscreet letter to Zora's fiancée had resulted in a happy ending, he seemed restless and continued to behave in an odd manner. His frequent visits to the pigeonholes in the mess, where our letters were kept, made us curious.

'Have you written some more letters?' Zora asked the Bong, one evening. 'You seem to be waiting for another catastrophe.'

'What's cooking? Come on, spill the beans!' insisted Sandy.

'All in good time,' he smiled, mysteriously.

Two days later, he burst into my room with a bundle of letters. Among those letters were a few pictures of girls, close-up mugshots as well as full-figure ones.

'Where did you find these?' I asked, sure that he had raided someone's post box.

'They are for me,' he declared pompously as he arranged them on my table.

Soon, Sandy, Porky and Zora arrived and joined us in examining the booty.

One look at the photographs and Porky whistled excitedly. 'Where the hell did you find these?'

In reply to his query, the Bong took out a letter from the heap and read it aloud: 'Smart, slim, exceptionally beautiful, very gori, homely, English graduate girl, 22/157/58, father executive in public sector...'

'These sound like matrimonial advertisements,' said Zora.

'I can understand 36/24/36 but what's 22/157/58?' Porky was baffled.

'You are impossible! You don't understand the basics. These denote the age, height, and weight of the girl,' the Bong chided him.

'You idiot, where did you get these from?' asked Zora, picking up the picture of a young girl.

'I put an ad in the matrimonial column,' Maachh finally confessed.

‘WHAT?’ we were aghast. The guy’s madness knew no limits.

‘Remember the discussion we had about girls not wanting to marry army officers? Sandy was insisting that no one wanted to marry faujis, so I decided to put an ad and see for myself whether there are any responses to it. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, after all.’

‘Who is eating the pudding?’ Porky’s ears perked up at the mention of pudding.

Everyone ignored him.

‘You spent money to test Sandy’s opinion?’

‘It helps to know one’s market value,’ claimed the crazy chap. ‘I was worried that I would die a bachelor. At least now I know I won’t. Do you know how many letters have come in response to my ad?’

‘First, tell us what you wrote in the ad?’ asked Sandy.

‘Just the facts – handsome, smart, intelligent, army officer, 25/170/60, belonging to a respectable Bengali family looking for a slim, beautiful, and convent educated girl. To be honest, I picked up the words from some ads. Almost everyone wants a smart, slim, beautiful, gori, and convent educated bride. So I also asked for those attributes.’

‘A bundle of lies,’ scoffed Sandy. ‘All fictitious stuff...’

‘What lies?’ protested Maachh. ‘Am I not smart, intelligent, and handsome? Don’t I belong to a good Bengali family? What is fictitious about that?’

‘You are not yet an army officer and you are not 25,’ said Sandy. ‘In fact, you are not even intelligent.’

‘How dare you call me unintelligent?’ Maachh was getting belligerent. ‘Can you come up with such ideas? Are you capable of carrying out such plans? Now, you tell me, who is intelligent and who is not.’

‘You call these idiotic ideas intelligent? Let me tell you something; even a moron wouldn’t think of doing such stupid things.’

‘It requires guts to do them,’ the Bong retaliated. ‘Not many have the courage to give shape to their ideas.’

‘Courage? I think one has to be mentally challenged to behave this irresponsibly.’

Zora intervened before the two got into fisticuffs.

‘Alright! You are intelligent but you come up with the most ridiculous ideas, there is no doubt about that,’ he tried to smoothen Maachh’s ruffled feathers.

The chap was truly irrepressible. It was good to have the crazy guy with us; he guaranteed a few laughs, at least. We couldn’t have survived the tough life at the academy without these hilarious episodes. The guy provided enough fodder to amuse us for a lifetime.

For the next three hours, we pored over the responses and enjoyed the side-splitting comments mouthed by the Bong.

‘It is worth every rupee spent on the ad,’ declared Maachh. ‘The ad has opened up innumerable possibilities for me.’

‘What do you mean?’ threatened Zora. ‘If you are thinking of corresponding with these people, forget it. It is not ethical. It is bad enough that you have placed a fictitious ad and are enjoying the responses to it.’

‘It is not fictitious,’ insisted Maachh. ‘It is futuristic. I will be 25 and an officer some day. I am handsome, intelligent, and smart, aren’t I?’

‘OK, it is not fictitious but futuristic,’ pacified Sandy. ‘Promise me that you won’t take the matter further. Just drop it. We have had our fun. This is not a joke; it is the matter of a girl’s life and her dreams.’

‘It amounts to cheating people,’ I added.

Everyone agreed that it was a mean idea, but Maachh continued to defend himself.

After a prolonged debate, the guy promised that he wouldn’t take things further. But he put a rider to that decision.

‘I will note down the phone numbers of the girls I like, and when I want to get married, I will contact them. No one can stop me from doing that. After all, I have spent quite a lot of money and I deserve some benefit from the ad.’

‘By then, these girls would have been married and had children, too,’ laughed Sandy.

‘We will see.’ The Bong had the last word.

Relieved that he had agreed to drop the matter for the time being, we indulged his little fancy.