

**TWENTY**



Half an hour later Zora joined us, his face creased with a contented smile.

‘So how was the breakfast?’ Porky rubbed it in.

‘Do you think it was right of you to enjoy coffee and cakes without us?’ asked the Bong, who was peeved at being left out of the treat.

‘Look buddy, I had gone to say hello to the ladies and they invited me for breakfast. It would have been impolite to refuse and improper to tell them that you all should also be invited.’

‘Hmmmph.’ The contempt on Maachh’s face showed he was unconvinced. ‘Just remember, such things are not easily forgotten.’

‘I promise to get everyone invited for dinner tonight,’ pledged Zora. His promise brought a smile on the Bong’s face.

Truce called, we made our way to Landour. An ardent fan of Ruskin Bond, I wanted to visit Landour Bazaar which figures in many of his stories. As I walked around, tales from Rusty’s life came alive and I sighed with pleasure.

From there we trekked uphill to Lal Tibba and were rewarded with a magnificent view of the Garhwal peaks. The snow had not melted and the sight of the resplendent white peaks as they reflected sunlight took my breath away.

Standing there, I inhaled the crisp air. The view was worth a million dollars.

Maachh was lying on a bed of pine needles dreaming of chicks and chicken, Porky lay by his side, his eyes closed in serene thoughts. Leaning against a tree, Sandy and I stared at the beauty around us while Zora loitered around. It was the most peaceful hour we had spent for a very long time. With its foggy mountains, winding paths, and beautiful bungalows, Mussoorie was a tranquil paradise so unlike the bustling towns one encounters everywhere. The pace of life around us was leisurely and calm.

We dawdled for a while and then embarked on an uphill climb to the Sisters’ Bazaar. The walk, popularly known as the ‘Chakkar’, dotted with quaint cottages was set amidst pine, deodar, and oak forests. The sun was setting as we made our

way back to Mall Road after exploring St Paul's Church and Char Dukaan.

'You better hand me a hundred bucks,' the Bong told Zora. 'As per our bet, you were to get us invited for dinner. It has not happened, so I win.'

'The sun has not yet set. Dinner is a long way off. How about some momos? I'll pay for them.'

Zora's suggestion found favour with us and we ambled towards a stall that was selling piping hot momos.

'Please pack six momos,' ordered the Rajput after we had finished.

'Good idea,' Maachh rubbed his hands gleefully. 'We can have them enroute.'

'These are not for you.'

'So, you are planning to hog them yourself?'

'No, they are for bait.'

'I don't understand...'

'You won't,' Zora smiled. 'Have patience and things will become clear.'

'Where are we having dinner?' asked Porky. 'The momos were just starters, I need my dinner. I hope you didn't count the momos as dinner.'

'The problem with you is your impatience. If you wait for an hour, I assure you of a feast. Just trust me.'

Faithfully, we followed the leader who was carrying the momos.

Once at the hotel, Zora turned to us and instructed: 'Now, you go back to the room. I will call for you after half an hour.'

He knocked on the neighbouring door.

As instructed, we waited to be called with considerable patience. Half an hour passed, but no dice.

‘He is taking us for a ride. I am sure he is enjoying dinner with them,’ Maachh paused his pacing and wagged his finger.

‘Yes, we will die of hunger while he is feasting,’ seconded Porky. ‘Let’s not wait any longer.’

‘Let’s knock on their door,’ proposed Maachh. ‘They will be forced to invite us.’

‘We will do nothing of the sort,’ Sandy’s voice was firm. ‘We will wait for Zora’s call.’

‘You have a lot of faith in him. I don’t.’

‘It is almost an hour now,’ wailed Porky. ‘He is not going to call us.’

‘It is only 40 minutes,’ I scolded. ‘Your watch is galloping like a race horse.’

I had barely uttered the words when Zora entered the room.

‘Let’s go,’ he commanded, and we rushed.

We were greeted by the sisters who smiled winningly at us. After introducing us, Zora gave a brief description about each of his pals.

‘There is no food here,’ whispered Porky.

‘Shut up,’ retorted Sandy and smiled at Selina who was saying: ‘We never imagined there were ghosts in this hotel. Our father, Stephen Brown, owned two bungalows. The one at Dehradun is called Mayfair, and Bluebells is located in a lovely, isolated area in Landour, not too far away from Mussoorie. As children, we spent our summers at Landour and winters at Dehradun. Melina and I were educated in Mussoorie and now we teach at the girls’ convent school in Dehradun.’

At the mention of the girls’ convent school, Maachh’s ears perked up. It was the same school where the two jokers had escaped to when chased by the bees.

‘You teach at the convent school?’ he asked. ‘How nice!’

‘What happened to your bungalow at Landour?’ asked Zora, trying to steer the

conversation away from the girls' school.

‘Our brother, James inherited Bluebells and we inherited Mayfair. After his death the bungalow was sold off by his children, who have migrated to the USA. They rarely come to India and there was no point in holding on to the property.’

‘Oh, that’s sad.’

‘It is rather sad. We had been enjoying our vacations at Bluebells but now we are reduced to this.’

‘I am sure, the ghosts will not bother you again,’ promised Zora. ‘How long are you likely to be here?’

‘We will be leaving in two days. We come here to relax and relive our past. Melina and I take an occasional stroll on the Mall Road or at the Company Garden.’

For the next one hour, the Brown sisters entertained us with interesting stories from their childhood and lamented the many changes the hill station had experienced. They spoke fondly of the Anglo-Indian community in the area. When Selina learnt of my admiration for Ruskin Bond, she promised to introduce me to him, some day.

Porky was upset that there was no mention of food. ‘What is the best place for roasted chicken?’ he asked, trying to bring up the topic. ‘You must be aware of all the good restaurants in town.’

‘I think Earl’s Court is a good place for continental food,’ replied Melina.

‘Then, we must go there for dinner.’

‘Are you thinking of going out for dinner?’ asked Selina.

‘Yes, it is dinner time and I am hungry,’ said the idiot. ‘We have had a hectic day.’

Zora’s warning looks had no effect on him.

‘The bracing breeze in the hills make me very hungry,’ he continued.

‘Well, we were thinking of inviting the five of you for dinner but if you are going out...’

‘Oh no, we would be delighted to give you company,’ Maachh replied promptly.

‘We don’t want to impose on you,’ Sandy spoke like a gentleman. ‘We have already taken a lot of your time.’

‘It is no imposition,’ protested the sisters. ‘After the concern and help offered by you, I think we owe you a dinner. Besides, we enjoy the company of youngsters. Your friend, Zora, has been entertaining us with interesting anecdotes about IMA.’

‘Thank you,’ said Zora. ‘I am flattered.’

‘I know you have a very hectic training but we would like you to come to our bungalow in Dehradun whenever you have the time,’ invited Selina. ‘You can join us for the Easter and Christmas celebrations. Melina is a very good cook and I am told that my skills in baking are considerable.’

‘We will manage to make time for a visit,’ promised Maachh, delighted at the thought of enjoying a good festive spread. ‘It will be nice to spend some time at Mayfair. I am sure it is a beautiful bungalow.’

‘Yes, it is one of those colonial structures that the British excelled in making. We have a huge orchard with dozens of mango and lychee trees. In fact, you should come during the lychee season. The flavour and taste of lychee plucked off the trees is absolutely impossible to find in the ones sold in the market.’

Now this had a sobering effect on Maachh and Porky, who winced at the memory of the bee stings.

Restless at the delay in ordering dinner, Porky shifted uncomfortably on his seat and relayed silent missives to Zora. Half an hour later, the sisters brought out a fresh bottle of whisky and ordered a lavish meal after consulting Maachh, who seemed to leave no stone unturned. Chicken tikkas, malai prawn, mutton biryani, and ice cream – he ordered everything he could think of.

It was almost midnight when we sauntered back to our room, our bellies bulging with food.

‘The Mussoorie trip has been a great success,’ Maachh commented before sinking into deep sleep aided by several pegs of premium whisky.

The next morning, we departed with great reluctance but not before the two jokers had enjoyed a cup of coffee and cakes with the sisters and extracted an invitation for the Easter celebrations at Mayfair.