

**TWENTY-THREE**



We were almost at the end of our first term. The exhausting regimen could not rob us of joie de vivre. We were young and optimistic, and with the end of term fast approaching, life was beautiful!

Although a few of the cadets had turned serious, some like Maachh and Porky continued to wage their war against authority. One word which could not be mentioned in the academy was 'relegation'. It made even the stoutest heart tremble like a dry leaf on a stormy day. Even Maachh and Porky were tinged with sobriety when the fearful word was whispered.

Although there were hundreds of cadets in a single course, the ones who shared the same Company were closest to each other, and those that resided in the same barracks were nothing less than a family. But proximity can have its own problems; knowing the peculiarity of each cadet was just one of them.

There was not a cadet in the course who did not know about Sammy – Samir Samant – and his idiosyncrasies. That he had been exhibiting clear signs of madness all through the lovely months of October and November had not escaped anyone's notice. For some inexplicable reason, most cadets went nutty during these months. Maybe it had something to do with the holiday season and the pining of heart. Anyway, oddball Sammy showed severe signs of a delusional tendency.

The chap was famous at the academy for his theatrical skills. Any show put up by the cadets starred him in the prime role. The showers of compliments from instructors and cadets for his excellent performances on stage had gone straight to his head, and Sammy began to think he was cut out to be a film star.

'I am in the wrong profession,' he complained to anyone who was foolish enough to listen to him. 'I belong in Bollywood. Had it not been for my father, I would never have joined the academy.'

No one encouraged his ideas, but that didn't stop him from dreaming. 'One of these days, I am going to run away to Mumbai and join Bollywood.'

Sammy was not the only one who blamed his father for the choice of a wrong profession. Maachh topped the list of those who wished to be elsewhere.

And if there was a bigger loony than Maachh, it was this chap. His fertile imagination leap-frogged much beyond the realities of his life.

Although he was one of the most handsome guys on campus, he was definitely not star material. Generous application of neem paste and malai had not altered his swarthy complexion – a fact that frustrated him to no end.

‘All this running around in the sun has tanned me beyond repair,’ Sammy rued.

Nothing we said could convince him that acting was not the vocation for him. No sir, it was not his swarthy complexion that we thought would turn to be a downer, nor the lack of six pack abs. The reason we thought he wouldn’t ever become a star was because he would never be able to carry out bare-bodied stunts and springy dance moves like Dharmendra. This was a major drawback in Bollywood, everyone admitted, where prancing and singing with effervescent actresses was what set the cash registers ringing. The poor sod had a blanket-like covering of thick hair on his back. Now, this could be counted both as a blessing as well as a curse. The blanket of hair came in handy during the winter outdoor marches, when the temperatures plummeted. The thick, woolly blanket provided him with much-desired warmth, much to the envy of other cadets. But for a guy hoping to land a break in movies, it was a curse.

Sammy’s supporters, though few in number, opined that the shaving brush and blade could be put to good use in getting rid of the problem. The fact remained that it was a stumbling block in his journey to stardom. For the present though, the convenient spread of hair had earned him a fitting moniker – Blanket.

The right side of his brain was crammed with dossiers about the forthcoming movies or the latest gossip circulating in Bollywood circles, while the left side dealt with the day-to-day requirements of the academy. If only he could cram his lessons as well as he could memorize the dialogues from the latest movie, he would surely have bagged the Sword of Honour at the academy.

It was a Sunday morning. We spotted the guy toggled up in his best attire, reeking of liberally-applied aftershave. His hair sleek and gelled, the blanket on his back brushed clean. Armed with an out pass, the wannabe movie star hummed happily as he made his way out of the barrack.

‘Don’t try any tricks tonight,’ we warned him. ‘The Peacock is on the prowl. There are rumours of surprise checks.’

‘Rumours are rumours, not to be believed. Besides, I am on a rendezvous that is worth all the risks,’ he replied lightly, and disappeared after winking at us mysteriously.

There must be a movie shooting somewhere in the city, we deduced.

Come afternoon and there was no trace of Sammy. Evening brought no news of him either. Blanket’s friends surmised that he had finally made the promised escape to the big, bad world of movies. It had long been expected that someday our pal would finally find the courage to pull the absconding act, which just went on to prove that ambitious fathers should not push recalcitrant sons towards honourable goals. The number of sons who desired to don other caps than the beret was growing by the day. Amongst them was Maachh, who we expected to abscond any day.

I had barely hit the sack when there was urgent knocking at my door. I found Porky standing outside in his crumpled nightclothes, his face creased with anxiety.

‘Buddy, there is a problem,’ he whispered. ‘Maachh has not yet returned to his room.’

‘But the two of you went out together,’ I said.

‘We went out together in the afternoon, hung around the mall and went for dinner at the new Chinese restaurant that has come up near Ghanta Ghar. Although the food is good, the prices are rather steep. I don’t think I will go there again. You know how difficult it is to make ends meet...’

‘Come to the point, idiot! We are not here to discuss restaurants and their effect on your purse. Where did Maachh go?’

It couldn’t happen, I was thinking. Two guys absconding on the same day would be too much for the academy to swallow.

‘Don’t get impatient. I am coming to that. We had some fish and rice at the restaurant, followed by...’

‘There you go again, I didn’t ask for the menu! What happened to him?’

It was difficult enough carrying sane conversation with the guy on normal days, but when he got worried, it became almost impossible.

‘That is what I am telling you. I had some gol gappas at a food stall before dinner but it didn’t agree with my stomach. By the time I finished dinner, my stomach had bloated to twice its size, and had begun growling menacingly. It was a discomfiting affair, I tell you. The gas...’

‘Nothing new in that,’ I commented sarcastically.

‘Let me finish,’ he rebuked scathingly. ‘I returned to the academy, went straight to the MI Room, got myself some medicine, and went to sleep. I got up a few minutes ago and went to check on Maachh. Guess what, the bloke hasn’t got back. He is absconding.’

‘Did he say where he was going?’

‘Who?’

‘Maachh, you idiot!’ I almost screamed.

‘I was in too much discomfort, tummy bloated and all that, so I couldn’t wait to hear his plan in detail, but I remember him telling me that he would hang around for a while and get back later.’

We were back to square one.

‘Do you think he has run away?’ I whispered.

‘Oh no!’ Blood drained from the fellow’s face. Porky couldn’t imagine life without Maachh in the academy. If the Fish escaped, Porky would have to escape too.

‘Don’t worry,’ alarmed at the sudden pallor on his face, I reassured him. ‘Go to bed. He will return when he is tired of haunting the lonely streets of the city.’

Porky went back to his room shaking his head in misery. Sighing with relief, I went back to my bed.

Ten minutes later, he was back, knocking on my door.

‘What is it now?’

‘I just remembered. Maachh was following a girl. He has been following her for the past two Sundays, says he has fallen in love with her.’

‘That must be it,’ I laughed. ‘He has run away with the girl.’

‘He couldn’t have run away,’ insisted Porky.

‘And why do you think so?’

‘Because his favourite aftershave is still here. He won’t leave without that,’ Porky said, hopefully.

‘How little you know of love, my pal. A guy in love can leave everything behind. Especially a guy like Maachh who thinks it is okay to stalk girls.’

‘So you think he has legged it?’

I couldn’t resist the temptation to tease Porky.

‘Yes buddy. I think he’s gone. He’s done the flucht as the Germans say, or scampo if you prefer Italian.’

As Porky walked back to his room, his drooping shoulders gave away his despair. Feeling a bit guilty about upsetting the guy, I went to bed. Sleep, however, remained far from me as disturbing thoughts ran through my mind. Counting sheep, I burrowed myself deeper into the bed and had just begun giving flight to my imagination when what seemed like thunder woke me up. It was turning out to be a night of distressing events.

Someone was hammering my door down. Peeping cautiously from the window, I noticed Porky. He was flapping his arms uncontrollably, rather like windmills gone haywire.

‘The Peacock has got them,’ he wailed.