

**THIRTY**



The next week, Maachh remained mysteriously preoccupied. Flashing secretive smiles from time to time, he would disappear for hours without any explanation.

What we didn't know was that the idiot had undertaken two projects without telling anyone. The day after our discussion about Zora's engagement, he decided to help the Rajput wriggle out of his engagement. Our warning to lay off the matter had had no effect on him.

Although Maachh had suggested that the best way to emerge from the mess was to tarnish Zora's reputation, no one had taken kindly to the idea. That did nothing to deter the fellow from carrying out his plan.

One evening, while everyone was busy having a bash in Porky's room, Maachh disappeared for a while. It was a Saturday and we were in a celebratory mood. The previous Sunday, we had smuggled in a few bottles of beer and secreted them in Porky's box. We bought sausages, hamburgers, samosas, and sandwiches from the cafeteria to go with the beer. Sandy brought out a bottle of rum that he had managed to smuggle into his room. We were in high spirits with liquor and jokes aplenty. No one noticed Maachh sneaking away from the party.

Stealthily, he made his way to Zora's room and began searching for clues. Among the papers on his desk, the Bong came across an envelope. Excited, the Bong opened it and found the photograph of Zora's fiancée. Renuka's parents had sent the photo to Zora's parents and they had forwarded it to their son. The joker examined the picture. Staring at him was the pleasant face of a stout girl dressed in a traditional Rajput lehenga, choli and dupatta. The long-lashed eyes, the hesitant smile and the demure look on the girl's face touched the Bong's heart.

She is beautiful, he thought, studying the picture. Zora is a fool! Imagine not wanting to marry a girl as pretty as her. Sighing, he put the picture back into the envelope and replaced it amongst Zora's papers.

It was while he was putting back the picture that he noticed her address written in neat handwriting on the reverse side of the envelope. Pleased with the discovery, Maachh jotted down Renuka's address on a piece of paper and made his way back to the party.

Thereafter, he began fooling around in high spirits.

‘The fellow is up to some mischief,’ I remember thinking. I knew him like the back of my hand.

That night, the Bong wrote a letter to Renuka. Carefully, he listed out the reasons why she should not think of getting married to Zora. ‘He is an alcoholic and has many girlfriends at Dehradun,’ he wrote. ‘Under the circumstances, as a well wisher, I think you should call off the wedding.’

Although he knew the girl would be devastated upon learning that her fiancé was a scoundrel, the Bong felt obliged to help his friend. He considered it his duty to protect his buddy from an unwanted alliance.

He chose his words carefully and painted a grim picture of the boy’s character. Although it was a fairly longish letter, the gist was that Zora was given to drinking heavily, getting into debts and fisticuffs. He was also a womanizer. He signed it as a well-wisher. Satisfied that the letter was sure to break the girl’s heart as well as the engagement, the Bong went to bed.

A fortnight passed. Maachh’s restlessness grew as there seemed to be no reaction to his letter. Renuka and her family seemed to have ignored it completely.

It was a Sunday morning and we were preparing to go out on the town. Armed with the liberty pass, bathed and dressed, we were about to leave the academy when we spotted Zora leading his parents to the cafeteria.

The guy looked surprised at the sudden appearance of his parents. His father looked furious as they marched towards the cafe.

Only Maachh seemed delighted at the sight. He rubbed his hands gleefully and exclaimed – ‘At last! I had given up all hopes of seeing my plan succeed.’

His words made no sense to us.

‘What the hell are you babbling about?’ asked Sandy. ‘Do you know those people?’

‘I was expecting fireworks but I didn’t imagine they would land up here.’

‘Is it one of your funny ideas?’ Sandy stared suspiciously at the Bong.

‘To tell you the truth, I have been waiting for this,’ confessed Maachh proudly as we walked towards the cafe to discover the developments. We were baffled by his words.

‘Out with it or I’ll punch your brains out.’

‘When I suggested that we post an anonymous letter to Renuka’s parents, none of you agreed, so I wrote a letter on my own and posted it. I was sure of the outcome. I can guarantee that Zora is no longer engaged to the girl.’

‘You idiot,’ I exclaimed, ‘when will you learn to keep your hands off other people’s affairs? Zora doesn’t need your help to deal with the issue.’

Our criticism made Maachh looked more and more crestfallen as we neared the cafe. His face crumpled pathetically and he said: ‘I was just trying to help.’

We spotted them as soon as we entered the cafe. Zora’s father was frothing at the mouth while his mother was hissing at her son. Clearly, they were giving him a piece of their mind. Zora looked shocked. He had no idea why his parents had suddenly arrived at the academy nor did he know the reason for their anger. Their words were making no sense to him.

‘Since when have you taken to drinking?’ demanded his mother. ‘A drunkard and a womanizer; I must have sinned in my previous birth to be saddled with such a son.’

She began sobbing softly into her handkerchief.

‘It’s entirely your fault. You’ve given him too much liberty,’ his father scolded her. ‘I always told you to be strict with him but you wouldn’t listen. You are to blame for everything.’

Sitting at the adjacent table, we heard them ticking off our pal. Poor Zora, he didn’t know what hit him. As far as he knew, he had done no wrong, yet his mother was talking about drinking and womanizing. They were not ready to listen to any argument or explanation.

We glared at Maachh who had begun wriggling uncomfortably in his seat.

‘Go up to them and confess,’ hissed Sandy. ‘It is all your fault and you will have to set things right.’

‘You had no right to land Zora in trouble,’ I rebuked.

For once, even Porky did not take Maachh’s side.

‘Yes, Maachh, I think you should tell them the truth,’ he implored. ‘You have made his parents very unhappy.’

After squirming for a while, Maachh stood up: ‘Maybe, it was a mistake to have written that letter. I had not imagined it would create such a mess. I will apologise to them.’

To his credit, Maachh was a warm-hearted guy who wanted to do the right thing for his pal. Touched by Zora’s distress, he had made an earnest effort to solve the problem. His intentions had been honourable; all of us appreciated that.

We cheered as the Bong gathered up courage and walked towards Zora’s table. By now, Zora had guessed the identity of the mischief maker. He glowered at Maachh.

‘Good morning, Ma’am,’ the Bong began, bowing suavely.

We had to hand it to him. When the occasion demanded, the guy could behave like a perfect gentleman.

‘Good morning, Sir,’ he addressed Zora’s father. ‘I am Manoj Mitra, Zora’s course mate. I’m terribly sorry to barge into your discussion, but I couldn’t help overhearing the conversation between you and Zora. The misunderstandings must be cleared immediately.’

He drew a deep breath and paused.

‘Mind your own business,’ hissed Zora, but Maachh was determined to set things right.

‘I can vouch for your son’s excellent character and all our course mates will do the same. It is my fault that things have come to this stage.’

Zora's parents looked surprised.

'I don't understand...' began the father.

'Let me explain, sir,' said Maachh. 'When we returned after the break, Zora was very upset. He told us about his engagement and his reluctance to marry so early in life.'

He paused for breath. Zora's parents looked shocked.

'I couldn't bear to see him going around with a long face, so I decided to do something about it. The letter was a part of my plan to help him out of this.'

Expressions of anger, disbelief, and exasperation crossed their faces as Maachh continued speaking.

'I am sorry,' ended Maachh. 'It was foolish of me to have done what I did. I had no intentions of harming anyone or creating misunderstandings in the family. In fact, I didn't imagine that the letter would disturb you so much. It is my fault and I am willing to accept any punishment for it.'

His words, spoken from the heart, touched Zora's parents.

Zora's father was the first one to react. He patted the Bong on his shoulders and said: 'Son, I may have done the same thing for a friend. We should have spoken to Zora before rushing here.'

They accepted the fact that their trip was totally unnecessary.

'We should have had more faith in our son,' agreed Zora's mother.

'Am I forgiven?' Maachh pushed his luck.

'Of course, you are!' smiled Zora's mother, patting his hand. 'We are happy that our son has such loyal friends.'

She then turned to her son and rebuked him: 'If you were so desperate to get out of the alliance, you should have confided in us.'

'I did,' Zora protested. 'But you were not willing to listen. I don't want to get

married so early in life. Give me time to sort out my life. I have hopes and dreams that I need to see through before I settle down.'

'Don't worry, we'll find a way out of this,' assured his dad.

'Thank you, Sir,' Maachh seemed relieved with the outcome of the encounter.

'...And son,' Zora's father addressed Maachh, 'the next time you decide to shoot off such letters, maybe you should consult your friends. There must be some sane chaps in your gang.'

The Bong nodded his head sheepishly. He was happy to get away with a minor reprimand, and happier that Zora would soon be free.

After his parents left, the Rajput confronted Maachh.

'Idiot, when will you learn to stop meddling in my affairs? Anyway, I am off the hook and that is what matters, I guess. I should be thanking you for getting me out.'

'Thanks to the buffoon, your problems are solved,' granted Sandy.

'Actually, Renuka is quite a good-looking girl, you could have married her,' the Bong addressed Zora. 'In fact, I am feeling bad for her.'

'How do you know she is good-looking?'

'I saw her picture,' confessed Maachh.

'You scoundrel. You had the cheek to go through my belongings?'

'Sorry pal, I had to pry into your papers and found the envelope with her picture in it. I still maintain that she is a very pretty girl.'

'You have my permission to try your luck with her,' laughed the Rajput.

'Maybe I will...' Maachh beamed cheerfully. 'Some day, I will write her a letter and apologize for everything.'