

## **EIGHTEEN**



And so, with a well-planned budget and Maachh on a tight leash, the five of us set out on our journey.

‘We could hike for some distance, and then take a lift from one of the trucks. It would save us some money,’ suggested Maachh.

We promptly agreed and began marching towards the highway.

I brought out my mouth organ and began playing music. And so, singing and laughing, we made our way to the outskirts of Dehradun with several photo stops along the way. Along with the money, Sandy had borrowed a camera from Pinky bhabi and he put it to good use, taking photographs of the group as well as the interesting sights.

Once we reached the highway, we flagged a truck and took a lift to Mussoorie.

The journey from Dehradun up to the end of Mall Road in a truck cost us nothing when the genial driver learnt that we were GCs from the IMA. We were almost halfway to our destination when the truck driver halted for a cup of tea. Seated as we were on sacks that seemed to contain rocks and stones, we needed the cuppa as much as he did. The packet of banana chips, gifted by Noble, was empty within seconds.

Even as we sipped our steaming brew, a bus arrived and its passengers spilled into the dhaba. A big group of young girls alighted, chattering like magpies. Maachh might have been on a tight leash, but his eyes weren’t. They almost popped out of their sockets at the sight of the pretty ladies.

‘I think they are from the convent at Dehradun,’ he whispered. ‘Let’s go and say hello to them.’

‘Do you think they are going to Mussoorie?’ Porky asked, his eyes widening with excitement.

‘Where else would they be going, idiot? This road leads to Mussoorie.’

The two of them started to rise from their seats, but one look from Sandy and they sat down again.

‘You are not going anywhere,’ said Zora. ‘I’ll tie you up if I have to.’

Had not his words restrained the two chaps, they would have landed us in fresh trouble.

‘The nuns look like dragons,’ said Porky, eyeing the nuns who were accompanying the girls. ‘It will be wiser not to strike up a conversation with them.’

‘You are right, it’s not worth the trouble,’ Maachh tried to sound uninterested.

Memories of the tragic telephonic encounter with the warden of the girls’ hostel reared its ugly head and sanity prevailed.

Thankfully, the driver beckoned and we clambered into the back of the truck with as much dignity as we could muster, whilst the girls stared and laughed at us.

‘Idiots!’ was all Maachh could mutter as he found them clutching their bellies with laughter at the sight of him propped on a sack. To be fair to the girls, he presented a comic sight.

‘Let’s find a hotel first,’ suggested the ever-practical Zora as soon as we reached Mussoorie. ‘Then, we can dump our backpacks and go gallivanting.’

His suggestion found favour with all of us except Maachh, who was of the opinion that tanking up on food was necessary before we began our search for hotel rooms.

‘I am hungry,’ he revolted. ‘I can’t walk another step.’

‘All in good time,’ consoled Sandy, producing an apple from the voluminous pocket of his trousers. ‘In the meantime, here’s an apple to keep you going.’

Maachh was not the only one whose innards were raising flags of discontent. In a bid to maximise our vacation, we had started very early in the morning and the hurried breakfast had long been digested. Valiantly, we soldiered on without protesting.

The hill station was shrugging off its winter lassitude. Not yet invaded by

tourists, the place was shrouded in stillness. The aura of quiet elegance had not vanished, yet. A few honeymooners, some families, and groups of college students strolled down the Mall Road.

We wandered around town for about an hour, inspecting hotel rooms and checking the tariffs. Either the rooms were dirty and inadequate or the rates were too high for our wallets.

In the end, exhausted after endless haggling, we signed into Hotel Mountain View where Zora had managed a good off-season discount. We got two rooms with an extra bed in the larger one. It was a reasonably good hotel located in a peaceful area. Our rooms were clean and spacious and the view from the windows took our breath away. We stepped into the large balcony and took in the scenery. The snow covered peaks were clearly visible through the tall deodar trees. The refreshing, cool breeze was an added advantage.

‘It will be a treat to sit in the balcony and enjoy a peg of whisky along with chicken tikkas,’ opined Maachh, who was obsessed with food.

The mention of food stoked our hunger and a few minutes later, we embarked in search of an affordable eatery. The Bong stood and sniffed like a hound as we crossed each restaurant.

‘I can smell tandoori chicken,’ he remarked, his nose twitching excitedly. ‘Let’s go in here, I am famished. We don’t have to waste time in consulting the menu; I will have chicken tikkas for starters, biryani for main course, and kulfi for dessert. I am sure they have these dishes on their menu.’

‘A meal here will cost us more than three meals elsewhere,’ said Sandy, steering the Bong away from the restaurant. ‘You will have to skip dinner as well as breakfast if you eat there.’

‘Heartless goon,’ muttered the sullen Maachh. ‘Won’t let a chap eat.’

‘Patience, dear fellow,’ consoled Sandy. ‘A friend of mine who was here a couple of months ago mentioned a nice and affordable Tibetan eatery. You can eat to your heart’s content once we reach there.’

Ten minutes later, we were seated at the modest Tibetan restaurant adorned with framed photographs of a smiling Dalai Lama. The fresh mountain air had

whipped up our appetite and our bellies were rumbling with hunger. Maachh's clamour for mutton biryani was quickly set aside as Sandy took charge of our spending. Instead, we enjoyed steaming bowls of nourishing soup, thukpa, and momos.

Once his body was fuelled, Maachh's attention turned to girls again.

'I say, let's go to the Company Garden. I have heard it is a very beautiful and romantic place. There are sure to be some nice girls loitering around the garden and who knows what may happen.'

'Yes, let's go to the garden,' Porky piped up, excitedly. It was obvious that the two jokers were bent upon creating mischief.

'Only if you promise not to get us beaten up,' joked Zora.

The Company Garden turned out to be a damp squib. Expectations of colourful blooms dancing in the breeze and birds warbling a happy song vanished as we went around. Perhaps we had come during the wrong season, I couldn't help but feel disappointed. With only drooping flowers and neglect around us, we settled down on a bench to enjoy the cool breeze and pose for pictures.

'There are not many girls around here,' complained Porky. 'You said it was a romantic place and there were sure to be many girls.'

'Not many girls venture out in sunlight,' Maachh told him. 'They are worried about their complexion, you see.'

'In that case, we should have come here after sunset.'

'You won't find them roaming around after sunset, you silly fellow,' rebuked the Bong.

Disappointment was writ large on the faces of the two jokers, although Maachh was trying to put up a brave front. 'Learn to enjoy the beauties of nature,' he advised.

'Let us move to where the action is,' said Zora. 'I suggest we walk down the Mall Road. We can hang around there till sunset and then have our dinner.'

‘It’s been an exhausting day. Let’s take it easy today. Tomorrow we can venture out sightseeing,’ I suggested.

‘A cup of coffee would be nice,’ said Porky, after we had walked from one end of the Mall Road to the other. ‘I want to rest my feet.’

For once, everyone agreed. We had walked a lot and everyone felt the need to rest for a while. The sun was about to set and the temperatures were dropping.

We entered a café and occupied a corner table. ‘A cup of coffee costs as much as our meal at the Tibetan joint,’ whistled Zora, scanning the menu.

The waiter was hovering around for our order. We looked undecided. Splurging on coffee at the cafe was a luxury we could not afford.

‘Give us some time,’ Zora told the waiter. ‘Let’s walk out of this place,’ he whispered as soon as the liveried guy was out of earshot. ‘We can find a cheaper place.’

We were reluctant to go searching for cheaper cup of coffee and were scanning the menu for affordable fare.

‘Don’t look now, but Peacock is here,’ whispered Sandy. ‘He is sitting at the other corner with a serious-looking female.’

‘Where?’ Despite his warning, we swivelled on our seats. There he was, smiling and whispering sweet nothings into the ears of a woman. The two were lost to the world while their coffee lay forgotten.

‘So, that is your secret, Captain Vikram Sharma,’ muttered Maachh, rubbing his hands gleefully.

‘Why, that is Renu Chopra,’ exclaimed Zora. ‘She is from Jaipur. Her father is a Brigadier and a family friend.’

Excited at the sight, he continued: ‘She is a doctor and is working at a Dehradun hospital. Can’t believe she is romancing the Peacock, she’s is a studious and no-nonsense girl.’

‘Tell us about her,’ requested Porky.

*‘Arre, there is not much to tell. A serious girl, Renu never looked beyond her books. I can hardly believe my eyes. Wonder what the Paltu sees in her.’*

‘He looks totally smitten.’

‘Well, his mother will be terribly disappointed with his lady love. She is neither a showstopper nor a docile doormat.’

‘Vikram Sharma, you will have a tough time convincing your mother,’ smirked Sandy. ‘Wait till I tell Pinkky bhabi about this.’

‘I don’t blame him,’ I said. ‘He will be an old man if he allows his mother to look for a bride for him. He has done a wise thing by finding someone.’

‘True. No wonder, they have come all the way to romance in Mussoorie.’

‘Let’s follow them,’ said Maachh, all keyed up. At that moment, the waiter made his appearance yet again.

*‘Arre, we told you to give us some time to decide,’ Porky scolded him. ‘Now get us some water first.’*

Shooing away the waiter, we concentrated on the young couple once again. This was fodder for the grapevine. We gossiped like old women.

*‘Bacchhoo, now we know your secret,’ Maachh grinned. ‘All I have to do is to mention the magic words “Mussoorie” and “Renu” whenever I get caught by him.’*

‘... and he will let us go,’ tittered Porky. ‘What a discovery!’

It was not possible to sit much longer at the cafe without placing an order. The waiter, after placing glasses of water, had begun hovering around us. Not even stern looks from Porky could drive away the persistent fellow, who resorted to returning Porky’s looks with equal firmness. The Peacock, in the meantime, had placed his arms carelessly around Renu’s shoulders and things were warming up. We were reluctant to leave the cafe, involved as we were in noting the happenings at our instructor’s table.

‘Let’s order three cups of tea and split them. Tea is cheaper than the coffee,’



decided Zora.

The waiter threw us a disgusted look as we placed our order. 'The cost of tea is worth watching this romance. Do you think he is going to kiss her?' Maachh was getting thrilled with the idea.

'This is India, not Hollywood. Couples don't go around kissing each other in public. Put a brake on your imagination,' rebuked Zora.

'I am sure they are staying in a hotel, we must follow them.'

'What will you gain by following them?'

'We will know the name of the hotel.'

'So? How does that help you?'

'Besides, they may be driving back to Dehradun. It is not too late to do that.'

At that very moment, the two of them got up to leave. The waiter had not yet brought in our tea, and we decided to give him the slip. One by one, we sauntered out of the cafe. Once we had walked out, we sped along the road and entered a souvenir shop on the opposite side.

As expected, the waiter raced out within three minutes and stood there, his eyes scanning the road. We had a good laugh at the sight of his bewildered face. His customers had vanished without a trace.

'That was a very wicked thing to do,' I sighed. 'It was absolutely disgraceful and an absolutely un-gentlemanly deed.'

'Go and pay him for the tea, if you are feeling so bad for the waiter.'

'Poor guy, he will have some explaining to do.'

'I don't think so. They will heat up the tea and serve it to some other customer.'

Stepping out of the shop when the coast was clear, we were rewarded by the sight of Peacock's shining Premier Padmini disappearing round the bend of the road that led to Dehradun. With Renu by his side, the instructor was speeding

away happily.

‘Like I told you, they are not staying in Mussoorie,’ said Sandy, his eyes twinkling as he imagined Pinky bhabhi’s reactions when he told her about Peacock and his romance.