

THIRTY-TWO



It was a season of surprises, adventure and heartbreaks. The first surprise of the season was the news of Kiki's engagement to an NRI.

As usual, Maachh and Porky were the ones to break the news at the academy and a few hearts along with it. The duo met Pinkky bhabi at a popular hole-in-the-wall gol gappa joint in town. Their eyes watering with the pungent stuff, they were busy popping the fiery balls of deliciousness when she arrived. The three of them exchanged pleasantries while Pinkky bhabi ordered some gol gappas.

'Let me give you a treat,' offered the lady of generous proportions. Undeniably, her generosity matched the girth. 'Bhaiyya, give them whatever they want,' she instructed the vendor as she popped a crunchy ball in her mouth and sighed with pleasure.

The two jokers, elated at her offer, got busy loading themselves with all that the shop had to offer. It was a while before conversation began.

'Thank you, Bhabi, for feeding two hungry guys,' said the Bong, dramatic to the hilt.

'I have good news to share with you two,' she said.

'Sir has been promoted!' guessed Porky.

'You have bought a house.'

'You have bought a new car.'

The lady was amused at the flight of their imagination.

'There is to be an addition to the family,' Maachh hazarded.

'Yes, there is to be an addition to the family,' she laughed.

'I knew it,' exclaimed the Fish excitedly. 'Congratulations! We will all become chachas?'

Pink with embarrassment, Pinkky bhabi was quick to dismiss his idea. 'No, no, it

is an addition to the family but not in the way you imagine. Kiki is engaged to be married,' the lady trilled happily, unaware of the devastating effect her words had on the two cadets. 'I am so happy. Akshay is an architect with great career prospects. Imagine living in New Zealand! It is such a lovely place. I envy Kiki. She is very lucky.'

She gushed enthusiastically as the two swallowed their disappointment along with the gol gappas. Maachh swallowed a dahi wada the wrong way and burst into a series of coughs. Spluttering and gasping, they stared at her.

'When and how did this happen?' Maachh spoke after his coughing bout had subsided.

Popping a whole gol gappa gracefully into her cavernous mouth, Pinkky bhabi slurped a whole cupful of water before replying: 'Arre, no one can predict how and when cupid will strike. They met at cousin Nimmo's wedding at Patiala. None of us could imagine that Puppy – arre Akshay,' she clarified, 'would pop the question by the end of the fourth day. He declared that he had fallen in love at the first sight. I am not surprised. Kiki is a smart and beautiful girl. Anyone can fall in love with her.'

Maachh nodded enthusiastically although his heart had splintered all over his gol gappas. Not that Pinkky bhabi noticed anything amiss as she continued – 'She will be much better off marrying Puppy. Look at me; moving from place to place every few years. I had been trying to get her married to an army officer, but I am happy I was not successful. This is a much better proposal.'

Porky couldn't resist taking a dig – 'Kiki couldn't have fallen in love with Puppy in just six days.'

'Arre, love-shove is nothing. All that matters is that a girl finds a guy who can give her a comfortable life. These days if you have money, you can have everything.' She ended emphatically. *'Love can also happen.'*

The two of them nodded dutifully though they didn't agree with her views. They were disappointed by the fact that both Pinkky bhabi and Kiki preferred money over love. Materialism knew no bounds, they sighed.

'Besides, she will get the opportunity of getting away from this filthy and corrupt country. If I were intelligent, I would also have hooked an NRI,' she

sighed. 'Not that I am unhappy with my Mandy,' she added quickly, lest they get the wrong idea.

Maachh's jaws set in a hard line at the mention of filth and corruption. A patriot to the core, he sprang to the defense of his nation.

'I beg to differ,' he began, clearing his throat. Porky recognized it as the preface to a lecture on patriotism and he was right.

'It's not all roses in other countries. They also have their problems,' Maachh declared with vehemence. 'I don't think it is right to desert one's country or to condemn it as filthy and corrupt.'

'Arre bhai, who is deserting the country? I am married to an army officer, am I not?' Pinky bhabi was indignant. 'We are patriots, no doubt about that but fact is fact. Not speaking about the truth does not change it.'

Maachh was not appeased by her words. Mustering as much dignity as a session of hogging gol gappas would allow, he bid good day to the lady and walked away.

Pinky bhabi stopped in the act of popping yet another gol gappa into her mouth and stared at his retreating back. 'Kya hua ise?' she wondered perplexed at the sudden turn of events.

'He has these attacks,' explained Porky, chuckling. 'Thank you for the treat. Please convey our good wishes to Kiki.'

As they walked away, he thumped Maachh and tittered: 'You should have seen her face! Her eyes were as large as the gol gappas in her hand.'

On the way back to the academy, the two broken-hearted braves dissected the tragic event and consoled themselves with various excuses.

'With a name like Puppy, that guy can be no better than a mongrel,' opined Maachh. 'Imagine Kiki preferring the chap over us. Her taste in men is appalling.'

'Maybe we are better off without the likes of Goldie, Lovely, Puppy, Kiki, and Happy in our life,' agreed Porky. 'All show and sham, no substance. Give me a

nice and humble girl any day.'

'Yeah, one who will fit in with the kith and the kin. Someone who will gladden the cockles of the mater's heart, take charge of the family fortunes, and be pals with the bro and sis.'

'That is what matters at the end of the day, when the looks have gone and the fires doused... better to be with someone who will not criticize the country and run off with an NRI in search of greener pastures. '

'Right you are mate,' the Bong grew philosophical. 'All that glitters is...'

'... not gold,' Porky ended the phrase. For once, he was not lost for words.

The news of Kiki's engagement spread fast through the academy as soon as the gallivanting gadflies returned with the news. They added as much masala to the gossip as they could. The sound of splintering hearts filled the corridors of our barracks as the news made its rounds.

Barely had the splinters been swept off the corridors when we were told to prepare ourselves for the toughest of exercises.