

ONE

2010

Christ Church School, Mussoorie

Class XII, Christ Church Boys School, Mussoorie, was up in arms, unwilling to engage with the prescribed book.

“Why do we have to read such a boring book for the boards?” The class of adrenalin-charged, teenage boarding-school boys was a daily challenge that Piali, twenty-five, beautiful and smart, tackled with intelligence and charm.

“Like it or hate it, we have to not only read it, but also *study* it, because it is prescribed for us.” She paused. “I know how you feel, guys.” She moved closer to their benches, her voice dropped conspiratorially. “Actually, you know, as a student, I was not a great fan of this classic either; it was only later, as a grown up, that I realized what an excellent piece of work this was.”

The switch from ‘boys’ to ‘guys,’ the sharing of a personal secret, the shared feeling of initial dislike for the book brought about an immediate lowering of defenses and helped create the bonding no other teacher could establish with the boys. Besides, it was Friday, and it elevated the mundane weekday to the blissful promise of a weekend.

It was also the year of Christ Church’s centenary celebrations that had been planned on a grand scale; teachers had been told to condense the courses and the students were thrilled at the announcement. There was a general *joie de vivre* that set the year apart from other academic years.

“Ma’am why is Estella so cold-hearted? How can Pip tolerate her? Look at how she treats him.”

Dickens’ masterpiece found no appreciation among the boys and it was left to Piali to arouse interest in the text. In an old institution like Christ Church where most of the staff was above fifty, Piali, half their age, enthusiastic, dedicated, full of new ideas, was a whiff of fresh air; her chiseled Indian features, flawless complexion and limpid eyes only added to her appeal.

“Agreed, but remember, Estella has been brought up to be cold. Miss Havisham, who was betrayed once, is now bringing up a pretty young lady to break hearts.”

“But just because your guardian is a psycho, do you have to become like that?”

“Isn’t love a biological thing? Do you really have to learn it, ma’am?”

Their tones were earnest, beseeching.

“Makes perfect sense, what you say, but as we read further, the story will unravel. Why do the characters behave as they do? Let’s see. Or guys, do you want me reveal the suspense before we reach the end?”

Piali knew how to keep the class on its toes. No matter how ‘boring’ the book, nobody wanted to know how it ended before they actually got there.

* * *

The elite institution boasted of boys from influential backgrounds and from neighboring countries; the quality of education was a benchmark for other schools, and strict discipline combined with a rare degree of bonhomie marked its academic environment. For Piali, the school had been a major culture shock; the students were far more advanced and aware than any she’d known in her teaching career. Piali understood soon enough that she would have to respect these kids, not just lecture them. A quick learner, she customized her teaching methodology to cater to the students’ profile and her people management skills, combined with a strong sense of fair play and empathy, helped her establish herself as somebody the students could obey and emulate. Her ability to make literature come alive in class, her mastery over language that made learning fun, and, most importantly, her control of boys double her size, made her famous in the school.

Among the staff, she quickly established herself as a diligent teacher who inspired respect in her students despite her young age; her abilities did not escape the management’s notice. Her confidence and professional approach made her stand out among a complacent staff. Though the Brothers were kind to the staff, they were in desperate need of fresh blood, young teachers who were energetic, dynamic and proactive. When Piali had joined, she appeared like a prayer answered; braving

antagonism from the old hands, they put her in charge of the centenary celebrations.

* * *

Friday, afternoon

“Ma’am, as the centenary celebrations organizer, what is your one-point agenda?”

The school editorial board was interviewing Piali Roy, the celebrations organizer, for their yearbook.

“I aim to make our centenary mega-fest a benchmark for our school; our efforts are directed towards that one end. With the kind of history our institution boasts of, we have a huge responsibility.”

“Could you elaborate ma’am? What kind of responsibility?”

“The responsibility to be the best, to carry on the legacy of the school and its rich heritage, yet strive to scale newer heights.”

Piali was clear she did not want past glory to be an impediment in the path of progress. Too often people did not embrace change in the name of tradition. While tradition ought to be respected, it often led to rigidity and, eventually, to fanaticism. *So many nations took that dangerous road, so many households did...*

It was still sunny, past three-thirty p.m. when Piali emerged from the conference room. The staff quarters, ensconced amidst the hills at a level lower than the school, was a seven-minute walk in comfortable shoes.

“Ms. Roy, a call for you,” the secretary called out.

“Where from, Mrs. Menezes?” Piali shouted across the foyer.

“Hyderabad, Ma’am. This is the second time he called. The first time, you were with the board so I told him to call after three-thirty,” the elderly secretary furnished her with the details as Piali took the call.

“Hello.” Piali was breathless, guarded.

“Hey sweetheart.” The penetrating voice sent her spinning. “You thought you could vanish from town and from my life and I’d let you?” The tone held its characteristic laughter.

Her palpitations increased, her throat felt dry, she held the receiver tight and stared towards the hills. How had Sathya tracked her down? Sumana had strict instructions not to give her contact number to anyone;

the other teachers did not know of her whereabouts. “Answer me, honey.” Sathya persisted.

“I’m not answerable to anyone.”

“Haven’t lost your edge, have you?” Sathya was scathing. “Just your mind.”

Very aware of the public place the office phone was placed in and wary of Mrs. Menezes’ sharp ears, Piali wanted to cut the call short.

“No, sir, this is not the right time to talk to me. We are rather busy with our centenary celebrations.”

“Ha ha ha. This is how you behave in front of your father too. Listen, I want to talk to you right now. Give me your mobile number if you don’t want to be embarrassed further.”

“Yes, that should be a good idea. I’m available anytime in the evening after five,” she made it sound official as she dictated her cell phone number.

“Five pm it is. And don’t give me that officious tone next time.” His voice softened, “Love you, Bindi. Talk to you soon.” Before she could respond, Sathya hung up.

With leaden steps, Piali started walking down the hill towards what was now her home. She had known Sathya would track her down one day. Overcome with emotion, she just wanted to be by herself, not plagued by staff wives offering her *adrak chai*.

A minute after five, her mobile rang.

“Good time to talk, love?” The voice made her eyes moist.

Piali tried hard to hold back her tears but they flowed copiously. She wanted to be held by her man and assured that he would set things right, that he would bring Baba around, that he would take her away from this life of isolation that she had imposed on herself, that...

“Don’t baby, please don’t. I’ll never let you go; you know that, don’t you? Pia, sweetheart, do you *trust* that I will keep you safe? Tell me you do.”

Everything he said made her cry more. She loved her father too much to hurt him; martyrdom felt noble when she had left home but the decision to leave Sathya in return for serenity at home had robbed her of peace of mind.



TWO

2008, Jamshedpur (Jharkhand)

Up until six months ago, Piali was living with her family and working in a public school in Jamshedpur, Jharkhand. A quaint steel township, Jampot, as it was fondly called, was known for its quality education; just the place for someone with Piali's dreams to become an English teacher in a reputed school. Unlike many of her friends whose parents imposed their own unfulfilled dreams on their children, she was fortunate to have parents who supported her all along; they sent her to Jadavpur University to study English literature and helped her follow her heart's desire.

* * *

It was Piali's first job interview. She faced a panel of six somber-looking academicians. The number of candidates waiting outside would have intimidated a pro, but Piali Roy could move mountains with her smile and confidence. Her mother thought she would have made a good lawyer, but Piali had other dreams.

"Do you think you'll be able to handle the eighth class? That's a demanding group, in terms of age and academic requirements," said the principal.

"Ma'am, I don't think. I *know* I can."

Her response made the board smile; here was a refreshing change from the melee of indifferent candidates they regularly met.

"You are only twenty-three." The secretary was incredulous, his moustache bristling.

"Sir, by this age Keats was already famous." Pia smiled as she retorted.

Her interrogator nodded appreciatively, his smile barely hidden.

Her confidence, earnestness and love for her subject got Piali her first job.

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THREE

“Excuse me.” The deep baritone made her turn. Tall, bearded, bespectacled, the man looked every inch an academic, a philosopher, with an arrogance born of authority. A pair of dark, piercing eyes looked at her from behind his glasses, the penetrating look balanced by a thick, trimmed beard.

Did he know the effect he had on women?

“Yes?” Piali quickly regained her composure, amazed at the way the stranger had affected her. “Did you call me?”

He smiled. There was no one else within ten yards. She felt juvenile.

“Piali Roy. Hi. I am Sathya Nair. You are heading the teachers group going to Panchgani; I’m the man who carries the cash.” He extended his right hand.

“Oh, okay. Mrs. Krishnan just told me about you,” Pia almost blushed, conscious of the firm hand holding hers.

Mrs. Krishnan was the school principal. A visionary and a strict administrator, she had been quick to spot Piali’s leadership qualities. Although she was relatively new, Mrs. Krishnan chose her to head the delegation going to Panchgani for the Moral Rearmament (MRA) Camp.

Piali attributed her selection to her NCC training and the rigorous camps that gave her an edge over her non-NCC peers. The training had made her a leader, a team player, a communicator and built her confidence like few other activities had done. Barely a year into her job, Piali was thrilled at the confidence reposed in her but before she could thank her, Mrs. Krishnan started talking again.

“Sathya will be the financier; you have to coordinate with him for the expenses and ensure that the teachers behave.” Mrs. K’s child-like laugh brought a gleam to her eyes and flashed a glimpse of the real person behind the stern persona.

Pia smiled. Studying psychology in college often helped her look beyond facades, giving her a depth of understanding she may not have had otherwise.

“Ma’am, who is Sathya?”

Mrs. K gave a quizzical look from above her glasses and answered in a controlled tone, "Mr. Nair's son."

Mr. APJ Nair was the chairman of the school, a much revered, much feared man on campus. Stories of how he had started five schools after the success of this one were the talk of town. His demand for donations during admission, his corruption, the fleet of cars he owned, were part of the Nair saga.

Oh my God. If the father is like this, how is the son? Apprehensive, Pia walked out quietly from the principal's office.

"Hello. Where are you lost?" Sathya's voice jerked her back to reality. This very handsome, very disturbing man was having a strange effect on her, but he was born of a corrupt father; that should be reason enough to keep him at a distance.

Piali smiled as cheerfully as she could and responded in an upbeat tone. "Right here, sir." She did a mock salute. "Any instructions for me?"

"To start with, the name is Sathya." His eyes smiled as he waved an expensive mobile at her, "We need to exchange phone numbers to be able to coordinate." Piali gave him her number and waited for her cell phone to vibrate. She saved his number and looked up at him.

"Anything else, si...Sathya?"

"We'll reach the station by seven p.m.; the team knows that, I'm sure?" Sathya ticked off things on his checklist.

"I'm sure."

"You're my sole point of contact, I know no one else in the team, so I'm depending on you to help us bridge the gap."

"Will be done." Piali sounded every bit the cadet taking orders. She only stopped short of saying 'commander'.

Sathya smiled at the gutsy, young teacher. He liked her.



FOUR

Pune was a one-day journey from Jamshedpur; a luxury bus would take the group from the Pune station to the campsite in the hills of Panchgani. With its breath-taking beauty and serenity, Panchgani provided an idyllic setting for the MRA camp, just the kind of place to facilitate self-exploration.

Piali was the lead teacher for the group of twelve teachers, between twenty-four and thirty years old, travelling for the residential workshop on how to bring about changes in the education system.

Sathya was in charge of their tickets and finances. The man wielded his command over the group as if he, not his father, paid their salaries. The teachers would have been chirpier had he not been around, Piali was sure of that. The school could have booked second-class AC tickets rather than the confined and stuffy third-class AC, which was bad enough. With an overbearing character hovering in the foreground, however, it was becoming unbearable.

“What are you staring at me for?” Pia fumed.

“If you let the poor TT pass, I won’t.” Sathya’s smile infuriated her further. Was it fury or embarrassment? She could not quite tell.

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It was nine p.m., dinner was over, and most of the teachers were preparing to sleep. Pia wanted some fresh air. After a quick supervision, she walked towards the door. The compartment door was noiseless but the train door opened with a creaking sound. The gush of the night air almost toppled her slender frame. Pia stood at the door holding the hand rail, her dark, glossy hair blew all over her face, her floral top clung to her body, outlining her curves while beige cargo pants held tightly to her slim waist.

“No! Don’t jump.”

She almost let go of the handle.

“I don’t want the teacher-in-charge to jump out of a moving train.”

The gall of this man. How old could he be? Twenty-seven? Twenty-eight? Not more, surely. The beard and glasses made him look older.

“Very funny,” Pia muttered.

Sathya had followed her outside and was literally breathing down her neck in the cramped space between the washbasin and the door. His musk fragrance was intoxicating.

Goodness, what was she thinking? He was the boss' son, for God's sake.

“What are you doing here when everybody else is sleeping?” His tone was almost caressing.

“Breathing in some fresh air,” she said, turning to go back.

“What's the hurry? You're not sleepy, are you?” Sathya's hand was light on Piali's arm, restraining her. She sat at the door and let the breeze blow on her face. When he sat down beside her, she turned to look at him.

“What do you do? You are not a teacher, are you?”

“I escort pretty teachers to faraway campsites.”

“And see that they don't jump off moving trains,” Piali retorted. “A simple question *can* have a straight answer, you know.”

“Yes, it can.” Sathya threw back his head and laughed.

In the narrow doorway where they had to sit close together, his proximity had an electrifying effect on her. The man had an irresistible quality about him. This was the first time in her life that Pia was drawn so strongly to somebody. She had always been popular with men, but it had always been they who showed interest in her. Is this what they mean by love at first sight? The practical Piali had always pooh-poohed the idea. Ridiculous. So shallow. As if all that one fell for were looks.

“I am the scion of the Nair empire,” Sathya laughed lightly, “an animator by profession,” he continued in a more serious tone. “I was working as an animator in Hyderabad but Dad wanted me to join as the director of schools, so here I am.”

“And the Moral Rearmament camp is your initiation into your new profile?”

“You could say that, yes. We are looking at a holistic education system where we do not gauge a child just on the basis of her marks.”

The usage of ‘her’ for the child, where most would use the generic ‘his’, caught Piali's attention. *Okay, so here's a man looking to bridge the gender discrimination that was so much a part of the social fabric in India. Not bad.*

“Did you *want* to be the director?” Piali was amazed at the ease with which Sathya had transitioned from one role to another. She couldn’t imagine herself being so obedient. Her relatives wanted her to be in the IAS but Piali wouldn’t oblige them. She was sure of her calling and despite prevalent family opinion that she was sharp enough to crack the civil services exams, she went ahead to do her heart’s bidding.

“You know, you’re the first person to ask me this. Everybody else who heard about my changed course said I was lucky to be born with a silver spoon and didn’t need to go around proving myself.” Sathya was quiet for a while. “I was born with an artistic streak, but then, I was also born with a leadership streak. So I can do both equally well.” He smiled. “I wanted to start my life away from Achan’s shadow, to know that I could do things on my own. But I knew I had to come back to Jamshedpur sooner or later. It’s difficult for ach...my dad to manage everything by himself. And my younger brother, Srini, is a doctor, so we know he won’t be a part of the family business, if I may use the term.”

“Brave,” Piali observed quietly. “Won’t you miss the artist in you?”

“I’ll set up a studio in Jampot once I am settled in my school profile. The town doesn’t have anything like that so it’ll be for the larger good. And of course, it’ll keep my creative juices flowing.”

“I think I admire your ability to balance your priorities,” Piali said earnestly. “Don’t see myself being so flexible. I can only be a teacher, nothing else.”

Sathya smiled at her candidness. “You think or you do?”

“I think I do,” Piali played along. She was enjoying the conversation, as if they were old friends.

“Often the heart does not know what it is capable of,” Sathya philosophized. “You think today you can only be a teacher. With time you’ll realize you can also be a coordinator, a principal, or a director.”

Piali had never thought of her career in terms of growth. She did not know it then, but Sathya’s words would stay in her psyche for a long, long time.

The moonlight lit up the train doorway; the breeze caressed their faces; their bodies almost touched. They sat in silence.



FIVE

Piali woke up to chirping birds. She stepped out into the balcony of her second floor room; the mountain air was clear and crisp and the morning sunlight stroked her skin like a lover. No car horns or mikes blaring *bhajans* disrupted the early morning calm. With her hair loose and sleep-ruffled and the rising sun in her drowsy eyes, she stood mesmerized by nature's bounty. October flowers dotted the landscape, attracting swarms of butterflies; beyond the flowers and trees, the grey hills were slowly coming to life as the sun began its slow ascent behind them, bathing them in warmth and freshness.

Never before had she seen such splendor, such benevolence. The immensity of the mountains made her feel insignificant, a mere speck. The sight of the river flowing quietly in the valley below soothed her soul. What humility, what quiet confidence as it flowed along the imposing mountain without letting its stature intimidate. This picture perfect setting would be her guide and remind her to retain her identity amidst the influential, the affluent, and the powerful.

"Good morning. How about a walk?" Piali looked away from the beauty beyond and at the garden below.

Sathya. Trust him to be up and about before everybody else. In a black tracksuit, this man with his smoldering eyes set her heart aflutter even from a distance.

"Gimme five minutes."

She joined him on the lawn in her smart tracksuit.

"Had a good night's sleep? Does Sumana snore?"

Pia burst out laughing. "What rubbish. Who has ever heard of a girl snoring? Only men do."

Teachers had been allotted twin-sharing suites with modern amenities; Piali shared her space with Sumana.

"Who are *you* sharing room with?" she asked, giving him a sideways glance.

"They wouldn't let me move in with the prettiest teacher in the team, so I am alone." The cheesy line almost made her blush.

“Wrong question. The big boss gets the preferential treatment of course.”

“No big bosses here. We are one team and we must win all the competitions.” He paused for a while before continuing. “I need your help, Piali. The teachers haven’t opened up to me. You need to explain things to them.”

“What things?” Pia was confounded.

“Things like Sathya Nair may be a meat-eater, but he doesn’t eat team-members.”

“Gross.”

“No, seriously. I cannot direct them for a skit, for example, if they are so shit scared of me. They are all teachers, for chrissake. Why are they behaving like jittery teenagers?”

“Because you are so disturbingly handsome that they are scared they will fall for you if they warm up.” Whatever had made her say that? Pia immediately tried to cover up the sentiment with a lame laugh.

Sathya stopped in his tracks and looked at her seriously. “Vinitha and I are getting married next February. Tell your teachers to behave themselves and they’ll all be invited.”

All at once the birds stopped chirping, the sun seemed less warm, the flowers colorless; her heart stopped beating.

“It’s six-thirty already, breakfast is at eight. I better get back to the room.” Pia suddenly retraced her steps.

“What? You need one and a half hours to freshen up?”

“Yes, I do. I am not the director of schools who has a whole room to himself. I am sharing mine with another person.” Piali turned back to walk away.

Taken aback by her own outburst, she could not make sense of the tears threatening to prick her eyes.

This romantic place is wreaking havoc on my senses. I’m sure it’s the hills. Piali Roy, men fall for you, you don’t go drooling over them. Her inner voice rebuked. *Behave yourself. Behave, behave, behave.* The admonition became a chant in her mind.

