



*Out of  
The Cages*

PENNY JAYE

Out of  
The Cages

PENNY JAYE



*For those who have not yet returned,  
and those that fight for them.*

# Prologue

*Nepal. Three years ago ...*

Two girls squat by the bank of a river. Their brown hands plunge sudsy clothes into water, and out again. A blouse, a skirt, a colourless handkerchief. They talk as they work; the taller one, Meena, often looks up laughing. Her hair sits in a dark oiled braid down her back. The gold-plated stud she wears in one side of her nose shines in the morning light. She is twelve years old.

The girl beside her is not yet eleven. Her smile is softer, her cheeks fuller. Her name is Putali—Putali Maya—which means ‘butterfly’ and ‘love’.

They work by the river until their hands hurt and the wet clothes are stacked, twisted and wrung in metal basins. Then, still talking, the girls carry their basins to a nearby fence. A group of younger children walk along the road towards the school. Their uniforms starched white and blue. Red ribbons laughing in the small girls’ hair.

‘Pretty, pretty,’ Meena mutters under her breath.

There are no ribbons in Meena or Putali’s hair.

‘I’d go back to school if I could,’ Putali murmurs. She lowers her basin.

Meena shakes her head. ‘*Hoina*. I wouldn’t. Can’t make money at school, and my *baa*’s not like yours.’

Putali doesn’t comment. She knows what Meena means. Their fathers are as different as day and night. Before he went away, Putali’s father used to save his daily wage to buy his

children twisted toffee from the sweets seller. But Meena's drunken father beat her because they didn't have enough to eat. She understood now why Meena chose to store food among Putali's mother's supply, and why Meena often joined them for the night. Her laughter quiet, her shoulders trembling in the darkness. Still, she follows the school girls with her eyes. 'I'll go back to class, once my mother is better,' she says.

They let the school children pass and begin to hang their washing out. One by one, they stretch the clothes over the barbed wire to dry in the sun. Putali's long shirt catches on the wire and tears slightly. She groans. Her clothes are always worn. Always old; always from someone else.

As the last piece of clothing is hung out to dry, the boys ride up. Rajit and Santosh. They are Meena's uncle's boys. They're on motorbikes and have spare money. Syringe packets lean out the top of their jacket pockets.

'Kasto huncha?' Rajit asks Meena with his usual coy grin. 'How are you?'

Meena just giggles in reply and Putali ducks her head to hide a smile. It's obvious Meena likes the boys. She always has, but it's gotten worse since the boys started meeting them at the river several months ago. At first, they just brought sweets, but it soon progressed to larger gifts. Like a pretty hair clip, or a bunch of bananas for Putali's sick mother. Lately the boys have been offering them rides on their motorbikes. Putali never goes, but Meena does—she laughs and laughs until her face glows and her cheeks don't look so hollow.

'Did your baa tell you about the job?' Rajit asks Meena as he rolls a cigarette.

Meena shakes her head.

Rajit nods slightly, as if he understands. 'Our fathers have been talking,' he says. 'They've found out about a job. It'll pay well.'

Meena smiles quickly, hiding a flash of disappointment. 'Congratulations. When do you start?'

Rajit raises his eyebrows. 'Me?' He and Santosh share a chuckle. 'It's not a job for me. It's for you, both of you. You won't

have to chip rocks or wash some rich *rani's* filthy laundry ever again!

'A job for me?' Putali asks, lifting her face to stare openly at the boys.

Santosh shrugs like it's no big deal. 'Yeah, Meena's *baa* said your mum is sick. She could do with the extra money, couldn't she? And your dad's, where—?'

'Arab.' Putali's answer is barely a whisper. 'He has work there.'

'Right. Arab. So he's not coming back anytime soon, is he?'

Putali looks away, back up the hill towards the settlement. No, her father isn't coming back soon. And her mother isn't getting any better. She feels a hand on her shoulder. Meena. Hope is sparkling in her eyes like the bangles on the wrist of a dancer. Putali feels the excitement catching, even over her own sadness.

'Are you interested?' Santosh pushes. There is something unreadable in his expression.

'What about my *aama*? My mother? Who will care for her, if I have a job? Or do the washing?' Putali waves a hand towards their clothes, flapping along the wire.

Meena leans closer. 'Your *bajai-aama*, she can help. And your little brother—he's almost six now. That's much bigger. A job will change everything—just imagine! Enough money for proper medicine and *masu*, meat, to make your *aama* strong ...'

Putali frowns. She is thinking.

The boys are impatient to get going. Rajit stubs out his cigarette and they climb back onto their motorbikes.

'Think about it,' he says. 'But don't tell anyone. You know how hard it is to find work these days. You don't want someone hearing you talk and snatching your spot on the bus.'

'B-b-bus?' Putali stammers.

Santosh almost rolls his eyes but he catches himself and instead bends as far over the bike's handlebars towards Putali as he can. His face is so close, Putali can smell his dry

breath and the aftershave he wears. 'The interview's in India' he whispers.

'Interview? India?' Meena squeals. 'Like a real job? In Kolkata? Or Delhi?'

'Why not?' Santosh flashes her a grin. 'We'll come back tomorrow and pick you up, if you're interested that is. But remember—don't tell anyone.'

Meena nods and grips Putali's hand. 'We won't tell a soul,' she says, beaming. 'You can trust us.'

A strange expression flicks across Rajit's face for a second, but then he pulls the visor on his helmet down and kick starts his motorbike.

As the boys ride off in the dust, Meena gives another squeal and spins on the spot. Putali watches her and can't help but laugh. A grey roller bird swoops low over the rice fields, the blue underside of its wings brilliant in flight. Meena runs ahead, up the dirt paths between rice fields, towards the settlement. Then she spreads her arms, just like the roller bird, and swoops back to take Putali's hand.

# Part One



# One

Meena leaned over the plastic bowl. Her head ached. Her eyes stung. She retched one more time.

‘Is that all of last night’s dinner now?’

The voice was Meena’s roommate, Sarita. The older girl clicked her tongue and entered their shared room before kicking off her thick heels and pulling the unused condom packets from her bra. Meena could see the shoes over the bowl’s rim—black platforms, sparkling with plastic diamonds. She groaned and held out the bowl. Her hand was trembling. She felt the spit hang from her lips and attempted to wipe it away. Sarita muttered something under her breath about losing income while Meena was sick, then took the bowl and disappeared from the room to empty it. Meena lowered her aching self back onto the hard mattress that was their bed. Even with the bowl gone, the room smelt like vomit and sweat. There was only so long Madam put up with girls in Meena’s condition before they disappeared. Meena wasn’t sure where to. She pushed the thought away and curled her body, staring at the poster hanging on the wooden partition that was the wall between their room and Deepa and Devi’s. Muffled noises from the other side told her Devi had a client. Meena’s stomach threatened to heave again.

Sarita returned with the now empty bowl. She dropped it on the floor beside the bed and shook out their blanket to

rearrange it over Meena. Meena felt the warmth of it, distant over the false cold of her fever. Somehow, after all her years in Madam's hotel, Sarita still knew how to care. Meena felt as uncaring as the cardboard they used under their mattress for extra padding. She groaned involuntarily.

'You've been throwing up too much. It's disgusting.' Sarita scolded without venom. She felt Meena's forehead. 'You're not pregnant, are you? I've heard of girls getting pregnant in the wrong stomach. Maybe that's your problem?' A flash of concern crossed Sarita's face, contradicting the businesslike tone she used.

Meena winced as she shook her head. Although she'd barely had a period since coming to the brothel, she knew she wasn't pregnant. Devi had been pregnant three times. Deepa at least five times and Sarita more than she admitted. But Madam was quick to organise abortions and the girls were back working a week later. She knew the procedure.

'I'm not pregnant.' Meena fumbled over the side of the bed until her fingers felt the bowl's wet plastic. 'It's my gut. I ache ... I get fever, and I'm weak, so weak I feel like ... I'm ...' She stopped. A distantly familiar tinge of emotion was holding back the truth. She snapped it away. She couldn't admit to fear, not here, not in front of Sarita. That was the rule. The only way to survive. When she finally let the words out she had herself back under control. The words sounded like someone else's: 'I don't want to die.'

'Psshiiit, you won't die!' Sarita stalked away, a sudden anger tensing her shoulders. It was the same restless anger Meena had noticed increasing in Sarita over the past few months. Something was bothering her roommate. And nothing ever bothered Sarita.

Meena willed herself to watch as Sarita dragged a comb

through her thick hair. The repetition of the action seemed to shelve the older girl's restlessness. Meena didn't know Sarita's story, only that she'd worked for Madam longer than any of the other girls in the hotel. Sarita was one of Madam's privileged working girls—privileged because she was technically free to leave. At almost thirty years old, she was no longer indebted to Madam. Sarita chose to make a living from what Meena and the other young girls were forced to do. And she contributed to the running of the hotel, which kept Madam happy.

'You're not grateful enough,' Sarita lectured without turning around. 'That's always been your problem. Sure, you don't cry all the time like you used to three years ago—lucky for you, you learned that lesson quickly—and you don't gouge the eyes out of your clients anymore.' She laughed at a memory Meena could no longer place, like so many memories she refused to consider.

'But, you never did learn to be grateful, did you? I know better than anyone that it's not paradise here. But if you work the system—'

Meena stopped listening and allowed the words to sink into the anaesthetic-like fog she'd constructed to survive. She willed her mind to absorb only the immediate: Sarita eyeing her reflection in the tiny mirror pinned to the wall. Sarita's pink fingernails moving swiftly on her hair, changing the style, pinning half of it up and pulling loose strands down either side of her face. Meena's own hair felt like her soul: dry and flat.

'Will you die here too?' Meena asked.

'What?!' Sarita spun round to glare at her. 'No one's dying! Look, I'll be back in an hour. I'll try and get Madam to come up and see you. Maybe she'll call a doctor—'

'*Nain*, no. She won't.' The fog was thicker now.

'I'll make her. You used to bring in good money ... before you got sick. You're too valuable to lose, she'll see that.'

‘But I’m ... older now ...’

Sarita spat onto the floor. ‘You’re so ungrateful, you know that! One of your clients brings in twice as much as one of mine! Do you think I like working here? Do you think that’s why I stay?!’

Sarita snapped her mouth shut, as if she’d let out a truth she hadn’t meant to. For a moment her eyes glared a strange mixture of emotions Meena had never seen before, and then it was gone. Meena felt her stomach tighten but Sarita just clicked her tongue, back to normal, and deftly reapplied the dark *kohl* to her eyes. Once she had finished, she ran her fingers slowly down the scarf that hung beside the mirror.

‘I’ll never wear this scarf here,’ Sarita had announced to Meena after she’d received it from a regular but cruel client. ‘I’ll never give him the pleasure of seeing me wear it. But when I’m rich, and have my own beauty parlour, and do the hair and nails of movie stars—then I’ll wear it. I’ll wear it every day so that when he sees me he’ll know who I am, and he’ll know that I know the animal he really is.’

She’d never spoken of it since. But Meena had been noticing, as she did now, that Sarita’s fingers were lingering longer and longer on the scarf. Its purple-and-silver threads almost begging for Sarita to carry them into the sunlight.

Sarita sucked a quick breath before she turned and held out an open palm. ‘I’ll buy you some medicine.’

‘I haven’t got any money.’

‘What? None at all?’

Meena tried to shake her head. The action made it throb. ‘I ... gave the last bit to Bala ... to buy antibiotics ...’

‘So where are they? Why haven’t you been taking them?’ Sarita demanded.

Meena cringed. Her gut was cramping again. ‘I did ... they

didn't work. Nothing's worked.' She squeezed her eyes shut.

Sarita sighed in irritation. 'I'll talk to Madam,' she huffed, then left the room.

Meena listened to Sarita's flip-flops on the stairs. Meena didn't trust Madam like Sarita did—or at least, like Sarita said she did. Madam only showed kindness when she expected something in return.

'You weren't cheap. I paid a lot of money for you,' she'd heard Madam say to the new girls just as she must have once explained to Meena. 'I can't just let you go home because you don't like my business! I've got financial problems now, and if you continue to act like a baby they'll get worse.'

Meena must have fought the system once, she had scars that told her so. But that was a long time ago, before she moved downstairs, before she had shut down her memory and the ability to feel. She had become just like the rest of them; working like she was told to. Every day. No weekends. No holidays. No time off for cups of tea, or watching TV, or recovering from rough clients.

But lately Meena's health had deteriorated past the point of faking it. She was taking fewer and fewer clients, and those who did agree to follow her up the stairs were rough with her weakness and refused to leave tips. Then yesterday, Meena slept in. She woke just before the evening meal, rushed through her dressing, and make up, ready for work, then collapsed beside the squat toilet, leaning in her own vomit. Vishnu, the male guard in charge for their floor, must have carried or dragged her back to bed still dressed, still wearing her *sari* blouse, skirt and vomit. Meena did the slow calculations: if Sarita had taken off her work shoes and had left with casual flip-flops, then Meena had been in bed, alone, all night. That meant only one thing—Madam had given her time off. Madam had been kind.

## Two

There was a tapping of long fingernails on the partition wall.

‘Ehh, Meena? Are you there?’

Meena rolled onto her back and lifted the edge of the poster to reveal a round hole in the plywood board. Devi’s stained teeth grinned through the hole. Her mouth was smudged with lipstick.

‘I’m here,’ Meena forced the response Devi was waiting for. She could now see the dark lines of kohl around the younger Nepali girl’s eyes.

‘You look terrible.’ The dark lines squinted closer to the hole. Devi spoke fluent Hindi. ‘Are you still *bimara*? Still sick? At least you’re getting time off. Madam’s being kind to you—’

‘Kind?’ The word shuddered through Meena like something she was not allowed to remember.

‘Oh, I’d give anything for time off,’ Devi laughed. ‘Well, almost anything, not that I have anything left, but you know what I mean.’

Meena’s head hurt. Devi talked too much. Even with clients she talked too much. Elaborate conversations with men who didn’t come to talk. Meena used to listen in, to focus on Devi’s ramblings instead of the movements of the man on top of her. Devi prattled on asking about world news, about clients’ families, about whether they’d arrange a police raid, and tell them

how many minors she thought Madam kept. Once Meena had heard Devi caught mid-conversation with a client, by Madam herself. If Devi had just been speaking Hindi she would only have received a light beating, three bruises to the face perhaps. But she'd been talking Nepali. And Madam forbade it. Devi had disappeared for almost two weeks that time. After she returned, she didn't talk so much, for about three days, then she was back to normal—though always in Hindi.

'So, where's Sarita?'

'Out.' Meena's head pounded. She wanted to sleep. To sleep without dreaming like she had before she'd become sick ...

'Good, aacha, listen up!' Devi's face drew closer. A cigarette rested on her lips for a moment, then she spoke, letting the smoke push itself through the hole into Meena's room. The smell wrestled Meena's stomach and tried to dig up a memory. *A father ...*

'There's this man, Kamal,' Devi's voice continued.

Meena struggled with the image from the past and by weak force, focused on Devi's words instead. She couldn't remember. Not here, not now.

'Are you listening?' Devi squinted through the hole to make sure, before she continued. 'Anyway, Kamal was here earlier. The one before the one before the last one. He says he knows someone in the police department. He says there'll be a raid soon!' Devi's voice sounded like a child chasing a kitten. Meena had felt excitement like that once. Somewhere ... but it had been a lie ... somehow ...

'The police know they're here, under sixteens. So that's me and Sita, and Lalita and Little Sita, and Manisha and—how old are you?'

Meena looked away, a sudden numbness surrounding her soul. She'd lost count. She'd been a minor last year. She'd been

hidden with the little girls during a violent raid. But this year? She was older. Her breasts were almost full. Her *sari* size hadn't changed for a long while. Was she fifteen? Or sixteen? Was she still hidden property or old enough to be open and counted? Like Sarita? Or Bala?

Devi gave an impatient sigh and continued. 'This time Madam won't know anything. It's going to be a real police raid, with police doing what they are supposed to do. Think of that, Meena. And Kamal said he'll make sure the leak at the police station—don't you like the way they call it a leak as if men have nothing else to do? Anyway, he'll make sure the leak doesn't find out. It's really happening this time. We're going to be free. We'll go home and ...'

Devi's voice ran off. Meena opened her eyes. The girl on the other side of the partition sat further back now. Her eyes lost in a far off dreamland of people and places that for Meena no longer existed. Meena let the poster drop back in place. Raids were a farce—something the police did and Madam navigated. She wouldn't bother remembering the number of raids she'd been through, even if she could; jammed into hiding spaces, silent on the threat of beatings. All raids did was guarantee tighter restrictions, especially on the valuable girls—the ones who brought in the most money, the youngest Nepali girls.

\*\*\*

Later, sometime in the early evening, judging by the sounds in the hallway, Meena drifted awake from a clouded, fevered sleep. Her mind filled with scraps of memory, like shreds of torn paper blowing on a breeze. She forced her eyes to stay open, to take in the sights and sounds around her. To concentrate. Concentrate. No memory. No fear. Just the present. The hotel preparing for an evening's work.

Meena knew the routine without thinking. The girls who were allowed out of their own rooms would all be in the kitchen, buying food with tip money. Then Sarita would go to the sitting room and switch on the flashing lights while flirting with Garud who was the guard on that level. She would pump the cushions, letting foul phrases drop from her tongue, then turn on the radio loud enough to drown them out. She'd tidy the younger girls' hair next, as they came in after eating. Then she'd assign everyone a seat. Meena's normal seat was three away from the door. Madam would come in and lay down the rules for the day. Threats for the stubborn ones. Debt reminders for the lazy ones. Together, they'd wait for the customers. And when they came it was like a show:

'Look at me, *kancho* boy,'

'Are you feeling sexy ...?'

'*Oh-ho*, I can make you feel so good!'

But Meena knew none of the girls ever felt anything close to good. Some of them moved into automatic once the lights went on. Meena had tried to have a conversation with Priti once, but the girl was oblivious to anyone who wasn't a client. She was like a machine who took men upstairs and brought money back down to Garud, who sorted out what belonged to Madam and what Priti could keep. She didn't even realise Garud sometimes kept more than he should.

'Hurry up!' Meena heard Vishnu shout from the hallway. She struggled to a sitting position. Her head spun. A sudden glimpse of green hills and dry rice fields flicked through her mind. She held herself steady. Focus. But the mental lock-down was breaking. Cracks were appearing. Cracks Sarita had warned her about.

Meena lunged over the side of the bed and vomited again, just as Sarita reappeared around the curtain.

*'Ghinauna!'* Sarita let out a stream of curses, some Hindi, some in her mother-tongue, Tamil, and some English that she'd learned from TV.

'I can't ...' Meena tried. But Sarita just swore again and covered the bowl with a piece of newspaper. 'I'll empty it later.' She tilted her head towards the business already beginning beyond the curtain. She propped her hands on her hips, barely tucked into the low sitting skirt she wore. She was already dressed for work, the black heels on, her face made up, her hair shiny with oil. She must have come in and got dressed while Meena was sleeping. 'I'm guessing you won't be working tonight, either.'

Meena stared at the ceiling. She had a vision of red ribbons laughing. The bumps on the roof curved into each other, pretending to be hills from somewhere long ago. A flicker of pain rose in her chest. The fragments were chasing her.

'Where are you?' Sarita pulled the blankets up roughly, a wary concern flickering in her voice. 'Are you delirious?'

Perhaps. Meena cringed from a beating she knew she deserved. She couldn't afford to remember. And yet she was no longer strong enough to fight it ...

Sarita studied her for a moment longer then sat beside her, resting a hand on Meena's knee. 'I went to the bazaar again today,' the older girl spoke softly. So softly Meena had to strain to hear. 'They have medicine. Free for girls like us, and oranges, so I brought you some.' She laid the round fruit in front of Meena. They glowed through her daze.

'The medicine is just Cetamol. The nurse said it won't fix you, but would be good for pain and fever. Take two capfuls, three times a day.'

Meena watched Sarita dig through a plastic bag for the bottle of medicine. She heard the seal break.

'Smells nice,' Sarita commented then held it out. 'Drink

this, and promise me you won't vomit it straight back up again.'

Meena tried to sit up again. Sarita held the plastic cap to her mouth and poured the yellow liquid in. It was sweet and powdery on her tongue.

'Now, go to sleep. I'll work in Jameela's room again and make sure Vishnu keeps everyone out of here.' She paused as if weighing up her words. 'I asked Madam to call in a doctor for you. She won't. She says you're behind payments on your debt. There's only so much I can do to distract her from coming to check on you.' Sarita swore, her eyes flicking ever so briefly to her leaving scarf. 'How far behind are you? Really?'

Meena laid back. She looked up at Sarita, the girl she had hated for so long until she'd realised she wouldn't be alive without her. She tried to answer, to say she was fine. That she'd be better in the morning. That the images, the memories that were hounding her could be kept at bay. That she'd be back working, paying off her debt before Sarita could say '*Namaste!*' But her head spun. Grunts rose from Deepa and Devi's room and her answers dissolved into nothing. There was a noise—fist against face—from the room next door, but no one cried out. Sarita stood waiting, an unexplained emotion across her face. The fluorescent light shone too bright. Like the sun that defied a cage, and Meena heard laughter, young nervous laughter from the back of a motorbike. Laughter that wasn't Sarita's or Devi's or her own.

'Is there ... a bike?' she asked. But Sarita was already gone, and the only noises now were those that came from the hotel. Meena closed her eyes, succumbing to dizziness. Laughter rang again. She knew it wasn't real, and yet it was. It came from long ago, long long ago, and someone she had tried to forget ...

She is on the back of a motorbike, side-saddle behind Rajit, one arm around his waist the other gripping the back of his bike. Meena's ridden with the boys before, many times, but never like this. Never so fast or with such purpose. Never with the exhilaration of dreams coming true! She lets out a laugh, excitement bubbling like a spring in monsoon. She can feel Rajit laugh too, the trembles of it rippling his stomach and making her blush. She is glad he can't see her. Glad he can't read her thoughts. But there is someone else sharing her laughter. Someone on the back of Santosh's bike. Someone little, whose nervous delight carries over the noise of the bikes.