

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

I started writing this story when a fourteen-year-old girl just like Heera won a gold medal in a karate competition in Forbesganj. She was being groomed for prostitution along with other girls in her lane. A lane just like Girls Bazaar.

An annual cattle fair used to claim girls from that lane every year. When my NGO, Apne Aap, opened a community center and hostel there, we were constantly attacked by men like Gainul and Ravi Lala. They would stalk the mothers, their daughters, and me, hurling abuses, throwing stones, stealing from our offices and even kidnapping girls.

We built higher walls around the hostel to prevent traffickers from jumping over. I posted guards outside my home, hired lawyers, filed police complaints and cases in court. Just like Mai, some mothers in the lane disobeyed their husbands, even though they were beaten up. Their daughters were the first batch of girls in our hostel.

A lot happens over the course of this book—abduction, escape, competition, feuds, the complicated relationships between friends and family members . . . between male and female roles, between people of different castes. You will see an entire community change, characters transform, and the impossible is achieved. I actually saw this happen. I end the book with what has happened.

The change was both internal and external. We turned red-light areas into non-red-light areas across the country, put traffickers in jail and children in school. We started karate and kung fu classes for the girls to help them rediscover their bodies. They began to break burning tiles and win championships. They gained the respect of the town and their families and found new confidence in themselves. Women have taken over the huts and turned them into real homes and small businesses. Seventy of the seventy-two brothels in the lane this story takes place in are now closed.

The truth is that there is not one, but many Heeras. Girls Bazaars still exist in many parts of our world, including the US. I wrote this story because I wanted to share with you that someone somewhere of your age fought back and won. I wanted you to know that change is possible. I have witnessed it in my own lifetime.

Heera's story is a story of hope in spite of great odds. It's about our bodies—who they belong to and the command they can give us. It is the story of a community that resolves to make change contagious and succeeds. I hope you find a friend in Heera who will give you some clues to making the changes you would like in your own life.

The martial arts classes continue in Forbesganj.

Yours sincerely,  
Ruchira

