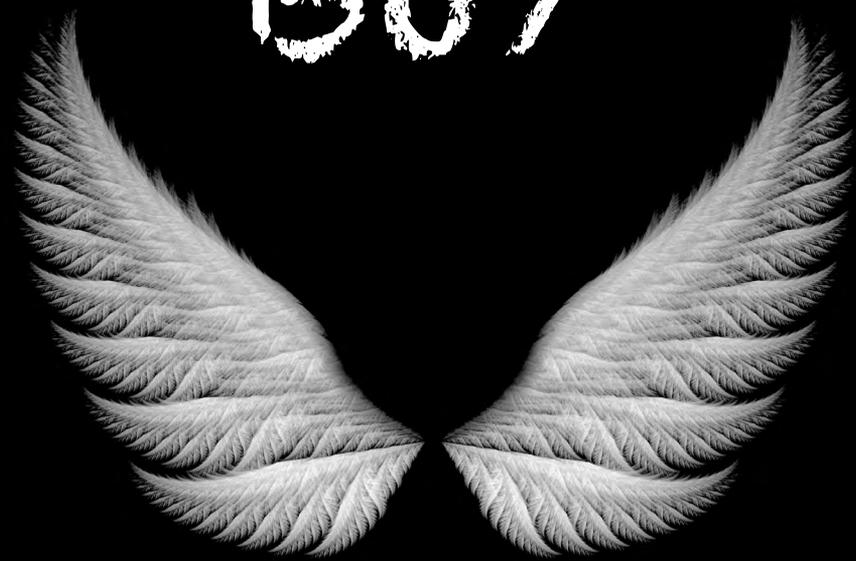


PRISON BOY



S H A R O N E . M c K A Y



annick press
toronto + new york + vancouver

© 2015 Sharon E. McKay (text)
Edited by Barbara Berson
Designed by Kong Njo
Image of wings on front cover: © iStock.com/Gladiathor

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We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund (CBF) for our publishing activities.



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Cataloging in Publication

McKay, Sharon E., author
Prison boy / Sharon E. McKay.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-55451-731-2 (bound).—ISBN 978-1-55451-730-5 (pbk.).—
ISBN 978-1-55451-733-6 (pdf).—ISBN 978-1-55451-732-9 (html)

I. Title.

PS8575.K2898P75 2015 jC813:54 C2014-907155-8
C2014-907156-6

Distributed in Canada by:
Firefly Books Ltd.
50 Staples Avenue, Unit 1
Richmond Hill, ON
L4B 1H1

Published in the U.S.A. by:
Annick Press (U.S.) Ltd.
Distributed in the U.S.A. by:
Firefly Books (U.S.) Inc.
P.O. Box 1338, Ellicott Station
Buffalo, NY 14205

Printed in Canada

Visit us at: www.annickpress.com
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*“The only thing necessary for the triumph
of evil is for good men to do nothing.”*

EDMUND BURKE



Chapter 1

Two visitors arrived on the same day. Each, in her own way, would change the future of the Pink House.

The first was a prune-faced representative of the King. She stood on the porch of the orphanage flanked by two soldiers wearing empty faces. In a low, flat voice she demanded to speak to Bell. Seven-year-old Pax stood behind Bell's empty rocking chair and watched.

Tiny Mega, who was all of eight but no bigger than a five-year-old, bashed back the plastic sheets that made do as a door, and ran into the house. She raced across the great room, leapt over the sleeping mats, and stood in the doorway of Bell's office. "Bell, a lady wants to speak to you." Mega's voice wobbled. To her, soldiers were big and scary.

"Now what?" Bell grumbled. Her real name was Isabelle, but everyone, even the children, called her Bell. She had come from England many years ago. She ran the orphanage, which

was not really an orphanage, at least not the kind of place where children hung out the windows crying to be fed. "It is our home. We are a family," she repeated. The government called it an orphanage and Bell, tired of the politics, shrugged. Really, what did it matter as long as they were left alone?

It was called the Pink House because it was, inside and out, pink. A long time ago someone had given Bell cans of pink paint. There were still some stored in the outhouse.

Santoso came up behind her. "Mega, what does that lady want?" Mango squished out of his cheeks and coated his lips.

"Come, come," urged Mega.

One by one, the children followed Mega and Santoso out onto the porch. They stood silently, looking at the woman and the soldiers.

At last Bell pushed aside the sheets of plastic and stood on the porch. The children moved closer to her, like little chicks gathering around a mother hen. Only Pax remained where he was, distant but watching.

"Can I help you?" Speaking in her most proper British voice, Bell put her hands on her hips and glared up at the woman. (Really, Bell had neither hips nor waist. Bell was short and round, like a puddle.)

"I am from Children's Services. Our great King has decided that people like you should go back to your own country." The woman's words were razor-sharp. Bell glared. "And what exactly do you mean by 'people like me'?" Her singsong voice was now a low growl.

"You Europeans, you think you know it all. Go back to where you came from and take care of your own orphans."

Pax braced himself for Bell's wrath to descend on the woman like a thunderstorm. He waited. He waited some more. He tipped his head just enough to peek out of the corner of his eyes. Bell's face was white with fury, but she said nothing. Pak's mouth fell open with astonishment.

The woman looked down at her clipboard and began to read questions from the top of the page.

"How many children are currently living here?"

"Six," growled Bell. She sounded like a dog before it bites.

"What are their names?" the woman asked without looking up.

Bell motioned to each child. "This is Mega, our only girl. Santoso, Guntur—they are twins. This is Bambang and . . ." She paused, her hand above a small boy.

"Bhima," said Pax. Bell was always forgetting about Bhima. Bell forgot lots of things.

"Yes, Bhima. And this is Pax, my best boy."

"Pax?" The woman raised a thin eyebrow.

"Paxton, after my father," said Bell, but not with the usual pride in her voice. That was odd.

"Yes, fine." The woman recorded each child's name.

The children stood in gloomy silence.

When she was finished, the woman said, "You may continue to operate, but you must not take in any more children."

"Really? How very kind. But perhaps the obvious has eluded you. We operate as an orphanage. What are we supposed to take in—orangutans?" Bell snorted.

"No, no, no," Pax whispered as he dropped his head.

The woman twitched her nose like a rat, then handed Bell a piece of paper. She left, and the two soldiers followed in her wake.

Bell scanned the paper, crumpled it into a ball, and pitched it in the ditch that ran alongside the orphanage. The children gathered around her.

“Will we be taken away?” Mega whispered. Her lips trembled.

“Not while I live and breathe.” Bell gave the plastic door a good bash and left them standing on the porch.



The second visitor arrived at the Pink House a few hours later.

“Bell, Bell!” Mega ran back into Bell’s office.

In a moment they were once again standing on the porch, Mega, Santoso, Guntur, Bambang, Bhima, and Pax. This time they were not afraid, only curious.

The old woman held up an infant boy. It lay naked on a rag. “Take it,” she said. She had no teeth. She had a hump on her back, sunken cheeks, and foggy eyes.

Pax stood behind Bell and held his breath.

Bell looked down at the baby. It was stringy—all head and thin, jerky limbs. “It needs its mother’s milk,” she said.

“The mother is dead. You give me money.” The woman thrust the baby at Bell.

Bell took a step back and narrowed her eyes. “I don’t buy babies.”

“Take it or I will drown it,” she cackled.

Pax sucked in his breath. She did not hold the baby

properly. Its head dangled. Pax reached out, scooped the baby in his arms, and hugged it against his chest. The woman let out a howl.

“Pax, wait,” said Bell.

“I want money!” the woman screeched.

“Go away before I call the police,” Bell yelled right back.

Pax took the baby into the great room and sat on his mat. He rocked him in his arms. The baby made twittering sounds like a little bird. “Ca, ca, ca.” He looked up at Pax with clear, big, brown eyes streaked with gold—like a baby lion’s eyes.

“What can you see?” Pax whispered. Little bubbles appeared on the baby’s lips. He smiled. Pax smiled back.

Bell stood above Pax. “It will likely die,” she said, but gently.

“No he won’t,” said Pax.

“I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Pax looked up at Bell. “I don’t feel hungry now,” he said.

“Hungry? What are you talking about?”

“Being alone is like being hungry,” he whispered.

Bell sighed. “Pax, I haven’t the faintest idea what you are talking about. You are surrounded by people. We have enough food.”

“I know, but holding him makes me . . .” He didn’t know what to say. He didn’t understand it himself. “He makes me feel—full.” Pax rocked the baby back and forth.

“Oh for heaven’s sake, you are talking in riddles. Mega, boil water and sterilize those old baby bottles in the cupboard. Let the water cool in the small tub and then bathe the baby. Check the temperature. No need to cook it,” said Bell.

Mega nodded. She was young, but she could do things like use a sharp knife, boil water, and bathe babies.

“No, I will take care of him,” said Pax.

Bell wasn't listening. She stormed off in search of her purse.

The other children looked at the infant over Pax's shoulder. Bambang, who was round with big cheeks (although he ate no more than the others), got down on his knees and touched the baby's face. “He's soft,” he whispered.

“Pax, he looks like you. He has eyes like you. See the little yellow bits?” said Santoso.

“Maybe he's your true, true brother,” added Guntur.

“That's right. And that woman was a fairy godmother,” said Santoso.

Bambang shook his head. “She's not a fairy godmother. She's ugly and has no teeth.”

Bell returned with a purse hooked over her arm and a kerchief on her head knotted under her chin. “I will go to the medical unit in the city and get some formula, but Pax, remember what I said. It will likely die.”

“His name is Kai.”

“Why Kai?” said Bell.

“He told me,” replied Pax.

Bell sighed and shook her head. “Just remember what I said.”

That is how Kai came to stay. From that moment on, Pax became Kai's guardian, his protector, his father, mother, and maybe his brother, too. Stranger things have happened.

As for Bell, it wasn't the first time she had deliberately ignored the government's regulations.



Chapter 2

Three years later

It was still dark. The sun funneled through a pinhole on the horizon.

Pax sat cross-legged on the porch listening to morning sounds—dogs barking, birds chirping, street sellers setting up shop. Someone was shouting. Someone was singing. And there were morning smells, too—hot cooking oil, bread baking, and underneath it all the stink of fresh poop.

An alley cut through the slum. Little paths wiggled out from it in random directions. Open sewers, filled with brown swill, lined every path. Cardboard shacks and broken huts held together with plastic sheets, black tarpaper, bits of wood, old tires, and chipped shingles retrieved from the dump surrounded the orphanage.

The wooden porch wrapped around the Pink House, all the planks were in different stages of rot. A small kerosene lamp sat on a three-legged stool beside Bell's rocking chair. The chair was fastened to the floor with a black chain.