

RIVER OF INNOCENTS

by

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## RIVER OF INNOCENTS

A novel of modern-day slavery.

<http://www.riverofinnocents.com>

This book is a work of fiction.

But slavery is real, and very much alive today.

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Cover Photo by Kay Chernush for the U.S. State Department

(A brothel-keeper and her slaves in a red-light district in Mumbai.)

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*Because it was there;  
and there but for the grace of God go we.*



# Chapter 1

## Before She Was a Slave

“All Human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights...

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.”

—Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations, 10 December 1948.

AFTER SHE PUT HIM TO BED, Majlinda walked quietly through the little house and into the shop, where dim moonlight shone through the glass door. She sat in an aisle with her back to an old, ribbed washboard, and she felt tears wanting to spring into her eyes. “But tears will not come,” she told herself quietly, firmly. “I will not *let them* come. He will be fine in the daylight. It’s only in the night: two nights of drinking. Two nights for her and for how hard it is, and maybe for himself. I won’t begrudge him missing her. I won’t begrudge him being poor.”

When morning came he made no mention of the night before. He haggled cheerfully with customers over home-made bread and potted plants and old, used clothes; he turned a tidy profit on boxed soap and even sold one of the books that lived in the back corner. If Majlinda had not known him so well, she would not have spotted the new darkness under her father’s eyes or the tiny lines aslant above them. “They will fade,” she told herself.

But that night he drank again.

“Like her,” he mumbled, reaching out with one hand to touch Majlinda’s cheek. “You’re like your mother. Such beautiful dark hair.”

He shuddered and looked at her face carefully, pulling his hand away and waving it clumsily to either side. "It all falls apart. Like dust. Your mother and the store. Pinch it and it's gone. Can you feel it?"

Majlinda took his clammy hand and hugged him gently. "It will turn round, father." His other hand floundered at her back. "Business will turn around, you'll see. And I'm still here—I'm not dust. I'm not gone." The sickly, wet sensation of his tongue on her earlobe made her push him away. She bit her lip gently, but not fearfully; and she took his arm and led him back to his room, where she left him in his bed with a picture of his wife.

"Three nights," Majlinda told herself. "Three nights for her and for how hard it is, and maybe for himself."

During the week that followed, the nights and the days grew separate in Majlinda's mind. At night her father drank and she soothed him to bed, she refused to cry and she refused to condemn him. She never feared for herself, but she feared for him. In the day her father haggled, and she tutored or she worked in the store; the sun shone brightly and her father was sober, and she let herself believe he would stay that way.

But as the days and the nights passed, and the week turned into two weeks and into three, and then to four, and five, the darkness of the night seemed to creep slowly into the features of her father in the day, as if he bore the night like a banner of despair that even day could not cast down.

Business grew worse. Late one afternoon in July, only three people had come into the store, and one failed to buy anything. Majlinda's father left to go to the liquor store as he did several times a week; it was then that the strange young man in the smooth shirt came into the store again.

"You remember me," he said firmly, his sure eyes smiling when he saw her. "I came through two months ago—"

"—passing through, on business from Vlorë," remembered Majlinda. She returned his smile slightly. He seemed impressive, what with his pressed pants and his smooth, silk shirt. "You were wearing the same blue shirt. You bought towels from my father."

The man laughed; Majlinda blushed. "I only remember because it's a nice shirt."

"I remembered you, too," answered the broad-shouldered stranger. "That's why I came back."

Majlinda found two butterflies fluttering in her chest, and she determinedly pulled them out. Her eyes narrowed. "You came for me?"

He shook his head in an Albanian *yes*, his soft smile calling to her, sending the butterflies right back in. "I remembered you telling me how much there wasn't to do here," he explained. "I work for a recruiting agency in Vlorë with clients in Florence, Venice, and Rome."

Majlinda blinked unbelievably, her thoughts not daring to anticipate him. One of the romances she'd read had been set in Florence, and the heroine of the novel—a prominent artist who'd been a daughter of poverty—came to her mind. It could not happen to her. She was only Majlinda.

When Majlinda didn't say anything, the stranger added, "I'm Murat."

"Majlinda," she answered, thinking Murat was never a name she would have put to this strange man, with his sure, soft smile and his fine clothes. No, his name would have been something exotic, something... more butterflies had flown into her breast, she realized, and she pulled them out again. "How can I help you?"

"We have a number of well-to-do clients—good families who pay their housekeepers well, and we're always on the lookout for young, talented, new hands for them." The smile he wore suddenly grew softer, even more earnest, and more friendly. "And if I didn't work for them, I'd still enjoy talking to the prettiest girl in town."

The butterflies came back a hundredfold. Majlinda blushed wildly, even as her eyes narrowed in the sort of delighted mock-suspicion that sometimes answers wanted praise. Softly, Majlinda asked, "What is it like?"

"Good, honest work," explained Murat. He had stepped closer to her over the course of the conversation, and now he stood right across the counter from her; she could have reached out and touched his hand, which rested on the countertop, and she was tempted to. "Nine, ten hours a day, some of it when the family is there. Enough money to send some home."

*To send some home*, Majlinda thought. She could help her father.

"I didn't mean that," she said. "The cities, tell me about the cities." She had seen Tirana when she was very young, and she remembered it dimly. It had seemed exciting, though not so exciting as the cities she'd read about or as some of the ones on television.

Murat kept on his earnest, easy smile, and she found her own hand

had crept slowly forward to rest near the middle of the counter. The man was shaking his head gently, the way her father would when he was haggling, before he closed a particularly pleasant trade. “Beautiful,” he said, “like the cool after a gentle rain in summer, and well-built. Italian cities—” he cocked his head pleasantly to one side. “The cities of Italia are like none other on earth: millennia of craftsmen built beauty to last, and it’s still there. But they’re young, too. Filled with accomplished men and middle-aged heiresses and strong young men and women, the sort who build futures and work every day at something—” he looked around her father’s store, over the tired wooden floor and the old shelves littered with curiosities, and Majlinda felt woefully inadequate, felt like she was surrounded by darkness and dust and failure and Murat was the only bright thing in the room. “Something that’s more than a store in a mountain town.”

Her hand touched his now—his still near him, hers reaching across the counter—and the tingling of her fingers at the touch frightened her, that he might pull away; but he didn’t. No longer smiling, he ran his eyes appraisingly over her face, and she wondered if he liked what he saw. She hoped he liked what he saw. These might be the eyes of a rescuer, she thought: of the hard, strong, independent man who swept the heroine off her feet. Majlinda was not a heroine, yet; he would make her one. She swallowed at the thought.

“You’re insulting my home,” she said quietly.

“No,” he said, nearly as softly as she, but more firmly. “Your home is beautiful, with the mountains, and the sea, and you. But there are things more beautiful still, and more exciting: city lights and dancing, the theater and the quick pulse of opportunity. Beautiful new friends who will understand you like no one here does. Places where anyone—even a young girl from Albania—can make a good life. If she is brave enough to try.”

“My father,” Majlinda whispered hoarsely. She took a deep breath, summoned her resolve, and spoke more clearly: “My father would worry for me. He needs me here.”

But Murat only tilted his head gently, raising his eyebrows ever-so-slightly. “You’ll help him more by being there,” he said with perfect assurance. “And it will be safe enough for even his approval.” He rubbed his thumb along the back of her hand softly.

“He won’t trust you,” she said.

Murat smiled. “If you say yes, a woman will come—Odetta. She’ll



explain how everything works, and he will trust her.”

Majlinda sucked in her lips thoughtfully, bringing to her cheeks dimples that were usually hidden. She pulled her hand from Murat’s and ran it gently through her long hair, wondering if anyone could convince her father to let her go, wondering if she could really be so lucky, if this amazing thing could be happening to her. Her eyes came to rest on the old glass door at the front of the shop.

Her father would be back soon, returning from the liquor store. Tonight he would be the same as he’d been every night for the past two months. She knew that, now—she could no longer lie to herself about what would happen come nightfall, about how he would stumble into her room and say she was like her mother, say he was sorry and maybe try to nibble on her ear, or run an arm down her side. For the first time in her memory, it felt that the night had escaped into the day through more than her father’s eyes, and she was surrounded by it. Murat was the only bright thing in this nightmare of a store, the only thing undimmed by her father’s drinking and the now-unbearable smallness of a mountain town. Murat was offering her a way to escape the night and to save her father, and how could she say no?

She swallowed, and she answered him, “I think that I should like that very much.”

## Chapter 2

# A Way Out

THE DAYS PASSED SLOWLY. The dry, clear Albanian summer was beautiful in a way the rest of the world might have envied, and Majlinda spent what spare time she had on the shores of the river Besim, hiding from the thought of her father. If you followed the river far enough its tiny twinkling waters would feed into the Seman, and that would run westward down to the small coastal plain and to the sea. Majlinda would think of that, sometimes, wondering what she would find when she crossed the sea to Italy.

Better men than Valdrin, she thought, with his broad shoulders and his soft kisses and his leaving town a year ago—men like the nice stranger with the smooth shirt. Valdrin was the only boy Majlinda had ever kissed, but the stranger washed her old thoughts of him away. “Murat,” she would say, playing with the name loosely on her tongue.

Sometimes she would read from the few books her father sold in his store—gardening books, some of them, or Western romances. The latter were fairly new: her father had ordered one by accident a few months ago, and to his surprise it had sold quickly. The heroines were stubborn, powerful women in great cities, and the men were rich, strong heroes who inevitably fell in love with the women and took them off to exotic places for weeks on end. Majlinda didn’t understand why the women would leave the cities, but she liked the men.



It was raining when Odeta came. She walked into the store like a flower grows amid weeds: bright and bold and meticulous. Her silver-lined pendant and small, studded earrings were elegant but not gaudy,

and the light blue fabric of her shawl seemed the same. She was tall but not too tall, fair-spoken but not pretentious, and cosmopolitan, but with an unassuming smile that charmed even Majlinda's father.

Charmed him, that is, until she explained why she had come: "It's a wonderful career for a young woman," Odeta was saying, holding papers in front of her and tapping them reassuringly, when Majlinda's father realized what she meant. His eyes darted suddenly, fearfully to Majlinda. "The money is good," Odeta added, "and the work isn't too hard—it's a little repetitive at times, but the money makes up for that and she can vary her routine a bit."

Majlinda had known her father would look at her, so she was hard at work cleaning the store's shelves, seemingly oblivious to the woman who came seeking her. Slowly, the fear on her father's face was replaced: a resignation seemed to grow downwards from the worry-lines written above his eyes, a resignation mixed with suspicion and maybe—just maybe—the slightest of hopes.

## River of Innocents

IN A WORLD of stolen children and broken dreams, the seventeen-year-old Majlinda struggles to hold on to her humanity. She has no control over her life or even over her own body, yet where people are disposable, where rape is part of the normal day, and where guards watch her every move, Majlinda strives to create a family out of the stolen children around her and to give them hope when all they know is fear.

RIVER OF INNOCENTS is a novel about that hope and that terrible fear, about ideals in the face of despair, about the strength we find in ourselves when others need us, and about slavery as it is. If we are to end today's slavery, we must first know of it; here is the story of Majlinda's long struggle to be free.

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