



HIDDEN

the true story of a modern-day child slave

GIRL

SHYIMA HALL

WITH LISA WYSOCKY



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To Mark Abend, for helping me navigate life in the United States, for his assistance in helping me raise awareness of basic human rights, and for his dedication to end slavery in our world.—S. H.

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—S.

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—L.



CHAPTER ONE

Everyone has a defining moment in his or her life. For some it is the day they get married or have a child. For others it comes when they finally reach a sought-after goal. My life, however, drastically changed course the day my parents sold me into slavery. I was eight years old.

Before that fateful day I was a normal child in a large family in a small town near Alexandria, Egypt. Growing up in a poor neighborhood in Egypt is nothing like life for kids in America. Like many who lived in the community I was raised in, our family was quite poor. I was the seventh of eleven children, many of whom were much older, and to this day I can't recall the names of all of my brothers and sisters.

We moved many times when I was a child, but the last home I lived in with my family was on a downtown second-story apartment. It was tiny, just two rooms that we shared with two other families, and there was not room during the day for everyone to be inside. At night our family slept together in a single room, and the two other families shared the second room. Our family slept on blankets on the floor, as we weren't rich enough to have beds. There was one bathroom for everyone—including the people who lived in the other three units in the building.

I know my parents were happy once—I had seen photos of them laughing on the beach, and with their arms around each other, photos taken in the first years of their marriage. The parents I knew, though, didn't speak to each other. Instead, they yelled. And I never once saw them hold hands or embrace.

My dad worked in residential construction, possibly as a bricklayer, but he was often absent from our home for weeks at a time. When Dad did show up, he acted in a way that I now know is abusive. He was a loud, angry, belligerent, unreasonable man who beat us whenever he was displeased, which was often. My father eventually spent more and more time at his mother's, but this was not necessarily a bad thing, as life was calmer when he was not around.

Even though Dad beat us, there were good times with him too. A number of times he held me in his arms and told me how lucky he was to have me. It was during those times that I felt completely loved, and my own love for my dad would be strong.

But then he'd flaunt other women in front of us, and in front of my mother. Outside we'd see him flirting with women. Even as young as I was, I knew instinctively that was wrong. Plus, I could see the grim line of my mother's mouth and the sadness in her eyes. Unfortunately, in our neighborhood there were any number of women who thought nothing of spending private time with another woman's husband. Most of the men I saw acted just as my dad did. It is sad to me that that kind of behavior was accepted.

Every time my dad came home, I hoped he would be different, but he never was. I hated waking up in the morning to hear my parents fighting, and that's why I was never too unhappy when he left to go back to his mother's house.

I didn't like my father's mother, because she was as mean and bitter as he was. I did not know the rest of his family well enough to know if they were like that too. His family members did not like my mother and rarely came to see us. On the rare occasion when we visited his mother's home, my grandmother asked him in front of us about other women that he spent time with, and she made it a point to tell us how awful our mother was, even when our mother was present. I never understood that because my mother was our rock. She was the backbone of our family and was the person who made sure we had what few clothes and food that we did have.

I don't know why my mother married my dad. Neither of their families approved of the match, but in the early years they had a good life near my mother's family in Alexandria. They had a nice home, four children, and were in love. Then an earthquake hit, and everything they had was reduced to rubble.

My mom and dad did not have the mental strength to move on from that level of disaster, for they never got their lives back together after that. Life began to spiral downward, and by the time I came along on September 29, 1989, my family was living in poverty in a slum.

When I was young, my mother was constantly sick, tired, and pregnant. I was later diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis (RA), when I was in my teens, and I think my mother may have had it too because genetics play a big part in who ends up with RA.

Rheumatoid arthritis is a long-term autoimmune disease that causes inflammation of the joints and surrounding tissues. Wrists, fingers, knees, feet, and ankles are most commonly affected, but RA can affect organs, too. The disease begins slowly, usually with minor joint pain, stiffness, and fatigue. Morning stiffness is common, and joints may feel warm, tender, and stiff when not used for a while. It is not an easy disease to live with, and it must have been even harder for my mother, who had few resources and who had to care for her many children.

In Egypt many children do not go to school. It is legal there for children to stop school and begin work when they are fourteen years old. Only families that need money force their children to begin working at that age, but the families that struggle the most don't send their kids to school at all. We were one of those families. I never went to school and never learned to read or write. (I did both much later in life, after I was freed.) I had four younger siblings, and my role in the family was to care for them while my parents worked.

To my knowledge only one of my sisters ever attended school. She was the fourth child in our family, and my mother's parents were raising her. Except during holidays, I never saw her. This sister led a completely different life from the rest of us. She even went to college, which was unheard of for people of our status in Egypt. I am not sure why this sister lived with our grandparents, but it might be because she was the youngest of my parents' four children when the earthquake hit. Maybe my grandparents offered to take her temporarily to help out while my parents got back on their feet, and it turned into a more permanent arrangement.

The two oldest of my siblings were twin girls. One twin left early on to get married, and I never saw much of her after that. It was as if she'd jumped at her first opportunity to escape our family. The other twin, Zahra, was the wild child in our family. She was always getting into trouble, which may have been why my parents sent her to work for a wealthy family who lived several hours away.

When it came to my brothers, I'm not sure what they did. I know that some of my older brothers went to school, because they got up every morning, gathered their books, and walked to the school that was not too far from our house. At least I think that's what they did most days. Other days they could have had jobs or have been carousing on a street corner somewhere. I wish I had thought to ask my brothers to teach me to read and write, but for whatever reason, that thought never came into my head.

My oldest brother, Hassan, was born between the twins and the sister who lived with our grandparents, and I know his name because it was the surname that I was born with. I was born Shyima El-Sayed Hassan, and my brother was Hassan Hassan. "El-Sayed" was my mother's maiden name, and it was common practice in Egypt then to use the mother's maiden name as a child's middle name. I am sorry to say that while I can guess, I am not 100 percent sure about the names of my other siblings.

I do know that the two siblings who came between the sister who lived with our grandparents and me were boys. They were my brothers, but I didn't like them much. I was too young to know much about Hassan, but these two boys were turning out to be much like our father. They were rude, loud,

and demanding, but what I recall most about them was that when they paid any attention to me, the attention consisted of inappropriate touching.

No one had ever talked to me about not letting others touch my private parts. In fact, I wasn't even sure it was wrong when my brothers did. I am not sure when it started, maybe when I was around five or six. The touches made me feel bad inside, and I avoided the boys whenever I could. I never knew my mother knew what the boys were doing, but I think that she didn't. I didn't tell her, because she didn't know it was wrong. Familial relationships were murky to me, and I didn't know anything about appropriate boundaries.

Since then I have wondered if, after I left, they touched any of my younger sisters as they had me. My older sisters were old enough—and not around enough—to not let them get away with that. At least I hope that is the case. But that is the thing about abusers: They choose vulnerable people.

There was a time, however, when one of my brothers saved me. I was about seven, and we had been playing on some hay bales that were stacked near our apartment. I didn't have any shoes on, and when I jumped off the stack of hay onto the ground, I landed on the edge of a sheet of glass and cut off all the toes on my right foot. I must have been in shock; I didn't even notice until another kid said, "How did that happen to your foot?" There was little blood at that point. Sometimes when amputations occur there is so much shock to the body that the body draws blood away from the area for a time. Apparently that is what happened to me.

One of the oddest things about this story is that I was not freaked out. After the accident I went around and picked up my toes. Then a neighbor kid grabbed me and carried me to my brother, who put me in a litter-type carrier. A litter is a large fabric sling that has long poles attached to the sides that extend in front of and behind the sling. Two people, one in front and one behind, stand between the poles and pick them up. Then the people carry the litter as they run to a destination. This was a common type of transportation in our town.

Nothing hurt until the people carrying the litter began to head to the hospital. Then the blood started to flow and I became petrified with fear and pain. The only things I recall of the hospital itself are the bed I lay on and that the bed was in an enclosed room, rather than being in the open. But the surgery to reattach my toes stays in my mind, as they did it without any anesthesia. You can imagine how painful that was! A nurse held my squirming body down as the doctors worked on my foot. Their faces were masked, which meant all I could see of them was the concern in their eyes.

I was terrified that I would die. The pain of the procedure was far greater than anything I had ever experienced, and after, when I saw the scary amount of my blood on the surgical towels that had been used during the operation, I thought I might faint.

Right after the operation I went home, although I am not sure how I got there. Then I stayed off my foot for a long time. When I started walking again, my dad said, "Do you want to lose your toes again? They are not healed. Sit down." That his words have stuck in my head must mean that he was home for part of that time. I know that my mom changed the wrap on my foot several times. I must have gone back to a doctor to get the stitches removed, but I do not remember any of that. Today I have all of my toes, but only two of them work normally—my big toe and the toe next to it.

My life in Egypt was like that—simple happiness interrupted by unimaginable tragedy. It was a very unsafe world. But it was my home.

• • •

While I never connected with my older brothers and sisters, I adored my younger siblings. Closest in age to me was a boy, then a girl and another boy, then my baby sister. When the first three of my four younger siblings were born, a midwife came, and the rest of us were sent out of the one room we lived in. But my youngest sister came into this world on a day when my mother and I were in our apartment.

while the rest of our family had gone to visit relatives to celebrate a holiday. When my youngest sister was born, my mother lay on a blanket while I guided the baby's head out. My mother instructed me to pull the head, but not too hard. I think my attachment to this younger sister was strong because I was there during her birth.

After my sister was born, my mom said, "Go down to the neighbors, and one of the women there will come to help." That was a big thing, because most of the people in our neighborhood were mean to my mother. I think between my mother's unsuccessfully trying to correct my brothers' behavior and having eleven children, other people looked down on her. And, as she behaved with my dad, my mother never stood up for herself with the neighbors. Instead she just took their verbal abuse. She forgave people all the time and often said, "You can't stay mad at people."

I hated that my mother allowed others to treat her poorly, and I wondered if she allowed people to steamroll her at work, too. My mother never said much, and when she did, she was soft-spoken. It was not in her nature to be mean. Instead she took the negative behavior people dished out to her.

As for my older brothers and sisters, they were away from our home for long periods of time. My mother might have been in contact with them when they were gone, but if so, she never mentioned it to me. I might not see a family member for months (or years), and then one day, poof, there they were. When I got to see my older sisters on holidays, especially the sister who was being raised by my grandparents, I was glad to see they were stronger women than my mother was. Holidays were about the only days I got to interact with my older sisters, and I paid close attention to what they said and did. I hoped that someday I could find that kind of strength for myself. Little did I know that I would need it sooner rather than later.

• • •

Though my family moved many times, each place we lived in was much the same. Each home was in a run-down two- or three-story apartment building in the middle of town, with anywhere from four to twelve units in the building. Once, we were kicked out of an apartment in the middle of the night for a failure to pay rent.

"Gather your things," my mother said, and we did. There wasn't much. That night my mother, my two older brothers, all of my younger siblings, and I slept in the street because we had no car and nowhere to go. The next day we walked what seemed like forever until we got to another apartment that was much like the last.

I can look back now and see how hard that must have been on my mother. With the continuous pregnancies—close to a dozen children—and her being ill, the many moves added to the stress of her life. My mother was well spoken, and I believe that she was an educated woman. I know that she had a job, but if I ever knew what she did, I have long forgotten.

One day my mother tried to enroll me in school. I must have been no more than seven years old at the time. I don't know what motivated her to do that, but I was excited about the possibility. My older sister who lived with my grandparents went to school, and she was smart. I wanted to be just like her. But, when we got to the school, we were told that I was too old. Too old? How can seven be too old to go to school? It may have been that there was no room at that particular school, or that it was during the middle of the school year and they didn't want to add a new student right then, but the result was that I cried for the rest of the day.

Since then I have met a lot of kids who complain about having to go to school. What if they never had the opportunity to get an education? What if they never learned to spell or count, or never learned anything about history or geography? How would these people who complain about going to school get through life?

Not being able to go to school broke my heart, and I was jealous that my brothers had the

opportunity to learn. I was jealous of the entire process, from getting up in the morning and getting dressed, to them coming home in the afternoon to do their homework. Knowing that I would not have the chance to be part of this left me dejected for days. The only thing that pulled me out of it was my younger brothers and sisters.

From the time I was about five years old I was in charge of our apartment while my mother worked during the day. I helped my mother with the daily tasks of the household: sweeping, washing, cooking and overseeing my two younger brothers and the first of my younger sisters. My younger siblings were everything to me. They were my world, and I loved them from the bottom of my heart.

Our mother was often gone all day, and when that happened, she locked us in our one room of the apartment. Then we might play dress-up. We used my mother's clothes and the clothes of my older sisters, although I'm not sure they ever knew this. We often played hide-and-seek under the blankets on the floor. Or we might play "good guy, bad guy," which was our equivalent of cops and robbers.

I'm not sure why our mother locked us in, but I can make a guess. The neighborhood we lived in was not safe. We lived in a center section of town where there were stabbings or shootings every now and then. And from my earliest days I knew not to speak to strangers. The streets were often busy, and there was the usual noise and activity that occurs when many people live close together. Some of that activity was unsavory, and when our mom thought the neighborhood was unsettled and something might happen, she locked us in. Our neighborhood was small, and news traveled fast. If we knew something like that was going on, we stayed inside. On some days when we were playing outside, friends or neighbors suggested that I get my siblings off the street. Then I'd hurry to round them up and take them to our apartment. On safer days we hung out outside, played games on the street, and moved to the side only when a car came by.

When I wasn't playing with my brothers and sisters, I kept busy cooking and cleaning. I washed our clothes by hand in a bucket. It was a lot of work, but I washed only the clothes that were absolutely filthy, and it helped that none of us had much to wear. I usually had whatever I was wearing, plus a T-shirt and pants, and then a dress for holidays. All of our clothes were hand-me-downs, and by the time the clothes got to me, they were pretty worn. But I didn't mind. No one in our neighborhood had a lot, and I was no different from anyone else I knew.

We usually had food for dinner, but not always. When we had food, it was rice or bread, and once in a while, meat. If there was money for a few potatoes, we went to a market some distance away to get them. When we got home, my mom would boil the potatoes and we'd share them for dinner. On a good day my mother would make a special recipe of grape leaves stuffed with rice. (Recipe in the back of the book!) Even though my mother often had to modify it because we did not have all of the ingredients, this was a treat!

Most days we ate two meals, and occasionally we might have had fruit or vegetables similar to those eaten here in the United States. I do know that I felt hungry during much of my childhood.

While I was glad to have food, I was even happier on the rare occasions when I got to take a shower. We had only one bathroom for the four apartments in our building, so bathing was not a regular thing. Our bathroom had to be shared by more than twenty people, and a portable heater warmed our water. On top of that we had to have money to buy oil to heat the water and had to carry all of our water, including our drinking and bathing water, from a well that was a long distance from our apartment. This was because we had no running water. For those reasons no one took long showers, although I often had to wait in a long line to use the toilet.

When we slept, we had a blanket under us and a blanket over us. There were no pillows and no designated sleeping places. That's why I always ended up sleeping in a different part of the room next to a different person. During summer months it got hot in that room, so hot that I could not sleep. I would toss and turn, sticky with sweat, before getting up in the middle of the night to open our one window.

I wore the same clothes for sleeping that I wore during the day. There was no such thing as pajamas in our family, and most times the next day I'd wear the same clothes I had worn the day, and the night before.

Then there was the rain. It seemed to me that there was a lot of it. And because our streets were not paved, the hard-packed dirt quickly turned to mud. There often were rivers of mud streaming down the street in front of our apartment. I hated that, because it meant I'd have more clothes to wash in my bucket and a lot more water to haul to wash the clothes in.

But I had some fun, too.

Some of my earliest remembrances are of playing marbles with my siblings out on the street. To play, we drew a circle in the dirt, or outlined a circle on the street with chalk. Then each of the players put some marbles inside the circle. When it was my turn, I'd take a slightly larger marble and try to knock some of the others out of the circle. Any marbles that I knocked out, I got to keep. I had a lot of marbles!

I also had a good time getting dressed up in my dress to visit relatives. These visits were usually with members of my mother's family. We had to visit secretly, though, as my dad forbade us to visit my mother's relatives. Often we went on the train to Alexandria and then walked a long way to my grandparents' house, but once in a while my uncle picked us up in his car. In either case, my mother would whisper to us, "Shhh. Don't say anything about this." We never did.

My maternal grandmother and grandfather were warm and loving, and their delight in seeing us was evident. There was always a lot of food and laughter when we visited. My grandmother was the most wonderful, caring lady, and my grandfather always gave us money for the candy store next door. When he passed away from complications related to alcoholism, I was saddened beyond anything I had ever known. I couldn't have been more than seven years old.

There were many aunts, uncles, and cousins whom we visited at my grandparents' house, although I no longer remember any of their names. We had many happy times there. When we visited, I felt as if everything was right in my world. And you know what? Everything was right. What it comes down to is that no matter how poor we were, how absent or abusive my father was, how hard I had to work, I was a happy child.

Despite our poverty, I was happy. I understand that some of that feeling was the unbridled joy of being a child, but the other reason for my happiness was love. Even though by American standards I was a neglected child, in those days I loved and was loved. It was all I knew. My younger siblings and I had formed an especially tight bond, and I adored looking out for them and being with them. Life was good.



CHAPTER TWO

My life with my family seems long ago, and my memories of that time feel far away. But there are details I will never forget. The way the dust flew up from the streets whenever a car passed, the feel of the hot dirt under my bare feet when I played outside, the sounds of the children in my neighborhood laughing, the way the colors on the clothes we hung outside to dry faded in the harsh sun.

That is the thing about memories of my early life. Some moments are etched into my mind clearly and I see them in my mind as if they happened just yesterday. Other moments are fuzzy and vague and yet others I have no recollection of. I have learned to hold close and treasure the positive memories and the good feelings they give me.

One day our entire household was in an uproar because one of my older sisters had been dismissed from her job in a shameful manner. I was eight years old by this time, and my sister Zahra, one of the twins, had been working for some time for a wealthy man and his wife in Egypt's capital city of Cairo. Our town near Alexandria was several hours north and west of Cairo by car, and after Zahra went to work in Cairo, I did not see her much. Not that I had seen her much before. Zahra was quite a bit older than I was—when I was eight, she could have been anywhere from sixteen to twenty, or maybe even older—and the age difference between us, and her frequent absences from our home, had made bonding next to impossible.

My parents had arranged for Zahra to work for this family, and while she had been paid a pittance (which my mother had picked up every month), she'd technically been held in bondage. I later learned that Zahra had never had days off, had not been able to leave the home of her employers unescorted and without permission, and had had to endure all sorts of physical and verbal abuse. My sister had essentially worked from sun up to sun down.

In Egypt it is not unusual for a poor family to make a contract like this with a richer family. I think the contract my parents made with this family said that Zahra was supposed to work for them for ten years, and she was into the contract for only two or three years when she was "fired." When we learned Zahra had been dismissed, there was a lot of yelling. And on this day my father's yells were exceptionally irate.

A few days later my mother, my youngest sister, and I went to visit Zahra's former employers in Cairo. I was the oldest girl living at home, so I often traveled with my mother. Most of the travel was to the market or to help her with errands near our apartment. But my baby sister and I had occasionally accompanied our mother when she'd go to pick up Zahra's "pay." On a few of those trips I saw the family's twin boys, who were younger than I was, and their youngest daughter, who was about my age.

Few things stick in my mind from our trip to see Zahra's former employers, but I do know that I stood in the enormous bedroom of the woman of the house as I held my baby sister. I could not have loved that little girl more if she had been my own child. I am sad to say that I no longer recall her name.

On that day there was another lady in the room. I came to understand that Nebit was a relative of the employer family, and that her family lived in that huge house too. The first woman was lying in her bed, and she told my mom that my sister had stolen money from them. More than my family could ever pay back. My mother had already confirmed this fact with my sister and knew the accusation would be true.

“You can’t pay back what your girl stole,” said the lady in Arabic. “So you can either provide u with someone else to work to repay the debt or we’ll call the police.”

Tears leaked from my mother’s eyes. I stood, silent, holding back my wild emotions. I felt afraid of this lady’s threat, and sad for my mother’s tears.

Then the woman said, “I can train the young one from the ground up, and we won’t have these adult issues of stealing.”

From what I could gather from the rest of the conversation, the contract my parents had made with this family was that my sister was supposed to have lived in this home and helped with the cooking and cleaning. Then I heard my mother agree that the fair thing for everyone was for another girl to work in Zahra’s place.

“All right. It’s a deal,” the woman said in Arabic.

The pit of my stomach lurched when I realized the girl they were talking about was me.

Then my mother began to talk about me as if I were nothing more than a piece of furniture, a commodity. How could she talk about me in this callous manner? Didn’t she love me anymore? A black hole formed in the core of my being as I realized I was going to have to leave my mother, my siblings, my home, my life. I had rarely been outside of my neighborhood and had certainly never been around strangers this far from home. I was confused and began to cry hard enough to shake my whole body.

When we are young, it often is the emotion of an experience that stays with us the longest. A child might not remember the details of a bad dream, but the feeling of terror the dream brings can remain for a lifetime. That’s how that day is for me. The feeling of abandonment is almost as fresh today as it was fifteen years ago, when I was eight. I had not had much experience in life, but I knew that families were supposed to stick together. Parents were supposed to nurture and support their children, not send them to strangers.

I have spent many hours wondering about my parents’ motivation. While Zahra had been earning a tiny amount of money every month that had gone to my parents, my employment in the house would be for the sole purpose of paying off her debt. This was not just the debt from the money she’d stolen; it was a debt of honor. My sister had caused this family grief, and to make up for that I was expected to become their domestic slave.

Why did my mother not say no? Why did she not fight for me? I was eight! Were we so destitute that my family could no longer feed me? Did my mother think my prospects were better living with this woman and her family as their slave than they would be if I lived at home? Was our family’s “honor” that much more important than I was? Had my parents been told the truth about what my position in the home would be? Did my father even care for me? Why did he allow this?

In recent years I have had a lot of therapy to better deal with the issues these questions have raised, and I have mostly made my peace with what happened. But on that day, when I was an eight-year-old child, I felt thrown away, and I was terrified that I would never see my home again. Unfortunately, my mother was right.

• • •

My mother hugged me tightly before I said a sad good-bye to my baby sister. My mother’s final words to me were “Be strong.”

On one hand, I could not believe she was leaving me there. On the other, I held out hope that I was going to stay for only a few days, a week at the most. In either case I felt betrayed. I was too young to understand that slavery was not an unusual situation for Egyptian families of our lower economic status. For my parents, for this family, this was part of life.

With tears falling down my face, I looked out the window as my mother walked down the long

driveway with my beloved baby sister. I wanted to savor every last drop of my family, so I watched until my mother turned a corner and I could no longer see her.

Neither my mother nor I knew when we walked into that house that day that I would not return home with her. Because of that I had nothing with me. No clothes, not even a familiar blanket or photo of my family. I had nothing, and I was devastated.

I never learned what happened to Zahra after I left, but I imagine that my father beat her—that is, he may have if she ever came home when he was there. It is possible that she did not see him for some time, or that she was sold to someone else. I'm fairly certain she was an adult by this time, though, and may have had more options. However, in the aftermath of her theft, Zahra was "tainted goods" which would have made "employment," or marriage to a quality man, difficult. Plus, the reason Zahra had been sold into slavery in the first place might have been because she was the family troublemaker. Maybe my mother and father had misguidedly thought it would settle her down and help her grow up. Or maybe they'd valued the money their child produced more than they'd valued the child.

I don't know if Zahra stole money from the family because she'd planned to run away and escape her bondage, or if she stole it because she knew that the act would cause her to be returned to our family. I tend to think the first scenario holds the truth, but I may never know for sure.

These unanswered questions are typical of my life, and of the lives of many children (and adults) who are held in bondage. Slaves often lose track of family and places, and memories fade or become distorted. Unfortunately, there are thousands of us—children and adults who live their lives in slavery in Egypt, Europe, and even in the United States.

According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, human trafficking is the fastest-growing criminal industry in the world today. There are two different forms of human trafficking: in one a person is recruited under false circumstances, and in the second a person is sold without his or her knowledge or consent. The latter is what happened to me, and is slavery in its truest sense. A few years ago I was stunned to learn from a 2005 Trafficking in Persons Report by the State Department in Washington that as many as eight hundred thousand people are trafficked across international borders every year. Half of those victims are believed to be children.

Most people think slavery in the United States was stamped out during the Civil War, but that's not true. Legalized slavery is gone, but today as many as 17,500 people who are held in bondage are illegally brought into our country every year. And it is estimated that there are more than forty-three thousand slaves in the United States at any given time. Even worse, there are as many as twenty-seven million slaves globally.

In the United States only about 2 percent of those who are held in bondage are eventually rescued. I find that number appalling, but it is a higher percentage than in other countries. Many of the rescues here come through tips that neighbors give to their local police departments. A neighbor has a feeling something is not quite right next door, and after long deliberation they finally call.

But in Cairo there was no nosy neighbor, and no one called. No one knew I was there, because the estate these people lived on was huge and the mansion was far away from other houses. A few days, or maybe a week, after my mother left me in the home of these strangers, my new cruel reality began to dawn on me on a deeper level—that I was not going home. Ever. I became hysterical and insisted that someone call my mother and tell her to come pick me up.

That was difficult for several reasons. First, my family did not have a telephone. Second, my captors, as I came to think of the man and his wife, were not about to call my mother. Instead, I pleaded with and enlisted the help of some of the other people who worked in the house. There were several, all adults, who worked and lived in the household in various capacities, and they were kind to me. It took some time, but eventually I found my mother on the other end of the phone line. I was so happy to hear her voice that I was probably incoherent. But the tone of her voice shattered me.

“You are good. You do good for our family. You must stay there,” she said. “If you do not, bad things will happen to you.”

I could barely breathe. My mother had truly abandoned me. Didn't she want me? How had this happened? What had I done to deserve this? Of course the answer was: nothing. I had done nothing but be a happy young girl who loved her family. I found that for me the old saying “bad things sometimes happen to good people” was true.

When I hung up the phone, I turned around and looked at my coworkers in dismay. This life of slavery, of bondage, was going to be my life. Forever. I crumpled to the floor and sobbed.

It turned out that I was not held in bondage forever, although every day I was a slave was a day to be counted. I was one of the lucky ones; I was one of the fortunate 2 percent. I was rescued, but that wouldn't happen for a number of years. First I had many tears to shed. I had to find inner resources that I didn't know existed, and I would have to travel halfway around the world before the freedom I longed for was mine.

Every day when I woke up in the home of my captors, the first thing I thought of was the home and beloved family I had left behind. And, whenever I had a free moment during the day—which wasn't often—my family popped back into the forefront of my mind.

I'd had many friends in our neighborhood. I had loved my mother, my younger siblings, our neighbors, and my extended family. I had loved my life and my sense of belonging, and I hated that when I was sent to live with my captors, my parents allowed all that to be taken away.



CHAPTER THREE

Abdel Nasser Eid Youssef Ibrahim and his now former wife, Amal Ahmed Ewis-ab Motelib, were my captors. I addressed them as sir and ma'am, as I was not allowed to call them by their names, but in private I did not give them that kind of respect. Instead I thought of them as The Mom and The Dad. They called me "stupid girl."

I would soon realize that The Mom always had a sour expression on her face. Nothing anyone ever did was good enough for her. She was always displeased, and always entitled. The Dad was on the phone so much, I am surprised it did not attach itself permanently to his ear. He always argued with whomever he was talking to, and his eyebrows knitting together accompanied his angry voice. He also touched his forehead often in an effort to help himself relax. In retrospect, his face was not anywhere near as mean as his wife's.

My captors wore Western-style clothes, and by that I do not mean cowboy clothes but clothes that the average person would wear here in the United States. For them it was all about the brand. If a specific exclusive designer would impress other people, those were the clothes that they wore.

The Mom and The Dad and their five children lived in a five-story, gated, brick home on sprawling grounds. I thought the house looked like a castle. I did not go out of the house much, but when I did each time I was amazed at the size of the property. To get there you would turn off the main road onto a long drive and pass several houses that were spaced far apart. These were houses for groundskeepers and others who were employed on the estate. You'd then pass a large and beautiful garden that looked like something you'd see in a famous painting.

The main house had a seventeen-car garage and an elevator, and on the first floor was an indoor pool with a retractable roof that opened to the sky. The family accessed the pool from either the elevator or a broad set of stairs, but I had to use a separate staircase, one that descended from the kitchen and was reserved for the help.

The rest of the first floor was furnished to impress guests and was filled with expensive sofas, chairs, and tables, with luxurious lighting and lots of knickknacks. Except for using the pool, none of the family hung out on the first floor, and the children of the family were specifically banned from that area. Instead, The Dad rented the space out to film companies and to corporations that held big parties and other events there.

The second floor held several large bedrooms. The Mom's brother and his wife and kids had room there, and the master bedroom was large enough to be a house by itself. There was a huge round bed in the middle of the room, with a sitting area by a large window. The master bathroom had two bathtubs and what seemed like acres of marble.

My captors had five children, and the two youngest were identical twin boys who were about five when I came into the household. The boys had a cute Winnie-the-Pooh-themed room on the second floor, with bunk beds; and the youngest daughter, who was close to me in age, had a beautiful Barbie-decorated room. To me it looked like a room a princess might sleep in.

Also on the second floor was a humungous kitchen that came fully equipped with a staff person who cooked for the family. The stairs that I was allowed to use to go from floor to floor were accessed from a corner of the kitchen.

The two oldest daughters slept on the third floor. The oldest had a weird totally black room with black walls and black carpet, while the second daughter had a room complete with posters that could have been any teen girl's room here in the United States.

Also on the third floor was a fully-equipped game room, and two huge sitting areas with televisions. The laundry facilities were on this floor too, which meant I spent a lot of time there. The fourth floor was reserved for guests and was rarely used, while the servants, myself included, slept on the fifth floor.

All of this was a culture shock for me. I couldn't believe homes and furnishings like this existed and it was hard for me to fathom that people could live in such luxury.

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A home like this required a small army of servants. There were four or five of us who lived in the house and cared for the family, but most of the others lived in separate servants quarters on the estate or came in for the day. Each of us had different "employment" arrangements. Some servants worked for a small salary, while others had room and board as part of their compensation. These servants were not slaves and could return to their homes and families when they were not working.

Those of us who lived at the house slept in bunk beds in one of two rooms on the fifth-floor attic level. Some of these people were live-in maids, while others might have been indentured servants, or were being held in bondage, like me. Unfortunately, none of the other servants thought it odd that I was enslaved with this family. It is sad that child bondage was, and still is, common enough in Egypt that most people did not think too much about it.

My life in the mansion was strange in many ways that you might not imagine. This was the first time I had ever slept in a bed, the first time I ever had a pillow, and those were novelties unto themselves. (Not that I got to enjoy sleeping much.) Next to the two servant bedrooms there was a fairly large bathroom with two sinks, a bathtub, and a separate shower.

Even though the family ate from beautiful dishes and used nice silverware, the servants always ate from paper plates, drank from red plastic cups, and used cheap plastic silverware. It was never said but it was always implied that we were not good enough to use the family's dishes.

The same went for the furniture. I was never told not to sit on any of it, but I never did because I knew I wasn't supposed to. On the rare occasion when I had more than a second to sit down during the day, I sat on a bench that was reserved for servants in the kitchen. Whether it was calculated or not, all of this combined to make me feel "less than," and isn't that how captors hope their slaves will feel? To complete the shredding of my self-esteem, I was never given any shoes to wear. Granted, everyone went barefoot inside the house, a common custom in that part of the world, but my only shoes were hand-me-down flip-flops.

Two of the women who lived in as servants were probably in their thirties. These women both had families—husbands and children—wherever home was for them. For various reasons they had fallen on hard times and worked as live-in help for The Mom and The Dad. Only on rare occasions did they go home to see their families.

The two ladies were nice and helped me a lot, especially in the first few months. I felt comfortable with them because they looked and dressed like my older sisters. In that way these two ladies reminded me of home. It is typical for Muslim women to have their hair covered with the traditional head covering, the hijab. This is a veil that covers the hair and neck and is worn in public—and in the presence of unrelated adult men—and these women covered their hair.

There was also a mother and her daughter working as servants. The daughter must have been about twenty, and didn't want to be there. I can't blame her. I didn't want to be there either. Turnover for many of the workers was high, and some stayed only a few days. There must have been several dozens of these workers who were in and out quickly during the years I was there.

We were all busy and rarely got to talk to one another during the day. At night we were too exhausted, but there was always some kind of discussion going on in the kitchen about the family-

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