

HOLDING ESTHER

Written by

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For
RiverCross-TWR

15 UNDER BRIDGE

15

Dripping water. Traffic overhead.

SARAH

I'm so cold.

ESTHER

At least it's dry here. We've spent the last two years sleeping on the cement floor at Uncle and Aunties. This isn't much different.

SARAH

Except we had a real roof.

(beat)

Esther, we can't survive out here. We've nothing to eat--

ESTHER

We had hardly anything to eat at Uncle and Aunties!

SARAH

It's more than we have now! I can go back, Esther. I know what he wants. I can do it.

ESTHER

The brothers are coming home this weekend, too. Kanye is not so bad, but Jelani--I know he does things to you.

SARAH

(murmur of memory)

ESTHER

(continuing)

Besides, after leaving like we did...Uncle would kill us.

SARAH

He wouldn't kill us. He would beat us but--

ESTHER

(determined)

We're not going back. That's not what Mama and Papa would have wanted for us.

SARAH

And you think sleeping under a bridge eating chicken bones from the garbage is what they do want for us?

ESTHER

Mama wanted me to watch out for you. I told her I would.

SARAH

But we're just girls...

ESTHER

(not fully convinced)

We can do this. No one else in this world cares about us--so we'll take care of each other. We'll never rely on anyone else again.

Beat.

SARAH

I'm scared.

ESTHER

(exhale)

Me, too.

(beat)

Here.

She takes off necklace.

ESTHER (CONT'D)

You should wear this now.

SARAH

Mama's butterfly necklace...no, she gave that to you to have.

ESTHER

You need it. Remembering will give you strength. Sometimes I just touch it and I feel better.

SARAH

But, I can't...

ESTHER

I want you to.

She clips it on her.

ESTHER (CONT'D)

There. Do you feel better?

SARAH

A little...

ESTHER

We'll start looking for more food tomorrow. C'mon, curl up next to me. It'll be warmer...

Sarah moves over to her.

Transitions to music bridge.

16

STREET CORNER

16

The girls are begging. People are walking by, but not paying attention to them.

ESTHER

Please...see how hungry my sister is.

STRANGER

Get out of my way.

SARAH

Can you spare some money for food,
Please?

STRANGER #2

Move, girl.

People continue walking by.

ESTHER

How much do you have?

SARAH

Only the coins I found on the sidewalk. Not even enough for sugarcane. We've been out here almost a week, and we've hardly gotten anything.

(beat)

I'm so hungry.

ESTHER

We'll find you something...

(beat)

What are you looking at?

SARAH

Look, the man running the market. He has bananas.

ESTHER

We don't have enough money.

SARAH

He's talking to that lady with the tomatoes. He won't even notice.

ESTHER

Notice what?

SARAH

If we take one.

ESTHER

We don't steal.

SARAH

We also don't run away from home and eat food from a garbage pile--but we're doing that!

ESTHER

Sarah...

SARAH

Just wait here. I'll be right back.

She walks off.

ESTHER

(calling after her)

Sarah, come back here.

(to self)

I don't like this...I don't like it at all...

SHOPKEEPER

(shouting, from short distance)

Hey! You! Girl! I saw that!

Sarah runs past.

SARAH

Run!

Esther follows.

ESTHER

Sarah! Just give it back!

They keep running. Shopkeeper chases them.

SHOPKEEPER

(chases after her)

Get back here, you street rat!

ESTHER

(panting)

He's coming after us!

SARAH

(panting)

Faster! We'll cut across here.

ESTHER

No! Watch out for the--!

Bus tires squeal and hit her. Sarah screams.

ESTHER (CONT'D)

Sarah...Sarah...Oh, no, no, no....

Esther runs to Sarah's side and kneels down next to her. People crowd around. Bus driver gets off bus.

BUS DRIVER

(gruffly)

Crazy girl came out of nowhere. I tried to stop. It wasn't my fault! She ran right in front of me!

RANDOM LADY

Is she dead?

ESTHER

No...no, she's breathing. Sarah...wake up. Please! Somebody help!

SHOPKEEPER

She's a thief! Stole from my shop. Little rat deserves it.

Maria makes her way through crowd.

MARIA

Excuse me...excuse me.

Reaches Esther.

MARIA (CONT'D)

What happened?

ESTHER

My sister. She got hit.

SARAH

(groans)

MARIA

She's conscious. Can you wiggle your toes, dear?

SARAH

(weakly)

Yes.

Beat. Maria does a quick examination.

MARIA

Good. Good. Can you move your arms and legs?

(beat)

Good. Doesn't seem like you broke any bones, but you have some deep cuts and lots of scratches.

Crowd begins to disperse.

ESTHER

Are you a doctor?

MARIA

No, but I've had some medical training.

BUS DRIVER

Well, let's move her out of the street. My passengers are waiting.

SHOPKEEPER

And she still owes me for the fruit she stole.

Maria digs through purse and hands him some money.

MARIA

Here. For what she took.

SHOPKEEPER

(mumbling as he leaves)

Stupid thieves. They should all get

MARIA

Let's get her up. Take her other side...that's it, now what's your name?

ESTHER

(in a hurry to leave)

Thank you for your help, we'll go now.

MARIA

Wait wait. Your.. your sister needs treatment. I know of a clinic.

ESTHER

I can't afford a clinic. Really, she's fine. We'll just go home.

MARIA

Look I won't charge you.

ESTHER
(suspicious)
It's your clinic?

MARIA
Friends of mine. Your sister is hurt. She might have a head injury. And if that leg gets infected, she'll be in serious trouble. It won't cost you.

ESTHER
(muttering)
Everything costs something.

MARIA
I was heading there now. It's only a block away. I'll help you.

SARAH
(groans)
Oh...it really hurts, Esther.

MARIA
(now knows name)
Yes, Esther. Take a look at your sister. She needs medical assistance. We'll clean her up and you can be on your way if you want.

Long beat.

ESTHER
(hesitantly)
Okay.

MARIA
Good.

ESTHER

Okay. Let's go. Take her other side, and we'll help her walk.

They each take a side of Sarah, and lift her up. Sarah winces in pain. And slowly they hobble along.

MARIA

That's it. Easy with her, Esther.

ESTHER

Who are you?

MARIA

Maria. My name is Madam Maria.

Music bridge.

17

CLINIC

17

Maria, Sarah, Esther, and Dr. Ngabire are in the examination room. Dr. Ngabire is checking on Sarah's injuries.

DR. NGABIRE

Lay back, relax. You just need some stitches in your arm, Sarah.

SARAH

(in undo panic)

No, no...don't touch me!

DR. NGABIRE

(comforting)

Okay...it's okay. I'll have my wife, Nurse Lorraine, take care of you instead. Would that be all right?

SARAH

(beat, weakly)

Yes.

Opens door.

DR. NGABIRE
(calling)
Lorraine! Lorraine, would you please
examine this child?

LORRAINE
Of course!

She comes over. Dr. Ngabire lowers his voice to talk only to her.

DR. NGABIRE
Do a general examination, please.

LORRAINE
I will.

She goes inside.

DR. NGABIRE
Esther, you stay here with your sister. I'll
be out here speaking with Madam Maria.

He closes door.

DR. NGABIRE (CONT'D)
Maria?

MARIA
Dr. Ngabire. How is Sarah?

DR. NGABIRE
(sigh)
She'll recover from the accident injuries.
I'm more concerned with the others.

MARIA
Other injuries?

DR. NGABIRE

Faded bruising and broken bones that have healed incorrectly, indicative of physical abuse, as you know.

MARIA

(sadly)

Yes.

DR. NGABIRE

And she definitely is afraid of men--which is why I had Lorraine go in there. Such fear is a worrying sign.

MARIA

Yes.

(remembering)

And thank you. You've always been so kind as to help me out with these girls.

DR. NGABIRE

I just wish I could give you better news.

Music sting.

18

CLINIC - LATER

18

Lorraine opens door to waiting area.

LORRAINE

Okay, girls, finish getting dressed, and step out when you're done.

Closes door.

MARIA

What did you find out?

LORRAINE

It certainly appears that the girls were physically abused.

MARIA

Girls? You were able to check on Esther as well?

LORRAINE

She allowed me to do a general examination, and I found many of the same injuries as Sarah had.

MARIA

What about sexual abuse?

LORRAINE

We're not able to tell at this point. I wouldn't want to traumatize them with that sort of examination. But, as you know, you'll likely find out as you get to know them better.

MARIA

If they allow me to get to know them.

LORRAINE

I told them you are trustworthy, Maria. That you'll protect them, and you provide for children like them in a safe house.

MARIA

Hopefully that will give them some reassurance.

DR. NGABIRE

Have you already documented everything, Lorraine?

LORRAINE

Yes, I completed paperwork for both of them.

Door opens. Girls come out.

MARIA

Hello, Girls. Would you like something to eat?

ESTHER

You don't have to be nice to us.

MARIA

No...I don't have to be. But I would very much like to get you something to eat.

Exterior door opens. Naomi comes in with Belia, who's moaning in pain.

NAOMI

(frantically)

Maria! Thank goodness you're here. Labor is in Belia! I mean Belia's having a laby. I mean...you know what I mean!

Belia lets out a cry.

DR. NGABIRE

(urgently)

She's four weeks early. Lorraine, help me get Belia into the examination room.

They gently move Belia.

NAOMI

(in one breath)

Her water broke and you weren't there and she was crying and I didn't know what to do...!

MARIA

Relax....breathe...

NAOMI

(still frantic, calling after her)

Yes, Belia...relax and breathe!

MARIA

No no no, I meant you, Naomi.

Door shuts to examination room. Naomi, Maria, and girls out in waiting room.

NAOMI

But I'm not the one having the baby.

MARIA

Which is why you can relax and breathe.

NAOMI

(deep breath)

MARIA

Good, and you can meet my new friends,
Esther and Sarah.

NAOMI

Oh, my. Poor dear. Looks like she got hit
by a truck.

MARIA

Of course, she didn't.

NAOMI

(apologetic)

Oh, I just meant...

MARIA

It was a bus.

NAOMI

Really? You really got hit by a bus?

SARAH

(almost laughing at Naomi's
surprise)

Yes.

MARIA

Look, I need to stay here with Belia.

SARAH

Will she be okay?

MARIA

Nurse Lorraine is an excellent midwife. But Naomi could you please take Esther and Sarah to get them something to eat?

ESTHER

Oh, no...we're fine. We'll go home.

MARIA

And where is home?

ESTHER

It's nearby. Just...around the corner.

MARIA

Do you live on the street, Esther?

ESTHER

No. It's just...why does it matter if we live on the street?

MARIA

Because it means you probably need a good meal, and we can offer you that.

ESTHER

Oh no, we can't--

MARIA

No no, I'm not asking for anything in return.

Belia screams from the other room.

MARIA (CONT'D)

I should go in there.

ESTHER

That girl--Belia--she looks...my age.

MARIA

She's twelve.

ESTHER

And...she's having a baby?

MARIA

As we speak. Excuse me.

Maria opens door. Belia screams.

Short music bridge.

19

MARIA'S HOUSE

19

Naomi is showing the girls around the house.

NAOMI

We all meet in the evenings to sing and
have a time of prayer.

(to girl there)

Elena, could you bring some bread and
juice out for these two girls?

ELENA

Yes, Auntie Naomi.

She leaves, opens door.

NAOMI

And through here is the kitchen where we
all eat.

ESTHER

So that girl lives here, too?

NAOMI

Well, yes, and the ones you saw out front jumping rope. And a few others. It's crowded, but we make room for everybody. The toilet is across the compound--

ESTHER

Why are you doing this?

NAOMI

(uh...confused)

Because you might need to know where the toilet is.

ESTHER

I mean, why do you take in these girls? Why are you helping us?

NAOMI

Because they need help. You need help don't you?

ESTHER

We can't pay you.

NAOMI

We don't expect to be paid. Now, dinner is at 6. You're staying for dinner, right?

ESTHER

Um, we weren't planning on it.

NAOMI

Well, think about it. I make a pretty good chicken stew.

Elena returns with food.

ELENA

Here's that bread and juice you wanted,
Auntie Naomi.

NAOMI

Careful, thank you, Elena.

Takes tray, hands it to girls.

NAOMI (CONT'D)

Eat up, girls.

They hesitate.

NAOMI (CONT'D)

Go on. It's okay.

They start eating and gobble it up quickly.

ESTHER

Go on Sarah...

NAOMI

Sarah you should get some rest. There's a
room with spare beds upstairs where you
can both sleep.

ESTHER

(mouth full)

Thank you. We'll leave after dinner.

NAOMI

Of course. Whatever you want.

Smash cut.

20

CLINIC EXAMINATION ROOM - LATER

20

Belia screams. In background, Belia whimpering, Lorraine offering calm words.

MARIA
(concerned, to Lorraine)
This is taking too long. Is she okay?

DR. NGABIRE
Lorraine knows what she's doing. Let her work.

MARIA
But...it seems so much more difficult than-
-

DR. NGABIRE
It is. Belia's a little girl having a baby. The baby is struggling to fit through such a small birth canal. Unfortunately, we've seen this far too often.

MARIA
So what do we do? She can't go on like this. She can't...

LORRAINE
I'm doing all that I can.

Another scream of help from Belia.

21 BEDROOM, LATE AFTERNOON

21

Sarah groans as she rolls over. Esther waits patiently at her side.

SARAH
Ooooh, that hurts.

ESTHER
Are you in pain? Do you need more water?

SARAH

(still groggy)

No...no...oh, I slept a long time. Where are we?

ESTHER

Some house. Do you remember Madam Maria and Auntie Naomi?

SARAH

Yes.

(gasp of realization)

Oh, Mama's necklace!

ESTHER

You're still wearing it. It's okay.

SARAH

(relieved)

Good.

(beat)

This is a real bed, Esther. With a real blanket.

(she smells it)

And it doesn't smell like vomit like that cloth from the garbage pile.

ESTHER

Yes...and look, Naomi gave us some clean clothes.

SARAH

Clean clothes...to keep?

ESTHER

And do you smell dinner cooking?

SARAH

(takes big sniff)

It's like when father would catch a wild chicken and mother would make stew.

ESTHER

But it's not that. You know we'll never have that again. And we promised ourselves we wouldn't trust anyone.

SARAH

You don't think we can trust them?

ESTHER

I..I just don't know what they really want.

SARAH

What could they want from us?

ESTHER

I don't know, but I know there's always a price.

(beat)

Music bridge.

22

CLINIC EXAMINATION ROOM

22

Belia is in the final stages of delivery. She's breathing heavily, groaning.

LORRAINE:

I see the baby! We're almost there.

MARIA

You're doing great, Belia. Not much longer, sweetheart.

BELIA

(whimpers)

LORRAINE

You need to push, dear.

BELIA
(groans/screams)

Cries of baby.

MARIA
You did it!

LORRAINE
A baby girl, Belia!

MARIA
Oh...she's beautiful!

LORRAINE
Here. Would you like to hold her?

Long pause.

LORRAINE (CONT'D)
Belia. This is your baby. Would you like to hold her?

Belia rolls away from her.

BELIA
Just...take her away.

Music bridge.

23 MARIA'S HOUSE, LIVING AREA, EARLY MORNING

23

Maria is telling Naomi about Belia and her baby.

NAOMI
Yawning. Oh Maria, good morning. Have you gotten any sleep?

MARIA

No it was a long night. But the baby is with us. She is tiny--but perfect in every other way.

NAOMI

How did Belia respond?

MARIA

Sadly she wasn't interested in the baby. Wouldn't even look at it.

NAOMI

How is she physically?

MARIA

Well, it was a difficult birth. Girls that young aren't meant to deliver babies. Thankfully, though, she didn't end up with a fistula.

NAOMI

What's that?

MARIA

A hole in the tissue between organs--it happens often when a child or a small woman gives birth.

NAOMI

Is it serious?

MARIA

The baby often dies, and the mother can as well. Even when they survive, it's not easy. I had one girl stay here once that had one. Because she was constantly leaking urine and stool, the poor girl always had a foul odor.

NAOMI

How terribly sad.

MARIA

Yes, none of the other girls could stand to be around her. Which, of course, only made her feel worse about herself. Girls and women with fistulas often face rejection.

NAOMI

But Belia--she's okay?

MARIA

Yes, although it wasn't an easy birth. She'll stay at the clinic for another day or so. Lorraine was going to see if she could get Belia to nurse the baby.

NAOMI

How's the baby eating now?

MARIA

Lorraine's feeding her cow's milk for now.

NAOMI

I don't understand. Why can't Belia connect with the baby?

MARIA

As you know, Belia became pregnant because she was raped. I'm sure it's hard for her to love a baby that was the result of so much pain.

NAOMI

Will she ever care for the baby? I mean, it's her child.

MARIA

Belia has difficulty connecting with anyone. Because of all she's gone through, that ability is damaged. She lived here for two months before she even said anything.

(MORE)

MARIA (CONT'D)

Not a word. We thought she was mute at first.

NAOMI

She doesn't talk much even now.

MARIA

Yes, but at least she will sometimes. It's progress.

NAOMI

So sad...it's like her whole childhood has been robbed of her.

MARIA

Well, you'll see a lot of the girls here have missed out on their childhood. Oh, are Esther and Sarah still here?

NAOMI

Yes. It's nearly breakfast time. They should be up soon.

MARIA

Do you think they'll stay long-term?

NAOMI

Esther is pretty set against it. She's concerned about Sarah's health, so they stayed last night.

MARIA

I suppose that gives us a little bit of time then.

NAOMI

It doesn't make sense to me. We're only trying to help them. Why do they treat us like we're the enemy?

MARIA

Naomi, we don't know what they've been through. But whatever it is, they've learned not to trust other people. The kindness they've received has likely been at a high cost.

NAOMI

As in sexual?

MARIA

Very often. Especially girls that age.

NAOMI

So that's it. We bandage them up, feed them, give them a place to rest, and then they leave?

MARIA

Most likely. But maybe these will be ones who stick around, or maybe we'll run into them again.

NAOMI

(dryly)

Yeah, the next time they get hit by a bus, they'll know where to come.

MARIA

Who knows. We have to take this work minute by minute, doing whatever we can for each child with whatever opportunities we've been given. If something more comes out of it, great. If not, then we at least offered some small bit of hope.

NAOMI

I don't know how you do it.

MARIA

Many, many prayers to our Heavenly Father. And knowing others in the community are praying for this work, too. I learned a long time ago I can't fix the whole world. I can only love the child in front of me.

Esther comes downstairs.

NAOMI

(quietly)

Or the one coming down the stairs.

MARIA

Hi, Esther.

ESTHER

Hi, Madam.

MARIA

You may call me Auntie Maria.
How's your sister?

ESTHER

Better. Thank you. I...um...I think we'd like to stay for a few days. Until Sarah is a bit better. If that's still all right.

MARIA

Of course. We'll go over the house rules at breakfast. For now, why don't you go help Desta in the kitchen?

ESTHER

Yes. Auntie Maria.

She goes into the kitchen.

NAOMI

Progress?

MARIA

Maybe.

(thoughtful sigh)

But it's going to take a lot of time, Naomi.
It always does.

Music bridge.

24 BEDROOM, MIDDLE OF NIGHT

24

Night sounds out open window. Deep breathing as the girls sleep. Esther makes short noises in her sleep. The dream starts out fuzzy so we know what it is, and then grows clearer.

ESTHER

Sarah, Sarah! Hurry! Run!

SARAH

Why the rush?

ESTHER

I just...I don't have a good feeling about
this place.

SARAH

Ask that man. In the big coat. Ask him for
money.

They walk up to man.

ESTHER

Excuse me, Sir. Do you have some spare--

UNCLE

What do you want?

ESTHER

Uncle Shomari!

UNCLE

You ungrateful girl. How dare you run away!

ESTHER

Run, Sarah. Get out of here!

I'll show you what happens to girls who run away....

He tightens grip and yanks at her.

ESTHER (CONT'D)

Ow! Let me go! Let me go!

Uncle laughs.

ESTHER (CONT'D)

(screams)

She wakes herself up. She's in bed in Maria's place.

ESTHER (CONT'D)

(she breathes heavily)

A dream...just a dream...

She gently shakes Sarah.

ESTHER (CONT'D)

Sarah? Sarah...are you awake?

SARAH

(sleepily)

No.

ESTHER

I'm going downstairs. To get some water. Will you be okay?

SARAH

(sleepily)

Go.

Sarah rolls over and goes back to sleep. Esther gets out of bed.

ESTHER

Just a dream.

She opens door and closes it behind her.

ESTHER (CONT'D)

Where's a light?

Maria's standing right there.

MARIA

Who's there?

ESTHER

(screams)

She kicks and flails.

ESTHER (CONT'D)

Let go of me! Don't hurt me!

Esther continues whimpering but slowly relaxes.

MARIA

Ow...shhh.

(repeating calmly)

Esther. Esther. Esther, it's okay. It's Maria.
I'm not going to hurt you. I thought I heard
you yelling.

ESTHER

Don't touch me!

MARIA

I'm sorry. I was only trying to keep you
from falling. Let me get the light.

She switches on light.

MARIA (CONT'D)

See...it's just me. You're in the hallway of my home. Your sister is recovering from her accident. You're safe here.

ESTHER

(breathes heavily, swallows)

MARIA

Are you okay?

ESTHER

(breathing slows, but just slightly)

Yes.

MARIA

Come downstairs. Where it's private. I'll make you some tea.

Music sting....

25

LIVING AREA

25

Maria pours a cup of tea, and offers it to Esther.

MARIA

Here. Take this.

ESTHER

(meekly)

Thank you.

MARIA

Oh, my Dear, you're still shaking. That must have been some nightmare.

ESTHER

I'm fine.

MARIA

Esther, you can trust me. I care about you
and your sister--

ESTHER

(bitterly)

Why would you?

MARIA

Because I know you've been through a lot.
I might not know exactly what that is. But I
know this is hard for you.

ESTHER

You don't know anything about us.

MARIA

I'd like to. But only if you want to share.

She takes a sip of tea.

ESTHER

I've done some really bad things.

MARIA

We all make mistakes.

ESTHER

(angrily)

I let my sister get defiled, how's that for a
mistake?!

MARIA

Oh, my dear child. It's not your fault.

ESTHER

(slightly calmer)

I didn't know. I should have known...

MARIA

You can't take responsibility for what someone else does. You're a child, you can't fix those things.

ESTHER

I thought he was only doing to her what he did to me...watching me. I didn't know how he was hurting her-- and with other men.

MARIA

What happened to you and your sister was wrong. You never deserved to be abused. Ever. Truly, Esther. It's not your fault.

Esther is silent.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Who was doing this to you, Esther?

Esther snaps out of trance.

ESTHER

Nothing. Never mind.

MARIA

So you ran away, to protect your sister.

ESTHER

Please. I don't want to talk about it.

MARIA

It's okay that you're scared. I understand that.

Beat.

MARIA (CONT'D)

I want to help you, Esther.

ESTHER
(urgently)
No!
(calming herself)
I don't need your help.

She noisily drops the tea back on the table.

ESTHER (CONT'D)
I'm going back upstairs.

MARIA
I'm always here to listen, Esther.

Esther runs upstairs without responding.

MARIA (CONT'D)
Patience, Maria. It always takes patience.

Music bridge.

27 UPSTAIRS BEDROOM

27

Sarah rolls over, just awakened, to see Esther awake.

SARAH
(rolling over, just waking up)
Mmmm...
(sees Esther, sleepily)
You're awake already, Esther?

ESTHER
Yes.

SARAH
I slept so well. I'm so used to Uncle coming
in at night--and waking me up.
(quieter)
Although I really haven't slept all that well
since mama and papa died anyway.

ESTHER

We need to go.

SARAH

You say that every day.

ESTHER

I said too much to Auntie Maria. Do you know what they could do, Sarah, if they found out? They could send us back to uncle!

SARAH

We won't say anything. They haven't ordered us to talk.

ESTHER

I guess we can stay a bit longer. If you promise not to say anything to them. Never trust them, Sarah. Never. We can't risk it.

SARAH

I promise.

(beat)

And I'm holding on to Mama's necklace.

Music takes us to....

THE END OF PART TWO.