

HOLDING ESTHER

Written by

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For

RiverCross-TWR

26

KITCHEN - EARLY MORNING

26

Maria is stirring up eggs in a bowl. Naomi enters.

NAOMI

You're up early this morning, Maria. I thought I'd be the one getting breakfast ready.

MARIA

I didn't sleep very well last night.

NAOMI

I heard you talking to someone and wondered if I should get up and help. And then--well, I don't really remember what happened after that so I must've fallen back asleep.

Pours eggs into pan on stove. They sizzle.

MARIA

(chuckles)

It's fine. Esther had a nightmare, but it led to an interesting discussion.

NAOMI

So, did she tell you her story?

MARIA

Not really. But she shared more than I expected for not being here very long. Normally, it would take children much longer to reveal their history. Perhaps because she's experienced a trustworthy relationship with her parents in the past.

NAOMI

And, what did she say?

MARIA

Since you'll be working directly with the girls, I'll tell you what you need to know to care for them. But their stories are theirs alone. You're not to talk about it to anyone else besides me or them, understood?

NAOMI

Of course. I remember you talking about that at my orientation.

MARIA

Well, the girls have been abused. Which we suspected. But it sounds like whoever it was, was sexually abusing Esther, and sexually exploiting Sarah.

Maria hands Naomi a loaf of bread.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Can you cut up this bread?

NAOMI

Sure. So what's the difference?

She starts slicing the bread.

MARIA

Sexual abuse is when someone uses a child for their own sexual pleasure.

NAOMI

So, defilement, you mean.

MARIA

Yes, defilement generally refers to intercourse, but it could also mean making a child touch you in the private parts, or you touching them in that way or making sexual comments, exposing private parts to a child.

(MORE)

MARIA (CONT'D)

In Esther's case, it sounds like he'd make her take off her clothes and he'd watch her. But I don't know the details.

NAOMI

But he didn't touch her.

MARIA

She didn't say.

(beat)

She didn't say much at all.

Maria gets dishes down and starts setting table. Eggs continue sizzling in pan.

NAOMI

So would that still be sexual abuse? I mean, even if he didn't touch her?

MARIA

Absolutely. And it's still traumatic. Trauma is really anything that happens to a child that makes them feel unlovable or unsafe. He violated Esther.

NAOMI

Yea, I can see how it would definitely make her feel scared.

MARIA

And used. Which creates feelings of worthlessness. They feel they're dirty.

NAOMI

So what's that other term you used? Sexual ex-something.

MARIA

Sexual exploitation?

NAOMI

Yeah, that's it?

MARIA

It's when someone makes money by selling
out a child to do sexual acts with other
people.

NAOMI

(sharp intake of breath)
Oh, no. And that was Sarah.

MARIA

I think so.
(beat, sigh)
Those girls have been through a lot.

NAOMI

Did she ask you to keep it a secret?

MARIA

No. But I couldn't have promised her that
anyway. We never can. Sometimes that
information needs to be shared in order to
protect her.

NAOMI

So one more question...

MARIA

Sure.

NAOMI

Do you know your eggs are burning?

Maria turns to stove. Eggs still sizzling.

MARIA

Whoops!

Takes eggs off stove.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Well...the eggs are done. And overdone.
Still want some?

NAOMI
(with a laugh)
Oh sure...

Smash cut to...

28 MARIA'S HOUSE, LIVING AREA

28

Esther, Elana, and Sarah are playing with the baby. Baby is cooing.

ESTHER
Oh, look at her! She's smiling!

ELANA
I think it's because she burped. Belia, did you see? Your baby smiled.

Nothing.

ELANA (CONT'D)
(sigh)
Fine. Keep ignoring her.

SARAH
You should name her, Belia. She's over two months old now. She should have a name. Like...Sarah.

The girls giggle.

ESTHER
Sarah! We can't name the baby after you. A better name would be...Esther!

The girls laugh.

Belia stands up and walks off.

ELANA

Belia, where are you...?

Door shuts.

ESTHER

And off she goes again. Elana, why doesn't Belia like her baby? She's such a little cutie.

ELANA

Belia acts that way with everyone. She has as long as she's lived here.

Naomi enters.

NAOMI

Almost breakfast time girls. Have you completed your chores yet?

ESTHER

Yes Auntie Naomi. Should I change the baby?

NAOMI

No, I'll take care of that. You three go in and have something to eat.

She takes the baby.

ELANA

Yes, Auntie.

Girls open to mid-conversation. Maria stops talking to the other girls to greet Sarah, Elana and Esther.

MARIA

And Jesus understands that too.

(directed toward new entrants)

(MORE)

MARIA (CONT'D)

Oh, good morning, girls. Have a seat.
We're just about to serve breakfast.

SARAH

This smells so good.

The girls sit down at the table. They begin serving the food.

GIRL

But, Auntie Maria, how can Jesus know
how we feel when we're lonely or afraid?
He's God--he can have anything he wants.
He never feels those things.

MARIA

But when He came to Earth, He did feel all
those things. He was rejected, betrayed,
and abandoned.

SARAH

Papa used to say that...

ESTHER

Sh!

MARIA

What did you say, Sarah?

SARAH

Nothing.

Beat.

MARIA

I'll say grace.

Shuffling as the girls bow their heads.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Father, thank you for this food. We do not take it for granted that we have something to eat. We know it is a blessing from you. In your precious name, Amen.

Clanging of dishes as the girls eagerly dig into breakfast.

SARAH

(mouthful)

Good eggs.

MARIA

So Nellie, the Bible tells us the night before Jesus was killed, he went into the garden to pray and brought his closest friends to pray with him. But do you know how many of them stayed awake to pray?

GIRL

No.

MARIA

None of them. They all fell asleep.

ESTHER

Really?

MARIA

Can you imagine how lonely and abandoned that must have felt? Here he was, near a terribly painful death, and his friends can't even stay awake to be with him.

ESTHER

I never thought of it like that.

MARIA

Oh, Jesus knows your pain girls. He understands it. He's felt it.

(MORE)

MARIA (CONT'D)

(beat)

And He sees it.

Short beat.

ELANA

I'll take Belia a plate of food. I think she's feeding the baby.

MARIA

Thank you, Elana. The rest of you girls remember to put your plates in the sink when you finish eating and then start your chores. Oh Sarah, you can get the beddings off ready for cleaning. Esther, you'll help me wash the breakfast dishes and then we'll weed the garden.

Agreement from girls.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Oh yes, now we have a carpenter coming to fix the railing this morning. He's been here before and knows our rules. Be polite, but remember we keep strangers in the house at a distance. And, don't forget, we'll have a Bible study this afternoon in the living room.

Naomi enters.

NAOMI

Maria, Mwongo is here.

MARIA

Oh, thanks, I'll go show him what needs to be fixed.

NAOMI

I'm going to run to the store.

MARIA

But aren't you off this afternoon? Lucy
can take care of that.

NAOMI

It's fine. I can do it. See you later...

Naomi leaves.

Music sting.

29

SARAH'S BEDROOM

29

She's pulling sheets off the bed and breaks a stool.

SARAH

(humming, gasps)

Oh, no! The stool!

Runs downstairs.

SARAH (CONT'D)

(to self)

I can't believe how clumsy I am.

Mwongo is whistling nearby. Sarah approaches him.

SARAH (CONT'D)

Uh...are you the carpenter?

MWONGO

Yes. I'm Mwongo.

SARAH

(in a rush, panicked)

I was pulling sheets off the bed and I
accidentally stepped back and broke a
stool in the room, and I don't want anyone
to get mad at me--

MWONGO

(smiling, calming her)

Don't worry. Don't worry. I'm sure we can fix it.

SARAH

But you won't tell anyone, right? I don't want to get in trouble.

MWONGO

If you don't tell, I won't tell. C'mon, show me the stool. Now...what is your name?

SARAH

Sarah.

MWONGO

(warmly)

Well, Sarah. You can help me fix it.

They head upstairs.

Music sting.

30

GARDEN

30

Esther and Maria are pulling weeds out of the garden. Continue pulling throughout conversation.

ESTHER

I haven't worked in a garden in a long time. Not since...

MARIA

Not since when?

ESTHER

My mama used to have one. A long time ago.

(changing subject)

Your tomatoes are growing well.

MARIA

Yes, they are.

(beat)

It seems like you know what you're doing.

ESTHER

What do you mean?

MARIA

You recognize the weeds from the crops.
For instance, those carrot tops can
confuse people.

(beat, continues weeding)

It reminds me about our lives.

ESTHER

Our lives?

MARIA

Yes. This garden has a lot of beauty in it--
a lot of good. Flowers, fruits, vegetables--
but sometimes the weeds can outgrow
them. To the point that you can no longer
see the beauty.

ESTHER

(confused)

Yeah...

MARIA

Well, our lives are like that. Each child that
is born is precious in the sight of God. So
very valuable and loved. But sometimes
the lies cover up that truth. The lies say
that we're not important or seen.

ESTHER

So the lies are like the weeds?

MARIA

Yes, they keep us from seeing ourselves the way God sees us. So we need to pull out the lies like we pull out the weeds.

ESTHER

But how do you pull out lies?

MARIA

With truth from God's word. For instance he promises us, "The Lord is near to all who call on him...he hears their cry and saves them."

Esther yanks harder at the weeds.

ESTHER

Mmhmm.

MARIA

Satan is called the "Father of Lies" because he constantly speaks lies to us, so we doubt God's love and care for us. Even in the Garden, with Adam and Eve--

ESTHER

(interrupting)

I'm going inside the house.

Esther hurriedly stands up.

MARIA

Esther? Are you okay?

ESTHER

I just...I don't feel well.

MARIA

Is it what I was saying?

ESTHER

(flustered)

Maybe. Probably not. I'm going to go wash this dirt off--

MARIA

Esther, listen to me. You're still a precious and valuable person. Despite the lies that have been planted. You're wonderful--God says so.

ESTHER

(not believing it)

Fine.

MARIA

The way you have been mistreated--

ESTHER

I wasn't mistreated!

MARIA

(slower)

The mistreatment that happened to you was not your fault. It happened to you.

ESTHER

I...I...

Mwongo comes out.

MWONGO

Madam, I have finished the work for today. The railing is fixed, and I'll repair the front steps next time.

MARIA

Okay, thank you, Mwongo.

MWONGO

I'll be back later this week.

He leaves.

MARIA

Esther, listen to me.

(slowly)

What happens to us doesn't make us who we are. God makes you who you are.

(noticing Esther's face)

Are you all right?

ESTHER

Yes, just...a butterfly. My...

MARIA

(concerned)

Esther?

ESTHER

(desperate to get out of there)

I'm going to see if Sarah needs help.

She is up and running back to the house before the sentence is done.

Music bridge.

31

CLINIC

31

Man leaving on crutches. George and Lorraine clean up clinic after he leaves.

MAN

Thank you, Dr. Ngabire.

GEORGE

Of course, Tadakki. Keep weight off that foot for a week.

MAN

And, you too, Nurse Lorraine.

LORRAINE

See you next week...bye bye..

Ad-lib good-byes. Door closes.

GEORGE

(exhale sigh)

Busy day today. We must have treated
over thirty people.

LORRAINE

(distracted)

Mmmm.

GEORGE

Lorraine? You've been distracted all day.
What's on your mind?

LORRAINE

Oh...it's silly. It's, well, it's Belia.

GEORGE

The little girl with the baby? Is she doing
better?

LORRAINE

No. I spoke to Maria today. Belia still
seems disinterested. She's only a child
herself, and how can she raise a baby?

GEORGE

You know as well as I do that trauma can
delay a child's emotional and mental
development. Belia likely has the reasoning
limitations of a much younger child.

LORRAINE

Yes, I see that often with her. And Maria
has told me she has trouble grasping even
simple instructions--like making her bed or
doing laundry.

GEORGE

And the abuse has also caused her to have trouble bonding with others--including her own child.

LORRAINE

That poor girl...

(quieter)

That poor baby.

(louder)

George?

GEORGE

Yes, Dear?

LORRAINE

What if...what if we took Belia and the baby into our home?

GEORGE

Are you...suggesting adoption?

(with a chuckle)

Lorraine, our children are grown and gone. Aren't we getting a bit old to do that again?

LORRAINE

If we can still run a clinic, we can love two more children.

GEORGE

But it's more than loving them, there's so much more to it. And what will others think--it appears that we're 'buying' a baby and--

LORRAINE

Please, dear, just pray about it. That's all I ask.

GEORGE
(sigh, far from convinced)
Ok, I'll pray about it.

Maria enters.

LORRAINE
Maria! Good to see you.

MARIA
You as well. I was hoping to get the results
of Sarah's blood work. Do you have it yet?

LORRAINE
Yes.

Getting paperwork.

LORRAINE (CONT'D)
She had two sexually transmitted diseases.

MARIA
Oh, no. I suppose I'm not surprised--with
the odor she had and the painful urination
she complained about--it's why I asked you
to test her. But it's still sad.

LORRAINE
Yes, obviously sexual abuse. Repeatedly. In
the more in-depth exam I did last week, I
noted pelvic bleeding and adhesions. And a
urinary tract infection.

MARIA
Oh, that poor girl. Her bedwetting and fear
of being touched were symptoms of that,
as well.

GEORGE
Although those could be associated with
trauma of any kind--not necessarily sexual
abuse.

LORRAINE

Fortunately, both of these particular STD's are treatable. So we'll give you antibiotics for her.

MARIA

Thank you.

GEORGE

The sad thing is the physical damage of abuse is small compared to the emotional and spiritual damage.

MARIA

Yes, it's no wonder these girls are so fearful of us. What about Esther's examination?

LORRAINE

She had some signs of physical abuse--but I didn't find anything indicating sexual abuse.

GEORGE

Of course, that's no guarantee. Sometimes there aren't any physical signs even if there has been abuse.

MARIA

Well, it's not the news I was hoping for. But it does help us in knowing what they need from us.

Music bridge.

32 FRONT PORCH, FOLLOWING MORNING

32

Sarah is sweeping the front porch. Mwongo approaches.

MWONGO

Good morning Sarah, how are you today?

SARAH

Mr. Mwongo! Thanks for fixing the stool for me yesterday--and not telling anybody.

MWONGO

Oh, that's fine, Sweetheart. And you can just call me Mwongo.

SARAH

Mwongo...okay. Are you fixing something else today? I'll call Miss Maria.

She opens door.

MWONGO

Oh, no...no.
(he lowers voice)
I came here to see you.

SARAH

Me?

MWONGO

I saw this bracelet and bought it for you. I thought a pretty girl like you should have some pretty things.

SARAH

(examining)
It's beautiful...
(uncertain)
You got it for me? I can't pay for it.

MWONGO

Oh, no, Sweetheart. It's a gift.

SARAH

Thank you! I've never had any jewelry before.

MWONGO

Well, that's not right. A beautiful young woman like you should.

SARAH

Thank you! I'll show my sister. She'll--

MWONGO

Sarah...I would like you to keep this between you and me. Just like the way I kept the secret about the stool.

SARAH

Okay...

MWONGO

I don't want the other girls to feel jealous, just because I think you're very special.

SARAH

I understand.

MWONGO

You and I have a special friendship, right?

SARAH

(uncertain, more certain)

Yes...yes.

MWONGO

All right. Good. I'll see you tomorrow then, when I come to do more work.

SARAH

Okay, I'll see you then.

MWONGO

How about a hug before I go, sweet thing? You like the bracelet?

SARAH

I do.

After a beat of hesitation, she gives him a hug.

SARAH (CONT'D)
(muffled by shirt)
Thank you.

MWONGO
You're very welcome.

Music bridge.

33 LIVING ROOM

33

Naomi and Maria are talking. Naomi is cleaning.

MARIA
Naomi, take a break. You've been cleaning for hours. We have a volunteer coming tomorrow. We'll have her take care of the mopping.

NAOMI
No, I don't mind.

MARIA
(more authoritative)
Sit. You are too busy.

She sits.

NAOMI
(sighs)
Sitting. Okay?

MARIA
I have a feeling much of your hard work is less about a dirty floor, and more about feeling bad for not being able to fix what is going on in these girls' lives.

NAOMI

Maybe.

MARIA

(gently)

I did the same thing. Sometimes when it feels like we can't help the children as much as we want, we try to make up for it by working harder in other areas.

NAOMI

It's just nice to do something productive--I notice the difference after I mop the floor. I don't notice the girls changing. Hardly at all.

MARIA

It takes time. And sometimes you take a few steps forward, and then a few steps back. It's a journey.

NAOMI

I brought Belia lunch today. Sat and talked to her. Offered to hold the baby.

MARIA

And...

NAOMI

And, it was like talking to a stone wall. She didn't even look at me. I kept trying and trying...and then eventually she got up and left. Didn't even eat. What did I ever do to her?

MARIA

Nothing...but somebody did something. Twelve-year-olds don't have babies by their own choice. Whatever happened to her caused a lot of pain. Her mind can't comprehend trust and goodness right now.

(MORE)

MARIA (CONT'D)

The only thing she knows how to do is protect herself.

NAOMI

I just didn't think it would be this hard.

MARIA

Naomi, none of us are prepared for it. But it helps once you understand their behavior is a natural reaction and
(emphasizing)
Not your fault.

NAOMI

So what do we do to fix it?

MARIA

(chuckles)

I wish there was some kind of formula to heal every child. But each child is unique--they come with a different story, different wounds, different ways of responding to their pain. I've cared for children who haven't said a word for six months, and then there's those who scream and yell non-stop, or the children who only want to be cuddled and touched, and then there's those who wince and run away at the slightest touch. Every child comes here with a story--their own trauma, and wounds, and background. And as we learn their story, we can learn ways to help them cope, and help them create a happier next part of the story.

NAOMI

But they won't even talk to me! How do I learn their story?

MARIA

It's not always through conversation. Sometimes that happens, but often it's through playing with them, or doing chores alongside them. Watch what a girl enjoys doing, then find a way to do that with her. It's amazing what you can learn about a child that way. But also be patient. It takes a while to figure out the story behind each child--if we ever do.

NAOMI

Is that meant to encourage me?

MARIA

It's meant to remind you that it's not your responsibility to fix everything. All we can do is rely on God--he loves these girls more than we do, and do whatever we can to make the girls feel like they belong, that they're important and worth listening to-- whenever they want to talk.

NAOMI

And when that doesn't work?

MARIA

When that doesn't work, we wake up the next day, and do it all over again.

(sigh, beat)

But what doesn't help is when you get overloaded by working too much. You need to take a day off.

NAOMI

I'm hardly doing anything as it is.

MARIA

Believe me you're doing more than you think. You're valuable here.

(MORE)

MARIA (CONT'D)

And it's better to have one healthy person who's in it long-term than a constant rotation of caregivers who grow exhausted and quit.

NAOMI

Okay, okay...
(beat)
Here comes Sarah.

Sarah opens the door from the porch and comes in.

SARAH

(startled)
Oh. Hi.

MARIA

Hi. Is everything okay?

SARAH

Yeah. Why do you ask?

MARIA

You're holding your wrist. Does it hurt?

SARAH

Yeah, I, um, got a splinter. I was just going upstairs to remove it.

Naomi stands up.

NAOMI

I can help you.

Sarah runs upstairs.

SARAH

(calling back)
No. I'll do it.

NAOMI

See...this is why I wash floors.

MARIA
(chuckles)
Oh, Naomi...

Music bridge.

34 LATER--MARIA'S HOUSE, LIVING AREA

34

As they close, Maria claps her hands together, and dismisses them to their rooms.

MARIA
That's all for tonight girls. It's bedtime.
You'll be starting back to school tomorrow.

The girls disperse. Sarah and Esther head upstairs.

ESTHER
I'm excited about school. It's been a long
time.

SARAH
I don't care as much about school any
more.

Go into their room and close door.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Maybe you were right. About staying here,
I mean.

They crawl into bed.

ESTHER
I don't know...I think it might be okay.

SARAH
I hope school doesn't take too long.
Mwongo's coming tomorrow.

ESTHER

Mwongo? The carpenter?

SARAH

Yep. He's really nice. Maybe I can help him with his job.

ESTHER

Auntie Maria wouldn't like that. She told us the rules. We're not supposed to be alone with an adult. And she told Mwongo the same thing.

SARAH

See? That's what I don't like about staying here. All these stupid rules.

ESTHER

(shrugs)

I don't think it's so bad. Why do you want to help fix things anyway?

SARAH

Something different to do, I think. And I like Mwongo.

ESTHER

Shouldn't you call him Mr. Mwongo?

SARAH

We're friends. He treats me better than Auntie Maria.

Esther sits up and clicks on light.

ESTHER

You don't even know him well. He's only been here once.

(beat, thinking)

Has he come back since he was here the other day?

SARAH

No...nothing like that. He's just nice.
That's all.

ESTHER

You better stay away from him. Auntie
Maria won't like him hanging around you.

Clicks light off again and lays down.

SARAH

(muttering)
I know. I know...

ESTHER

(starts singing mother's song)
Hakuna Mungu Kama

SARAH

No. Stop. I don't want to hear that.

Sound of crickets outside window transitions us to Lorraine and George in
a different house at the same time.

35

MR. AND MRS. CLINIC'S HOUSE

35

LORRAINE

Ready for bed, George?

GEORGE

I've been thinking, Lorraine. Praying.

LORRAINE

About Belia?

GEORGE

(sighs)
Do you remember me telling you about my
sister? Lydia?

LORRAINE

Yes, of course. The little girl who died of AIDS. Such a sad story.

GEORGE

All because of that terrible myth--that the cure to AIDS is sleeping with a virgin. She was just a child.

LORRAINE

And heartbreaking that people believe that even today.

(half-beat)

What brought Lydia to mind?

GEORGE

She was just a vulnerable girl. A beautiful girl that had been broken by the selfishness--and ignorance--of someone else.

LORRAINE

Like Belia?

GEORGE

Like Belia.

(pause, breath)

I think Belia needs a chance. And we can give her one. The Lord tells us many times in the Bible to care for the defenseless and hurting. I think we need to take that seriously. He desires for children to be in families--and we can offer that.

LORRAINE

And what of your concern about people's perceptions?

GEORGE

Granted, it's unusual. And others won't necessarily understand.

(MORE)

GEORGE (CONT'D)

But it's right and good. And what I think
God is calling us to do.

LORRAINE

(hugs him)

Oh, George. I know it won't be easy, but I
care about Belia. And I care about her
baby. This is the best thing for them.

A caring family is best. And you George
are the best!

Music bridge.

36

LIVING ROOM

36

Sarah is waiting for Mwongo.

Knock on door. She opens it.

SARAH

Hello, Mwongo!

MWONGO

Hello, Beautiful!

(talks quietly)

I'm glad you answered the door. I brought
you something else.

SARAH

Another gift?

He digs it out of his pocket.

MWONGO

Here. A clip for your hair.

SARAH

Oh...it's shiny. So beautiful!

MWONGO

Just like you. We should go upstairs so you can try it on in front of the mirror.

SARAH

Okay.

MWONGO

Let's go before anyone knows I'm here.

SARAH

All right. C'mon...

Music sting.

37 UPSTAIRS HALLWAY

37

They walk down the hallway. Mwongo is trying to keep her quiet.

SARAH

There's a mirror in this room--

MWONGO

Let's keep our voices down.

Maria emerges from room.

MARIA

What's going on here? What are you doing?

MWONGO

(forced cheerful)

Uh...I'm just here to fix some things!

MARIA

We made it very clear from the beginning, Mr. Mwongo. You're not to be near the girls.

MWONGO

Sorry, madam, I....

SARAH

Don't be mad, Miss Maria. He's really nice.
He just gave me this pretty hair clip and
we were going to see how it looked.

MARIA

Mr. Mwongo, I'd like to see you in my
office downstairs. Sarah, would you please
help the other girls with lunch?

SARAH

Uh...yes, Madam.

MARIA

Naomi, I'd like you to come with us.

NAOMI

(confused)

Of course.

She leaves.

MWONGO

I can always come back some other
time...if this isn't convenient...

MARIA

My office, please. Now.

Music sting.

End of Part 3.