

HOLDING ESTHER

Written by

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For
RiverCross-TWR

38

MARIA'S OFFICE

38

Mid-conversation as Maria speaks sternly to Mwongo. They sit in her office.

MARIA

You went against the rules of the house.
We clearly discussed these boundaries
before you were hired! You were told
never to approach any of the girls in
private.

MWONGO

Just trying to be nice to the girl--

MARIA

We have rules to protect the children, and
you broke them. You will no longer be
allowed on this property. Ever. Do you
understand that?

MWONGO

Yes, Madam.

MARIA

I'm writing up a report of the event. Now,
please leave.

He gets up and goes out of office. Maria follows.

SARAH

(calling)

Lunch is ready!

(seeing Mwongo)

Oh, Mwongo. Maybe you could join us. I
helped make the sandwiches!

MWONGO

I can't now, Sweetheart.

He heads to the door.

MARIA

Good-bye.

(with warning)

And remember what I told you.

MWONGO

I will.

He leaves. Maria closes door behind him.

SARAH

Why did he leave so quickly? He didn't even fix the porch steps yet.

MARIA

We'll hire someone else. Mwongo won't be back.

SARAH

But why?

MARIA

Sarah. I don't trust that man. He didn't obey our rules for visitors.

SARAH

But they're just stupid rules...

MARIA

I believe he was trying to get close to you so he could take advantage of you.

SARAH

(not believing)

I liked him. He was nice, and he said sweet things to me. Is...is...

(realizing)

This is my fault.

MARIA

No, it's not your fault. It's his fault.

SARAH

I shouldn't have said anything about the hair clip. He told me not to.

MARIA

You did the right thing. Adults shouldn't ask you to keep secrets like that.

SARAH

But he was the only person who really cared about me. And because of me, you fired him! I...I...I hate you!

She runs upstairs.

MARIA

(calling)

Sarah! Let's talk about this. Please!

SARAH

Leave me alone! I hate you!

Door slams upstairs.

Music bridge.

39 UPSTAIRS BEDROOM

39

Esther is trying to console her sister.

ESTHER

Auntie Maria was only saying that she wanted good things for you, and Mr. Mwongo was not a good thing.

SARAH

I knew what he wanted. Not at first...but later.

ESTHER

Then why didn't you stay away from him?

SARAH

Because he was nice to me. And it's like uncle always said. I'm stupid and lazy. Mwongo...made me feel good. He cared about me.

ESTHER

Oh, like Uncle "cared" about you? Mwongo wanted to take advantage of you.

SARAH

You don't understand, Esther. You don't understand anything!

ESTHER

Sarah--

SARAH

Leave me alone.

Music sting.

40 LIVING ROOM, THAT EVENING

40

Night sounds out window. Maria and Naomi are talking. Maria is pacing.

MARIA

We have policies and procedures in place so these things don't happen--it's frustrating that it still came so close.

NAOMI

It's my fault. You told me to wait in the living room with Mwongo, but I wanted to get the kitchen cleaned up.

MARIA

You do need to let the volunteers do some of that. Accept help when it comes. When we try to do too much, mistakes can happen. It's our policy that you take time off--it's not optional.

NAOMI

I know. I'm sorry.

MARIA

But, what happened today is Mwongo's fault. Oh that poor girl. She still won't talk to me, have you tried?

NAOMI

Twice. After lunch and again a few minutes ago. She won't even talk to her sister. She keeps saying we took away the best thing in her life.

Dish breaks in kitchen.

NAOMI (CONT'D)

Uh-oh.

MARIA

Oh now what...

Maria enters kitchen. Naomi follows.

MARIA (CONT'D)

What happened?

ESTHER

(muttering, mad)

I dropped the plate.

ELANA

You threw the plate across the room, you mean.

ESTHER

(irate)

Be quiet! I dropped it!

MARIA

Esther, why don't you come out to the living room with me?

ELANA

So now I have to clean the dishes for her?

NAOMI

Shush, Elana. I'll help you.

ESTHER

(angrily)

I'll pay for the stupid plate if you want me to.

MARIA

I don't care about the plate. I care about you.

ELANA

(muttering to self)

Dropped the plate.

They enter living room. Sit down.

MARIA

Have a seat, Esther.

ESTHER

(angrily)

I don't want to sit down. I don't want to talk to you!

MARIA

Just sit down and relax. Do you notice how quickly you're breathing?

ESTHER

(pauses, quick breathing, then
irritated)

I...I don't know why.

MARIA

Just close your eyes, take some deep
breaths.

ESTHER

(takes deep breath, slightly
calmer)

Can I go now?

MARIA

In a minute. How do your back and neck
feel? Are they tense?

ESTHER

(hint of irritation)

Yes...

MARIA

What about your jaw and fists, are they
clenched?

ESTHER

(kind of surprised)

Yes.

MARIA

(continued calm)

Think about relaxing every part of your
body. Take some more deep breaths--
through your nose, counting backwards
from 5 to 1. Release the tension in every
muscle of your body.

ESTHER

(takes deep breath)

MARIA

5...4...3...2...1...Now exhale.

5...4...3...2...1

(beat)

Why do you think you're body was tensed up? What are you feeling?

ESTHER

Nothing. Why are you asking me these questions?

MARIA

Because I want to help you--and I want you to learn to help yourself. Just take a breath and think a little deeper--to how you feel.

ESTHER

I'm...I'm mad.

MARIA

Keep your eyes closed, keep breathing...

(pauses)

Who do you feel mad at?

ESTHER

You...me...that man who wanted to hurt my sister.

MARIA

I can understand feeling that way.

ESTHER

I didn't protect her.

(starts to cry halfway through)

I knew she liked him. I knew it! Now she won't even talk to me!

MARIA

That must hurt to feel like you didn't protect your sister. And it's scary, too, to think what could have happened.

(MORE)

MARIA (CONT'D)

But the only one at fault here is Mwongo.
Not you...and not Sarah.

ESTHER

It is scary.
(voice breaking)
She's been hurt before.

MARIA

I know. You've been hurt, too.

ESTHER

(lost in sad memory)
No...not like her. My uncle was much
worse to her.

MARIA

What he did to you is still abuse Esther. It
still hurts, and damages. Even watching
someone else be abused is hurtful.

ESTHER

I don't want to think about that.

MARIA

Just look at me, Esther. Look in my eyes.
It's not your fault. None of this is your
fault. It is the failure of the adult.

Beat.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Esther, you are one of the strongest, most
loving girls I've ever met.

ESTHER

I'm not strong. Not even a little.

MARIA

You rescued your sister. That takes an
enormous amount of courage to run away.

(MORE)

MARIA (CONT'D)

And an incredible amount of compassion to care for her like you do. Do you know how many people just turn away and pretend bad things aren't happening around them?

ESTHER

That's what my aunt did.

MARIA

But you were brave. You ran. And you survived.

Esther, you are a wonderful girl.

ESTHER

I'm going to check on Sarah again. Maybe she'll talk to me now.

MARIA

Okay. I'll be up in a minute.

Esther goes upstairs.

Naomi enters carrying a tray of tea.

NAOMI

I brought you some tea.

MARIA

Thank you.

She sets it down.

NAOMI

I thought Esther would still be here.

MARIA

She went upstairs.

NAOMI

How is she doing?

MARIA

She's angry and sad and feeling guilty.

(takes sip of tea)

All the emotions I'd expect her to feel.

NAOMI

I feel pretty awful myself.

MARIA

(murmur of agreement)

NAOMI

You know, there's something I don't understand. Why was Sarah wanting to protect Mwongo? Didn't she understand what he was trying to do. And that we were watching out for her?

MARIA

He was doing what many people now refer to as "grooming" her.

NAOMI

"Grooming"?

MARIA

Preparing the child to be abused-- convincing her this is what's right. Forming a secret bond that gives him control.

NAOMI

So they think this all out ahead of time?

MARIA

Mmm. It's very intentional. Abusers use a variety of tactics.

(MORE)

MARIA (CONT'D)

Sometimes they give a child gifts or compliments, sometimes they make threats or promises--whatever it takes for them to gain emotional control over the child. We both know that man didn't truly care for Sarah, but he'd already convinced her that he did.

NAOMI

But how can she even believe that?

MARIA

Plenty of reasons. One, she's young. She doesn't reason like you or I do. Her brain isn't that developed yet. Also, her mind has been affected by her previous abuse. It's now hard for her to figure out what true "care" and "love" really are.

NAOMI

And Mwongo took advantage of her confusion.

MARIA

Yes. Children who've been abused in the past can sometimes feel a false sense of security with an abuser because the situation seems comfortable, familiar.

NAOMI

(taking it in)

Oh...that's that's really sad.

MARIA

But Naomi no one is beyond redemption. Sarah can learn what real love is and how to trust. She can learn how truly valuable she is.

NAOMI

But it takes time.

MARIA

And people committed to her. People who
create a safe, secure environment for her.

Esther runs down the stairs.

ESTHER

(panicked)

She's gone! Maria! She's gone!

MARIA

What?

ESTHER

Sarah! She ran away!

Music bridge takes us to...

40

STREET

40

Background noise is bustling with activity of cars, people, and city noises.

ESTHER

(eager)

Is that her--in the red? Do you think that's
her?

GEORGE

No, I'm sorry, Esther...that's not Sarah.

ESTHER

No, it's not.

(discouraged)

We're not going to find her. Are we, Dr.
Ngabire?

GEORGE

(sigh)

God knows where she is. We need to trust that he'll watch over her. Nurse Lorraine is across the street asking people now. Perhaps someone will have seen her.

ESTHER

We've looked every day--all over the city! The girls back at the house are saying by now someone would have picked her up--to use her, sell her. Is...is that true?

GEORGE

(hesitant, not sure how to answer)

We don't know anything, Esther. The people at the safe house and the clinic are doing all they can. We can still hope. And pray.

ESTHER

I...I was supposed to take care of her. I promised my mama I would.

(tearily)

She, she was my only family.

GEORGE

I know. I'm so sorry. Maria...Naomi...they care about you. I know it's not the same, but--

ESTHER

(angry)

It's my fault. I let terrible things happen to her and I deserve this.

GEORGE

Esther...

41

MARIA'S HOUSE

41

Maria and Naomi talk while they mop.

NAOMI

It happened again today.

MARIA

What?

NAOMI

Someone knocked on the door. Just a delivery. But I was sure it would be Sarah. Returning.

MARIA

Hoping for something that doesn't happen can hurt. I continue to hope, too.

NAOMI

(growing more agitated)

I just don't understand, Maria. Why do they leave? We care for them. When they have no one else, we care for them.

MARIA

We can't fully understand, Naomi. Not fully. Emotional and sexual abuse can be just as damaging as physical abuse-- sometimes even more so. That abuse affects their mind...their soul, even their brain development.

NAOMI

You know I've noticed some of the girls struggle with thinking through something that would be common sense to most people.

MARIA

Yes. And it's hard for them to make decisions. Or they react quickly--out of emotion. Usually fear.

NAOMI

So Sarah left because she couldn't understand this place was good for her?

MARIA

She was overwhelmed, I'm guessing. Too many thoughts and emotions, that she didn't know what to do with. Mr. Mwongo triggered something in her. Something deep. And she tried to escape it. Running away was the only thing she could think to do.

NAOMI

But does that ever change? Can kids like Sarah learn to reason?

MARIA

With some time and support I believe so, yes. But--

Esther enters. Slams door. Kicks mopping bucket. Water splashes across floor.

NAOMI

Hey, hey! My mopping bucket! Girl!

MARIA

Esther! What is wrong?

ESTHER

(shouting)

Just leave me alone! Leave me alone!

MARIA

Sweetheart, please. It's okay. You're safe here.

ESTHER

No...no! We'll never find her! I just...I
can't...aaaugh!

She keeps kicking the bucket around the room.

MARIA

(firmly but kind)

Esther. Sit down, please.

Esther does.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Now take a deep breath with me.

They take deep breath together.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Now, let's count. Breathe deep.

(deep breath)

1...2...3...4...5...

Beat.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Now tell me. I'd like to know. Tell me what
you're feeling.

ESTHER

(calmer, but still irritated)

I can't put words to it...I'm...I'm mad
and...and I don't know what else!

MARIA

Who are you mad at? Me, Dr. Ngabire?
With Sarah? With...you?

ESTHER

Yes...yes. I'm mad at myself--and Sarah.
But how can I be mad at Sarah? It's my
fault she left--I brought her here! We
shouldn't have stayed!

MARIA

Esther, it helps to name your emotions. It makes them not feel so overwhelming.

Think about it. What else are you feeling?

(to Naomi)

Naomi, hand me the feeling cards.

Naomi does.

NAOMI

Here.

MARIA

So these cards have pictures of different emotions. You can read them, too.

ESTHER

(reading)

Lonely, frustrated, happy, hopeless...

(pointing out)

This one.

MARIA

Afraid?

ESTHER

Yes...this hollow in my stomach. I'm afraid. I'm afraid I'll never see Sarah again. And I feel guilty for losing her, for disappointing my mama.

(softer)

And God.

(looks up at Maria)

Is it normal to feel more than one feeling?

MARIA

Yes...you can feel a lot of feelings at the same time and that's sometimes what makes them so confusing.

NAOMI

Whenever I feel lonely or afraid, I remind myself about what's written in the Bible: about what's really true. The Bible says "Do not be afraid, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you."

ESTHER

But he has left me!

MARIA

Is that how you feel?

ESTHER

Yes!

TMARIA

Then Tell Him that. Jesus wants you to give him all your cares because He cares so much about you.

ESTHER

I don't think I can do that--just tell him what I feel.

MARIA

But that's what's true. And here's another truth: God's not mad at you, Esther. He doesn't blame you for anything. And your mother, if she were here, would say the same thing. You are loved. You are so, so loved.

Music bridge.

42

DOWNTOWN OF CITY

42

City street noises. Two woman are walking along.

WOMAN 1

So I told her I could help her out, but I
wouldn't be there until Saturday.

WOMAN 2

I'm going to run errands on Saturday, and
Joseph said--

Footsteps running, as Sarah comes by and grabs purse.

WOMAN 1

(scream)

My purse! That girl stole my purse!

WOMAN 2

Hurry after her!

WOMAN 1

Help! Someone!

They chase her.

WOMAN 2

Stop! Come back here!

WOMAN 1

Which way did she go?

WOMAN 2

I think over the fence. That awful girl!

Switch to Sarah's perspective. Running and panting. As she goes through fence gate, up steps, through alley. She's panting the whole way. Voices of women fading the further she runs.

SARAH

(to self, still out of breath)

Now...what's in here?

She rummages through bag. Sounds of coins.

SARAH (CONT'D)

(to self)

Not much. But enough to buy dinner tonight.

(sadly)

Oh, Esther, you'd be so disappointed in me.

Music bridge.

43

MARIA'S OFFICE

43

Maria is talking with the Ngabire's

MARIA

George and Lorraine thanks for meeting again today. I'm very happy that you're interested in formally taking in Belia and the baby. I wish adoption wasn't such an uncommon thing to do.

LORRAINE

We know it's important, Maria. And we've grown fond of Belia.

GEORGE

We believe underneath that hard exterior is a sweet, scared little girl.

MARIA

I believe that, too. And being part of a caring family will bring her more healing than anything else.

LORRAINE

We've spoken with the social worker, and understand that the attempts to restore her to her birth family were unsuccessful.

MARIA

Yes. They turned her out, and refuse to take her back. It's not a safe place for her to be anyway. So I'd like to get this process moving as quickly as possible.

LORRAINE

We appreciate that.

Maria shuffles, stacks papers.

MARIA

But since it's a legal process, there will be costs involved.

GEORGE

Yes, we're aware of that.

MARIA

And the baby still doesn't have a formal name. Do you have one in mind?

GEORGE

We'd like to call her Lydia.
(beat)
After my sister.

Music bridge.

44

OUTSIDE

44

Elena and Esther are feeding the chickens.

ELENA

Here chickens! Get your grain.
(calling back to Esther)
Are you going to help, Esther?

ESTHER

Yes...yes...

ELENA

Why do you always get so strange when we feed the chickens? It's not a hard chore.

ESTHER

I don't mind it. It's just...Sarah and I were...

(sigh)

it makes me remember things, I guess.

ELENA

Bad things?

ESTHER

It's nothing.

Beat.

ELENA

I'm kind of jealous of Belia.

ESTHER

Because the Ngabires are taking her in?

ELENA

And the baby. They come to visit her every day. And when the paperwork is done, they'll take her home to live with them. To live there.

ESTHER

I know.

ELENA

Well I can't stand it. Dr. Ngabire making funny faces at the baby, holding her. The way they talk to Belia about how excited they are for her to be a part of their family.

(beat)

A family.

ESTHER

Yes....a family.

ELENA

You still remember yours at least. You've said your mother and father loved you.

ESTHER

Yes. But...but after they died...we went to live with mother's sister.

(beat)

There was no love there.

ELENA

What happened?

ESTHER

(sigh)

Uncle would hurt us...look at us...make us.....

ELENA

Esther?

ESTHER

It's best not to talk about it.

ELENA

Remember the times you had with your mother and father instead.

ESTHER

In some ways that's even harder. Because I'll never have that again. And I miss them so much.

(beat)

Did you have a family?

ELENA

A mother. But when we needed money, she'd sell me out to the landlord in exchange for rent.

(MORE)

ELENA (CONT'D)

I can't really blame her--we needed a place to live.

(beat)

Right?

ESTHER

Did she...love you?

ELENA

I remember her singing to me when I was very little--she stopped though.

ESTHER

(remembering)

Hm...my mother sung to me, too.

(beat)

But I can't remember the tune any more.

Music bridge.

45

ON THE STREETS

45

Crowds of people in background. Shopkeeper working.

SHOPKEEPER

Girl! Are you buying something or not?

SARAH

I...uh...

SHOPKEEPER

You've no money.

SARAH

No, sir.

SHOPKEEPER

Then get out. You come in here every day and look, but you never buy anything.

Don't think you can steal from me.

SARAH

No, Sir.

SHOPKEEPER

Go. Get out of here.

SARAH

Yes. Okay.

She starts to leave.

SHOPKEEPER

Hm. Wait there. You're a pretty young thing, aren't you?

SARAH

Sir?

SHOPKEEPER

What's your name?

SARAH

S..Sarah.

SHOPKEEPER

Perhaps we could work something out, Sarah.

SARAH

(hesitant than determined)

Yes....I think we could.

Music bridge.

46

OUTSIDE

46

ESTHER

Where's your baby, Belia?

BELIA

Inside. With Naomi.

ELENA

Are you happy about the Ngabires--about them adopting you?

BELIA

I...I don't know.

(beat)

I'm going inside.

She hurries away.

ELENA

I don't understand her.

ESTHER

I might. I loved having a family, but it's hard to know what kind of family you're going to get.

ELENA

The Ngabires seem nice enough to me.

ESTHER

Uh hum. Sometimes people might seem nice--but they don't turn out that way. They can still hurt you. They can still change their mind.

ELENA

Yes...that's true.

ESTHER

My aunt and uncle seemed nice at first. Sarah thought Mr. Mwongo was nice.

(beat)

You just can't trust people.

ELENA

What about Auntie Naomi and Auntie Maria?

ESTHER

Yes...I suppose I trust them now. But sometimes I still wonder if they'll give up on us. Maybe they don't care at all.

ELENA

I've wondered that, too.

Beat.

ESTHER

I guess we should get to the gardening.

ELENA

Yes.

ESTHER

Do you want to know a secret?

ELENA

Sure.

ESTHER

Remember when we talked a while ago-- about my mother and how she sung to me.

ELENA

Yes.

ESTHER

Well, I have this doll I hold sometimes. It makes me feel a little better.

ELENA

Where did you get the doll?

ESTHER

I made her. Here, I have her with me.

Esther pulls the doll out of her skirt pocket and shows it to Elena. Elena takes her and examines her.

ELENA

She's nice. You did a good job with an old rice sack and some grass. What's her hair made out of?

ESTHER

Maize silk. I named her Halima.

ELENA

Pretty. Do you talk to her?

ESTHER

Mm.

(almost to self, forgetting
Elena)

And rock her, and hold her. Like Mama did with me.

(catching herself, back to
Elena)

I know it's silly. I'm too old for dolls...but, I don't know...she just makes me feel more...

ELENA

Safe?

ESTHER

Yes. Not so alone.

(beat)

You won't tell anyone will you?

ELENA

No. I like her. Maybe...

ESTHER

What?

ELENA
Maybe someday I'll make one.

Naomi calls out to the girls.

NAOMI
(calling)
Esther! Elena! Zula! All of you...come over
this way.

ELENA
More chores, Auntie Naomi?

NAOMI
No, we're going to make a village.

ESTHER
A village?

NAOMI
A pretend village.

Several other girls are gathering and responding with uncertainty.
"Really?" "Why?" "How do you do that?"

NAOMI (CONT'D)
I've collected some sticks and rocks to
start. But you can find other things
outside to use.

ESTHER
But...I've never...

NAOMI
Just try it, Esther. All of you. Just have
fun.

Music sting...

ELENA
This mushroom does kind of look like a hut.

ESTHER

Put it in the center of the village.

ELENA

These can be your chickens.

ESTHER

Yes. Ants make good chickens.

ZULA

Although I wouldn't eat their eggs.

The girls laugh. Maria comes out of the house. And she and Naomi talk in the foreground while the girls continue talking in the background.

ZULA (CONT'D)

I'll see if I can find some more huts.

ESTHER

These sticks can be used as a bridge to cross the river.

ELENA

What river?

ESTHER

The one I'm about to dig.

ZULA

We can use these grasses for trees.

ELENA

I'm building a raft for the river. What are you getting Esther?

ESTHER

Oh...I'm picking out rocks.

ZULA

For what?

ESTHER

It's...my family. This ones my father, and
mother...

MARIA

How are they doing?

NAOMI

They seem to be enjoying it.

MARIA

Play is so important for them. Many of
them missed out on simply being children.
And they need to have that. Laughter and
play are as important to growing up
healthy as food and sleep.

NAOMI

It's fun to see them working together and
using their imaginations, too.

MARIA

Yes. Simple games and activities can really
open up their hearts.

Last line from girls comes up.

ELENA

And this leaf is my donkey. I'll name
her...Millie.

Music bridge to montage scene.

End of Part 4.