

## Part II

### Promises & Key Rings

I walked out of the bathroom with the towel wrapped around my body. For a moment I felt silly, the towel did well at hiding my body but not my shame. I could see Angelo was confused and I knew this wasn't the right way to bring this up, but was there ever a right way or even a right time?

He looked at me with hurt in his eyes. I wasn't sure if he felt rejected or unwanted but it wasn't his fault. We were living together and would share a room, I knew eventually he would want sex but somewhere in my mind I hoped he would wait.

“Before you ask, it’s not you. I find you attractive”, I whispered gently as I moved to sit next to him. “I know it's not the right way to tell you or the right time but I'm done making excuses in relationships. I had my excuses lined up. Today I would say it's not possible cause our friends are around or I'm too tired. Tomorrow I was going to lie about my period or something and on and on. I'm tired”.

He was lost. He had this thing he would do when he couldn't understand something, he would look down and play with his fingers. Normally playing with his hands were fine but now he was scratching his scratching his palm and I knew a half explanation wouldn't be enough.

“I told you that I couldn't have kids, I didn't tell you why.”, she paused. “My uncle... He used to rape me. He raped me. He then taught my cousins... His kids how to please a woman with me as their training doll. He got me pregnant but my mother didn't want everyone to know her brother and his sons were rapists or that her daughter was now used

goods, so she took me for a backdoor abortion. Something went wrong and I lost my womb. Other than the rapes, I have never had sex. I don't know how to".

Two days ago he first told me he loves me and today I am telling him my biggest secret. Through his eyes I could see that his soul was leaving his body, there was a spark in them when he was happy but with each word I saw the light fade and all that was left was a brown void begging me to stop, begging me to say it was a lie.

I wondered if he was as afraid as I was. In his mind he probably thought I lied about who I was and that he could never love someone so broken. I on the other hand struggled to let myself be loved but here I am moving in with a man with more demons surrounding him than the devil. Maybe that's why I fell for him, we were broken in different ways but our brokenness was what we shared.

I felt my throat dry up and my conscience tell me that I shared too much but I wanted a future with this man and laying with him, even if just to please him would be another form of rape. So I needed him to know everything, to understand everything and hopefully he would be patient until I was ready.

"It started off small. He would offer me sweets in exchange for a kiss on the lips. Letting him touch my breast meant he would help me with my chores, so I had more time to spend with my friends. When I sat on his lap, it meant I could watch whatever television show I wanted and letting him give me a bath or help me change into my pjs meant a little extra tuck shop money".

"I'll be right back". I felt his hand move from mine as he spoke. His body followed and before I knew it, he was out the door and rushing down the stairs.

I put my clothes back on and walked to the hallway. I stood at the edge. I struggled to hear what was going on with the music playing but I heard him say to Kyle, 'I can't do this'. I knew it, this was too much for him. I walked back to the room and started to pack my things. How could I expect him to love damaged goods?

I walked back to the room and started to pack my things. The least I could do was make it easy for him when he kicked me out. My friends were still here so they would help me carry my things and I could ask Tshepiso to let me stay at her place. I could feel my heart racing and I knew I had to call her, a panic attack was coming and I had to call Lynda.

"Hello Lynda", I called her, "Lynda, he said he can't do this".

I felt my chest tighten and grasping for air felt like too much work. As the room spun around I struggled to hear her pleas for me to calm down. "I told him. I told him. I told him and now... now... He doesn't want me."

He doesn't want me. I should have just let him have his way with me. I have laid and let men who feel nothing for me satisfy themselves with me, so why couldn't I just quiet my fears and let him love me in that way? If anyone deserves to have me, it's him.

The room just kept on spinning. I felt my eyes heavy. I felt my soul heavy. I felt the music fade into the background. If this was death calling, then I was ready.

"Loni, Lonwabo. Wake up". He was shaking me violently. "Lonwabo, wake up. Please wake up".

"Angelo", I responded, "I'm awake".

“Are you sure? Some lady named Lynda called. She said you were having a panic attack”. He asked with a worried look in his eyes.

He was worried about me. I guess that meant some part of him still felt something for me. Lynda must have called him when I passed out. I looked around and we weren't in the bedroom.

“Angelo, what are we doing here? What happened to the music? Where did everyone go? How did we get to the living room?”, I asked confused.

“Oh them”, he responded, “I asked them to leave. I felt we needed to be alone to talk and I didn't think you'd be comfortable talking in the bedroom. So I got rid of them, so we could talk here. I want you to tell me how you feel, tell me everything. Only if you are ready to.”

He was still here.

He was still here.

I couldn't believe he was still here. He was still here and he wanted to know more. Whether this was love or pity, I didn't care, I was just happy someone other than my therapist cared to listen. Someone else was willing to believe me.

“Hmmm... You know I don't wear make-up right and I tell you that it is because I prefer being natural but the truth is I don't wear make-up or dress up because I don't want to look like something someone would want to rape. I don't want to look attractive but even this, downplaying myself doesn't feel enough because men find other reasons to justify their

actions. So I am scared. I am worried because of something that started over a decade ago”.

He put his hand around me and pulled me closer, placing my head on his chest. As he played with my hair I felt safe, it felt like he was telling me to carry on and that he wasn't afraid to take all of me.

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The first time he did it, I remember blood. There was blood everywhere but I wasn't there long enough to memorize the sight. He just picked me up off the ground, kicked sand over it and took me to the park.”

Angelo's hands around me felt so comforting. I couldn't see his face but I felt his tear on mine. He was hurting too. I was hurting him. My past was something I carried and only shared with Lynda during our therapy sessions. This was different, I was speaking to someone who wouldn't detach themselves from the pain and hopefully help me carry the load.

“Do you want a break?”, I asked. “We can stop. I know it's a lot.”

“N... No”, his voice was breaking. “I'm right here. Keep going if you are comfortable.”

I knew hearing all of this was hard for him and I wasn't sure if he was just trying to be nice but it felt good to know he was there for me.

“My uncle was always a bad man. A lazy drunk and loud most of the time. He blamed everything on his parents, saying they favoured my mother over him and that's why his life turned out the way it did.

For most of my childhood he stayed away from me but when I turned 12, I was at the wrong place, at the wrong time. I came home one day while he was fighting with some girl. I think she didn't want to have sex with him because he was drunk. So he saw me and saw a replacement. At first it was just comments about how I'm the most beautiful girl he has ever seen, then comments about how lucky the man I marry will be to have a woman with a body like mine. The list went on and on until one day he added actions to his words and the touching began.

It was just him at first. I was his property until I turned 14. His sons were celebrating their birthday at our place and my mother was out of town. They were bored and unhappy, so he thought up a fun activity for them to do and teach them how to be men.”

Angelo's hands tightened around me, it moved from a hold to a grip. He had a sense of what I was going to say. I wanted to stop, maybe I should have but where would I find the courage to open up to him again? I just hoped he would not look at me differently after I everything was said.

“I remember asking myself if I should fight back but how far would I get. He had overpowered me enough times for me to know I had no chance. He took me to his room and forced me to undress. When I refused because his sons were watching, he slapped me and told them that a woman should never talk back to a man. Not only was I about to be violated, but I was also being used to teach misogyny.

He ripped my clothes off me and told me to lay down. I knew what was coming and normally I took it because it was always our little secret, a dirty secret but something I wanted buried. I still remember his sweat, from the moment he started until he finished.

His older son wasn't having it. He said he saw something on TV and he wanted it that way, that he wanted me to bend over. The look of pride on my uncle's face sickened me. He was celebrating that his son knew exactly how he wanted to defile me. He was 15 and should have known better but his father was a monster, so I guess the fruit didn't fall far from the tree."

I guess that's where I learnt 'family' is just a word people use. If they loved or saw me as their blood, they would have stopped their father or walked away and said they weren't interested. Instead they took turns using my body. Pleased at earning their father's approval and becoming men. I spent days praying Angelo was different. I forgot how to pray until Angelo gave me a new reason to pray. Right now in my heart I was praying he would still want me tomorrow and the day after, that I'd still be enough despite all I had to say.

"A few months after I turned 16, he and his sons got me pregnant. I thought my mother would hate me, that she'd think I was busy running around sleeping with men but when I told her the truth she believed me. I used to find comfort in that, the fact that she believed me but all her belief did was fuel her desire to keep their sin within the family and not allow him tarnish the family name any further.

When she told me I had to get an abortion something inside me said I should pack my bags and run but I was a child. I was 16. My focus was finishing and getting out of school. Something went wrong and I lost my womb."

I sat up and put my hand on my stomach. Had I known that I was going to lose my womb, I would have kept quiet until it was too late for my mother to tell me to abort.

Having his bastard child would have been better than never being able to feel the joy of giving birth.

I couldn't help but feel sorry for myself. God was punishing me. Not only could I not have children but the one I love just found out he had a child with the love of his life.

We spoke until sun came up. We spoke about how my cousins and I never saw my uncle again after the abortion and how even though I never saw him in person, I saw him in the new habit he taught his sons. We spoke about how becoming a teacher was my way of trying to protect other kids from getting hurt like I was or how I would be ready if any of them said they need help. We spoke about Namisa, Ora and how I felt about the situation. I said a few hurtful things and he said some things. We carried on until he fell asleep.

I went upstairs to get a blanket for him and as I was about to lay next to him I heard a knock on the door.

I went to open and there was a lady standing there, staring at her watch. She was clearly in a hurry. I was surprised as we didn't have any guests planned for today but her greeting really caught me off guard. "Hi, my name is Namisa, is Angelo here?".