

DON'T MESS *With This* MAMA

Risking It All to Rescue Our Daughter



A TRUE STORY

MISSY MAXWELL WORTON

FOREWORD BY CHRIS OVERSTREET

Chapter 11

A CHANGE OF PLANS

*“Sometimes when you’re in a dark place
you think you’ve been buried, but you’ve
actually been planted.”*

—Christine Caine, author

The children, returning from the nearby school, busted through the orphanage’s blue gate door with anticipation and excitement. Isabella, a beautiful 10-year-old girl with long, braided ponytails, immediately spotted Favor. With squeals of joy and outstretched arms, the two friends ran toward each other. Isabella’s brother, Fikadu, was not far behind with exuberant hugs. Fikadu patted Favor on the head and asked where all her hair went. Favor shrugged her shoulders, grabbed Isabella’s hand, and the two friends ran to McKenzie. You would’ve thought McKenzie was the Queen of England with the way Favor and Isabella gathered around her.

After greeting all the children with hugs and kisses, Mark and I settled back into the main living room, where Pochi was sitting with one of the babies. She was an incredible orphanage director. She poured out her love on these little ones, playing with them as though she was a child herself.

Mark was in a different world. I could see his mind turning and figuring out what he should do next. I could recognize that “fix it” spirit anywhere, usually kicking in moments after I would express a concern that something wasn’t right. Fix-it Mark was coming to the rescue, and this time I was okay with it.

“Pochi, do you know someone who could drive me to the Embassy tomorrow morning around 8 a.m.?” he asked.

Pochi looked up at him. “Are you trying to beat EAI to the Embassy to pick up her passport?” she asked. “I don’t blame you. I will call someone and let you know.”

“Thank you,” Mark said. The fewer people who knew about our plans, the better. He also wanted to protect Pochi from EAI. She could honestly say that she knew nothing. The problem we faced was that EAI knew where we were staying and when we were flying out. They had our entire schedule. If they wanted to stop us, it wouldn’t take much.

After a few quiet minutes, as if knowing our thoughts, Pochi suddenly looked at us with a deep concern in her eyes. “You are not planning to leave early, are you?”

We both took a sip of coffee to avoid being the one to answer.

“That wouldn’t be good,” she said. “There are three other children trapped in this foster care, too...not just Favor.”

Mark slowly lowered his cup and took a deep breath as Pochi kept her eyes planted on him. “We need to decide what’s best for Favor,” Mark said. “Favor is our child and it’s up to us to protect her.”

Pochi was visibly shaken by the possibility of us leaving early. “That could affect the other three children they are holding in the foster care system!” she said, shaking her head in disbelief.

Mark put his coffee down, got up and walked out of the room. Pochi looked at me. “You have to

do this the right way,” she said.

“What if the right way for Favor...” I paused, “is to leave?”

“I understand that you don’t want to lose her,” Pochi pleaded, “but this might affect the others.”

“Pochi, we can’t take that chance.”

Pochi didn’t respond. I could tell she was very emotional. We couldn’t understand why she wouldn’t want the best for Favor. One child getting safely home was better than taking a chance that none would see freedom.

The drive back to our hotel was very quiet. A lot was left unsaid. In the back of my mind, I knew Pochi didn’t want us to leave for the sake of the other three children, but all I could see was my child. While the other kids would be going to people to cook and clean, Favor was going into a potentially life-threatening situation. In our resolve, there was no room for negotiation.

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That night, after the girls had fallen asleep, I turned on my computer and wrote to our faithful prayer warriors. It had been two very full days. I knew I couldn’t give every detail yet, but I wanted them to know we were okay and tell of the marvelous grace we had been given over the past few days.

I know all of you have been praying and wondering how everything went with the rescue. Let me say this, we are still in a battle! Keep praying! We need prayers to get us safely out of the country without any delays. We need prayers for protection and favor over the orphanage director and the precious people who have helped us. Wish I could say more, just know we appreciate you all so much.

We did have to go to our embassy appointment without Favor, but we now hold her official birth certificate and court decree, which states that we are her legal guardians. We see God moving supernaturally in every step we take. His grace is evident.

Also, we now know that there are three other children involved who are being held back from their adopted families for this “foster care.” Please pray for their release to be reunited and placed with their forever families. I know these families have to be brokenhearted. God so loves these children. I can’t imagine why anyone would keep them from being adopted into a loving family. It is clearly not God’s plan, but the enemy’s.

We serve a greater God and I’m believing all these children will be able to go home with the families who love them. Thank you so much for your prayers! Be sure to read my status...just another way God is going before us and performing miracle after miracle on our behalf.

Love, Mark and Missy

My heart was so thankful for these individuals. I hit the send button, and started to shut the computer down and go to bed, when suddenly responses started filling my page. The prayers and words of encouragement filled my heart and brought tears to my eyes. I knew that they had been faithfully waiting for a word just to know we were okay.

While I was reading the comments, Mark laid in bed quietly. His mind was racing with different scenarios of what he would do if EAI showed up while he was at the Embassy. What if they beat him to the appointment? Would he have to fight for the passport and visa or would they try to take it from him? He faced another night of no sleep and no food in his stomach.

I quickly jotted an extra note to our prayer warriors and answered a few of their questions.

One more thing—tomorrow is going to be very important for us. We need your prayers for divine favor with who we come in contact with: the Embassy, government, airlines. It will be a miracle to find a flight back to America. There are so many people stranded here because of Hurricane Sandy. The next 12–24 hours, we need God to show off! I'll let you know if the first hurdle is cleared by 10 a.m. Ethiopia time. You are 8 hours behind us so I'm sure most of you will be asleep.

I know a lot of you are asking...and, yes, my arms are really happy right now!!! Can't wait to share more. Steve, love on Dad and Mom for me!

Please don't post anything other than we need prayer covering in the next 24 hours.

Thank you! Love you!

I sent the message, and within moments, the “hallelujahs” began to pour in. Tears, joy, thankfulness, and praise—they couldn't wait to hear more “happy arms” stories. Many of my friends from all parts of the world were responding and offering up their homes, saying we could fly into their country until we could get back to the States. I was engulfed in love and in their amazing hospitality. I couldn't believe my eyes as I heard from the many who would travel hours to come to our rescue. Seeing this kind of outpouring made the bad that was happening seem so small. An army of saints was assembled, ready to do whatever they could to bring us safely home, and it touched me to the depths of my heart. Tears started to flow.

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We had another long and sleepless night. Our hearts raced and our stomachs hurt from not knowing what the day would bring. I had an urgency to leave. I felt claustrophobic and trapped in Ethiopia, and the need to leave on an airplane overwhelmed my every thought. I shared with Mark the strong, pressing feeling that I had to leave. I told him that it was imperative that we got out today. I knew it in my gut. It felt like a volcanic eruption was about to go off under my feet. I had no reason to feel the way I did, but I couldn't shake the anxiety and the feeling of danger. Maybe my mind was starting to imagine things, but the urgency to leave overpowered all my senses.

Mark quietly got up and got ready to leave early. He wanted to be at the Embassy before they opened. When he arrived downstairs, he met Dave, the man Pochi had sent from her church to be his driver. He was early and had already been waiting for Mark for 10 minutes. Dave was a handsome man in his early 30s, and the peace and love of God radiated from him. When he smiled, his eyes would disappear. Mark knew that he was in the presence of a man he could trust.

Mark arrived at the Embassy and requested to speak with the vice-consul who he had talked with a few days before. Dave waited in the car, praying.

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Back in the hotel room. I sat quietly as the girls slept in the bed next to mine. They were entangled from head to toe. It looked very uncomfortable, but the smiles of contentment on their faces exuded peace and utter relaxation.

I was in a quiet place of peace, but I still couldn't shake the feeling that we had to leave today. I turned on my praise music and let it calm my spirit, taking my emotions to a place where they could connect with the things that are unseen. I was exhausted, but I couldn't sleep because of the nervous energy. I had to pray. Mark should be at the Embassy by now. I didn't want to think about what could go wrong, so I took a deep breath and stilled myself. Then I felt like someone had placed a warm comforter over my shoulders and placed their arms around me. I could feel God pulling me into the throne room. All I could do was kneel at His feet, and I felt His overwhelming love around me. I felt Jesus' hand touch my face, and as I looked up and saw His beautiful eyes, it was as if He was saying, *Missy, the battle was won when your foot hit the ground. Your obedience will be rewarded.*

I opened my eyes and looked around the room.

Everything was the same as it was a few minutes ago—the girls still in dreamland, the computer screen lit up. I could see we were getting messages from America, although it was the middle of the night for some of them. Prayer warriors were lifting our arms on this battlefield. No wonder I had felt such a strong presence of the Holy Comforter. Prayers of the saints were going up for us. I knew God would get us safely home with Favor. I could trust His word, and His word alone.

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After 30 minutes, the vice-consul called Mark to the window. Mark apologized for being early and told the vice-consul he was concerned about Adefere and EAI. The fact that they didn't want us to leave the country with Favor alarmed us. The vice-consul quietly listened, then asked him to wait while he gathered everything we would need for Favor's packet.

Adefere's unusual actions had stirred up every kind of concern that an adoptive parent can have. So, when the vice-consul came back to the window and handed him the packet, Mark asked again, "So, are we okay? We did everything, right? We don't need to worry about them taking her away from us? The vice-consul reaffirmed that Favor was legally ours and we were fine to leave.

Mark took the packet from the vice-consul and opened it as he walked away. To his surprise, the packet wasn't Favor's information at all—it belonged to a five-year-old boy. His heart rate quickened as he returned to the window and asked to see the vice-consul again. Fears about the trustworthiness of the Embassy were seeping into his mind. *Why did he receive someone else's information? Did Adefere have connections within the American Embassy?* Mark, more adamant this time, showed the packet to the vice-consul, voicing his concerns, but talking under his breath to avoid being overheard.

Suddenly an alarm went off in the Embassy. The vice-consul gave Mark the signal to step back as the guard rushed over to see if there was a problem. Apparently, Mark had moved too close to the bulletproof glass so others wouldn't hear his conversation with the vice-consul. Every time he would lean in to tell the vice-consul something, an alarm would be triggered. Seeing the problem, the vice-consul had a better idea. "Meet me in the courtyard," he said.

Mark made his way toward the courtyard. As he opened the door to step outside, he could feel the sun shining down, warming the Earth on this beautiful morning. The U.S. Embassy was newly built, and the landscaping captured a piece of America with the nicely mowed lawn and trees with flowers surrounded with flowers. The Embassy hardly looked like it was in a third world country.

“Okay, so you’re asking if it’s legal for you to leave early with her?” the vice-consul said as he came out the side door with Favor’s packet.

“Yes,” Mark answered. “We’ve heard that our agency said that they don’t want us to leave with her.”

“There’s no reason for that,” he said. “There seems to be some confusion concerning what is happening at Debre Birhan. We have someone attending the hearings tomorrow to find out more. As for your case, everything looks good according to Ethiopian law and now American law. You did everything right. She’s yours. Leave whenever you want.”

“Okay,” Mark said, looking for anything in the vice-consul’s eyes that would say otherwise.

“Listen,” the vice-consul said, sensing he was dealing with a man on the adoption edge, “Here is my private cell number and email if you need to reach me, but I can assure you, you’ll be fine. There is nothing they can legally do to you.” He added his personal information to his business card and handed it to Mark.

Mark looked at the card. “Thank you,” he said.

“Glad to help. Congratulations on your new daughter!” he said, smiling at Mark as they shook hands. Then he turned and walked back toward the Embassy door.

As Mark left the Embassy, he scanned the streets for any sign of someone from EAI. Nothing. Fortunately for him, they never ran on time. He never heard a word from Josiah or EAI, and they didn’t come at the scheduled time to pick him up for our embassy appointment either. We will never know if they heard that we had already been to the Embassy, or if they never intended to pick him up in the first place.

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“Praise God!” Mark said, entering the hotel room. “We have everything. Favor is ours!”

“Oh, thank God!” I said. “First hurdle cleared!”

“What do you mean?” McKenzie asked. “She has always been our girl.” Favor grabbed McKenzie around the waist, giving her a big hug. The girls were ready to have a day at the pool.

“Did you check flights going out today?” I asked.

“We can’t get a ticket. It’s packed with people trying to get back to America,” he said. “They’ve been stranded here since Hurricane Sandy.”

I knew my husband wouldn’t lie to me, but sometimes I had to clarify things. “Did you actually check with the airlines, or just assume there would be no tickets? What about going through another country?”

Mark looked exasperated. “No,” he said, “let me go down there right now.”

“Check on flights going anywhere...just please get us out of here.”

“Mom,” McKenzie said, “we’re hungry.”

Mark stopped at the door in hopes I’d postpone checking on tickets for food, but my mind was

made up—we had to get out of Ethiopia.

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The Ethiopian Airlines service center was packed with people trying to get flights back to America. Mark walked up to the exasperated agent. When he asked about the possibility of getting an earlier flight to America, she shot him a “you’ve got to be kidding me” look.

“Everything is overbooked as a result of the storm,” she said. “You’ll need to stick with your original flight out. At least you have a guaranteed seat that way.”

Mark stood there, silent.

“Anything else?” she asked.

Mark was working things out in his mind: *Should I ask about another country to fly through? That would probably be very expensive, and the checking account is almost drained. It would definitely be more money than our account could cover. The credit card is at its maximum, so there wouldn’t be enough room to charge it. The vice-consul said we shouldn’t have any trouble, so why worry about this and spend all this extra money that we don’t have to get out of the country a day sooner? It’s just not affordable. That’s it, we don’t have enough money. So, I’m going to believe that God will get us out safely.*

“No, nothing else,” Mark said, “thank you.”

As Mark walked back to the room, he tried to figure out how he would break the news that we were going to stick with our original plan. When he opened the hotel room door, the first thing he heard was that pressing question.

“Did you get us a flight out?” I asked

“There were no flights back to the states because of the storm.” Mark said. “Everything is overbooked. We’re lucky to have our original flight.”

“Well, can we just go anywhere? Another country?”

“No,” Mark responded, shaking his head.

“Nothing?” I asked. “We’ve got people in the U.K., Australia, South Africa, Germany...all over. They’re willing to help us get out. Did you check other countries?”

“No, we can’t get a flight.” In Mark’s mind, that meant, *according to our checking account, we can’t.*

I was stunned. I really thought God was going to get us out, even if it meant going through another country. Nothing felt right, and the peace I had that morning had vanished.

Mark saw the shift in my personality. “The vice-consul didn’t see any reason they would stop us,” he reassured me. “We have everything. She’s ours.”

I sat quietly dealing with a feeling that I couldn’t ignore.

He continued, “And even Pochi said there was nothing they could do to stop us from leaving with her, and didn’t she say that they can’t take Favor away, now that we have her visa and passport?”

Something wasn’t right. I wanted to ask him again. Had he checked all flights out? Instead, I did nothing but sit still, resolved that we were stuck and not going anywhere until our scheduled flight the next evening. God had to have a better plan than me, but this didn’t feel right.

“I have peace that everything will be okay,” Mark said. “Remember God’s promises to us. He even sent Chris Overstreet to remind us. God will take care of us and get us out safely.”

I couldn’t say anything. I felt tremors beneath my feet that said *RUN!* The tremors were similar

to the labor pains I had experienced—I knew it was a physical manifestation of what was happening in the spirit around me. I felt a fight-or-flight reaction, but I sat silent, battling with trusting what I was feeling or submitting to my husband’s peace.

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Resigned, we decided to make the most out of our last full day at the hotel, starting with a lovely breakfast of eggs and waffles served to the girls. We sat beneath a tiki hut overlooking the pool, as birds of varying beautiful colors stalked our table for falling crumbs. The weather was perfect, and the girls were inhaling their breakfasts so they could go swim.



McKenzie and Favor around the grounds at the Hilton Addis Ababa.

We spent most of the morning watching them enjoy the pool, doing our best to live every moment to its fullest. Maybe I was being too paranoid, thinking we should get out today. Sitting by the pool and watching the girls play felt so peaceful, and the girls were happy and having so much fun. Maybe I had overblown everything. The ache in my stomach could be from a lack of food.

Favor was so full of energy that she wore out McKenzie—a tough thing to do. McKenzie dramatically dragged her body out of the pool and said she had no strength left within her. With that, we decided to make our way back to the room and get ready for lunch.

When we stepped into our room, the phone was ringing. It was Pochi. She had just returned from the court hearing concerning the child who had not been released to the parents the week before. She was speaking very fast and was very upset and nervous.

“Adefere met me outside of the court and said that there was no way we could allow you to leave with Favor,” Pochi said. “He told me that we needed to grab her, or they would be in trouble and so would my orphanage.”

Mark looked at me. I saw a grave look come over his face.

I quickly gathered the girls into the bathroom and started the bath running so they couldn't hear the conversation in the next room. “Where's the bubble soap?” I asked, turning to McKenzie. “You both need to take a quick bath before we go eat lunch.”

“Who is that on the phone, Mom?” McKenzie asked with a look of concern.

Knowing I have a very smart daughter, I said as I looked her in the eyes, “I need you to keep Favor in the bathroom and happy until I let you know what we're doing next. Okay?”

“Okay. You'll tell me later?”

“Yes,” I answered, “I love you. Thank you.”

I stepped back into the room in time to hear Mark say, “Wait, slow down Pochi, I can barely understand you!”

“When we got to the court hearing this morning, I saw a man waiting for Adefere,” Pochi said. “We went in and gave our information to the judge. Adefere still had not shown up. When we were finished, we came out and Adefere was just getting to court. The man I saw waiting was very friendly with him, and then I remembered that he works at the Embassy.”

Mark's stomach turned. “He works at the Embassy? It's not the vice-consul, is it?”

“No,” Pochi answered. “He is an Ethiopian, but you should know there is someone in there who might be feeding Adefere information.”

“Did he know that I had picked up Favor's passport and visa?”

“Oh,” Pochi laughed, “he was furious about that!” Pochi paused. “Something has happened to Adefere. He's not thinking right. For him to tell me to grab Favor from you...this is crazy.”

“Pochi, why would he try to take her from us? Do you think he has others trying to grab her?”

“He does not want you to leave with her,” Pochi said. “I told him he was crazy to ask me to do such a thing. That would be kidnapping. She is yours!”

“Do you know if he has others trying to grab her?” Mark asked again.

“I don't know,” Pochi replied. “I would not think he would go that far. He is trying to get ahold of you and he is very desperate! I don't know what he will do! I would not answer your phone.”

“He told me not to have any contact with him,” Mark said.

“Then I would not,” Pochi said. “This is better for you.”

“Is my family going to be safe here?”

“I would tell hotel security what is happening if he tries anything,” Pochi said. “I will call you back if I hear from him.”

Mark hung up the phone and sat on the bed. Immediately, the phone started to ring.

We both stared at the phone until it stopped.

“Do you think it's him?” I asked.

“I don't know,” Mark said.

“I'm calling Pochi,” I said, as I started to reach for the phone.