

DON'T MESS *With This* MAMA

Risking It All to Rescue Our Daughter



A TRUE STORY

MISSY MAXWELL WORTON

FOREWORD BY CHRIS OVERSTREET

Chapter 25

FACING THE GIANT

*“When the enemy attacks on every side,
that speaks of an enemy that is
confused, panicked, and using up all his resources...”*

—Ben Wilson, cousin and prayer warrior

I ran to the kitchen to start boiling water and grab a towel. “Girls, help me with Daddy,” I said as I ran past them.

They jumped up and ran to Mark’s side, “Daddy, what happened?” McKenzie asked.

Mark sat on the bed, holding his head as blood ran down the side of his face.

“Daddy wasn’t thinking,” he sighed, annoyed at himself.

I returned with a towel and wiped away the blood, but it didn’t take long before his head was covered with blood again from the deep gash on the top of his head. The last thing either one of us wanted was take a trip to the hospital. The girls helped me walk him to the kitchen and put him in a chair so we could get a better look. I had McKenzie apply pressure to the wound while I got the boiling water started and pulled some antibiotics from my bag.

Favor watched and held her daddy’s arm. He had his three girls taking care of him.

Ten minutes had passed and the bleeding wasn’t slowing down.

“We need to pray for Dad,” I said.

“Okay,” McKenzie said. “You first.” I looked at her for a moment.

“Father,” I said, “please stop the bleeding and heal this wound. I pray he doesn’t need stitches. In Jesus’ name.”

“Um,” McKenzie started, “Jesus, please help my dad not to go to the hospital, because that would be really, really bad.”

“Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,” Favor kept saying under her breath over and over.

I waited for a moment then slowly pulled the towel back. The bleeding had stopped. Blood was starting to clot up. “Oh, thank you, Jesus,” I said in relief. I put the antibiotic cream on Mark’s wound and gave him an Advil for the pain.

“He needs a Band-Aid,” McKenzie said.

“That’s a great idea,” I said. “You have any ideas what we can use?”

McKenzie looked around the kitchen, then the bathroom. “I’m looking,” she said. She went into our room and a few seconds later emerged with an eye pad cover we had received from Ethiopian Airlines. I put a cotton pad on the wound and McKenzie put the eye pad over it, pulling the elastic band tightly under Mark’s chin. He was a sight, but at least we avoided a trip to the E.R.

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Friday arrived, and Mark and I woke up with our nerves high because today, we would finally meet our accuser face-to-face. We didn’t know how we would feel when that moment came, but we wanted

to finish well. I looked in the mirror as I was getting ready. “I promise to hold up my part by not believing the lies of the enemy,” I said. “And Jesus, I’m trusting You and Your word that we will have a victory today.”

I could hear Mark playing a song in the other room that had encouraged us many times in this journey. It was God’s perfect timing, and I felt like He was saying, *I got this*, through Rick Pino’s song, “Abba.”

As we walked to the front gate to meet Dave, I could hear the little miracle-believing church outside The Academy worshiping. It was loud and amazing. They were having their Friday healing service, and people were packed in like sardines. There was standing room only, with people flowing out into the street around the building. I wanted to go in, if only for a few minutes before our battle, but Mark thought he’d never get me out. So, instead, I sat outside and listened, letting the sounds that filled the air around us bring us strength and peace. I could feel a difference in the atmosphere as I sat there.

I didn’t want to leave when Dave picked us up. I slowly crawled into the back seat of Pochi’s Toyota. It was cozy, having the girls in the back with me. I felt an uneasiness about bringing them, but we had been told to bring Favor in case the judge had any questions for her. Driving through the crowded streets of Mercato was a new experience for McKenzie, and as usual, we were stopped in traffic. I had never seen it this busy—it was Friday, and the Muslims were filling the streets to pray around the mosques that seemed to be at every mile. The day of the week caused a bigger than usual traffic jam.

Suddenly, I noticed something was happening across the street to my right. We could hear yelling and someone screaming out in pain. Two strong young men appeared from behind a car, and they were dragging something out into the traffic. I watched, thinking it was probably a dog that had stolen some food, but then my heart jumped. What I saw was horrific—the two young men were dragging an old man! He covered his face and winced from the blows and kicks that came from his tormentors. He was dressed in rags and looked as if he hadn’t had a bath in weeks. The men threw him into the street and stepped back, yelling at him as he struggled to get up. Dirt and oil stuck to his skin as he labored to get out of the street and to safety.

Out of nowhere, we heard a car slamming on its brakes.

We held our breath.

The car came to a stop inches away from the man. The old man looked up to the heavens, paused, then began to move his hands. The driver waited patiently in his car as the old man used the front bumper to get up and limp back into the crowd. We all watched, stunned by what had happened.

“Oh,” McKenzie said, “why would they beat an old man like that? That was mean.”

Dave shook his head, unable to find the words to answer her.

“Mom?” She looked at me.

“I don’t know why,” I said.

Traffic started to move, and soon we were driving toward the courthouse again. Dave dropped Mark and me off 30 minutes early. Then, he took the girls to a safe location nearby to wait, in case they wanted Favor to testify.

Mark and I stood patiently before the locked door to the court. I remembered the first time we

had come to this building in August. We had Favor with us, dressed in her *"Pick me"* shirt and sparkly pink boots. She was so happy that she couldn't sit still. We were in awe at the gift God had blessed us with. Now, three months later, we were fighting to keep her.

I looked over at a woman who had come to the curb in front of the court. She was bent over and carried an infant in a wrap that went around the front of her body. A little girl who looked to be about three years old followed her, holding on to the hem of her mother's skirt. The woman found a pole, placed her back to it, and slowly slid down to a seated position next to the road. She didn't look at anyone. I wondered if she knew that the families lining up were here to adopt and if she picked that spot on purpose. The little girl crawled into her arms next to the younger sibling. She looked at her mother and put her hand to her mouth as if to say, *Do you have food?* The mother responded by shaking her head, no. The little girl looked up toward me, eyes filled with disappointment and need, as she leaned her head against her mother's chest.

I opened my purse and started digging for anything to give her. I found one small bag of crackers. "I'll be right back," I told Mark. I walked over to the woman with the little girl, kneeled in front of her, and handed her the crackers. The woman looked at me and smiled, taking the crackers from my hand.

I walked back to Mark's side and looked up to see Emebet walking down the street toward us. I couldn't believe, that under all the threats she had received, she braved coming out to speak up for us. It showed me how much she loved Favor. I rushed to give her a hug and thank her for being here. We tried to catch up over the next few minutes, but the language barrier made it hard, so I pulled out my camera and showed her what we had done since we saw her last. Her expressions of joy as she saw Favor's big smile in each photo were priceless.

"She is so happy," Emebet said.

"Yes," I responded. "She knows she is well-loved by us and you."

"Yes," Emebet said. "I'm happy she has you."

"You helped that happen," I said. "Thank you!"

Emebet grabbed her heart as a sign of being touched and then reached out to give me a hug. "Thank you so much," she said. As we stood there with locked arms, we couldn't say much else. We knew that we needed each other, and we knew we were thankful for each other. Our connection was a little girl who we both loved dearly.

The waiting room to the judge's chambers was full of excited and nervous adoptive families. Along with Mesfin, DJ and the foster mother came in and greeted us with hugs. It was humbling to think that in addition to Mesfin's legal service to us, that DJ and the foster mother would testify for us, if called upon. We found a few available seats and waited, knowing we would probably be the last called. We looked around and saw no one from EAI yet. After 45 minutes, I was getting anxious as the crowd started thinning.

"What if Adefereese doesn't come again?" I asked Mesfin.

"He will be here," Mesfin said. "He will be here. Don't worry."

"We can't be delayed another two weeks," I said.

"You won't be," Mesfin whispered.

I sat back and started to pray as Mark and Mesfin discussed our family back home in Tennessee.

I was too nervous to talk. I knew it all came down to today and my stomach was doing somersaults.

Jamila from EAI walked in with EAI's lawyer and looked around. She spotted all of us, then glanced at the lawyer. From the expressions on their faces, we knew that they weren't happy to see DJ and the foster mother with us in the waiting area. I watched as they walked over and took a seat. Still no Adeferese. I wondered what he was up to, coming this late to an appointed court hearing.

Something didn't feel right. I could sense a danger. I wasn't sure if it was our appointment to meet face-to-face with our accuser, or an unseen attack from someone or something else. Was it possible that false evidence was going to be presented against us? My mind began to swirl with what it could be, then I heard a whisper in my ear. *Pray!* I knew that voice. I didn't have to look around, it came straight from my spirit. I started praying. I felt a suffocation—a struggle going on inside of me.

Jesus, I prayed, I don't know what is happening, but I'm asking you for protection right now. I'm asking you to guard us. Don't let a false word be brought against us. Please don't let any plan of the enemy succeed. I kept praying as the war continued. I was surrounded by people, yet no one knew the battle inside, and tears came to my eyes.

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The girls were getting restless in Dave's car, parked a few blocks away from the courthouse. Favor jumped into the front seat and started teasing Dave, who was quietly watching and praying.

"Favor," McKenzie said, "don't bother Mr. Dave." Favor ignored her older sister. "Favor, stop bothering him." Favor, keeping with the little sister title, kept on playing with Dave, trying to get him to respond.

"Favor," Dave said in Amharic, "please go back with your sister."

Favor was tired of sitting in the car. It had been almost an hour since they had parked, and it was getting stuffy in the back seat. Favor tried to grab Dave's glasses. Dave calmly blocked her. Then Favor reached down and grabbed one of his shoes from under the gas pedal on the floor. Favor dangled it behind her, then in front of her, teasing Dave and making a game of it.

"Favor," Dave said, "I need my shoe back. Please give me my shoe."

She held the shoe behind her a second too long and McKenzie grabbed it from the back seat. Favor screamed with glee—she had her sister in the game now.

"Mr. Dave said he needs his shoe," McKenzie said, and started to hand it back to him. Favor lunged at the shoe with both hands and grabbed it as Dave took it into his hands.

"*Snap,*" the thong broke from the base of the shoe.

"Oh," Dave said in frustration, "no, no, no." He calmly took his broken sandal from Favor and looked at it.

"Favor!" McKenzie said. "You broke it! That wasn't nice."

Favor knew she was in trouble and jumped in the back seat, burying her head in the corner.

Dave turned around to her, "Favor," he said, "I am not mad at you...Favor?"

Favor didn't look up.

"Can you fix them?" McKenzie asked.

“No,” Dave said. “They are done. They are very cheap, for camping.” Dave was leaving for a men’s camping retreat immediately after he had taken us all back to The Academy. This had left him with no shoes.

“Do you have time to buy another pair this afternoon?” McKenzie asked.

“No,” Dave replied.

“I’m sorry,” McKenzie said. “Maybe they have some in one of those shops.” She pointed across the street to a group of shops. Dave looked around. Across the four lane street was a clothing shop and he could see some sandals hanging on a rack at the entry.

“I will be right back,” Dave told McKenzie.

“Wait,” McKenzie said in shock, “you’re leaving us?”

“I will lock the doors,” Dave said. “Do not open them for anybody. I will be right there,” he said, pointing to the shop where he had seen the sandals. “You can see me from here. You will be safe. I won’t take my eyes off of you.”

“Don’t leave us,” McKenzie pleaded.

“You will be okay,” he said. “You can watch me. Nothing will happen.” Dave locked the doors and started across the street toward the shop.

As if on cue, a white van pulled in behind the girls.

McKenzie, unaware, watched Dave cross the street and look at the rack of shoes. Three men jumped out of the van and walked toward the car.

Favor looked up and out the back window. Without a word, she scrambled to the floor and covered herself from head to toe with her scarves and jacket.

“What are you doing?” McKenzie blurted out, still unaware of the men.

McKenzie felt someone at the car’s right-hand door. She looked up and saw a man standing next to the car, facing her. Her heart started pounding. McKenzie looked toward Dave. He was looking the other way.

Then suddenly, a man stepped in front of her view and pressed up to the left back door.

McKenzie desperately tried to look around him toward Dave. She opened her mouth to yell, but nothing would come out.

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“Adefere is here,” Mark whispered in my ear.

I looked up. There he was, standing in the doorway with a man I had yet to see. He glanced over the crowd, then walked toward the area by the window, taking the farthest seat from us. He started a conversation with a gentlemen who seemed to know him well. I watched as he glanced out the window while the man would glance toward us. I wanted to wave at him as if to say, *Yeah, we’re the ones he’s talking about!*

“That man is married to the attorney who is representing the other family that went back to America without their child,” Mesfin whispered to us, as he shook his head in disbelief. “They obviously know each other well. They have told that family that there is no hope to get their child. They think you are crazy for staying.”

“There’s no hope if their attorney is friends with Adefere,” Mark said.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Now it was clear why we hadn't felt right about going with that attorney. Again, God had stepped in for us and provided the attorney we needed.

"Mark Wortons," the secretary's voice announced.

Mark gave my hand a squeeze and we walked in together, taking our regular seats to the right of the judge. Emebet, DJ, and the foster mother stayed seated in the waiting area.

The judge looked up and gave me a quick smile. She was dressed in a striped top, with her hair neatly pulled back in a tight ponytail. I glanced around the courtroom. Everything looked the same, except for two extra court clerks seated to the judge's left.

Adefere walked in behind his attorney, with Jamila walking behind him. They took their place beside Mesfin, facing the judge.

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Three men were now surrounding the car that McKenzie and Favor were in. McKenzie's heart was pounding as she pulled the scarf on her shoulders over her head and slumped down in the back seat. One of the men tried to open the door, but it was locked. McKenzie tried to catch a glimpse of Dave again, praying he would turn around.

Dave chose a pair of sandals off the rack and handed his money to the woman at the counter. He turned to glance toward the car. His heart leapt with alarm when he saw the men circling the car. Without delay, he started running across the four lane street toward the girls, waving his hands in the air and yelling at the top of his voice for help. People near the area heard him and started surrounding the three men trying to get to the girls. Dodging the cars as he ran across the four lanes, Dave kept yelling for help. More people came.

The men were being enveloped by the crowd and getting pushed away from the car by the complete strangers surrounding them. The men shoved their way out and ran to jump into the white van and sped away, almost slamming into Dave as they peeled out.

"Thank you," Dave said. "Thank you for your help." The people watched as Dave unlocked the car door and ducked his head in to check on the girls. "Are you okay?"

McKenzie uncovered her face and looked up at Dave with tears in her eyes. She was so happy to see him. "You shouldn't have left us!" McKenzie cried out.

"I am so sorry! I was wrong," Dave said as he looked at McKenzie, petitioning her forgiveness.

"What just happened?" she asked. "Why were those men trying to get us?"

Dave shook his head and crawled into the front seat, locking the door behind him. "Where is Favor?" he asked.

"She's on the floorboard, covered up," McKenzie said. Favor hadn't moved since seeing the men come toward the car.

"Favor, are you okay?" Dave asked. "You are safe. You can come out of hiding."

Favor didn't move.

"Who were those men?" McKenzie asked.

"I don't know who they were," he said, "but they are gone now."

McKenzie was shaking. "Where is my mom and dad?" she asked.

"They should be back by now."

“They are still in court,” Dave answered.

“That really scared me,” McKenzie whispered.

“I am so sorry,” Dave remorsefully said, “I won’t leave again. Never again.” It was clear that he was also shaken by what had happened. He was their bodyguard, and he was there to protect them. He knew this was a battle, but now he knew at what lengths the enemy was willing to go. “I am so sorry. Thank you, Jesus, for protecting the girls.”

McKenzie couldn’t stop the tears as she looked out the window at the people on the sidewalk. She wanted to go home where she felt safe, where she understood what people were saying, and where she understood the world around her. She wanted this nightmare to be over. She wanted to be in the arms of her mom and dad. She longed to feel safe again.

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Adefere stood in the courtroom with his chest held high and his eyes on the judge. She glanced up at him and said a few words in Amharic, then swore him in. Adefere then pulled a sealed envelope out from his breast pocket.

Mesfin’s eyes followed the envelope as it was presented to the judge. She made a statement to the clerk and opened the envelope to begin reading.

I turned and looked at our accuser—the giant standing between us and the freedom of our daughter. He stood so proud and pretentious, watching the judge as she read. *Why was he fighting so hard against us when all we wanted to do was give this child a home and a family?* He turned and glared at me, but instead of looking away, I locked eyes with him. I could feel the hatred he had for me spilling out. He had nothing but disdain as he flashed me a piercing stare behind his glasses. I knew he would like nothing more than to see us disappear. *Why did this man hate us so much?* There was no obvious reason for his actions, and I realized he was just a man being used by the real enemy. I looked at him, but not in anger or hate. I felt pain—not mine, but his. Then it happened...I felt a wash of love come over me for this man with such hostile loathing toward us, and before I could reason why, I found myself praying that God would draw him with love from head to toe. I prayed that he would be freed from the torment that had grabbed his soul, and I prayed that he would someday know the love of God as I did. I was astonished. All I had inside was love for this man, despite what he had done.

I smiled at him.

He narrowed his eyes and spun his neck to look in the opposite direction.

Dumbfounded, I sat there. *What had just happened? Where did that kind of love come from?* I knew it was God. He had been transforming my heart in this journey, but the depth of His transformation took me by surprise in that moment. I didn’t need this man to like me or be respectable to me. I knew what God thought and He loved us both, and I was good with that.

“This paper from Debre Birhan says that she should be placed in foster care,” the judge said. “Is this your only evidence?”

“It is all we need,” Adefere said. “The child was in foster care.”

“Your Honor,” Mesfin calmly spoke up, “the paper says she *should* be placed in foster care, but never said she *was* placed in foster care. One sheet says she should be put into foster care, the other says she should be placed in the orphanage for adoption by a family. They are signed by the same official. The one I have was signed three days after the one handed to you by Adefere. Three days

after this official signed that paper, he signed the paper I hold in my hand, which says she should be placed in the orphanage to be adopted.”

As the judge listened to Mesfin and Adefereese disputing the two sheets of paper, I remembered the day I first heard that Favor was going to be put into foster care and would never be allowed to be adopted. I remembered how I ran to Cindy’s home and stood in faith that God would take care of her, and He did. I remembered how all of us fasted and prayed for three days that the official would change his mind and allow Favor and the other three children to go back into the orphanage. I remembered how the official had then called Pochi into his office after those three days and miraculously signed the very paper Mesfin held in his hands. I remembered how Pochi picked up that piece of paper from the floor, after the official had thrown it at her, telling her to get out of his office. God had already done all that we had asked of Him. It all came down to a piece of paper. Was that one piece of paper enough to convince the judge? If so, we had won the battle the moment it was signed, months ago.

“Bring in the foster mother,” the judge demanded.

The foster mother walked in and stood until the judge had sworn her in. I could see she was nervous; her hands were wiggling around as she held them in front of her body. Adefereese stared at her, but she never looked his way. We knew that she had been warned not to come and testify by the Debre Birhan official, but she was unmoved, waiting to tell her story and answer any questions asked.

“Tell me where do you work.” The judge said.

“I work at the orphanage where this child comes from,” she responded.

“Are you her foster mother as well?” The judge asked.

“I was told that I would only have to foster her until the adoptive family came to pick her up,” she said.

“So,” the judge said, “you were not planning to keep her as a foster child?”

“No, your Honor. That was never the plan. She already had a family working to adopt her.”

“Did you receive payment for fostering this child?” The judge asked.

“I never received money for fostering,” she said, confused by the question.

“Who paid for the expenses of this child then?” The judge asked.

“The orphanage took care of all the child’s expenses,” she answered.

“The orphanage?” The judge clarified.

“Yes,” she said. “The child was always under the care of the orphanage. The government foster program never paid anything toward any of the four children. It was the orphanage seeing their needs were met—their food and clothing.”

“Did you ever see Adefereese at the orphanage?” The judge asked.

The foster mother looked at Adefereese and then back to the judge. “No,” she said with resolve.

The judge pierced her lips and took a deep breath. Her eyebrows lifted as she looked with disapproval at Adefereese. He swallowed hard. She held her gaze, waiting for him to speak.

Adefereese pointed at the paper he had brought her from the official in Debre Birhan. “You have the evidence in front of you that she was under foster care,” Adefereese said. This set off a blaze of verbal whiplash from the judge, not only toward Adefereese, but at times toward Mesfin. Papers were flying and voices were getting louder and more passionate, except for Mesfin, who remained calm to

the end.

“Your Honor,” Mesfin softly spoke, “I believe you can see that this agency did not do their part for this adoptive family, nor did they do right by the child. Their job is to make sure the child is safe and in good care. He clearly did not check on any of these children and is now trying to save his reputation by accusing my clients of wrongdoing. He would rather give this child to a nonexistent foster care instead of a good family. He is proving that he has no interest in what is best for the child—only in his reputation.”

“I do want the best for the child,” Adefereze yelled out, “but I do not want my agency or my name damaged in the process!”

The judge cocked her head at his statement. He had said too much. Without a comment, the judge reached for her calendar and started looking for a date.

Adefereze began to say something, then abruptly stopped. The judge was done, and we could sense the chill in the courtroom.

“I will make my ruling sometime in the next two weeks,” the judge said.

Our hearts sank. We looked at Mesfin for help.

“Your Honor,” Mesfin quickly said.

The judge looked up, annoyed with the interruption.

“Your Honor, look at this man,” he said, pointing toward Mark. Mark didn’t have a clue what he was saying, although, he knew he was suddenly the center of conversation in the room. “This man is clearly exhausted. He has worn the same clothes for weeks now. They both miss and need to get back to their other children in America. Can we please have a ruling at a closer date? For the sake of this man?”

Everyone in the courtroom laughed, except Mark and me, who hadn’t a clue what had just been said.

The judge looked at Mark, and for a moment, I saw pity in her eyes. “I will see you this coming Monday. I will write up my ruling over the weekend.”

“Is Monday good for you?” Mesfin looked at us with triumph.

“Yes,” I said. “That would be fine.” Mark was silent. It was like the wind was out of his sails. I knew he was still hearing that we would be in Ethiopia for two more weeks, “Mark, she’s going to give us a ruling this coming Monday.”

“Really?” Mark asked in a daze. He looked toward the judge, “Thank you. Thank you.”

The judge gave Mark a faint smile and wrote it down in her books.

Before we stood from our seats, Adefereze had left without a word. I turned and thanked the foster mother for coming and testifying for us. She began to go off on how disappointed she was that the judge didn’t hand a verdict down and be finished with it all.

“Why wouldn’t the judge tell you today?” The foster mother asked. “There is no question that Favor should be with you and they’ve done wrong. Something is not right. I think they got to her!”

I walked beside her in silence. I believed in our judge.

As we walked out the door, Emebet joined in on the conversation with the foster mom. They both were disappointed about the verdict not being handed down, and discussed among themselves what must’ve happened. My attention was quickly drawn to Mesfin as he grabbed Mark and pulled

him into the hallway. I could tell something was transpiring.

“All I’m saying,” Mesfin whispered to Mark, “is that I feel very positive about your case.”

“Did the judge say something to make you feel this way?” Mark asked.

“Adefere presented a very weak case,” Mesfin stated. “She was not happy that she waited so long for a piece of paper that proved nothing. I feel very positive, but we’ll have to wait until Monday to see which way she decides. She is a strong judge, and she will decide well. I hope nobody gets to her and tries to convince her otherwise.”

“Do you think she would allow that?” Mark asked.

“No,” Mesfin said. “I just know that they will try. She is strong. She will do what is right. I believe I made a strong case.”

Mark listened. His mind was trying to grasp everything Mesfin was saying, but his body was tired and he was emotionally spent.

“The whole reason they say they are not letting you have Favor is that she is in a foster care program,” Mesfin continued, “but they have no proof that the foster care exists or has done anything for her care. The orphanage is the only one taking care of her. The orphanage has paid for everything.”

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The street was full as we walked out of the courtroom. Mark noticed Adefere talking on the phone near one of the courtroom offices that faced the street. He didn’t look happy as he paced back and forth, speaking in an irritated tone.

“Wonder what that conversation is about?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Mark said. “He doesn’t look happy about something.” We both watched him as unobtrusively as we could, until he looked up. We looked away for a moment, only to look back and see that he had disappeared.

“He is not happy with today,” Mesfin said with a smile. “That is a good sign. I am confident we have a strong case. You can have a good weekend, knowing you did all you could, and you did it right.” At that, Mesfin gave us a hug and walked up the sidewalk toward his car. Mark called Dave and found out they were parked up the street from where we stood, so we began to walk in that direction. McKenzie was the first one out of the car. She ran to us and quickly grabbed me for a long hug.

“I’m so glad you’re done!” McKenzie said. “It took forever!”

“Mommy!” Favor yelled as she threw her arms around my waist. It felt good to have them both in my arms again.

“Now you know why we left you at The Academy those other times,” I said to McKenzie. “Was it a long day?” Neither girl answered me, and I noticed that McKenzie didn’t seem like herself. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, then looked away.

My eyes searched for hers. “You sure?” I asked.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?” She gave me a big smile and another hug. “I just missed you.”

“I missed you!” I said, squeezing them both in my arms.

“The girls are very happy to see Mama.” I turned around to see the foster mother standing behind me with Emebet and Dave. “Favor, come give me a hug,” the foster mom said, holding her hands out

to Favor. Favor went to give her a hug and a kiss on both cheeks. “You look so pretty!” Favor gave a timid smile and looked at me.

“She is a pretty girl,” I said. “I need to get a picture of you with Favor.” I reached in to get my camera and snapped some pictures of Favor with Emebet, Dave, and the foster mom.



Emebet, Dave, and Favor's foster mother with Favor after court on Friday.

“You are the strong one,” the foster mother said. “He’s weak.”

“What?” I asked, thoroughly confused at what she was talking about.

She pointed toward Mark, who was wiping away tears from his eyes.

“See,” she said, “he is crying. You are strong.” She had an interesting but very flawed perspective. I knew my husband was not weak. Worn out and a little sensitive at the moment—but not weak.

“What’s going on?” I asked Mark, hoping it was something I could handle hearing.

Mark was standing next to DJ, who had been one of our mightiest prayer warriors. Mark couldn’t answer me as he fought back tears and pointed to DJ.

“I was telling Mark that I had a dream last night,” DJ said. “The judge was handing you papers.” He was fighting to hold back tears himself. “She was saying to you, ‘You can take your daughter and go home.’”

Mark’s eyes watered up again and the tears started to flow. The load of the past three-and-a-half weeks had taken their toll, and his emotions were raw. The desire of our hearts was to hear those words. DJ’s dream was a confirmation of what we knew in our spirits to be true.

“Thank you, DJ. I believe it will happen,” I said.

“God is a good God!” DJ said, “He will help you have victory. Favor will go home with you. This, I believe!”

“Yes,” I proclaimed as I raised my arm in victory.

“Yes,” the foster mother said, pointing her finger at me, “You are a fighter. See? Strong!”

I turned back around and looked at Mark. I knew she was trying to build me up as a woman, and I appreciated her tenacity, but if she only knew how far from the truth her statement was. Mark was the strongest man I knew, and as tears ran down his cheeks, I saw the man I fell in love with. The

tears were proof of his strength—they moved me and confirmed what I already knew about his tender heart. He was with me, a warrior for the orphan, and for his family. I couldn't love him any more than I did right at that moment.

We said our goodbyes and thanked everyone for coming before we got into the car. I had barely gotten the girls in the back seat when I noticed two men approaching Mark. One, in his 30s, was a nice looking man who was guiding the older man by the hand. The older man stumbled with his stick, trying to avoid tripping on the curb. His eyes were completely white and we knew he was blind. He put his hands out, begging for money as the younger man asked for our help. I found a few birr and placed it in the man's hand, but Mark stopped him.

In an instant, Mark put his hand on the man's eyes and prayed that Jesus would heal him and for his eyes to be opened. "Be healed in Jesus' name!" Mark said. Everyone stood still. "In Jesus' name, be healed," Mark repeated.

The old man looked up and smiled at Mark as the younger man started pulling him away from where we stood. We could tell that he was not pleased that Mark had just put his hand on the older man, but as we got in the car, both men stopped and looked back at Mark. The younger man was now smiling as his old friend gave Mark a huge, toothless smile. His eyes were no longer white as before.

"Did you see that?" I asked Mark.

"Yeah," Mark answered, and watched as the men walked away from us.

"Wow," I said, "What got into you, oh Mighty Man of God?"

"I just thought, here's a blind man...the Bible says to lay hands on him and believe, so, I did."

Mark crawled in the front seat of the car, and Dave started to drive us back to The Academy as usual—but somewhere on the streets of Addis Ababa, I believe that an old man who once was blind, now sees.