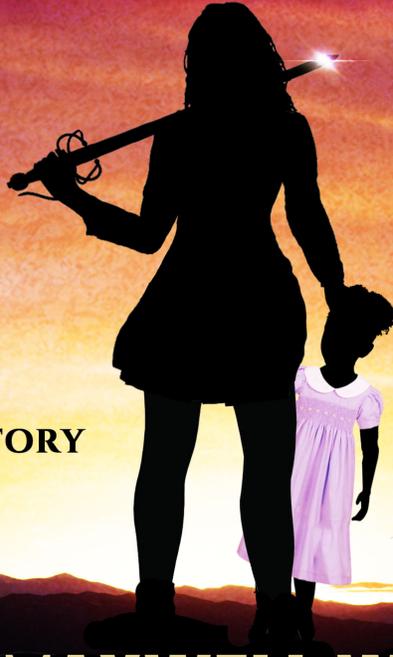


DON'T MESS *With This* MAMA

Risking It All to Rescue Our Daughter



A TRUE STORY

MISSY MAXWELL WORTON

FOREWORD BY CHRIS OVERSTREET

Chapter 19

FALSELY ACCUSED

*“No weapon formed against you will succeed,
and you will refute any accusation raised against you in court.
This is the heritage of the LORD’s servants,
and their righteousness is from Me.”*
—Isaiah 54:17, HCSB

A shadow came across the table where we were having lunch. We looked up to see Pochi and Pastor standing over us.

“Mind if we join you?” Pochi asked.

It had to be the worst timing in human history, but Pastor was such a likable guy that I caught myself smiling when I looked at him. When he looked at you, you knew he genuinely loved you. He came over and gave me a hug, which felt like a warm blanket to my freezing soul. They could see that we were both in pain and exhausted. During the next few minutes, they both tried to build our spirits with encouraging words.



Pastor and Pochi join us at Topview restaurant in Addis Ababa.

They had just returned from a meeting with the director and the lawyer at the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MOWA). It had been a good meeting, and they had been able to present what was happening with some of the children in Debre Birhan being pulled out of the orphanage and put into foster care. MOWA was not happy about what they heard, especially since all the children Pochi was speaking about had families actively working to adopt them. MOWA’s top concern was the welfare of children. Pulling a child from an orphanage was illegal unless you were a family member. The regional government office at Debre Birhan had no right to pull any of those children out of the orphanage.

As Mark and I listened to them recount their meeting, my emotions swirled around me. Five million orphans on the streets of Ethiopia, and they march into where our little girl and three other children are, and pull them out. *Why?* It made no sense to anyone. MOWA was going to send a note demanding that the regional offices at Debre Birhan release the children back to the orphanage.

Pochi and Pastor then told the director and the lawyer of MOWA about our case and how

Adefere and the head official at the Debre Birhan regional government office was harassing Favor's aunt, Emebet, for helping us rescue Favor. They were even threatening to send her to prison. MOWA's director and the lawyer could see that Emebet had every right to go get Favor, and that we had every right to leave with her. Those were hard words to hear when you're stuck in a court wormhole to retrieve a visa and passport.

At one point in the conversation, Pochi looked at us sitting across the table. I knew we had to be a sight...no sleep, little food, same wrinkled clothes.

"You were sent for this battle!" Pochi declared. "You were chosen because you are strong. Don't you see? You stayed and did not run away like the others. You stayed to fight for the children!" Just because we didn't leave, we somehow looked like we had strength to Pochi and Pastor. In that moment, though, we had no thoughts of judging the other family for their emotional state or their decision to leave. The reality was that we were all in the same position to lose our children. We were just the ones to have a front row seat to the event.

Mark sat forward in his chair. His lip started to quiver as he pointed his finger at Pochi. "It's easy for you to sit there and say those things to us," Mark said, trying to hold his emotions back, "but the reality is, you're not in the same place we're in. We're on the front lines taking the beating. We're the ones being challenged, threatened, and facing the possible loss of a daughter. We have everything to lose. You're not going through any of this!"

Pochi looked at Mark with a nervous smile. "Yeah," she laughed, "I know."

Her words delivered a gut-wrenching blow to both of us, and I could see it didn't sit well with Mark.

"Why did they come after us and not you?" Mark asked. "We did everything according to the law. What aren't you telling us? I think we have a right to know."

"Mark," Pochi said, "we did nothing wrong. This is a war. The enemy hates adoption and while you're only thinking of your daughter, we are thinking of four children that can hopefully be released to their forever families, because you've stayed to fight."

Pochi and Pastor looked at us from across the table. Their faces had hope and courage beaming from within. Then it hit Mark and me: While all we could see was our losses, they saw four children who could be freed and adopted if we would just fight for them. They were hoping we would hear the call to be their champions. They were believing that we would be the ones who would dare to go into the ring, armed only with faith.

Did God set up this moment? Were there two human collaborators sitting across the table from us, all part of the plan to make a path to freedom for these kids? Could this all be about affecting a change in the system? Was God really calling us up to do something that courageous? How desperate was He? What if we failed? Could we not only lose our daughter, but three others? The last thing in the world Mark and I felt like were prizefighters.

"Adefere is afraid of you." Pochi said. "He thought you left. The fact that you stayed..." Pochi started laughing.

"It terrifies him," Pastor finished. "He called me up, screaming, accusing me of child trafficking."

"People are asking what is wrong with him," Pochi said. "He's acting crazy, like he's losing his mind over this. It's not like him. He's always been very respected, but now he's lying and harassing anyone involved in this case—mostly us and the people at the orphanage."

“But why has he come after us so strongly?” I asked.

Pochi shrugged her shoulders. “I believe it is because he can’t control you, and that scares him.”

While we were talking, Emebet called Pochi to see how we were doing. She was no longer answering her phone because of the harassing calls from both the regional office and Adefere. We had not heard from her since we were stopped at immigration. She was so thankful we didn’t leave and stayed to fight for Favor. *There was that word again: fight.* She shared how sorry she was that we had to be away from our other children, but she felt God had sent us for this time. We, on the other hand, were amazed at her bravery. She had no way out of her situation, but she fearlessly fought for Favor. Even in the face of threats to her freedom—here she was—encouraging us.

The case was building. We knew, once again, that this was not about us. It never had been. A shift had taken place in my spirit at some point during our conversation. My eyes were redirected from myself and my needs, and refocused on a greater need. A fire started burning in my heart. It wasn’t only about Favor, and it wasn’t about these four kids. It was about all the kids who had lost freedom in this nation because of age or corruption. My mind was made up. I would go into the ring and fight for the sake of those trapped in this abusive maze. I wasn’t sure if Mark was ready for it, but he was going in too. My strength was starting to mount up. Maybe, just maybe, something good could come out of all of this.

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At 1:30 in the afternoon, Mark and I were back from lunch standing in front of the locked doors of the adoption courts. Couples were being dropped off with their agencies for their court dates. The looks of joy and anticipation on their faces were priceless. They all looked so fresh in their Sunday best. I glanced at Mark and myself. We looked like we hadn’t got the memo.

I heard a familiar accent behind me, so I turned to see a jet-lagged family trying to manage three children. “Are you from America?” I asked.

“Yes!” she answered.

“Where are you from?”

“Houston,” she answered. “And you?”

“A little city south of Nashville,” I said.

She looked at me, then tilted her head. “Are you the Wortons?” The question took me by surprise and she obviously could see it by the expression on my face. “My friend told me about what you’re going through to bring your daughter home. She said you would be here.”

“Wow!” I said. “Small world!”

“You’ve got so many people praying for you. I just want you to know that you’re not alone.”

“Thank you,” I said as the tears began to well up in my eyes. I was humbled to know that others we didn’t even know had our backs in prayer. I gave her a hug. “That means a lot.”

The doors opened, and most of us walked up the three stories of steps to the adoption court, while a few braved the rickety elevator. I kept talking with my new-found friend from Houston, while Mark caught up with Mesfin. We watched as, one by one, couples were summoned into the judge’s chamber to attend their court date. They all went in so somber, but a few minutes later, they came out with tears of joy in their eyes and celebratory smiles on their faces. What a perfect reflection of how

your heart feels after the judge tells you that the beautiful child you've dreamt about and loved for months—the one you've worked towards bringing into your family and giving your name—is yours. From my seat, it was bittersweet.

Mark and Mesfin had their heads together, talking about our case. It looked intense. A part of me was glad to be sitting in a different area of the room.

“Based on what you know,” Mark asked, “what are our chances of leaving this week with Favor?”

Mesfin was guarded but positive as he answered Mark's questions. “Nowhere in Ethiopian law has an adoption been revoked after a verdict has been rendered,” Mesfin said confidently. “If EAI wanted to challenge your adoption, they should've done it before your court appointment in August. They didn't. Today, I want to find out why you were stopped at immigration. What right did they have to stop you?” Mesfin shook his head. “This is personal.”

* * * * *

I tried to write down what I was feeling in my notebook, but the words wouldn't come. Explaining the spectrum of emotions that I was feeling was nothing short of impossible. I was full of hope and purpose, but then I was scared and fearless at the same time. I was on an emotional rollercoaster. I really just wanted to go home and hug my kids, but there was an unshakable stubbornness that would not leave without fighting—for both my daughter and the injustice that had been done.

When I looked up from staring at a blank page, I realized the last couple had just left the judge's chamber. My heart jumped, and I raced to load everything back into my purse before our name was called. The young lady came out and looked around. Mesfin quickly addressed her and asked that we be able to have a moment with the judge. She nodded and ducked back into the judge's chamber.

The door opened, and the young lady came out again. “The judge says she is done for the day,” she said. “She will review your paperwork and you can go for today. Make an appointment to see her next week.”

What? Mark and I stood there, helpless.

Mesfin approached the clerk and said something in Amharic in a soft, calm voice. The clerk looked up at him, took a deep breath, and went back into the room. A few minutes later, she opened the door and ushered us into the judge's courtroom.

Mark and I were filled with emotion as we entered the room. It looked exactly the same as it did three months earlier, when we were here for Favor's court date. We sat in the exact same seats. We looked into the eyes of the same woman who had declared with a smile that Favor was ours. Now, she looked annoyed as she glanced up at us. We knew that she had signed the papers to stop us from leaving the country, but we didn't know why. We also understood that she was the only one who had the legal power to either take away our daughter for good, or declare her ours for life. It all sat on her shoulders.

“Take a seat please,” the judge said. She jotted down some notes, then looked up at Mesfin and spoke in Amharic.

Mesfin stood tall and began to speak. His voice was calm, and his inflections and tone were exact as he spoke to the judge in their native language. Mark and I sat quietly. We saw the judge's emotions rise and fall after each statement from Mesfin. We didn't understand a word that was being said, but

we could somewhat decipher the conversation by the judge's voice inflections and responses. Mesfin's demeanor never changed; he remained calm. It didn't look like it was going well from our point of view, and the judge seemed to be on edge more and more as they talked. At one point, Mesfin handed her a few documents, including one of the letters that was slid under our door at the hotel. She began to read it. That's when the fireworks started.

"Who wrote this?" she demanded, looking at us.

"Adefere," Mark said.

"I did not suspend your adoption!" she said with alarm, as she underlined the word *suspended* on the sheet. "This is not true! I did no such thing." We could tell she was very upset by what Adefere had done. She started speaking Amharic in a raised and stressed tone to Mesfin, who stood composed, agreeing.

She took a deep breath as she looked down at the paper and shook her head.

"I want to make this very clear," she looked right at us. "I did not suspend your adoption as this letter states. No matter what the agency says, she is your daughter and that has not changed!"

I squeezed Mark's hand. Our spirits leapt at the news. Maybe we could leave tonight if we could get her passport and a flight out.

"The reason I signed the paperwork which stopped you from taking Favor out of the country was because there was another case just like yours. I am concerned with what is happening to these children, and I need to get to the bottom of this. I'm sure you can understand this."

I shook my head in agreement, but my mind was trying to figure out what that meant for us. Could we leave with Favor now, or was she telling us this was going to be a long, drawn out court case as she got to the bottom of this? The bottom could be a long way down.

"I want to hear your story," she said.

Mark and I looked at Mesfin, who had told us earlier not to say a word.

She interjected again, "I want to hear what *you* have to say."

For the next 20 minutes, she listened intently as Mark and I shared our story. We told her everything, from the emails to the conversations we had with Pochi and Adefere before we arrived in Ethiopia. We told her how Favor's aunt traveled to Debre Birhan to rescue Favor, and the awkward meeting with Adefere in his office after Favor was in our arms. We left nothing out, even the last few days that were filled with harassment and intimidation from Adefere, which eventually brought us to her. When we were done, she shook her head with a noted irritation and started talking to Mesfin. Mesfin simply listened and agreed with what she said. Mark and I sat quietly and clueless.

"What did you do to make him so mad at you?" the judge asked.

"We came to get our daughter," I said.

"You know that this has become a very personal attack on you?" she said. "Adefere has attacked you both, personally."

We had no words. We knew he had accused us of being involved with child trafficking. With all the personal information we had to divulge to be considered for adoption, let alone pass court, you'd think someone would've caught that if it was remotely true. We knew this man would stop at nothing to make himself look good, and that included making us look bad with unfounded accusations.

"I do not like that he used my court to intimidate you and threaten you," she said, but then took

a deep breath before she continued. “Because he did, this is now a court problem, and it will have to be resolved in the courts before we can release you to immigration for her visa and passport.” The judge pulled out her calendar.

“EAI is due in court to present evidence on November 16th,” she said. “You return then.”

My heart sank. That was almost two weeks away. I couldn’t stand the thought of being gone from my boys, Matt and Shewit, that long. Mark and I stared at Mesfin as if to say, *Help us! We want to leave now!*

“Is there any way we can make it sooner?” Mesfin asked. “They have children back in America that they must get back to.”

The judge quickly fingered through her datebook, paused, then pointed at a date. “I can bring you in Thursday the 8th. I will have my office contact Adefere to be here.”

“Thank you,” Mesfin said and glanced our way. Our hearts soared and we were excited at the possibility that this nightmare could be behind us within a few days.

“My concern is what has happened to these four children,” the judge said. “You understand—I have to get to the bottom of this.”

“We understand,” I said. We all stood to leave. “Thank you, for hearing us today.”

She nodded her head, “I can see you love your daughter very much. I won’t change my mind, but I must complete the court process.”

My eyes started to water. I said thank you in Amharic and turned to leave before the water works really started.

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Mark immediately started questioning Mesfin about what was said in the courtroom.

“I relayed to her the facts,” he started. “EAI can’t come, after she had issued the adoption decree, with “so-called” evidence to stop your adoption. What is upsetting to her is that Adefere claims he knew nothing of what was happening to these four orphans. That means he never checked up on an orphanage he was representing.”

“How do you feel about our case?” Mark asked.

Mesfin paused, “I feel good,” he said. “We should be in a good position. She is a very good judge, and she will hear all the evidence before making a decision. I believe she will do what is best for the child, but we must not let our guard down. He has lied and accused you of very bad things to get you stopped. He is a desperate man.”

When we got downstairs to the street, Mark brought up Mesfin’s fee. We had heard nothing and were getting a little nervous that it might be more than we could afford. But we were invested, no matter how much it would cost. At this point, everyone who wasn’t too scared to take our case had doubled or tripled their fee, with no hope of winning.

“So how much are you going to cost me?” Mark nervously asked.

Mesfin was thinking. He took a deep breath, narrowed his eyes and said, “It will be a minimum of \$5,000.”

I could see Mark trying to hold his composure as his eyes got big and he swallowed hard before responding. “U.S. dollars?” he asked.

“No,” Mesfin quickly responded. “No, no, berr.”

“Berr?” Mark asked with relief. One hundred berr was worth about six American dollars. “Is that a fair price for the work you will be doing for us?”

“I believe so,” Mesfin said.

Mark paused. Even with his bank account running out back home, he knew Mesfin’s service was worth far more. So, for the next five minutes, Mesfin and Mark went back and forth to find a fee that they both agreed would be fair. When all was said and done, both walked away very pleased with their agreement.