

DON'T MESS *With This* MAMA

Risking It All to Rescue Our Daughter



A TRUE STORY

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FOREWORD BY CHRIS OVERSTREET

Chapter 5

SLEIGHT OF HAND

*“...if God has called us to this adoption,
He will provide what we need.
Job or no job, what He orders, He pays for.”*
—Missy Worton

The clock was ticking down—every second inching us closer to saying goodbye to Favor. We cherished every moment. The last night, Favor and I took Pochi out to dinner. Mark was still sick and resting up for our 18-hour flight home the next day.

As Pochi and I talked over our meal, I found out that EAI Ethiopia had blamed us for being late to our court date, telling the judge we were slow filling out paperwork and that was the reason we were so late. That story was another fallacy, and I was getting more and more concerned about our adoption agency telling bold-faced lies! *How many times and ways were they going to sabotage us?* I knew these actions were not normal for an agency, but we had come so far that we couldn't start over with a different agency without losing all the money we'd spent so far. Besides, we were only a few weeks away from being done with this agency.

Favor sat quietly, not touching her food. She looked exhausted, but I could tell that she probably felt the same way I did—we were both dreading the moment that we would have to say goodbye. The new adoption laws, made to protect the children from trafficking, had adoptive families make two trips to Ethiopia—one for the court date and one for the embassy date. When we adopted Shewit, we only had one trip—our embassy date—and then we were able to bring him home with us. This trip was starting to feel like torture to me. We were going to be with Favor long enough to get attached. Then, we would feel the pain of being separated for a few months before we would reunite. They told us it would only be six to eight weeks between the two trips. They might as well have said six to eight years. We didn't want to leave our little girl—and seconds felt like eons.

I asked Pochi about what happened back in April when the men came to take away the four children. I wasn't clear on why they would be able to come in and take children that already had forever families working toward adopting them. I can't say that she made the matter any clearer to me. It sounded like a regional government office decided to bully a local orphanage.

Favor crawled into my lap and fell asleep in my arms as Pochi continued to tell me about the underbelly of the foster care program that almost took my daughter.

“The man that wanted Favor is very powerful and very rich,” Pochi said. “Many people say that he is a devil worshiper.”

“A devil worshiper?” I asked. “Why would they allow someone like that to be a foster parent?”

“Because he is wealthy, the kids will have a home, and they will be able to stay in Ethiopia,” she said.

“Does he have a wife?” I asked.

“No,” she answered, “I don't believe he does. The horrible thing about this is that people say he

has had foster children before—and they have all died or disappeared mysteriously. Nobody knows why and they cannot find a reason for their death. It's very weird." I couldn't believe what I was hearing. It sounded like a chapter out of a horror book! Yet, I wasn't completely surprised as I had heard and read about how much devil worship and witchcraft existed in Africa. But this time, I was hearing this about the man who was involved in the adoption of MY DAUGHTER!

"Why does he want Favor?" I asked.

"We don't know," Pochi answered. "I can't imagine it is for good reasons. He says he has money to give her a good life and education."

"At what price?" I said, "Her life? She would just be another foster child that died or disappeared."

"This is why we fight so hard for these children," Pochi said. "It is a life and death situation for them."

"Isn't that what adoption is—a life-or-death situation?" I responded. "In some cases, it's a life-or-death situation for their souls."

"Yes, yes," Pochi said. "That is why I pray so hard before referring a child to a family. I care for more than just their lives. I care about where they will be for eternity."

"Pochi," I paused before moving forward with my question, "if this man is so powerful, is Favor safe in Ethiopia? How has he not found her?"

"We moved her to another orphanage in another city," Pochi said.

"Is there any way he can find her?" I asked.

"No," she said, "but it doesn't matter. The paper the regional office gave me released her to the orphanage to be adopted. They gave me their word that she was okay to be adopted. This man is out of it. It would be okay even if we take her back there."

This new information put my mind into a tailspin. Something didn't feel right. I had more unanswered questions than I did before.

"Please tell me she will never be taken back to the other orphanage," I said, looking Pochi in the eyes. She looked away. "Pochi?"

My heart started beating faster. "Pochi, please promise me you will not take her back to the orphanage where she was before—in Debre Birhan," I pleaded.

Pochi looked up at me and took a deep breath. I could tell she was picking her words wisely.

"I think the regional office (in Debre Birhan) wants to see her before she leaves for America," Pochi cautiously spoke. "It's nothing to worry about. I have the paper so they cannot keep her."

My heart felt a sharp pain of imminent danger. "They have no right to see her!" I said. "There is NO reason they need to see her, since that paper is signed! She is now ours, and as her mom, I am telling you that I do not want her to go back to that city. I know it isn't safe for her to be there."

"You do not need to worry," Pochi said, playing with the silverware in front of her to avoid eye contact.

"No," I argued, "I do need to worry. I can't ignore the fact that I feel she'll be in great danger there. Now, I need you to promise me you will not take her back."

"The foster mother will not agree...I'm afraid she will not," she said.

"I don't care," I persisted, "Mark and I don't want her going back."

“Okay, okay,” she said, “I will tell her, but the foster mother will not be happy. She thinks she will be in big trouble because they asked her to bring Favor in. She promised them she would. I just don’t want to upset her. This is very touchy because she is the foster mother we’ve put in place to protect Favor from being taken to a place where we couldn’t find her. The foster mother works at my orphanage.”

“How can she still be a foster mother when I just had a judge tell me Favor is my daughter by law?” I asked. “She can’t be an adopted child and a foster child. There is no need for the foster mother now—I am her mother. The papers were signed, weren’t they?”

“Yes, they were signed,” she said. “She just doesn’t want the regional office to be upset with her. She made them a promise.”

None of what Pochi was saying made any sense. She wasn’t telling me something. I could feel it. I kept asking questions, but I got the same answer, or was encouraged not to worry.

When she dropped Favor and me off at the Hilton, I turned and looked at her.

“I’m begging you not to take her back to that city. I don’t know what I’m not being told, but I do know that Favor will be in danger if she’s taken back.”

“I would never put her in danger,” Pochi said. “You do not need to worry.”

I shut the car door and watched as she drove out of the complex. My pleas were falling on deaf ears. I looked down at Favor. She was holding my hand and leaning on me, half asleep. I loved her so much, and I couldn’t bear the thought of losing her again. Not now. How was I going to leave tomorrow, knowing what I knew?

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The next morning I woke up with Favor staring at me. She smiled when she saw that I had caught her. We couldn’t understand each other’s language, but our eyes and arms spoke beyond words. That morning she was my shadow. I would put on my makeup foundation, and she would grab it and copy me. Then I would take a washcloth and remove it from her beautiful face. I would put my lip gloss on, and she would grab it and apply it to her lips, copying my every move. When I went to flat-iron my hair, Favor took the flat iron from me and wanted to straighten my hair. These were precious moments that I captured for my memories of her, to treasure during our upcoming separation.



Favor and I embracing every moment!

Today was going to be a hard day. I looked over at Mark, who had been up most of the night battling food poisoning. It was obvious that he had lost. He wasn't in any kind of shape to travel in an airplane for 18 hours.

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The one-hour trip back to Covenant Orphanage in Holeta was quiet. Favor greeted the children and started handing them the gifts that she had chosen and specially wrapped for them. As she gave these gifts to her friends, Favor had so much pride, which was evident in the way she held herself and watched as each friend reacted to the specially-picked out, unique gift.

Mark planted himself in a chair in the living room of the orphanage. I knew he felt like crawling into a hole, but I watched in admiration as he found strength to entertain the children. They gathered around him as he would try to pronounce some of their words in Amharic. The laughter would explode as he would butcher a phrase. He sat there for more than an hour, with all of them waiting for what he would say and do next. He had them in the palm of his hand, and they loved him.



Mark surrounded by the children at the orphanage.

After dinner with the children, we had to load up and get back to the large city of Addis Ababa, where we would catch our flight back to America. I knelt down to say goodbye to Favor. This moment was the one I had been dreading since before I'd arrived. There she was, the little girl I had dreamt about, fought for, and loved—standing in front of me. If there was any way legally and safely to stuff her into my suitcase and take her home, I would've done it in a second. I fought to stop the tears and show her a happy face that she could remember.

Looking in her eyes, I told her I loved her in Amharic, “Eh-wuh-dih-shah-loh.”

She smiled and nodded her head, whispering it back to me.

“I will come back soon and take you to America to live with me,” I assured her. “I promise. It won't be long.” Then I hugged her and kissed her goodbye, trying to rip off the emotional Band-Aid as quickly as I could. As I turned to go, I felt her arms grab my waist, trying to keep me from leaving. I took a deep breath and grabbed her up in my arms, holding her as tight as I could.

“Father, please protect her,” I prayed in a whisper. The nurse came and put her hand on Favor as if to say *it's time*. She turned and hugged the nurse, allowing me to walk to the car. Everyone was seated and waiting as I crawled into the back seat and shut the door. As we drove away, we waved goodbye to all the children standing at the blue gate, but my eyes only went to one. I watched her until I couldn't see her any more. My tears started flowing as if a dam had broken within, and my whole body ached just to hold her one more time. It was almost unbearable. I kept pushing back the feeling that I would never see her again. Mark put his arm around me and, without a word, just let me cry.

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Our flight was overbooked so we had to change airlines, and we had an unexpected upgrade to first class. I believe the man at the gate took pity upon Mark, who looked absolutely pathetic by this point. As we waited in the immigration line, Mark suddenly realized he didn't have his jacket with him. It carried all our money in it. He ran toward the security area, hoping he had not left it in the hotel van, or worse. My husband was not himself. Besides not feeling well, he had been way off his game before he ever got sick. When he came back, he had his jacket that had been left in the security area, and

thankfully, all the money was still in it.

Once we got to the waiting area, I asked him where his head was. He had been checked out most of the trip, and with some of the comments he was making, I felt like he was slipping into a doubtful and faithless mentality. I had married a man of strong faith, and I was wondering what had happened to him. He had missed the opportunity to enjoy the moments with Favor because his mind had been hijacked by worry of what tomorrow would hold for us financially.

“Mark, who do you think holds our tomorrows?” I asked. He looked at me for a moment and then shook his head, acknowledging the reality called faith. “We both agreed that if God called us to this adoption, He would provide what we needed. Job or no job. What He orders, He pays for, right?” Mark gave me a half-hearted smile.

“I know that,” he said. “I just don’t feel well.”

I started feeling bad for beating him up when he was already down, so I just sat quietly beside him and waited to board.

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The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, which explains our second flight—not the same lovely experience as the first. This time, we had the “pleasure” of sitting in the middle seats in the back of the plane. I am a lover of people, but the precious souls that filled those two seats smelled like a bath was on their bucket list of things yet to do.

Halfway through the flight, I opened up my phone to look at the pictures I had taken in Ethiopia. Somehow, the first picture that came up was of my three children waiting for us back in Tennessee. My depression over leaving Favor switched to thankfulness and expectation for the three I had back home. Soon, we were reunited with three very happy kids, holding them in our arms, telling them every moment we could remember about our trip. After all the gifts were handed out and the details shared, we all went to bed. There is something magical about crawling between the sheets of your own bed. It doesn’t matter how much hotels try, how amazing or how soft their high-thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets are, they can’t compare to the feeling you get at home. I loved being home.