

DON'T MESS *With This* MAMA

Risking It All to Rescue Our Daughter



A TRUE STORY

MISSY MAXWELL WORTON

FOREWORD BY CHRIS OVERSTREET

Chapter 23

MAKING A PATH

*“I understood why His heart aches for the orphans...how He yearns
for them to feel loved unconditionally.
To feel valued. I understood why He instructs us,
as His adopted children, to go and help the orphan.
We were once like them. I could hear His heartbeat—
it was almost deafening.”*
—Missy Maxwell Worton

It was Sunday night in Addis Ababa, and the streets were relatively calm as Dave drove us through the city to attend the Reinhard Bonnke meeting. Bonnke is known for his crusades—some drawing more than 150,000 attendees in a single night—throughout the continent of Africa. Bonnke, on his ministry website, reports that as a young man, God placed upon his heart the vision of “the continent of Africa, being washed in the precious Blood of Jesus.”¹ So many of our friends were excited that we would be in Ethiopia to experience Bonnke, and some of them believed it was one of the reasons why we were detained. I wasn’t sure if that was the case, but I had to admit, God’s timing was impeccable. He had lined it up perfectly for Mark and me to attend, and we had learned not to believe in coincidences.

As we approached, we could see crowds walking toward the large field that would hold the first Bonnke meeting in more than 20 years for the Ethiopian people. The cow pasture was known for having a stronghold of witchcraft over it. Witches had supposedly put curses on the land, but that didn’t stop Bonnke from taking back the land for God’s glory.

Dave drove through the special entrance for cars. Most people were on foot, some walking miles to get here. We pulled past the guard and went through a section called “the homeless city.” The rooms were made out of anything they could find that had been discarded—sheets of metal, wood, or cardboard. As we drove by, we looked through the walls that barely stood to shelter those inside. I’d seen such levels of poverty in pictures, but not up close. The rotting smells and hopeless looks on their faces made it personal. I rolled down my window as we passed them, and I could hear jubilant music playing as we rounded the corner to see a pasture covered with thousands of beautiful, dancing Ethiopians! My spirit leapt. I couldn’t wait to be in the midst of it.

Dave parked and started walking us through the crowds of people to find Pochi. Everyone we passed smiled back—full of so much life and love. What a noticeable difference from what we had been experiencing on our drives to court. I looked around—there were no chairs, no concession stands. All they had was a large, dry, cow pasture, set with a stage, a huge sound system, large projector screens, and a few lights so you could see where you were walking. In every direction I looked, I saw people worshipping God with pure abandon. Nobody was complaining about how loud the music was, or about sitting on the hard ground. They had come with one hope—to see Heaven come to Earth.

Mark and I did our best to avoid the cow patties and large cracks in the ground as we followed closely behind Dave. I was shocked that with all those people, we quickly found Pochi and some women from her church about halfway down the field. The praise music continued to ring out over the land, and there was no sign of anything but the glory of God in the place.

Mark and I listened as Bonnke passionately shared a simple message about God's love and how the name of Jesus is not spoken in Hell because it brings life and hope. Hell has no hope nor life. We immediately recognized his interpreter as one of the Covenant Church pastors we had enjoyed lunch with in the beautiful high rise several days ago. When Bonnke wrapped up his message and made a call for those who wanted to know Jesus, people from every direction started making their way toward the stage. That night, thousands gave their lives to a living and loving God. We watched miracles happen before our eyes: a lame man walked, huge tumors disappeared, a young girl's leg grew out healthy and whole. At one point, a wheelchair was thrown onto the stage. The man who used to be lame and confined to it had run home to show his family what God had done. We knew it was real. I had never seen so many miracles at one time; the experience was life-changing, and it renewed my belief that my God was a big and powerful God! He was a healer! He could do whatever He chose to do for those who believed on Him. God's Spirit was alive and moving in Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian praise music started to play again, and everyone around us started dancing in praise and thanksgiving. I understood why David danced before the Lord and why the Israelites danced after crossing the Red Sea—that's what joy does to you. Mark and I needed to be in this atmosphere. We were going up against our own giant and facing our own impassable sea. We felt God's restorative power come upon us, and we were filled with faith at the mighty wonders we had seen. How could we doubt that He had a miracle waiting for us? And so, we danced!



*Mark and I at the Reinhard Bonnke meeting
with more than 100,000 beautiful Ethiopians!*

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Before we left, I took a few pictures of the people dancing around me. They had such expressions of joy and gladness on their faces, and I wanted to remember this moment. I checked the picture before we left, and realized that I had caught what looked like fire coming down on people's heads, with

hundreds of angels filling the sky above us. I took another picture. Maybe my camera was messing up. The same thing happened again, except more angels were visible in the photos. My camera was working just fine.

We were all filled with excitement as we drove back to the compound, but as we rounded the corner, we saw white plastic sheets covering bodies alongside the highway. It looked like white body bags lined up. We noticed people sleeping on the median in the middle of the highway, inches from the cars that drove by. It took my breath away.

“Oh my gosh,” I said, “are these people all homeless?”

“Yes,” Dave said.

“Are they families,” I asked, “or just strangers curled up together?”

“Some are families,” Dave said, “but most do not know each other. They sleep next to a stranger to keep warm at night. This is the only way to survive.”

“What about the ones who are sleeping in the middle of the highway?” I asked.

“They are afraid someone will steal from them,” he said. “This is how they protect themselves.”

“They’re inches from cars hitting them!” I said in disbelief.

“What are they afraid people will steal?” Mark asked.

“Anything,” he said, “their shoes, jacket, food.”

“Does the government help at all?” Mark asked.

“There are too many,” Dave said. “85 percent are in poverty. Where do you start?”

The drive was quiet the rest of the way back to our apartment. I knew poverty was a big problem in Ethiopia, but the reality that people would snuggle up to strangers, covered by a plastic sheet on a urine-soaked sidewalk, wrecked me. I wondered how this horrific problem could even be solved. The image in my mind from the sight I had seen was vast...too many people to count, too many to forget.

After our long drive, we pulled up to the gate of The Academy. I took a picture of the charismatic church, built next to the high wall of The Academy. I looked at the picture. I had taken a section of the dark, unlighted area above this little miracle-believing church, but what I saw was more angels than I could count filling the skies. They came across like large and small orbs in the picture. Maybe I knew they were already there. After all, the light shines the brightest...in the midst of darkness.

The more I learned about this little church nestled next to The Academy, the more I wanted to experience it. Radical Islam had moved in all around their community; yet, they stood, loved, and worshiped, opening their doors every Friday to anyone who would come for healing. Instead of running, they stayed and served their community. They prayed for anyone, regardless of their beliefs, and God’s love and power healed them. They simply loved the people around them, and much like Covenant Church that we had attended with Pochi on a few occasions, this little church knew how to bring down Heaven in worship.

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When we arrived back at Jody and Pat’s home to pick up the girls, we found out that the girls had left to go back to the apartment more than an hour ago. Jody tried to get them to stay until we got back, but they had their minds made up. It surprised us, but we figured that McKenzie babysat all the time, and Jody said they would be safe anywhere on the compound.

On their walk back to the apartment, the girls' imaginations took over. One of the armed guards spotted them and started walking briskly to catch up. The girls thought he was coming after them so they screamed and ran to the apartment, shoving the chair against the door. I'm sure the guard got a good laugh, but the girls were a little freaked out.

We hurried up to the apartment and banged on the door, but nobody answered.

"It's Mom and Dad," I said through the door.

McKenzie opened the door with big eyes, and gave me a huge hug.

"Please don't leave us alone again," McKenzie pleaded.

"We didn't leave you alone," Mark said. "We left you with some friends. You should've gone back there."

"I couldn't get Favor out the door to go back," McKenzie said. "She thought the guard was a bad guy coming after us, but I could hear him laughing when Favor said something in Amharic and took off running. I only ran because I knew I'd be in trouble if I lost her."

"He was probably wondering what two little girls were doing out in the dark alone," Mark said. "I'm glad to hear she knows to run if someone is chasing her."

"Oh, she definitely knows how to run. She's a fast little thing," McKenzie said.

Favor shot McKenzie a look.

"I'm sorry," I said. "We were just trying to keep you safe."

"Mom," McKenzie said, "you do know she doesn't understand a word you're saying?"

"She can feel it," I answered.

I put the girls to bed and snuggled up to them. Favor could understand little at this point, but she knew that I cared and loved her. As I lay between them, my mind went back to all the homeless people we saw. They weren't lazy—they were poor, and some of them were sick. I felt that so many of them, if given an opportunity to make money, would take it. There were no handouts or welfare. *How could we possibly make a difference?* My mind kept trying to figure out ways to fix this huge problem, until I fell asleep.

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We woke up to "Blessed be the name of the Lord" blasting over the intercom. It was Monday morning, and the school was welcoming the students back from the weekend. We rushed down to the little coffee shop on campus to get our morning coffee—the best coffee I'd ever tasted, and each cup was just pennies to enjoy.

"Mom, did I tell you about the ugly huge cat we saw last night?" McKenzie said.

"What cat?" I said.

"It was huge, little ears and a big bushy tail. We tried to catch it, but it ran up to the attic."

Mark and I looked at each other.

"Do me a favor," Mark said, "if you see that cat, stay away from it! That doesn't sound like a cat."

"Hey, it's the Wortons! Having your morning coffee and...popcorn?" Jody said as she walked up.

"Breakfast of champions!" I said.

"How'd it go last night?" Jody asked.

"Heaven got a little fuller," I said.

“That’s awesome,” Jody said. “So, the girls were good when you got home?”

“Yes, but I think they got a little frightened by the security.” I answered.

McKenzie looked up from her popcorn, “Hey, he had a gun,” she said.

“These guys are great,” Jody replied. “They’re here to protect you.”

I was so thankful to have a safe hideaway. I knew Jody and Pat would do anything to help us out, and I knew that at some point I would have to talk to them about another really big favor I might have to ask of them, but now was not the right time.

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That afternoon, Pochi and Pastor picked us up to visit Covenant Orphanage in Holeta. When we arrived, the children ran out to greet us. They were all so happy, especially to see Favor and McKenzie.



Mark, Missy, McKenzie and Favor visiting the children at Covenant Orphanage in Holeta.

They asked why we had not left for America yet. I watched as Favor’s countenance changed. She looked down and walked away from all of us standing there.

“Favor,” I called out. She turned and looked at me with a face that told me she was hurting. “Favor, come to me, sweetie.” I held my arms out, and she ran to me and slowly put her arms around my shoulders. “We are not leaving you here.” She looked in my eyes. “You are going back with us tonight. You are my little girl.” Favor’s eyes never left mine, and although I knew she didn’t understand all the words I said, she knew I wasn’t going to leave her. She smiled and gave me a hug before rushing away to join the others.

“So,” Pochi said, “how are you feeling about the court and what you’ve seen?”

After the last court date, our confidence had been rocked, and we saw a fight before us with unbalanced scales.

“I don’t know,” I said, “I thought they would let us go once they saw that Adefere didn’t show up for his court hearing.”

“Of course not,” Pochi said. “This will take time. They have to hear his side, but don’t worry, they will find nothing.”

“All it took was a lie to stop us. What stops them from lying again?” I asked.

“Nothing does,” Pochi said. “You have a smart and good judge. You have to believe she will find the truth.” Mark and I sat silent. “You look worried, Mark.”

“I am,” Mark said sharply. I could feel Pochi pull back. “It didn’t go well at our last court hearing. We could feel a change in the judge toward us. It’s not a done deal that we’ll be able to keep Favor.”

Pochi said, “I know, it did not go well, but it’s not just...”

“I know,” Mark interrupted her. “Pochi, you used us, knowing we could lose her. It’s kind of hard not to take that personally when we’re the ones who get to feel the pain.”

“We did not use you,” Pochi stressed.

“Pochi,” I asked, “why didn’t you encourage us to leave that Thursday?”

“I didn’t think you would have trouble leaving,” she said. “You had everything, her passport, visa. Why would I think they would stop you?”

“Because you told us they could stop us,” I answered. “But by then, it was too late for us to do anything about it.”

For the next few moments we sat in an awkward silence. The only thing we could hear was the children playing in the yard. Pochi searched for words, while Mark and I sat in our reoccurring pain. She would start to say something, then hesitate and take a deep breath. “I know this has been difficult,” she said. “I feel your pain, I see your pain, but I know this is God’s will for a higher call. When I was a young girl, my father would take me on walks on this long road, in the forest nearby our home. It had tall trees and many bushes on both sides. I remember one day when we were walking he asked me, ‘How do you think this road got here?’ I did not know, because in my life it had always been. Then he explained how it used to be only a forest when his grandfather was young, but as time went on, they needed a path. So, many men came with their sharp tools and cut a path that became this road. Men cleared the trees and rocks away so it would be easier for those who would travel this way. It was hard work, but they knew it would be a blessing to others when it was finished. Some of them never got to use that road—they died before seeing it completed, but they worked on it anyway. ‘Now,’ my father said, ‘we walk on this path, and we don’t ask ourselves who did this so our way could be made easier or better. We just see a path, but someone made that path for us.’ I will never forget my father telling me this.”

Mark and I listened.

“You are making a path,” Pochi said, pointing to us. “All you see are the trees and rocks in the way and how hard it is, but I see you making a path for others to walk through with ease. It is true, you might not get to walk the path. Most will probably never know the pain you went through to clear it, but God will.”

I appreciated what Pochi was saying, but it wasn’t a warm, tingly feeling that I felt, but exhaustion.

I knew Pochi was trying to tell us that although it may not turn out the way we'd hope, it was going to help others in the long run.

The children came running into the living room and took every available seat around us. They brightened up the room and pulled us back into the moment. A flu bug was going around, and I could hear the sniffles and coughs as the Pastor began their chapel time. Pastor and Pochi had chapel for the kids at the orphanage every Monday evening.

We sat as the children worshiped God in their native language, clapping their hands, and lifting their voices. Then the Pastor shared a short sermon about how the Israelites were in an impossible situation—all hope had gone—but God made a way and they crossed the Red Sea. They escaped from those trying to hurt them. Nothing was impossible for God. He will surely make a way for us like He did for the Israelites. The children held on to every word as if it was life and death for them. I thought perhaps Pastor had fashioned his lesson for Mark and me, as a way to encourage us that God was for us.

We began to pray for each other, I could hear a sweet little voice next to me crying out. I opened my eyes and saw one of the most precious sights I could ask for: a room full of fatherless children crying out to their Heavenly Father. Favor's eyes were closed, and her head was lifted to the heavens, petitioning the Father with her whole heart. Her voice cried out His name as she would barely take a breath between her requests. I knew He heard her because I could feel His presence near us. I could feel the heartbeat of God for them. The love and passion that He had for each one of them was so incomprehensible and immeasurable. I understood why His heart aches for the orphans, and I experienced, in some measure, how He yearns for them to feel loved unconditionally. To feel valued. I understood why He instructs us, as His adopted children, to go and help the orphan. We were once like them. I could hear His heartbeat—it was almost deafening.

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On the way home, Pochi began to tell us some of the things Adefere had been saying about us to others. "He told me that he cannot understand why you care so much for this child," Pochi said. "He wants you to walk away from this. He is telling people that he will draw this out and drain all your money, or threaten you with jail. He thinks this will cause you to run back to America. I told him you will not run away, and he laughed."

I sat in the back seat, holding Favor in my arms. It really didn't matter what this man had said—I was not going to let his words determine my mindset. I wasn't going to let go of this little girl in my arms. I was holding on to the promise that victory was ours from the moment that we set foot in Ethiopia. I was fighting for her—no matter what he tried to do.

"He has told me that we must get her away from you, that you cannot leave with that 'kid,' or he and I will be in big trouble," Pochi said. "He asked me, 'Why did you come?' He wanted you to stay home and pick another child, and he is so mad that you did not listen to him. He says, 'What is so special about this child? Why must they have this one? There are a million more out there.'"

"Wait," I said, "did you say that he wanted us to pick another child? Does he think we pick kids like they are pets or commodities? He really doesn't get it, does he?" I thought back to the first time I came to Ethiopia, when Pochi had shared how the official at Debre Birhan had said that no one

would care about these four little orphans and nobody would miss them. He and Adefere were drinking the same Kool-Aid, but they were wrong. People do care, and people will rise up to help the orphans.

“Oh my goodness,” Pochi continued like she had some fresh news. “He is very panicked that he doesn’t know where you are hiding. He has people looking and asking where you are. I had a person call me and ask where you were hiding. I knew they were friends with him so I just said that I didn’t know. We are telling no one. They are confused at how you just disappeared. “They know no one in Ethiopia...how does this happen?” they asked.”

“Why wasn’t he at the court hearing last Thursday?” Mark asked.

“I don’t know,” Pochi said. “I found out that he was up in Debre Birhan, meeting with the regional officials today. It was his first time there. He has never even visited our orphanage. He’s trying to prove that she was never in our orphanage.”

“There are pictures of her at the orphanage and witnesses that saw her there,” I said.

“They have nothing,” Pochi reassured us. “He says he has the proof in an official envelope with a seal on it from the official so they can present it to the judge on Friday.”

I took a deep breath. I had to believe in the promises God had given me.

“The president of the courts, MOWA, and the Embassy have all pulled away and are waiting to see what happens at your court hearing on Friday, before they decide to get involved any further.”

Our hearts hit the floor. I could feel hopelessness push into my mind as she continued to talk. “Adefere has someone at the Embassy that is standing with him, and I think he has gotten them on his side. They say he is in the right, and they all know Adefere will get his way. They don’t understand why you are giving up so much to fight for one little girl. They think you are crazy.”

“Great! Any good news?” I asked sarcastically.

Pochi laughed, “Yes! God is on the throne.”

I looked out the window. The mountains seemed to be disappearing in the darkness that was overtaking the day. My heart hurt, again—a little deeper tonight for some reason. Maybe it was all the negative news coming like arrows. I felt alone, abandoned by people who were supposed to help us. *How did it get this bad?*

“Emebet and the foster nurse are coming to support you on Friday,” Pochi said. “They are both so mad at the official and Adefere. The official told them that he would have them thrown in prison if they do not do what he tells them to do. They don’t care, they are so mad at the way he and Adefere are harassing them constantly.”

“Will it be dangerous for them to be there?” I asked.

“They’ve done nothing wrong,” Pochi said. “Why would it be?”

The conversation continued the rest of the way home, but my mind had gone elsewhere. I was fighting a personal battle. I had defaulted to being angry at Mark again for not leaving. I started silently crying to myself. *Why was I going around this mountain again?* I knew God had a greater plan, but in my weakness, I was angry at the situation. Maybe I was just tired and hungry.

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We got back to the apartment, and I went downstairs to heat up the leftover Shiro, a traditional Ethiopian

food primarily made from powdered chickpeas, for the girls. The old microwave in the teacher's lounge started with a turn of a handle—I hadn't seen one of those in years. As I stood waiting for the food while the loud fan churned, I saw something move in my peripheral vision...coming right toward me.

I turned and looked.

There, 10 feet in front of me, was a creature I had never seen. We both stopped in our tracks, looking right at each other. My mind started taking over with unheard comments: *What an ugly cat! Look at those small, beat up ears, look at that poor thing! It's huge! Look at that tail, it's so fluffy...Wait, that's not a cat. I bet that's the mongoose. Okay, I'm not going to move, and maybe he won't notice me. Nice mongoose...I hope he's a nice mongoose. Please don't attack me and give me some disease that will eat my brain.*

The mongoose quickly looked away from my gaze, but stood completely still—like he was saying, *Maybe she won't notice me if I look the other way and don't move.*

In one of the oddest minutes of my life, we both stood motionless until a loud, obnoxious *Ding!* announced the food was ready. At that point I screamed, and the mongoose bolted out the way he came. I rushed upstairs with the Shiro burning my hands.

"I think I just met the cat you were chasing last night," I said, out of breath as I entered the apartment. "That ugly cat is no cat. It's the mongoose!"

"You ran into the mongoose?" Mark asked excitedly. "Where?"

"Downstairs."

"Is it still down there?" he asked.

"No, and don't try to find it," I yelled to McKenzie, already with one foot out the door.

"Really?" McKenzie said. "Please?"

"No way," I said. "Come and have some Shiro before Favor eats it all, and I'll tell you about it."

As we sat around the table talking about the mongoose, I realized that this was an adventure that we needed to grasp with both hands. It wasn't every day that you could say you ran into a mongoose in the hallway while heating up some Shiro. It seemed crazy, but we all had the best night together. Joy had come in the most unusual way.