

DON'T MESS *With This* MAMA

Risking It All to Rescue Our Daughter



A TRUE STORY

MISSY MAXWELL WORTON

FOREWORD BY CHRIS OVERSTREET

Chapter 14

IMMIGRATION

*“Sometimes destiny takes a path we
would never chose on our own.”*

—Missy Maxwell Worton

The Hilton lobby was bustling with activity when the elevator door opened. My heart was beating outside my chest, and I could tell Mark was in a rush to get to the airport. I grabbed the girls’ hands and drew them close. I could sense a bad presence, and I knew it was near—like the feeling you get when walking into a cold, dark room. A chill went up my spine.

“Let’s stay really close together, okay?” I said with a forced smile, acting as normal as I could. I glanced nervously at the faces around us as we walked through the lobby. I took the girls and had them stand behind a pillar near the concierge within a few feet of Mark, who was now checking out of the hotel.



The girls holding on to one another in the lobby just before we left for the airport.

I couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was watching us. I scanned the lobby again.

Then I saw him.

My heart started racing. I turned to Mark.

“Is that Adefere?” Mark asked.

I nodded yes. The security guard must have seen what was happening and was immediately by my side asking where he was. I pointed over to the couch he was sitting on. He was gone.

“He was just there! He’s gone!” My eyes searched the faces in the lobby in desperation, trying to find him again.

“Do you remember what he was wearing?” the security guard asked.

My mind was racing. *What was he wearing? Think, think! Was he going to try to take my daughter? Was he here to make sure someone else took her from me?* I looked in every direction. *What was he wearing? Think!* Every person who looked at us was suspect. *How much did I remember from my self-defense classes back in Franklin?*

“Miss! What was he wearing?” the security guard asked again. “Did he have glasses on? A hat perhaps?” I could see that I now had three security men surrounding me, asking questions and trying to get information from a mom who was doing her best to not hit the freak-out button.

Suddenly I remembered. “Glasses!” I blurted out. “Yes, he had glasses on...and a striped shirt. Blue, vertical stripes.”

“Can you come with us to identify him?” the security guard asked.

“I can’t leave my girls.”

“I understand,” one of the guards said, looking down at my girls who were now tightly fastened to my waist. “Stay here and we’ll look for you.”

“Thank you,” I said. I watched as they searched the lobby and every adjacent room, looking for the man who had been harassing and threatening us for the past 48 hours.

Meanwhile, as Mark was trying to check out, the hotel was having internet problems and our card was not going through. Finally, Mark agreed to sign off on our bill and told them that they could run our card later.

“We’ll keep you safe, Mrs. Worton,” a voice said. “I have the head of security here to escort you to the airport.” As I looked up, I saw the man from the concierge desk talking to me. He had been so helpful and genuine the entire time that we had been at the Hilton. I smiled and thanked him. It was one of the many characteristics that made me love the Ethiopian people so much. They had always been there for us—and now more than ever.

Mark walked up behind me. “Okay, we’re ready.” The concierge looked at Mark and signaled a tall man who we were introduced to as the head of security. He reassured us that he would take care of us through the airport security so no one would be able to harm us. Two of the security men surrounded us as we rushed out of the hotel to the waiting van. I expected Adefere to jump out at any moment to stop us, but he never did. Nobody said a word.

As we piled into the van, an unknowing passenger had seated himself in the front seat. I could tell by his posture that he was frustrated that he had to wait for us, and possibly a bit obsessive compulsive. “What’s going on here?” he asked, concerned by the amount of commotion around us.

“We’re going to the airport,” the head of security nonchalantly answered as he jumped in the driver’s seat.

The man turned around and looked at me for a moment, then at Mark and the girls, then back to me, narrowing his eyes and trying to figure out what all the fuss was about. Perplexed, he turned back around as the doors were shut and the van sped out of the parking lot. We turned right instead of left to the airport, sending the passenger we didn’t know in the front seat into a panic mode. “Why are you going this way? We never go this way! I could swear the airport is that way,” pointing in the opposite direction.

“We are taking a shortcut,” the driver answered. “Don’t you worry about it, sir.”

The man didn’t miss a breath, “But I know the airport is that way,” he said as he desperately pointed the opposite direction. “Now, where are we...?”

Suddenly, the driver took a right off of the main road onto a dirt road that had mounds of dirt piled everywhere. It looked suspect to say the least. The skeptical passenger in the front seat searched in desperation for something to hold onto. We were bouncing around like Mexican jumping beans,

and by the stares we were getting, I don't think this neighborhood was used to seeing a Hilton van drive through these parts. Favor and McKenzie giggled with delight as they bounced off their seats and crashed back down. I caught myself laughing. We must've looked ridiculous. God had an amazing sense of humor, and we were living out a comedy scene.

"This isn't even a finished street!" the man exclaimed. He was clearly confused and getting quite agitated. About that time, a herd of white goats marked with hot pink hair on their heads crossed in front of our van and we came to a complete stop.

The extra passenger was annoyed. "Oh great—goats! Are you serious?"

"That is so cool!" McKenzie said with excitement. "Look Favor, goats with pink hair! They're stylin' goats!"

I glanced over at Mark, who was deep in thought. He was playing out in his mind what would happen if Adefere showed up at the airport. His only concern was the safety of our family.

The passenger in the front seat was about to have an anxiety attack. The driver calmly reassured him: "I promise. I will get you to the airport — no problem. Don't worry."

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As we approached the airport, the driver abruptly stopped, pointed to the man in the front seat, and said, "You, get out here! This is your exit!"

"Here?" the man asked, confused. But aware that this had not been the normal ride to the airport, his resolve to get out overwhelmed his desire to argue.

"Thank you, sir!" the driver said hastily as he gave him his bag. "You have a nice flight home." We quickly drove away. I looked back to see the man shaking his head, wondering what had just happened.

The head of security drove us to the far left of the airport where he jumped out and started pulling out our bags and placing them onto a cart. "Just follow me," he directed, "I will get you there safely and nobody will bother you. I promise." I grabbed the girls, covered their heads with scarves, and made sure we had removed all of our things from the van. We followed him up the ramp, running past a line of people waiting to go into the airport.

"Why are they all staring at us, Mom?" McKenzie asked.

"I'm sure we're quite a sight right now," I answered.

One of the guards put his hands up to stop us. Our driver told him we were Americans and the guard quickly waved us by. Americans still have so much grace and favor as we travel abroad.

Everything went smoothly as we all made our way through security and to the check-in gate. It looked like God was clearing a path for us, just like we had prayed.

"Are you going with us all the way to immigration?" Mark asked.

"You'll be fine," he said. "He won't be able to stop you. No one is allowed past this point."

"You're positive?" Mark needed confirmation.

"Yes!" He said reassuring Mark with a pat on his shoulder. "He does not have that kind of power. I wish you and your family well and a safe journey back to America!"

We thanked him for his kindness and said goodbye. Mark tipped him and made a beeline to the ticket counter. Quickening my pace, the girls and I caught up just in time to be handed immigration

paperwork. I quickly filled them out and handed the papers to Mark as we stepped up to the counter. Then we waited for what seemed like eons.

To pass the time, I looked at the people checking in at other counters. I couldn't believe my eyes—I recognized someone from America! Julie Hedberg was standing there with her mother, Sue! Julie had lived with my next door neighbor Cindy this past summer. It was surreal to see her standing there at the airport in Addis Ababa. I tried to get Julie's attention, but she was focused on helping her mother check in.

"Mark, it's Julie! I can't believe she's right here!"

I didn't even get a grunt out of Mark. He was in another world. His expression was as clear as if he had said, *I've got the world on my shoulders right now—so don't talk to me!*

"Okay, well I thought that was totally awesome," I said, talking to myself.

Mark turned to me with the tickets in his hand, "So far, so good! Now let's just pray we get through immigration." I followed Mark with the girls jumping up and down behind me, rolling their carry-ons.

"Mom," Favor said in her thick Ethiopian accent, "America, airplane, America...We go now?" I smiled and nodded my head, praying that going to America would be the outcome. Favor's smile was bright, and her sparkling eyes were filled with the excitement and anticipation of going to her new home. She could hardly contain herself as she walked with a little bounce in her step, giggling with McKenzie.

I could tell Mark was nervous by his pace. I prayed silently, *God, please get us through. I know You love the orphan. I know You love us. You promised me if I just set foot on Ethiopian soil, the victory would be ours. I trust You and I thank You for letting us walk through these gates with Favor. I know the battle is won. I know You will get us home safely.* Suddenly, I heard a song come from my spirit. I began to sing it to myself as we approached the immigration booths. *I have given you this battle, put your trust in Me alone. Hold on to My promise, I'll complete what I've begun.* I kept hearing the song rise up in me. I could feel the victory was within my reach.

"Next," called the guard sending us to the immigration booth. I took a deep breath. I was trying to contain a nervous energy as I kept praying silently.

Mark handed immigration his passport. He stamped it and handed it back. Favor's passport was next. Mark's heart was beating hard. Favor was giggling with McKenzie about riding the airplane. As the immigration officer opened Favor's passport to the visa inside, he studied the screen before him. Suddenly he looked down at a piece of pink paper next to his keyboard. Mark glanced at me with a look of concern. We both watched in disbelief as he quickly got up, left his booth, and rushed toward another immigration officer, obviously his superior. My heart sank. Noise filled my head and I felt everything start to go in slow motion.

"They're stopping us," Mark said, almost in tears.

I took a deep breath. *This can't be happening...we did nothing wrong!*

"Mom, what's happening?" McKenzie nervously asked. "Why did the man leave with Favor's passport?"

"I'm sure they're just checking out something," I responded, "just keep Favor near you." We followed the immigration officer over to the doorway that held their offices. A crowd of officers started gathering around us.

“What is the problem?” Mark asked. “Why are you stopping us?”

No one answered him. They kept talking among themselves and looking at Favor’s passport. I brought the girls into my arms. Mark dug into his briefcase and pulled out a file filled with all our important documents proving Favor was legally ours. The head officer briefly looked at the documents, her birth certificate, and the court decree, as Mark desperately tried to influence her to allow us to go. She looked up at Mark and firmly stated, “I’m sorry, but she will not be able to travel. I have been told to collect her passport.”

Mark shoved the documents at them, “I have everything that says she is our daughter.” Mark pleaded, “What right do you have to stop us?”

The lead officer handed Favor’s passport and visa to a man, who then walked through a doorway that was labeled “*No Entrance to Public.*”

“Wait!” I yelled. The officer ignored me and kept walking. I felt a tinge of hopelessness as I realized that we weren’t leaving Ethiopia any time soon.

“You don’t understand!” I pleaded, almost in tears. “We have to get her out of here.” I knew that a dangerous man wanted her as his own. I wondered: *What kind of power did this man have enabling him to reach immigration and stop Favor from leaving the country?*

“We have been told to take her passport and visa,” another officer said in broken English. “We don’t know why.” He then turned to answer the head officer in Amharic. As they talked between each other, Favor’s face changed from excitement and joy to despair and uncontrollable sobs.

“Mom, what just happened?” McKenzie asked. “Favor is crying...bad.” I looked down and saw that Favor was inconsolable. Something came over me. I’m not sure if it was the mother bear in me or the lioness—it might have been both—but in that moment all fear left and I turned to the officers talking.

“What did you say?” I interrupted. He looked at me for a second, shocked that I was so brazen. “You said something that upset my daughter. She understood you! What did you say?”

He looked at Favor and for a moment I saw a hint of sympathy, “I said you can go, but she is not allowed to go with you to America.”

Favor started crying harder. I got on my knees to embrace her and look in her eyes. “Favor,” I said, searching for eye contact, “I’m not leaving you.”

“We’re not going to leave her,” Mark said to the officer. “Who do we talk to so we can get this fixed? Our plane leaves in two hours.”

“We cannot help you,” the officer said, “a court order was written to stop you. We were not told why.”

“When did you receive the court order?” I asked.

“At five o’clock,” the officer in charge responded.

“Today?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, “just a few hours ago. We do not know anything, but only to stop her from leaving Ethiopia. Two of you can leave, and one of you can stay, if you don’t want to leave her.”

I looked at Mark. My pain was so deep in that moment that words wouldn’t come out of my mouth, but I felt screams of agony from my soul. Tears welled up as I mouthed, “I am not leaving her.”

Mark looked at me and at our two daughters. McKenzie had her arm around Favor, who continued to sob. All he could think about in that moment was the fact that he had not tried harder to leave the country as I had urged him.

“I’m sorry,” was all he could say. “I’m sorry.” I knew he meant it by the emotion he carried and how he looked at me—but all I could feel was pain.

Fighting back tears, I put my hand up to stop him. *No, don’t do this now. Don’t say anything.* No words were spoken, but he understood. I felt myself pushing him away, and by the look in his eyes, he knew what was happening. I was angry, afraid, and hurt. I knew there was a price we would all pay because of his choice. I couldn’t look at him. In that moment, a barrier came between us...a severing of my trust.

Mark watched, helpless to change the path we were on. He knew the financial decision he had made might cost him his daughter, and he could see that a wedge was quickly separating him from his wife.