



LEVI BENKERT

and CANDY CHAND

no greater
LOVE



one man's radical journey through the heart of Ethiopia



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No Greater Love

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LABUK, ETHIOPIA: APRIL 7, 2009

THE EARLY MORNING FOG hovered over the grass huts scattered along the Omo River.

In the distance a few women ventured out, gathering sticks to build a fire. Soon the scorching sun would burn across the sky, baking everyone and everything in its path. For the most part the little village was peaceful, except for one small hut where a young woman was giving birth.

But this was not a joyous occasion.

Inside the hut, the distraught woman struggled through labor, knowing that when the baby was born, there would be no celebration. She understood that the events following this birth—like others before—would haunt her forever.



“It’s a girl.” The young woman’s husband spoke, if only in a whisper, as he held his tiny infant for the first time. While he used a sharp rock to cut the umbilical cord, his wife’s tears flowed freely, running down her cheeks to the dirt floor.

“Take her away,” she pleaded, refusing to look into the eyes of her newborn child. “I don’t want to see her!” she cried, gesturing frantically toward the low opening in the hut.

Placing a small cloth over the infant’s face, the baby’s father made his way outside. Crouching in the fierce heat of the morning sun, the man scratched his fingers into the dirt, spit into his hand, and rolled together a small handful of claylike substance.

Brushing the cloth from his daughter’s face, he looked into her eyes—for just a moment. The muscles inside him tightened. Shutting off all natural instincts, he methodically followed his well-thought-out plan. Tilting the infant’s head back, he opened her mouth and fed her a handful of dirt.

Then, laying her in the dust, he rose to his feet and reentered the hut, leaving his daughter to die alone.

He didn’t look back, determined not to watch the helpless babe struggle for breath while the life drained from her tiny body. He knew from experience that within a few moments, it would all be over.

But this time was different.

Unlike thousands of children before her, on this day, for this child, death was not to be.

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SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA: FEBRUARY, 2009

I promise, I never saw it coming. I was in Northern California unwinding the final shreds of my failing real estate development company.

“Don’t go too far without me,” I called to my children, who were making their way down the sidewalk leading to the park. We’d moved into the downtown neighborhood—a project I had developed—only three months earlier, and we were just settling in.

“Hurry up!” eight-year-old Nickoli called out, as he danced from foot to foot on the newly laid sidewalk.

“I’m coming! I’m coming!” I snapped, a bit harsher than I would have liked. I had always prided myself on being a good dad. I’d even been interviewed in the newspaper as a young entrepreneur who successfully balanced work and family. But lately, I found it difficult to be mentally present.

I knew the distance that was growing between my family and me was wrong. It killed me every time I thought about it, but the truth was, no matter how badly I wanted to be with my kids, I was preoccupied with my deteriorating business. Everything was falling apart, and the fact that

I was failing as a father seemed to pale in comparison with the threat of bankruptcy and the need to lay off employees who'd given everything they had to make the company viable. The dreams I once had for an environmentally friendly urban village, blossoming from blight, were turning into a nightmare of epic proportions.

Over the past four years, I'd seen my development business go from one secretary, who worked out of my garage, to a successful company with fourteen full-time staff and more than a hundred consultants and contract employees. I was heralded as one of the youngest and most successful businessmen in the city, often asked to speak at conferences and events about my thoughts on the market and how I'd become so successful by the age of twenty-six.

Then, with the collapse of the real estate market, I watched the entire business crumble and evaporate to nearly nothing.

The crash had done more than wipe me out financially. It had wiped me out emotionally. I was tired. Tired of putting everything I had into something that was not working. I was tired of stealing time from my three kids, of asking my wife, Jessie, to endure another late night alone while I stood in front of another planning commission pleading for project approval, all the while sensing that no banker in his right mind would fund construction in a time newspapers were calling a "once-in-a-century recession."

That, of course, was on the inside.

Outwardly I put up a positive front, trying to encourage those around me that there was hope the business would survive. But in my heart, I knew it was over. I'd finally come to the realization that I couldn't pay my employees. I also knew there was absolutely no money left to refund to my investors. The truth was, I couldn't pay anyone a dime.

And the guilt was killing me.

I worried about the unknown. I worried about lawsuits and dragging my family through it all. I wondered what things would look like when it was over. And more than once, I realized my life insurance policy made me worth more dead than alive.

Despite all the unknowns, there were a few things I knew for certain: people were going to blame me. They'd say I should have seen this coming. And they'd want answers. The problem was, I *hadn't* seen it coming. And I had no answers. All I knew was that the market had crashed and the equity we once had was gone. To make matters worse, experts were saying, the pain was not over, and the downturn was about to create a wave of home foreclosures across the country, hitting places such as California the hardest. There was no doubt: my Midas touch was gone.

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"Hello," I said, dropping five-year-old Luella's hand to pull the phone from my pocket and shift my weight to

support two-year-old Ruth, who was still in my arms. The kids were silent. They knew better than to be loud when I was on my cell. Especially these days.

I rattled off some budget details to the banker on the phone. He clearly knew the deals were in trouble and was doing everything he could to get as far away as possible before everything collapsed.

“You have to list the property to see what we can get for it,” he explained, as he delivered more bad news. The bank had given us a construction loan to build the homes when values were more than triple what they were now, but the loan documents clearly spelled out what we were to do in a situation like this: come up with cash to construct the houses ourselves or sell off the deal for pennies on the dollar and give the bank any leftover money.

We finally made it to the park. I let Ruth out of my arms, and she ran to the rope swing, which Nickoli had already commandeered. It wasn't ten seconds before she got in the path of Nickoli's swinging and was hit in the face with a shoe.

“I'm going to have to call you back,” I said, sliding the phone into my pocket and picking her up, leaves and dirt covering her curly brown hair and tears streaming from her eyes.

“What on earth—” I said, flashing Nickoli an angry look.

“I didn't see her,” he said, appearing more shaken by the incident than his sister. It took Ruth only a moment

to recover as she climbed down from my arms and headed back toward the swing.

My cell rang again.

“Hello,” I answered, with the most patient voice I could muster.

“Oh, hi, Steve,” I said, surprised to hear from anyone who didn’t want money. Steve was an old family friend who had mentored me during my formative teen years. He was now a pastor at a local church, The Rock of Roseville, and was one of the most generous, compassionate people I’d ever met.

“How are you?” I asked, relieved to be talking to someone about anything other than the declining real estate market.

“I just found out a few guys I know are heading to Ethiopia to help with an orphanage project and was wondering if you’d want to join them.”

“Sounds like fun,” I said, trying to humor him.

“No, really.” He almost pleaded. “You’ve got to hear this. There’s a rural tribe there that are killing their children because of some superstition. A group of German photography students traveling in Ethiopia heard about what was going on and, in order to save the kids, worked to build relationships with the elders of one of the villages.

“Levi, they were given a little girl named Bale who was only hours away from being drowned in the river by her own parents. And there are more children, Levi, just like Bale, who are going to be killed if someone doesn’t

rescue them. These guys I know are heading to Ethiopia for two weeks to assist with the makeshift orphanage. The Rock will be sending funds to help pay for local staff and the basic needs of the kids. We need a couple of people to make sure things go smoothly. Will you go, Levi? Will you help?" Steve asked.

"What good would I be in Africa?" I asked, intrigued and at the same time absolutely sure there was no way I was going anywhere. My business was a disaster, and I was spending more than ten hours a day trying to climb my way out of the hole. A trip to Africa, for any reason, was out of the question.

"Well, you have experience working with orphans overseas, so I figured you could help," he said, recalling my volunteer work with orphans before Jessie and I were married. "I know it's a lot to be throwing at you, so suddenly and all, but why don't you call me back after you've at least thought about it for a few minutes."

"Okay," I mumbled before hanging up, already knowing what my answer would be. I might be daring and adventurous, but leaving for Ethiopia would be crazy. The timing couldn't have been worse.

Still, there was something about Steve that made me consider the possibilities. I'd lost touch with him for almost ten years, but when my business began to fall apart, I looked him up and we reconnected. Remembering how gracious he'd been to me when I was younger, I knew he would provide a compassionate ear during those struggles.

Knowing he was a minister, I had made it clear up front when we reconnected: Jessie and I were not attending church. Frankly, although we were believers, we were tired of what we often saw: lots of people who didn't do enough to help others and, for the most part, appeared way too self-absorbed. Steve never judged us. He didn't even suggest that Jessie and I return to church. He simply encouraged us to seek God, who, he believed, always had a plan.

I had once shared with Steve that I found life uninspiring. "Even when things were going well and we had lots of money, I had to step back and ask myself, *What's the point?* I know that money, recognition, and success aren't the answers, but I have a hard time finding anything else that matters either," I'd told him one evening in desperation.

During our occasional get-togethers, Steve managed to offer a broader perspective on life. He once asked me about my volunteer work in Mexico, India, and Brazil. "Did you feel a sense of purpose then?" he probed, gently trying to urge me in the right direction. "More importantly, Levi, have you thought about whom you're living for?"

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I spent the next five minutes pushing the kids on the swing while my mind continued to wander. I knew I should call Steve back to give him an absolute no, but

instead, I started thinking about what a break it might be to escape to Africa—if only for a couple of weeks. I slid my phone out of my pocket and hit speed dial for my wife. I tried to casually drop Ethiopia into the conversation and then laugh it off, but Jessie immediately set me straight. “You should do it,” she insisted.

“Whatever,” I said, still chuckling.

“No, really, Levi. Hang up the phone and call Steve back. Tell him you’re coming. You can use our emergency fund to buy your ticket.”

“No way!” I protested. “That two thousand dollars was set aside in case the absolute bottom falls out. It’s our only safety net. It’s there in case our family needs it for survival, for things like groceries.”

“We’ll be fine, Levi. My intuition tells me this is the right thing to do,” she persisted. “You need to take a leap of faith.”

I fumbled around for a way to respond, but Jessie was so firm that I was at a loss to challenge her. Besides, there was a side of me that desperately wanted to get away, to be alone and then return with a renewed passion for life—and maybe some ingenious ideas for saving the business. “It was while I was on a trip to Africa,” I would say when asked how I’d come up with the idea that saved my investors and beat the market. The fantasy flashed before my eyes as I contemplated the beauty of it all. It could work: I would go to Ethiopia, do good deeds, find myself along the way, and come back to do even more

good at home. It was well worth the relatively small price of a plane ticket.

“Just call him!” Jessie insisted, interrupting my thoughts before hanging up the phone.

I stood with the cell to my ear, stunned and confused. Maybe Jessie was right, I thought. Maybe I should just go for it.

I began to toy with the idea of traveling to Africa. There was no doubt that I was at a point where I wanted desperately to find meaning in my life. During the past year I had lost my brother to a drug-related suicide and my best friend and business partner to liver disease. Maybe, I thought, I'd find meaning in Ethiopia. Maybe this is just what I needed. My heart sped up slightly as a glimmer of hope—the first in a very long time—flashed through my thoughts.

While I watched the kids on the swings, I wondered what to do. Should I call Steve? Should I say yes?

As if on cue, a flurry of doubts rushed in: why in the world was I wasting time thinking about Ethiopia? There were meetings I was supposed to be attending, failing budgets to deal with, and an office full of people who looked to me for stability. I knew that even hinting about taking a trip at a time like this would be the end of their loyalty.

Then, suddenly, it hit me.

My presence hadn't done a thing to help our company's bottom line. In fact, it seemed the more I tried,

the worse things got. The reality was, the verdict had already been delivered: we were going out of business, and I had no power to stop it from happening. Leaving for two weeks to help people was the right thing to do. Afterward, I figured, I would still have time to wrap up all the financial loose ends, and maybe, just maybe, there'd be a way to save everything after all.

Though I feared with everything in me that it might be the wrong choice, that I might regret going, I found myself punching in Steve's cell number. While I waited for him to answer, I thought, *This is it, Levi. It's finally happened. You are now certifiably insane.*

"I'm in," I blurted out as soon as Steve answered, my voice sounding more confident than I felt.

"Great!" he shouted, before rattling off a number for a man named Rich Lester. "You just need to get ahold of this guy. He will fill you in on the details."

After we hung up, I stood still for a while, trying to wrap my head around what I'd just committed to doing. The whole idea seemed crazy. I didn't even know where Ethiopia was, only that it was somewhere in Africa and there were lots of hungry people living there.

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Over the next few days I began to develop a strange sensation that the trip to Ethiopia might be God's calling. I didn't know exactly how to pinpoint what I was feeling,

but there was a quiet sense growing deep inside me that my decision to go had been divinely orchestrated.

One night, after I tried to express my feelings to Jessie, she told me she'd been praying for a long time for something like this to happen. "I don't know exactly what will come of your trip," she whispered, "but somehow I believe it will be good and that you will be changed forever."

Jessie is an amazing woman with great compassion for others. There was a time when we were a young, adventurous couple, ready to take flight at a moment's notice. We'd both shared a passion to help the world's poor and disadvantaged. Jessie and I had even spent a few months in India working with the poorest of the poor. But things were different now. We were in survival mode, with no money or time to give to anyone. The day we'd dreamed of together, the one where we had made so much money we could help people all over the world, had eluded us.

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By the look on Jessie's face, I could tell she understood what the failure of the business was doing to me and was desperate to see something, anything, change. Her encouragement seemed to help when I had to tell investors and employees that I was leaving the country—now, of all times.

But it did not help me sleep at night.

I felt as if I were caught between two worlds: one that I didn't understand but was mesmerized by, and another that had me wrapped so tightly in its dark economic clutches that I could hardly breathe.

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It was nine at night as I sat in a small café waiting for Rich to arrive. Although we'd spoken briefly on the phone, this was the first time we'd had the chance to actually meet. Rich, who was planning the details of our trip, was a young staff member at The Rock of Roseville, the local church that had raised money to help with the orphans who'd been rescued.

From the moment Rich walked into the café, we hit it off. While we sipped freshly brewed coffee, Rich tried to explain what I'd signed myself up for. However, it wasn't until he pulled up a Google Earth map and showed me exactly where we were headed that it actually hit me. We were going to the middle of nowhere.

Rich and I talked excitedly until the café was ready to close and the tired waitstaff more or less kicked us out. But before heading out the door, we had ample time to bond over shared grief. Rich had recently lost his father, and my brother had died less than a year before. It was clear we had a great deal in common. More important, I sensed in my gut that I could trust him.

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Within a few days we were packed and ready to go. After I kissed Jessie and the kids good-bye, Rich and I headed for San Francisco International Airport and toward the unknown.

My feelings flitted from excitement, to nervousness, to wondering if I'd lost my mind. When it was finally time to board the plane, Rich and I looked at each other, raised our eyebrows, and shrugged. Everything felt surreal. Only days before, we had no idea any of this would be happening.

Once we had boarded, I did what I hadn't done in years. I shut off my cell phone and put it away. It was exhilarating to be on my own. Although I deeply enjoy being a father, there is something about going on an adventure that makes me feel ready to take on the world.

The flight was long—more than twenty hours—but Rich and I kept busy talking about the enormous possibilities awaiting us in Ethiopia. After going over every single thing we knew about the newly created orphanage and the rescued kids, we finally came to the conclusion that we hardly knew anything at all.

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ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

“This is it, Levi. All we can do is move forward and see if God has a role for us to play,” Rich said, as we finally

made our descent, in the dark of night, to the Addis Ababa airport.

Once we left the plane, we got our first glance at Yabi—a short Ethiopian man in his midtwenties—standing in the waiting area with a small sign bearing our names. Yabi had a calm demeanor and a great smile. He seemed unfazed by the fact that he had to wake up at two in the morning to meet our flight. “No problem,” he said in clear English. “I do this all the time.” Yabi helped Rich and me grab our small bags and then led us to the airport doors.

Once the squeaky exit door slid open and we were blasted with warm, smoggy air, I got the immediate impression of Ethiopia as a country of great contrasts. Before us stretched the capital city, Addis Ababa, a mix of modern buildings alongside rusty metal shacks. The view was nothing at all like what I’d imagined, which was something more akin to scenes from *The Lion King*.

A newer, raised freeway stood prominently in the distance. The cars in the parking lot were a mix of old and new. Many looked as though they had seen their last stretch of road years ago and had now been abandoned for good. And yet parked near a row of dilapidated vehicles was a shiny new Hummer with polished chrome wheels and bumpers.

Yabi showed us to a red, rusty mideighties Land Cruiser. He ran around to the front, opened the door, and grabbed a screwdriver from under the seat, skillfully using the tool to pry open the back door. Rich smiled,

then flashed me a quick we-are-really-in-this-now glance as we loaded our stuff into the vehicle.

Yabi drove us to a hotel just a short way from the airport, where we booked a small room with two beds, both covered with stained, yellowish sheets and surrounded by equally grimy walls. To make matters worse, the bathroom smelled as though it hadn't been cleaned in years. I unrolled my sleeping bag and laid it across the top of my mattress, hoping I wouldn't get the bedbugs I was convinced were invisibly crawling all over the room.

One glance out the window revealed a woman who, by the looks of her clothing, was working the streets as a prostitute. She was leaning against a Land Rover with a large image of a machine gun with a red circle and line through it. I quickly shut the window and made my way to the bed and crawled in. Already we'd ventured far outside my comfort zone—and we hadn't even left the hotel.

When the sun came up, I was amazed to discover that the room looked even worse than it had the night before. But Rich and I were too excited to complain.

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We left the hotel at five in the morning for the two-day drive to rural Jinka, traveling south along winding roads full of potholes. And the potholes were the good parts. They appeared only on the paved path. The rest of the roads were constructed of rough, difficult-to-navigate-on gravel.

When not distracted by the bumpy ride, we took in the incredible landscape. Because the car had no AC, we kept the windows down, giving us the opportunity to feel the world around us. As we drove, kids ran alongside our vehicle, hopeful for a handout of some kind.

We quickly learned our empty water bottles were a choice gift to the local children. Yabi explained that the kids used them to carry water from the rivers and various wells that had been dug by nongovernmental organizations and other aid groups.

While we traveled from the eighty-four-hundred-foot mountains of Addis Ababa to the below-sea-level valleys of the south, the weather turned from mild and cool to a dry heat—a heat like I'd never felt in my life.

The landscape varied from amazing, lush vegetation to dry, barren desert. I observed twenty-five-foot termite hills that towered above the car. There were incredible African acacia trees, the kind I had seen only in movies, and a multitude of bird species perched in the branches. Rich and I were spellbound. Ethiopia was beautiful—more beautiful than the *Lion King* Africa I'd expected to see.

We spent the long ride in the car talking with Yabi, a man with a genuine heart for kids, and the person who had helped the team of photography students who rescued Bale and eight other children. He was passionate about doing what he could for his people and encouraged us not to be afraid but to help him save lives.



JINKA, ETHIOPIA

When we finally arrived at the makeshift orphanage, located in a small rented mud house staffed by Ethiopian locals—a couple of nannies, a guard, and a cook—I was so excited to meet the rescued children. But when I did, I about broke into pieces. We were introduced to nine kids with eyes full of innocence—children who had no idea they had been just days away from being murdered by their own families.

I knew what it felt like to love a child. I had three at home. Two by birth, Nickoli and Luella, and our youngest, Ruth, whom Jessie and I had adopted through the California foster care system. I understood what it meant to love orphans, children who did not have families of their own. But standing in that small compound with a tiny mud house in the middle and looking around at nine rescued little ones with longing in their eyes, I knew it was all over for me.

Although the kids were in a safe place for now, a place where they were loved, I was aware it was only a temporary fix. Many of the children had been rescued only days earlier, but there was no long-term plan for their care. The team of photography students who had discovered Bale and had worked over the past two months to rescue all nine of the kids were getting ready to return to Germany. I feared for the children's future once those

students were gone. The Rock of Roseville had provided for their initial emergency needs, but I knew people wouldn't feel comfortable sending additional support if there wasn't an independent party on site to ensure that the donations were actually reaching the kids.

Being a father, I understood the level of commitment it would take to provide for their needs. But as I held the babies and watched them play, I also knew I could never go back to America and pretend I hadn't seen their faces. Something broke inside me. Something changed deep down as I wandered around that tiny, dirty compound in the deep south of Ethiopia, holding those precious children, allowing thoughts of their futures and destinies to take over. Perhaps Jessie was right; maybe she knew all along I would never be the same after seeing the kids. Perhaps there was more to this than Jessie or I could have imagined.

Maybe God was at work.

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Shortly afterward, Yabi introduced us to Simi, a tribal man who'd been a driving force behind the rescues. Simi was committed to the children, but he had little money and knew there was no way he could take on the care and feeding of nine kids on his own.

"I am going to need help and support," Simi told us as we sat at a local hotel sipping Coke from reused glass

bottles and eating *Injera*—a traditional food that tastes like a tangy pancake with an assortment of sauces spread across the top.

From the moment I met Simi, it was clear to me that he was a natural leader. He was well spoken and had a powerful presence about him. Even with his broken English, this man commanded attention.

Simi was born into the Kara tribe and early in life was given the opportunity to attend a boarding school in the north. But even as he learned about the outside world, he remained committed to his people. Over the years, Simi returned to his home many times, and after his education was complete, he came back to live in the small village of Duss, where he was hired as a teacher in a government school.

From an early age, Simi believed he would do great things for his people. And he never doubted that the practice of killing children was wrong. For years he had prayed for a way to rescue the innocents. He told us the young photographers were from a small organization called Pick a Pocket, a group based in Germany who took photos around the world in an effort to raise awareness and work to end extreme poverty. Simi believed our arrival and the Pick a Pocket photographers who helped him establish the orphanage were answers to his prayers.

While we sat in the café on wobbly plastic stools, Simi tried to fill in the missing pieces. “Bale was a one-year-old girl considered *mingi*, which translates in your

language as ‘unclean,’ or ‘cursed,’ because her top teeth came in before the bottom teeth. It was for this reason she was sentenced to death.”

Simi didn’t allow the shocked expressions on our faces to slow him down. “A child can be declared mingi for three reasons: if the parents are not married, if the parents do not announce to the elders in an elaborate ceremony that they intend to conceive, or if the child’s top teeth come in before the bottom teeth. Once the infants or children are labeled mingi, they are murdered to protect the village from evil spirits. The elders teach that if the killings don’t happen, the whole tribe will be harmed.”

“Bale was a one-year-old girl considered mingi, which translates in your language as ‘unclean,’ or ‘cursed,’ because her top teeth came in before the bottom teeth. It was for this reason she was sentenced to death.”

It will not rain. Crops will fail. People will die. Although nobody knows the exact number, some believe as many as one thousand Ethiopian children are killed each year because of the mingi superstition.”

While Simi explained the practice, I felt horrified that something like this could be happening in the world today. Although I had traveled to developing countries before, the concept of mingi was difficult to grasp.

“Why?” I wondered out loud. “Why would any parent do this?”

“Because they live in fear,” Simi explained. “They are

afraid of the spirits, because the spirits might get angry at them and hurt the rest of their family. And they are afraid of what the other tribe members might do to them if they do not kill the mingi child.”

As I listened to Simi and my world began to expand, I could feel a deep ache inside. In that little café, this strong Ethiopian leader forced me to confront the furthest reaches my mind could comprehend. I knew there were crazy things going on in the world and that not everyone lived or believed as I do, but this was more than I could fathom.

Rich and I listened intently as Simi continued. “The youngest mingi children are left in the jungle to starve or are suffocated by having their mouths filled with dirt. Older children usually have their hands and feet bound and are thrown into the river. That,” he explained, “was to be Bale’s fate.”

Our eyes pleaded with Simi to stop so we could catch our breath, but he went on.

“Except, in this case,” Simi said, smiling, “negotiations took place. The photographers helped me save the children. They promised the elders they’d remove Bale far from the village to ‘free their people from the curse.’ It was not necessary for her to die, they insisted, only be taken away. Reluctantly the elders agreed, allowing Bale’s parents to deliver her to us in a canoe, traveling safely down the river—the same river where she was to be drowned.”

With a mixture of amazement and gratitude, Simi

added, “Once Bale was rescued, tribal elders allowed eight more mingi children to be released into our care.”

Rich and I were on overload. Gesturing to Simi that we’d heard enough, that we needed time to digest what we’d been told, we asked to go back to the compound.

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Once we had returned to the orphanage, I felt an overwhelming need to be alone. So I excused myself, went into the yard, and stared at the starlit Ethiopian sky, my mind swirling with conflicting emotions: sorrow and joy. Dread and peace. Confusion, and yet a powerful sense of newfound direction.

Bowing my head, I asked God for help.

There was no doubt about it. Hearing the orphans’ stories had transformed my heart. But it took more than stories to revolutionize my life. From the moment I’d met the children face-to-face, from the moment our destinies crossed paths, I knew there’d be no turning back.

So, while the little ones were sleeping, I went back inside and made an overseas call to the one person who had seemed to know all along.

“Jessie,” I said, “we need to talk.”