

# Becoming Mama

YVROSE TELFORT ISMAEL

*with CRAIG BORLASE*



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## **Becoming Mama**

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# PROLOGUE

*Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Tuesday, January 12, 2010. 4:53 p.m.*

**B**reathless, I try to roll from my back to my knees. I get halfway up, but then it happens again. I am thrown into the air. I hang here, just for a beat. Weightless. Then I am hurled down once more onto my back.

Forty-six years I have lived on this earth. Not once has it ever moved beneath my feet. Not once has it ever stirred. But the earth is no longer asleep. The planet is awake—and incensed. It is a violent, raging giant. It wants to be rid of all us parasites that have dared to touch its surface.

Another surge slams me down onto my side. It throws me the way a dog wrestles with a stolen toy, the way a cow's back will spasm to dislodge the flies that have settled upon it.

I spend these first seconds of the earthquake in a state of shock. Nothing makes sense. I wonder what is wrong with my hearing, for my ears have been robbed of all the familiar city sounds that had filled the air moments before. Then I realize that the strange feeling in my ears is not deafness but a noise so loud as to be deafening. The sound of the city being torn apart.

With this new realization comes terror, slamming into me with

a force even greater than this concrete trampoline beneath me. I can taste the fear in my mouth, feel it all the way down to my stomach. It tastes like stale blood. *Jesus*, screams the prayer deep within me. *Save us!*

A series of kicks from the ground and I am thrown across the street, tumbling, twisting, dragged through air and rubble by invisible ropes. Only when I come to a halt do I look back at where I was standing—the familiar street corner not far from my mother-in-law's home—and see it disappear under a cloud of bricks and dust. The sound alone is enough to crush me.

The street is narrow, barely wide enough for two cars to pass each other. I look up to see the wall of the building above me bulge and billow, like it is trying to hold back an ocean. It starts to crack and break up, and I know exactly what is about to happen. Another peal of thunder comes from the bricks and I see the wall break away and fall toward me. This is it. This is the moment of my death.

I'm flying.

The earth sends me first to the left, then to the right, a paper bag caught in a hurricane. I hear the earth explode behind me. Everything happens so fast I do not know whether all of this is real or not. Am I really getting pulled out of the way moments before these buildings come down? And why do I feel no pain? Has death already happened?

I open my eyes. I am 20, maybe even 30 feet from where I was when the earthquake started. The street corner has disappeared. Vanished. The buildings that once stood so tall on both sides are now spread out across the road, nothing but bricks and dust and sky.

I breathe. At last the ground is still.

For a while, the air is quiet. A handful of car horns are bleating, but they are weak and feeble after the chaos of the last 30 seconds. And then, as if on the cue of some invisible conductor, the screaming starts up.

“Save us!” some call.

“Jesus! Jesus!” plead others.

Other cries sound more like those of a wounded, terrified animal. No words. Just pain and fear from the lips of men and women, adults and infants. I try to look, but I can't see any of them. The air is misted, a thin cloud of dust that catches in my throat as I try to breathe.

I check my body for cuts and breaks but don't expect to find any. I know that I have been protected, that not a hair on my head has been harmed.

I get to my feet and struggle back toward the corner. A figure approaches, more like a ghost than a man. He's covered in gray dust, and in his arms he carries a child, a little girl who can't be older than five or six. She's also painted gray, but there's blood covering most of her face. Her legs and arms hang limp as they pass by.

For the first time in what feels like forever, I exhale. *I am alive. I am alive. Thank You, Jesus.*

I stand at what's left of the corner, trying but failing, then trying and failing again to reach my husband, Pierre-Richard, on my cell phone. When I finally give up, I notice that the cries have grown louder and a crowd has formed nearby. Some people are helping drag others out of buildings, others can only stand and watch as those who are trapped can barely force an arm out through an impossibly small gap. Bodies lie on the ground; some are alone, others have people beside them, weeping or frantically trying to help.

*Why do I get to survive when so many others have not?* I push the thought away for now. I cannot stop. I have to get back.



As soon as I see my mother-in-law's house, I cry. Waves of relief wash over me as I approach the one-story timber and mud

home, which is still standing. I step into the front yard. Everyone is alive.

That's when the question returns and ignites within me. *Why me? Why am I alive?*

As sure as the dust in my mouth and eyes, I know that God has heard my question and that He has an answer for me.

“You are alive to do My will. That's why I've put you in this place. You are here to represent Me. That's why you are alive.”

The tears come almost instantly. It's like I am a child again, a newborn. I feel weak and vulnerable but also called into life by my loving Father. My every breath is dependent on Him. My life is His. I have felt this way before—years earlier when I was living in Florida and I handed over control of my life to Him. There were no earthquakes then, but my life was in ruins all the same. And just like He is doing now, God held His arms wide open and bid me come to Him. What had I done to deserve such love and kindness?

For the twentieth time I try to phone Pierre-Richard, but again the call doesn't go through. I have tried so hard not to panic, but as I sit and wait in the house he grew up in, I cannot hold back the fear any longer. I replay the last phone call we had, just five minutes before the earthquake struck.

It had been one of those calls that you have with your husband when you get home from a long trip where you have been apart. There was way too much to say in a simple phone call, so we stuck to the facts about where and when he was going to collect me. We ended the call the way we always do, saying “I love you.” Those three words don't seem enough somehow. Why didn't I tell him just how much I love him?

The thought that I might never speak to him again terrifies me. Fear infects every cell in my body. I can taste the blood in my mouth.



The sun was glowing warm red and starting to set when the earthquake struck, but as I sit and pray and hope desperately for Pierre-Richard to arrive, the city slips into darkness. I can feel myself slipping, too, so I try to distract myself by walking the streets looking for people to help. I don't stray far from the house. I'm hoping that Pierre-Richard will return soon.

Even though I am armed with nothing more than water and cotton swabs, I do what I can. It helps quell the fear within for a while.

There's no power, but the streets are alive with light. People are searching frantically with flashlights among the debris, and in places the sky glows orange as fires burn out of control. It's chaos out here, and more than once I flinch at the sound of cars crashing into each other a few feet from where I am working.

I am walking back to the house when I hear shouting coming from it. I run as fast as I can. Fear and hope rise with every step.

I keep on running when I see him. Pierre-Richard looks up, sees me, and falls to the ground. He is alive and unharmed as far as I can tell. The relief I feel is total, as if my body is finally given fresh air to breathe after a month of being locked inside. He's sobbing, and I am, too, as I crouch down beside him on the ground. For the longest time Pierre-Richard can't speak. All he can do is gulp at the air in between sobs.

"It was the bodies, Yvrose," he whispers. "They're all over the street. I had to drive around them. Some of them were..."

He breaks off and cries once more.

We have been married three years, but we have been through enough together to know that some conversations need to be put aside for when there is enough time. Right now, with God's words loud in my head, I take hold of his hands, step back, and fix my eyes on his. "We're alive," I say. "We're alive and there's got to be a reason why. Let's get to work."

We grab some more supplies from his car—a tube of Neosporin,

some painkillers, and water—and head out together. In the middle of all this death and fear, I take a moment to thank God for sending me a man of such faith and courage.

We work together, pulling people out of the rubble, sharing our water, tending to broken arms and legs and cleaning wounds as best we can. I am thankful for my years of nursing training in South Carolina as much as I am for the man by my side. I'm thankful, too, for the little tube of Neosporin. Every time I think it's about to run out, there's enough inside to help. It's a miracle—a small one, but a miracle all the same.

We try to move quickly, aware that around every corner there are more people who need help. My training helps me think clearly and fast, keeping my emotions far enough back to be able to work. But from time to time I am truly shocked by what I see, such as the mother frantically asking everyone if they know where her baby has gone. “He was in the car over there,” she says, pointing to a mound of concrete big enough to cover a school bus. “Can you see him?”



Some time after 2:00 a.m., Pierre-Richard and I are helping people near the hospital. There are doctors and nurses around, but they look like patients. Some are wounded, all look worried and lost. One whole wall of the building has collapsed, folded in on itself like a piece of disposable trash. It is not safe to go in the hospital, and the screaming is louder here, but not every cry is the same. Some are full of grief and sorrow, others are calling out to be rescued.

“Please help,” says a man as he pulls us over to his wife. She is lying on the ground, her legs covered in blood. Her breathing is shallow, and I can tell that she doesn't have long to live. She's also heavily pregnant.

I want to tell the man that I can't help, but he pleads with me

to do something, anything. I look him in the eye and know that he understands. He's not hoping for a miracle. He just can't face watching his wife die on his own.

She barely moves as I clean the blood from her legs, but the husband thanks me. And when I've done all I can, I don't feel that it's right to leave. I stay there and pray silently.

For the first time in hours the streets are finally quiet. I can't tell whether time is moving fast or slow, but when I next look at her, she's even weaker. It can't be long now.

Minutes pass.

Her breathing is shallow and rapid. Her husband buries his face in her hair.

I pray. *What do I do now, God?*

When I open my mouth to speak, I don't know exactly what I'm going to say. But I know the words will come. I take hold of the lady's hand, lean in close, and speak.

"I know you're hurting," I say. "I know you're in pain. But do you know that God is here in the midst of all this? He loves you so much that He took me and sent me here. He sent me here because He knows you and He loves you. It's not something to be taken lightly, but would you give your life to Him? Give Him your life."

I can see in her eyes that she has heard me, and I know deep down that she understands, and it takes all her effort to speak. But she tries.

"Yes," she says before she closes her eyes.

# PART ONE



# LONELY AND ALONE

*Charlotte, N.C. Saturday, May 21, 2005. 10:49 p.m.*

Is there a right time to start worrying when your husband doesn't come home at night? I guess it depends. On the night I sat alone in the house I shared with Michel, I decided on 11:00 p.m. That would be the point at which I would allow myself to panic.

I could easily have chosen an earlier time. Michel never stayed out late. Had he ever been out later than 10:00 p.m.? Or 9:00 p.m.? I couldn't remember. Sure, he'd spend most Saturday afternoons fixing cars and hanging with his friends. But that never lasted long. He didn't have the patience, and his friends didn't have the tools to do more than the most basic automobile repairs. I told myself that all my husband really needed each weekend was a few hours and a few beers to talk about whatever it is that men talk about on Saturday afternoons. And that was okay. Because Michel always came home. Always.

We'd been through some difficult times in the past, but it was my belief that we had finally settled into something good. So I had my own routines on a Saturday too. I'd clean for a while, then carry on grading the workbooks I'd brought home with me from school. Maybe I'd meet up with a girlfriend. If I did that, shoe shopping usually was involved at some point. And then I'd go home. Always.

Most Saturdays, if I walked in the door and he was there, I'd know. He didn't have to call out, and I didn't have to look for his shoes or coat by the stairs. All I needed to do was inhale and smell his cologne, now mixed with a little engine oil. Sounds strange, but I loved that smell. It warmed me like an open fire on a winter morning. I'd take off my shoes, go find him, and we'd embrace. After I'd show him the stack of papers I'd conquered or the new heels I'd purchased, we'd go out and eat.

Michel and Yvrose. Just another regular couple doing life in America.

But this particular Saturday in May was different. The pile of grading was bigger than usual, so there were no trips to the mall for me. I was sitting at the kitchen table when Michel left after lunch, and I stayed there all afternoon correcting fifth-grade French assignments. As the light faded from the sky, I pressed on, tackling the mountain of work in tiny steps.

It was a little before 8:00 p.m. when I looked up and allowed myself to realize that Michel had stayed out.

It was a little after 8:00 p.m. when I noticed the first waves of anxiety swirling within me.

I talked myself down. We hadn't argued. We hadn't fought. We didn't have money worries and we didn't have problems. Well, we didn't have any *new* problems. There were plenty of old ones, but life in the previous weeks had been settled. We'd been living in Charlotte for two years, and everything was good. We were even

going to church. There was no reason at all for me to suspect that anything was wrong.

I decided to put a hold on worrying until it was late. Why worry about the impossible when any minute the door could open and I'd be hugging Michel hello again? So I carried on working, finished what I'd brought home from the previous night's meal at my favorite seafood restaurant, and felt my heart rate start to rise as the minute hand inched its way toward the top of the clock.

At 11:00 p.m. precisely, the fear unleashed itself. Without warning it exploded within me. I pushed away the books and the take-out box and called him on his cell. No reply. I hung up and immediately called him a second time. This time I hung around for the beep.

"Michel? Honey? It's me. I'm just wondering where you're at. You okay?"

The minutes dragged. I tried watching a little TV. That was no use. Flipping between *Desperate Housewives*, *America's Most Wanted*, and *Law and Order* killed my appetite. I tried going to bed but felt just as restless.

I dialed Michel again. I hung up when it reached voice mail.

It was midnight when I went back to my grading. I could only manage a few papers before my mind started to drift again. So I closed the books and paced a while up and down the kitchen. I checked the fridge. Tidied up a little. Glanced at my Bible.

And then I decided to dial the bank and check my balance.

The moment that I heard the automated teller inform me of my balance, all the breath in my lungs froze. My money—our money—gone. All of it.

Shaking, I punched buttons on my phone and retrieved more information. There had been a series of withdrawals earlier that evening at ATMs downtown. They had drained the account that Michel and I shared. Thousands of dollars that we had been saving

ever since we turned our back on Florida and headed north. All gone.

I ended the call.

For a short while possible explanations lit up my mind like fireworks. Had someone stolen Michel's wallet and somehow got his code? Had he been forced at gunpoint to make the withdrawals himself? Or maybe he'd taken it out himself.

I dismissed them all and decided to stop trying to figure out what had happened. I knew that what mattered more was figuring out what I was going to do about it.



This wasn't the first time I'd lost all my money. It wasn't even the first time that it had happened to me and Michel. In many ways the main reason we moved to Charlotte was because of what happened to us a few years earlier.

We were living in Boca Raton. Like so many people who had fled Haiti, we had found that South Florida was a natural place to settle. Our homeland felt closer down there, even though life in Florida was so different from Haiti that it might as well have been on a different planet. But whenever I stood and looked out at the ocean, it was almost possible to imagine that the lush green mountains and dusty roads of my homeland were just beyond the horizon. Or, at least, that we had not traveled so far that we had forgotten who we were or where we had come from.

Michel and I did what good immigrants do. We worked hard and made money. I was a nursing assistant at the time, and by living cheaply and squeezing every working hour out of the day, I was able to save a lot of money. I sent hundreds of dollars back home every month, and in the eight years since leaving Haiti, I had been able to save up tens of thousands of dollars.

I had a plan to turn it into hundreds of thousands of dollars. It was a good plan, too, and a friend joined me in the business. We rented a boat and filled it with all the items that we knew people were desperate to buy back in Haiti. Mattresses, beds, furniture, food, beer—we had it all on board, waiting to be delivered and sold at a handsome profit. And it would have all worked out as well, except the captain had a heart attack on the boat before reaching the Haitian coast. The captain died, and though the boat made it safely to port in Haiti, it was looted. In the space of a few hours, we lost everything.

That experience taught me a lot of different things. It taught me that it can take years to get you to the brink of success and moments to deliver you to the depths of disaster. It taught me that getting out of debt is a long and painful business and that there can be no substitute for hard work. It taught me that even though I was married, when everything came crashing down, I was pretty much on my own.



When I woke up in Charlotte on Sunday morning and found that Michel still hadn't come home, I was ready to act. No more waiting around. No more being a victim. It was time to do something.

I phoned the police first, reporting Michel as missing. Then I called the bank again and got the details of all the ATMs where the money had been withdrawn. For a moment I was tempted to tell them I suspected we'd been robbed, but something stopped me. I wasn't ready to call it yet. In fact, the locations of the ATMs themselves told me everything I needed to know.

They were all within a few blocks of where he always spent his Saturday afternoons. I visited each one in turn, and even though I saw nothing unusual as I walked from one to the other—and saw

no sign of Michel or any of his friends—somehow, I knew then that my husband had withdrawn the money himself. I don't know how I knew. But I knew.

Saturday evening had been dominated by a growing sense of panic about Michel; Sunday was given over to a growing sense of sorrow. A single question repeated within me. *Now what?* All this time, all these years, now what? After all that we'd saved, now what? After all our plans to open a business together, now what?

Piece by piece, I could feel the life that I had worked so hard to build begin to crumble.

Again...



I was 17 when I first got pregnant. The father of the child was young like me, and the only response he had when I told him was to back away, shaking his head.

“You must get rid of it.”

*It*. Not her or him. Not our child or the baby. Just *it*.

*It* was enough to reduce my world to dust. Whatever lay ahead of me, whatever choice I made, I knew then that I would face it alone.

I decided to keep the baby. I kept her secret as she grew within me. And when that became too difficult, I moved away from home, telling my parents I was moving to the mountains for a few months in order to work.

The mountains of Haiti are some of the most beautiful places on earth. Nothing comes close to the sight of the early morning sunshine picking out the tapestry of green that flows like a living ocean across the peaks. The weeks I spent there were some of the most wonderful I had ever known. As I felt this little life grow within me, everything around appeared more and more alive.

But the feelings did not last. I held her too few times before her life ended. And when that happened, my joy vanished.

I called her Moïka.

My father and mother had brought me up as a churchgoer. I had attended faithfully for many years. But in the pain that followed the loss of my baby, I never once considered turning to God for help. He was a stranger to me. Instead, I made a choice. I lost all interest in study, became a rebel, and looked for comfort in sex and drugs.

I didn't find much comfort. Though I learned to mask the pain, the ache of loneliness was never far from the surface. I tried my best to keep it away, but it was an impossible task. All it took was something like Michel disappearing for a night and a day to hurl me back into the pit.



It was early on Sunday afternoon, and I was sitting at the kitchen table, staring blankly at the books. I heard the front door open and footsteps approach. Instinctively, I lifted my head and inhaled. I guess a part of me still hoped for Michel to walk in and give me a hug as if the previous 24 hours had never happened.

Michel stood in the kitchen doorway. Neither of us spoke. He looked tired. His clothes—the same ones he had gone out wearing the day before—looked tired. But it was the smell that shocked me. He did not smell of beer and cars and time spent laughing with friends. He smelled of burned rubber. I recognized it immediately.

When I had first moved to America, I lived with my brother Jean. He rented a room in an apartment in New York City and worked in a factory up in Connecticut that made windows and blinds. He was earning good money. Good money that he spent entirely on drugs. Jean would work all week and then burn through

\$500,000 in a single night. If he worked enough overtime, he'd be able to keep on partying through Sunday as well. And by the time Monday morning came around, Jean would always be begging me for a few dollars for food.

Jean never sent any money home, and even if I gave him some cash on Monday, there was always a chance that he'd try to steal some from me by the end of Wednesday. He had no interest in anything but drugs, and when he wasn't high or I wasn't giving him money, we'd fight far worse than we ever did when we were kids growing up on the streets of Port-au-Prince.

"You should do society a service," I screamed one day. "Go throw yourself under a train."

For a moment I thought he was going to retaliate, but it passed. Jean grabbed his jacket and left, slamming the door and leaving the apartment with nothing more than the smell of burning rubber that clung to all his clothes.

Michel smelled exactly the same on this Sunday as I stared at him in the kitchen.

"You're on drugs," I said. "Crack?"

He didn't deny it.

I weighed my next words carefully, knowing they were dangerous.

"The police are going to return. They asked me to call them if you came back."

For the first time since he stepped inside the house, Michel stared at me. His eyes held both fear and anger. "You called them?"

In our culture if you call the police on someone, the relationship is over. No matter how long the friendship or how old the marriage. There are no questions, no explanations. It's just over.

I took a deep breath in. "Yes, I called them. I thought you were missing. I had no idea you were on drugs."

Michel spun on his heels, his body suddenly shot full of energy. I heard him run upstairs—two at a time—and begin hauling

furniture around in the bedroom. By the time I reached him, he had pulled back the thick rug at the end of our bed and was lifting up a floorboard. I didn't say anything as he pulled out a pipe and a bag of drugs and pushed past me and into the bathroom. He emptied the bag and flushed it away, then covered his pipe in lighter fluid, lit it, and watched it burn in the sink.

When the flames had taken hold, he finally turned to me. There was no fear in his eyes anymore. Just anger.

"You know what this means?"

"I was worried," I said, my own temper starting to rise. "I was worried something had happened to you. That you'd done something stupid. Turns out I was right, wasn't I?"

He stared, trying to work out how much I knew.

I decided to save him the effort. "I know about the money."

He sat down on the edge of the bath. I hesitated for a moment, then went back downstairs.



After almost a year of living with my crackhead brother, Jean, something remarkable had happened. He started seeing his ex-girlfriend from Haiti, Rachel. And not long after they hooked up again, one Saturday morning while Jean was sleeping in, she joined me in the kitchen and told me that she was going to ask him to marry her.

"Are you crazy? You know he's a drug addict?"

"I do," she said, pouring herself some coffee. "But God told me to do it."

I had to work hard not to laugh out loud. "God told you? Then your God needs to get His eyes tested, 'cause He ain't seeing things clearly."

Rachel tensed up, and I felt bad.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you. But I don’t want you to go through what I’m going through with him. It’s like he’s dead inside. I don’t think anything can bring him back.”

Rachel smiled, and the conversation ended.

Within months they were married, and I moved out. Jean phoned me a few weeks after the wedding.

He said he had quit taking drugs and that he had enrolled in theology school and wanted to apologize for everything he had put me through.

I couldn’t find the words.



Almost a decade had passed since Jean got married. He had long since stopped being known as Jean. He was Pastor Jean now, a living example of the power of God to change any life for the better. And the power of Rachel. A lot of people had seen his transformation and become Christians. Myself included. I started praying, found a church, and was trying to live my life rightly.

But it was hard.

As I sat in the kitchen while Michel remained in the bathroom, I prayed.

Michel wasn’t the only one who needed help. I did too. So I told God that I was feeling desperate. I told Him that I was weak and didn’t think I could face having to rebuild my life again. I told Him that if ever He was going to do a miracle for me, now was the time.

Michel came downstairs eventually. He sat at the table with me. He looked far older than a 40-year-old should.

“I really was worried about you,” I said.

He looked at me. “I know.” His face was impossible to read.

“I should call the police and tell them that you’re safe.”

He tensed but nodded.

I didn't really think about the words that came out of my mouth next, but I knew I wanted to forgive Michel for taking the money. I wanted him to change like my brother had.

"You know, my church has a treatment program that you can take. Or the police would probably let you go to rehab if you told them the truth."

The silence settled heavily like fog on the valley floor.

I waited as long as I could. "Michel? What do you want to do? Do you want to change?"

He shrugged.

"Call the police."