

Live a life of purpose by
leaving comfort and going scared

IMPERFECT COURAGE

JESSICA HONEGGER

Founder of Noonday Collection



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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved. Details have been recalled to the best of the author's memory.

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*For Joe,
who made me a promise
once that changed the world.*

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The path to success is straight, and the
experience of walking it is marked by
both confidence and clarity.

No One, ever

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INTRODUCTION

GIVE IT A GO

CASH IS KING WHEN YOU OWN A BUSINESS,” my entrepreneurial dad has always liked to say, and here I was standing at the counter of an Austin pawnshop living out this truth. After visiting several different pawnshops, I settled on the most promising one, clutching a fistful of precious gold jewelry that my mom and grandmother had given me over the years—my confirmation cross, my sixteenth birthday ring, my middle school graduation necklace—and prepared myself to sell off all of it to keep my dream of my homegrown business, Noonday Collection, alive. This scene hardly meshed with the posh and privileged debutante parties of my youth, but desperate times call for desperate measures. I was pawnshop desperate, it seemed.

Based on the conversation that was unfolding between the man behind the counter and me, I knew that I was being had. But this is how things go when you're needy and rushed: you impulsively take the first semi-reasonable offer that comes along. “You’ve got a deal,” I told the guy. “Nine hundred for it all.”

I left the pawnshop feeling victorious, even as doubts scratched at the back of my mind. Would I later regret this decision to forever part with my family heirlooms? The Noonday website had been a rudimentary one at best, and I knew that I needed to invest more than the paltry fee that my friend Joel had benevolently charged me to get a more

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robust website off the ground. I needed a *real* site, and in line with the adage, “it takes money to make money,” I needed this cash to grow—to make my business *real*.

A spirit of entrepreneurship has flowed through my veins since I was old enough to hawk my handmade bandana banana clips for a profit, and even though I was terrified to step into the unknown, I was a woman on a mission—to build a business and to bring home a bright-eyed little boy named Jack.



Prior to launching Noonday in 2010, my husband Joe and I were parents to two—a girl, Amelie; and a boy, Holden—but were considering growing our family through adoption.

We had met and fallen in love years prior during a training program with Food for the Hungry, a relief and development organization serving the world’s most vulnerable people. We soon realized that the thing that made our two hearts beat fast was partnering with those who were living in material poverty, often where injustice was great. One year after we’d met, Joe proposed to me on a wobbly pier over Lake Atitlán in Guatemala,¹ where we lived at the time.

I’ve since returned to this beautiful town several times to visit artisan partners there, and every time I can’t help but think back on those early married-life days, when we were just starting to dream about how we could build a life of impact together.

Joe and I settled into life after getting married, always with the intention of living internationally again. But then our two littles arrived, as did our Austin house-flipping business. We would purchase, remodel, redecorate, and list every residence we could, and while we en-

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joyed the entrepreneurial challenge of real estate, we still held those Food for the Hungry days close to our hearts. On many occasions, we would look at each other following yet another tile-versus-concrete argument and shake our heads. Was a life of purpose reserved for idealistic singles in their twenties? Or was it meant for home flippers with a growing family too?

Joe and I took many international trips to visit friends and not-for-profits to continue to learn about sustainable solutions toward poverty alleviation. These trips also served to keep our perception of the illusory American Dream in check—and to remind us that life for most of the world looked very different. On one of those trips, I held a child orphaned by the HIV crisis in my arms for the first time since becoming a mother myself. It was then that I felt a stirring in my heart that told me we would eventually grow our family through adoption.

After Joe and I discussed the possibility of adopting internationally and realized that our hearts were aligned, we began to prepare ourselves for what this next big step could look like for us. It was during this season of preparation that we booked a trip to Uganda to visit friends. One of the couples we visited on that trip was Bobby and Downie Mickler, who had relocated from Texas to Uganda, with hopes of creating entrepreneurial opportunities for people living there in need of work. With Texas pecans in hand, we paid them a visit and brought them a taste from home.

One Sunday afternoon, Joe and I sat on their porch as Bobby explained how his work was going. Some of the businesses he'd helped launch were small—the man who started a full-on plumbing business from his bicycle, for example—while others were big, such as the creation of an innovative mosquito-repellant spray system that larger hotels in the area were putting to use. As Bobby went on about one of the

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businesses he cared for most, his passion rose. “We have friends here who are *incredible* artists,” he said. “Their names are Jalia and Daniel Matovu. We sent several crates of their goods back home and tried to create a marketplace for them on our visits. But we have realized that this endeavor needs a lot more attention if it’s really going to succeed. Downie’s mom has two crates left—bags, scarves, jewelry pieces, that sort of thing. Would you be interested in selling them?”

Downie went on to fill me in on Jalia and Daniel, explaining that the sale of their handmade goods was the only thing keeping them afloat week by week. “They are committed to using their art to provide for themselves and their kids and eventually, they hope, their extended family and friends,” Downie said. “I believe that they are the future of Uganda, but right now they barely get food on the table . . .”

I listened intently, nodding as the story of this tenacious but struggling couple sparked something deep in my heart. Since my time with Food for the Hungry, I was convinced that a good job was the surest and most dignified way to empower a family to rise out of poverty. These people, Jalia and Daniel, sounded like my people. I tucked that knowledge away, not really believing that I’d ever play a part in their story.



Joe and I arrived home from that trip refreshed, filled with vision and eager to adopt. We weren’t sure that Uganda was where we’d find our child, but we still felt confident that international adoption was the path for us. Our small nest egg would provide the means; now it was time to research the way.

What we didn’t foresee (but perhaps should have) was that the next

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month the Austin real estate bubble would pop with the advent of the recession. That adoption nest egg we boasted in? Yeah, it started paying the grocery bill. At its worst, Joe and I owned five houses, one of which we were living in and four of which we needed to sell. Three of them showed no signs of selling—stressful, to say the least. Joe and I began playing chess with our credit cards, and still today, I remember the look on my husband's face each time he came into our bedroom on errand day. In a quiet voice, he'd say, "Use the Mastercard today, not the Visa, okay?"

It was a hard season for us—both financially and otherwise. During sleepless nights, I stayed awake wondering if the four of us were going to have to move in with my parents. However, with the current real estate reality, our house would never sell, so round and round it all went in my head. One day, I received a call from Joe on his way home from what was supposed to have been a closed real estate deal—the only one in months.

"She backed out," he said. "The client was too worried the home was going to depreciate in value."

The despair led me to googling, "What to do when God has led you toward international adoption but you have no money." Nothing helpful popped up.

Okay, so maybe I never googled that exactly, but I did begin to pluck my way through the internet, determined to find direction of some sort. Within a month of beginning that process, two things happened that I could only explain as divine nudges. The first was an email I received from a friend who had just returned from Rwanda after interviewing for a job with International Justice Mission. "I heard through the grapevine that you are exploring adoption," he wrote. He went on to say that he had met a woman on his trip, Jennifer, who lived in

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Rwanda. She had recently finalized the adoption of her son and wanted to begin facilitating adoptions for American families.

The second nudge felt even more exacting. I searched online for additional information regarding adopting from Rwanda, and one of the first hits I got was a blog by a fellow Austinite who was months away from adopting a little boy from Rwanda. Intrigued by her story, I reached out to her through her site to see if she could offer us any words of wisdom. “We should meet up,” she responded. As I set the date in my calendar, I decided to take a closer look at her blog, and as I scanned her About Me page, I noticed her maiden name and saw her photo. My jaw dropped. This woman was no stranger; she’d been my college roommate. The nudge became more of a push. “Maybe *Rwanda* is it,” I said to Joe.

By this point I knew that to fund our adoption expenses, Joe and I would need to ask for money from family and friends (a prospect that mortified me) or I would need to start a side hustle of some sort. I reached out to Downie in Uganda via text.

“I’m interested in selling those goods after all,” I told her, and soon enough, I was road-tripping to San Antonio to pick up those crates of vibrant, beaded Ugandan goods while reaching out to every Austin-based friend I knew to invite them to my first “trunk show.” There I would sell Jalia and Daniel’s handmade goods, many clothes from my own closet, and spare sets of my dishes, in hopes of getting one step closer to my adoption fund-raising goal.

The day leading up to the party, I felt junior-high-like fear rising to meet me. I was suddenly gripped by the conviction that this was all a big mistake. I was convinced no one would come, and then I wondered what people would think if they did. The guest room was filled to the brim with clothes, my grandma’s dishes lined the fireplace, and rows of

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paper beads were laid out on the dining table. What if pursuing this dream was a fool's errand? I almost canceled then and there, as fear of rejection and failure stared me in the face. But instead, I sat in my living room and gathered my courage, imperfect though it was. I decided to simply go scared.

Little did I know then that that night I would be launching what would become the largest fair-trade jewelry company in the world. And that in only five years, Noonday Collection would be named by *Inc. Magazine* as the forty-fifth fastest growing business in the United States. Or that, two years after that, I would stand on a stage next to my now business partner, Travis Wilson, to accept the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year award—an honor shared by Whole Foods' John Mackey, among others.

My fears may have come out in droves that night, but thankfully, my friends did too. As did those friends' friends, whom they'd invited. They came because they *did* care about our new journey toward international adoption, and once in my home surrounded by all the African goods, they were utterly compelled—by the intersections of fashion and impact, style and story, work and dignity, and profit and purpose. An hour into the party, I was shocked to find that I had sold more than 90 percent of all that I had.

As the last of my guests left with their purchases, I wondered if there wasn't something to this concept. After that night, I started dreaming bigger than I'd dreamed before. The products were distinctive, the backstory was compelling, the gap in the market was evident, and the power of women gathering together for each other, face to face, was real. In fact, Noonday exists because women showed up for me on that humble evening in our home. Emboldened by such support, I decided to see where this path would lead.

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That first trunk show led to another, and to another after that. I had no business cards at those early events, so I'd scribble down my name and number on yellow sticky notes, handing them out to anyone who expressed interest in hosting her own trunk show.

As money trickled in—fifteen dollars for a bracelet, thirty dollars for a necklace, twenty dollars for a scarf, all of it cash only—I'd reach out directly to Jalia and Daniel via email in Uganda to order more. Joe and I scrambled to set up a Western Union account to wire money to them while Jalia and Daniel scrambled to figure out how to order raw materials, price their items, and sell them to me. After each show I would order fresh stock of exactly what I'd just sold and get busy booking my next trunk show, where I'd do it all over again. It was a pretty stripped-down process, but what I lacked in infrastructure, I made up for in drive.

Across these last seven years, my “little jewelry thing” has bloomed into a thriving, global direct-sales brand that has employed more than four thousand Noonday business owners in the United States and over forty-five hundred artisan partners in twelve countries around the world. Jalia and Daniel, who formerly lived on less than two dollars per day, are now part of Uganda's middle class and employ more than three hundred local people, many of whom are single moms. Closer to home, our son Jack's adoption has been completed and he is now an official part of our family. At eight years old, that thoughtful and energetic boy is a daily reminder to me of the value of courage—and of choosing to say yes to big dreams, even when fear is knocking at the door.

Until I started this Noonday journey, I had always equated *courage* to the word *fearlessness*. In my mind, courage described people such as Martin Luther King Jr., who rallied a crowd every time he spoke, despite the danger that rally inevitably drew; firefighters who ran into the

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Twin Towers on 9/11, while everyone else was running out; women who leave their abusive spouses, having no idea what will happen next. *That*, I told myself, was courage. On the day we moved forward with the adoption process despite what our bank account said or the night I opened up my home for possibly no one to come or the day I pawned my gold jewelry, I had not felt like a hero. And yet, with a beating heart and shaking hands, I said yes to risk and yes to moving ahead. I had simply gone scared.

Imperfect courage is the only kind I possessed, but it was courage nonetheless. Instead of waiting for fear to subside, I had made it my friend. Because when you've got a vision, you don't have time to wait around for your fears to vanish before you start moving. Perhaps the hero's journey is not for a few brave people after all but is an invitation to me, to us all, to rally our courage and go do the thing we're meant to do. This mind-blowing transformation—from letting fear sideline you to choosing to go scared—is what I wish for you. And so, my friend, this book: a memoir-ish road map to get us from here to there.

We're going to do this thing in three parts, because all the best things come in threes: Corona, salt, lime; morning, noon, night; location, location, location. In part 1, we will accomplish a little inner reckoning, that painful but fundamental work that invites courage into our lives from the inside out. What are you afraid of, and what toll is that fear taking in your life? I'm not here to tell you to stop feeling afraid; instead, this book is a guide to *going scared*. To not waiting around for your nerves and your nerve to reconcile. Still, if we're going to *go*, we've got to understand the things that are holding us back.

In part 2, we'll explore the wonders of togetherness as well as the dangers of going it alone in our quest for living a life that counts, both for ourselves and for a world in need. If you're a lone ranger type, then

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you'll hate part 2, but listen to me: you may not skip it. It holds the key that will unlock your fear and empower you to move ahead.

And then in part 3, I bring out my coach's whistle, waking you up, getting you in the game, insisting (but in a lovably encouraging way) that you *bring everything you've got* to this one life that you have been given, to make a meaningful impact for others.

That thing that makes you come alive that you've just been waiting for the courage to do? It's time to give it a go.

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PART ONE

THE FIRST STEP

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ONE

CHOOSE COURAGE



Courage is being scared to death
but saddling up anyway.

John Wayne

IT'S THE SUMMER OF 2017, AND OUR GROUP has just arrived in Uganda, returning to the place where Noonday Collection all began. I hear the drums beating in the distance, and my heartbeat falls into rhythm with the percussionists' tempo. Our group has come from all over the United States; social entrepreneurs—at Noonday, we call them ambassadors—who have achieved some serious sales goals to arrive at this moment and finally put faces to the names of the artisans they've known only from photographs. The surreal nature of the moment hits me as we step out of the van onto the red dirt road that leads to the jewelry workshop. It's a journey that seven years ago I couldn't have imagined, as I sat hunkered in my guest bedroom with nothing but a handful of paper-bead necklaces.

I sneak behind the gate before the rest of my group and I are met with a tidal wave of tight hugs, swishing skirts, and joyful laughter. As the ambassadors emerge and are swept up in this celebratory parade, I tell them to resist the urge to get out their phones and snap photos. "Just

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be present!” I insist, raising my voice above the music. I don’t want us to miss a nanosecond of this experience.

As I scan the familiar faces of my artisan friends—Mama Sham with her impossibly bright grin, Bukenya with a trace of a joke always on his face, Latifa with her eager smile, Caleb and his sturdy handshake, Rosetta with her freshly cut hair, Mama Jabal with her ever-changing head covering, and Nakato with her shy countenance—I think of the long journey we’ve all been on together. Seven years ago, I couldn’t imagine starting a business that fostered a global sisterhood. My little jewelry business had become more than I had ever dreamed it could be.



After the first trunk show, things really took off—women showed increased interest, I had multiple trunk shows after that, and the business emerged as one that was *real*. After a few months’ work, demand grew not just in Austin but in cities across the country. I began to dream of what it would be like to work this business with other impact-hungry people like me. If I could multiply myself, then jobs across the world would multiply too, I figured; I was determined to see if I was right. But before I had a chance to start recruiting, I received an email from a woman in Seattle who had gotten wind of Noonday via another mom’s adoption blog. She wrote,

My name is Sara. I would be interested in hosting a Noonday trunk show, but I’m also wondering if it would be possible to do more than that. I’m interested in working with your company to host Noonday trunk shows in the Seattle area—to earn income

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toward my family's own adoption, to help others raise funds, and to make a difference in the lives of women in Uganda and around the world. Like you, I've had the opportunity to travel and to volunteer in places such as Argentina, Guatemala, and Pakistan. I'm passionate about the not-just-for-profit business model and would be excited to work with your company. Would you be interested in talking more about what that could look like?

Why, yes, I would . . .

Sara and I began to exchange emails, exploring a compensation model for this impromptu arrangement, and within a couple of months, Sara became the first Noonday Collection ambassador and held the first-ever Noonday trunk show outside of Texas.

My vision was beginning to spread, and soon, more women were saying yes to launching their own Noonday businesses. Without realizing it, they had become Noonday's first official ambassadors. In the next seven years, Noonday Collection would grow to add artisan partners in Guatemala, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Ecuador, Peru, India, Vietnam, Nepal, Afghanistan, and more; we would add ambassadors in every state across America; and we would sell nearly two million accessories, ship more than six hundred thousand orders, and raise more than half a million dollars for adoptive families through the adoption fund-raiser trunk shows we continue to hold to this day.



In Uganda, as I watch my artisan friends dance, I reflect on how hopeful Jalia and I were seven years prior regarding the possibilities for this

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little endeavor, yet I was aware then that we each had taken wild risks to make it happen. Although the idea had gained traction, to be sure, most of the time I felt utterly incapable of leading the way. While I was passionate about my business's success, I still had so much fear. I wondered about the outcome, whether that be failure or success, and I lay awake many nights worrying about both. Failure would mean lost livelihoods and perhaps a waste of all this time and effort. Success would mean more responsibility and a dramatic shift in how I spent my time—less Play-Doh and more PowerPoint. Was I really qualified to run a global business? My résumé said an emphatic no. Was I able to be an attentive and caring mom while also leading the company?

During that time of uncertainty, on the other side of the world, Jalia too had taken a leap of faith in our partnership by hiring her first employees, all people who were living in acute poverty and for whom I felt the high stakes of their success. It was painfully clear to me that if I failed in this endeavor, there was more at stake than just my personal success. In moments of despair, that singular thought kept me from caving in. It fueled my earnest belief, and it bolstered my determination that nothing was going to keep me from building this thing I was building—not financial desperation, not mom-of-two-kids-under-three (so far) exhaustion, not direct-sales cynicism, not unfavorable odds of *any* kind. If I was going to make it, I couldn't wait around for my fears to dismiss themselves. Courage cornered me, and I accepted its challenge, regardless of what the cost would be.



One of my favorite thinkers and mentors, Andy Crouch, has a saying that my family has adopted for ourselves, which is that “the only thing

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money can buy is bubble wrap.”¹ Andy’s sentiment is aimed primarily at North Americans who, by being born here, are among the most affluent in the world. Affluence and privilege can be used for incredible good—and I hope that by the end of this book you will awaken to the power your privilege can wield—but it can also insulate us from the best (and worst) things that life may bring our way. I know that being born in a wealthy zip code to two white, resourced parents certainly insulated me from the realities of racism, poverty, and injustices that many people around the world face daily. Truly, no matter how broke Joe and I may have felt during our real estate demise and adoption journey, we were not selling our prized-possession leather-bound Bible to get money for the only meal our family would have that week, which is what Jalia and Daniel once had to do.

I’ve always been passionate about *going* in life—going out of my comfort zone, going straight through my fears, *going scared*. And yet even I acknowledge that there are myriad benefits to staying put: comfort, safety, and plush couches, to name a few.

Take Netflix, for example. Is there anything more satisfying than tucking yourself into a comfy couch, remote in one hand, smartphone in the other, binge-watching *Friday Night Lights* and scrolling through your social media feeds? Comfort. Safety. Security. Alrightness. Call it the siren song of the recliner. When we are seated, we cannot fall. Am I right? My own children, accident prone though they may be, have never broken an arm while watching TV.

It’s tempting to bubble-wrap our lives. Layer upon layer of protection means we stay unbroken, right through to the end. We wrap ourselves in fear. We wrap ourselves in isolation. We wrap ourselves in nightly glasses of wine or in our beloved Instagram feed. We avoid real issues involving real people who live in the real world because, *What if*

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I get hurt? And yet what does this approach yield for us? A life of boredom, a lack of impact, spiritual death.

“Amidst safety the world has never before known,” Andy wrote, “the greatest spiritual struggle many of us face is to be willing to take off our bubble wrap.”²

We know that outside our front door, something much more fulfilling lies in wait. But instead of pursuing the desires of our heart, we spend our energy in defense mode, trying to avoid disappointment, betrayal, and pain. Something in us clings to these places of safety and makes it difficult to stand—even as something deeper within us longs to stand up, to eventually rise.

Here on the couch, you and me, we can’t make a misstep. We can’t break a limb here. We can’t get shamed here.

And yet. (Here is where I may gently tug that cozy blanket off you.) We know down in the marrow of our bones that we were made for something more.



My original motivation for writing this book hinged on a single thought: There is a whole world out there begging for us to use the opportunity we have been given, to create opportunity for others, so that we—*all of us*—can flourish. So, while comfort may beckon us, choosing courage will always be the route to impact.

When we first step out of our comfort zones to embrace our larger world, a small but meaningful revolution takes place inside us as formerly invisible injustices are juxtaposed against a bubble-wrapped reality. Even now, when I think back to the day when my teenage eyes were first opened to the harsh realities faced by so many people in our world,

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I can feel the weight of it hitting me afresh, like being plunged into ice-cold water after spending my whole life comfortably warm.

When I was fifteen years old, I signed up to volunteer on a trip to Kenya with my church. There in East Africa, I would witness the obstacles faced by many people living in poverty and see with fresh perspective just how many resources I had at my disposal. Where I grew up, many kids received new cars on their sixteenth birthday, friends spent their weekends four-wheeling around ranches that had been passed down through generations of Texans, and life revolved around the Fiesta social events of San Antonio. It was a far cry from what I would see in Kenya. My world was about to get rocked.

When my church group landed in Nairobi, I took in the bustling city. Amid the dizzying scene, the image of one woman stood out to me, the contrast of her bright eyes impossible to miss. Set against a backdrop of dusty shanties and corrugated-metal-roofed lean-tos, one crawling on top of the next as far as the eye could see, was a makeshift set of wooden shelves, held erect by sawed-off tree limbs that supported a well-worn tarp. Positioned precariously but with great intention on those shelves were baskets of fruits and vegetables—tomatoes and bananas, avocados and mangos, potatoes and cabbages—their vibrant hues catching my eye.

One of my Kenyan friends explained that this woman was a new entrepreneur, her bustling stand made possible by a microcredit loan she had recently received. Evidently, the woman's husband, an abusive man who drank any earnings he brought home from odd jobs, was not providing for his children. So she had decided to take matters into her own hands. I was immediately inspired by this woman's spirit. Though our lives and motivations were very different, I too had an entrepreneurial itch. From the jewelry stands I set up as a kid where I would

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hawk my handmade banana clips and conch earrings to the no-frills day camp I launched in junior high for grade-schoolers in my neighborhood, I had always been attracted to the idea of multiplying whatever resources I had into something much more. And this woman was taking what she had been given and *running with it*, transforming simple fruits and vegetables into economic empowerment.

My fifteen-year-old self would have been incredulous had she been told that one day she'd return to those very same streets as an adult, offering up entrepreneurial opportunities for other Kenyans living in the slums. The fact that Noonday now partners with eighty-five talented metalworkers in Nairobi is one of the sweetest serendipities I've known in life. And it's a beautiful reminder that you and I can take the resources we've been given and invest them for good in this world. Yes, such investments will cost us something—comfort, security, control. But impact doesn't come from the couch dweller, right? It comes from those with imperfect courage who choose to go scared. In the same way that a toddler learns to walk by walking, we get our *courage* legs under us only when we stand to our feet and *move*.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK

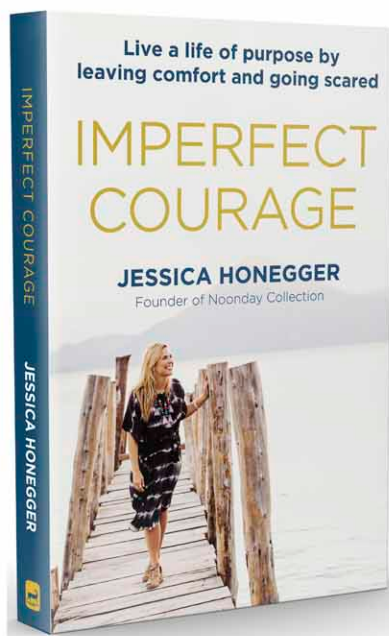


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