


PREVIEW

CHRISANN DAWSON

CONGO CRISIS



THE CONGO SERIES

BOOK 1



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Congo Crisis

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Resilient and strong; full of true joy and forgiveness: the incredible people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo have much to teach the nations of the world. From them, I learned the importance of genuine courtesy and concern. I have discerned from them that true generosity begins in the human spirit and flows outward to a physical expression of giving. This book is dedicated to the Congolese, young and old, with hope for their nation's health and prosperity.

CONGO CRISIS

The image features the words "CONGO" and "CRISIS" in a large, bold, black, distressed font. The letters have a grainy, weathered texture. Between the two words is a black silhouette of a figure with large, bat-like wings, appearing to fly or descend. The figure is positioned centrally, overlapping the space between the two lines of text. The entire composition is set against a plain white background.

Chapter 1

Alessandra leaned her head back on the wicker porch chair immensely enjoying doing absolutely nothing. The late spring breeze gently lifted her auburn curls as she reflected on the activity of the past weeks: a blur of term papers, speeches, and pre-dawn study sessions. Thankfully it was all behind her, and her whole life stretched out ahead.

Alessandra was suddenly aware of footsteps coming up the walkway. In her reverie, she hadn't noticed her younger stepbrother Daniel returning from his evening job. He took the steps two at a time and landed in the adjacent chair.

"Doesn't it feel great to be done with college, sis?" Daniel exclaimed. "I feel happy, and I still have two years to go. What are you going to do with your summer? Any plans?"

"Not sure. I've been so busy these last four years, a summer off sounds like just my thing, but I have had *another* invitation."

"Like what? You haven't let me in on any secret plans. What's on your mind?" Daniel coaxed.

Before Alessandra had a chance to explain, Julia pressed her face against the living room window screen and said, "Don't leave me out of a great conversation, you guys. Wait for me! I'll go get

Mom and Jim and a tray full of goodies. Please don't say anything important until I return."

Daniel laughed as Julia raced off to find their mom and Jim. "Poor Julia; it's not often she gets included in our earth-shaking talks. With us both away at college these last few years, she must feel like she's been left behind. She sure has grown though; I can hardly believe that she graduates from high school next Friday."

Alessandra inwardly sighed at the delay in the conversation, barely nodding her agreement to Daniel's last statement. Her blended family was not as perfectly mixed as it should have been after all these years. When Alessandra was nine, her mother had died of cancer. When she was ten, her father, Jim, had married a widow with two children; Daniel, who was two years younger than her; and Julia, who was four years younger. Alessandra had openly accepted Daniel and Julia as family right from the beginning, but years of little, unresolved differences had managed to build an invisible wall between stepmother and stepdaughter. Alessandra pulled herself out of introspection, looked at Daniel, and picked up the ball of conversation where she had dropped it.

"Not only has she grown tall and mature, but Julia seems to have a strong relationship with the Lord as well. I'm excited that she has decided to join you at Bible College this fall," Alessandra finished.

Just then Alessandra's stepmother, Kay, walked onto the front porch with a tray of frosty glasses filled with iced tea. Julia followed with a tray of grapes and finger sandwiches. Kay gingerly placed her tray on the wicker table and glanced up just in time to catch a cold look in Alessandra's soft gray eyes.

"I'm so glad that you're home, Alessandra," Kay expressed formally as Jim joined them on the porch.

"I'm happy to be home, Kay. As much as I enjoyed school and my roommates, I could never love them as much as you guys," Alessandra said somewhat self-consciously, remembering her irritation at the interruption.

"Stop with the sentiment, sis. I can't stand it!" Daniel exclaimed.

"What's the big secret, Alessandra? Julia told me that you were about to disclose the details," Kay inquired politely.

"Yeah, what's with leaving your old dad out?" Jim teased as he sat down next to Alessandra, patting her on the knee.

"Well," began Alessandra as she reached for a sandwich and a glass of iced tea, "I have had an invitation for the entire summer. Do you remember the Carmichaels? I took History of Civilization and some English classes with them while I was a freshman. They are now serving the Lord as missionaries in the Congo. About two months ago, they wrote and asked me to spend the summer with them and to experience first-hand the

thrills of missionary service. I'm seriously considering their offer."

"Didn't that country used to be called Zaire? I remember studying it a while back for my current events class," Julia added.

"You're right," Alessandra encouraged, "in May of 1997 a new government took over, ousting a thirty-two-year dictator. Even though the current government has only been in power a short time, they have already made some visible changes. At least that's what the Carmichaels have told me."

"If the government is that unstable, why are you even thinking about going? Alessandra, the last place you need to be is in the middle of a war zone," Daniel challenged with a note of worry in his voice. "Besides, that war got started because of the Rwandan genocide; those people have no respect for human life."

"Daniel, it's not my desire to be foolish, but it is my wish to follow the Lord and His leadership in my life. Remember, 'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.'"

"You don't need to throw Jim Elliot's quote at me, Alessandra," Daniel defended, "I just finished reading *Through Gates of Splendor* for my missions' class. Besides, glibly quoting famous missionaries isn't a charm."

"I don't feel that I'm risky, Daniel, if God wants me to go," said Alessandra rather heatedly, leaning forward in her chair.

“All right, you two; let’s not turn this into a three-hour argument on the will of God and His sovereignty,” Jim said, stopping the argument.

“It seems that if you are planning to go that you will have to make your mind up quickly. June is just around the corner, and you must be back the third week of August to prepare for teaching history this fall,” Kay quietly reminded. “When do your friends expect an answer?”

“By the end of the week,” Alessandra replied. “What do you think, Dad? Would you allow me to go, and can we even afford it? My own bank account wouldn’t cover that trip.”

“We don’t have an extra \$2000 laying around if that’s what you’re asking,” Kay answered rather shortly.

Jim gave his wife a look that was hard to interpret. Alessandra wondered what it meant and locked eyes with Daniel, who had also caught the glance between his mom and stepdad.

“As it turns out, Less, money is really not an issue,” Jim said deliberately, while also using his favorite nickname for his daughter. “I’m the only one who knows this, but your mother left a small legacy for you to be used for travel or marriage once you graduated from college. It’s not significant, but it would certainly cover the trip and a wedding. Maybe you could bring a groom back with you since you couldn’t manage to find one at college.”

Alessandra gave her dad a wry smile, then added, “I didn’t know Mom did that. Where did that money come from?”

“She got some money when her Aunt Ruth died right before we were married. I was too proud at the time to let her contribute it towards our home’s down payment, so she eventually put it in a trust fund for you. Actually, I believe the money comes with a letter too. I’ll have to call the lawyer on Monday about that. As far as permission to go, you don’t need that from me. You’re a big girl; if you feel that God wants you to go to the Congo this summer, it must be a part of His plan for your life. You have my blessing.” Everyone was suddenly aware that Julia was on the edge of her seat with excitement.

“Can I go with Alessandra, please?” Julia begged, looking at Jim and her mom with eyes full of hope.

“Julia, this is Alessandra’s opportunity. You weren’t invited. Besides, I think you’re a little young, don’t you, Jim,” Kay quickly responded, hoping her husband would agree with her.

“I’m sorry, Julia; I know how much you love an adventure, but I agree with your mom. Besides, you already have several commitments for this summer, including an excellent job. You’ll have to be content with high school graduation and heading off to college this fall.”

Everyone watched as Julia's body language told the depths of the disappointment she was feeling. She slumped back into her wicker chair, her eyes nearly filling with tears.

"Julia," Kay answered tenderly, "your opportunities for adventure will come."

"Well, Daniel, you're the only one in the family circle to hesitate. This adventure will involve all of us to some degree or other. Will you support me? I need your prayers and encouragement too," Alessandra asked purposefully, drawing the attention away from Julia to give her a minute to control her emotions.

"I'm sorry if I sounded discouraging. I don't want to thwart God's will for your life if it includes a trip to the Congo this summer. I happily give you *my* blessing, too, if that's what you think you should do. I just don't want anything to happen to you, that's all," Daniel concluded glumly.

As Daniel finished, his mother began to chuckle. "Son, you don't sound euphoric to give that blessing." Turning to her stepdaughter, Kay said, "I'm not sure if I ever told you that your mother and I were best friends throughout college; we even roomed together two years. Carol had a profound interest in missions herself and was sorry she did not take a trip like this before she married your dad. I didn't know that she set aside a separate fund so you could travel, but it doesn't surprise me in

the least. The fact that your Heavenly Father provided for this trip years ago is an indicator that He approves. Where God guides, He provides, you know.”

Alessandra could barely mask the shock she felt at learning that Kay and her mother had been good friends. A flood of thoughts bombarded her as she tried to absorb it all.

“I can hardly believe it! There is so much to think about all of a sudden, I don’t know which thought to start with. Most amazing is that God seems to have opened the doors for a Congo trip this summer, and that I get to read something from Mom after all these years of silence. I don’t know if I have the patience to wait for Monday to read that letter, Dad.”

“You’ll have to wait, Less,” Jim answered. “It’s Friday evening. Bill Bradshaw’s office doesn’t open until nine Monday morning. Come on; help me clear these things,” Dad finished.

Kay, Daniel, and Julia quietly discussed the upcoming trip and Julia’s high school graduation while Alessandra and her dad cleaned up the plates and glasses.

“Do you really think I can do this trip, Dad?” Alessandra asked once she unloaded the glasses from the tray into the sink.

“Why not? People take short-term missions trips all the time. But it would not hurt to pray about it for a few days just to give you assurance. Ask God to give you peace or some sort of

confirmation from His Word. He's already said, 'Go ye,' so He has, in a way, already given His affirmation," Dad finished.

"You're right, but I'll give myself this weekend to pray about it. Dad," Alessandra said lowering her voice, "I didn't know that Mom and Kay were friends; how come you didn't tell me?"

Jim cleared his throat nervously and hesitated, "I'm not sure. I guess, when you were younger, I thought you wouldn't understand how positive I was that God brought Kay and I together after your mother's death. Besides, Kay did visit in the months before your mom died. Don't you remember meeting her at all?"

"I can't recall ever meeting her before Mom's funeral, and that first meeting seemed strange to me, at least back then. She hugged me so hard, I couldn't breathe. I didn't even know her but there she was, crying and saying things I couldn't fully understand. I've never been the huggy type and the whole thing left a bad first impression on me. And I never remember seeing Kay here at the house."

Jim thought for a minute, "It seems to me that she often came during the day when I was at work, and you were at school. It makes the most sense really because she would have the freest time when her own kids were in school. She would often leave a supper warming in the oven, then go meet Daniel and Julia at the bus stop. She was like a quiet presence, helping out, hardly leaving

any evidence of her having been here,” Jim finished tenderly. “I wonder...”

“Wonder what, Dad?” Alessandra asked shortly, irritated that he hadn’t finished his thought.

“Oh, nothing. Let’s get these dishes done. It’s not often that we all get to sit together as a family. Let’s get back to the porch and enjoy the rest of the evening. And I promise to follow up on the letter first thing Monday morning,” Jim said.

As he and Alessandra stepped onto the porch, Daniel looked up.

“Are you going to need a mosquito net, sis?” Daniel asked. “I have one up in the attic from my Boy Scout days. It stretches to fit a double bed as well as a single.”

“I hadn’t yet thought about it, but I’m sure that I will,” answered Alessandra. “Thanks, Daniel.”

The family spent another hour leisurely finishing their refreshments and discussing things to come. They ended with a short season of prayer before breaking up and drifting off to their various rooms. A little while later, the home was quiet as its members all settled down to rest. Alessandra snuggled under her fresh sheets, glad to be home in her own bed once again. The cool summer breeze fanned her to sleep more quickly than she could have thought possible.

Chapter 2

The birds' jubilant singing invaded Alessandra's dream the next morning. She woke up feeling excited before she remembered what she was supposed to be excited about. "The Congo," she said out loud as she sat bolt upright in bed. "I'm going to the Congo in just a few short weeks! I need to make a list of things to do; I need to pack; I need to let my friends know of my decision. Calm down, girlfriend," she stated, reprimanding herself out loud. "First, I need to seek the Lord, read His Word, and gain His guidance for this whole excursion."

Alessandra spent the next thirty minutes doing exactly that. Just as she was finishing and beginning to prepare for the day, Julia popped her head in the door, "Good morning!"

"Good morning, lady. How are you spending your last Saturday as a high school student? Do you have plans to go to the mall with some of your friends from youth group?" Alessandra inquired.

"I don't have any plans. Mom and I went shopping last week for my dress for graduation. I was hoping just to hang around with you if you don't mind."

"You know that I would love to have you help me in this endeavor. It will be your job to calm me down when I get too crazy

with running around,” Alessandra answered. “What’s Kay doing today? Does she work on Saturdays now?”

“Yes, can you believe it? When she transferred to the Newtown branch, they immediately promoted her to bank manager. She has to work every Saturday from nine to noon. That’s the only branch with Saturday hours. Hey, do you want to see my graduation dress?” Julia asked quickly changing the subject in her enthusiasm.

“I’d love to; go get it.”

As Julia dashed off to get her dress, Alessandra finished putting on her jean skirt and a college t-shirt. She was just beginning to brush the knots out of her thick auburn hair when Julia returned. She hung the garment on the hook behind Alessandra’s door and lifted the plastic cover. The creamy silk gown was covered with exquisite embroidery of pale roses and mint-green leaves.

“Perfectly elegant. Where did you find that beauty? It’s almost pretty enough to get married in. You must have paid an arm and a leg for it.”

“Knowing how much Mom likes a bargain, we didn’t pay what it was worth. It was marked down three times from its original price, so we paid less than thirty bucks. Mom always figures that you get the best deals by shopping the clearance racks at the nice department stores. She was definitely right on this one,” Julia finished joyfully.

“Kay is right, but because I am such a miser, I’m afraid to enter even those stores in search of a bargain. It’s beautiful though, Julia. In that dress, your brown hair and eyes will come alive. *You* have grown into a lady.”

“Do you think so? None of the guys at school seem to notice. They only tease me about being a bookworm and studying too much. Anyway, there is no one in school that I care to attract,” she ended rather glumly.

“But I thought you liked...what’s his name? Same name as that famous basketball player that retired a few years back.”

“James Worthy?”

That’s it! Wasn’t he paying a lot of attention to you when I was home for Christmas break? I thought that you liked him.”

“I did and I thought that he liked me too, but about a month ago he suddenly changed. He used to stop by my locker almost every day and talk, but recently he started hanging around with a different group at school. Since then, he hasn’t been to one youth group activity, *and* he’s missed church two weeks in a row. When I asked him about it last week, he just gave me an insolent look and told me it was none of my business. I’ve given up hope.”

“I’m sorry. I guess he is going to need our prayers. I wonder what brought about the sudden change. Have you heard anything else that would clue you in?”

“No, I haven’t, but you know that I tend to keep to myself. You’re right. I’ll just keep praying for him and trust the Lord to take care of me. Hey, let me go take this dress back to my room, and I’ll meet you downstairs in the kitchen. Maybe we can catch a family breakfast before Mom heads out the door for work; Daniel’s already gone, but Jim is just working around the house today.”

After a breakfast of scrambled eggs, pork roll, and bagels, the family split up, going their separate ways to work, errands and chores. Alessandra realized that there wasn’t much that she could accomplish on a Saturday, but she pursued things as far as she could. She helped her dad with mowing the lawn and weed-whacking and drove Julia to school for graduation practice. The day ended well with a family barbecue and a lively game of Monopoly.

Following church the next morning, Alessandra discussed the plans for her trip with Pastor Crenshaw. He reminded her, just as Kay had, that she would have to be back by the third week of August for the teacher-planning week. “Alessandra, you had better leave yourself a little extra time at the end. You never know when something will come up in an unstable country like that. I wouldn’t want to be short one teacher this fall because you got caught in the middle of a political crisis,” Pastor Crenshaw encouraged half joking, half serious.

“I’m sure nothing like that is going to happen, Pastor; my friends wouldn’t have invited me if they thought that it was dangerous.

Nevertheless, I will take your advice and plan to return the beginning of August.”

On Monday morning, Alessandra set a chain of events in motion by calling the Carmichaels and letting them know that she was accepting their invitation. Monday, after work, her dad came home with a check from the legacy left for her by her mom, a little over four thousand dollars, and the letter that went with it. She spent an hour in her room reading it, shedding many tears, and finally emerging with a new appreciation for the way God had worked out so many details in her young life. Because she wasn't ready to share its contents with her family, she tucked it into the secret compartment in her antique desk, an inheritance from her great-grandfather.

The next two weeks flew by as Alessandra purchased her plane tickets, applied for her visa, and got caught up on all her travel shots. Julia's graduation was beautiful, and the family beamed with pride to watch her receive so many awards and honors.

On the Saturday after Julia's ceremony, Alessandra received a confirmation email from the Carmichaels saying that everything was ready on the Congo side for her arrival. They would not be coming down from Ilebo to pick her up in Kinshasa, the capital, but they had arranged for a missionary friend to meet her at the airport.

That last week at home was a whirlwind of activity. She was scheduled to fly out of JFK Airport in New York on Monday, June 8, 1998. The flight left at 8:00 p.m., and she was to be there two hours early to check in her luggage. The Carmichaels advised her to take advantage of the 70 pounds allotted for each trunk. Not only was she bringing over her clothes and supplies for six weeks, but also tracts and Bibles in French and treats for the Carmichaels and their children as well.

Alessandra was up before dawn that Monday morning, too excited to sleep any longer. Aside from a few last-minute things to pack, she had nothing to do but spend time with her family and wait for three o'clock to come when they would all escort her to the airport. Although it was only a two-hour drive to JFK, Jim and Kay thought that it would be wise to give an extra hour for traffic problems or flat tires.

The morning and afternoon hours crept by at a snail's pace. Daniel arrived home from work at noon in a minivan that he had borrowed from his supervisor. "Are you ready for this, sis? You don't want to change your mind, do you?" Daniel asked.

"Of course not, Daniel; you sound more nervous than me. If you are going to talk like this all the way to the airport, I'm going to ask Dad to leave you home," Alessandra teased.

"I'm sorry but, I have to admit, I'm jealous. Next time you do something like this, promise me I'll get to go too," Julia pleaded.

“Jules, you’ll get your chance someday. Let’s enjoy Alessandra’s adventure with her, okay?” Kay interposed.

“Give me a hand with this trunk, Julia,” Daniel said. “Your bulging muscles ought to be good for something.” Julia scowled at Daniel as she helped him lift it. With everything loaded in the van, the family piled in, and Jim took the wheel.

Two and a half hours and only one wrong turn later, Alessandra and her family pulled up in front of the Air France terminal. Daniel ran in to get a handcart while Jim and Julia unloaded the van. Once she was in line to check her luggage and get her boarding pass, Alessandra took a minute to study the other passengers. She wondered how many were headed for the Congo. “I guess I won’t know for sure until I get on the flight from Paris,” Alessandra thought.

Once her bags were checked through to Kinshasa, Alessandra rejoined her family and led them upstairs to a waiting room just outside of her terminal. Only Alessandra was permitted past the security checkpoint, so she spent her remaining minutes with them there.

“Well, sis, how much time until the final farewell?” Daniel asked.

“I can’t board until seven o’clock, so just a little over an hour,” Alessandra responded. “Then I’m sure I’ll have at least another hour after we finally take off before they serve us supper and I’m already starving.”

“I’ve got you covered,” exclaimed Julia as she placed her oversized backpack on the table in front of her. She proceeded to pull out ham and cheese sandwiches, a can of Pringles, and juice boxes.

“You’re my hero!. What made you bring all of this?” Alessandra asked.

“My home economics teacher always encouraged us to think through the day and figure out where a snack or meal would be most appropriate. I knew we’d all be hungry at suppertime, so I prepared this while you guys were at the grocery store this morning.”

“Thanks, Jules. This’ll really hit the spot,” Daniel said picking up a sandwich and a handful of chips.

The next hour flew by on the wings of pleasant conversation. Before Alessandra knew it, she was saying an emotional goodbye to her family and heading through the security check. Dad’s and Daniel’s prayers for her safety had brought tears to her eyes that she was still attempting to brush away.

As she stepped into line to board, a voice behind her asked, “Could you use a tissue? I happen to have a pack in my briefcase.”

“Oh, thank you, but I have some in my pocket. I appreciate your offer though,” Alessandra answered looking into the kind face of a tall stranger. “I planned on tears, so I came prepared,” Alessandra finished with an embarrassed giggle.

“Is this your first trip away from home?” the young man asked.

“It’s my first time out of the country. I’ll only be gone for seven weeks, but I have such a wonderful family that it’s hard to leave them even for a short time,” Alessandra offered.

She felt suddenly awkward to find herself having a conversation with such a handsome man and was glad to take her turn at the counter. As she finished checking in, Alessandra turned and smiled a farewell to her newfound acquaintance and headed off down the ramp. When she stepped onto the airplane, she found that she had been assigned to the second level. She had never flown in a jet with an upper deck and looked forward to the experience.

Alessandra placed her carry-on bag in the overhead compartment and settled into her seat by the window. She was so excited about the adventure that lay ahead of her, she could scarcely sit still. She wondered if all the ingredients of experience, education, and upbringing would be enough to help her face the challenges of the next few weeks. Suddenly she remembered that she was not alone. Jesus had promised in the very last verse of the Gospel of Matthew, according to the King James version, to be with her always, even to the end of the world. In Alessandra’s thinking, the Congo was as near the end of the world as a person could get. She relaxed a little, conversed with the Lord, and prepared herself for the flight.

Chapter 3

After consuming every crumb of her delicious dinner, Alessandra settled back to try to sleep. The upper deck of the jetliner was completely full. She noticed that several families with small children had been assigned seats in the area around her. The plane had been in the air more than an hour, and the young mother across the aisle seemed to be having some trouble getting her three-year-old son to settle down to sleep. Alessandra was ashamed of the irritation she felt rising within her heart. “Just my luck to have to endure a seven-hour flight with a crying child,” she thought. She then concluded that it would be easier on herself to help than to ruin her trip of a lifetime.

“Excuse me; would you like some help? I could hold the baby if you want me to.” Alessandra offered.

The young woman turned and gave Alessandra an appreciative glance. “Thank you so much. I was just wondering how I was going to handle this. The baby’s name is Susannah. She just loves to be held.”

Alessandra stepped across the aisle to pick up the baby, glad that her two seatmates had gone downstairs to visit some friends. She

began walking her up and down the aisle, but Susannah would not be calmed with only a walk; she was hungry.

“Any advice?” Alessandra asked. “This doesn’t seem to be what she wants.”

“She’s probably hungry. The bottle is here in the diaper bag. Thanks so much,” the mom sincerely exclaimed as she resumed patting her young son’s back.

Alessandra settled down in her seat with the baby. Susannah seemed ravished and fairly attacked the bottle in her eagerness to eat. Just as the infant was settling into her meal, Alessandra’s seat mates returned, much surprised to see a baby in her arms.

“Hey, where did you pick up one of those?” teased the high school aged girl as she settled into the seat next to Alessandra. “I love babies, but I never have a chance to hold one.”

“This is Susannah. She belongs to the young mother across the aisle. In fact, I forgot to get her name,” Alessandra replied leaning around her companion to get the attention of the mother.

“I can’t believe I forgot to ask you your name. I’m Alessandra Smith. My seatmates are Jan and Joan, who are sisters traveling to Paris to meet their father who is on business there. Would you mind if Jan held baby Susannah for a few minutes?” Alessandra finished.

“That’s fine. My name is Betty Janney. I’m joining my husband. The Marines have just stationed him in Paris for two years to work

in the embassy. I'm really excited about this tour," finished Betty in a whisper, fearing to disturb her almost sleeping child.

Alessandra handed the baby to Jan, who finished giving her the bottle. Within a half hour, the baby conked back out and was returned to her carrier. After attempting sleep in several positions, Alessandra finally found one that was semi-comfortable and finally dozed off.

The remainder of the flight to Paris was smooth and uneventful, and Alessandra was looking forward to spending the day relaxing in a hotel near the airport. She felt thoroughly exhausted from her lack of sleep but was excited to be in Paris for the first time in her life.

The customs' lines at Charles de Gaulle Airport were rather short at that time of the morning. Alessandra was able to breeze through them and arrive at her hotel room by 9:00 a.m. Paris time. Her flight to Kinshasa was to leave at 11:35 p.m., so she had practically a whole day to do absolutely nothing.

Her first objective was to get as much rest as she could. After a brief shower, she closed all the curtains and lay down to rest. However, fear of oversleeping and missing her plane prevented her from getting any at first, even though she had set her alarm clock. Finally, after calling down to the concierge to request a wake-up call at 5:00 p.m., she eventually fell into a deep slumber.

Alessandra's alarm clock rang only a minute before the front desk called. At first, she was disoriented, not remembering where

she was. She dressed and collected her things and caught the bus back to the airport terminal.

After consulting with an employee at the Air France counter as to her check in time, Alessandra went in search of something to eat. She was surprised to find that the sandwiches at the Café l'Avion comprised of either meat *or* cheese, but the two were never used together. Locating a ham and cheese sandwich was out of the question. Deciding on the cheese and purchasing a yogurt and coffee to go with it, Alessandra found a seat in the corner of the café and proceeded to eat as slowly as she possibly could. She had over three hours until check-in time.

Filling the timespan with reading her pocket New Testament, writing a postcard to her family, and window-shopping at the airport boutiques, Alessandra arrived at the hour of departure and began the final leg of her journey. Although she had slept well all day, she was once again able to find a comfortable position and sleep most of the flight from Paris to Kinshasa.

An hour and a half before the plane would be landing, the stewardesses began serving breakfast. Alessandra entertained a strange thought that this would be her last meal, at least for a while anyway. She consumed every crumb on her tray and requested another cup of the strong French coffee with extra cream and sugar.

The closer she got to her destination, the more nervous she became. She got out the last email letter that the Carmichaels had

sent her and reread the conditions she could expect to find in the airport. Her friends had told her that the N’jili Airport was an adventure waiting to happen. The first thing she was to expect was a man in a white coat outside the terminal that would inspect her health card. Once inside she should find someone holding a sign with her name on it.

The pilot’s voice over the intercom interrupted her worry, “This is a good time to announce that the Congolese government strictly forbids pictures to be taken of the city of Kinshasa from the airplane. It is also forbidden to take photographs on the streets. Thank you.” The message was repeated in French.

By the time the plane landed at 8:46 a.m., Alessandra was a bundle of barely-controlled, jittery nerves. She had checked the contents of her belt pack five times and, under the advice of her friends, safety-pinned it to her skirt. She had her passport, visa, and health card within easy reach. Copies of everything were in her backpack, which she had rearranged twice since she left Paris. She was ready. She stood up, grabbed her carry-on, took a deep breath, and sent a Nehemiah-like prayer toward heaven, asking God to help her. As Alessandra walked toward the front door of the plane, she had an overwhelming desire to return to her seat and take the next flight back to Paris. She could never remember feeling so nervous in her entire life.

The heat and humidity of this Kinshasa morning hit her with such force that it sent her senses reeling. Alessandra found herself tightly gripping the handrail of the portable stairs as she descended to the tarmac below. The intense heat and her own overactive nerves combined to make her feel weak and helpless. Alessandra was used to considering herself capable of handling any situation. For the first time in her life, she felt completely lost and lonely.

Following the other travelers to the main terminal, she found herself in line to show her health card.

Alessandra noticed that the man in front was being questioned by the official. When her time came, she handed the man her information and gave him a big smile. The man returned the smile and the card and made a gesture for her to enter the main building.

It was unlike any other airport terminal she had ever been in. Chaos seemed to be the reigning king here. Alessandra was immediately pressed on all sides by Congolese citizens seeking to make a little extra money by carrying the bags of travelers. She could barely maintain her footing as she was jostled around. One particularly tall man repeatedly attempted to remove her backpack indicating that he wanted to carry it for her. Alessandra, whose French was extremely rusty, could only reply, “Non! Non!”

Just as she began to feel herself becoming panicky, a strong hand on her elbow seemed to guide her forward toward the customs?

booth. She turned to look straight into the eyes of the kind gentleman that she had met in New York.

“Oh, it’s you again! You’re a Godsend!” Alessandra exclaimed. “I assumed that you must have stayed in Paris. I never saw you on the plane after that.”

“I was way in the front,” the gentleman replied. “You do have someone here to meet you, I hope. Handling the drama of N’jili airport is never easy. This is my third trip, and I’m still as scared as a child.”

As they stood in the customs’ line, she finally introduced herself; “My name is Alessandra Smith. I’ve come to visit some missionary friends of mine for several weeks.”

“I’m Wesley Grant. I represent an American-based mining company.”

The brief conversation ended as Alessandra stepped up to the booth and handed the official her passport and visa. He checked and stamped it and sent her through. On the other side, she found a man in his mid-thirties holding up a sign with her name on it. When he noticed her walking toward him, he advanced and introduced himself.

“Alessandra Smith?” As Alessandra nodded her consent, he continued, “I’m Dan Carson. I was asked by my missionary aviation agency to meet you here. Since I’m through N’jili several times a week, I’ve gotten to know many of the officials and their way of

doing things. Are you traveling with a friend?" Dan finished as he pointed to Wesley who was stepping forward to join them.

Alessandra introduced Wesley to Dan explaining that she had just met him on this trip and had only been formally introduced minutes earlier.

The three walked together toward the baggage claim area where Dan had stationed one of his Congolese friends to keep an eye out for Alessandra's trunks. Wesley excused himself and went off in search of his company's contact to see if he was able to get his luggage without any problem.

It was almost an hour before Dan had Alessandra's trunks loaded in the Land Rover, and they were driving out of the airport complex. Just as they were leaving, Alessandra caught one last glimpse of Wesley and waved good-bye to him. Wesley returned the gesture with a smile.

She wondered when or if she would ever see him again.

Alessandra's thoughts quickly left Wesley as her senses were bombarded by the activity that was teeming all around her. The ride along the main road from the airport to downtown Kinshasa was the most eye-opening trip of her twenty-two years. Only a few miles from the airport, they came upon a Kinshasa slum that Dan told her was called Masina. A river of walking, talking people seemed to flood her soul with the reality of their existence. Once as their vehicle came to a stop near a dirty, open-air market, she glimpsed a

baby sitting on the filthy ground. He sat crying with fatigue as his mother stood nearby trying to sell sandals, probably to buy enough food for that day. Alessandra was shocked at her own feelings and thoughts. She was ashamed to admit that she was disgusted by the filth. She was just wondering if she was too obviously displaying her horror when Dan interrupted her thoughts.

“So, what do you think, Alessandra? Are you are going to like Africa?”

“To be honest with you, I’m not quite sure yet,” Alessandra replied. “Things appear to be so much worse than I actually expected that I am still staggering under the shock of it all.”

“I realize that you won’t believe me yet, but you will adjust to it all,” Dan replied. “When you see so much dirt, you change your opinion of what clean is.”

“Where does your worker live?” Alessandra asked curiously.

“Jean-Marie? Officially, he’s my chauffeur. I’m sorry I forgot to introduce you. Jean-Marie lives back there in Masina. He’s lived there all his life. He knows it like the back of his hand.”

The conversation stopped as they entered downtown. Alessandra was relieved to see tall buildings and cafés. The familiarity of city life was soothing to her shamed conscience.

As they passed a small strip of stores, Alessandra noticed a restaurant called The Hamburger House. “What’s that one like?” she inquired. “Do they have good food?”

“Oh, yeah,” he responded. “But it’s pretty expensive. Cheeseburger, fries, and a soda will cost you almost eight dollars. It’s worth it though, especially when it has been a while since you had food like that. You wait until you’ve finished your several weeks up country. That food will taste like a bit of heaven.”

“Sounds good already. I’m starved.”

“You’ll be staying at M.P.H. They are prepared to cook you lunch and dinner today and breakfast in the morning. I’m scheduled to be your pilot tomorrow, so I’ll pick you up right after you eat,” Dan finished.

“What does M.P.H. stand for?” Alessandra inquired.

“Methodist-Presbyterian Hostel. Those two groups have invested quite a bit of money in building guesthouses, clinics, hospitals, and schools in this country. We are still benefiting from their philanthropy decades later.”

“Wow!” Alessandra exclaimed. “There is so much that I’ve never even considered about missions. I used to think I was pretty smart, but this ride is making me reconsider my opinion. What’s this place behind the wrought iron fence on the left? It looks important.”

“It is important,” Dan replied. “That’s the presidential palace and it’s only *one* of his homes, but it’s certainly the most elaborate. President Kabila may not be there right now, though. I believe he is attending an economic summit in Capetown.”

Dan's driver suddenly pulled to a stop in front of another large wrought iron gate and started honking the horn impatiently. Alessandra watched as an older man walked slowly toward them to open it up for the Land Rover to enter the compound.

Alessandra hopped out, eager to stretch her legs after two long days of travel. She reveled in the calm, tropical beauty of the property; it was a haven of rest in a city of chaos. Dan helped her unload her trunks, introduced her to the manager who spoke fluent English, and gave her a quick tour of the place before heading back to the office to finish his paperwork for the day.

She found her way up the stairs to her room and sat on her bed studying her accommodations. Everything was so plain compared to lodging in America. The ceilings were much higher than she was accustomed to, and the screenless windows had been opened to allow in as much of a breeze as possible.

Alessandra glanced at her watch and realized that she had thirty minutes to shower and dress for the noon meal. She hurried through her preparations and scampered down the stairs to the dining area. She was glad to find that the food they were serving was all-American: hamburgers and french fries.

During both the noon and evening meals, Alessandra was able to converse with many different people. One Belgian man was there on a three-week business trip for his company. A lady named Jo was there waiting to go up country and study the chimpanzees. Two

families were missionaries from the Republic of Congo across the river. They had sought refuge in M.P.H. for several weeks while opposing factions clashed in Brazzaville, the capital.

Alessandra spent the remainder of the day napping and glancing through books at the hostel's library. Although exhausted, she didn't sleep well that night. Unfamiliar sounds floated through the open window. A mosquito buzzed annoyingly near her head. Her mind raced forward to tomorrow's flight and reuniting with her old friends. Finally, after tossing and turning for almost two hours, she fell asleep and didn't wake until early morning.

"I'm so glad I'm able to just lay right here and read my Bible," Alessandra thought, opening her eyelids to start the new day. She leaned over to grab it from her backpack and came face to face with a gecko sitting on the bed frame only inches away. She stifled her scream and backed up to the end of the bed.

"How long have you been sitting there?" Alessandra asked the creature. "It makes my blood curdle to think that you may have been positioned that close to me all night long."

No longer interested in lying leisurely in her bed to read her Bible, Alessandra got up and dressed herself and sat near the open window. She turned to Psalm 18 and gained confidence from the first few verses: "I will love thee, O LORD, my strength. The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my

salvation, and my high tower. I will call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised: so shall I be saved from mine enemies.”

“Lord, I don’t know if lizards and bugs can be considered enemies, but I sure hope that You save me from them,” Alessandra prayed.

After a breakfast of pancakes and jam and hot tea, she repacked her travel bag and stationed herself by her trunks in the front hall to wait for Dan. He was supposed to bring her diamond mine permits with him. Without them, she would not be able to fly to the interior.

As their nine o’clock appointment time came and went, Alessandra began to worry that something was wrong. Although she took them to the throne of God, she continued to feel anxious about getting out of Kinshasa on time. Dan had explained the day prior that they had one fuel stop at a mission station called Vanga about halfway through the flight, and that they should be in Ilebo by around two o’clock. That would allow him to fly back to Kinshasa by sundown.

By ten Alessandra was apprehensive. She went in search of Kwete, the manager of the hostel, to see if he could find out what was keeping Dan from coming. His call to the mission aviation compound ended Alessandra’s wonder and triggered her disappointment. He was not coming today.

“Why not?” Alessandra asked Dan when Kwete handed her the phone; she could barely keep the tears from flowing. “What has happened?”

“Although this is a new experience for you, Alessandra, things rarely work out the way we plan them in this country. You see, I started my worker on the process of obtaining your mining permit weeks ago, but I didn’t bother to follow up on his progress. When I didn’t see him at the office last week, I assumed that he was out trying to get your paperwork through. In actuality, he was home sick all last week with malaria. He came in this morning with your permit still unsigned. So, it will take him all day to get it worked on. And, to add to your disappointment, I can’t fly you tomorrow because it is a national holiday. So, Lord willing, Friday, we will take off to Ilebo.”

“Wow. I guess things are more complicated than I imagined. How will I let the Carmichaels know that I am not arriving today?” Alessandra questioned.

“I know their two-way radio frequency. I had asked them to stand by starting around noon to see how the flight is proceeding, so I’ll call them and let them know the change of plans. Also, because your extra stay at M.P.H. is our fault, we’ll cover the cost for the rest of it. Put me back on with Kwete and I’ll let him know what is going on.”

Alessandra returned the cell phone and headed back up the stairs to her room. Although she was twenty-two years old and she had always considered herself a mature person, she flopped down on her bed and cried for five whole minutes. After a while, the tears dried up and Alessandra slipped into a soul-weary sleep. She was out for almost an hour and woke to find herself facing another communal meal with the other guests at the hostel. She felt awkward showing up for lunch after she had said her final farewell that morning after breakfast.

Chapter 4

At lunch, everyone smiled as she explained why she was still there.

“That’s the Congo for you!” one mother exclaimed. “After a while you get so used to things not working out right the first time, that you are pleasantly surprised when it does. Anyway, Alessandra, don’t forget that Romans 8:28 is still in the Book.”

“You’re right. I guess I should have trusted God to fulfill His will in my life. I’m embarrassed now to admit exactly how disappointed I was this morning,” Alessandra replied.

“What is Romans 8:28?” Jo interrupted.

“It’s a Bible verse,” Alessandra said, “promising that all things work together for good for those who love God. It reminds us that even though problems or disappointments come, everything is a part of the plan that God is orchestrating for our lives.”

The flow of conversation concerning God’s will didn’t stop until lunch was over, and Alessandra found herself returning to her room in much better spirits than she had left it.

Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* helped her take her mind off things throughout the afternoon and evening hours. After supper, she was pleased to receive two invitations for the next day. In the morning,

she was headed to the Zando, a central open-air market in Kinshasa, with Kwete and the head cook. For supper, Dan and his wife Sheryl were going to take her out to eat.

A solid night of sleep had prepared her well for Thursday's excursions. The market was a thoroughly African experience right out of a docu-drama. Alessandra was glad to have an escort. Kwete and Job, the cook, knew the market well, and navigated their way through the narrow passages between tables and booths. On their way to the center pavilion where the produce was sold, they passed several booths of exquisite fabric that Alessandra noticed were worn by most of the African women.

Kwete and Alessandra left Job to pick over the vegetables while they proceeded to the flour stalls. Everywhere they went, people pointed at her and asked Kwete who she was. Her unusual name attracted their attention, and she heard several ladies saying her name over and over and laughing. Alessandra felt as though she were the object of some hilariously funny joke; it was very embarrassing.

After several minutes of arguing over the price of a sack of flour, Kwete was satisfied with the deal. He found a teenager who was willing to carry the flour to the truck for a small tip. When that was finished, he led Alessandra to a booth that sold beautiful material and helped her purchase three bolts.

“My mother and sister back in America will love these. Do you think that I could have them sewn into outfits like these ladies wear?” Alessandra asked.

“Sure, that would better be done up in Ilebo where you will have an opportunity to decide exactly how you want it,” Kwete answered.

It was lunch by the time they returned to M.P.H. The afternoon was occupied by finishing *Ivanhoe* and recording her adventures in her journal. She so much looked forward to her evening outing that she began dressing for it an hour in advance.

When Dan arrived at six o'clock, he introduced Alessandra to his wife Sheryl and their two children, Michael and Elizabeth.

“Where are we going?” Alessandra inquired as she piled into the back seat of the Land Rover next to the kids.

“The Embassy Club. It is a very exclusive place usually only attended by embassy employees and very well-to-do American businessmen. As a matter of fact, this will be our first time there. Missionaries can't normally afford such luxuries, but on holidays, they waive the membership rule and open it up for all Americans. I've heard that they have an excellent barbecue chicken dinner. We've been looking forward to this all week.”

Craning her neck to look at Alessandra, Sheryl added, “It has been almost two months since we've gone out to dinner, so please excuse us tonight if we eat like a pack of ravening wolves.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m beginning to realize that I’ll probably feel the same way by the end of my short tour. Already my thoughts and opinions on things have changed so drastically in just the last few days. The Congo is a virtual hotbed of amazing experiences.”

Once at the Embassy Club, Alessandra hopped out of the vehicle and found herself the claimed possession of the Carson’s two children. With Michael holding her left hand and Elizabeth holding her right, Alessandra followed Dan and Sheryl into the club. They found a table with a pleasant view near the deep end of the Olympic-size swimming pool.

Alessandra was pleased to see how much like America it seemed within the walls of the Embassy Club compound. The adults ordered dinner while the children ran off to play on the well-equipped playground.

“This is really nice,” Alessandra commented. “I’m surprised at how organized and well-kept everything is here.”

“The United States government,” Sheryl said, “takes pride in reproducing a small replica of America in every country where they are represented. I must agree that they have a reason to be proud. Stepping into such a place can seem like a dream come true, especially in a third world country like this. It’s an oasis of Americana in a desert of decidedly different culture.”

“Honey, you stated that so beautifully that it could almost pass for poetry,” Dan teased. “Your alliteration in that last line was near genius.”

Sheryl laughed pleasantly at her husband’s remark and changed the subject to the climate in the Congo. The conversation flowed easily among the three until the meal arrived. The Carsons plowed into their meal with such enthusiasm and numerous comments of praise that Alessandra was forced to laugh out loud.

“I guess it *has* been a while since you’ve been out to eat. Do you think that six weeks here will be long enough to make me appreciate my meals so enthusiastically?” Alessandra inquired.

“We must be a pretty picture for her to make such a comment. What do you think, Sheryl? Is six weeks long enough to turn Alessandra into a connoisseur of delicious food?”

“I’m sure that it is. Seems like we were only here two weeks before our first trip to the Hamburger House. Remember how those french fries tasted like manna from heaven?” Sheryl answered.

The whole family agreed, and Alessandra looked forward to obtaining a more appreciating appetite.

Just then Dan looked up, stopped chewing and said,

“Isn’t that Wesley walking towards us?”

“Who is Wesley?” Sheryl asked. “I don’t remember anyone by that name.”

“Wesley is a young man that I met on the plane coming over,” Allesandra answered. “Well, actually I met him in New York while we were waiting to board. I never saw him on either flight though. He must have been sitting in business class.”

Engrossed by an article he was reading in the *Wall Street Journal*, Wesley hadn't noticed the table where Alessandra and the Carsons were seated. Just as he was about to pass them, his foot caught the corner of Sheryl's chair, which caused him to lose his balance, slip on the wet cement, and fall headfirst into the pool. The whole incident happened so quickly that it took a second for everyone to respond.

Dan leaped out of the chair to help pull Wesley from the pool, and Sheryl sent the children to the reception desk for towels. Alessandra couldn't help but laugh at the look of shock on Wesley's face when his head emerged from water and saw who had witnessed the whole fiasco.

“I've heard of men falling for a girl before but falling for an article in the Wall Street Journal is a new one to me,” Dan teased as he gave Wesley his hand to pull him out of the water.

Dan got him to a seat at the table, and the children returned with the towels and helped to dry him off a bit.

“The next time I find myself reading an article on the stock market near a pool, I will be much more careful,” he promised. “I'm glad that I wasn't wearing an expensive suit or carrying a tray full of

glasses. That would have made the scene a tragedy instead of a comedy,” Wesley finished with a smirk.

The table laughed with him and then invited him to sit with them if he had no other engagements. Wesley agreed and gave his order to the waiting attendant. Dan ordered banana splits for his table, and the children returned to the playground where they had met some new friends. The four talked casually while Wesley ate his meal.

“Sheryl, would you take a walk with me around the pool a time or two. We should take advantage of the kids playing so happily to work in a little romance. What do you say?”

Sheryl answered by standing and taking hold of her husband’s hand. They walked away talking quietly, leaving Alessandra and Wesley to themselves.

“It is refreshing,” Wesley said, “to see a couple still happily in love after many years of marriage. That is unusual in today’s crazy world. I wonder what keeps them in love?”

“That’s not so difficult to figure out,” Alessandra answered. “Their love for the Lord is the key to their loving each other,” she finished with a shy smile.

“You’re smiling like you know something that I don’t. And, what do you mean about their loving the Lord? I never heard of that being the key to a great marriage,” Wesley responded with a tinge of playful annoyance in his tone.

“Well, Jesus said that if a person listens to and follows the teachings of God’s Word, that he is building his life on a solid rock. And if troubles come, that the person will withstand the storm because he has built his life on a strong foundation. So, because Dan and Sheryl have dedicated their lives to Christ and have followed the principles of God’s Word for a good marriage, their union is strong, and their love has increased with the years.”

“What are you? A preacher or something?” Wesley asked, irritated to find himself hearing a sermon. “I have never met a lady who talks like that.”

“I’m sorry if I offended you,” Alessandra apologized, noticing his use of the word lady. “I was simply answering a question that you had asked. If I had known that you were such a chicken, I wouldn’t have answered you so boldly,” she said with a teasing giggle.

“Now you are laughing at me,” Wesley whined.

“Well, I’d laugh with you if you would join me,” Alessandra said coyly.

“You never answered my question,” Wesley accused.

“Which one?”

“Are you a preacher? How did you learn so much about the Bible?” he asked.

“No, I’m not a preacher. Not in the way you mean. I *am* a Christian and I try to follow His teachings,” Alessandra answered cheerfully.

“Did you go to school to learn all this? Or were you born knowing it,” Wesley asked still somewhat sarcastic.

“Well, I did attend four years of Bible College, but I became a follower of Jesus when I was nine years old. That was when I realized that I was a sinner and that I needed a Savior to pay for my sins. I asked Jesus to cleanse me of those sins and come into my life. The Bible says, ‘For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.’ Instead of dying to pay for my own sins, I accepted the fact that Jesus took the punishment for me by dying on the cross to pay the wages of my sin. It was an exchange really. Jesus took my sin and death and then gave me eternal life. I love Him because He loved me enough to do that for me.”

“You make it sound so simple. How could something that is so profound be so simply explained; it doesn’t make sense to me,” Wesley answered.

“I see your point, but wouldn’t it seem illogical for God to sacrifice His Son to save mankind from sin, then make the understanding of that wonderful provision so difficult that no one would believe it? What God did to cleanse man was so precious and so complete, that He wanted everyone to receive it. God put the

cookies on the bottom shelf so that even the simplest child could reach them. As a matter of fact, God *wants* you to reach them, too. John 3:36 says, ‘He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him.’ God wants everyone to believe.”

“What you say makes sense, but I’m not ready to give up all the fun things that I do just to make God happy,” Wesley said. “You probably wouldn’t even talk to me if you knew all the things that I do. Anyway, let’s change the subject; my dessert is coming.”

While Wesley was eating, Alessandra asked him questions about his job and family. She also explained that she was flying interior in the morning to spend six weeks with some college friends who were missionaries. Just then Dan and Sheryl returned, and the children came running up when their dad announced that the banana splits had arrived.

The rest of the evening was spent in relaxing conversation. While Dan was sharing an interesting story about a flight he made last week, Wesley took the opportunity to study Alessandra more closely. She had such a clean beauty that was singularly attractive. Her red-gold hair was the perfect frame for her freckled face and gray eyes. He admired her for being bold enough to tell him what she believed to be the truth. Even if he never saw her again after tonight, he felt sure that he would never forget her.

When the children began to fall asleep, Dan declared that it was time to head home. Wesley walked them out to the parking lot and pulled Alessandra aside for a personal farewell.

“Well, Alessandra, despite our minor conversational clash, I really enjoyed spending the evening with you. Do you have anything with your name and address on it so that we can keep in touch?” Wesley asked.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I made a few prayer cards up for folks in my church to remember to pray for me while I was here,” Alessandra answered groping in her belt pack for one.

Wesley took the card and peered in the dim light to make out the address.

“You live in Yardley, Pennsylvania? That’s not too far from where I live. I’m just south of Philly. Is your phone number on this, too? I’ll try to give you a call when you get back. When is that going to be?”

“I’m booked on a return flight the third of August. I’ll be home the next night and should be over my jet lag in a few days, so that should be August...,” Alessandra hesitated counting forward the days, “...eighth. You’re welcome to call any time after that. And please give some serious consideration to what we talked about. Here take this,” she said, handing him a small pamphlet. “It explains things in more detail and probably better than I can.”

“If it will make you happy, I promise to read it,” Wesley consented. “Watch your step,” he cautioned as he helped Alessandra into the back seat next to Elizabeth, “and please be careful. The Congo is a frightfully unpredictable place. I heard a rumor today that makes me a little nervous.”

“What’s that, Wesley?” Dan asked suddenly interested in the conversation: “Nothing too worrisome I hope.”

“Well, the company I work with has interests in eastern Congo, and someone sent a letter to my boss today saying that he has seen truckloads of ammunition near the border town of Bukavu. That was all the letter said, but my boss seemed very concerned about it,” Wesley finished.

“I’ll have to think on that one. Let me give you my Telcell number. Please give me a call if you hear any new developments. One of the things the U.S. government relies on our agency for is evacuation in emergencies,” Dan said handing Wesley the slip of paper. “Give me a number where I can reach you, too.”

The men finished exchanging information and shook hands. Wesley gave Alessandra a smile and said goodbye once more.

The ride back to M.P.H. was rather quiet. Alessandra had the idea that Dan was thinking about what Wesley had said and was just waiting to drop her off to discuss it with his wife. She would have to get him to tell her his thoughts tomorrow on the flight to the

interior. It made her nervous to think that a conflict could actually arise while she was in the country.

Once inside the hostel compound, she thanked Dan and Sheryl again for the beautiful evening. With a promise to be ready by 8:30 a.m., Alessandra headed inside to get a good night's sleep. Although she was fatigued, thoughts about Wesley's warning kept worrying her. Finally, she took her concerns to the Lord in prayer, remembering to also pray for Wesley's salvation.

Just as she was drifting off, the Holy Spirit reminded her that God had brought her there according to His will and that He was capable of caring for her no matter what lay ahead. Alessandra finally fell asleep and didn't even notice the lizard that was positioned on the wall only inches from her face.

Chapter 5

Roosters, thousands of them, trumpeted the morning, forcing Alessandra awake earlier than she planned to be. She had never been subjected to the routine of roosters back in her comfortable suburban home. Now that she found herself awake before dawn, she decided to get up and shower and ready herself for the day's adventure. She was starting to expect the unexpected and anticipated the next experience that would teach her something new.

After showering and packing, Alessandra discovered that she had almost an hour until breakfast and two hours until Dan was to pick her up. She decided to read and analyze the book of Philippians. The Apostle Paul was a missionary; he, too, had experienced many problems during his journeys. Alessandra spent almost an hour in her study of the book and wrote down many thoughts for later meditation. One thing that stood out was that Paul "learned...to be content" no matter what the circumstances. If contentment was learned, she prayed that God would teach her.

Alessandra closed her Bible, gathered up her belongings, and headed downstairs to breakfast. Back home she had not been

much of a hot tea or coffee drinker, but she found herself looking forward to the flavor after only four days of being away. The full-cream powdered milk added a richness to her tea this morning that she had never tasted before. Each guest was served half of a papaya for breakfast along with cinnamon toast and hard-boiled eggs. It was the first time Alessandra had ever tasted papaya, and she had to admit to herself that the sweet fruit was good although it had a slightly perfumy taste.

Dan Carson and Jean-Marie picked up Alessandra at the appointed time, and they were at the airport in forty minutes. It took them some time to check the Cessna and fulfill all of the government's requirements for traveling interior. Alessandra noticed a young, serious-looking Congolese woman standing nearby watching the proceedings. She appeared to be bored although she observed all their actions with sharp, intelligent eyes. When Dan walked past, she asked him who the young lady was.

“She is an ANR official. That is the Congo's National Security Agency. We are required under this new regime to carry an agent on every flight we take. It is the government's way of making sure that we are behaving ourselves,” Dan answered with a smirk. “It is also very likely that she understands English, so be careful of what you say during the trip. Any derogatory remark could have consequences.”

As it turned out, the government official was a very nice person who enjoyed practicing her English with Alessandra. Her name was Monique, and she was a graduate of the University of South Africa in Johannesburg. With her on board, however, Alessandra had no opportunity to ask Dan about Wesley's comment the evening before.

The flight took four hours which included one fuel stop. Vanga was a beautifully maintained mission station with a church, hospital, school, and airfield. National employees fueled the plane from 55-gallon drums, and, in fifteen minutes, the plane was once again air-bound. As the Cessna approached Ilebo for landing, Dan decided to circle the field to assess the conditions and to make sure that there were no goats in the proximity. When all seemed clear, he began the descent. Alessandra was nervous as it was her first time to touch down on a grass landing strip, but Dan's hundreds of hours of experience made it look easy.

No sooner was Alessandra out the door of the plane, than Cathy Carmichael ran up and gave her a warm, welcoming hug. Rob shook her hand and inquired after her trip. It took several minutes for Rob and Dan to deal with the officials in Ilebo's tiny airport. Cathy and Alessandra chatted under the wing of the plane while they waited for the men.

"I feel like I am on display," Alessandra commented. "Why are so many people here at the airport?"

“Ilebo is a rather small town. Everyone here knows our business because we are the only foreign family here, except for a few Catholic nuns. Many people know that we have a visitor coming, and they are eager to get a glimpse of you. A large number of people are actually Christians from our church,” Cathy answered.

Just then the men returned, and Dan bid Alessandra farewell. Rob got some people to help handle her trunks while he grabbed her carry-on bags. Just outside the airport compound on the dirt road, a Toyota Land Cruiser waited for them. As Rob loaded the things into the back, he explained that the mayor had lent him the vehicle since they didn’t have one.

As the Land Cruiser covered the short distance from the airport to the home that the Carmichaels rented, Alessandra seemed incapable of taking in all that she saw. It was hard to believe that she was actually in the heart of Africa and that the scenes all around her were real and not part of a National Geographic magazine. Everywhere she looked, the children appeared to be dressed poorly. The rags on some were dirtier than what they used to clean the floors back home. She was surprised to see a family of enormous pigs walking beside the car. As near as the animals were to the children, the children didn’t seem to notice them.

“Why aren’t the kids afraid to walk alongside those pigs?” Alessandra asked. “Won’t those pigs harm them?”

“The children are as used to the pigs as the pigs are to them. Besides, they are surprisingly tame; I’ve never heard of one harming anyone.” Rob stopped to translate what Alessandra had said to the driver. The driver laughed out loud when he heard her concern, and then he began telling a story in Lingala.

“What did he say?” Alessandra asked when the driver had finished.

“He said that normally pigs are very calm, but once he knew a man who had been placed under a curse, and he was bitten by a pig. The infection caused the man to lose his leg. The moral of the story is to stay away from pigs if you are under a curse,” Rob translated with a chuckle.

Alessandra was somewhat shocked by how casually Rob talked about witchcraft but had no time to comment as they were pulling into the yard.

Cathy reacquainted Alessandra with her three children who were eagerly waiting for the introduction. Jimmy, the oldest, stepped forward to shake her hand.

“Alessandra, do you remember Jimmy? He’s thirteen now and grown quite a bit since you knew him three years ago.”

“Of course, I remember him. He was in my Sunday school class. You are taller than I am now. Exactly how tall are you?” Alessandra inquired.

“Five foot eight inches,” Jimmy replied proudly. “I’ll be as big as my dad soon. I’m glad you’re here.”

“Thanks,” Alessandra smiled. She turned toward the girls who were a little shy. “You must be Jackie and Jenny. You were both in pigtails when I last saw you. How old are you now?”

“I’m ten,” Jackie offered, “and Jenny is eight. We remember the time that you babysat us and played teacher. That was a lot of fun.”

“If it weren’t summer break, I would have asked Alessandra to play teacher again,” Cathy interposed smiling.

The children showed Alessandra to her room, which was in a separate building within the walls of the property. It was airy and had been freshly whitewashed for her coming. Alessandra thought that she would like it here, except that being so far away from the others in the main house made her a little nervous.

“The first thing that we need to unpack is your mosquito net,” Cathy said. “We have to get it up and ready for use as soon as possible.”

Rob brought in her trunk, and Alessandra was able to remove her mosquito net without exposing all the goodies that she had

packed to treat the family. She had already decided to parcel them out a little at a time, to continue surprising the family.

It was almost three o'clock in the afternoon. Most of the day had been spent in the airplane, and Alessandra found herself ravenously hungry. She helped herself to a granola bar and handed one to Jackie who had hung around to chat after the rest of the family slipped out.

“I haven't had one of these in years!” Jackie exclaimed. “I should save a piece for Jimmy and Jenny; they would love it.”

“That is so thoughtful of you to remember your brother and sister but go ahead and enjoy the whole thing. I have plenty more to share with the others. Where did the rest of your family go to, anyway?”

“Dad is talking to a pastor, Mom has a Tshiluba lesson, and Jimmy and Jenny walked to the market for bread and avocados for dinner,” Jackie answered.

“Bread and avocados? That's an unusual combination,” Alessandra said.

“Well, we usually eat our big meal at noon and have sandwiches for supper. One of our favorite sandwiches is cheese and avocado with tomatoes. It is so yummy.”

“Sounds like it is worth a try. Hey, do you kids speak the language well?” Alessandra asked. “I have to say, I'm surprised that you go shopping by yourselves. Isn't it scary?”

“Sometimes it is a little intimidating for us girls, but Jimmy really enjoys bartering with the ladies in the market. He looks at it as a game of strategy to try to figure out if they are charging us more than an item is worth. Jimmy spends a lot of time checking with his friends on the price of things just so that he can be one step ahead of the mamas at the market.”

“Do you speak the language as well as Jimmy?” Alessandra asked with interest.


“Yes, Jenny and I both know Lingala very well, and Jenny is learning Tshiluba, too, because one of her friends speaks it. I’m trying to learn French. It seems that if I knew French, I could use it in a lot of places, not just here.” Jackie finished.

“You’re right, French can be used in many countries around the world. I think it’s neat that your whole family can speak the language so well. I’ve heard that children pick up language faster than an adult; I guess you three are living proof of that. Do you think I could learn a little while I am here?” Alessandra asked.

“I think that’s Dad’s plan for you. I believe that he has asked one of our Bible Institute professors to tutor you for the next few weeks so that you can get a taste of what language school feels like.”

“That sounds great,” she said sincerely. “I’m looking forward to the challenge.”

CONGO
CRISIS

The image features the words "CONGO" and "CRISIS" in a large, bold, black, distressed font. The letters have a grainy, weathered texture. Between the two words is a black silhouette of a figure with large, bat-like wings, appearing to fly or descend. The figure is positioned centrally, overlapping the space between the two words. The entire composition is set against a plain white background.

about the author

In 2003, Chrisann Dawson found herself with a broken leg and a toddler to care for. Each afternoon during nap time, she would work on this book, her first... “Congo Crisis.” Since 2003, “Congo Crisis” has itself gone through many changes.

Although the book is fictionalized, every event that the characters lived through were experienced by Chrisann and her family. She and her husband Gale, along with their three children, lived in the Congo, Africa (formerly Zaire) for seven years doing mission work. They learned the Lingala language, became emersed in the culture, and established lifelong friendships with the Congolese people, who continue to do the work of their non-profit mission, Rise Congo.

Chrisann now lives in Payson, Arizona, where she works part-time for the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, doing vision and hearing screenings for preschool children in her county. She also works as a member of a chaplain team with Gale at Payson Christian Clinic, and she continues to pursue her writing dreams.



also by Chrisann Dawson

Now Available:

“Principles and Proverbs from Pride and Prejudice”

“Relationship Secrets of Pride and Prejudice”

Coming Soon:

“Congo Terror”

“Congo Ebola”