

CHRISANN DAWSON

CONGO TERROR



THE CONGO SERIES

BOOK 2



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Congo Terror

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CONGO TERROR

The image features the title 'CONGO TERROR' in a bold, distressed, black font. The word 'CONGO' is positioned above the word 'TERROR'. Between the two words is a large, dark, textured graphic that resembles a bat's wings or a large, jagged tear in a surface. Inside this graphic, three silhouettes of people are shown running away from the viewer, suggesting a sense of urgency and danger. The overall aesthetic is gritty and horror-themed.

Chapter One

“Nzambe!” Dinanga cried out in anguish to the one true God. I cannot be brave enough to escape on my own. Send someone who can help me gain my freedom. Please, I beg You. Do this before my womanhood is discovered. She paused in her tormented thoughts and swallowed a sob. Send me hope for a successful escape! Dinanga stepped onto the trail leading away from the camp. The empty water bucket dangled loosely in her grip. She sighed.

Life for everyone in the settlement was a nightmare, except for a few in top positions of authority. Every woman, every child, every youth soldier was subservient to the goals of the General. His word was law. He ruled with rigid control, a control so suffocating that it choked hope from those in its grasp.

Dinanga was a victim to that vise-like grip herself. Three years ago, she had been violently ripped from her village by another band of roving rebel soldiers. Eastern Congo was plagued by these groups of armed men, seeking political power through the weapons of rampage and terror. Dinanga had been witness to their brutality the

day her village became another statistic. She shuddered in her reflection of her older cousins and aunts becoming pawns in the war on women in Congo.

For more than two years, this young villager had actually been protected by leaders of that group; they recognized her value, her keen intelligence. But six months ago, she had been traded to General Boloji, and the small band he ruled, in exchange for weapons and ammunition. Six months in this new camp was an eternity. A promise had been sought that she would not become a wife to the General until she was fully a woman. Her original captors knew enough about her to realize that she was special, deserving special consideration. But now, it had happened. The change had started.

Again, Dinanga sighed. Today was the day she officially reached the ranks of women everywhere. Capable of having children. She was older than many; already thirteen and understood that she could not long hide her dilemma.

“Tata Nzambe! Father God! Help me!” she cried aloud once more before continuing her inner dialogue with God. *I need to be rescued from this*

camp. Free me from the clutches of the General. You saw his first wife's face this morning, bruised and swollen. One of her eyes was completely shut. He is viciously cruel to his women. O God, liberate me before that becomes my life!

Just then something caught Dinanga's eye. A few feet off the path to the right, a card hung from a low branch. She ventured forward to study it. What she saw astonished her. In four languages, French, English, Swahili, and Lingala, the card emboldened women trapped in rebel camps to flee their captors, not to let the fear of being recaptured cripple them into the despair of enduring captivity, to escape and reclaim their lives and freedom, to take the needed chance for a return to some semblance of normalcy.

Dinanga could hardly reflect on the risk involved in doing that. The thought of being recaptured and tortured as punishment froze her blood.

She dipped her bucket into the closest stream with good drinking water near the village and wondered if worry and the utter discouragement she felt could actually be heavier than the physical burden she was carrying. Positioning the container with perfect balance on the top of the cloth on her head, Dinanga straightened her back and neck and prepared herself for the ten-minute walk through the forest to her home. It seemed like a lie to use such a beautiful word to describe her current place of residence, a place of ugly greed, pure selfish ambition, and cruelty.

Home, she thought, was the village where she had lived with her mother and father, older brother, and younger sisters; a place where her mother's mother lived with them in peace and security, until that one night three years ago when their village was attacked by rebel soldiers. Dinanga trembled and pushed the image out of her mind.

This morning was a particularly beautiful one, so she tried to focus on that instead of her fears. The forest was fresh from a late-afternoon rain the day

before. Birds filled their homes with pleasant songs, and overhead a flock of parrots squawked.

Kongolo stepped onto the pathway in front of her only a few feet from the village. He often met her here in the early morning.

“Good morning, brother! Did you sleep well?” Dinanga asked fondly.

“Eeh. Nalamuki malam. Yo?” Kongolo responded. “How are you doing, dear sister? You lingered longer than usual this morning getting water.”

“So, you are timing me now?” Dinanga teased. “How many minutes late am I?”

“You know how worried I am for your safety. Some in the village are aware that you have begun your cycle. I am very concerned that the General will soon find out. We both know what this means.”

“I do know, Kongolo. I am worried for myself. I was late this morning because I was crying and praying to Tata Nzambe to send a way to rescue me. To rescue us. I am scared.” Dinanga’s voiced dropped abruptly.

“Well, let’s hope God answers your prayers soon. You go ahead of me into the village. I will collect some firewood to cover my absence. We will talk again soon. Remember, no one must know that we are related.”

Chapter Two

Morning was only just beginning to wake the inhabitants of the small rebel encampment. Mostly women were up, starting morning cook fires, preparing for another aimless and worrisome day.

“Good morning, Dinanga. Did you sleep well? Did you wake up well?” Suzanne, a mama from the camp, greeted as she walked up to the main fire in the middle of the clearing.

“Yes. Thank you. How about yourself?”

“As well as could be expected,” Suzanne returned. “You are later than usual getting back from the stream. Is everything okay?”

“Yes,” Dinanga said. “I was merely spending time speaking with Tata Nzambe about some things. Tell me, Suzanne, about the time you were taken. Were you the only one from your family? Forgive me, but I’m still trying to process my own captivity. Maybe your story can help me.”

“I don’t like to speak of that night, but no, I was not the only one taken. I had a young teenage

daughter. We were separated after the men violated my mother and grandmother in front of the whole village and killed my father.”

The day grew brighter and hotter as the men and children awoke to the smell of the women’s preparations. Stomachs were growling before the breakfast was fully ready. Men ate first. The women then fed their children before they began eating. The mamas had very little hope for themselves, but they desired their children to be strong for a possible future after captivity.

“Dinanga? One more thing,” Suzanne paused. “Will you teach the children again this morning? They love to learn from you.”

“Yes! It is one joy that I have in this place,” she readily agreed, the prospect of doing something she loved lifting her spirits. Unfortunately, it was short-lived.

Screams pierced the air from a mama on the other side of the clearing. Her husband was yelling at her and slapping her hard across the face. As she tried to block his blows, he became angrier. He

shoved her onto the ground and called two of his comrades to hold her arms. Women around the village looked down at the ground, pretending not to notice for fear of retribution against them, as he beat her back with a rod for several minutes. Her screams terrified the children who ran to hide behind their mothers. After what seemed like hours, the beating finally stopped. The cries turned to gentle sobs. The women continued to ignore their friend's plight. Dinanga sighed and turned back to her task of stirring beans for the evening supper. Every woman knew better than to interfere in what just happened; rallying behind their friend could bring a similar fate upon them or their children. They all knew if they were in that poor woman's position, she would have done the same thing. They felt sad, but not guilty. They were all inmates trying to survive in this prison of forced silence.

The day dragged on. The weary, suffering woman stopped sobbing and fell asleep on the mat where she had received her punishment for a being the wife of a rebel soldier, a choice she never made.

Dinanga spent the morning teaching the younger children letters and words. They practiced writing in the dirt. Older children passed an hour in the conjugation of the French words “to be” and “to have.” Only two meals a day were prepared in the village, the latter served around 4:30 p.m. After resting through the heat of the sun, one woman began tenderizing the greens in a large mortar with a pestle, worn smooth by decades of hands passing over it. Another stirred a pot of beans that had been simmering since morning. She added onions and garlic and more rock salt to flavor it.

The day finished with an early evening tropical storm that forced the camp’s residents into flimsy shelters sooner than normal.

Chapter Three

One lone rooster crowed tentatively, testing the morning. The gentle hum of the fan and its movement of the mosquito net was relaxing, mesmerizing actually. Julia roused from slumber, wondering what time it was. A look at her watch told her it was almost 4:30 a.m. *I'm not ready to be awake. Yesterday was the longest day of my life*, she thought. Julia reflected over the events of the last four days, the ones that brought her to eastern Congo, and prayed that the rooster would go back to sleep, giving her more time to rest. Julia had always loved the quiet of early morning; her favorite time for reflection, but this was too early after the last few arduous days.

The previous morning, Julia had been nervously waiting at her gate at O. R. Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg, South Africa. She had flown all night from Newark, New Jersey on South African Airways, landing in Johannesburg around 5:00 a.m. local time. Exhausted from sleeping poorly on the

plane, Julia had gone in search of a great cup of coffee and a place to get off her feet for a few minutes.

After walking through the three-story concourse, she had come upon the Mugg & Bean. She ordered a cup of plain, strong coffee, to which she added cream and sugar from the condiment bar, and a scone and jam. Finding a place in the corner that offered enough room to set her carry-on nearby, she plopped into the chair and sighed, taking a moment to breathe deeply. Julia tested the hot coffee gingerly. She thought back to when she had recently said goodbye to her mom, stepfather, brother, and stepsister. Although her blended family was not perfect, their normalcy was beautiful. Julia knew she would miss them but viewed this assignment at a fistula hospital in Eastern Congo as an adventure. Fatigue, however, had already begun to speak words of doubt: Would she be able to do this job well? Would she make friends with her colleagues and other locals? Julia easily admitted to herself that she was less confident than her gregarious siblings. They made friends effortlessly, but Julia always struggled

to form meaningful relationships outside of her own family.

The layover of nearly five hours had crept by, but Julia had eventually boarded the plane and was on her way to Kinshasa, Congo's capital. Upon arriving, she was shocked at how completely different the N'Jili Airport was from the one she had left in South Africa. It was almost like they were not even on the same continent. First, the passengers had been deplaned on the tarmac. This offered the travelers the shocking opportunity to be greeted by Congo's heat and humidity as if hit by a climate-possessed freight train.

Once inside the terminal, after passing by the health official, chaos and confusion had met Julia head on. Several men had kept trying to offer to help carry her bags by attempting to pry them from her fingers. Fortunately, Julia had been tutored by her sister and brother-in-law on the ways of surviving the airport's chaos. Alessandra and Wesley had spent years living both in Kinshasa and Antwerp as a part of his work for a diamond company.

“Don’t let anyone help you with your bags,” Wesley had warned. “Smile weakly and try to avoid making eye-contact.” In addition to his advice, Wesley’s connections on the ground in Congo had arranged for a man, known locally as a protocol, to meet Julia. He would help her remove her luggage from the South African Airways carousel and get her to the cargo plane headed for Goma, in Eastern Congo.

After making her way through the throng of people, Julia had come upon a man holding a sign with her name on it who introduced himself as Jean-Marie. He spoke English with a fair amount of skill, a relief to Julia, who had only obtained a smattering of Lingala from her sister.

“Come this way,” Jean-Marie had encouraged. “Your trunks are already coming onto the carousel. We need to hurry to get you on your flight. It departs in an hour!” Jean-Marie and some men that he had hired grabbed Julia’s plastic cases off the conveyor belt; he had already arranged to give the customs agent a “gift.” Most government officials in Congo

were paid irregularly, at best. A pre-paid *matabisi*, or tip, ensured quality service without hassle. Faster than Julia could have believed, she had been checked into the in-country airline, had watched her trunks being loaded, and had been led by Jean-Marie back out onto the tarmac. Julia thanked him and handed him ten crisp twenties before walking up the metal stairs onto the plane.

Inside, it was nothing like she had anticipated. Somehow, she had expected rows of passenger seats. Instead, the seats lined the sides of the plane and were separated by large bays with cargo being secured under restraints and netting. A rather self-important Congolese stewardess, wearing sunglasses with the UV sticker still attached, helped Julia get her shoulder straps fastened correctly. As the ancient Russian-made aircraft taxied down the runway, Julia had a dull, sick feeling settle into her gut. She prayed for a safe flight and sucked her breath in nervously. Intense fear did not mingle well with exhaustion.

After having her teeth nearly rattled out due to the rough take-off and worrying about the obvious draft moving through the aircraft, Julia was approached by the stewardess again who asked if she would like a Coke and a sandwich. Famished, Julia had accepted but was a bit concerned when the stewardess opened the Coke bottle with her teeth. The thought of sharing this woman's germs was deeply disturbing, especially as a nurse well-trained in the need for cleanliness. She slowly breathed out a prayer for microbial safety and began to sip the cool drink. Despite her doubts, the beverage was refreshing, and the sandwich filled the empty spot in her stomach. The flight across the Congo to Goma was scheduled to take six and a half hours, so Julia had decided to settle back for the long journey.

Resting her head carefully against the unpadded wall behind her, Julia had taken inventory of the other passengers. Many were of Middle Eastern descent that she assumed were Lebanese since Alessandra had told her that a large community of

Lebanese businessmen were a vital part of Congo's economy.

Others were Congolese, headed to the east to make deals with mineral companies. The Congo was, after all, rich in mineral resources like tin, tungsten, and gold. There was also a large amount of coltan which is used in cell phones and laptops to keep the devices cool. The mineral's function could not be performed by any other ore. Of course, there were industrial-grade diamonds readily available as well.

Several passengers were westerners like herself. Maybe they were tourists, hoping to catch a glimpse of mountain gorillas; maybe they were there to give a term to helping one of the many Non-Governmental Organizations, commonly called NGO's, at work in Eastern Congo. The flight seemed interminably long. She had wondered when they would ever arrive. Obviously, they did ultimately arrive since, a day later, she found herself lying in bed, reflecting on these events.

She now realized that she should have been more thankful for the long flight. The landing part

had been significantly more terrifying than the flying part. Julia shuddered as she remembered her first glimpse of the runway. The cargo plane had only a few windows, but when it had banked hard to the left to get into position for its approach, Julia had seen what she suddenly feared could become the site of her demise. Always a bit afraid of touching down, the ancient and unkempt look of the Goma strip had made her heartbeat furiously.

There was only one runway. From their height, it appeared as if there were potholes and large cracks along a good portion of its length. The fields around it were overgrown, and goats were grazing near the end. The stewardess signaled to the passengers that they were on their final descent and took a seat herself, strapping up and looking a bit worried. Julia gripped her shoulder straps while the Russian pilot skillfully landed the large craft on the dilapidated field. She, and several other travelers, had breathed their relief, and soon the plane was taxiing up to the tiny terminal as the stairs were being lowered to the tarmac.

Julia now smiled to herself in the semi-darkness of her room when she remembered how fearful she had been of meeting Thomas, her contact in Goma. She wasn't exactly sure who he was or what he looked like, but she had been pleased to be greeted warmly in British-sounding English by a tall, East-African man. Thomas had introduced himself as the official chauffeur for the hospital where she had planned to give three months of her life. Julia had been relieved to have someone answer her questions along the one-hour drive to the medical compound from the airport. Thomas had done his best to satisfy her curiosity concerning the living quarters for the expatriates working there, and the arrangements for their meals.

They had arrived the previous night about a half hour after the sun went down. Although it had been rather early, no one seemed to be moving about as most Westerners knew enough to fear mosquitoes after dark. A sentinel had greeted them outside a long building and helped Thomas haul Julia's belongings into a small room with a sink but no

toilet. Thomas pointed her in the direction of the shower and outhouse building, then left her to prepare for bed. The kitchen had already closed for the night, making Julia thankful for the snacks she'd carried with her.

She remembered glancing around the room as she unpacked the items needed to prepare for heading to bed. It was plain; the walls were cinder block and freshly painted a pale yellow. The compound was connected to the hospital area by a gate and was a relatively new complex. Large grants from several foundations had built the hospital ten years ago, but the living quarters for Westerners were only put up the previous year. Julia was glad to see that a mosquito net had been hung over the bed. Her sister had often expressed the great relief of being protected from all the creepy crawlies that roamed at night. A cockroach wasn't dangerous but was still unwelcome in a bed. The mosquito net provided peace of mind, which was needed to get a good night's sleep.

Julia had nibbled on a peanut butter granola bar, climbed into some lightweight pajamas, and inspected the sheets for spiders. She had placed a flashlight, phone, water bottle, journal, and pen inside the netting and had properly tucked it in. She was thankful to have used the bathroom before leaving the airport and crawled into the netting after adjusting the fan to be aimed directly at the bed. Julia had exhaled a long, slow breath, as she rested her head on the pillow, appreciating the fresh sheets.

That was the last thing she had remembered before the rooster decided to wake her early.

Chapter Four

Since breakfast was not available until 8:00, Julia knew she was going to be starving if she couldn't go back to sleep. Unfortunately, there was another pressing problem: she really needed to use a bathroom. The sentinel had pointed to a small building last night, saying that it was both a shower area and outhouse. Julia considered the distance from her comfortable position in the bed and how badly she had to go. She decided that if she was going to make the trip across the courtyard and down to the corner of the walled property, she might as well take her shower things too.

She hopped out of bed after inspecting the floor around her flip-flops for spiders. She placed the items she would need for a quick shower in a tote, grabbed her flashlight, and gingerly opened her room door to assess how things looked outside. Far to the east, Julia realized that the sky was beginning to show a lighter gray. No one appeared to be in the area between where she stood and the small

building where she was heading. The presence of humidity made the air feel rather cool and encouraged her to close her door and take a few steps on her journey toward the outhouse.

Crossing the space with relative ease, Julia reached the building and realized that she was suddenly glad to have learned a few words in French. The two doors on the left were labeled “douche,” which meant shower, and the ones on the right had the letters “W.C.” on them, which she was able to discern stood for water closet. Julia opened the stalls and studied the interior thoroughly with her flashlight. Although the compound was rather new, this bathroom was typical in Congo. An elaborate ceramic toilet floor welcomed her. It featured a place on either side for her feet, and a downward sloping floor that led to a hole toward the back. Several buckets of water and large plastic mugs, positioned inside for rinsing down the bodily fluids, lined the wall. Two qualities of toilet paper sat on a shelf: one was light pink and had the consistency of crepe paper. The other was the typical

white stuff that proved to be much more popular with the expatriates. Julia placed her shower bag on the ground outside the door and acquainted herself with these new bathroom skills.

Once finished, she proceeded with her shower; pleased to find running water flowing from a normal-looking faucet, but sad to realize it was not hot. Maybe during the heat of the day, a cold shower would have been refreshing, but at this hour, it felt almost like a form of initiation, like torture for the new expats. The cold cleansing, however, actually did more to revive Julia than even she could have imagined. Having completed the shower, she went back to her room to properly turn it into something comforting for the three-month term that she had agreed to. Julia plugged her ear buds into her iPod to listen to some music while she arranged everything to look a little more like her room at home. In many ways she was a minimalist; at least compared to Alessandra who had wanted each aspect of her lodgings to be just like they were in the U.S. Julia

loved her surroundings to be simple, easing her mind with their order.

Her stepsister had met her husband, Wesley, on a mission's trip to the Congo years ago. They, and eventually their children, had spent many years in the Congo's capital, Kinshasa, as Wesley became the point man for the diamond company he worked for. Julia had never visited their home but had seen pictures of how Alessandra had decorated it. She had wanted her children to not feel any resentment about living in a foreign country.

Julia was very different.

She wanted her room to be a haven, without completely sacrificing the local color. Placing a beautiful African woman's cloth on the small table near the bed, and a comfy pillow of the same material on the wicker chair in the corner, Julia pulled out the 110 adaptor from a trunk and plugged in a small reading lamp that she had managed to bring from her apartment back home without it breaking. She placed two pictures on the table: one of their whole family: Dad and Mom, Alessandra and

her family, and Daniel and his new wife, and herself; and another of just her niece and nephew, Casey and Josh. She hung her bath and hand towels neatly on the rack provided, and then finished by organizing the two trunks she had brought. One was filled with her carefully guarded stash of American snacks and toiletries, and the other contained a few pieces of clothing. She was happy to learn from Thomas the evening before that Congolese women could be hired to hand wash and line dry clothes for a minimal fee.

Once completed, she sat back in the wicker chair, propped her feet up on the footstool, got her Bible, journal, and three pens, and began to dedicate her mind, spirit, and body to this task that she had signed up for three months as an OR nurse in a fistula hospital in Eastern Congo, just on the outskirts of Goma. The hospital had been built by donations to a foundation dedicated to healing the ravages that war had left on the physically damaged and emotionally scarred women of the east who had been brutally violated by rebel groups and even

government soldiers. Their spirits had been crushed by the horror and humiliation of being publicly raped during village raids by soldiers who were looking to pillage as a way of feeding their units.

Julia shuddered to be so close to the front lines of the war on women. Her innate fears bubbled to the surface, and she hoped that doing this assignment would force her to be less timid. She had been assured that the U.N. soldiers assigned to protect this project were capable to provide the necessary security to keep the volunteers from harm. Surely, Julia reasoned, she would be safe during her three-month tenure.

Julia went looking for a specific verse in the psalms. She loved that book and often prayed the writer's prayers. Warrior-King David had regularly relied on God to be a refuge during battle; Julia sought the comfort that David had found.

"There it is," she said out loud. *The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in Him, and I am helped: therefore, my heart greatly rejoices; and with my song I will praise Him.* That was Psalm 28:7.

She spent many minutes reflecting on ways that God was her internal strength and external shield. Julia memorized the reference to come back and study it further but was comforted by God being both David's strength and the shield that protected him. She was sure that she would make these psalms a part of her daily routine.

Julia was reminded of how long it had been since she had eaten a full meal by the frequent protests of her stomach. She suddenly remembered that the cafeteria opened at 7:00 a.m. with coffee and bread available, and scrambled to locate her watch to check the time: 6:30 a.m. She decided she couldn't quite wait half an hour to eat and dug out a handful of peanuts from her trunk.

Alessandra had clued her in on how to easily obtain local snacks, peanuts being one. They could be purchased already shelled and roasted, plus could be ground into peanut butter. Alessandra had also raved about how delicious the fresh bread was; baked all day and spread with Irish butter and jams from Europe. Julia's mouth watered as she looked

forward to the first encounter with that, but her mind began to nag her concerning meeting her colleagues. How difficult would it be to work with them and rub elbows each mealtime?

Chapter Five

Julia stepped outside to take in the morning activities in this small community. The sun was just peeking over the horizon. Roosters everywhere were crowing. Julia was first aware of the smell of smoke, cooking fires from around the neighborhood. A gentle morning breeze was diffusing a variety of aromas throughout the area but there seemed to be two that stood out: one distinctly burning wood, but the other more pungent that she could not identify. Julia stopped a moment to face the sun, close her eyes, and appreciate the gentle stir of wind as it caressed her cheek. Strangely, she connected more intimately to it than any other element of nature.

Just then, she noticed a young boy standing close beside her.

“Bonjour,” Julia greeted. “Do you know English?”

“Yes,” the boy replied. “I am learning this language in class. What are you called?” he asked formally.

“My name is Julia,” she responded. “I came last night to work at the hospital. What is your name?”

“I am called Gabby,” he answered. “Short for Gabriel. My village name is Makasi. My mother works here in the cuisine. She makes mikati. Do you know mikati?”

“No, but I’m guessing it’s a food,” Julia answered with a grin.

“Come. I show you,” Gabby offered, grabbing her by the hand.

He led Julia to the dining hall, which was a separate building, partly enclosed with one side open to the courtyard like a gazebo. Julia noticed ceiling fans already stirring the humid air as Gabby continued pulling her toward the back of the building. Just outside the open kitchen door stood a tired-looking, thirty-year old woman frying something over a coal fire. Immediately, Julia realized that was where the peculiar smoke smell was coming from.

“This is my mother,” Gabby introduced. “Mother, this is Julia. She come to work here.”

“Bonjour,” the woman greeted, extending a hand and offering a warm shake. “I am called Bolingo; it is Love.”

Julia inspected the pile of already cooked mikati and understood that the woman’s job was to make fresh donuts. Eagerly, she reached a hand out, and Bolingo gave her one from the top of the large platter, waiting for the young girl’s response.

“This is delicious,” Julia declared, but soon realized that neither mother nor son knew the word, ‘delicious,’ so she simply stated, “This is very good.”

“Thank you,” Bolingo smiled shyly. “My own recipe.”

Tasting those amazing pastries rolled in coarse African sugar, completely unrefined with a molasses flavor, started Julia’s day with eagerness. After spending several minutes with Bolingo and Gabby, she headed into the dining area and helped herself to a cup of freshly ground Congo coffee, very strong but perfectly roasted. Julia discovered the joy of using full cream powdered milk, spooned directly into the coffee with some sugar. The milk added a

richness that was different than using fresh cream or half and half.

She took her coffee to a table near the back wall and turned to face the door. She wanted to be able to see it while observing the other hospital volunteers and their eating routines. She smiled to herself remembering that Doc Holliday had always sat with his back to the wall as well. Western history and novels were a big part of the Smith family culture.

Julia soon realized that the cafeteria served both the Congolese and expat staff. Confident Congolese doctors and nurses entered one and two at a time, most choosing to draw their morning drinks from the large thermos of sweetened and creamy steaming tea. The fresh local bread had finally been set out along with butter, local peanut butter, jam, and an off-brand chocolate hazelnut spread. The medical staff, greeting each other in a mixture of French, Swahili, and Lingala, laughed and talked as they gathered around tables in groups, obviously well acquainted. Julia felt a tinge of wistfulness,

hoping that soon, she too would be with friends around a breakfast table.

Just then, two young women entered the cafeteria, appearing to know each other well. They noticed Julia sitting alone and headed her direction once their cups were full of coffee and their small plates loaded with bread. The pair joined Julia at her table and introductions were made immediately.

“I am Esther and this is Winnie. We are nurses from South Africa.” Esther explained how they met in secondary school, became good friends, and decided to go to nursing school together at the University of Pretoria.

“We worked together in a hospital in Leondale for two years before volunteering for a short-term contract here in Congo,” Winnie added in her lilting accent. “But enough about us! What is your name?”

“I’m Julia Smith. I grew up outside of Philadelphia and graduated with a nursing degree from the University of Pennsylvania a little over eight years ago. I’ve been practicing at an obstetrics clinic ever since. My sister and her husband have

spent time in Congo off and on for many years, so I have always had an interest in this area. I'm actually here by myself, so I'm very glad to meet you both."

The three conversed easily throughout breakfast. Julia enjoyed the boiled eggs, local cheese, bread, and banana muffins. She also loved her first experience with mangoes. When the women were finished, they headed back to their rooms to wash up and prep for a day at the clinic.

Each morning, from nine to noon, the doors of the hospital were open to meet the medical needs of the local community, as well as the intake of more serious cases, those seeking procedures or surgery. Some were simple enough, like pregnant women needing a C-section, but others were time-sensitive such as those wounded by the violence of recurring conflict.

Women were brought to the hospital on beds on the backs of over-stuffed merchant trucks, barely alive by the time they reached help and safety at their hospital. Surgeries to repair the victims' bodies were scheduled for early afternoon, giving enough

time for surgeons and nursing staff to become acquainted with the specific needs of each case. Julia looked forward to the simple care of the morning clinics but shrank back from the exposure to the violence of the more significant incidents. She hoped her experience as an attending nurse in procedures back home had prepared her for this new assignment.

Chapter Six

The morning staff meeting introduced Julia to the rest of the western and local Congolese doctors and nurses she'd be working with. Julia recognized the people she saw at breakfast. Many were from France, Belgium, England, and Germany. She was the only American. Strangely, Julia felt that her welcome from her European colleagues was a bit cool. They greeted her, shook her hand, but offered no warm smile; they just stared, expressionless. The two nurses from South Africa were pleased to have her introduced, excited to share their new friend with the rest of the group. The Congolese staff offered beautiful smiles and broken-English welcomes. Julia wondered about the coldness of the other expats and decided to ask Esther and Winnie about it later.

The head doctor, an American-trained Congolese man, was named Pierre Katonga. He shook hands with Julia, smiled, and stated that he would like to compare notes, at some point, about places he had visited during his college years.

“Today, the clinic hours will be busy. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees has provided funding for basic immunizations for children; particularly they are interested in stopping the renewed spread of polio. Live vaccines have been provided by the World Health Organization. Mothers and their babies and young children are already lined up to receive the vaccines. They are being charged 990 Congo francs for each child who receives shots today. You will be responsible for administering the various injections. Esther and Winnie, I want you to work with Julia giving the hepatitis A shot; two of you will prepare the injections and one will provide them, taking turns with each role.”

Julia was relieved to be selected to work with her new friends and breathed a little easier as Pierre assigned the rest of the vaccinations to the other groups of expats and Congolese nurses. He had a few nurses, along with himself, do intakes for the afternoon surgeries.

Julia observed as the other groups set themselves up to administer the pertussis, measles, mumps, and polio immunizations. Esther took charge of setting up their station and organizing who would be doing which task. She had Julia and Winnie starting with the prep. Julia prepared the syringes before Winnie filled them with the solution. Esther would take the first turn with giving the shots. Sooner than she expected, Julia was ready with a box of clean syringes and a sterile worktable just as the clinic doors were officially opened.

The first mother with two young boys stepped toward their station to receive the vaccine. Within minutes, their team was working with precision, getting mothers and children moving through the clinic's open bay to the next station. Money was being collected at the front door. Julia took turns with the other two, filling syringes and administering the doses. Just before noon, the last family was admitted, and the doors were closed. Stragglers were told to return the next day for their chance to be seen. The staff breathed a collective

sigh of relief and cleaned up the stations before heading to the dining hall for lunch. By mid-morning, the day had warmed up considerably. Julia was drenched in sweat and looked forward to pounding down a cold glass of water.

Lunch was nearly a repeat of breakfast. The food was good but simple: rice and beans, a meat stewed in a tomato sauce, and fruit. The bread, local peanut butter, jams, and butter, Julia soon discovered, would make an appearance at every meal. While the morning conversation consisted mostly of exchanging introductions and pleasantries, Esther and Winnie spent a great deal of lunch attempting to explain the coldness of the European colleagues.

“It is your government,” Winnie started in her beautiful accent. “They have been interfering in African politics for years. Especially those of the Congolese.”

“Why?” Julia asked. “Is being involved in the Congo a bad thing? And why would anyone hold me responsible for something I have no part in?”

“The American government,” Esther explained, “enters the world stage with a swagger. Do you understand? They are like a sheriff in a western movie, trying to be involved in every problem, like a cowboy fixing a corrupt town. Most view this stance as hypocritical since the U.S. government is so corrupt itself. It was the CIA that assassinated Congo’s first elected president, Patrice Lumumba. Since the 1960’s the U.S. has led the effort to manipulate the government of Congo. The region is very rich in natural resources, making it a very desirable place to have control over.”

“But why?” Julia asked dully. “That’s our government, not me.” She still wasn’t quite making the connection.

“America is a free country,” Esther said. “You elect your officials. Everyone knows this. It is assumed that since you choose your leaders, you must approve of their actions. If these leaders are making such decisions without your knowledge, then they are corrupt, and your people sit in ignorance. Essentially you are responsible for the

actions of your leaders since you place them in office with your vote.”

“Is there no way,” Julia asked, “for me to change how my colleagues feel about me? I don’t want to spend three months alienated from people I work with every day.”

“I think it will take time,” Winnie encouraged. “Just work hard and be polite. Eventually, they will see you more as a person and less like a voter and approver of America’s international policies. Already we like you. I am sure in a week or so things will be better.”

The afternoon went well, with no extreme cases needing attention. An emergency C-section was performed on one woman who was delivering twins, with the first baby presenting breach. Julia was shocked to learn that the women were only given local anesthesia for that procedure. Typically, in America, a woman undergoing a C-section would be given an epidural. Although the surgery began with the young mother feeling nearly no pain, the effect began to wear off when the doctor was stitching the

incision, and she was practically hysterical by the time the last one was secured. When Julia inquired as to why the woman was not given an epidural, she was told that no one there was trained to give such a risky injection, and then painfully realized that the months ahead would expose her to a lot of suffering. Thankfully, things smoothed out from there. Two women delivered babies without much trouble. Julia was assigned to practice some of the midwifery techniques she had used back in the states. Her colleagues were not familiar with the idea of purposefully stretching a woman and using warm oil to add some comfort to the process. By the end of the afternoon, Julia felt a softening toward her in some of her teammates.

Supper finished a long day. Julia took her second shower and settled into the wicker chair which she positioned outside her door to relax and enjoy the sunset. A warm breeze that reminded Julia of the end of a beach day, gently lifted her hair, and cooled her face. She leaned her head back, closed her eyes, and allowed this wind to totally relax her.

The sun set quickly in Congo. At 6:00 p.m. the sky was a beautiful orange and yellow; forty-five minutes later, everything was almost completely dark. Fearing the mosquitoes that roamed the night searching for someone to share their diseases with, Julia headed to the outhouse one last time before retreating to her room. She finished her first twenty-four hours as a Non-Governmental Organization nurse by writing in her journal and eating a chocolate-covered granola bar. Tucked securely in the net, Julia fell into a solid sleep.

Chapter Seven

The days fell in a steady routine and several weeks passed. Julia would rise early and shower, dress and read Scripture, listen to Voice of America Africa edition on the little short-wave radio she purchased at the market, and eat meals with her new friends. She spent mornings on the immunization project and routine clinic visits, and afternoons

treating more serious patient needs and surgeries. Those cases were caused by the horrors of war and currently sporadic, as a cease-fire was in effect. Warring factions in the east had made an agreement with the Congolese government to permit healthcare workers to make progress with vaccination projects.

On Saturdays, she took Swahili lessons from the cook and was making some headway. She was able to address local patients with, “Jambo. Habari gani?” She was also comfortable asking their names and giving her name. Esther and Winnie were invaluable. They provided insight into the nuances of her relationships with the other NGO volunteers, especially the Germans.

Many of the workers stationed in this hospital, which was originally spear-headed through the efforts of Paul Carlson, a famous American missionary to the Congo, over sixty years prior, were with the German International Cooperation, more commonly referred to as the GIZ. That organization began the groundwork in 1978 and sought to

address the medical needs of the Congolese people. Two other stated goals were, sustainable poverty reduction and peace building. One German volunteer represented The Christian Blind Mission. Although it took some time, her German colleagues began to warm up to her. Julia simply surmised that they realized she was not her government and had personal opinions unrelated to the international policies of the United States.

Once Julia had figured the trick of accessing the hospital's internet provider, she was back on Facebook for the first time since leaving America. She had originally relied on texting to keep in touch with family but transitioned to messaging after a bit to maintain a secure connection with her family. Besides, the international calling and texting plan was expensive. Messaging was free.

Julia had spent more than ten years thinking about her high-school sweetheart or dreaming of meeting someone just like him. James Worthy had been placed on the mantle of her love hopes, where he was revered for who she remembered him to be.

She had always admired his transparent spirit and willingness to speak the truth about himself. She reflected on only the good things that she could recall of his character and personality.

James had attended a small, Christian high school with her. However, a few weeks after graduation, he had shipped off to boot camp. That had been the last bit of contact they had for over thirteen years. So, when a friend request from him came through on her Facebook account, Julia's heart skipped a beat. Of course, she accepted, although she worried that he was in a committed relationship with someone else and was just being curious about her life.

Almost immediately, James messaged her. He wanted to know everything: how she was doing, where she was living, what kind of a job she had, and whether or not she would mind renewing a long-distance, virtual friendship. Julia's daily routine suddenly had a new goal: finish her work and rush to check her Facebook messages.

Unfortunately, James did not write every day which resulted in more disappointment than even she liked to admit. When there was a message from him, it only gave vague details about his life in the military and the whereabouts and objectives of his unit, indicating that whatever he was involved in was protected by a high-level of secrecy.

Ironically, this renewed relationship plunged Julia deep into her heart's doubts and weaknesses. She wondered if she was incapable of being close to a man because of the absence of her father for much of her life. Sometimes she believed that the loss of her dad at a young age robbed her of the opportunity to grow in her relationship strengths. Her deep-seated insecurities increased, and fears surfaced to plague her as more and more communication with James continued. She hated the idea of her current happiness depending so heavily on a small message she might receive from this voice from her past.

James had been a steady friend throughout their four years of high school together but they never really considered themselves to be dating, never

boyfriend and girlfriend. Mostly they just enjoyed sharing their different youthful adventures together. Since it was a small Christian school, James played nearly every sport, and Julia was a cheerleader for each of them. That meant long bus trips together to away games and tournaments as well as days at local amusement parks, museums, and field trips.

They studied together, too; both loving history and struggling a bit in math. The thirteen years since those memories had been made had erased some of the hurt they'd experienced as they neared graduation.

Somehow, they had begun to drift apart. Something happened to James during the summer before their senior year. Julia could never figure out what had caused the change, but that last year started with a distance between them. James was withdrawn.

He had always been open with her about things he struggled with spiritually. This was a quality that Julia had appreciated in his character, but suddenly he had pulled away. He avoided hanging out with her

initially and soon opted out of all sports to go to work. He finished well academically, but even on graduation night he had not said a word to her, until he mumbled a half-hearted, "Congratulations."

Julia was deeply hurt by the loss of his friendship. She had never known what was going on in his life until this recent contact. The relationship was almost like new, the contact simple and uncommitted. She fought down thoughts of hope about their possible future together, not wanting to place herself in a position of being wounded a second time by James' potential rejection.

She looked at herself intensely in the mirror one morning and stopped brushing her brown, shoulder-length hair. Staring into her gold-flecked eyes of the same color, she just couldn't shake the negative thoughts that were consuming her like a hungry monster.

Within the environment of her small, close-knit family, she was surrounded by people in pleasant, solid relationships. Her mother and stepfather had been together for nearly twenty years. Their steady

friendship set the atmosphere of a peaceful home for Julia, her brother Daniel, and her older stepsister, Alessandra, who's own relationship was rock-solid. Living in various foreign countries where Wesley's company had assigned him brought a unity to their marriage. They saw themselves as a team in their unique cultural environments.

Even Daniel, a few years back, had met Suzanne. Their wedding the previous summer was a joy, but a reality check for Julia. She was the youngest and now that she had been finished with her schooling nearly a decade, believed she should have considered herself equal with her siblings but still somehow felt like an outsider.

Her high school and college friends gradually all married and began families. She still stayed in touch with a few of them through Facebook or texting, but she was not close with any. As Julia stared at herself that morning in eastern Congo, a wave of loneliness and self-pity engulfed her. She detested her role of being the observer in every relationship. Always

looking into a family through the lens of her foggy and icy loneliness.

She tried to shake off the gloom by listening to a few of her favorite songs, but the self-consuming thoughts followed her into the clinic. Her new South African friends noticed and commented.

“What is the matter,” Esther asked, consoling, “my American friend? You look like you are struggling under a heavy weight this morning.”

“I am,” Julia admitted. “I don’t know how to get rid of this feeling that I will always be alone, always wondering if I will ever be in a relationship with a dependable man. Do you two ever worry that you will be single forever?”

Both Esther and Winnie softly laughed. In many cultures outside the U.S., marriage, or even a steady committed relationship, was less of an all-consuming goal. Somehow, Julia’s question came across like that of a small child who had lost her puppy, and they found her confession of despair slightly amusing.

Despite this, Winnie responded gently. “Julia, we know that you trust God for many things. You have let God draw you to this place on the globe to do His work. You trust Him for direction and protection. Why will you not trust Him to lead you to a good man? Are you fearful that your God has a limited range of working miracles? God is even capable of sending you a husband while you are here.”

Julia smiled at the thought of meeting someone special in that clinic compound. “I appreciate your attempts to console me. I believe that you both want me to feel less lonely, but I’m still sad.” She took a deep breath before continuing. “But you’re right: I’ve trusted God to work in different parts of my life, so why can’t I trust His faithfulness to lead me to the man he has chosen for me to marry? I guess I’ve fallen into a bad habit, over the years, of negative self-talk, especially in this area. I worry that God does not want me to be married; that He wants me to be content with being single. My prayer requests are influenced by whether I’m praying according to

His will for my life or according to my will and desires.”

Winnie and Esther felt bad for their new friend but didn't know what else to say, so the conversation ended there, but the thinking continued.

Chapter Eight

The weeks of internal conversations concerning James, singleness, and despair melted into a month. Julia entertained thoughts that were always leaning toward being reflective, as well as a bit melancholy, and was creating a habit of letting defeat control her emotions. She questioned everything: her own confidence, or lack of it; her trust issues; and whether this thing with James would even go anywhere.

Julia had always been fully aware that her most crippling weakness had been her insecurity in relationships. She was confident in her learning and work experience as well as in the strength of her walk with Jesus, but she had always questioned her connections with others outside of her family circle. Her renewed relationship with James forced her to face this enemy of weakness head on, and she didn't like it. She felt trepidatious, like walking on the thin ice of a newly frozen pond.

She had only been contracted to spend three months in eastern Congo; her job at the hospital back in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania was being held for her for only so long. She was down to three weeks left of her commitment when contact from James suddenly stopped. For a few days, she believed him to be in transit between assignments, but when five days passed without a word, Julia began to worry. Those same initial fears that James was in a long-term relationship and had only contacted her out of curiosity reared their ugly heads again. She felt herself slipping into a continual flow of negative thoughts when local gossip collided with a VOA news alert: one hundred Special Op Forces were being stationed in the Goma area. Their mission: to hunt down and eliminate vicious warlords that had plagued the surrounding region for more than a decade.

“I wonder if that means James is here,” Julia asked herself out loud, after taking in the shocking news. She didn’t have an opportunity to answer her own question as she was interrupted by a knock at

her door. Since it was Saturday, a non-clinic day, Julia was surprised. So, she hesitantly opened it a crack and peeked out. Esther and Winnie were standing there smiling broadly.

“What’s going on?” Julia asked, glad to see her friends but a little skeptical of their exuberance.

“We would like you,” Esther offered, grinning, “to take a walk to the market with us. We heard that a new shipment from America has just arrived. Amazing things are for sale everywhere.”

Julia accepted, still wondering why they seemed to be hiding some intense secret. The short walk to the market was always attention-grabbing. The local merchants were thrilled to be selling unique items, always hoping to catch the eye of a potential customer. Today, it all felt amplified, however, and everyone seemed particularly excited. People were talking rapidly, calling out to each other enthusiastically, gesturing wildly, and laughing. Before she even realized it, her friends had led her to the south end of the fruit market, and she was suddenly surrounded by English-speaking soldiers.

The men parted, and Julia found herself facing James, just a few feet away. She thought she was dreaming until he grabbed her in a bear hug and lifted her small frame off the ground easily. His comrades were cheering, and Esther and Winnie were standing off to one side watching the scene like a couple of proud parents.

When James finally placed her gently back on the ground, Julia just stared up at him, nearly unable to speak. "I . . . can't . . . believe . . ."

"It's really me, Babe," James beamed calling her their pet name that stemmed from a night in high school when they watched a movie about a loving, talking pig.

Slowly, although her surprise wasn't going anywhere, her voice began to find itself. "Why? I mean, what are you doing here?"

"I'm going to be in the Goma area indefinitely; my unit has been assigned here on an 'advise and assist' mission. I can't go into details, but you've probably been keeping up on VOA Africa."

“Yeah but, until today, I never imagined you’d be here.”

“I know,” James stated, almost gleefully. “Crazy, huh? Can you believe after all this time we finally get to reconnect, but we had to go to the other side of the globe to do it?”

Julia found herself embarrassed to be giggling like a giddy schoolgirl. “I am so glad! Do you have any free time before you get busy with your mission? Do you think you could visit the compound where I’m working? It’d be nice to catch up without an audience,” she teased.

James agreed and asked her to lead the way. As they were slowly progressing through the market, the conversation bounced happily through the newly organized group. James introduced Julia and her friends to Caleb, Mike and Brad, three guys from his unit that were a part of the task force stationed in the area. Julia returned the favor by introducing Esther and Winnie. Lots of laughter and light banter prevailed, while the group recognized the need to keep the communication general because of the

nature of the U.S. involvement in that part of the world.

Once at the compound gate, Caleb, Mike, and Brad excused themselves and returned to their outpost. Esther and Winnie led the way to the lunch hall where they fetched snacks and coffee for James and Julia and disappeared to their rooms. The two remaining individuals were unable to contain their joy as they faced each other and anticipated their first private conversation in more than a decade.

Chapter Nine

So, tell me about yourself and your family. How are your parents doing? What are Alessandra and Daniel up to? What has been keeping you busy since graduation?"

"Wow!" Julia exclaimed. "That's loaded. I may need to write you a book!"

James laughed, embarrassed that his over-eagerness had been noticed, but Julia just gave him a flirtatious nudge before continuing.

"Hmm, well, after graduation, I went to nursing school at U.P. and commuted daily on the train from Langhorne the whole time I went there. It seemed like a long four years. I went on scholarships, mostly, and saved money by living at home. Plus, I wasn't interested in the party life the dorms were offering."

James returned the flirtatious nudge, indicating he was not at all surprised by Julia's last statement. She smiled at him, a bit sheepishly.

"While I was doing that, Alessandra was experiencing some of her own Congo adventures. Do

you remember her taking a trip the summer we graduated?”

James looked into the distance as if searching for that memory. Julia didn't wait for an answer.

“Well, she was barely on the ground and settled in Ilebo with the missionary family when the counter-revolution broke out. It was terrifying for her. The State Department called for the evacuation of all Americans, but the family that she was with were not ready to leave their work, so she stayed with them for several days after most expatriates had left the country. Finally, she couldn't wait any longer and had to leave her host family behind for her own safety. Alessandra's memories of the fear she felt about crossing the river to Congo-Brazzaville and possibly not making it out still haunt her.”

“That's too bad,” James responded with sincerity. “It's sad she had such a negative experience.”

Julia answered, “I worked for several years at Jefferson Abington Hospital. I started, of course, in med-surge, but wanted to specialize. I moved to ICU

and obstetrics, but then decided to pursue my master's degree in Public Health nursing so I'd be qualified to take a contract like this one in Goma. So, I stayed busy with work, and mostly online school, but I did fit in a bit of social life and some hobbies."

"Like what?" James asked, perking up to see if they would have any in common.

"Mostly mountain biking and hunting for antique books," came the reply.

James found the honesty of her nerdiness endearing but couldn't help expressing a slight disappointment in the lack of connection he was hoping for.

"Now, it's your turn," Julia stated, seemingly unaware of his emotional misfire.

"Well," he began after taking a deep breath, "you know that I went right to boot camp after graduation. May not have been the smartest decision of my life. In hindsight, I probably should have followed an ROTC- college course first; I had the grades to qualify. Then I could've started in the military at a higher rank. But I didn't, so I began at

Fort Benning, in Columbus, Georgia. I wanted to do something specialized, but because I came in as a grunt, it took me a while to climb the ranks and reach my goals. I really worked hard to become a part of Special Forces, mainly because I was interested in making a difference in unique missions like this one. I trained specifically as a communications specialist, although each man in my unit can do the job of everyone else, so no one is really ‘specialized.’”

“But I thought,” Julia interrupted, “Special Forces was really exclusive. I mean, Daniel has somewhat compelled me to watch those ‘Surviving the Cut’ type shows.” She wrinkled her nose saying this. “The physical and mental stress seems appalling to me. How long did it take you to get through the process?”

“Ahh, watching military shows, eh?” James smiled at Julia’s growing blush. “Actually, it was very challenging. It took me three times to make it through.”

“I’ll bet nothing in high school prepared you for that,” Julia groaned.

“Actually, there’re ways in which a Christian education did prepare me for some of the rigors and the harshness. The world view it provided taught me the reality of life on this planet and the importance of striving for the best. When I was tempted to give up the dream, I thought of all the things Christians face around the globe, and I was encouraged to try harder. I felt that my special training in the military would give me a specific way to make a difference in a variety of conflict zones.”

Julia and James talked for an hour before he glanced at his watch and realized it was nearly time for him to be back at camp.

“How far away is your base?” Julia asked.

“Not far. We’ve set up within the high walls of a compound.”

“Is it primitive? Houses or tents?”

“Really just a house with a large yard and several outbuildings. Somebody knew somebody, who knew somebody, who had a place to rent. It’s ancient, like from the Belgium era, but has lots of storage space, a working kitchen, several bathrooms, and security. It

even has a pit for working on vehicles. Pretty nice, actually. We feel lucky.”

“Good,” Julia reacted. “At least you feel like you’re in a secure spot.”

“Definitely.”

“Hey, maybe we could we go to a local church together in the morning,” Julia suggested before explaining what Alessandra had shared with her about the unfortunate nature of worship in Congo. She informed him that in many denominations, Christianity was mixed with witchcraft. It was not unusual for a pastor to seek out a witch doctor to gain sway over his congregation, looking for larger offerings. Julia finished by saying she would ask Mama Bolingo to recommend a church they could trust.

“Sounds good to me,” James said. “Let me check with my commander. I’ll shoot you a message and let you know. Hopefully, I’ll see you tomorrow and maybe we can walk somewhere afterward. Work for you?”

Julia agreed. They parted with a down-to-the-soul hug, and Julia couldn't have wiped the smile off her face if she wanted to. She was certain the meet up was significant to her future and couldn't wait to spend more time with James.

Chapter Ten

The next week was busy and pleasant. Julia's daily tasks were made joyful by texting conversations with James in the evenings and looking forward to getting together on the weekends. Winnie and Esther delighted in getting to know him as well, and particularly loved watching the relationship blossom. In many ways, James and Julia were just like their high school selves, laughing and teasing. But their maturity and years of experiences apart from each other made them more serious and focused. They were growing together on purpose and completely enthralled with God's work in their lives. Neither considered their reunion a coincidence, and they waited with eager anticipation to see how God was going to finish this work that He had started all those years ago.

That Saturday, the couple was sent to the market for some ingredients needed by Mama Bolingo, particularly a vanilla powder to flavor her donuts and a few large packages of yeast. Before the two

took off on their errand, they had agreed to let her show them her garden in a part of the jungle that had been cleared by her family generations ago. The hike would begin at sunrise on the following Saturday, nearly the end of Julia's contract.

James and Julia took their time on the walk from the compound to the market. It was less than a mile, but they savored every step. They enjoyed each other and absorbed the chaotic world surrounding them: babies crying, hawkers enthusiastically selling wares, and the general swelling and breathing of raw humanity. The unique birdcalls and the ever-present doves, with their peculiar cooing, created a pleasant backdrop to all the confusion.

As they approached the market, the once-distant sights drew near to engulf them. They were suddenly drowning together in a pool of needy humans. The market was a huge rectangle, with clothing, shoes, and household items all around the outside. Shouts of theatrical bartering stole their attention when they began traveling into the heart of this tumultuous sea of buying and selling. They

passed grains, fruits, vegetables, fish, meat, and edible insects like worms, grub worms, and locusts. The variety of odors attacked their noses fiercely. Dried, slightly rotten fish, bush meat with its peculiar, dank smell, and small coal fires cooking with clarified palm oil, all teamed up to welcome them into the open-air market experience.

Stalls were set up in certain areas that were selling items unusual to the Congo: boxes of cereal and oatmeal in tins, powdered milk in twenty-five-pound sacks, sugar, European coffee, and the highly sought-after yeast and vanilla powder. Their attempt to make their way through the market to the area where these things were sold was impeded by people of all ages trying to tempt them to purchase their wares. Julia was weak in the ways of bartering; James was helpless. Although communication skills and negotiating had been a part of his training for thirteen years, he had a soft spot for the need of the vendor to make the sale, knowing that each transaction would help to feed a large family. Every time they gave a negative answer to a plea to

purchase something, they were thrown dirty looks. This, of course, made Julia nervous. She had never been to a market without a Congolese worker to buffer the onslaught of begging. Her panic was growing when an ambitious musician noticed their distress and offered them to sit in his stall for a few minutes to catch a break. The heat in such a confined space was intense, but once James and Julia were seated in plastic lawn chairs and had a minute to rein in their thinking, Julia jumped into a line of questioning that had been brewing for several days.

“James, I know this is a weird place to ask you this, but I’m going to take the plunge: what happened to us in high school? Why did it seem as if we were suddenly no longer friends?”

James looked down for several seconds before lifting his gaze to look bashfully into her face and cleared his throat: “Remember that time when we were competing in a history tournament?”

This beginning totally caught Julia off guard but she was able to recall what he was talking about. She and James had been on a team, competing against

other small, private schools. Julia had studied up on American history while James had focused on the English and European colonization around the world.

“I haven’t thought about that day even once in years,” Julia responded. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, we did great! Remember? We were beating everyone. As a team, we were unstoppable, but then the judges thought that they would like to take it further and pit us against each other.”

“Oh yeah,” Julia said. “At the time, I thought that was kinda weird. But I can’t quite remember exactly how it turned out.”

“You actually only know a small part of it. We both kept answering correctly,” James paused for a second at the sound of an exhausted, hungry baby screaming his anger, but when it became clear that the noise was not going to stop any time soon, James continued with a slightly increased volume. “I realized that you were feeling stressed by all the questions. So, I intentionally got my last question

wrong.” James put his head in his hands and paused. “I wanted to see you declared the champion.”

“What? Why did you do that?”

“I was worried,” he defended, “about you being upset by either beating me soundly or losing to me. I realized in that moment that you were more important to me than winning.” James looked adorably shy. He lifted his face for a second then dropped his head again as he finished, staring hard at the ground.

Julia sat silent, trying to process this account of that long-forgotten part of their past. The screaming baby paused for a moment in its tantrum long enough for Julia to ask, “But what changed? Why did you seem so distant our last year of high school? I always worried that something was seriously wrong or that I’d done something to hurt you.”

James grinned widely and studied the ground more intensely.

“What is it?” Julia begged. “I’m a big girl; you can tell me.”

“I can’t believe I’m about to say this but, I was crazy in love with you, Julia.” James sighed deeply before continuing his confession. “But I’d already committed myself to a military career. I knew that you were determined to pursue a nursing degree so, I just thought that a relationship would distract us both. I decided to pull back, at least emotionally.” He hesitated. “I was miserable because I could tell that you took it as rejection. It hurt me that I was hurting you. But I thought that I was doing the right thing at the time for the both of us.”

Julia breathed in something that felt a lot like a choking sob. It took her many minutes to gain control of the conflicting emotions of tenderness, regret, and gratitude battling inside of her. She began tentatively, not trusting herself: “I wish you would’ve told me back then what you’d been thinking. I’ve spent more than a decade worrying about what I’d done to hurt you. I know myself enough to understand that, at that time, I would have been too immature to agree with your decision, but eventually the truth would have been easier to bear

than the lies I have been telling myself all these years.” Julia paused in her admonishment and allowed a sly grin to creep up in the corners of her mouth. “But honestly, from my lofty age of thirty-one, I can understand that you thought you were protecting us.”

“Julia,” James pleaded tenderly, “look at me.” She turned her gaze to his earnest face, “I’ve never stopped loving you. There’s never been anyone else, in all these years, that has ever come close to you for me. I never should’ve made that decision for the both of us. I should’ve let you in so we could’ve figured it out together. Can you ever forgive me?”

Julia continued to look him squarely in the eyes and smiled. “Of course, James. I’m so proud of what you’ve become and humbled by your constant affection and that God brought us back together here.”

As the exhausted baby picked up his wailing complaint again, James and Julia thanked the musician by buying one of his CDs, and then ventured back into the market for the things they

had gone for, knowing they would be leaving with way more than vanilla powder and yeast. They knew that things were different -- very different.

Chapter Eleven

The occasions that Julia and James could steal from their diverse and busy schedules were now more significant, more purposeful. They weren't children anymore and their leftover affection from high school was gradually, one degree at a time, evolving into something solid and serious. The strength of their maturity and the openness of their transparent conversations could only take them forward in their growth together.

On Monday morning, Julia confirmed the invitation for she and James to join Mama Bolingo on Saturday for the trip to her garden: Julia's last scheduled weekend in Congo. Julia messaged James and told him to pick her up at the clinic compound at 4:30 that morning. Mama Bolingo lived on the north side of Goma, and they were to grab a taxi to the market there and meet up with her.

When the day for their adventure finally arrived, Julia was up before 4:00 a.m. She had picked up two bagged breakfasts the previous evening for her and

James to munch on along the way to the garden. They both had a liter of water, sandwiches for lunch, and Julia's well-protected granola bars from the States. Julia stepped outside the front gate of the compound at 4:25 a.m. James had been given the task of booking two bodaboda taxis: motorcycles that gave rides to backseat passengers for less than a dollar. His success was verified as he arrived on the back of a Chinese-made motorcycle, wearing one helmet and carrying a second one. Where he managed to find the helmets, Julia never got around to asking. She just greeted him with a quick peck on the cheek. "I have never been on a motorcycle in my life. Not even sure how to get on," she claimed, eyeing the other bike skeptically.

"Basically," James said, "you place your left foot on that peg, grab the shoulders of your driver, and swing your right leg over. Kinda like mounting a horse." He finished by introducing the two drivers: brothers who drove folks around Goma, all day, every day. James warned her to not burn herself on the exhaust pipe and praised her wisdom for

choosing to wear long, loose exercise pants for the trip which acted as a barrier against the very hot piece of metal and a prevention from insect bites during their trek to the garden.

They took off. Julia, at first worried about the safety of such a trip, soon relaxed and enjoyed the relative coolness of the wind against her face. She closed her eyes just a second to appreciate the soothing breeze as they made their way across the lava-tortured streets of Goma.

Even though the volcano, Nyiragongo, blew more than a decade ago, several streets were still pockmarked with lumpy, hardened lava. The bigger trucks could crawl over them, but motorcycles attempted to steer clear. Thus, the ride to the market on the north side of town was a bit zigzagged from time to time. With very little traffic to compete with, Julia and James were riding side by side for most of the trip. The drivers had chosen to stay on Boulevard Kanyamuhanga, taking their passengers past the closed nightclubs often frequented by expats.

Soon they were leaving the touristy district and began moving through slum neighborhoods. Dogs barked, roosters crowed, and the smell of charcoal fires irritated the riders' noses with its pungent smoke. A few babies howled their protest of being wakened early by their mamas who were setting up roadside stands, selling everything from flour to flip-flops. Push-push owners, some of Congo's hardest working men, muscled their two-wheeled carts in front of them. Some were loaded with barrels of fuel or oil. Others had heavy loads of mud bricks or cinder blocks. Julia felt a twinge of guilt, watching them struggle with these tremendous loads, while she sat serenely behind her very skilled driver.

A short twenty-minute ride had delivered them to the front of Marche Monoko, the primary outdoor market for folks traveling into Goma from the north. Villagers bearing goods to trade or sell would stop at this location first. It was easier for them to sell to a middleman of sorts here, who would transport the items to the central market in town, than attempt to get the grains and produce there themselves. This

middleman had connections such as brothers; cousins; or friends, who could get the merchandise to other markets around Goma for an acceptable price, a racket and monopoly that benefitted themselves more than the villagers who were hoping to make a good profit on their labors.

At a stall to the left of the market entrance, Mama Bolingo was waving to them, right where she had described she would be. The taxis stopped and James paid for their trip, plus extra money for the drivers to get back to 'centreville' to pick up more riders. They arranged for the brothers to meet them back there at 5:30 that night.

Mama Bolingo gave Julia a hug and explained in broken English that she had reserved a spot for them on a Unimog truck to take them to the edge of the forest path that led to her garden. The driver explained that, although he had heard some warnings of roving bands of rebels in the area, his cousin assured him that it was only rumors to keep locals from visiting their gardens. If locals were blocked from tending their gardens, then these

military units could more easily steal from them. He pointed to a spot in the back of his truck where the three could sit with their legs dangling off the tailgate. James climbed up first, pulling up their backpacks and Mama Bolingo's gardening tools. He then helped her and Julia position themselves into a comfortable spot. Or, at least as comfortable as could possibly be while riding inches from two goats who were strapped into the back and bleating their protests.

Along the way, the conversation led to the church that Mama Bolingo had recommended and caused James to share some of what he'd learned from briefings about those roving bands of rebels that corroborated the nature of worship in the area. James recalled hearing about one of the leaders who claimed to speak in tongues with his seven "spirit helpers," although his lifestyle was not remotely Christian. He considered himself spiritual because of the access he believed he had to the other side. Julia nodded in agreement and told him that she had read

similar things on the internet when preparing for her trip.

The ride to the forest path that meandered its way to the destination took a little more than half an hour. While the group traveled, Mama Bolingo explained to her companions that the garden had been in her family for more than fifty years. The care of it had been passed down from her grandparents to her parents and then to her when her older brother moved to Lubumbashi to attend university ten years ago. It was obvious that she was proud to possess and cultivate such a treasured heirloom as a garden plot. Many in Congo could not afford to purchase one, even if there were virgin spots still available.

The truck paused long enough to drop them from the back of the truck bed and let them grab their packs before moving northward towards its destination. Mama Bolingo smiled her pleasure at sharing this day with her new American friends, knowing that she could be telling this experience to listeners for years to come. "This way," she led, as the

two took one last minute to glance back toward Goma and civilization, then shifted their gear to make it feel more comfortable, before heading into the cool, semi-darkness of the tropical forest.

Chapter Twelve

Only a few steps down the path, Julia, James, and Mama Bolingo were engulfed by the forest, immersed in sights, sounds, and smells that bombarded their senses. At least that was the way the two Americans felt. The trail began wide enough for a small car to drive down, but quickly narrowed to two footpaths. One was a bit higher than the other and had been eroded by passing torrents from the tropical rains.

Still cool and always very damp, the thick foliage put off a confusing array of fragrances and a few less pleasant, more pungent odors. First, there was a distinct smell of corn, or more specifically corn chips. The new couple looked at each other questioningly, and simultaneously blurted, “Fritos?”

“That’s a smell,” James commented, “I never expected on this side of the planet. Makes me think of family movie night as a kid. What do you think, Jules? Could you go for some corn chips?” He teased

Julia with a flirtatious grin and she responded with a coy shove before becoming a little more serious.

“Very strange smell,” she acknowledged before noticing that the odor seemed to be slowly fading and a sweet fragrance was gradually taking its place. “Mama Bolingo, what makes that perfumy smell? Is it a flower?”

Their Congolese companion nodded and pointed to a tree just a foot off the path with flowers that looked like magnolias. She stepped up and plucked a blossom to give to Julia for a closer inspection. “I have heard it called frangipangi,” Mama Bolingo stated.

“Smell this, James!” Julia exclaimed as she offered him the bloom. “It’s so powerful, so delightful.” James agreed and then tucked it gently into Julia’s ponytail holder. This simple move made him smile, but he tried not to let his thoughts wander too far into the future just then. Fitting Julia into his career, at that moment, seemed nearly impossible.

As they wandered further down the path, distancing themselves from civilization, a noise from

the brush startled the threesome. Julia and James stared where the foliage was being obviously disturbed by some jungle animal. Both worried about a random encounter with a mountain gorilla. They always admired these beautiful creatures in captivity but were not overly eager to encounter one face to face. Mama Bolingo pointed toward the sky, directing their gaze with her sharp eyes.

About ten feet up, in the branches of a bonyanga tree, sat a rather irritated looking monkey. Julia had never been much of an animal lover, and even James, who had also received a briefing on local wildlife, could not place the type of primate. The creature simply sat and stared.

“He is studying us,” Mama Bolingo offered. “He wants to learn if we have anything good to eat. I believe he has had many opportunities to get to know man. He seems expectant, like he hopes we hand him some fruit. Let us move along. I do not like these animals; they are very deceptive. In one minute, he could have his hands in your pack, Julia, looking for food.”

“I have no doubt. Let’s get moving.”

The three journeyed for another mile. Before stopping at the barely perceptible entrance to the garden, James pointed out a thick cluster of bright-blue butterflies on something just a few feet off the trail. First, they were enthralled at the sight of thousands of these winged beauties, until they realized that what was attracting them was the carcass of a fully grown okapi, likely inadvertently wounded in a snare, since it’s a protected species under Congolese law.

“Wow! That’s pretty gross!” Julia exclaimed. “Is it normal for butterflies to be scavengers?”

“Actually, it is,” James responded. “When I was hunting with my dad and uncle back in Pennsylvania, I came across a deer, covered in monarchs. It must have been shot by a hunter and ran off just far enough to die alone. Many don’t know that butterflies are part of God’s clean-up crew. The flesh needs to be broken down somehow.”

Julia nodded numbly. They walked only a few more yards and found that they had arrived at their

destination. The opening to the garden plot was cleverly disguised with a well-trained vine that Mama Bolingo pushed aside with her hand. With pride, she stepped in and held the vine back for James and Julia to enter her most prized possession. They were pleased with the layout of the huge garden, probably four acres or more.

“It’s amazing,” Julia complimented. “I never dreamed it would be so large. Give us the tour. Tell us what you’re growing here.”

Beaming, Mama Bolingo led them around the garden. In some areas, she was in the process of clearing an old crop. One very large section was planted with field corn and another with manioc root. A vegetable garden displayed rows of tomatoes, okra, and eggplant, and an additional small section had been dedicated to pineapples. Another plot was freshly planted with nguba, the Lingala word for peanuts, which, like the pineapples, were often used as a cash crop. Finally, all around the garden were healthy fruit trees bearing plantains, bananas, mangoes, lemons, oranges, and avocados,

obviously maintained by a caring hand. The scent of citrus lingered as Mama Bolingo plucked a couple of late blooming oranges for her guests to try before they began their labors. The two praised the delicious fruit to their happy host. Soon the treat was consumed and the work began.

James was assigned the job of harvesting the rest of the oranges and lemons. Mama Bolingo said that there was very little left of the growing season and wanted to sell them in the market to pay for her children's school tuition. While James was busy, Julia weeded the vegetable garden. Mama Bolingo gave herself the job of gathering leaves from the manioc plants that were used to make the greens that made a nightly appearance on the Congolese dinner table. She grouped them into neat packages and soon had fifty small bundles laying on the ground surrounding her. Suddenly, a terrifying sound caught her sharp ears. Mama Bolingo ran toward James with a large stick in one hand and a machete in the other.

Before James even knew what she was reacting to, Mama Bolingo was ferociously attacking a short,

very fat snake, first using the stick to immobilize it. The snake was only a few feet away from where he was standing in the citrus grove. James responded with equal force and joined Mama Bolingo in beating the now lifeless serpent. She lifted the machete and, with a deft stroke, beheaded it. Julia watched in horror as Mama Bolingo moved the completely severed, diamond-shaped head away from the body of the snake. Although detached, the mouth continued to open and close, revealing the deadly fangs.

“What kind a of snake was that?” Julia gasped.

“That,” James paused, his chest heaving with his effort, “was a Gabon viper. One of the deadliest snakes on the planet. Unlike my knowledge of monkeys, I was made very familiar with this thing. Sometimes it is referred to as a two-step. With snakes like these, it’s one bite and two steps later, you die.” James paused for a moment, reflecting on what could have been. “What made you come running, Mama Bolingo? How did you even know it was there?” he asked, still puffing.

“This viper makes a sound, a sound like a growl, not like others that hiss. I knew this because my grandfather used to tell me hunting stories about this snake. I have always feared an encounter like this. I have heard them before, but today is the first time I have seen one with my own eyes. Nzambe Apambolama! God be thanked that I listened to my grandfather.”

James and Julia silently agreed and, although visibly shaken, the two Americans returned to their chores, often jumping at every small sound and peering more intensely into the foliage of the surrounding forest.

Slowly noon arrived; a time to rest and pull out the water bottles and various snacks. Julia’s granola bars were a hit with Mama Bolingo who was new to the crunchy sweetness. Quicker than they wanted, they were back to work on different assignments. The early afternoon dragged by, and Julia found herself completely drained by 3:00 p.m. She sat down to rest, noticing a heavy, humid wind beginning to stir, and asked Mama Bolingo when

they should begin the trip back out to the main road, wondering about a storm.

“We should leave here soon,” Mama Bolingo said, “to arrive back at the road before it begins to get dark. I could not arrange a truck, but each day many pass, going to town to sell their items at market. I have never been without a ride in twenty years of working here. I maybe believe we should begin to go back now,” she said changing her mind, looking worried as she studied the sky. “The wind changing may mean a storm is coming. You seem very tired, and the walk is still before us.”

Julia agreed heartily, and even James with all his endurance training confessed that he, too, was exhausted. They gathered their wares, only now realizing that everything would need to be carried back to the road. Mama Bolingo opened a large sack and assisted James in loading the oranges and lemons into it, then helped to secure it to his back. He led the way down the path with the two women following, each carrying a load of manioc green bundles. Mama Bolingo added a large stack of

firewood to her own load, carefully balancing it on her head.

Although drained of energy, the idea of returning to civilization, a shower, and comfort motivated them to keep placing one foot in front of the other. The wind strengthened as they neared the end of the path.

Chapter Thirteen

Julia knew that they were only a few minutes from reaching their destination at the roadside. She felt a strange mixture of relief and worry. Something was nagging her mind. She kept glancing forward to James and could not help but notice him frequently peering into the gathering gloom of the forest on either side of the path. She wondered what was catching his attention. Too far away to ask, she felt the uneasiness of the sense increasing, but felt helpless to do anything about it. A backward look to Mama Bolingo showed she was sporting a furrowed brow. Was she, too, worried about something?

Suddenly, the shared concern took on a more noticeable form as all three stopped briefly to stare intently into the forest on the right side of the path.

“I am very scared,” Mama Bolingo expressed. “I believe that something or someone is watching us closely as we walk along. Let us move more quickly. We must reach the road very soon.”

James, more used to the need for a speedy response than the women, resumed the trek with a faster, more intense pace, but to no avail. Without forewarning, the three were suddenly surrounded by armed men, each carrying Russian made assault rifles and at least one knife on their belts. One soldier stepped boldly up to James and held a razor-sharp knife to his throat while a second man searched him for weapons and cash. A tall, sinewy, young soldier grabbed Julia and placed a greasy, sweaty hand over her mouth to prevent any irritating screams. Mama Bolingo immediately began praying out loud while negotiating with the men in a local dialect. She was shoved off the path by the man guarding Julia and lost footing when her load shifted. The soldier began addressing both Julia and James in disjointed English.

“You are from America? Why in Congo? Spies? Are you a soldier?” he asked James directly. Julia found this assessment extremely troubling as he had no reason to suspect anything. James was not even dressed in fatigues.

Without hesitation, James answered that he was not, before firing back with a command of his own. "Identify yourself," he demanded confidently. "Who are you?"

"We are Bitumba Sida, the most powerful group in the east!" the man responded while pressing the blade more firmly, breaking into James' skin near his collar bone. Although blood began to trickle down, James did not flinch. "We are fighting for the liberation of Congo from foreign oppressors. You must follow us. No speech. No communication between you and the woman."

Shocked into silence and nearly incapable of walking, Julia stumbled forward, following James while worrying about the stern warrior a half step behind her. A glance backward to see how Mama Bolingo was doing, revealed that she was nowhere to be seen. More men had piled out of the forest onto the path surrounding the captives in front and back, but her Congolese friend was not visible.

Julia wondered feebly at her absence and hoped it meant that she had been able to elude the rebels

and prayed that she would find a way back to Goma and get help. Unfortunately, Julia's glance behind her made her captor curious. He too looked back, but it seemed as if Mama Bolingo's presence had either been forgotten, or she was unimportant to the agenda, so her absence was of no concern.

It was a short and terrifying walk back to the main road. The only vehicle in sight appeared to belong to this armed group. A man was waiting at the wheel of the deuce and a half, a bygone military truck, and several men armed with AK 47s and RPGs moved forward to meet the group as it emerged from the forest onto the dirt road. Julia was lifted effortlessly into the back of the World War II vehicle. James climbed nimbly up beside her, but they were quickly separated by the soldiers to opposite sides of the truck bed to keep them from communicating; not before he was able to give her shoulder a reassuring squeeze, however.

The truck began a slow movement northward, leaving hope for return to Goma farther behind with each passing kilometer. Terrified and trembling,

Julia, wedged shoulder to shoulder between two leering soldiers, prayed silently for the first time since the intrusion of the warriors onto the path:
Dear God, help; help us!

She began to weep softly, but it still got the attention of every person in the truck bed, especially James who cleared his throat to draw Julia's glance his way. He couldn't have her falling apart when he needed her strong. He was familiar enough with her character to know that she was now nearly frozen with fear, but also that her faith was steadfast. She looked up and somehow ascertained exactly what James was thinking. She was aware that he wanted her to regain control of herself and was asking her to be stronger than she was naturally capable of being. Somehow, that unspoken message had the effect he wanted. She immediately stopped her tears and tightened her mouth.

The soldiers in the truck understood that some unspoken message had passed between the two captives, and they didn't like it. The one seated beside Julia was the most superstitious among them

and wondered if the man and woman were speaking through spirits that indwelled them. He looked at Julia strangely and scooted a fraction of an inch away from her. He didn't always approve of the actions of his leaders, and he was not about to get mixed up with a potentially dangerous woman possessing *nkisi*, a powerful spiritual medicine.

As the truck traveled north, the sun set, and the world plunged into darkness. Only the ancient lanterns in front sent a weak beam forward into the night. More than an hour later, the driver finally stopped. The men piled out, Julia was helped to the ground, and James jumped down beside her. They were made to understand that they would continue on foot. Flashlights emerged. The two Americans were separated once again by their captors, and a tiresome trek began.