

Chapter 1

Kidnapped!

Violence and bloodshed spread across Zaire like wildfire. But nowhere were the effects as chilling as in Kinshasa, the capital. The soldiers and police, formerly the people's protectors, had become the ones most feared. They had been given a license to steal and kill at will, trapping the eight million residents of the capital in a nightmare of fear.

When Mobutu Sese Seko came to power in Republic of the Congo, he promised a new government that would bring the good life to all. He pledged to redistribute the wealth from the expanding gold and diamond mines. Under his leadership, the country would become the wealthiest nation in all of Africa. As a monument to his leadership and progressive new policies, he changed the name of the country to Zaire.

Unfortunately, his promises proved to be only political pretense. After nearly two decades of Mobutu's "progressive reforms," the monetary system devaluated beyond usefulness, making it impossible for any

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kind of banking system to function. With the collapse of the economy, the postal system also collapsed. As the national infrastructure deteriorated, desperate shortages were experienced throughout the country. The clinics and hospitals were simply buildings filled with beds and empty shelves and staffed by frustrated medical professionals.

Rather than redistributing the wealth, Mobutu's regime became one of the most ruthless and greedy in history. All of the country's resources flowed into his personal coffers, amassing billions and billions of dollars. As a result, paying the salaries of the military, police, and civil servants was a thing of the past. For two long years, they had struggled to exist with only promises for pay. By 1994, they were desperate!

People talked about a delegation of military officers and police who were chosen to present their case before Mobutu. After listening only briefly to their pleading for compensation, Mobutu silenced them with a solution more inhumane than any could have imagined. Looking coldly into the faces of his petitioners, he sneered, "Why are you coming to me for money? You have guns, go and get what you want from the people."

Not only was there nothing keeping the soldiers from ravaging the citizens of Zaire, but it was very possible that they had been given the strongest injunction to join the criminals on the streets. Those employing the most inhumane stratemilitia groups of organized criminals. Changing from their fatigues to civilian clothes made it impossible to distinguish them from other citizens. Most of them found it wasn't easy to transition from peacekeeping soldiers to vicious, cold-blooded killers. However, after resorting to drugs and alcohol, as did the criminals, they became capable of the most unimaginable bloodshed and cruelty.

The sounds of gunshots and victims' screams could be heard regularly throughout the city. People were robbed in broad daylight on streets or sidewalks and then shot as just part of a day's work.

Uniformed police stopped people and demanded their watches, billfolds, or briefcases. If they complied without protest, they often were rewarded with the privilege of another day of life. But if they resisted or turned for a second look, the officer simply drew his gun and shot

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them. The victims were then dumped into the Congo River just outside the city. Within minutes, the waiting crocodiles would devour the evidence.

The women of the city were also brutally victimized. Whether day or night, at home or in the street, women were vulnerable. Frequently, women, as well as young girls, could be heard screaming in pain while pleading for mercy. But their cries for mercy were met with taunting, jeering, and mocking. Whether they lived or died, it was of little consequence. It was as if the heart and conscience of Kinshasa's protectors had been removed in Mobutu's palace.

Near the end of Mobutu's reign, the Division leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church chose Kinshasa, Zaire, as the location for the newly formed West Zaire Union. Agreeing to serve as the new president, Pastor Paul Ratsara moved his family from central Madagascar.

Pioneering the new Union was a daunting task, aided by only a couple of departmental leaders and their secretaries. They had no building to use as an office and no personnel even if they had one. It was under these most forbidding circumstances that a handful of men and women knelt in prayer, asking for wisdom to lead the rapidly growing church in the Congo.

Soon a large, vacant mansion, built during the Belgian occupancy, was discovered. With its many spacious rooms, it would adequately function as the new office building. In answer to their earnest entreaties, God soon blessed the leaders with a team of dedicated workers. But in the midst of such dire national chaos, every step forward came with great difficulty. With each challenge, they watched and waited for God to open the way before them.

Pastor Ratsara felt blessed to have a team of dedicated men and women working together as a harmonious unit. As the Union secretary, Pastor Nshimba became his closest associate. Pastor Nshimba's deep spirituality and humble spirit clearly contributed to the cohesiveness of their group. Together, Pastor Ratsara and Pastor Nshimba pointed their

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team to the One who was not hampered by human impossibilities.

One afternoon Pastor Nshimba and his wife left the office early to purchase some necessary supplies. After completing their shopping, they returned to their car with their arms loaded. Just as they reached the car, five armed men surrounded them.

“Give us the keys to your car!” demanded the leader. Startled, Pastor Nshimba and his wife looked up into gun barrels pointed directly at them, then into the steel-cold eyes of the men holding the guns. This was not a joke; with their fingers pressed against the triggers, it was quite clear the men meant business.

“No, I cannot give you the keys,” Pastor Nshimba replied firmly, looking directly at the leader.

“I didn’t ask if you wanted to give me the keys! I’m telling you, if you want to live, you better hand them over right now!” the leader demanded angrily.

“No, that’s impossible. I use this car every day for my work as a church administrator,” Pastor Nshimba replied determinedly.

“Then give me your briefcase!” screamed the gangster, shaking his gun at the pastor.

Pastor Nshimba’s mind raced as he mentally inventoried the contents of his briefcase. If he should surrender his briefcase, a number of important documents inside could not be replaced. He resolved not to give in to their demands.

“No, I cannot give that to you either,” he responded with increasing determination.

BANG! BANG! BANG! Three shots ended the standoff as quickly as it had begun, with the gunmen fleeing from sight. Mrs. Nshimba looked on in horror as her husband slumped to the pavement with blood oozing from three holes in his shirt.

Terrified, Mrs. Nshimba screamed for help as she crouched by her husband lying in a pool of blood. Her frantic cries were heard by a sympathetic passing driver. Together, they slid Pastor Nshimba into the backseat as he faded out from consciousness.

“Oh, please hang on,” Mrs. Nshimba prayed as they raced for the hospital.

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Mrs. Nshimba quickly sent a message to the Union office, informing them of her husband's senseless shooting and need for emergency surgery. The news of the terrible tragedy spread quickly from office to office. When the news reached Pastor Ratsara, he quickly called his staff together to intercede for their friend hanging in the balance between life and death. Kneeling in a circle, they prayed for God's intervention on behalf of their colleague and for the surgeons who would soon begin the operation attempting to save his life.

"Lord, as the Great Physician, please come and stand beside the surgeons, guiding their hands as they work to save Your servant's life. Fill their minds with wisdom and understanding beyond their training. We know You are still able to heal with a simple touch. In Your Word, You ask us to consider if Your hand has been shortened or hindered from being able to redeem; then You ask us if we believe You still have power to deliver from the enemy. Lord, You told us all things are possible if we believe and we want to confess together right now that we believe in Your power," Pastor Ratsara began the prayer with his staff.

When their prayer ended, Pastor Ratsara rose from his knees but still continued to pray silently as he walked to his car. He could think of only one thing, being near Mr. and Mrs. Nshimba in their emergency. All across town he continued to pray as he made his way through the heavy traffic to the hospital.

At the hospital, Pastor Ratsara joined Mrs. Nshimba for the long night ahead of them. Beginning at 9:00 P.M., they waited anxiously hour after hour as the surgeons labored to repair the damage caused by the three bullets. After six long hours, three exhausted surgeons stepped from the operating room.

Though the surgeons provided the best care available in the city, they weren't able to do all that needed to be done. With very little equipment and medical supplies, the surgeons were hampered in the procedures they could perform. The empty supply shelves repeatedly left the medical staff feeling helpless and frustrated. This was no exception. After removing portions of damaged organs and a long section of colon, they were extremely concerned about Pastor Nshimba's chances for recovery.

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After three days, the head surgeon called to update Pastor Ratsara on Pastor Nshimba's condition. It was imperative that he receive advanced medical care because the three bullets had caused not only extensive internal injuries but also serious spinal column damage. In addition, without the needed medication, they were completely helpless to manage an almost certain systemic infection. Pastor Nshimba's condition was critical. He needed to be transported as quickly as possible to South Africa to a fully equipped intensive care center in order to stabilize his condition. The surgeon explained they would need nine airline seats for his medical transport and attending staff.

After two unsuccessful days of searching for the needed tickets, Pastor Ratsara knelt by his desk and began to pour out his heart in prayer, "Lord, lead me to a travel agent that can help us. You know with only two flights a week, it's nearly impossible to find even one seat on a plane to South Africa, let alone the nine needed for the doctor, Mrs. Nshimba, and the bed on the plane. Lord, I accepted the position as president of the West Zaire Union with the assurance You would show me what to do each step of the way. I need Your wisdom and help right now. Please come and show me what to do. You have been true to Your word all through my life. You promised, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you,' and You never have. I claim Your promise again today and praise Your name that You have a solution for every problem, even before I call. Heavenly Father, I pray Your name will be honored and glorified even in this terrible tragedy. I bring my request before You in Jesus' name, amen."

Feeling the urgency, Pastor Ratsara decided to put everything aside and try to locate the tickets himself. *I might as well start with the manager of the travel agency we regularly use for the office*, he thought to himself as he put the key into the ignition.

Glancing from side to side, Pastor Ratsara began looking for somewhere to park near the travel agency. *I can easily walk from here*, he thought, spotting an opening beside a large hotel about a block away. Grabbing his briefcase, he crossed the busy boulevard, darting between cars to reach the sidewalk on the other side.

I sure hope they can help us find some tickets, Pastor Ratsara thought,

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as he began the short walk to the travel agency.

Hearing footsteps behind him, Pastor Ratsara glanced over his shoulder and noticed a young man who appeared to be following him. This was nothing new; often street people followed foreigners, hoping to annoy them enough to receive some kind of “gift.” *He’ll probably get tired and give up if I just pick up the pace a bit*, he thought to himself.

“Hey, mister, wait up a minute; I want to talk to you,” the young man called.

This guy sure is persistent; he isn’t giving up like the others, Pastor Ratsara told himself as he picked up his pace.

Seeing the travel agency just ahead, he breathed a sigh of relief. *Once I’m inside, he’ll no doubt look for someone else to harass*, he reassured himself. But the sound of the footsteps came even closer.

I wonder what this guy is up to. I don’t like the way this is beginning to feel, he whispered under his breath.

All at once, the young man sprinted around in front of him and ordered, “Get into the car.”

Pastor Ratsara glanced over at the small brown Toyota parked right beside him with three men waiting inside.

Lord help me, he prayed silently, hoping for some miraculous intervention.

“I said, ‘Get into the car!’ ” the young man commanded.

“No, I can’t. I have something very important to do,” Pastor Ratsara pleaded.

“I said, ‘Get into the car!’ ” repeated the young man as he pulled his shirt away from a large gun tucked under his belt.

Staring at the gun, Pastor Ratsara decided it wouldn’t be wise to resist as Pastor Nshimba had done; he would comply and pray that somehow he would be able to negotiate once he was inside the car. Pastor Ratsara’s mind raced as he realized that what had just happened to his secretary was now happening to him! *Is this the way my life will end? Has God brought me all this way just to die in a foreign country?*

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With his life hanging in the balance, Pastor Ratsara's thoughts rapidly turned back the pages of time to Vohitraivo, his home village in Madagascar. Memories of his early years began to flash before him. In an instant, he was barefoot, three-year-old Tsarasaotra, looking up into his mother's warm, smiling face.

"Mama, I finished cleaning the yard. May I go visit Grandpa, please, please?" he pleaded.

"Yes, you've been a good helper today; you may go visit for a while," his mother replied, looking down at her earnest petitioner.

I'm sure glad we live in the royal village; it makes me feel special, Tsarasaotra thought to himself as he wiggled his toes in the warm dirt of the path leading through the village. He also knew he was special, being the firstborn son of the chief medicine man of the village. The respect and admiration of the other villagers felt good; even though he was young, he knew he was important—he was the great-grandson of the last king of the region before the French occupation.

The main path leading through the village cut through the cluster of huts, permitting him to see what everyone was doing. It was fun waving to his cousins as they played. Each of the neatly woven thatch huts were constructed similarly, with a main family room on one side and a kitchen on the other, separated by a large storage area. Looking into the open kitchens as he walked along the path, he could see the large rice pots that would soon be steaming for supper. Some of the girls were peeling cassava, while others were cleaning beans to cook with their rice. On his way home, his stomach would no doubt growl as the savory smells drifted back to greet him.

Reaching the village square, he stopped at the foot of the large stone monument marking the burial place of his great-great-grandfather, the king of a vast region of Madagascar. As he walked past the huts at the far end of the square, he decided he would ask his grandfather to tell him about the king who lived in their village long ago.

"Grandpa, please tell me the story about the king," little Tsarasaotra began as he walked over to the place his grandfather was stacking his freshly cut firewood. With a twinkle in his eye, the old man paused from his chore to entertain his little visitor.

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“Tsarasaotra, you remember that my grandfather was the king of the many villages surrounding us until France came to colonize our island,” he began his familiar speech. “Even though the French made him take off his crown, everyone still treated him as the king. He still ruled this entire region of Madagascar. I used to come and sit with him just like you and I do. From my earliest years, he trained me in the ways of the spirits to have power among the gods. I spent hour after hour memorizing all the genealogies of our ancestors; that’s why they now honor me with the most power. Soon, you, too, will learn the names of our ancestors to carry on as the next powerful medicine man. Because of your high calling, *Tsarasaotra* was chosen as your name. This name denotes honor and your royal heritage. It also declares to the entire village that someday you, too, will be a powerful medicine man. It doesn’t matter that the French won’t allow us to wear our crowns; the spirits still honor us with the highest power. So, Tsarasaotra, you must always walk with your head high; one day you will be the chief medicine man. The spirits have declared you to be the chosen one.” Grandfather ended his story with a smile.

Just as the well-rehearsed speech ended, Grandma came with a plate of cookies still warm from the kitchen. “You don’t like these coconut cookies anymore, do you?” she teased, holding one out to him.

“You know they’re my favorite, Grandma,” Tsarasaotra said with a grin.

“Here is another one for your walk home; you better run now so you won’t be late for supper,” she said with a pat on his cheek.

He smiled as he walked back through the village. Tomorrow was his birthday, and he would be four. For days he had heard his mother and father planning the celebration. He wasn’t quite sure what circumcision was all about, but the way everyone kept talking about it, was sure to be fun; more important, it was going to be just for him.

Early the next morning, family, friends, and relatives began to arrive. It didn’t take long until the baskets of food carried by the women began to fill the air with enticing aromas. Soon the uncle chosen to be Tsarasaotra’s guardian, arrived. Together, the men gathered outside the house sharing their wisdom while the women shared the latest news in the kitchen.

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The air was full of fun and laughter as the master of ceremonies proclaimed, "It's time to go for the sticks," leaving Tsarasaotra and his uncle alone in the yard to wait for the stick ritual.

After the feasting was finished, Tsarasaotra's grandfather stood to begin the stick ceremony. Dressed in his new clothes, sewn just for the occasion, Tsarasaotra and his uncle stepped forward to begin the ceremony. Lifting Tsarasaotra to his shoulders, his chosen uncle began to run around the house while the other uncles chased them.

"Life will be hard; you must be brave," the men chanted in unison while swatting the legs of his guardian in fun as they ran.

Soon the ritual was over. The medicine man then performed the rite of circumcision, and the ceremony was over.

Sitting in the shade of the tree in the front yard the next afternoon, Tsarasaotra decided this thing called circumcision was not really fun at all. It was easy for everyone else to be full of smiles and laughter; they simply ate lots of good food and then went home.

I'm not sure eating lots of food and getting new clothes was really worth it, he thought as he tried to stand to his feet.

Now that he was four, Tsarasaotra was responsible for keeping the yard clean with the bush rake. Each day as the older boys went out to watch the cows, he faithfully cleaned the yard. He knew it must be really clean when he was finished, or Mama would let him know about it. Very early he learned she wanted no nonsense when it came to work. Everyone in the family had to do his or her part. But as often as possible, he made the short walk to the other side of the village to visit his grandfather. Who wouldn't? His grandfather clearly favored him over his brothers and sisters. With endless treats waiting for him, he looked for any excuse he could think of for another visit.

Being the grandson of the richest man in the village was nice, but it didn't entitle him to free time while others worked. With each passing year, more responsibilities were added to his list of chores. From the age of six, he was expected to help with the cattle and work the farmland. Owning the largest fields and biggest herds meant putting in many long hours, but it was worth it. Their family had not experienced the hunger and privation that many of the villagers struggled with from time to time.

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Learning the ways of the spirits also occupied much of their family's time. Repeatedly, his father reminded him it was of utmost importance to please the spirits at all times. Often his family had witnessed a villager or even entire families receive punishment for displeasing the spirits. Sometimes it was sickness, other times it was crop failure, and in extreme cases, even death. Fear of displeasing the spirits was the people's first thought each morning and the last at night. Life was lived in constant fear of invoking their displeasure due to their ever-changing demands.

To please the demanding spirits was not an easy task. For example, in some areas halfway to the rice fields, the spirits might command everyone to turn around and go to the cassava fields. The next day when the villagers were walking to the cassava fields, the spirits might order everyone to go back to the rice fields. Some days the villagers would arrive at a field only to be told they had worn the wrong clothes. They had no choice but to return home and change.

The women experienced the same kind of chaotic harassment while attempting to do ordinary household chores. For no apparent reason, the spirits might declare there was to be no fire in the kitchen for the day, creating extreme difficulty with food preparation. If the girls dared to express anger or frustration, they could be sure severe punishment would follow. The lives of the villagers were lived in anxiety and bewilderment as to how to please the spirits.

For generations, the village fathers had regarded the spirits as their powerful ancestors, mighty warriors who had died but lived on in the spirit world. It was generally believed they had retained their power in death and had gone on to become gods. The ancestors held the power for success or failure for all who lived under their domain. Since these spirits could see and know every detail in each person's life both day and night, there was never a moment's rest from the fear of their punishment.

As the chief medicine man, Tsarasaotra's father was ever mindful to respect the spirits in their home. He dedicated one corner of the main room just for holy articles and his place of worship. Several times each week, he gathered his family to their holy corner. In this corner, he had one special place just for the talismans. These spirit charms needed to

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be carried at all times for protection from angry spirits.

Faithfully, he performed a morning ritual for his family's safety. From the holy articles, he took the revered bowl filled with water. He then carefully dropped the talisman selected by the spirits into the bowl of water. Next, he praised the ancestors in the order of their genealogy for the wonderful things they had done. When he felt he had declared sufficient praise to satisfy the spirits, he called each family member over to the bowl. One by one, they dipped their sacred spoon into the holy water. As they drank the water from their spoons, they were assured the spirits' protection and pleasure for their faithfulness.

The most holy of the articles in the sacred corner was the anthill. The anthill began with just a few exploring ants but soon grew into a thriving colony. The spirits were very jealous of this anthill, declaring it of sacred origin. They forbid that the ants must ever be disturbed as these were holy ants. Consequently, the anthill continued to grow year by year. His father often smiled as he saw the way the spirits continued to bless the anthill with thousands and thousands of additional ants. After several years, the anthill grew to nearly four feet tall. All in the family were thankful for the token of special favor.

The rituals varied from family to family, but all faithfully attempted to obey the spirits' commands. The medicine men were regularly sought for wisdom and instruction as to how to please the spirits. The medicine men varied in degrees of power and favor with the ancestors. Those just establishing their practice were classified as level-one medicine men. When villagers sought their help to locate their lost cattle, they had to spend much time in incantations and pleading with the spirits before the spirits would render the help they sought. Through much dedication and genealogy memorization, level-one medicine men could become level-two medicine men. When level-two medicine men asked for revelations, they received answers very quickly. Very few became chief medicine men, or level three. The spirits dwelt in these favored ones at all times, providing them with special powers of clairvoyance and wisdom. Through the spirits' power, they could inform a villager where their lost cows could be found, even before they mentioned they were missing. They were directly connected to the highest god above

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all the ancestors, who called himself the “creator god.” Tsarasaotra was proud to be the son of such a powerful and favored level-three medicine man.

In addition to the daily harassment of the demonic spirits masquerading as ancestors living on in the grave, it was a real challenge for each family to grow enough food to last until the next harvest. Working the land with animals was a slow, difficult process. In order to plow enough farmland for a single family, many long, hot hours guiding the plow through the fields were required.

A large portion of farmland was devoted to growing rice, the staple crop. Growing rice was not a simple matter either. Large mud beds had to be created to germinate the rice. After it sprouted and began to grow, each little plant had to be transplanted in the field. Even after the transplanted rice became healthy, the battle was far from over. If the rains came at the wrong time, it meant very little food for the coming year. When a neighbor’s cow got free and into a field, it could mean a substantial loss for the year. If all went well and a good harvest followed, the rice had to have proper storage to keep it from spoiling. Storing the rice was another challenge all in itself.

The farmers in Madagascar had used a unique rice storage process for as long as anyone could remember. Very large, deep wells were dug into the ground to keep the rice cool and dry. The larger the farm, the bigger the storage well needed to be.

Very early on, what to call the rice storage wells became a troubling dilemma. The naming of the rice wells was no doubt significant enough to engage the collective wisdom of all the village fathers. This name-selecting process probably didn’t happen in just a day but rather over many long days of discussion and contemplation.

When the elders emerged from their conference, a very appropriate name for the rice storage wells had been chosen. Today, the chosen name still stands; the name every family uses for their rice well is the same: “the hole where you put the rice.” Once this name was established, never thereafter has any confusion arisen concerning the purpose for these holes. The council involved in the name-selection process had, without question, chosen wisely.

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The screeching tires of a swerving car jarred Pastor Ratsara's attention back to the crisis at hand. Frantically, he looked up and down the busy city street, searching for a sign that someone would come to his rescue. *How can I be abducted in the middle of the day on one of the busiest streets in Kinshasa without anyone willing to help?* he wondered in bewilderment.

While making one last glance in search of someone who might rescue him, Pastor Ratsara felt the young man firmly grab his arm and shove him toward the open car door.

"Quit stalling and get in the car," repeated a gruff voice from the other side of the backseat.

Ducking into the backseat, Pastor Ratsara slid over next to a large man on the far side of the backseat. In a flash, his young assailant jumped in beside him, slamming the door—and they were off.

"Lord, long ago I learned the words from the psalm where You promise that even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, You would keep me from fear," Pastor Ratsara prayed earnestly. "Many times we have walked this valley together. I'm so grateful You have always given me freedom from the fear of death. I need the gift of Your peace again. I know You see I'm being held captive by these desperate men who probably have my harm or even death in mind. So, dear Lord, if You will give me Your peace once again, I will walk this valley. I know You will not allow fear to hold me prisoner. I want to thank You that Your promises never fail. So even in my captivity, I surrender my life once again to Your will, heavenly Father."

I wonder where they're taking me, Pastor Ratsara thought to himself.