

# **KIDNAPPED**

The Abduction of  
the Bongo Mission  
Medical Staff

## **IN ANGOLA**

**VICTORIA DUARTE**

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## CHAPTER 1

# Welcome and Farewell

It had been a day of intense activity at the Adventist mission hospital in Bongo, in southern Angola, and I was exhausted. After completing my final rounds at the hospital and leaving orders for the Angolan nurses who would be on night duty, I was finally able to go home and get some rest.

Making myself comfortable, I began working on a program for Mother's Day that we had postponed until June 13. A drama about a modern prodigal, it was well adapted for presentation by our talented African youth from the nearby seminary.

I heard a soft noise. Was that someone knocking? I opened the door; the person who had been leaning against the door shoved his way in abruptly. Recognizing a young man from the seminary who was making signs for me to be quiet, I stifled a scream.

I quickly closed the door behind him and asked in a whisper what was going on.

"Government soldiers!" he replied, with fear in his eyes. "They are coming with authorization to take all of us and force us into military service. We will have to hide until they're gone. Some of my friends have already run off into the forest; others are hiding in that abandoned house at the end of the property. Two friends and I want to hide in the empty house next door." I had the keys to the house beside mine, so I let them in through the back door, urging them to keep quiet.

The next day brought news of the capture of sixty young men in a nearby village. Among them was a student from our seminary. After a very brief training, they would be sent to the front. This raid was a hard blow for the seminary, which had to suspend classes until the threat had passed.

The officers were convinced that the young men must be hiding someplace nearby, but they were not authorized to enter private homes, so they

stationed guards at strategic places around the mission to catch any who appeared.

I had to figure out a way to provide food for my young friends without being seen by the guards. At times, I would communicate with them through a series of taps on the wall. Then, after dark, they would slip over to my house, where we could eat together and exchange a few words of encouragement. I was the only one who knew about their hiding place. After a time, the soldiers must have suspected something because one of them was assigned to stand directly in front of my house.

At times, it seemed I was an actor in a police movie. Early in the morning, after taking care of my friends by the back door, I would put on my uniform and go striding out the front door with an air of great tranquility, passing right by the soldier, who would look at me with obvious suspicion. I would greet him in a friendly way and go on to the hospital, praying to God that my neighbors would not make too much noise. They peeked nervously through the curtains, admiring my courage.

The soldiers remained at the seminary for a week. We were afraid the young male nurses might also be taken. Every morning, the first thing I asked when I arrived at the hospital was whether they were all still there.

The scenes of Sabbath, April 1, were still fresh in my memory. One of our helpers brought the startling news that fourteen of our employees had been loaded onto a military truck and taken to an unknown destination.

Immediately, Dr. Sabaté went to the police to see whether he could get some sort of information. “We are at war, and these actions have a political cause” was the only explanation.

We were all deeply concerned. The mission seemed lifeless as we struggled to work under a heavy cloud of great fear and foreboding. Overwhelmed with stress, I decided to shut myself in the little library, where I wept and prayed.

Hoping to pressure the authorities, we closed the hospital and only took care of emergencies while Dr. Sabaté worked to negotiate the freedom of our employees.

Shortly after that, rumors began circulating about the prisoners. They were accused of collaborating with the government’s opposition party, UNITA (The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola). It was clear that our situation could quickly become extremely dangerous.

Nevertheless, four days later, the employees were released as unexpectedly as they had been arrested. The news of their release spread rapidly, and when the truck brought them back, more than five hundred people from nearby villages came to welcome them with songs and African dances.

As June 7 dawned, the mission prepared to receive Pastor Ronaldo Oliveira, who would be arriving at any moment with his family. They were from Brazil and would live in a little house next to mine, which was very good news for me. Alexander Justino, the director of the seminary, made a special effort, with the help of the young women students, to prepare the house for its new occupants. But we wondered what the pastor would say when he learned he would not be able to teach classes because all the students were in hiding.

That morning, it was my turn to present a devotional thought to the hospital staff and patients, and I wondered how I would be able to do it. In their faces, I saw fear, suffering, and anxiety. There were young women who did not know where their husbands were and mothers whose sons had disappeared. There were the wounded. There were widows and widowers whose spouses were victims of the conflict.

What could I say to them? What did I know of the depth of their anguish?

I opened my Bible to Psalm 23. After reading it, I was able to say, "The Lord is, indeed, our Shepherd, but He has not promised that we will not suffer. As long as we live in this world, we must be prepared to deal with the consequences of evil. At times, we will even walk through the valley of the shadow of death, but we need not fear the evil things that may happen because the Lord is right there with us. He is at our side." Even as I spoke those words, I wondered whether I truly believed them.

After the morning devotions, we began our normal activities for the day.

I was especially worried about two cases: two newborn infants, children of malnourished mothers, who were struggling to survive in our old incubator. That obsolete electric box represented, in many cases, the only hope for babies. We often used bags filled with warm water to help it maintain the right temperature for the infants.

The supply of nutritional concentrate had also run out, but people continued to bring us children with severe kwashiorkor, the devastating illness caused by protein deficiency. We often saw patients with diarrhea, dermatitis, and dementia, the symptoms of pellagra caused by the lack of vitamin B<sub>3</sub> in their diet. We began testing a new mixture of eggs and milk, to which we added vitamins. We saved the lives of some of the children, but in spite of all our efforts, we still lost many.

That fateful week, five babies died from nutritional deficiencies. We were distraught. Nevertheless, that same week, five more babies were brought in who were in the same condition.

On June 9 at three o'clock in the afternoon, the Oliveira family arrived.

We welcomed them as best we could. Since no students were present, we decided to hold a reception for them in the local church on Sabbath.

After the evening meal, I agreed to meet Rosmarie Oliveira in the morning. She planned to come to my house and prepare breakfast for her thirteen-month-old baby. When we stopped at the Oliveiras' house, we noticed that there were neither blinds nor curtains on the windows. I ran to the hospital and brought some sheets to improvise some drapes. As we sewed them together, I told them a little about the war, trying not to frighten them too much.

The Oliveiras were tired and wanted to rest. But as we were saying good night, we realized that there was no key to lock their door. Knowing that this could be dangerous, we searched diligently but could not find it. I couldn't understand how it had happened. How could a bunch of keys suddenly disappear? Finally, we decided to reverse the lock so that it could be opened only from inside. The makeshift solution seemed to work.

I said good night to the family and went back to the hospital for a final night round. Then I headed home, where I laid out provisions for the baby's breakfast. After a shower, I paused for a brief meditation. I was very happy about the arrival of the Oliveiras. Having new neighbors from the same continent was special for me. But I still felt the need for a single nursing colleague like myself—someone with whom I could talk and exchange experiences. Five months earlier, we had been told that a Portuguese nurse who was living in Germany would be coming, but since that time, we had heard no more. There was nothing to do but continue to wait. In the face of the apparent lack of answer to my prayers, I prayed once again, "Lord, send the help that I need."

It was close to midnight when, at last, I was able to retire and get some rest. As I drifted off to sleep, I recalled that the following day, June 10, would be a day of special celebration for the armed forces. A few minutes later, I fell into a deep sleep.

Suddenly, I woke up, startled. An intense exchange of gunfire could be heard coming from the direction of the military station. The full moon was spreading such brightness over the night scene that I thought it must be about six o'clock in the morning and that the soldiers were probably getting an early start on the celebration of their special day. But the boom of heavy artillery and the sound of automatic weapons and grenades soon convinced me otherwise.

I jumped out of bed and looked at the clock. "It can't be true!" I told myself, seeing the hands pointing to 1:36 A.M. Still not believing my eyes, I looked for the clock on my radio. It also said 1:36 A.M. My terror was

overwhelming as I realized the war had now come to us in full force.

I have never known such fear. I began to shake uncontrollably as I stood before the window, "Lord, help us!" I cried. "We are in terrible danger. Please, take care of us: the Sabaté family, the Oliveiras who have just come. All of us who live here."

In my heart, I reproached myself for not having been more specific with the Oliveiras, for not having told them more about our situation. They needed to know that under no circumstance must they leave their house to try to get away. I wanted to run to them and tell them, but I thought that they would be greatly frightened by my sudden arrival if they were sleeping. Furthermore, I was afraid to go out with such a firefight going on. I stood at the window praying intensely but with my eyes open to see what was happening outside.

Suddenly a group of soldiers appeared at the entrance to the hospital. They pounded violently on the door. I could see the nurse allowing them to enter. *They must have some wounded*, I thought. *I should go and help.*

I imagined our current patients, so vulnerable and defenseless in the face of an attack. How frightened they must be. I thought it likely that they would try to run and hide. I wanted to go and reassure them, but I remained in front of the window, not knowing what to do.

Still shaking, I began to knock on the wall to communicate with the young people in the adjoining house. Someone responded, and I felt a bit more at ease.

I turned to look again out the window. In the hospital, something strange was happening. The frantic movements were not like those of the soldiers we knew. Furthermore, they began carrying out large bundles of things tied up in sheets, evidently loaded with hospital supplies.

Then I had a clear understanding of what was happening. *These are not the government soldiers we know; this is the opposition, the guerrilla army, UNITA, and they will come to take me.*

For a year and a half, I had been afraid, thinking of the day "they" would come for me. In my mind, I often organized my flight and thought about where I would hide. Nevertheless, now only one uninterrupted prayer came from my lips. "Lord, what should I do? What will I do and say? When they come, show me what to do, please!"

Suddenly I saw a group of soldiers running toward my house from opposite where I heard the sounds of shooting. "Here they come," I said under my breath.

As quickly as possible, I pulled the jeans I had worn the previous day over my pajamas and turned again toward the window. "Lord, show me

what to do, please! Please, Lord, help me! I don't know what to do." At no time did I think of attempting to get away.

As the running soldiers turned the corner, I lost sight of them. Seconds later, I heard the thunder of heavy boots, then violent blows on a door, but it was not mine. I could see no one through the window. I ran to the back door. Nothing! Unable to understand where the pounding was coming from, I ran from window to window like a caged animal, overwhelmed by panic. It all seemed like a terrifying nightmare. That horrible shooting seemed endless. It did not occur to me that they might take anyone other than me. I never thought they could be pounding on the door of the Oliveiras.

I was beginning to calm down when I again heard voices. And then I saw them, this time, at my own door. "The time has come," I said to myself, "and there is nothing I can do."

An amazing calm overtook me. Suddenly I stopped trembling as if a mysterious hand had taken away my fear. I knew then what I had to do. *I will remain calm and try to delay them. And to discover their purpose, I thought.*

I believe the Lord allowed me to be fully awake and prepare myself mentally for the arrival of the guerrillas at my door. I had feared them so much that if they had found me sleeping, the shock would have been very hard to take.

"Nurse, get up! Nurse, get up!" they repeated.

"I am already up," I answered. "Who are you?"

But their loud pounding kept them from hearing me.

"Nurse, nurse, get up!"

"Here I am. What do you want?"

One of them heard me and came to the window. "We are messengers from UNITA, and we have come to look for you. We have a very important message for you. Open the door."

The word *UNITA* was terrifying. "A message for me?"

The soldier who spoke had in his hand a paper with a photo of his president on which could be read in large black letters the word *UNITA*.

"Yes, our president wants to talk with you, and he has sent us to take you."

"Who is your president?" I asked, trying desperately to win time.

"President Savimbi. Don't you know him? He wants to talk with you. Open the door. We are going to help you get your things ready. We will take everything you need for the journey."

"But I don't want to go with you. The mission and the patients here need me."



“No, you have to come with us. We have much better work for you.”

“But I don’t want to go and work for you. I want to stay here in this hospital. What will you do to me if I go?”

“Nothing. We’re not going to hurt you. The president wants to talk with you. He has a car and a plane that are waiting to take you to your home.”

“But I don’t want to go to my home. The mission needs me.”

I was surprised that the soldiers did not seem irritated by my unending questions and negative answers. I desperately wondered whether to open the door. If I went with them, what would happen to me?

They seemed like strange, shadowy figures. I could see that some wore reddish wigs. Others had their hair braided in a way that is done only by African women.

“Why do I have to go with you?”

“We are ambassadors of UNITA. It is important that you open the door. We have a message for you. Hurry up!”

I noticed they were carrying some things that belonged to the Sabatés. One had a large red flashlight that Ferrán would use when the old generator went out. Another had a curtain from the baby’s room tied around his head. They had gotten into the Sabatés’ house!

In a final effort to find a way out, I stammered, “I can’t leave the mission without the doctor knowing.”

“The doctor?” the one who seemed to be in charge asked ironically. “He left two hours ago, and so have your friends, the Brazilians.”

“And what about the baby?” I asked, in great fear.

“Our men are carrying the baby. Don’t worry, nurse. We are taking care of all the details.”

At that instant, I understood, with great anguish, that all hope was lost. I had no choice but to go with them. My friends would need me.

Impatiently they demanded again that I open the door and renewed their pounding on it with a rifle butt.

“What are you going to do to me?” I asked fearfully.

“Nothing, don’t worry! Just open the door!”

I went to the window again. In my helplessness, I told them I was a child of God, and if they did anything to me, they would have to answer to Him. Laughing, one of them replied, “We already know that. Don’t worry; we are not going to hurt you.” I tried to believe these men were not as bad as I had imagined them since they could laugh that way.

By now, it was two o’clock in the morning. I went over to the door and unbolted it. In an instant, the house was filled with soldiers. The leader came to me with a UNITA pamphlet showing a photograph of

their guerrilla leader, General Jonas Savimbi.

“We are from UNITA, and you need to understand that . . .”

“Yes, yes, I already know that,” I interrupted, “you don’t need to explain anything.”

Surprised by my apparent calm, the men looked at me, not knowing exactly what to say. The captives taken by UNITA usually reacted with hysteria and tears. Those who were able would attempt to flee. I thank God that at that moment, He gave me calm and, especially, self-control.

I began to observe the soldiers more closely. The leader of the group seemed friendly, but his face reflected a bitter coldness. As time went by, I discovered that these men could be simple and kind, yet at times very hard and pitiless.

“You have to pack your suitcase,” said the group leader. “We are going to help you. Then you will come with us to see our president, who has a message for you. Now get dressed!” he ordered, opening my wardrobe.

“I’m ready,” I replied, remembering I had put my jeans on over my pajamas.

They picked up my suitcases, laid them open on the bed, and began to empty everything from my closet into them. Why were they tearing apart my room if we were only going on a short trip? I was still in denial about the reality of what was happening.

“Listen,” I insisted, “so many things! That’s not necessary.”

“Yes, it is; you will need them. Now just calm down. With UNITA, you won’t lose a thing. We will give everything back to you when we get there.”

I turned to see that a soldier was trying to reach a little box where I kept my desk supplies. I ordered him to leave them there, and he put it back in place. It irritated me to see what they were doing, and I ran behind them, telling them, “No, I will not need this. We don’t have to pack that.” I assumed that whatever the circumstances were, I would soon be back.

Henda, the leader, picked up my windbreaker and handed it to me. “Put this on,” he said. “It’s cold outside.”

I obeyed and began to put on my jacket, going through the motions like an automaton. “Put on some good shoes,” I heard Henda say.

Now I was watching transfixed as the men were attempting to pack up even the room decorations and personal keepsakes, things that were very precious to me. I wanted somehow to control what they were doing. Without thinking, I began taking objects from their hands and putting them back. It all seemed like some kind of horrible dream from which I would wake up at any moment.

My Bibles, one in Spanish, one in French, and another in Portuguese, were still on the nightstand. Henda asked me if I wanted to take them. I agreed, and he added them to the suitcase. He pointed to some watches and took them too. I would never see any of them again.

The soldiers continued tearing my house apart. They emptied the drawers. What the bags could not contain, they threw on the bed. They made up large bulky packs tied in sheets and carried them off. I discovered later that they had even taken my hot water bottle with the water still in it! My clothes hamper served for hauling off other things.

The soldiers in the kitchen were making everything disappear, even the food I had prepared for Rosmarie and her baby. Resignedly, I handed them a package of spaghetti, a bag with about ten pounds of rice, the beans, and other food items that were in the pantry. I picked up a freshly baked loaf of bread and handed it to them, innocently assuming this food would be for us.

The soldiers continued to work steadily until everything that could be carried off had been packed and loaded on the heads of the men who were going on ahead of us.

As my captors were carrying the last things out of my house, I saw Pastor Justino on the porch. He was watching, horrified. When our eyes met, he exclaimed, "Sister Victoria!" Terrible anguish was reflected on his face and in his voice. We looked at each other for a moment in silence.

During the previous months, the capture of civilians by the guerrillas had become the order of the day. Pastor Justino and I had spoken many times about this possibility, and I would usually say, as a chill ran over my body, "If something like that were to happen to me, I just couldn't survive. I would die of fright." And he would answer, "Don't worry. Here on campus, you'll be safe." He felt that with the men's dormitory so close to my house, the guerrillas wouldn't attempt anything. Now in his eyes, I read the question: *How are you feeling?* But I had no way to answer.

It still seemed impossible to imagine that what was happening was real and that it meant saying goodbye to the mission. "This can't be true; it can't really be happening!" I told myself again and again. There was so much suffering and need everywhere, and we were doing our best to help. How could they take us away? For years I had been preparing myself for service. From childhood, my dream had been to serve as a missionary nurse.