

A misty forest path with a person in the distance. The path is covered in fallen leaves and ferns, leading into a dense forest. The atmosphere is mysterious and slightly eerie.

# **KIDNAPPED ASYLUM**

**A NOVEL**

**BRANDI PARSONS**

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The following is inspired by a true story.

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## Democratic Republic of Congo, March 2017

Nothing was special about the day Raphael was killed. It was hot, like any other scorching central African day. Christel danced beneath the burning sun, having risen early to care for his animals. He and his brother Raphael collaborated on their family's farm and with the *Paix Programme*.

Mornings were for tending to the animals. Christel and Raphael rose before the treacherous sun burned their dark skin and their bodies demanded the refuge of shade. The barren landscape housed the 15 head of sheep and 20 head of goat. Christel dressed quickly, finishing by pulling on his work boots, and plodded to the small shelter where the grains were kept secure from wild animals and others looting off their land.

"*Bonjour!*" Christel muttered, his eyes focused on the lock's combination, not ready to be awake this early. Even though he despised mornings, he always, day after day, met his brother in the wee hours.

"*Bonjour!*" Raphael replied, waiting next to him to gather the buckets used to feed and water the animals.

Christel and Raphael lifted grains, fetched water, and cleaned out pens – all in the synchronicity born from working together their whole lives. Each morning was the same. The two brothers marched rhythmically and catered to the needs of their livestock, usually finishing before the sun seared the sparse earth. Each left every morning, went to their house, changed clothes, and set off to work with the repatriation of militants in the jungles near their home.

Minutes after changing into a woven, white dress shirt, with sleeves rolled up past the elbows, and black pants, Christel hummed a tune while he walked, kicking up dirt, on the well-loved path between his house and his brother's. Today was his brother's turn to drive.

A blue, four-door, Mercury Sable rested near Raphael's house. His house was not far from Christel's – just a couple of fence-links away – so Christel trotted over and flung himself onto the surprisingly immaculate hood of the car; it had been washed the day before. "You hit me!" he teased his brother.

Raphael laughed and both men clambered into the vehicle, settling in for the drive to Kisanga. There they met Caleb, a United Nations expert, and Sara, his interpreter. Caleb and Sara settled into the back of Raphael's car, piling their

backpacks of water between them. As routine as the unrelenting sunshine, Raphael, Christel, Caleb and Sara sped through the paved streets of Kisanga to the dirt roads leading to the desolate jungle – home of the militants.

Once the gravel markings through the small piles of grass disappeared and the road faded into dirt, the four stopped the car and began plodding further into the jungle. An awareness enveloped them. They knew the risks of trudging further into the overhang of the boscage – and each moved with their eyes scanning the perimeter and their ears alert for anything that was not the softness of their own feet.

Raphael and Christel flanked Caleb and Sara. They were shadowed by the leaves and, when the gentle breeze rustled the vines, they all froze. Each stood silent and observed, determining whether the sound was really the wind rattling or if they had stumbled into rebel territory. The four continued down the worn path, acutely aware of the rustling of the brush around them, waiting to engage in conversation with the militants.

No one brought a weapon. Caleb believed that peace would come by understanding and communicating. The weapon he chose was words. The group halted in a clearing where the sun sparkled in rays and the shadows continued, but they were hypersensitive when the ground moved around them. It was not the wind.

The child toddled into the light, wearing a once-white rag around his waist, and nothing else. His eyes wandered to the four travelers, but he said nothing, picked up a stick, and drew in the dirt while he turned away.

“*Paix!*” Raphael shouted using his deep voice.

“*Paix?*” echoed the child. “*Qu'est-ce que la paix?*”

Caleb stooped down, looked at the child. “*La paix est en sécurité.*” Caleb, native to the United States but well versed in other languages, knew specific sayings in French. However, he still relied on an interpreter for more specific conversations. The child, no more than two, continued drawing in the dirt, leaving the four pacifists in silence until the child cried, “*Maman.*” To the right, a frail, worn woman broke the silence by stepping hesitantly into the area.

“*Paix,*” she repeated. Her voice trembled, but her eyes illuminated the smallest shred of hope.

The men, Sara, the woman, and the child trudged back toward the vehicle and spoke no words. Hand gestures signaled when to stop and go, and the woman and child obeyed with precision. Once in the security of the car, the woman said, “I need to go home. Back to Rwanda.”

The frailness of working so hard to avoid the police in the Democratic

Republic of Congo showed on the woman's face. Her frailty rose to the surface and she said, "Please. Take me to the border. I walk from there." The ride in the car was an uneventful two hours to the border. The woman was relieved to ride, and the child was fascinated with being in a car. A few jungle trees gave some coverage to hide the car a ways from the border, but Raphael and Christel insisted on accompanying the woman and her child to a safe passage. It was the mission of the *Paix Programme* to work with expatriates and repatriate them to the country of Rwanda.

In the 1990s, Rwandan refugees fled to the Democratic Republic of Congo. They occupied the space for many years, but twenty years of life in the jungle – fleeing from militants, fleeing from other refugees, and living in hostile conditions – was wearing on those remaining. The *Paix Programme* worked with the Rwandan refugees living in the DRC to return them home. There were promises of no repercussions (if one wasn't accused of an international crime). The *Paix Programme* and the United Nations worked together for repatriation, but Raphael and Christel knew not to trust the border agents.

"I'll go the rest of the way," Raphael said. He motioned for Christel to hide and wait. Christel knew not to argue. He knew that his older brother always trumped him and knew that he would wait in the shadows. Christel glanced at his watch. It was 2:30 PM. The journey from where they entered by foot to the border should take only 5 minutes. He paced, but without rustling any leaves. He fidgeted, but only when the wind blew. The minutes etched by like water creating a canyon over billions and billions of years. Finally, Raphael met up with Christel, and they hiked back to the car to begin their journey back to Kisanga.

Kisanga, the largest city in the Tshopo province, housed the UN headquarters for this region. On the way home, Raphael paused to let Caleb and Sara return to their space and then stopped for some groceries before retreating home. The market was busy, but darkness had not yet fallen. Christel strolled through the market too, not interested in buying anything, but grateful for the successful day. But as the men walked out of the market and headed back to the car, Raphael was stung by a bullet in his back. He dropped to the ground, and Christel, with a breaking heart, kept walking.

Caught in his peripheral vision, Christel saw his brother one last time, but knew the reality of the situation: he needed to evacuate this space as soon as possible. It was common that the rebels would attack randomly and violently, often kidnapping women and children while disposing of men. The strength that it took to keep walking and not run back was enormous, but Christel plunged on

anyways. Although he showed strength, single tears escaped his eyes and he retreated to the shadows of a concrete building nearby.

\*\*\*

Christel drove his brother's car home. No longer clean, he parked it in the dirt near his house, walked inside, and collapsed on the sofa. It had been a day of success, but also a day of heartache; a day of triumph and a day of sorrow. "*Poppa!*" screeched his daughter, clambering on his legs and snuggling against him.

"*Mon bébé,*" Christel smiled. He hugged her and set her down on the floor next to him so that she could roam free, but she climbed right back up. Right back to her father's chest where she reached her arms around him for a hug, which he returned grandly.

His wife, Lucia, domestic in all ways, but also a strong fighter for peace and highly educated, had finished a dish of Maombe, the most popular dish in the DRC. She set it on the table where she called everyone together to participate in the meal. "Is Raphael coming?" she asked Christel.

"Bad. Bad. Bad. He...was....k-k-k-killed today." Christel's eyes exploded with grief and tears. He couldn't breathe.

"Children, eat," Lucia commanded and guided Christel away from the table. She escorted him up the stairs and to their room, where she embraced him and let him freely engage in mourning the loss of his brother. When the overwhelming anger and sadness were depleted for the day, Lucia settled Christel into a prone position and covered him with a loose blanket. Christel fell to a slumber that was restless, but needed.

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Once the mourning period passed and one of the more lavish Congolese funerals was held for Raphael – although without a body – Christel returned to the UN headquarters.

"What's the plan?" Christel inquired.

"We need to write a report," Caleb explained. "We have to submit it to the UN."

"May I see it?"

"Of course."

The two men perched side by side, writing and editing, revising and

correcting the 10 page document that would go to the UN. Although it stated the truth, it was very likely that they would be in danger once the papers were received and contact had been made with the government.

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Christel, Caleb, and Sara felt a piece of themselves missing as they traveled back toward rebel territory. It was a journey they made without Raphael for the first time. Christel and Caleb walked with Sara in between and plodded along through the dirt and into areas where they may be able to communicate with the rebels. No one dared to go far. They walked along the worn paths, but did so with such great caution that they only stepped a few paces into the jungle before returning to the car and retreating for the day.

The next day, they walked a bit farther, and the next even farther. They kept walking, spending at least an hour every day traveling through the jungle. Each day they dug deep inside themselves, trying to be better stewards of peace. Every day they focused on the mission – to find the rebels and guide them back to their home country.

## **Rwanda 1994**

Francois worked for the government of Rwanda in 1994. The uprising due to the genocide moved him from a permanent citizen of Rwanda to a refugee in the neighboring country of Zaire, before it became the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1997. As a lower-ranking member of the Hutu-run government, Francois recoiled at the thought of killing innocent people. Rather than be a victim of the government's abuse, he fled to Zaire, where he led a difficult life, often turning to anger.

## Democratic Republic of Congo, March 2017

In the vines and canopied trees of the forest, Caleb, Sara, and Christel came to a halt when they noticed crunched leaves, squished down from the humidity, and began to track where the other occupants of the forest may be waiting. It was heart-stopping to hear the deep voice come from the shadows of the trees. “*Qui es-tu?*”

Christel took the lead. “I am Christel. These are my companions, Caleb and Sara. We are not the government. We are with the Peace Program.”

“Prove it!”

“No weapons. We just want to talk.”

“Put your bags down.”

“Okay, would you like some water?”

Caleb knew that the chances were good that the expatriates would respond better to them if they were not starving for basic needs. He packed water daily. He also often carried dried fruit with him.

“Water, good.” Now the voice was closer to them. It still hadn’t exited the safety of the shadows, but the Samaritans waited for the voice to continue toward them. Bags were on the ground in front of them and no one moved while the voice neared.

“We are peaceful,” Christel announced. “We will be opening the bag to get water.” Christel reached down, opened the backpack filled with water bottles, and distributed them to the group, including the newest addition.

Christel pulled the visitor into the conversation. “I’m Christel, and this is Sara and Caleb. What’s your name?” he inquired.

After a huge gulp of water, the cleanest water the man had drank in years, he stuttered, “F-f-f-ran-cois.”

“Nice to meet you. How long have you been living in the jungle?”

“A long time.”

“How long will you stay in the jungle?”

“I don’t know.” Francois collapsed next to a tree. The others sat down too. The dirt didn’t bother them, but seeing someone in so much agony did. Francois’s face had skin overlapping skin and the base of his neck was wrinkled. His eyes were inset, as is often seen in people who are malnourished. “I’m

tired.”

“I see,” said Caleb. “What language do you prefer to speak?”

“I speak Kinyarwanda, French, and Swahili. I like Swahili best.”

“Sara speaks all of those languages, but is much better at French and Swahili,” Christel said. He was the local, with the same color skin and same origin, but obviously more well-to-do than Francois, since he was not sentenced to living in the jungle. “I speak both French and Swahili. Caleb speaks English. Sara is here to interpret for Caleb and you, but she will be giving a lot of attention to each of you as you speak. Just remember, speak slowly and clearly so she can communicate with ease.”

The dialogue lasted several hours between Caleb, Sara, Christel, and Francois. The four decided to return to the same spot the next day and continue learning more about everybody.

The Quaker Church and the Church of Emmanuel in Congo had worked together to form the *Paix Programme*. Caleb had worked for the Quaker Church for a long time and had a degree in global studies and conflict resolution. After a while, he was recruited by the UN and there he met Christel.

Each day, Caleb, Christel, and Sara went to meet Francois. Caleb knew enough French and Swahili to pick up a lot of what Francois said, but relied on Sara when he was unsure of the context or the meaning. Caleb was personable and learned the vernacular of the language that was spoken – not the textbook language. He did a lot of listening. He worked to discover the root of the conflict.

Sara asked him, “Do you see these people as human beings, savages, or animals?”

Caleb never hesitated when he responded, “I see them as human beings, like you or me.” He loved people, loved working in the hostile territory, and loved being on a mission to bring peace in the wave of conflict.

It took two weeks for the four to come to an understanding, work the “underground railroad” system, and get Francois back into Rwanda where he could reunite with what was left of his family. Although, he was pretty certain that they had likely been killed by the Rwandan government in 1994.

Once Francois crossed the border, their focus switched. The UN sent a new assignment: investigate the militia and activities of the national army in the DRC. It was a fateful assignment.

Caleb, with the help of Christel and Sara, worked to understand the rebel armies. He bonded in villages, often laughing and joking with the locals in French. He helped encourage children and he helped be a positive influence in

their lives. Christel often accompanied him and Sara on the visits to the local villages. Christel, a wealthier person in the DRC, was one of few who owned a car and a house and had an education. He said he had power.

The stick shelters, shaped like a half-moon, were part of the village landscape. The investigation into the rebel armies took the trio to the villages often and most children and women were very friendly, but typically the men were not to be trusted. Christel, however, could cut through the lies and demand the respect that those with white skin could not.

There were things that Christel needed to take care of in Kisanga due to his brother's death. He only needed one day. It was the only time that he didn't go to the village with Caleb and Sara. When Christel showed up at their office the following day, they weren't there. The secretary for the UN said she had not seen them. They were not answering phone calls, and they had not checked in for over 24 hours. The UN deemed them kidnapped at this point.

Christel's eyes, for the second time that month, shed more than one tear. Chances of survival after a kidnapping in the DRC were almost non-existent. It may happen one time in a million, but generally it didn't happen often at all. Maybe once in one billion times when someone went missing would they be found alive.

A few days later, the confirmation of the death of both Caleb and Sara hit the news, and Christel was faced with his own crisis. His house, which was near both his brother's now vacant one and another neighbor, was on a raised platform. The yellow outside shone with brightness in the sun and Christel collapsed again, his phone charging next to him. Thankfully, he was the only person home.

His neighbor's text came in time for him to quietly exit his house and move toward the bushes. He stepped lightly, disappearing into the shadows as much as possible, and said a small prayer for his family. He knew too much. The reports for the UN had been sent. He'd helped Caleb write them. They were written in French. They were explicit about the charges that should be filed for international war crimes. He felt his heart beat quickly. Soon, it was racing, and his breathing had increased. It was a horrible feeling to flee, but he knew that he couldn't stay.

His phone vibrated, and he moved toward the shadows, careful to take a peek at it once he was certain no one was watching. His movements were timed with gracefulness and awareness. He read the text, written in French, Swahili, and English.

## **Go to Uganda embassy.**

Christel caught his bearings. He knew he needed to head east from Kisanga and get to Bukavu where he could cross through to Goma.

Much of the area in this part of the Democratic Republic of Congo had a large lake. The lake was an open space, but within it were the miles of forests that he was used to wandering through daily in order to make connections with the rebel armies. Nevertheless, it was important that he was careful. Before taking steps, he evaluated the safety and, when something seemed suspicious, he paused to gather his bearings before continuing on.

Getting through Bukavu was not as difficult as getting through the sparsely populated forest where he had been unsure of what was around every corner. The city was populated and he blended with the crowds. Even from behind, if the rebel armies saw him, they would not recognize him. The city stank like a rotten tomato that had been forgotten in the bottom of the refrigerator. He bumped people constantly on the way to the ferry as he passed them by, though not in a rude way. In the DRC, it was common to only have a small amount of space to move. He would soon find out that it wasn't like that in the US.

Ferries left Bukavu for Goma frequently. The range of ferries were anything from small, private boats to large ferries with standing room only on the bottom deck. Christel chose the mid-sized ferry and moved as inconspicuous as possible. He didn't know who was to be trusted. He didn't know if the armed guard on the boat was a friend to people fleeing the country, or if he would shoot anyone suspected of trying to flee. Christel took no chances.

The boat ride was four hours of eternity. Christel silenced his phone and left it in his pocket the whole time. No one would be able to read over his shoulder. He sat down in a vacant chair, inhaled the smell of the fish in the lake, and closed his eyes. He was never relaxed, nor did he let the swaying of the boat rock him to sleep. No one bothered him. He sat in silence. He sat without attracting attention. And as he exited the boat into Goma, he released the longest exhale of his life.

Goma, a city in the North Kivu province of the DRC, bordered Rwanda. Although Christel was not likely any safer in Rwanda than in the DRC, it was the most direct route to Uganda. Another journey by foot, and he knew that his body would not function much longer without some needed rest. The boat ride provided physical rest, but the mental acuteness that he endured during the ride was not the relief his brain needed. A safe house was established in Goma. He wound his way there and, once inside, the hostess greeted him kindly.

Upon his arrival, he received towels for his face, hot water for tea, and a warm meal. A bed awaited him. Christel collapsed on the bed, not even bothering to take his shoes off before his eyes closed and he slumbered.

Before dawn, the hostess was in his room. "*Monsieur!*" She tapped Christel's shoulders. "It's time to go," she said.

"Where?" Christel asked.

"To Uganda. The counselors will take you. You must go through Rwanda. It is not safe."

"Okay." Christel jumped out of bed and grabbed his backpack – the only trace of home he carried with him.

Christel met the counselors that were going to escort him through Rwanda. Emy was a round Rwandan. Jean Baptiste was a tall, thin member of the Congolese Church of Christ. Both men greeted Christel warmly. "We will drive carefully through Rwanda. Another car is waiting in Uganda," Emy explained.

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