

Scared

A NOVEL ON THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

TOM DAVIS

SCARED

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A Note from the Publisher

Dear reader,

The story you are about to read is very much based upon real life. Some pages contain depictions of horror unimaginable to many of us but are reality to some. It is a sad reminder that there is much darkness roaming the globe. First John 1:5 reminds us that God is light and there is no room in Him for darkness. In fact, one of the dear characters in *Scared*, Pastor Walter, will reference this verse when comforting a young Adanna who wonders if God is indeed present. Given the abuse, poverty, death, and destruction that afflict so many, one does wonder, “God, are You there?”

The answer to that question can be found in countless thousands of people who say in the affirmative, “Yes, He is here ... and He is light.” Child advocate and speaker Tom Davis gives us a gripping portrayal of the hurt and pain that affects many in Africa. This story reminds us of our need to be engaged in being light in a very dark world.

Some scenes will grip and haunt you, some passages you will want to run away from—but this is real life. And real life requires true Christ followers to act justly and love mercy. May Adanna’s story inspire and embolden you.

Thank you for reading,
Don Pape,
Publisher, David C. Cook

Prologue

◆◆ Adanna ◆◆

The last thing I remember before going to sleep last night was the pain in my gut and the question of what I would wear to church this morning. These worries are for nothing, because I have no food and only rags to wear. Today is Easter Sunday. Pastor Walter calls it “Resurrection Sunday.” A day of hope.

I think about what hope means for the people in my village. I try to imagine them rising up in glory, as Pastor says. But I only see twisted bodies, bones poking out of paper skin. They do not rise. They lie in mounds of yellow dirt. I think of my own body, wasting away because I haven’t eaten for days.

Sometimes I wonder if the gods don’t like me. Maybe it’s because I am dirty and stained, like old rags. I’ve been told by Pastor and Momma, “Easter means new life.” But our lives never change.

Stepping outside my home, a shimmering road unfolds in front of me. It is smooth, like a gift wrapped in gold.

Voices from ahead call out to me, and one foot hurries to catch the other. The sounds are beautiful, like a choir, their voices layered in perfect harmony.

I’ve never felt a road so smooth. It’s like walking on cool water. The roads I know are brown and rocky.

A magical energy flows through every part of me from my feet to my head, refreshing my tired body. How can something so unfamiliar feel like home?

But this place is nothing like home. The horizon blazes beautiful, glowing colors—violet, blue, and amber dance like giddy fairies. The land is on fire with color.

I turn and see rows of trees taller than any I have ever seen. I could swing from their branches. I would write poems about their splendor. The leaves are leaping for joy. The apples hanging from the trees look like red balloons. One could feed me for a week.

Here, people do not pick up moon rocks and die.

My throat is parched, so I run to the banks of a river. The water is like crystal. It is so perfect I do not want to touch it, but I cannot help myself. I cup my hands and thrust them down to get a drink.

When I pull out my hands, they are no longer brittle and cracked. They appear soft, even glowing. My hands are new.

Thirst spreads from my mouth to every cell in my body.

I jump.

I glide through the water like the colorful fish around me, swimming free. Forgetting I am underwater, I suck in a breath. I expect to choke, but I do not. Taking another breath whisks me out of the water and onto the bank.

The jagged scar on my arm has disappeared. I feel new. Not hungry or sick. Even my scars on the inside seem to be gone.

In the distance a marvelous light pulsates, lustrous, pure, and white. What shines so warm and soft?

“Adanna.”

The voice sounds like a thousand mighty rivers, a thundering boom. But I am not afraid.

“Who are you? And how do you know my name?”

“Adanna. Come closer.”

I move toward an illuminated man. He is sitting in a golden chair. The music of many villages rises from where he sits. Love pours out, giving life to the grass, the trees, and I feel it growing roots in my heart.

“Are you the ruler of this world?”

“I am. This world and many others. I’ve waited a long time to be with you.”

“I do not know who you are.”

“I have known you, Adanna,” he chuckles, “for a very long time. I have watched you grow. I have delighted in seeing you play, and I have rejoiced over how you have matured. My love has always surrounded you.”

Maybe he is one of my ancestors.

“I’m not one of your ancestors, but you are one of mine.”

How did he hear me?

“I do not think I have ever met you.”

“Oh, but you have. Come closer, Adanna. I want to show you something.”

Cautiously, I step forward. He is inviting me with his smile. He stretches out and opens his hand. On it there is writing.

“That is my name, but how did it get there?”

“I put it there.”

“But why?”

“Because I have always loved you.”

“But I am nothing special.”

“Adanna, if you only knew the greatness inside you. You must trust me; I will draw out of you what the world needs to see. Here is your gift. Use it wisely. It will make the way clear for you, and it will save many of your people.”

He extends a white scroll made of lamb’s skin and hands it to me. I reach up and receive the scroll. “Thank you, sir. I am most grateful. May I ask who you are?”

“You will know, soon.”

“Can I stay here?”

“Not now, but the time will come. Just remember this: No matter where you go, I will be there to help you.”

“What is your name?”

“Whatever You Need. That is my name.”

“I do not understand.”

I take the parchment in my hands. I untie a silk ribbon and unroll it.

My eyes open, and the thatched roof of my hut shudders in the wind.

Chapter One

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Africa, 1998

Ten years ago I was a dead man.

It all began when Lou, my broker from Alpha Agency, said, “Stuart, how would you feel about heading to the Congo? *Time* is putting together a crew and needs a hot photographer.”

He asked; I went. That’s how I got paid then. It’s how I get paid now.

My job was to cover a breaking story on a rebel uprising that would soon turn into genocide. Unfortunately, neither Lou nor any of us were privy to that valuable information at the time. We should have seen it coming. The frightening tribal patterns resembled the bloodbath between the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994. We knew what happened there had spilled over to the DRC—but we ignored it.

Our job was to focus on the story of the moment, whatever we might find. But this was more than a search for journalistic truth. It was an opportunity to win a round of a most dangerous game—the chase for a prize-winning picture.

The plane landed in the capital city of Kinshasa. A man in combat fatigues stood near a large black government car. Six armed guards toting fully automatic rifles flanked him.

“That must be the mayor and his six closest comrades,” I said to our writer, Mike, as I swung my heavy neon orange bag over my shoulder. “Welcome to a world where you are not in control.” This was Mike’s first international assignment. I swear his knees buckled.

Our team consisted of me; Mike, shipped in from Holland (a lower executive from *Time* who was looking for a thrill and trying to escape his adulterous wife for a few weeks); and Tommy, the grip, whose job it was to carry our gear.

“Welcome to the Democratic Republic of Congo. I am Mayor Mobutu.” We introduced ourselves, exchanging the traditional French niceties.

“Bonjour, monsieur.”

“I must go and attend to some urgent matters, but there is a car waiting for you. These guards will take you out to Rutshuru, North Kivu.”

He pointed to a Land Cruiser near the airport building. The mayor’s face carried the scars of a rough life. His right cheek looked as if someone tried to carve a Z into it. His left eye was slightly lazy, giving you the feeling he was looking over your shoulder, even when you were face-to-face.

He turned to me. “You know how dangerous it is here. You are taking your life into your own hands, and we will not be responsible. We keep telling reporters this, but you never listen.” He started to walk away but turned one more time and wagged his finger at each one of us as if we were children. “Pay attention to what these guards tell you, and do not put yourself in the middle of conflict.”

Nobody ever won a Pulitzer by standing at arm’s length.

“Thank you for welcoming us, sir, and for your words,” I said.

“We will keep them in mind.” The guards nodded for us to follow, and we made a solemn line into the Land Cruiser.

It was the rainy season, and on cue an afternoon storm whipped and lashed across the landscape like an angry mob. As we drove in silence, the hair on the back of my neck stood straight up. We arrived at the village that would serve as our headquarters. Amid the familiar routines of a small community that seemed oblivious to the dangers surrounding them, people who were displaced by violence congregated in huddles hoping for safety.

I snapped off pictures of the scene. Once the children noticed my camera, school was over. They surrounded me like ants on a Popsicle. I had come prepared. I handed out candy as fast as I could, then got back to the business of capturing images of this unsettling normalcy.

The sun hid behind the trees, and darkness enveloped the thatched huts and makeshift refugee camp, swallowing them whole. Our armed guards escorted us into a separate compound meant to keep us safe from any danger lurking in the nearby jungles.

We took a seat on concrete blocks to enjoy a traditional African meal of corn and beans, and we laughed about the monkeys we had seen on the road hurling bananas at our Land Cruiser. It was funnier than it ought to have been.

And then it happened.

The crisp pop of bullets battered our eardrums. The sounds ripped through the jungle night and into the village. Then the screams began. Screams that boiled the blood inside my ears.

I dropped, crawled on my belly to the window and slid up along the front wall, craning my neck so I could see outside. A guard across the room mirrored my actions at another window. Everyone

else was flat against the ground. As I peered through the rusty barred window, flashes of light pounded bright fists against the sky, the road, and the trees.

Buildings exploded with fire, and a woman cried out in terror. Shadows flickered, black phantoms haunting the night. I made out five or six soldiers beating a woman with their boots and the butts of their guns.

She quit screaming, quit moving, and then they ripped the clothes from her broken body. They began raping her. She came to and started to scream again, pleading for help, and they hit her until her screams choked on her blood.

She couldn't have been more than sixteen.

I turned my head.

The horror of this night was no act of God. No earthquake or tsunami. This was the act of men. Evil men. Demons in the guise of men.

The uncertainty of what might happen next hovered at the edge of an inhaled breath.

The armed guards screamed for us to lay prostrate on the dirt floor as bullets flew through the walls and widows, scattering plaster and glass. I wiped away salty sweat burning my eyes. But the sweat was thicker than it should have been. I tasted it.

Blood.

Fear strangled the air. Shallow breaths and rapid heartbeats echoed throughout the tiny room. I thought about my last conversation with Whitney.

My last conversation.

Was it my last?

Mike's hand slid up next to me. His whisper turned my head. "Ask not for whom the bell tolls, man."

Mike shoved his glasses back onto his oversized, pockmarked nose. "This happened to one of my closest friends in Northern Uganda. The rebel militia mutilated everyone and everything in sight. No one made it out alive. No one. These monsters believe in a kind of Old Testament extermination of anything that moves."

"Thanks for the encouraging words."

"I always knew I'd die young."

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a string of wooden rosary beads.

"These were my mother's."

"I'm not Catholic."

"Neither was I. Until now..."

"Shut up!" one of the guards hissed.

Rivers of sweat baptized our faces, our necks, our chests.

Death, real and suffocating, pressed in, driven by the wailing of dying babies, the yelps of slaughtered animals, the screams of women being beaten and raped.

My heart raced in rapid-fire panic.

I peered through a hole between a cinder block and a broken windowsill. Rebel troops swarmed like locusts, devouring every living thing in their path.

Mike elbowed me in the thigh. "Remember that story about an African militia group that raped a bunch of Americans? Men, women, children—they weren't choosy."

"You have to be quiet," whispered a guard. He got to one knee, steadying his gun. "Now shut up, or I'll kill you myself."

A rebel commander yelled something just outside the door. Another shot, and the guard who had just spoken fell dead right on top of me. His blood flowed over my neck and right arm, staining my band of brothers ring crimson. The screaming intensified, people ran, yelled, and died.

I scooted against the wall, huddled next to Mike as shots continued to shriek overhead. Plaster exploded and covered us. We tried to make ourselves invisible, curling into the fetal position, wrapping our arms over our heads.

A bullet whined by my ear, missing by centimeters. I crawled facedown to the other side of the room, trying to get out of the line of fire.

Then a sudden, deafening silence.

Nobody moved for what seemed like hours. Fear paralyzed me, and the silence thickened, punctuated by an occasional moan or a sob. We waited and waited, wondering when it would be safe to stand, wondering if it would ever be safe.

Finally, I gazed out the window, my eyes searching for rebel soldiers in the yellow-orange gloom of smoke. No figures or movement.

“I’m going out,” I whispered to Mike.

He didn’t respond

“Hey, listen. Let’s go, man.”

I elbowed him in the ribs.

“Mike!” I grabbed his jacket to turn him toward me. There was a pinpoint crimson stain on the front of his light blue shirt. His eyes stared through me.

I was frozen for a moment, not knowing what to do. Then I

pulled my camera out of my bag. I picked up Mike's gear and slung it around my neck.

Outside, the air burned of flesh. Some shadows moved in the distance, but the streets were barren. A few jerking and twitching heaps lined the road and quivered beside the buildings.

Oh, God. Oh, God.

I walked toward the flames. Everything was silent except for a sour ringing in my ears. Something compelled me to enter the destruction, to get closer.

Severed body parts lay before me in a display of such horror I began to heave. A young pregnant mother crumpled over, lying dead next to a burning haystack. She barely looked human. One leg lay at a right angle, an arm hung loosely from her shoulder, held there by a single, stringy tendon. Her stomach had been sliced wide open, the wormlike contents spilled in front of her, still moving.

There was nothing I could do to help her. Nothing.

I lifted the camera to my left eye. Snap. Snap. Snap. The lens clicked open and closed.

I stepped closer to capture the look on her face. Steam rose from her insides. More pictures. Through the blood and mucus by her midsection I made out a face, a tiny face with eyes closed.

Voices rose over the roofs. Something was happening at the end of the village. Without thought, I raced through the corpses and debris toward the commotion.

The rebel troops had gathered the bodies of all the men they had slain. They were stacking them together in the shape of a pyramid.

As each body was thrown on top of the others, the rebels jeered, spit on the dead, and drank from a whiskey bottle, reveling in their

triumph. They shot their guns into the air. Fire flashed around the perimeter. It was a scene from hell.

A man climbed on the roof above the bodies, unzipped his pants, and urinated all over the dead. The men slapped each other on the back and laughed.

Another rebel poured some liquid over the bodies.

I adjusted the camera settings and snapped a series of shots as fast as my fingers could click. The fire ignited, a pyramid pyre, and I continued to shoot. I snapped pictures of the dead—men I had seen earlier that day caring for their families—as their faces melted like candle wax. I snapped pictures of the rebels' ugly glee. And I felt like retching again.

I turned and walked, faster and faster, until I was running.

Each step I took pounded the question: *Why? Why? Why?*

I raced to the edge of the compound and saw Tommy hanging out the window of our car, frantically motioning me to come. We sped off, the remaining guard driving like a bat out of hell, for it was indeed hell we were escaping. As I turned to look out the back window, I saw Mike's body crumpled in the seat behind me. Like a rotted rubber band, something inside me snapped. My whole body shook. Sobs came without tears. I could muster only one coherent thought: *If we get out of here alive, at least we can send Mike back to his family.*

Back to his cheating wife.