Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Heart of Danger

Written by

Eliot Schrefer

Published by

Chicken House Ltd

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

For Kinsuke

Text © 2012 by Eliot Schrefer

All rights reserved.
Published by arrangement with Scholastic Inc., 557 Broadway, New York 10012, USA
The Proprietor hereby maintains that the Author asserts his moral rights to be identified as the Proprietor of the Work.

First published by Scholastic Inc., 557 Broadway, New York 10012, USA in 2012

First published in Great Britain in 2013
The Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.doublecluck.com

Eliot Schrefer has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, to be identified as the author of this work.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted or utilised in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover and interior design by Mavro Design
Bonobo photo by Martin Harvey
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

ISBN 978-1-908435-61-3

NOTE: THROUGHOUT THIS BOOK, CONGO REFERS TO THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO (THE COUNTRY FORMERLY KNOWN AS ZAIRE), NOT NEIGHBOURING CONGO-BRAZZAVILLE.



CHAPTER 1

KINSHASA, THE CAPITAL OF CONGO

Concrete can rot. It turns green and black before crumbling away.

Maybe only people from Congo know that.

There was a time when I didn't notice that sort of thing. When I was a little girl living here, it was a country of year-round greenery, of birds streaming colour across clear skies. Then, when I was eight, I left to live with my dad in America; ever since then, coming back to spend summers with my mom meant descending into the muggy and dangerous back of nowhere. The fountain in downtown Kinshasa, which I'd once thought of as the height of glamour, now looked like a bowl of broth. Bullet holes had appeared up and down it, and no one I asked could remember who had put them there. When I

looked closely, the pockmarks overlapped. The Democratic Republic of Congo: Where Even the Bullet Holes Have Bullet Holes.

Kinshasa has ten million people but only two paved roads and no traffic lights, so the routes are too crowded to get anywhere fast. Almost as soon as the driver left the house to take me to my mom's workplace, we were stuck in traffic, inching by a barricade. A police roadblock wasn't common, but not all that unusual, either. Some of the Kinshasa police were for real and some were random guys in stolen uniforms, looking for bribes. There was no way to tell the difference, and it didn't much change the way you dealt with them: show your ID through the windshield. Do not stop the car. Do not roll down the window. Do not follow if they try to lead you anywhere.

A man was approaching each car as it slowed. At first I thought he was a simple beggar, but then I saw he was dragging a small creature by its arms. I crawled into the front seat to see better.

It was a baby ape. As the man neared each car, he yanked upward so that it opened its mouth into a wide grin, feet spinning as it tried to find the ground. The man had a lame foot but got around agilely, his scabby stump pivoting and tilting as he manoeuvred. Behind him was a rusty bike with a wooden crate lashed to the back, which he must have been using to transport the ape.

Already that morning, I'd seen plenty of animals suffering. Grey parrots crammed so tightly into roadside cages that the dead stood as tall as the living; a maimed dog howling in a crowded market, flies swarming the

exposed bone of her leg; a peddler with half-dead kittens tied to his waist. I'd learned to shut all of it out, because you couldn't travel more than a few miles in Kinshasa without seeing a *person* dying on the side of the road, and I figured dying humans were more important than dying animals. But it had always been my mom's philosophy that the way we treat animals goes hand in hand with the way we treat people, and so she'd dedicated her life to stopping men like this one, bushmeat traders hoping for a sale. Dedicated her life so fully, in fact, that when my dad's work in Congo ended and he had to go back to the States, she'd stayed on and they'd divorced. Our shared life as a family had ended.

It appeared that the ape was having the time of his life, grinning ear to ear. But when I looked closer, I saw bald patches and sores. He'd been restrained by a rope at some point; it was still tied around his waist and trailed in the dirt.

'Clément, that's a bonobo,' I said stupidly.

'Yes, it is,' he said, his gaze flicking nervously between me and the man.

'So stop the car!' I said. Irritation – at being stuck in this car, at being stuck in this country – fired away.

'*Te*, Sophie, I cannot,' he said.

'This is precisely what my mom fights against. She would insist that you stop, and you work for her, so you have to,' I said, waving my hand at him.

'No, Sophie,' Clément said. 'She would want me to contact her and have the Ministry of Environment deal with it. Not her daughter.'

'Well, *I* insist, then.'

In response, Clément locked the doors.

It was a pretty weak move, though, since there weren't any child locks in the front. The car was barely rolling because of the roadblock traffic, so I simply opened the door, jumped out and sped back to the trader. He swung the baby bonobo up into his arms and greeted me in Lingala, not the French that Congo's educated classes use.

'*Mbote!* You would like to meet my friend here, *mundele*?' he asked me.

'He's so cute. Where did you get him?' I asked in Lingala. I spoke French and English with my parents, but was still fluent in the language of my childhood friends.

The man released the bonobo. The little ape sat down tiredly in the dirt and lowered his arms, wincing as his sore muscles relaxed. I kneeled and reached out to him. The bonobo glanced at his master before working up the energy to stand and toddle over to me. He leaned against my shin for a moment, then extended his arms to be picked up. I lifted him easily and he hugged himself to me, his fragile arms as light as a necklace. I could make out his individual ribs under my fingers, could feel his heart flutter against my throat. He pressed his lips against my cheek, I guess to get as close as possible to my skin, and only then did I hear his faint cries; he'd been making them for so long that his voice was gone.

'Do you like him?' the man asked. 'You want a playmate?'

'My mom runs the bonobo sanctuary up the road,' I said. 'I'm sure she'd love to care for him.'

Worry passed over the man's face. He smiled nervously. 'He is my friend. I have not harmed him. Look. He likes you. He wants to live with you. He wants to braid your hair!'

He knew the way to a Congolese girl's heart.

The man began to plead. 'Please, *la blanche*, I have travelled six weeks down the river to bring this monkey here. There was a storm and I lost all of my other goods. If you do not buy the bonobo, my family will starve.'

Looking at the man, with his crippled foot and greasy ragged tunic tied closed with woven palm fronds, it wasn't hard to believe he was close to starvation.

By now Clément had parked and huffed up the street to join us. Undoubtedly he had already called my mom. 'Sophie,' he said. 'We need to leave. This is not the way.'

He didn't get it. 'Stop worrying! If we wind up in trouble, I'll tell Mom it was all my idea.' The baby ape reached his fingers under my collar to touch my skin directly. 'How much do you want for him?' I asked the man.

'The sanctuary doesn't buy bonobos,' Clément said, stepping between us.

'He is my property,' the man replied. 'You cannot take him from me.'

'It's not going to come to that,' I said. I wished Clément would go away; he was on his way to ruining everything. I turned to dismiss him, but paused. Clément was staring back at the roadblock. From his worried face I could tell he'd clearly decided these weren't true police but the other kind: drunk men with guns and a hunger for bribes. Already they were watching us curiously. It was

risky to be out of our car at all in this part of the capital. People were robbed – or, for girls, much worse – all the time. But I was going to get this bonobo to give to my mother.

'One hundred American dollars,' the man said. 'One hundred dollars and you can have him.'

'*Te!*' Clément said. 'We will not pay you for what you can't legally sell.'

The thing was, I *did* have that kind of cash on me, right in my front pocket. Shouldn't have, but I did. The notebook money.

When I'd first arrived in the United States years ago, I'd been the only African girl in the whole school. I'd gotten plenty of looks, with my plastic slippers and hair whose kinkiness I hadn't decided whether to embrace or fight. When Dad had picked me up from school after the first day, I'd tearfully told him he had to tell me what a mall was and then go straight there.

There was only one nice thing anyone said to me in my early America days, but I heard it over and over: my notebooks were really cool. It turned out that the year before there had been some sort of stationery arms race among the kids, with each trying to have the most unique pens and paper. I pulled out these shiny Congolese foolscap notebooks, roughly bound, with big green elephants stencilled on the front. I gave them all away, making do with plain old spirals, and the five girls I offered notebooks to became my closest friends.

Each time I left to be with my mom for the summer break, the American kids would ask me, 'So, Sophie,

you're going back to Congo; what's it like?' and I'd say, 'Poor,' and we'd move on to the important business of notebook requests. A ton of them. Even now that we were fourteen, not eight.

I still had my friends' money. My free hand went to my pocket.

'No, Sophie,' Clément said, watching me. 'Your mother would forbid it.'

'This is *for* my mother,' I said. 'Saving bonobos is the most important thing for her.'

The bonobo's skin was feverish, baking against mine. He was still making his almost-mute cries.

Any moment, those men with guns might get involved.

'No,' Clément said to the man. 'Take the bonobo back.'

Reluctantly, the trader reached out. I could feel the weak legs wrapped around my belly tense and tremble. I'd seen it at my mom's sanctuary – young bonobos spend years hanging on to their mothers. Without that constant affection, they die. The baby had spent weeks with this man, but he already preferred to be with me. What did that say about how he'd been treated? He had probably been in that cage the whole time, with nothing warm to touch. If I let him be pulled off me, the cage was right back where he'd go.

Supporting the scrawny bonobo bottom with one hand, I pulled the cash out of my pocket and handed it to the man. It was less than he'd asked for, but the trafficker took the thick wad without counting and backed toward his bike.

'*Te, papa,*' Clément called after him. 'We will not buy this bonobo! Come back.'

I buried my face into the baby's neck, felt his pulse beat its hot and fragile rhythm.

The transaction finished, the trader got on his bike and cycled away.

Clément hurried me back to the car and refused to say a word to me all the way to the sanctuary. I sat in the back, the bonobo in my lap. He wrapped his legs around me and kept his arms at his side; they must have gotten hurt when the man dangled him all morning.

I was no bonobo expert, but he was the ugliest I'd ever seen. He was practically bald and covered with scabs, his belly wrinkly and stuck out. It, too, was nearly hairless, covered in only a soft grey down. On each hip bone, where the rope had been rubbing, was a pus-filled blister. The little finger was totally gone from one hand, and the next finger was only an angry red nub.

'He's missing fingers,' I said to Clément.

He didn't break his silence.

'Why would he be missing fingers?' I asked.

I gently lifted the bonobo's hand, but he tugged it away, turning his head to stare quietly out of the window, his fingers making knitting motions over his rope. *Leave me alone.*

Staring at him was the only thing in the world I wanted to do. He didn't meet my eyes. There was no seeing in his looking.

I pressed my forehead against the window and watched what he watched as it passed by outside: the life-

less streets of the wealthy district with its guards dozing against front gates; day labourers crowding job boards; swamps of trash picked over by street kids; chickens with wrung necks thrown flailing into ditches; boys pushing a truck until the engine kicked over. It was a big change from the tidy American scene I'd left two days before.

The bonobo either hadn't been given anything to eat or had refused it – he was so thin. Nothing was coming out now, but he had had major diarrhoea sometime recently; the hair on his legs was matted and stinky. The breath that came from between his chapped lips was hot and dry. He had nothing left in the world except me, and we had known each other for just minutes. For all I knew, he could have only hours left to live. No wonder he was trying to shut everything out.

So what? I thought against the quaking in my heart. *He's an animal.* But I couldn't feel it. Despite myself, I cared about him.

I stroked the bonobo's belly, and for a few moments he half-closed his eyes. His breathing slowed as if he might fall asleep, but then Clément hit a bump and the bonobo jumped. Suddenly panicked, he sat up and stared about.

'Shh,' I whispered. 'You can relax. No one's going to hurt you now.'

Even then I knew it was a dangerous promise.