

CHAPTER TWO

Southern Sudan, 2008



Nya put the container down and sat on the ground. She always tried not to step on the spiky plants that grew along the path, but their thorns littered the ground everywhere.

She looked at the bottom of her foot. There it was, a big thorn that had broken off right in the middle of her heel. Nya pushed at the skin around the thorn. Then she picked up another thorn and used it to poke and prod at the first one. She pressed her lips together against the pain.

Southern Sudan, 1985



BOOM!

Salva turned and looked. Behind him, a huge black cloud of smoke rose. Flames darted out of its base. Overhead, a jet plane veered away like a sleek evil bird.

In the smoke and dust, he couldn't see the school

building anymore. He tripped and almost fell. No more looking back; it slowed him down.

Salva lowered his head and ran.

He ran until he could not run anymore. Then he walked. For hours, until the sun was nearly gone from the sky.

Other people were walking, too. There were so many of them that they couldn't all be from the school village; they must have come from the whole area.

As Salva walked, the same thoughts kept going through his head in rhythm with his steps. *Where are we going? Where is my family? When will I see them again?*

The people stopped walking when it grew too dark to see the path. At first, everyone stood around uncertainly, speaking in tense whispers or silent with fear.

Then some of the men gathered and talked for a few moments. One of them called out, "Villages—group yourselves by villages. You will find someone you know."

Salva wandered around until he heard the words "Loun-Ariik! The village of Loun-Ariik, here!"

Relief flooded through him. That was his village! He hurried toward the sound of the voice.

A dozen or so people stood in a loose group at the side

of the road. Salva scanned their faces. There was no one from his family. He recognized a few people—a woman with a baby, two men, a teenage girl—but no one he knew well. Still, it was comforting to see them.

They spent the night right there by the road, the men taking shifts to keep watch. The next morning, they began walking again. Salva stayed in the midst of the crowd with the other villagers from Loun-Ariik.

In the early afternoon, he saw a large group of soldiers up ahead.

Word passed through the crowd: "It's the rebels." The rebels—those who were fighting against the government.

Salva passed several rebel soldiers waiting by the side of the road. Each of them held a big gun. Their guns were not pointed at the crowd, but even so, the soldiers seemed fierce and watchful. Some of the rebels then joined the back of the line; now the villagers were surrounded.

What are they going to do to us? Where is my family?

Late in the day, the villagers arrived at the rebel camp. The soldiers ordered them to separate into two groups—men in one group, women and children and the elderly in the other. Teenage boys, it seemed, were considered men, for

boys who looked to be only a few years older than Salva were joining the men's group.

Salva hesitated for a moment. He was only eleven, but he was the son of an important family. He was Salva Mawien Dut Ariik, from the village named for his grandfather. His father always told him to act like a man—to follow the example of his older brothers and, in turn, set a good example for Kuol.

Salva took a few steps toward the men.

"Hey!"

A soldier approached Salva and raised his gun.

Salva froze. All he could see was the gun's huge barrel, black and gleaming, as it moved toward his face.

The end of the barrel touched his chin.

Salva felt his knees turn to water. He closed his eyes.

If I die now, I will never see my family again.

Somehow, this thought strengthened him enough to keep him from collapsing in terror.

He took a deep breath and opened his eyes.

The soldier was holding the gun with only one hand. He was not *aiming* it; he was using it to lift Salva's chin so he could get a better look at his face.

"Over there," the soldier said. He moved the gun and pointed it toward the group of women and children.

"You are not a man yet. Don't be in such a hurry!" He laughed and clapped Salva on the shoulder.

Salva scurried over to the women's side.

The next morning, the rebels moved on from the camp. The village men were forced to carry supplies: guns and mortars, shells, radio equipment. Salva watched as one man protested that he did not want to go with the rebels. A soldier hit him in the face with the butt of a gun. The man fell to the ground, bleeding.

After that, no one objected. The men shouldered the heavy equipment and left the camp.

Everyone else began walking again. They went in the opposite direction from the rebels, for wherever the rebels went, there was sure to be fighting.

Salva stayed with the group from Loun-Ariik. It was smaller now, without the men. And except for the infant, Salva was the only child.

That evening they found a barn in which to spend the night. Salva tossed restlessly in the itchy hay.

Where are we going? Where is my family? When will I see them again?

It took him a long time to fall asleep.

* * *

Even before he was fully awake, Salva could feel that something was wrong. He lay very still with his eyes closed, trying to sense what it might be.

Finally, he sat up and opened his eyes.

No one else was in the barn.

Salva stood so quickly that for a moment he felt dizzy.

He rushed to the door and looked out.

Nobody. Nothing.

They had left him.

He was alone.