

CHAPTER TEN

Southern Sudan, 2008



The men finished their meeting. They all stood and walked past Nya's house. Nya joined the crowd of children following them.

A few minutes' walk beyond her house, there was a tree. The men stopped at the tree, and the strangers talked to Nya's uncle some more.

There was another tree some fifty paces past the first one. With Nya's uncle beside him, one of the men stopped at the halfway point. The other man walked the rest of the way and examined the second tree.

The first man called out to his friend in a language Nya did not understand. The friend answered in the same language, but as he walked back toward the group, he translated for the chief, and Nya could hear him.

"This is the spot, halfway between the two largest trees. We will find the water here."

Nya shook her head. What were they talking about? She knew that place like the back of her own hand. It was there, between the two trees, that the village sometimes gathered to sing and talk around a big fire.

There wasn't a single drop of water on that spot, unless it was raining!

Southern Sudan, 1985



Salva reached for his gourd. He knew it to be half full, but suddenly it felt much lighter, as if there was hardly any water left in it.

Uncle Jewiir must have guessed what he was thinking.

"No, Salva," he murmured. "You are too small, and not strong enough yet. Without water you will not survive the rest of the walk. Some of the others—they will be able to manage better than you."

Sure enough, there were now three women giving water to the men on the ground.

Like a miracle, the small amounts of water revived them. They were able to stagger to their feet and join the group as the walking continued.

But their five dead companions were left behind. There were no tools with which to dig, and besides, burying the dead men would have taken too much time.

Salva tried not to look as he walked past the bodies, but his eyes were drawn in their direction. He knew what would happen. Vultures would find the bodies and strip them of their rotting flesh until only the bones remained. He felt sick at the thought of those men—first dying in such a horrible way, and then having even their corpses ravaged.

If he were older and stronger, would he have given water to those men? Or would he, like most of the group, have kept his water for himself?

It was the group's third day in the desert. By sunset, they would be out of the desert, and after that, it would not be far to the Itang refugee camp in Ethiopia.

As they trudged through the heat, Salva finally had a chance to talk to Uncle about a worry that had been growing like a long shadow across his thoughts. "Uncle, if I am in Ethiopia, how will my parents ever find me? When will I be able to go back to Loun-Ariik?"

"I have talked to the others here," Uncle said. "We believe that the village of Loun-Ariik was attacked and probably burned. Your family . . ." Uncle paused and looked away. When he looked back again, his face was solemn.

"Salva, few people survived the attack on the village. Anyone still alive would have fled into the bush, and no one knows where they are now."

Salva was silent for a moment. Then he said, "At least you will be there with me. In Ethiopia."

Uncle's voice was gentle. "No, Salva. I am going to take you to the refugee camp, but then I will return to Sudan, to fight in the war."

Salva stopped walking and clutched at Uncle's arm. "But, Uncle, I will have no one! Who will be my family?"

Uncle gently loosened Salva's grip so he could take the boy's hand in his. "There will be many other people in the camp. You will become friends with some of them—you will make a kind of family there. They, too, will need people they can depend on."

Salva shook his head, unable to imagine what life would be like in the camp without Uncle. He squeezed Uncle's hand tightly.

Uncle stood quietly and said nothing more.

He knows it will be hard for me, Salva realized. He does not want to leave me there, but he has to go back and fight for our people. I musn't act like a baby—I must try to be strong. . . .

Salva swallowed hard. "Uncle, when you go back to Sudan, you might meet my parents somewhere. You could tell them where I am. Or you could talk to those you meet, and ask where the people of Loun-Ariik are now."

Uncle did not answer right away. Then he said, "Of course I will do that, Nephew."

Salva felt a tiny spark of hope. With Uncle looking for his family, there was a chance they might all be together again one day.

No one in the group had eaten anything for two days. Their water was nearly gone. Only the vision of leaving the desert kept them moving through the heat and the dust.

Early that afternoon, they came across the first evidence that the desert was receding: a few stunted trees near a shallow pool of muddy water. The water was unfit to drink, but a dead stork lay by the pond's edge. Immediately, the group began to make preparations to cook and eat the bird. Salva helped gather twigs for the fire.

As the bird roasted, Salva could hardly keep his eyes off it. There would only be enough for a bite or two for each person, but he could hardly wait.

Then he heard loud voices. Along with the rest of the

group, he turned and saw six men coming toward them. As the men approached, he could see that they were armed with guns and machetes.

The men began shouting.

"Sit down!"

"Hands on your heads!"

"All of you! Now!"

Everyone in the group sat down at once. Salva was afraid of the weapons, and he could see that the others were, too.

One of the men walked among the group and stopped in front of Uncle. Salva could tell by the ritual scarring on the man's face that he was from the Nuer tribe.

"Are you with the rebels?" the man asked.

"No," Uncle answered.

"Where have you come from? Where are you going?"

"We come from the west of the Nile," Uncle said. "We are going to Itang, to the refugee camp."

The man told Uncle to get up and leave his gun where it was. Two of the other men took Uncle to a tree several yards away and tied him to it.

Then the men moved among the group. If anyone was carrying a bag, the men opened it and took whatever

was in it. They ordered some people to remove their clothing and took that, too.

Salva was trembling. Even in the midst of his fear, he realized that for the first time on the trip, it was a good thing to be the youngest and smallest: The men would not be interested in his clothes.

When the men had finished their looting, they picked up Uncle's gun. Then they walked to the tree where Uncle was tied up.

Maybe they will leave us alone now that they have robbed us, Salva thought.

He heard them laughing.

As Salva watched, one of the men aimed his gun at Uncle.

Three shots rang out. Then the men ran away.