

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Southern Sudan, 2008



After the two men left the village, the task of clearing more of the land between the trees began. It was very hard work: The smaller trees and bushes had to be burned or uprooted. The long grass had to be scythed and hoed under. It was dangerous work, too, as poisonous snakes and scorpions hid in the grass.

Nya was still making the two daily trips to the pond. Each time she returned, she could see that slowly but surely the patch of cleared earth was growing larger.

The earth was dry and rock-hard. Nya felt puzzled and doubtful: How could there be water in such a place?

And when she asked Dep that question, he shook his head. She could see the doubt in his eyes, too.

Southern Sudan and Ethiopia, 1985



They buried Uncle in a hole about two feet deep, a hole that had already been made by some kind of animal. Out

of respect for him, the group walked no more that day but took time to mourn the man who had been their leader.

Salva was too numb to think, and when thoughts did come to him, they seemed silly. He was annoyed that they would not be able to eat after all: While the men had been looting the group, more birds had arrived and pecked at the roasted stork until it was nothing but bones.

The time for grief was short, and the walking began again soon after dark. Despite the numbness in his heart, Salva was amazed to find himself walking faster and more boldly than he had before.

Marial was gone. Uncle was gone, too, murdered by those Nuer men right before Salva's eyes. Marial and Uncle were no longer by his side, and they never would be again, but Salva knew that both of them would have wanted him to survive, to finish the trip and reach the Itang refugee camp safely. It was almost as if they had left their strength with him, to help him on his journey.

He could not think of any other explanation for the way he felt. But there was no doubt: Beneath his terrible sadness, he felt stronger.

Now that Salva was without Uncle's care and protection, the group's attitude toward him changed. Once again, they grumbled that he was too young and small, that he

might slow them down or start crying again, as he had in the desert.

No one shared anything with him, neither food nor company. Uncle had always shared the animals and birds he shot with everyone in the group. But it seemed they had all forgotten that, for Salva now had to beg for scraps, which were given grudgingly.

The way they were treating him made Salva feel stronger still. *There is no one left to help me. They think I am weak and useless.*

Salva lifted his head proudly. *They are wrong, and I will prove it.*

Salva had never before seen so many people in one place at the same time. How could there be this many people in the world?

More than hundreds. More than thousands. Thousands upon thousands.

People in lines and masses and clumps. People milling around, standing, sitting or crouching on the ground, lying down with their legs curled up because there was not enough room to stretch out.

The refugee camp at Itang was filled with people of all ages—men, women, girls, small children. . . . But most of

the refugees were boys and young men who had run away from their villages when the war came. They had run because they were in double danger: from the war itself and from the armies on both sides. Young men and sometimes even boys were often forced to join the fighting, which was why their families and communities—including Salva's schoolmaster—had sent the boys running into the bush at the first sign of fighting.

Children who arrived at the refugee camp without their families were grouped together, so Salva was separated at once from the people he had traveled with. Even though they had not been kind to him, at least he had known them. Now, among strangers once again, he felt uncertain and maybe even afraid.

As he walked through the camp with several other boys, Salva glanced at every face he passed. Uncle had said that no one knew where his family was for certain . . . so wasn't there at least a chance that they might be here in the camp?

Salva looked around at the masses of people stretched out as far as he could see. He felt his heart sink a little, but he clenched his hands into fists and made himself a promise.

If they are here, I will find them.

* * *

After so many weeks of walking, Salva found it strange to be staying in one place. During that long, terrible trek, finding a safe place to stop and stay for a while had been desperately important. But now that he was at the camp, he felt restless—almost as if he should begin walking again.

The camp was safe from the war. There were no men with guns or machetes, no planes with bombs overhead. On the evening of his very first day, Salva was given a bowl of boiled maize to eat, and another one the next morning. Already things were better here than they had been during the journey.

During the afternoon of the second day, Salva picked his way slowly through the crowds. Eventually, he found himself standing near the gate that was the main entrance to the camp, watching the new arrivals enter. It did not seem as if the camp could possibly hold any more, but still they kept coming: long lines of people, some emaciated, some hurt or sick, all exhausted.

As Salva scanned the faces, a flash of orange caught his eye.

Orange . . . an orange headscarf . . .

He began pushing and stumbling past people. Someone spoke to him angrily, but he did not stop to excuse

himself. He could still see the vivid spot of orange—yes, it was a headscarf—the woman's back was to him, but she was tall, like his mother—he had to catch up, there were too many people in the way—

A half-sob broke free from Salva's lips. He mustn't lose track of her!