

CHAPTER TWELVE

Southern Sudan, 2009



An iron giraffe.

A red giraffe that made very loud noises.

The giraffe was a tall drill that had been brought to the village by the two men who had visited earlier. They had returned with a crew of ten more men and two trucks—one hauling the giraffe-drill along with other mysterious equipment, and the other loaded with plastic pipe. Meanwhile, the land was still being cleared.

Nya's mother tied the baby on her back and walked with several other women to a place between the village and the pond. They collected piles of rocks and stones and tied them up into bundles using sturdy cloth. They balanced the bundles on their heads, walked back to the drilling site, and emptied the rocks onto the ground.

Other villagers, using tools borrowed from the visitors, pounded the rocks to break them up into gravel. Many loads of gravel would be needed. Nya didn't know why. The piles of gravel grew larger each day.

The clangor of machinery and hammer greeted Nya each time she returned from the pond—unfamiliar noises that mingled with the voices of men shouting and women singing. It was the sound of people working hard together.

But it did not sound at all like water.

Itang refugee camp, Ethiopia, 1985



“Mother! Mother, please!”

Salva opened his mouth to call out again. But the words did not come. Instead, he closed his mouth, lowered his head, and turned away.

The woman in the orange headscarf was not his mother. He knew this for certain, even though she was still far away and he had not seen her face.

Uncle's words came back to him: “*The village of Loun-Ariik was attacked . . . burned. Few people survived . . . no one knows where they are now.*”

In the moment before calling out to the woman a second time, Salva realized what Uncle had truly meant—something Salva had known in his heart for a long time:

His family was gone. They had been killed by bullets or bombs, starvation or sickness—it did not matter how. What mattered was that Salva was on his own now.

He felt as though he were standing on the edge of a giant hole—a hole filled with the black despair of nothingness.

I am alone now.

I am all that is left of my family.

His father, who had sent Salva to school . . . brought him treats, like mangoes . . . trusted him to take care of the herd. . . . His mother, always ready with food and milk and a soft hand to stroke Salva's head. His brothers and sisters, whom he had laughed with and played with and looked after. . . . He would never see them again.

How can I go on without them?

But how can I not go on? They would want me to survive . . . to grow up and make something of my life . . . to honor their memories.

What was it Uncle had said during that first terrible day in the desert? “Do you see that group of bushes? You need only to walk as far as those bushes. . . .”

Uncle had helped him get through the desert that way, bit by bit, one step at a time. Perhaps . . . perhaps Salva could get through life at the camp in the same way.

I need only to get through the rest of this day, he told himself.

This day and no other.

If someone had told Salva that he would live in the camp for *six years*, he would never have believed it.

Six years later: July 1991



“They are going to close the camp. Everyone will have to leave.”

“That’s impossible. Where will we go?”

“That’s what they’re saying. Not just this camp. All of them.”

The rumors skittered around the camp. Everyone was uneasy. As the days went by, the uneasiness grew into fear.

Salva was almost seventeen years old now—a young man. He tried to learn what he could about the rumors by talking to the aid workers in the camp. They told him that the Ethiopian government was near collapse. The refugee camps were run by foreign aid groups, but it was the government that permitted them to operate. If the government fell, what would the new rulers do about the camps?

When that question was answered, no one was ready. One rainy morning, as Salva walked toward the school tent, long lines of trucks were arriving. Masses of armed soldiers poured out of the trucks and ordered everyone to leave.

The orders were not just to leave the camp but to leave Ethiopia.

Immediately, there was chaos. It was as if the people ceased to be people and instead became an enormous herd of panicked, stampeding two-legged creatures.

Salva was caught up in the surge. His feet barely touched the ground as he was swept along by the crowd of thousands of people running and screaming. The rain, which was falling in torrents, added to the uproar.

The soldiers fired their guns into the air and chased the people away from the camp. But once they were beyond the area surrounding the camp, the soldiers continued to drive them onward, shouting and shooting.

As he dashed ahead, Salva heard snatches of talk.

"The river."

"They're chasing us toward the river!"

Salva knew which river they meant: the Gilo River, which was along the border between Ethiopia and Sudan.

They are driving us back to Sudan, Salva thought. They will force us to cross the river. . . .

It was the rainy season. Swollen by the rains, the Gilo's current would be merciless.

The Gilo was well known for something else, too. Crocodiles.