

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Southern Sudan, 2009



Nya thought it was funny: You had to have water to find water. Water had to be flowing constantly into the borehole to keep the drill running smoothly.

The crew drove to the pond and back several times a day. The pond water was piped into what looked like a giant plastic bag—a bag big enough to fill the entire bed of the truck.

The bag sprang a leak. The leak had to be patched.

The patch sprang a leak. The crew patched the patch.

Then the bag sprang another leak. The drilling could not go on.

The drilling crew was discouraged by the leaks. They wanted to stop working. But their boss kept them going. All the workers wore the same blue coveralls; still, Nya could tell who was the boss. He was one of the two men who had first come to the village. The other man seemed to be his main assistant.

The boss would encourage the workers and laugh and joke with them. If that didn't work, he would talk to them ear-

nestly and try to persuade them. And if *that* didn't work, he would get angry.

He didn't get angry very often. He kept working—and kept the others working, too.

They patched the bag again. The drilling went on.

Ethiopia-Sudan-Kenya, 1991-92



Hundreds of people lined the riverbank. The soldiers were forcing some of them into the water, prodding them with their rifle butts, shooting into the air.

Other people, afraid of the soldiers and their guns, were leaping into the water on their own. They were immediately swept downstream by the powerful current.

As Salva crouched on the bank and watched, a young man near him plunged into the water. The current carried him swiftly downstream, but he was also making a little progress across the river.

Then Salva saw the telltale flick of a crocodile's tail as it flopped into the water near the young man. Moments later, the man's head jerked oddly—once, twice. His mouth was open. Perhaps he was screaming, but Salva could not

hear him over the din of the crowd and the rain. . . . A moment later, the man was pulled under.
A cloud of red stained the water.

The rain was still pouring down—and now bullets were pouring down as well. The soldiers started shooting into the river, aiming their guns at the people who were trying to get across.

Why? Why are they shooting at us?

Salva had no choice. He jumped into the water and began to swim. A boy next to him grabbed him around the neck and clung to him tightly. Salva was forced under the surface without time to take more than a quick, shallow breath.

Salva struggled—kicking, clawing. He's holding on to me too hard . . . I can't . . . air . . . no air left . . .

Suddenly, the boy's grip loosened, and Salva launched himself upward. He threw his head back and took a huge gulp of air. For a few moments he could do nothing but gasp and choke.

When his vision cleared, he saw why the boy had let go: He was floating with his head down, blood streaming from a bullet hole in the back of his neck.

Stunned, Salva realized that being forced under the

water had probably saved his life. But there was no time to marvel over this. More crocodiles were launching themselves off the banks. The rain, the mad current, the bullets, the crocodiles, the welter of arms and legs, the screams, the blood. . . . He had to get across somehow.

Salva did not know how long he was in the water.

It felt like hours.

It felt like years.

When at last the tips of his toes touched mud, he forced his limbs to make swimming motions one last time. He crawled onto the riverbank and collapsed. Then he lay there in the mud, choking and sobbing for breath.

Later, he would learn that at least a thousand people had died trying to cross the river that day, drowned or shot or attacked by crocodiles.

How was it that he was not one of the thousand? Why was he one of the lucky ones?

The walking began again. Walking—but to where?

No one knew anything for sure. Where was Salva supposed to go?

Not home. There is still war everywhere in Sudan.

Not back to Ethiopia. The soldiers would shoot us.

Kenya. There are supposed to be refugee camps in Kenya.

Salva made up his mind. He would walk south, to Kenya. He did not know what he would find once he got there, but it seemed to be his best choice.

Crowds of other boys followed him. Nobody talked about it, but by the end of the first day Salva had become the leader of a group of about fifteen hundred boys. Some were as young as five years old.

Those smallest boys reminded Salva of his brother Kuol. But then he had an astounding thought. *Kuol isn't that age anymore—he is a teenager now!* Salva found that he could only think of his brothers and sisters as they were when he had last seen them, not as they would be now.

They were traveling through a part of Sudan still plagued by war. The fighting and bombing were worst during the day, so Salva decided that the group should hide when the sun shone and do their walking at night.

But in the darkness, it was hard to be sure they were headed in the right direction. Sometimes the boys traveled for days only to realize that they had gone in a huge circle. This happened so many times that Salva lost count. They met other groups of boys, all walking south. Every group had stories of terrible peril: boys who had been hurt or killed by bullets or bombs, attacked by wild animals, or left behind because they were too weak or sick to keep up.

When Salva heard the stories, he thought of Marial. He felt his determination growing, as it had in the days after Uncle's death.

I will get us safely to Kenya, he thought. No matter how hard it is.

He organized the group, giving everyone a job: scavenge for food; collect firewood; stand guard while the group slept. Whatever food or water they found was shared equally among all of them. When the smaller boys grew too tired to walk, the older boys took turns carrying them on their backs.

There were times when some of the boys did not want to do their share of the work. Salva would talk to them, encourage them, coax and persuade them. Once in a while he had to speak sternly, or even shout. But he tried not to do this too often.

It was as if Salva's family were helping him, even though they were not there. He remembered how he had looked after his little brother, Kuol. But he also knew what it felt like to have to listen to the older ones, Ariik and Ring. And he could recall the gentleness of his sisters; the strength of his father; the care of his mother.

Most of all, he remembered how Uncle had encouraged him in the desert.

One step at a time . . . one day at a time. Just today—just this day to get through . . .

Salva told himself this every day. He told the boys in the group, too.

And one day at a time, the group made its way to Kenya.

More than twelve hundred boys arrived safely.

It took them a year and a half.