

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Southern Sudan, 2009



Nya waited her turn in line. She was holding a plastic bottle.

The well was finally finished. The gravel had been put down to make a foundation, the pump had been installed, and the cement had been poured and left to dry.

Before the pump was used for the first time, the villagers all gathered around. The leader of the workers brought out a big sign made of blue canvas. The canvas had writing on it. The writing was in English; but the leader spoke to Nya's uncle, and Uncle told everyone what the sign said.

"In honor of Elm Street School," Uncle said. "This is the name of a school in America. The students at the school raised the money for this well to be dug."

Uncle held up one end of the sign. The workers' leader held up the other end. Everyone else stood around it, and one of the workers took their picture. The picture would be sent to the American school so that the students there could see the well and the people who were now using it.

Then the villagers all got in line to wait their turn for water from the new well.

When Nya reached the head of the line, she smiled shyly at her uncle, who paused in his work for a moment to smile back at her. Then he began moving the pump handle. Up and down, up and down . . .

A stream of water flowed from the mouth of the pump.

Nya held her bottle underneath the pump mouth. The bottle filled up quickly.

She stepped aside to let the next person fill a bottle. Then she drank.

The water was delicious. It wasn't warm or muddy, like the water from the pond. It was cool and clear.

Nya stopped drinking and held up the bottle so she could look at it. Funny that something without any color at all could look so nice.

She drank a few more sips, then glanced around.

Everyone had a bottle or a cup. They were drinking that lovely water, or waiting in line for more, or talking and laughing. It was a celebration.

An old granddad standing not far from Nya shook his head. In a loud voice, he said, "This is where we used to gather for our bonfire celebrations. I have been sitting on this ground my whole life. And all those years I never knew that I was sitting on top of this good water!"

Everyone around him laughed. Nya laughed, too. In a few more days, the school would be finished. Nya and Dep and Akeer would all go to school, along with the other children. Next year there would be a marketplace where the villagers could sell and buy vegetables and chickens and other goods. There was even talk of a clinic someday—a medical clinic, so they wouldn't have to walk so far to get help, as they had to when Akeer was ill.

It was the well that was bringing the village all these good things.

But the well was not for their use alone. People would come from miles around to fetch the good clean water. Nya knew from listening to the grownups that the crew leader had made many arrangements concerning the well. No one was ever to be refused water. Some of the villagers would be responsible for maintaining the well. They would be busy with this new work, so the entire village was to help them with their crops and cattle. Other villagers, including Nya's uncle, would resolve any disputes that arose.

The well would change their lives in many ways.

I will never again have to walk to the pond for water, Nya thought.

She wandered around a little, sipping at her cool, fresh

drink. Then she caught sight of the crew leader. He was standing by himself, leaning against one of the trucks and watching her uncle work the pump.

Dep saw her looking at the man.

"That man, the boss of the workers," Dep said. "You know he is Dinka?"

Nya looked at Dep in astonishment.

The Dinka and the Nuer did not look very different physically. You had to look at the scar patterns on people's faces to tell the tribes apart—Dinka scar patterns were different from those of the Nuer.

But the crew leader had no scars on his face. Nya had heard some of the teenage boys talking about that—wondering why he had no scars when clearly he was a grown man. The leader's assistant was Nuer. So were most of the crew—they all had Nuer scars. Nya hadn't thought about it much, but she realized now she had always assumed that the leader was Nuer, too.

The Dinka and the Nuer were enemies—had been for hundreds of years.

"Why would a Dinka bring water to us?" she wondered aloud.

"I heard Uncle and Father talking about him," Dep said.

"He has drilled many wells for his own people. This year he decided to drill for the Nuer as well."

Dep had not really answered Nya's question. *He probably doesn't know the answer*, she thought. But now Nya felt there was something she had to do.

She walked over to where the man was standing. He didn't notice her at first, so she waited quietly.

Then he saw her. "Hello," he said.

Shyness flooded through Nya. For a moment, she didn't think she would be able to speak. She looked down at the ground, then at the stream of water still flowing from the pump mouth.

And she found her voice. "Thank you," she said, and looked up at him bravely. "Thank you for bringing the water."

The man smiled. "What is your name?" he asked.

"I am Nya."

"I am happy to meet you, Nya," he said. "My name is Salva."