

CHAPTER SEVEN

Southern Sudan, 2008



Nya sat on the floor. She reached out and took her little sister's hand.

Akeer did not seem to notice. She lay curled on her side, hardly moving, silent except for an occasional whimper.

Her silence frightened Nya. Only two days earlier, Akeer had complained noisily and at length about the pains in her stomach. Nya had been annoyed by all the whining. Now she felt guilty, for she could see that her sister no longer had enough strength to complain.

Nya knew many people who suffered from the same illness. First cramps and stomachache, then diarrhea. Sometimes fever, too. Most of the adults and older children who fell ill recovered at least enough to work again, although they might continue to suffer off and on for years.

For the elderly and for small children, the illness could be dangerous. Unable to hold anything in their systems, many of them starved to death, even with food right in front of them.

Nya's uncle, the chief of their village, knew of a medical clinic a few days' walk away. He told Nya's family that if they

could take Akeer there, doctors would give her medicine to help her get better.

But a trip like that would be very difficult for Akeer. Should they stay at the camp and let her rest so she might heal on her own? Or should they begin the long hard walk—and hope they reached help in time?

Southern Sudan, 1985



The walking began again. Salva shook with terror inside and out.

He clung to Uncle like a baby or a little boy, hanging on to his hand or shirttail when he could, never letting Uncle get farther than an arm's length away. He looked around constantly: Every movement in the grass was a lion stalking, every stillness a lion waiting to spring.

Marial was gone—vanished into the night. He would never have wandered away from the group on his own. His disappearance could mean only one thing.

Lion.

A lion had been hungry enough to approach the group as they slept. A few men had been keeping watch

but in the dark of night, with the wind rippling through the long grass, the lion could easily have crept close without being seen. It had sought out prey that was small and motionless: Marial, sleeping.

And it had taken him away, leaving only a few splotches of blood near the path.

If it hadn't been for Uncle, Salva might have gone crazy with fear. Uncle spoke to him all morning in a steady, low voice.

"Salva, I have a gun. I will shoot any lion that comes near."

"Salva, I will stay awake tonight and keep watch."

"Salva, we will soon be out of lion country. Everything will be all right."

Listening to Uncle, hurrying to stay close to him, Salva was able to make his feet move despite the cold terror throughout his whole body.

But nothing was all right. He had lost his family, and now he had lost his friend as well.

No one had heard any screaming in the night. Salva hoped with all his heart that the lion had killed Marial instantly—that his friend hadn't had time to feel fear or pain.

* * *

The landscape grew greener. The air smelled of water.

"The Nile," Uncle said. "We will soon come to the Nile River and cross to the other side."

The Nile: the longest river in the world, the mother of all life in Sudan. Uncle explained that they would come to the river at one of its broadest stretches.

"It will not even look like a river. It will look like a big lake. We will spend a long time crossing to the other side."

"And what is on the other side?" Salva whispered, still fearful.

"Desert," Uncle answered. "And after that, Ethiopia."

Salva's eyes filled with tears. Marial had been right about Ethiopia. *How I wish he were here, so I could tell him I was wrong.*

Salva stood on the bank of the Nile. Here, as Uncle had said, the river formed a big lake.

The group would cross the Nile in boats, Uncle said. It would take a whole day to reach the islands in the middle of the lake, and another day to get to the far shore.

Salva frowned. He saw no boats anywhere.

Uncle smiled at Salva's puzzled expression. "What, you didn't bring your own boat?" he said. "Then I hope you are a good swimmer!"

Salva lowered his head. He knew that Uncle was teas-

ing, but he felt so tired—tired of worrying about his family, tired of thinking about poor Marial, tired of walking and not knowing where they were going. The least Uncle could do was tell him the truth about the boats.

Uncle put his arm around Salva's shoulders. "You'll see. We have a lot of work to do."

Salva staggered forward with yet another enormous load of reeds in his arms. Everyone was busy. Some people were cutting down the tall papyrus grass by the water's edge. Others, like Salva, gathered up the cut stalks and took them to the boatbuilders.

Among the group were a few people whose home villages had been near rivers or lakes. They knew how to tie the reeds together and weave them cleverly to form shallow canoes.

Everyone worked quickly, although there was no way of knowing whether they had to hurry or not, no way of knowing how near the war was. The fighting could be miles away—or a plane carrying bombs could fly overhead at any moment.

It was hard work running back and forth between those cutting and those weaving. But Salva found that the work was helping him feel a little better. He was too

busy to worry much. Doing something, even carrying big, awkward piles of slippery reeds, was better than doing nothing.

Every time Salva delivered a load of reeds, he would pause for a few moments to admire the skills of the boatbuilders. The long reeds were laid out in neat bunches. Each end of a bunch would be tied together tightly. Then the bunch of reeds was pulled apart in the middle to form a hollow, and the two sides were tied all along their length to make a basic boat shape. More layers of reeds were added and tied to make the bottom of the boat. Salva watched, fascinated, as little by little the curve of a prow and low sides grew from the piles of reeds.

It took two full days for the group to build enough canoes. Each canoe was tested; a few did not float well and had to be fixed. Then more reeds were tied together to form paddles.

At last, everything was ready. Salva got into a canoe between Uncle and another man. He gripped the sides of the boat tightly as it floated out onto the Nile.