

## CHAPTER NINE

*Southern Sudan, 2008*



Nya's family had been back in the village for several months the day the visitors came; in fact, it was nearly time to leave for the camp again. As the jeep drove up, most of the children ran to meet it. Shy about meeting strangers, Nya hung back.

Two men emerged from the jeep. They spoke to the biggest boys, including Nya's brother, Dep, who led them to the home of the village's chief, his and Nya's uncle.

The chief came out of his house to greet the visitors. They sat in the shade of the house with some of the other village men and drank tea together and talked for a while.

"What are they talking about?" Nya asked Dep.

"Something about water," Dep replied.

Water? The nearest water was the pond, of course, half a morning's walk away.

Anyone could have told them that.

*Southern Sudan, 1985*



Salva had never seen anything like the desert. Around his village, Loun-Ariik, enough grass and shrubs grew to feed the grazing cattle. There were even trees. But here in the desert, nothing green could survive except tiny evergreen acacia bushes, which somehow endured the long winter months with almost no water.

Uncle said it would take three days to cross the Akobo. Salva's shoes stood no chance against the hot stony desert ground. The soles, made from rubber tire treads, had already been reduced to shreds held together with a little leather and a great deal of hope. After only a few minutes, Salva had to kick off the flapping shreds and continue barefoot.

The first day in the desert felt like the longest day Salva had ever lived through. The sun was relentless and eternal: There was neither wisp of cloud nor whiff of breeze for relief. Each minute of walking in that arid heat felt like an hour. Even breathing became an effort: Every breath Salva took seemed to drain strength rather than restore it.

Thorns gored his feet. His lips became cracked and

parched. Uncle cautioned him to make the water in his gourd last as long as possible. It was the hardest thing Salva had ever done, taking only tiny sips when his body cried out for huge gulps of thirst-quenching, life-giving water.

The worst moment of the day happened near the end. Salva stubbed his bare toe on a rock, and his whole toenail came off.

The pain was terrible. Salva tried to bite his lip, but the awfulness of that never-ending day was too much for him. He lowered his head, and the tears began to flow.

Soon he was crying so hard that he could hardly get his breath. He could not think; he could barely see. He had to slow down, and for the first time on the long journey, he began to lag behind the group. Stumbling about blindly, he did not notice the group drawing farther and farther ahead of him.

As if by magic, Uncle was suddenly at his side.

"Salva Mawien Dut Ariik!" he said, using Salva's full name, loud and clear.

Salva lifted his head, the sobs interrupted by surprise.

"Do you see that group of bushes?" Uncle said, pointing. "You need only to walk as far as those bushes. Can you do that, Salva Mawien Dut Ariik?"

Salva wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. He could see the bushes; they did not look too far away.

Uncle reached into his bag. He took out a tamarind and handed it to Salva.

Chewing on the sour juicy fruit made Salva feel a little better.

When they reached the bushes, Uncle pointed out a clump of rocks up ahead and told Salva to walk as far as the rocks. After that, a lone acacia . . . another clump of rocks . . . a spot bare of everything except sand.

Uncle continued in this way for the rest of the walk. Each time, he spoke to Salva using his full name. Each time, Salva would think of his family and his village, and he was somehow able to keep his wounded feet moving forward, one painful step at a time.

At last, the sun was reluctantly forced from the sky. A blessing of darkness fell across the desert, and it was time to rest.

The next day was a precise copy of the one before: the sun and the heat and, worst of all to Salva's mind, a landscape that was utterly unchanged. The same rocks. The same acacias. The same dust. There was not a thing to indicate that the group was making any progress at all across the

desert. Salva felt as if he had walked for hours while staying in exactly the same place.

The fierce heat sent up shimmering waves that made everything look wobbly. Or was he the one who was wobbling? That large clump of rocks up ahead—it almost seemed to be moving. . . .

It *was* moving. It was not rocks at all.

It was people.

Salva's group drew nearer. Salva counted nine men, all of them collapsed on the sand.

One made a small, desperate motion with his hand. Another tried to raise his head but fell back again. None of them made a sound.

As Salva watched, he realized that five of the men were completely motionless.

One of the women in Salva's group pushed forward and knelt down. She opened her container of water.

"What are you doing?" a man called. "You cannot save them!"

The woman did not answer. When she looked up, Salva could see tears in her eyes. She shook her head, then poured a little water onto a cloth and began to wet the lips of one of the men on the sand.

Salva looked at the hollow eyes and the cracked lips

of the men lying on the hot sand, and his own mouth felt so dry that he nearly choked when he tried to swallow.

"If you give them your water, you will not have enough for yourself!" the same voice shouted. "It is useless—they will die, and you will die with them!"