

CHAPTER FIVE

Southern Sudan, 2008



There was a big lake three days' walk from Nya's village. Every year when the rains stopped and the pond near the village dried up, Nya's family moved from their home to a camp near the big lake.

Nya's family did not live by the lake all year round because of the fighting. Her tribe, the Nuer, often fought with the rival Dinka tribe over the land surrounding the lake. Men and boys were hurt and even killed when the two groups clashed. So Nya and the rest of her village lived at the lake only during the five months of the dry season, when both tribes were so busy struggling for survival that the fighting occurred far less often.

Like the pond back home, the lake was dried up. But because it was much bigger than the pond, the clay of the lakebed still held water.

Nya's job at the lake camp was the same as at home: to fetch water. With her hands, she would dig a hole in the damp clay of the lakebed. She kept digging, scooping out handfuls of clay until the hole was as deep as her arm was long. The

clay got wetter as she dug, until, at last, water began to seep into the bottom of the hole.

The water that filled the hole was filthy, more mud than liquid. It seeped in so slowly that it took a long time to collect even a few gourdsful. Nya would crouch by the hole, waiting.

Waiting for water. Here, for hours at a time. And every day for five long months, until the rains came and she and her family could return home.

Southern Sudan, 1985



Salva's eye was swollen shut. Buksa's forearms were lumpy and raw. A friend of Buksa's had a fat lip. They all looked as though they had been in a terrible fistfight.

But their injuries weren't bruises. They were bee stings.

A fire had been started under the tree, to smoke the bees out of the hive and make them sleepy. But as Buksa and the other Jur-chol men were removing the hive from the tree, the bees woke up and were not at all happy to discover that their home was being taken away. They expressed their unhappiness very clearly by buzzing, swarming, and stinging. Stinging a lot.

It was worth it, Salva thought as he touched his eye gingerly. His belly was a rounded lump stuffed full of honey and beeswax. Nothing had ever tasted so good as those pieces of honeycomb dripping with rich, luscious gold sweetness. Along with everyone else in the group, he had eaten as much as he could hold—and then a little more.

All around him, people were licking their fingers in great satisfaction—except for one Dinka man who had been stung on his *tongue*. It was swollen so badly that he could not close his mouth; he could hardly swallow.

Salva felt very sorry for him. The poor man couldn't even enjoy the honey.

The walking seemed easier now that Salva had something in his belly. He had managed to save one last piece of honeycomb and had wrapped it carefully in a leaf. By the end of the next day, all the honey was gone, but Salva kept the beeswax in his mouth and chewed it for the memory of sweetness.

The group got a little bigger with each passing day. More people joined them—people who had been walking alone or in little clusters of two or three. Salva made it a habit to survey the whole group every morning and eve-

ning, searching for his family. But they were never among the newcomers.

One evening a few weeks after Salva had joined the group, he made his usual walk around the fireside, scanning every face in the hope of seeing a familiar one.

Then—

“Ouch!”

Salva almost lost his footing as the ground underneath him seemed to move.

A boy jumped to his feet and stood in front of him.

“Hey! That was my hand you stepped on!” The boy spoke Dinka but with a different accent, which meant that he was not from the area around Salva's village.

Salva took a step back. “Sorry. Are you hurt?”

The boy opened and closed his hand a few times, then shrugged. “It's all right. But you really should watch where you're going.”

“Sorry,” Salva repeated. After a moment's silence, he turned away and began searching the crowd again.

The boy was still looking at him. “Your family?” he asked.

Salva shook his head.

“Me, too,” the boy said. He sighed, and Salva heard that sigh all the way to his heart.

Their eyes met. "I'm Salva."

"I'm Marial."

It was good to make a friend.

Marial was the same age as Salva. They were almost the same height. When they walked side by side, their strides were exactly the same length. And the next morning, they began walking together.

"Do you know where we're going?" Salva asked.

Marial tilted his head up and put his hand on his brow to shade his eyes from the rising sun. "East," he said wisely. "We are walking into the morning sun."

Salva rolled his eyes. "I *know* we're going east," he said. "Anyone could tell that. But *where* in the east?"

Marial thought for a moment. "Ethiopia," he said. "East of Sudan is Ethiopia."

Salva stopped walking. "Ethiopia? That is another country! We can't walk all the way there."

"We are walking east," Marial said firmly. "Ethiopia is east."

I can't go to another country, Salva thought. If I do, my family will never find me. . . .

Marial put his arm around Salva's shoulders. He seemed to know what Salva was thinking, for he said, "It

doesn't matter. Don't you know that if we keep walking east, we'll go all the way around the world and come right back here to Sudan? That's when we'll find our families!"

Salva had to laugh. They were both laughing as they started walking again, arm in arm, their strides matching perfectly.

More than a month had passed since Salva had run from his school into the bush. The group was now walking in the land of the Atuot people.

In the Dinka language, the Atuot were called "the people of the lion." Their region was inhabited by large herds of antelope, wildebeest, gnus—and the lions that preyed on them. The Dinka told stories about the Atuot. When an Atuot person died, he came back to Earth as a lion, with a great hunger for the human flesh he once had. The lions in the Atuot region were said to be the fiercest in the world.

Nights became uneasy. Salva woke often to the sound of roars in the distance and sometimes to the death-squeal of an animal under a lion's claws.

One morning he woke bleary-eyed after a poor sleep. He rubbed his eyes, rose, and stumbled after Marial as they began walking yet again.

"Salva?"

It was not Marial who had spoken. The voice had come from behind them.

Salva turned. His mouth fell open in amazement, but he could not speak.

"Salva!"

CHAPTER SIX

Southern Sudan, 2008



Nya's family had been coming to the lake camp for generations; Nya herself had been there every year since she was born. One thing she liked about the camp was that, even though she had to dig in the clay and wait for water, she did not have to make the two long trips to the pond every day. But this year she realized for the first time that her mother hated the camp.

They had no house and had to sleep in makeshift shelters. They could not bring most of their things, so they had to make do with whatever was at hand. And for much of each day, they had to dig for water.

But the worst was the look on her mother's face when Nya's father and older brother, Dep, went off to hunt.

Fear.

Her mother was afraid. Afraid that the men in the family would run into Dinka tribesmen somewhere, that they would fight and get injured—or worse.

They had been lucky all these years. No one from Nya's

family had been hurt or killed by Dinka. But she knew other families in the village who had lost loved ones in this way.

Nya could see the questions in her mother's face every morning: Would they be lucky again?

Or was it now their turn to lose someone?

Southern Sudan, 1985



Salva's mouth closed and opened again, as if he were a fish. He tried to speak, but no sound came out of his throat. He tried to move, but his feet seemed stuck to the ground.

"Salva!" the man said again, and hurried toward him. When the man was only a few steps away, Salva suddenly found his voice.

"Uncle!" he cried out, and ran into the man's arms.

Uncle Jewiir was the younger brother of Salva's father. Salva hadn't seen him in at least two years, because Uncle had been in the army.

Uncle must know about the war and the fighting! Maybe he will know where my family is!

But these hopes were dashed as soon as Uncle spoke. "Are you alone? Where is your family?" he asked.

Salva hardly knew where to begin his answer. It seemed like years since he had run away from his school and into the bush. But he told his uncle everything as best he could.

As Salva spoke, Uncle nodded or shook his head. His face became very solemn when Salva told him that he had not seen nor heard a single word of his family in all that time. Salva's voice trailed off, and he lowered his head. He was glad to see Uncle again, but it looked as if he might not be much help either.

Uncle was quiet for a moment. Then he patted Salva's shoulder. "Eh, Nephew!" he said in a cheerful voice. "We are together now, so I will look after you!"

It turned out that Uncle had joined the group three days earlier, but since there were more than thirty people traveling together, they had not found each other until now. As they began walking, Salva saw that Uncle had a gun—a rifle that he carried on a strap over one shoulder. Already Salva could tell that because of his army experience and because he had a gun, Uncle was seen by the group as a kind of leader.

"Yes, when I left the army they let me keep my rifle," Uncle said. "So I am going to shoot us a fine meal as soon as we come across anything worth eating!"

Uncle was true to his word. That very day he shot a young antelope, the kind called a topi. Salva could hardly wait for it to be skinned and butchered and roasted. As the smoky, meaty aroma filled the air, he had to keep swallowing the saliva that flooded his mouth.

Uncle laughed as he watched Salva gobble down his first piece of the meat. "Salva, you have teeth! You are supposed to use them when you eat!"

Salva could not reply; he was too busy stuffing another chunk of the delicious charred meat into his mouth.

Even though the topi was a small one, there was more than enough meat for everyone in the group. But it did not take long for Salva to regret his haste in eating. After so many weeks of near starvation, his stomach rebelled mightily: He spent most of the night vomiting.

Salva was not alone. Whenever his heaving stomach woke him, he would hurry to the edge of the camp to vomit and find others there doing the same. At one point, Salva found himself in a line of half a dozen people, all in an identical pose—bent over, holding their stomachs, and waiting for the next wave of nausea.

It might have been funny if he hadn't felt so miserable.

* * *

The group continued to walk through the land of the Atuat. Every day they saw lions, usually resting in the shade of small trees. Once, in the distance, they saw a lion chasing a topi. The topi escaped, but along the path Salva saw the bones of prey that had not been so fortunate.

Salva and Marial still walked together, staying close to Uncle. Sometimes Uncle would walk with the other men and talk seriously about the journey. At those times, Salva and Marial would drop back respectfully, but Salva always tried to keep Uncle in sight. And he slept near Uncle at night.

One day the group began walking in the late afternoon, with hopes of reaching a water hole before settling down for the night. But there was no water anywhere, though they searched for miles. They kept walking, into the night and through the night. For ten hours they walked, and by dawn everyone was exhausted.

Uncle and the other leaders finally decided that the group had to rest. Salva took two steps off the path and fell asleep almost before he lay down.

He did not wake until he felt Uncle's hand shaking his shoulder. As he opened his eyes, he heard wailing. Someone was crying. Salva blinked away the sleepiness and looked at Uncle, whose face was very solemn.

“I am sorry, Salva,” Uncle said quietly. “Your friend . . .”
Marial? Salva looked around. He *should be somewhere nearby. . . . I don’t remember if he slept near me—I was so tired—perhaps he has gone to find something to eat—*

Uncle stroked Salva’s head as if he were a baby. “I am sorry,” he said again.

A cold fist seemed to grip Salva’s heart.