

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Southern Sudan, 2008



After the two men left the village, the task of clearing more of the land between the trees began. It was very hard work. The smaller trees and bushes had to be burned or uprooted. The long grass had to be scythed and hoed under. It was dangerous work, too, as poisonous snakes and scorpions hid in the grass.

Nya was still making the two daily trips to the pond. Each time she returned, she could see that slowly but surely the patch of cleared earth was growing larger.

The earth was dry and rock-hard. Nya felt puzzled and doubtful: How could there be water in such a place?

And when she asked Dep that question, he shook his head. She could see the doubt in his eyes, too.

Southern Sudan and Ethiopia, 1985



They buried Uncle in a hole about two feet deep, a hole that had already been made by some kind of animal. Out

of respect for him, the group walked no more that day but took time to mourn the man who had been their leader.

Salva was too numb to think, and when thoughts did come to him, they seemed silly. He was annoyed that they would not be able to eat after all: While the men had been looting the group, more birds had arrived and pecked at the roasted stork until it was nothing but bones.

The time for grief was short, and the walking began again soon after dark. Despite the numbness in his heart, Salva was amazed to find himself walking faster and more boldly than he had before.

Marial was gone. Uncle was gone, too, murdered by those Nuer men right before Salva's eyes. Marial and Uncle were no longer by his side, and they never would be again, but Salva knew that both of them would have wanted him to survive, to finish the trip and reach the Itang refugee camp safely. It was almost as if they had left their strength with him, to help him on his journey.

He could not think of any other explanation for the way he felt. But there was no doubt: Beneath his terrible sadness, he felt stronger.

Now that Salva was without Uncle's care and protection, the group's attitude toward him changed. Once again, they grumbled that he was too young and small, that he

might slow them down or start crying again, as he had in the desert.

No one shared anything with him, neither food nor company. Uncle had always shared the animals and birds he shot with everyone in the group. But it seemed they had all forgotten that, for Salva now had to beg for scraps, which were given grudgingly.

The way they were treating him made Salva feel stronger still. *There is no one left to help me. They think I am weak and useless.*

Salva lifted his head proudly. *They are wrong, and I will prove it.*

Salva had never before seen so many people in one place at the same time. How could there be this many people in the world?

More than hundreds. More than thousands. Thousands upon thousands.

People in lines and masses and clumps. People milling around, standing, sitting or crouching on the ground, lying down with their legs curled up because there was not enough room to stretch out.

The refugee camp at Itang was filled with people of all ages—men, women, girls, small children. . . . But most of

the refugees were boys and young men who had run away from their villages when the war came. They had run because they were in double danger: from the war itself and from the armies on both sides. Young men and sometimes even boys were often forced to join the fighting, which was why their families and communities—including Salva's schoolmaster—had sent the boys running into the bush at the first sign of fighting.

Children who arrived at the refugee camp without their families were grouped together, so Salva was separated at once from the people he had traveled with. Even though they had not been kind to him, at least he had known them. Now, among strangers once again, he felt uncertain and maybe even afraid.

As he walked through the camp with several other boys, Salva glanced at every face he passed. Uncle had said that no one knew where his family was for certain . . . so wasn't there at least a chance that they might be here in the camp?

Salva looked around at the masses of people stretched out as far as he could see. He felt his heart sink a little, but he clenched his hands into fists and made himself a promise.

If they are here, I will find them.

* * *

After so many weeks of walking, Salva found it strange to be staying in one place. During that long, terrible trek, finding a safe place to stop and stay for a while had been desperately important. But now that he was at the camp, he felt restless—almost as if he should begin walking again.

The camp was safe from the war. There were no men with guns or machetes, no planes with bombs overhead. On the evening of his very first day, Salva was given a bowl of boiled maize to eat, and another one the next morning. Already things were better here than they had been during the journey.

During the afternoon of the second day, Salva picked his way slowly through the crowds. Eventually, he found himself standing near the gate that was the main entrance to the camp, watching the new arrivals enter. It did not seem as if the camp could possibly hold any more, but still they kept coming: long lines of people, some emaciated, some hurt or sick, all exhausted.

As Salva scanned the faces, a flash of orange caught his eye.

Orange . . . an orange headscarf . . .

He began pushing and stumbling past people. Someone spoke to him angrily, but he did not stop to excuse

himself. He could still see the vivid spot of orange—yes, it was a headscarf—the woman's back was to him, but she was tall, like his mother—he had to catch up, there were too many people in the way—

A half-sob broke free from Salva's lips. He mustn't lose track of her!

CHAPTER TWELVE

Southern Sudan, 2009



An iron giraffe.

A red giraffe that made very loud noises.

The giraffe was a tall drill that had been brought to the village by the two men who had visited earlier. They had returned with a crew of ten more men and two trucks—one hauling the giraffe-drill along with other mysterious equipment, and the other loaded with plastic pipe. Meanwhile, the land was still being cleared.

Nya's mother tied the baby on her back and walked with several other women to a place between the village and the pond. They collected piles of rocks and stones and tied them up into bundles using sturdy cloth. They balanced the bundles on their heads, walked back to the drilling site, and emptied the rocks onto the ground.

Other villagers, using tools borrowed from the visitors, pounded the rocks to break them up into gravel. Many loads of gravel would be needed. Nya didn't know why. The piles of gravel grew larger each day.

The clangor of machinery and hammer greeted Nya each time she returned from the pond—unfamiliar noises that mingled with the voices of men shouting and women singing. It was the sound of people working hard together.

But it did not sound at all like water.

Itang refugee camp, Ethiopia, 1985



“Mother! Mother, please!”

Salva opened his mouth to call out again. But the words did not come. Instead, he closed his mouth, lowered his head, and turned away.

The woman in the orange headscarf was not his mother. He knew this for certain, even though she was still far away and he had not seen her face.

Uncle's words came back to him: “The village of Loun-Ariik was attacked . . . burned. Few people survived . . . no one knows where they are now.”

In the moment before calling out to the woman a second time, Salva realized what Uncle had truly meant—something Salva had known in his heart for a long time:

His family was gone. They had been killed by bullets or bombs, starvation or sickness—it did not matter how. What mattered was that Salva was on his own now.

He felt as though he were standing on the edge of a giant hole—a hole filled with the black despair of nothingness.

I am alone now.

I am all that is left of my family.

His father, who had sent Salva to school . . . brought him treats, like mangoes . . . trusted him to take care of the herd. . . . His mother, always ready with food and milk and a soft hand to stroke Salva's head. His brothers and sisters, whom he had laughed with and played with and looked after. . . . He would never see them again.

How can I go on without them?

But how can I not go on? They would want me to survive . . . to grow up and make something of my life . . . to honor their memories.

What was it Uncle had said during that first terrible day in the desert? "Do you see that group of bushes? You need only to walk as far as those bushes. . . ."

Uncle had helped him get through the desert that way, bit by bit, one step at a time. Perhaps . . . perhaps Salva could get through life at the camp in the same way.

I need only to get through the rest of this day, he told himself.

This day and no other.

If someone had told Salva that he would live in the camp for six years, he would never have believed it.

Six years later: July 1991



"They are going to close the camp. Everyone will have to leave."

"That's impossible. Where will we go?"

"That's what they're saying. Not just this camp. All of them."

The rumors skittered around the camp. Everyone was uneasy. As the days went by, the uneasiness grew into fear.

Salva was almost seventeen years old now—a young man. He tried to learn what he could about the rumors by talking to the aid workers in the camp. They told him that the Ethiopian government was near collapse. The refugee camps were run by foreign aid groups, but it was the government that permitted them to operate. If the government fell, what would the new rulers do about the camps?

When that question was answered, no one was ready. One rainy morning, as Salva walked toward the school tent, long lines of trucks were arriving. Masses of armed soldiers poured out of the trucks and ordered everyone to leave.

The orders were not just to leave the camp but to leave Ethiopia.

Immediately, there was chaos. It was as if the people ceased to be people and instead became an enormous herd of panicked, stampeding two-legged creatures.

Salva was caught up in the surge. His feet barely touched the ground as he was swept along by the crowd of thousands of people running and screaming. The rain, which was falling in torrents, added to the uproar.

The soldiers fired their guns into the air and chased the people away from the camp. But once they were beyond the area surrounding the camp, the soldiers continued to drive them onward, shouting and shooting.

As he dashed ahead, Salva heard snatches of talk.

"The river."

"They're chasing us toward the river!"

Salva knew which river they meant: the Gilo River, which was along the border between Ethiopia and Sudan.

They are driving us back to Sudan, Salva thought. They will force us to cross the river. . . .

It was the rainy season. Swollen by the rains, the Gilo's current would be merciless.

The Gilo was well known for something else, too. Crocodiles.

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.