

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 splashes 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.

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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 boat-builders. 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.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Southern Sudan, 2008



It was like music, the sound of Akeer's laugh.

Nya's father had decided that Akeer needed a doctor. So Nya and her mother had taken Akeer to the special place—a big white tent full of people who were sick or hurt, with doctors and nurses to help them. After just two doses of medicine, Akeer was nearly her old self again—still thin and weak but able to laugh as Nya sat on the floor next to her cot and played a clapping game with her.

The nurse, a white woman, was talking to Nya's mother.

"Her sickness came from the water," the nurse explained. "She should drink only good clean water. If the water is dirty, you should boil it for a count of two hundred before she drinks it."

Nya's mother nodded that she understood, but Nya could see the worry in her eyes.

The water from the holes in the lakebed could be collected only in tiny amounts. If her mother tried to boil such a small amount, the pot would be dry long before they could count to two hundred.

It was a good thing, then, that they would soon be returning to the village. The water that Nya fetched from the pond in the plastic jug could be boiled before they drank it.

But what about next year at camp? And the year after that?

And even at home, whenever Nya made the long hot walk to the pond, she had to drink as soon as she got there.

She would never be able to stop Akeer from doing the same.

Southern Sudan, 1985



The lake's surface was calm, and once the boats had pulled away from the shore, there was not much to see—just water and more water.

They paddled for hours. The scenery and motion were so monotonous that Salva might have slept, except he was afraid that if he did, he might fall over the side. He kept himself awake by counting the strokes of Uncle's paddle and trying to gauge how far the canoe traveled with every twenty strokes.

Finally, the boats pulled up to an island in the middle of the river. This was where the fishermen of the Nile lived and worked.

Salva was amazed by what he saw in the fishing community. It was the first place in their weeks of walking that had an abundance of food. The villagers ate a lot of fish, of course, and hippo and crocodile meat as well. But even more impressive were the number of crops they grew: cassava, sugar cane, yams. . . . It was easy to grow food when there was a whole river to water the crops!

None of the travelers had money or anything of value to trade, so they had to beg for food. The exception was Uncle: The fishermen gave him food without having to be asked. Salva could not tell if this was because Uncle seemed to be the leader of the group or because they were afraid of his gun.

Uncle shared his food with Salva—a piece of sugar cane to suck on right away, then fish that they cooked over a fire and yams roasted in the ashes.

The sugar-cane juice soothed the sharpest edge of Salva's hunger. He was able to eat the rest of the meal slowly, making each bite last a long time.

At home, Salva had never been hungry. His family owned many cattle; they were among the better-off families in their village of Loun-Ariik. They ate mostly porridge made from sorghum and milk. Every so often, his father went to the marketplace by bicycle and brought home bags of beans and rice. These had been grown elsewhere, because few crops could be raised in the dry semi-desert region of Loun-Ariik.

As a special treat, his father sometimes bought mangoes. A bag of mangoes was awkward to carry, especially when the bicycle was already loaded with other goods. So he wedged the mangoes into the spokes of his bicycle wheels. When Salva ran to greet him, he could see the green-skinned mangoes spinning gaily in a blur as his father pedaled.

Salva would take a mango from the spokes almost before his father had dismounted. His mother would peel it for him, its juicy insides the same color as her headscarf. She would slice the flesh away from the big flat seed. Salva loved the sweet slices, but his favorite part was the seed. There was always plenty of fruit that clung stubbornly to the seed. He would nibble and suck at it to get every last shred, making it last for hours.

There were no mangoes among the fishermen's great

stores, but sucking on his piece of sugar cane reminded Salva of those happier times. He wondered if he would ever again see his father riding a bicycle with mangoes in its spokes.

As the sun touched the horizon, the fishermen abruptly went into their tents. They weren't really tents—just white mosquito netting hung or draped to make a space so they could lie down inside. Not one fisherman stayed to talk or eat more or do anything else. It was almost as if they all vanished at the same moment.

Only a few minutes later, mosquitoes rose up from the water, from the reeds, from everywhere. Huge dark clouds of them appeared, their high-pitched whine filling the air. Thousands, maybe millions, of hungry mosquitoes massed so thickly that in one breath Salva could have ended up with a mouthful if he wasn't careful. And even if he was, they were everywhere—in his eyes, nose, ears, on every part of his body.

The fishermen stayed in their nets the whole night long. They had even dug channels from inside the nets to just beyond them so they could urinate without having to leave their little tents.

It didn't matter how often Salva swatted at the mos-

quitoes, or that one swat killed dozens at a time. For every one he killed, it seemed that hundreds more swarmed in to take its place. With their high singing whine constantly in his ears, Salva slapped and waved at them in frustration all night long.

No one in the group got any sleep. The mosquitoes made sure of that.

In the morning, Salva was covered with bites. The worst ones were in the exact middle of his back, where he couldn't reach to scratch. Those he could reach, though, he scratched until they bled.

The travelers got into the boats one more time, to paddle from the island to the other side of the Nile. The fishermen had warned the group to take plenty of water for the next stretch of their journey. Salva still had the gourd that the old woman had given him. Others in the group had gourds too, or plastic bottles. But there were some who did not have a container. They tore strips from their clothing and soaked them in a desperate attempt to carry at least a little water with them.

Ahead lay the most difficult part of their journey: the Akobo desert.