

## CHAPTER ONE

*Southern Sudan, 2008*



Going was easy.

Going, the big plastic container held only air. Tall for her eleven years, Nya could switch the handle from one hand to the other, swing the container by her side, or cradle it in both arms. She could even drag it behind her, bumping it against the ground and raising a tiny cloud of dust with each step.

There was little weight, going. There was only heat, the sun already baking the air, even though it was long before noon. It would take her half the morning if she didn't stop on the way.

Heat. Time. And thorns.

*Southern Sudan, 1985*



Salva sat cross-legged on the bench. He kept his head turned toward the front, hands folded, back perfectly straight. Everything about him was paying attention to the teacher—everything except his eyes and his mind.

His eyes kept flicking toward the window, through which he could see the road. The road home. Just a little while longer—a few minutes more—and he would be walking on that road.

The teacher droned on with the lesson, about the Arabic language. Salva spoke the language of his Dinka tribe at home. But in school he learned Arabic, the official language of the Sudanese government far away to the north. Eleven years old on his last birthday, Salva was a good student. He already knew the lesson, which was why he was letting his mind wander down the road ahead of his body.

Salva was well aware of how lucky he was to be able to go to school. He could not attend the entire year, because during the dry season his family moved away from their village. But during the rainy season, he could walk to the school, which was only half an hour from his home.

Salva's father was a successful man. He owned many head of cattle and worked as their village's judge—an honored, respected position. Salva had three brothers and two sisters. As each boy reached the age of about ten years, he was sent off to school. Salva's older brothers, Ariik and Ring, had gone to school before him; last year, it had been Salva's turn. His two sisters, Akit and Agnath, did not go to

school. Like the other girls in the village, they stayed home and learned from their mother how to keep house.

Most of the time, Salva was glad to be able to go to school. But some days he wished he were still back at home herding cattle.

He and his brothers, along with the sons of his father's other wives, would walk with the herds to the water holes, where there was good grazing. Their responsibilities depended on how old they were. Salva's younger brother, Kuol, was taking care of just one cow; like his brothers before him, he would be in charge of more cows every year. Before Salva had begun going to school, he had helped look after the entire herd, and his younger brother as well.

The boys had to keep an eye on the cows, but the cows did not really need much care. That left plenty of time to play.

Salva and the other boys made cows out of clay. The more cows you made, the richer you were. But they had to be fine, healthy animals. It took time to make a lump of clay look like a good cow. The boys would challenge each other to see who could make the most and best cows.

Other times they would practice with their bows and arrows, shooting at small animals or birds. They weren't very good at this yet, but once in a while they got lucky.

Those were the best days. When one of them managed to kill a ground squirrel or a rabbit, a guinea hen or a grouse, the boys' aimless play halted and there was suddenly a lot of work to do.

Some of them gathered wood to build a fire. Others helped clean and dress the animal. Then they roasted it on the fire.

None of this took place quietly. Salva had his own opinion of how the fire should be built and how long the meat needed to cook, and so did each of the others.

"The fire needs to be bigger."

"It won't last long enough—we need more wood."

"No, it's big enough already."

"Quick, turn it over before it's ruined!"

The juices dripped and sizzled. A delicious smell filled the air.

Finally, they couldn't wait one second longer. There was only enough for each boy to have a few bites, but, oh, how delicious those bites were!

Salva swallowed and turned his eyes back toward the teacher. He wished he hadn't recalled those times, because the memories made him hungry. . . . Milk. When he got

home, he would have a bowl of fresh milk, which would keep his belly full until suppertime.

He knew just how it would be. His mother would rise from her work grinding meal and walk around to the side of the house that faced the road. She would shade her eyes with one hand, searching for him. From far off he would see her bright orange headscarf, and he would raise his arm in greeting. By the time he reached the house, she would have gone inside to get his bowl of milk ready for him.

*CRACK!*

The noise had come from outside. Was it a gunshot? Or just a car backfiring?

The teacher stopped talking for a moment. Every head in the room turned toward the window.

Nothing. Silence.

The teacher cleared his throat, which drew the boys' attention to the front of the room again. He continued the lesson from where he had left off. Then—

*CRACK! POP-POP-CRACK!*

*ACK-ACK-ACK-ACK-ACK-ACK!*

Gunfire!

“Everyone, *DOWN!*” the teacher shouted.

Some of the boys moved at once, ducking their heads

and hunching over. Others sat frozen, their eyes and mouths open wide. Salva covered his head with his hands and looked from side to side in panic.

The teacher edged his way along the wall to the window. He took a quick peek outside. The gunfire had stopped, but now people were shouting and running.

“Go quickly, all of you,” the teacher said, his voice low and urgent. “Into the bush. Do you hear me? Not home. Don’t run home. They will be going into the villages. Stay away from the villages—run into the bush.”

He went to the door and looked out again.

“Go! All of you, now!”

The war had started two years earlier. Salva did not understand much about it, but he knew that rebels from the southern part of Sudan, where he and his family lived, were fighting against the government, which was based in the north. Most of the people who lived in the north were Muslim, and the government wanted all of Sudan to become a Muslim country—a place where the beliefs of Islam were followed.

But the people in the south were of different religions and did not want to be forced to practice Islam. They began fighting for independence from the north. The fighting

was scattered all around southern Sudan, and now the war had come to where Salva lived.

The boys scrambled to their feet. Some of them were crying. The teacher began hurrying the students out the door.

Salva was near the end of the line. He felt his heart beating so hard that its pulse pounded in his throat and ears. He wanted to shout, "I need to go home! I must go home!" But the words were blocked by the wild thumping in his throat.

When he got to the door, he looked out. Everyone was running—men, children, women carrying babies. The air was full of dust that had been kicked up by all those running feet. Some of the men were shouting and waving guns.

Salva saw all this with one glance.

Then he was running, too. Running as hard as he could, into the bush.

Away from home.

## CHAPTER TWO

*Southern Sudan, 2008*



Nya put the container down and sat on the ground. She always tried not to step on the spiky plants that grew along the path, but their thorns littered the ground everywhere.

She looked at the bottom of her foot. There it was, a big thorn that had broken off right in the middle of her heel. Nya pushed at the skin around the thorn. Then she picked up another thorn and used it to poke and prod at the first one. She pressed her lips together against the pain.

*Southern Sudan, 1985*



*BOOM!*

Salva turned and looked. Behind him, a huge black cloud of smoke rose. Flames darted out of its base. Overhead, a jet plane veered away like a sleek evil bird.

In the smoke and dust, he couldn't see the school



building anymore. He tripped and almost fell. No more looking back; it slowed him down.

Salva lowered his head and ran.

He ran until he could not run anymore. Then he walked. For hours, until the sun was nearly gone from the sky.

Other people were walking, too. There were so many of them that they couldn't all be from the school village; they must have come from the whole area.

As Salva walked, the same thoughts kept going through his head in rhythm with his steps. *Where are we going? Where is my family? When will I see them again?*

The people stopped walking when it grew too dark to see the path. At first, everyone stood around uncertainly, speaking in tense whispers or silent with fear.

Then some of the men gathered and talked for a few moments. One of them called out, "Villages—group yourselves by villages. You will find someone you know."

Salva wandered around until he heard the words "Loun-Ariik! The village of Loun-Ariik, here!"

Relief flooded through him. That was his village! He hurried toward the sound of the voice.

A dozen or so people stood in a loose group at the side

of the road. Salva scanned their faces. There was no one from his family. He recognized a few people—a woman with a baby, two men, a teenage girl—but no one he knew well. Still, it was comforting to see them.

They spent the night right there by the road, the men taking shifts to keep watch. The next morning, they began walking again. Salva stayed in the midst of the crowd with the other villagers from Loun-Ariik.

In the early afternoon, he saw a large group of soldiers up ahead.

Word passed through the crowd: “It’s the rebels.” The rebels—those who were fighting against the government.

Salva passed several rebel soldiers waiting by the side of the road. Each of them held a big gun. Their guns were not pointed at the crowd, but even so, the soldiers seemed fierce and watchful. Some of the rebels then joined the back of the line; now the villagers were surrounded.

*What are they going to do to us? Where is my family?*

Late in the day, the villagers arrived at the rebel camp. The soldiers ordered them to separate into two groups—men in one group, women and children and the elderly in the other. Teenage boys, it seemed, were considered men, for

boys who looked to be only a few years older than Salva were joining the men's group.

Salva hesitated for a moment. He was only eleven, but he was the son of an important family. He was Salva Mawien Dut Ariik, from the village named for his grandfather. His father always told him to act like a man—to follow the example of his older brothers and, in turn, set a good example for Kuol.

Salva took a few steps toward the men.

“Hey!”

A soldier approached Salva and raised his gun.

Salva froze. All he could see was the gun's huge barrel, black and gleaming, as it moved toward his face.

The end of the barrel touched his chin.

Salva felt his knees turn to water. He closed his eyes.

*If I die now, I will never see my family again.*

Somehow, this thought strengthened him enough to keep him from collapsing in terror.

He took a deep breath and opened his eyes.

The soldier was holding the gun with only one hand. He was not *aiming* it; he was using it to lift Salva's chin so he could get a better look at his face.

“Over there,” the soldier said. He moved the gun and pointed it toward the group of women and children.

“You are not a man yet. Don’t be in such a hurry!” He laughed and clapped Salva on the shoulder.

Salva scurried over to the women’s side.

The next morning, the rebels moved on from the camp. The village men were forced to carry supplies: guns and mortars, shells, radio equipment. Salva watched as one man protested that he did not want to go with the rebels. A soldier hit him in the face with the butt of a gun. The man fell to the ground, bleeding.

After that, no one objected. The men shouldered the heavy equipment and left the camp.

Everyone else began walking again. They went in the opposite direction from the rebels, for wherever the rebels went, there was sure to be fighting.

Salva stayed with the group from Loun-Ariik. It was smaller now, without the men. And except for the infant, Salva was the only child.

That evening they found a barn in which to spend the night. Salva tossed restlessly in the itchy hay.

*Where are we going? Where is my family? When will I see them again?*

It took him a long time to fall asleep.

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Even before he was fully awake, Salva could feel that something was wrong. He lay very still with his eyes closed, trying to sense what it might be.

Finally, he sat up and opened his eyes.

No one else was in the barn.

Salva stood so quickly that for a moment he felt dizzy.

He rushed to the door and looked out.

Nobody. Nothing.

They had left him.

He was alone.