

## 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 splorches 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 I 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 boatbuilders. 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-Atrik. 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-Atrik.

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.

## 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.



Salva had never seen anything like the desert. Around his village, Loun-Arrik, 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 Dur Arrik!" 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 Dur Arrik?"



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!"

## CHAPTER TEN

*Southern Sudan, 2008*



The men finished their meeting. They all stood and walked past Nya's house. Nya joined the crowd of children following them.

A few minutes' walk beyond her house, there was a tree. The men stopped at the tree, and the strangers talked to Nya's uncle some more.

There was another tree some fifty paces past the first one. With Nya's uncle beside him, one of the men stopped at the halfway point. The other man walked the rest of the way and examined the second tree.

The first man called out to his friend in a language Nya did not understand. The friend answered in the same language, but as he walked back toward the group, he translated for the chief, and Nya could hear him.

"This is the spot, halfway between the two largest trees. We will find the water here."

Nya shook her head. What were they talking about? She knew that place like the back of her own hand. It was there, between the two trees, that the village sometimes gathered to sing and talk around a big fire.

There wasn't a single drop of water on that spot, unless it was raining!

*Southern Sudan, 1985*



Salva reached for his gourd. He knew it to be half full, but suddenly it felt much lighter, as if there was hardly any water left in it.

Uncle Jewir must have guessed what he was thinking.

"No, Salva," he murmured. "You are too small, and not strong enough yet. Without water you will not survive the rest of the walk. Some of the others—they will be able to manage better than you."

Sure enough, there were now three women giving water to the men on the ground.

Like a miracle, the small amounts of water revived them. They were able to stagger to their feet and join the group as the walking continued.

But their five dead companions were left behind.

There were no tools with which to dig, and besides, burying the dead men would have taken too much time.

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Salva tried not to look as he walked past the bodies, but his eyes were drawn in their direction. He knew what would happen. Vultures would find the bodies and strip them of their rotting flesh until only the bones remained. He felt sick at the thought of those men—first dying in such a horrible way, and then having even their corpses ravaged.

If he were older and stronger, would he have given water to those men? Or would he, like most of the group, have kept his water for himself?

It was the group's third day in the desert. By sunset, they would be out of the desert, and after that, it would not be far to the Irang refugee camp in Ethiopia.

As they trudged through the heat, Salva finally had a chance to talk to Uncle about a worry that had been growing like a long shadow across his thoughts. "Uncle, if I am in Ethiopia, how will my parents ever find me? When will I be able to go back to Loun-Arlik?"

"I have talked to the others here," Uncle said. "We believe that the village of Loun-Arlik was attacked and probably burned. Your family..." Uncle paused and looked away. When he looked back again, his face was solemn.

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"Salva, few people survived the attack on the village. Anyone still alive would have fled into the bush, and no one knows where they are now."

Salva was silent for a moment. Then he said, "At least you will be there with me. In Ethiopia."

Uncle's voice was gentle. "No, Salva. I am going to take you to the refugee camp, but then I will return to Sudan, to fight in the war."

Salva stopped walking and clutched at Uncle's arm.

"But, Uncle, I will have no one! Who will be my family?"

Uncle gently loosened Salva's grip so he could take the boy's hand in his. "There will be many other people in the camp. You will become friends with some of them—you will make a kind of family there. They, too, will need people they can depend on."

Salva shook his head, unable to imagine what life would be like in the camp without Uncle. He squeezed Uncle's hand tightly.

Uncle stood quietly and said nothing more.

*He knows it will be hard for me, Salva realized. He does not want to leave me there, but he has to go back and fight for our people. I mustn't act like a baby—I must try to be strong...*

Salva swallowed hard. "Uncle, when you go back to Sudan, you might meet my parents somewhere. You could tell them where I am. Or you could talk to those you meet, and ask where the people of Loun-Artik are now."

Uncle did not answer right away. Then he said, "Of course I will do that, Nephew."

Salva felt a tiny spark of hope. With Uncle looking for his family, there was a chance they might all be together again one day.

No one in the group had eaten anything for two days. Their water was nearly gone. Only the vision of leaving the desert kept them moving through the heat and the dust.

Early that afternoon, they came across the first evidence that the desert was receding: a few stunted trees near a shallow pool of muddy water. The water was unfit to drink, but a dead stork lay by the pond's edge. Immediately, the group began to make preparations to cook and eat the bird. Salva helped gather twigs for the fire.

As the bird roasted, Salva could hardly keep his eyes off it. There would only be enough for a bird or two for each person, but he could hardly wait.

Then he heard loud voices. Along with the rest of the

group, he turned and saw six men coming toward them. As the men approached, he could see that they were armed with guns and machetes.

The men began shouting.

"Sit down!"

"Hands on your heads!"

"All of you! Now!"

Everyone in the group sat down at once. Salva was afraid of the weapons, and he could see that the others were, too.

One of the men walked among the group and stopped in front of Uncle. Salva could tell by the ritual scarring on the man's face that he was from the Nuer tribe.

"Are you with the rebels?" the man asked.

"No," Uncle answered.

"Where have you come from? Where are you going?"

"We come from the west of the Nile," Uncle said. "We are going to Itang, to the refugee camp."

The man told Uncle to get up and leave his gun where it was. Two of the other men took Uncle to a tree several yards away and tied him to it.

Then the men moved among the group. If anyone was carrying a bag, the men opened it and took whatever

was in it. They ordered some people to remove their clothing and took that, too.

Salva was trembling. Even in the midst of his fear, he realized that for the first time on the trip, it was a good thing to be the youngest and smallest: The men would not be interested in his clothes.

When the men had finished their looting, they picked up Uncle's gun. Then they walked to the tree where Uncle was tied up.

*Maybe they will leave us alone now that they have robbed us,* Salva thought.

He heard them laughing.

As Salva watched, one of the men aimed his gun at Uncle.

Three shots rang out. Then the men ran away.

