

CHAPTER FOUR

Southern Sudan, 2008



Nya's mother took the plastic container from her and emptied the water into three large jars. She handed Nya a bowl of boiled sorghum meal and poured a little milk over it.

Nya sat outside in the shade of the house and ate.

When she was done, she took the bowl back inside. Her mother was nursing the baby, Nya's little brother. "Take Akeer with you," her mother said, nodding toward Nya's sister.

Glancing at her younger sister, Nya did not say what she was thinking: that Akeer, who was only five years old, was too small and walked too slowly.

"She needs to learn," her mother said.

Nya nodded. She picked up the plastic container and took Akeer by the hand.

Home for just long enough to eat, Nya would now make her second trip to the pond. To the pond and back—to the pond and back—nearly a full day of walking altogether. This was Nya's daily routine seven months of the year.

Daily. Every single day.

Southern Sudan, 1985



Salva held his breath as he scanned the faces, one by one. Then the air left his lungs and seemed to take all hope with it.

Strangers. No one from his family.

The old woman came up behind him and greeted the group. "Where are you going?" she asked.

A few of the people exchanged uneasy glances. There was no reply.

The woman put her hand on Salva's shoulder. "This one is alone. Will you take him with you?"

Salva saw doubt on the people's faces. Several men at the front of the group began speaking to each other.

"He is a child. He will slow us down."

"Another mouth to feed? It is already hard enough to find food."

"He is too young to do any real work—he'll be of no help to us."

Salva hung his head. They would leave him behind again, just as the others had. . . .

Then a woman in the group reached out and touched

the arm of one of the men. She said nothing but looked first at the man and then at Salva.

The man nodded and turned to the group. "We will take him with us," he said.

Salva looked up quickly. A few in the group were shaking their heads and grumbling.

The man shrugged. "He is Dinka," he said, and began walking again.

The old woman gave Salva a bag of peanuts and a gourd for drinking water. He thanked her and said goodbye. Then he caught up with the group, determined not to lag behind, not to complain, not to be any trouble to anyone. He did not even ask where they were going, for fear that his questions would be unwelcome.

He knew only that they were Dinka and that they were trying to stay away from the war. He had to be content with that.

The days became a never-ending walk. Salva's feet kept time with the thoughts in his head, the same words over and over: *Where is my family? Where is my family?*

Every day he woke and walked with the group, rested at midday, and walked again until dark. They slept on the ground. The terrain changed from scrub to woodland;

they walked among stands of stunted trees. There was little to eat: a few fruits here and there, always either unripe or worm-rotten. Salva's peanuts were gone by the end of the third day.

After about a week, they were joined by more people—another group of Dinka and several members of a tribe called the Jur-chol. Men and women, boys and girls, old and young, walking, walking . . .

Walking to nowhere.

Salva had never been so hungry. He stumbled along, somehow moving one foot ahead of the other, not noticing the ground he walked on or the forest around him or the light in the sky. Nothing was real except his hunger, once a hollow in his stomach but now a deep buzzing pain in every part of him.

Usually he walked among the Dinka, but today, shuffling along in a daze, he found he had fallen a little behind. Walking next to him was a young man from the Jur-chol. Salva didn't know much about him, except that his name was Buksa.

As they walked along, Buksa slowed down. Salva wondered sluggishly if they shouldn't try to keep up a bit better.

Just then Buksa stopped walking. Salva stopped, too.

But he was too weak and hungry to ask why they were standing still.

Buksa cocked his head and furrowed his brow, listening. They stood motionless for several moments. Salva could hear the noise of the rest of the group ahead of them, a few faint voices, birds calling somewhere in the trees. . . .

He strained his ears. What was it? Jet planes? Bombs? Was the gunfire getting closer, instead of farther away? Salva's fear began to grow until it was even stronger than his hunger. Then—

"Ah." A slow smile spread over Buksa's face. "There. You hear?"

Salva frowned and shook his head.

"Yes, there it is again. Come!" Buksa began walking very quickly. Salva struggled to keep up. Twice Buksa paused to listen, then kept going even faster.

"What—" Salva started to ask.

Buksa stopped abruptly in front of a very large tree. "Yes!" he said. "Now go call the others!"

By now Salva had caught the feeling of excitement. "But what shall I tell them?"

"The bird. The one I was listening to. He led me right here." Buksa's smile was even bigger now. "You see that?"

He pointed up at the branches of the tree. "Beehive. A fine, large one."

Salva hurried off to call the rest of the group. He had heard of this, that the Jur-chol could follow the call of the bird called the honey guide! But he had never seen it done before.

Honey! This night, they would feast!

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.

Tæn—

"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 Dinko tribesmen somewhere, that they would fight and get injured—or worse.

They had been lucky all these years. Not one from Nya's