

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.