

CHAPTER THREE

Southern Sudan, 2008



The smudge on the horizon gained color as Nya drew nearer, changing from hazy gray to olive green. The dirt under her feet turned to mud, then sludge, until at last she was ankle-deep in water.

There was always so much life around the pond: other people, mostly women and girls, who had come to fill their own containers; many kinds of birds, all flap and twitter and caw; herds of cattle that had been brought to the good grazing by the young boys who looked after them.

Nya took the hollowed gourd that was tied to the handle of the plastic container. She untied it, scooped up the brown muddy water, and drank. It took two gourdfuls before she felt a little cooler inside.

Nya filled the container all the way to the top. Then she tied the gourd back in place and took the padded cloth doughnut from her pocket. The doughnut went on her head first, followed by the heavy container of water, which she would hold in place with one hand.

With the water balanced on her head, and her foot still

sore from the thorn, Nya knew that going home would take longer than coming had. But she might reach home by noon, if all went well.

Southern Sudan, 1985



The tears were hot in Salva's eyes. Where had everyone gone? Why had they left without waking him?

He knew the answer: because he was a child . . . who might tire easily and slow them down, and complain about being hungry, and cause trouble somehow.

I would not have been any trouble—I would not have complained! . . . What will I do now?

Salva took a few steps to see what he could see. On the far horizon, the sky was hazy from the smoke of the bombs. About a hundred paces in front of him, he could see a small pond. Between the pond and the barn was a house—and, yes, a woman sitting in the sun.

Holding his breath, he crept closer, until he could see her face clearly. The ritual scar patterns on her forehead were familiar: They were Dinka patterns, which meant that she was from the same tribe as Salva.

Salva let out his breath in relief. He was glad that she was not Nuer. The Nuer and the Dinka had a long history of trouble. No one, it seemed, was sure where Nuer land ended and Dinka land began, so each tribe tried to lay claim to the areas richest in water. Over the years, there had been many battles, large and small, between Dinka and Nuer; many people on both sides had been killed. This was not the same as the war that was going on now, between the rebels and the government. The Dinka and the Nuer had been fighting each other for hundreds of years.

The woman looked up and saw him. Salva flinched at her glance. Would she be friendly to a stranger? Would she be angry with him for spending the night in her barn?

But at least he was not alone now, and that knowledge was stronger than the uncertainty about what the woman might do or say to him. He walked toward her. "Good morning, Auntie," he said, his voice trembling.

She nodded at him. She was old, much older than Salva's mother.

He kept quiet, waiting for her to speak.

"You must be hungry," she said at last. She stood and went into the house. A few moments later, she came back out and gave him two handfuls of raw peanuts. Then she sat down again.

"Thank you, Auntie." Squatting on his haunches next to her, Salva shelled the nuts and ate them. He chewed every nut into a paste before he swallowed, trying to make each one last as long as he could.

The woman sat without speaking until he was finished. Then she asked, "Where are your people?"

Salva opened his mouth to speak, but his eyes filled with tears again and he could not answer.

She frowned. "Are you an orphan?"

He shook his head quickly. For a moment, he felt almost angry. He was not an orphan! He had a father and a mother—he had a family!

"I was at school. I ran away from the fighting. I do not know where my family is."

She nodded. "A bad thing, this war. What are you going to do—how will you find them?"

Salva had no answer. He had hoped that the woman might have some answers for him; after all, she was an adult. Instead, she had only questions.

Everything was upside down.

Salva stayed in the woman's barn again that night. He began to make a plan. *Maybe I can stay here until the fighting stops. Then I will go back to my village and find my family.*

He worked hard so she would not send him away. For three days, he fetched firewood from the bush and water from the pond. But the pond was drying up; each day it was harder to fill the gourds.

During the daytime, Salva could hear the distant booming of artillery from the fighting a few miles away. With every shell that exploded he would think of his family, hoping they were safe, wondering desperately when he would be with them again.

On the fourth day, the old woman told him that she was leaving.

"You have seen that the pond is only a puddle now. Winter is coming, and the dry season. And this fighting." She nodded her head in the direction of the noise. "I will go to a different village near water. You cannot stay with me any longer."

Salva stared at her as panic rose inside him. *Why can't I go with her?*

The woman spoke again before he could ask aloud. "The soldiers will leave me alone, an old woman on her own. It would be more dangerous for me to travel with you."

She shook her head in sympathy. "I am sorry I cannot help you anymore," she said. "Wherever it is you walk, just be sure to walk away from the fighting."

Salva stumbled back to the barn. *What will I do, where will I go?* The words repeated themselves a thousand times in his head. It was so strange—he had known the old woman for only a few days, but now he could not imagine what he would do once she was gone.

He sat inside the barn and stared out, looking at nothing. As the light grew dimmer, the noises of evening began—the buzz of insects, the rustling of dry leaves, and another sound . . . voices?

Salva turned his head toward the sound. Yes, it was voices. Some people were walking toward the house—a small group, fewer than a dozen. As they approached, Salva took a sharp breath.

In the fading light he could see the faces of those nearest him. Two of the men had patterns of V-shaped scars on their foreheads. Dinka patterns again—the kind that were given to the boys in Salva's village as part of the ritual of becoming a man.

These people were Dinka, too! Could his family be among them?