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!