

where tomorrow leads

A NOVEL

DIANN
MILLS

Chapter 1

Sudan, July 2005

Rainy Season

Mosquitoes buzzed around Paul Farid's head, in his ears, and on his lips. Even if they didn't carry a disease, they pestered a man to death. Blasted flying demons.

"Tell me again about Jesus feeding five thousand men with two fish and five pieces of bread." The Dinka chief leaned in closer. "Sudan needs miracles like this."

Lines bore deep into the man's face, and his voice was graveled with age. But his heart and mind reminded Paul of a child's, soaking up the words of Jesus in a way that encouraged his tribe to do the same. The two men sat outside the chief's *tukul* before the rains began for the day.

"Thousands of men, women, and children had gathered on a hillside to hear Jesus speak. As the hours—"

Rifle fire pierced the air. Screams erupted. Two more shots cracked.

Government of Sudan soldiers had arrived with their scorched-earth orders, ignoring the fragile peace between northern and southern Sudan.

Paul rushed to pick up a small boy who'd tripped and placed him into his mother's arms. "Hurry. They have no mercy." He and the chief hastened the villagers toward the forest.

Several more shots shattered the once-peaceful morning.

"Leave now, my friend." The chief towered over Paul with his nearly seven-foot height. "May God clear a path before you."

"I'll stay and turn myself in. I'd be a prize for any of them. Maybe they'll stop pursuit of your people."

"Then who do we have to bring us food? The words of Jesus? Inside the forest is safety for my people."

Paul acknowledged the chief's instructions and snatched up his backpack from inside the *tukul*. He stole behind the hut and saw the path ahead was littered with the fallen bodies of villagers, those he'd grown to love.

The GOS knew no gender or age. He touched the 9mm strapped to his waist.

The chief clamped his hand on Paul's shoulder as if reading his thoughts. "They'll kill us no matter if they find you or not."

The truth rang through Paul's mind. He raced from the escaping villagers toward the tall grass, but a GOS soldier must have spotted him. A bullet whistled to the right of his head.

He maneuvered through the rustling stalks, hunched over as far as possible without losing balance. The forest loomed ahead. Another shot sped past his right shoulder.

Close.

Too close.

Finally his steps sank into the earthen floor of the forest, and he moved into the shadowed canopy, cool yet foreboding. He skirted around a few trees, then stopped to listen and observe any movement. When he felt certain no one had followed him, he cautiously retraced his steps into the tall grass.

Bent low, Paul peered through the brush to his left. The soldiers hadn't moved on. They fired at anything moving. At least he was on foot . . . and alone. The pistol at his fingertips offered scant protection with the odds against him. Why were the GOS in the area, unless they were in search of him?

He held his breath. A soldier stole past him. At first the battalion of soldiers spread out about one hundred meters outside the jungle in search of him, but when they didn't find Paul's position, they appeared to give up. Or so it seemed. Khartoum's fighting force oozed cleverness like sweat beaded on Paul's brow. Although a peace treaty had been signed, it didn't stop government soldiers in search of a man accused of treason. Neither did it stop his family, the royal family, from wanting him dead.

Paul maintained his crouched stance behind a pile of rocks and brush that offered a small ditch beneath it for him to hide. He refused to consider snakes. His knees ached, but discomfort was nothing compared to what would happen if the soldiers discovered him.

Paul's thoughts lingered on the village he'd left behind, Xokabuc—"We Still Struggle"—where he'd delivered medicine and issued Larson's directives about how to administer it to those suffering from malaria.

He worried about the plight of those who'd survived the initial raid. They'd be questioned and most likely persecuted or killed if they refused to convert to the Muslim faith or provide information about Paul's whereabouts. Loyalty at a price. The sacrifice of these villagers, and others like them, more than bothered him. Many times he'd wondered if his death would lessen their suffering. Long ago he'd set his course to aid the persecuted Sudanese and spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. Nothing had changed, except his ideals rang nobler than the fear clanging through his soul.

Now, as always when he stood in the path of danger, his thoughts turned to his wife. *Lord, take care of Larson if I don't make it.*

His daring frightened her. But as a doctor, Larson often risked her life for the same cause. Together they made a good team—sort of like the Lone Ranger and Tonto.

"He's disappeared," a soldier called in Arabic. "Was it Farid?"

If the enemy soldier looked directly to the east, he'd discover Paul's position. His white T-shirt and khakis made it hard to blend in with the terrain.

"Maybe. We should have found him by now," the commander said. "He either fell into a pit or grew wings and flew away."

The first soldier walked toward Paul's hiding place, his attention focused on the ground. *Footprints.* Paul commanded his body not to move.

The soldier pointed to spots of trodden grass. "He headed for the jungle. Come nightfall, the lions will take care of him."

The commander joined him and bent to study the tracks. Paul thought he could hear the blood flow through their veins, smell the stench of their breath. If he was caught, would his wife and friends be safe? Nizam's letter lay in his backpack. Paul needed answers from his brother. More, he needed the truth.

“We could trail him, but I’m not so sure he’s our man,” the commander said.

“One of the villagers said he was Paul Farid just before I shot him.”

The commander chuckled. “The infidel said that to save himself. He’d have claimed his mother was Farid.”

The two laughed.

The commander stood and stared into the trees. Paul’s heart pounded harder than the drums alerting nearby villages of the approaching enemy. The two soldiers scanned every plant and tree, often staring at Paul’s rock and brush fortress.

“I saw Farid in Khartoum with the president’s family some years ago. It looked like him running from the village. He resembles his brothers, especially Nizam.”

My brother who may want me dead?

“Hard to say,” the commander said. “Rumors are everywhere, but I’m itching to catch him. The reward would make me a rich man.”

The soldier stared straight at the rock and brush where Paul hid. A grin spread across his face. He lifted his rifle and took aim.

* * *

Larson Kerr Farid took a long drink of water and stepped into the sunlight. Home: the village of Warkou, the province of Bahr al-Ghazal, the district of Aweil. The unforgettable Sudan. She had its location memorized as though she’d lifted the words from the pages of a travel brochure. Its hypnotic appeal never failed to draw her into its beauty. The lush, green earth, with its abundance of waterfowl beside the Lol River, and the magnificent wildlife—from the tall giraffes to the graceful gazelles to the thick-skinned elephants—painted a pastoral setting. The soil, rich with nutrients, awaited plantings. But nature’s cloak hid the turmoil.

Since dawn, patients had trailed toward her clinic, forming an endless line of despair. Weariness settled in her bones. Paul was right. She needed to rest more. Her back ached, and she craved hours of sleep. Queasiness spread through her stomach as though she’d taken a raft down the Nile’s rapids. She didn’t have time for such nonsense. People needed her.

Larson closed her eyes and willed the sensation to disappear. Why hadn’t Paul come home?

Paul never let an opportunity pass to talk about Jesus. Sometimes she wished he weren’t so vocal when others wanted him dead. She wanted her husband alive.

Larson pressed her lips together. She had work to do. Lots of it. But the uneasiness marching across her mind, coupled with the sickness churning in her stomach, left her apprehensive.

Pushing away the sensation, she beckoned to a woman carrying a naked, sleeping infant—or maybe the baby was dead. A good many of her patients traveled for days to reach her. Too often, the ordeal killed them. She refused to dwell on those unfortunate Sudanese but on those who recovered. They were the lucky ones, the ones who could go on living another day in hope of peace and a better tomorrow.

“Good morning,” Larson said in Dinka. “Thank you for bringing your baby to me. I want to see if I can help him.” Larson lifted the baby boy into her arms. She couldn’t detect a pulse or a

heartbeat. Her heart plummeted. The mother's emaciated body told the story.

The day wore on. Weariness wrapped a debilitating clutch around her, but she refused to give in. Perhaps she needed an antibiotic. But the thought of wasting precious medicine on herself didn't sit well. Rest. A few hours' sleep would wipe all this nonsense away.

"Larson," her assistant, Sarah, said, "you don't look so good. Are you sick?" The woman laid a wrinkled hand on Larson's arm.

"Just tired. I plan on going to bed early tonight. Paul will be back soon, and having him here always helps."

"Do you hurt somewhere?" Sarah's shiny black face held many beads of perspiration.

Larson added the last stitch to a cut on a boy's forehead. Sarah took over with antiseptic. "I'm simply exhausted, Sarah. In fact, I'm so tired that my stomach is upset."

"How long have you felt like this?" Sarah kissed the young boy's cheek and complimented his bravery.

"A few weeks."

"And your monthly flow?"

Larson stiffened. Impossible. She and Paul took precautions for that very reason.

"*Children aren't for us. At least not until peace is set into place,*" he'd said. Combating multiple diseases wasn't the safest environment for a child either. "*If you ever become pregnant, I'll insist you head to Nairobi, or better yet, the States. Until my family is no longer after me, there can be no children.*"

"*The pill will take care of that.*" The words echoed across her mind. She had taken her pills.

Larson paused before summoning another patient. Why hadn't she kept track? Eight weeks late. She'd attributed the delay to stress and lack of sleep.

Sarah smiled, her face etched with lines of wisdom. "A woman knows no greater joy than to bear a child." She pointed upward. "It makes God's love and the love for your husband a complete circle."

Larson shivered. She should run a urine or blood test to be sure, but not knowing sounded better than learning the truth. She cringed at the thought of Paul's response to such a mess.

This was silly. A false alarm. She should be concentrating on her patients. "I don't want to talk about this."

"Maybe God has a different plan."

"Not for me."

Sarah turned and tilted her head as if she hadn't heard correctly.

"Having a baby is a ridiculous idea," Larson said.

The old woman chuckled. "We'll see what the future holds."

Hours later, Larson lay awake on the wood-frame bed she typically shared with Paul. Despite her overwhelming urge to sleep, her thoughts rushed ahead. Pregnant? A baby would ruin her work—maybe her marriage. As she mulled Paul's declarations over in her mind, she knew he would want only the best for her and his child.

Sudan was not a toddler's playground.

The nagging thought persisted until she rose and made her way through to the clinic. She wouldn't get a moment's peace until she ran a test and found out for sure. As Sarah had said, maybe God's plans were different from theirs. Larson envisioned her husband's dark eyes and tanned skin . . . the shape of his mouth and his thick, nearly black hair. Dare she let her mind drift to thinking about a baby girl or boy?

No, this couldn't be happening. More problems were brewing. Paul's brother Nizam had written another letter indicating a desire to see Paul. The thought frightened her. Her husband's Muslim family wanted him dead for converting to Christianity.

Larson completed the test and breathed a prayer for a negative result before taking a look.

* * *

Colonel Ben Alier narrowed his gaze to concentrate on his orders from the Sudan People's Liberation Army headquarters. The print seemed small, or maybe his creeping over the forty-year mark had affected his eyesight. If it was the latter, that thought did nothing to ease his mind about any of the worries hammering in his head. In fact, hard-to-read print fell under the topic of a minor irritation. The signed peace treaty by the government and the struggling southern Sudanese was another matter.

Colonel Alier,

We are encouraged by the signing of the peace treaty uniting northern and southern Sudan. Khartoum promises to work with the South through the efforts of John Garang, as first vice president and advocate for the South. We are fortunate to be represented by our most highly respected leader. Only through arbitration can the people of southern Sudan be free from oppression and free to utilize our own resources. We have fought hard for self-rule and won. In six years we can vote to become an independent nation. Your presence is requested in Juba beginning 15 August. Our goal will be to focus on the immediate needs of the South and the best way to fulfill our responsibilities to the suffering and oppressed. We appreciate your commitment to the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement and your years of sacrificial service. Your contribution to the SPLA is of infinite value to the rebuilding of our country.

Ben lifted his head and closed his eyes just long enough to allow another thought to march across his mind. Incessant pain hammered against his spine and halted his musings. Too many years in the bush had weakened him physically, and now he was paying the price. He stared at the letter in his fingertips.

How could the leaders of southern Sudan ever believe in lasting peace? Khartoum had no reason to keep a cease-fire—other than pressure from the U.S. and the international community. For that matter, the US was now focusing its attention on the war in Iraq. Sudan's affairs had little to do with American endeavors.

Ben expelled a labored sigh. Every thought for as long as he could remember had centered on some facet of the civil war—the north/south conflict had gone on for more than twenty years. He argued the points of war, planned strategic battles, or fought the GOS. The three-pointed sword of religion, politics, and oil occupied his waking and sleeping hours.

Shaking his head at the ludicrous thought of peace for a united Sudan, Ben crumpled the paper in his hands. He was proud to be a Dinka, even prouder to be a member of the largest tribe in Sudan, the ones who gave the government the most trouble. He had no intention of discontinuing the fight, any more than the lying GOS had.

“Arab devils. They should be boiled alive.”

Commander Okuk entered the tent. After respectfully saluting Ben with his left and only arm, he relaxed. “The men are encouraged about the new peace.”

Ben stiffened, and even that sent a surge of pain up his spine. “Good for them.”

“Colonel Alier, is this not what we’ve been fighting for?” Hope rose in the man’s voice. “I have known nothing but war since the day my mother gave me life. When my wife and children were killed, I joined the SPLA.”

Ben fought the urge to lay a fist into Okuk’s face. “Are you so stupid that you can’t see? The last time we were near your village, the GOS had burned everything to the ground and killed the goats and cattle. What was left of your people had been herded into a displacement camp without food and medical help. And you trust a worthless piece of paper?”

The muscles in Okuk’s face tightened.

“I’m a realist,” Ben said. “Let the results speak for those who are committed to the peace process.”

The tall, slender Okuk, barely thirty years old, maintained a controlled posture. He’d lost his right arm from a land mine, but that hadn’t held him back from learning to shoot with his left. He had served his country three years with both arms and five with one. Ben read the pain in his eyes.

“And I dream of the free world pressing Khartoum to honor the end of bloodshed,” Okuk said.

“I do too, but I have no faith in the word of a Muslim.” Ben stood over the man, the crumpled letter still in his fist. “I have seen nothing in the past that indicates willingness for the government to make concessions.” He shrugged. “Who knows? Perhaps the US has more information about Osama bin Laden’s connections to Khartoum. Pressure from the free world to negotiate peace in exchange for monetary aid is another factor to consider.”

Okuk nodded. “What are my orders?”

Ben felt the edges of the paper scratching his palm. “We’ll move out in the morning as planned. If we encounter the GOS, then we’ll find out if they’re keeping a cease-fire.”

The lines in Okuk’s forehead deepened.

“You have a problem with my orders, Commander?”

“No, sir. I will alert the men.”

Ben watched Okuk turn and leave. He’d rather die fighting than let the enemy deceive those

who believed in southern Sudan. And what would he do in the event of permanent peace?

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