

## Chapter 1



KALU

MORNING HAD ARRIVED to the west coast of Africa. Another hot, dusty day. Kalu had gone to the outhouse. His teacher had suggested he go there to practise a new tune on his bamboo flute. He'd just started playing when he heard what sounded like a gun firing close by. In the school!

His first instinct was to run to help. But he stopped himself. He stashed the flute back into his belt. Then he pulled the door on the outhouse closed more snugly. And waited.

Not for long.

The kids in his class filed past the door. He held his breath. He could see them through the cracks in the wall and hear

them shuffling in the dust. Some were crying. But quietly, so no one else would hear them.

Soldiers. The rebel soldiers had come for them. The march of their heavy boots was unmistakable. They had come to take the children away. The boys to become child soldiers. The girls to do unspeakable things.

There weren't many children in the school. Fewer than twenty. Kalu, who was thirteen, and his brother Oscar, fourteen, were the oldest. Oscar was taller. Their cousin Aisha was probably the youngest.

Several more shots were fired. Shouts. Terrified screams. Running. More shots. More screams.

Then the crackling of fire.

They'd set the village on fire. Soon the wind would drive the flames here. To the outhouse. To Kalu's hideout.

He eased the door open. Smoke burnt his nostrils. Already he could feel the fire's heat on his face. He saw no one.

He slipped out and crept to the schoolroom.

Empty.

Except for the teacher. He was sprawled face down on the desk, blood seeping from his head, staining the test papers he had been marking.

Kalu heard a scuffling sound and weeping. He inched to the desk and peered under. Between the teacher's knees a kid was hiding. His cousin.

"Aisha," Kalu whispered.

She scrambled out and grabbed onto Kalu's waist. She was sobbing and trembling.

“We have to get out of here.” He patted her back. “The soldiers might return to be sure they got us all.”

He looked out the school doorway. No soldiers. Just eye-watering smoke. Sweltering fire.

But he had to check if anyone was still in the village. Anyone alive.

“You wait in the outhouse,” he whispered to Aisha. “I’ll see if anyone’s left.”

But he couldn’t even get close to the huts. Their grass roofs burst into flames with a hot whoosh, one after another. The poles he and Oscar and a couple of the uncles had erected around the village for a windbreak were burning now. No one could be left there. Not even his mother.

He shook his head. He couldn’t let himself think about her. Not now. It would be better for her if she’d been shot rather than marched off by the soldiers.

“Come on, Aisha. No one’s left. We have to get out of here.”

Aisha had stopped sobbing, but she was still trembling. She nodded and followed him into the bush. The ground was hot under their bare feet. Kalu picked up a couple of pebbles and stashed them into his small cloth pouch along with a pinch of sweet herbs to remind him of home.

They would head to the village of their Uncle Gigi. It was a two-day walk under the blistering sun through the bush and over grassy lands where herds of sheep and goats roamed under the watchful eyes of young shepherds. But they’d have to keep off the trails in case the soldiers found them.

They arrived at dusk the next day, starving. For two days, they'd eaten nothing but a few sour berries and a bit of milk Kalu managed to coax out of a nanny goat he'd caught.

Their Uncle Gigi wasn't in the village. He'd gone to the city to try to find work. But his family gave Kalu and Aisha a bit of supper. Rice and lentils, and water to drink.

"You can sleep here tonight but you can't stay," their auntie told them. "We don't have enough food to feed even ourselves."

"Go to Sleeva," an elder said. "They always need help on the boats."

"What about Aisha?" Kalu asked his auntie. "Can Aisha stay with you?"

The auntie nodded reluctantly. "Maybe such a little thing won't eat much. And I'm sure she can work hard."

The next morning before daybreak, Kalu set off for Sleeva. They'd told him it was a small seaside town where many boats stopped to drop off cargo and pick up other goods.

Before he'd gone far, he was aware of a stealthy shadow following him. But every time he turned around, he didn't see anyone. Or anything. Was a soldier tracking him? Or a leopard?

He ducked behind a bush, fists ready, and held his breath.

A rustling of dried leaves.

Aisha! He grabbed her arm and she screamed.

When she realized it was him and had stopped screaming, he said, "You can't come, Aisha. You have to stay with Auntie."

“No.” She lifted her chin defiantly. “I’m going with you. She’s not my family. You are my family now.”

Kalu squatted beside her. “It’s going to be hard in the town. I’ll have a hard enough time looking after myself. I can’t look after you as well. What will you eat? Where will you sleep?”

“Like Auntie says, I don’t need much to eat. And I can work. I’m strong. Look.”

She held out a thin arm for him to feel her muscles.

What he saw was the determination in her eyes. He knew that she would follow him no matter what.

She was right.

They were family.