



SAMUEL

2006

Samuel lived by three rules.

Never doubt Kony.

Stay alert.

And trust no one.

He didn't just follow the rules. He lived by them. He lived *because* of them.

Sitting in the shade on the low porch of a sprawling compound, he couldn't recall the traitorous thought that broke his first rule, but proof of the betrayal hid beneath the bloody bandage wrapped around his thigh. His captors promised the medicine was working, but he could feel the angry swelling beneath the stained wrapping covering the bullet wound where the infection had taken hold.

Samuel understood infection. In his eleven years, he had seen it burrow deep into the bodies of other children. Their feet. Their legs. Their chests. Their arms. Spreading like brush fire until it consumed them.

He picked at the frayed edge of his bandage and struggled to keep his thoughts from evaporating in the fog of painkillers dulling his senses. The drugs ate away at his second rule. He'd spent the last week swaying between fitful sleep and blurry consciousness, unable to form a clear understanding of where he was or what his captors wanted.

A peal of laughter nudged Samuel's attention away from his wound. His head lolled to the side as he watched a faded and worn soccer ball arc through the cloudless Ugandan sky before dropping into the midst of a group of excited children. It bounced off the forehead of the tallest, a teenage boy with legs like the gray crested crane, long and knobby-kneed. He sent it soaring across the dirt field to the waiting chest of a teammate. The huddle of children squealed with delight and scrambled after the ball, kicking up clouds of red dust with their bare feet.

Hard as he tried, Samuel couldn't fit together the images of the laughing children and the razor-wire fence trapping them within its boundaries. His eyes drooped closed from the effort as another numbing current of painkiller pulled him under. Splinters of a memory prickled beneath Samuel's muddled thoughts, and the joyful laughter on the field dissolved into terrified screams.

A sudden attack. Samuel and other panicked rebels grabbing their weapons. Government soldiers charging, guns raised. Explosions ripping into the earth, silencing screams and scattering bodies. A confusion of commands roaring above the smoke.

Bullets firing. Rebels falling. A terrible sharp pain in his leg. Blood gushing from the bullet wound. Samuel begging for help. Crying out for his mama.

Hands reaching for him. Taking his rifle. Taking his panga. Taking his bullets.

Leaving him wounded. Leaving him helpless. Leaving him.

RICKY

1987

“A powerful home is a place where people work hard.” Ricky’s mother said, handing him a basket. “You want us to have a powerful home, don’t you?”

Ricky placed his school uniform in the basket and set it by the door. “Yes, but I promised I’d help my friends gather wood for the bonfire tonight.”

“And you’ll keep your promise,” she said, “after you fetch me some cassava.”

Ricky groaned. During the wet season, the sweet-potato tubers pushed deep into the earth, making them difficult to dig up in the dry season when the ground hardened. “How many do you need?” he asked.

“Fourteen. The whole village is gathering for the wangoo. I want to make sure I prepare enough.”

Ricky groaned louder. “Can’t Patrick do it? My friends are waiting.”

“It won’t kill them to wait a bit. Patrick is helping your father

close up the school,” she said, slicing a mango into bite-sized chunks. “And then he’s promised to fix the radio for tonight, so I need your help preparing dinner.”

While she wasn’t looking, Ricky grabbed two chunks and popped them into his mouth. “What about the girls?” he asked, reaching for more. “Shouldn’t they be helping?”

She swatted his hand away. “They are already outside gathering simsim.”

Ricky’s mouth watered at the thought of the sesame-and-honey treat he hoped his mother would make from the seeds his sisters were collecting. “Are you making candy?”

She smiled. “I thought it would be a nice treat to celebrate the end of another successful school year. Your father tells me you did well in your studies.”

Ricky dug his big toe into the dirt floor. “Not as well as Patrick,” he mumbled.

His mother looked up from her cutting. “Your brother has two more years of schooling than you. When you’re fifteen, you’ll be just as smart.”

“When I’m fifteen, Patrick’ll still be two years older and smarter than me.”

She turned to fetch another mango. “Stop worrying about your brother’s grades. Just worry about your own.”

Ricky crammed another handful of fruit in his mouth before she returned to the table. He stopped chewing when she looked at him with one eyebrow raised and grabbed his swollen cheeks with her sticky fingers.

“And worry about what I am going to do to you if you don’t stop eating my mango, Anywar.”

Pulpy bits squished between Ricky’s teeth as he smiled at her use of his Acholi name, a name reserved for special occasions or when he was trying her patience. “Sorry, Mama.”

“You will be sorry if you don’t get me some cassava.” She delivered a playful swat to his backside. “Now, go! I have much to prepare before we leave for dinner.”

Ricky swiped another chunk of mango and ran out the door.

As he made his way into the fields surrounding the family homestead, he tossed his hand hoe in the air. It somersaulted twice in the crisp blue sky before falling toward his waiting basket, where it bounced off the edge and landed in his father’s beloved flower garden. Ricky stepped into the garden, and the familiar scent of night roses filled his lungs. A contented smile parted his lips, allowing a sigh to escape as he closed his eyes and breathed in his home.

The sprawling homestead had been in Ricky’s family for generations. Tilled soil rolled in gentle waves with row upon row of maize, cassava, millet, simsim, and cotton, which grew in abundance on either side of the compound. A single-story, tin-roofed farmhouse and two thatch-roofed huts huddled together at the center of the property. Beyond the crops, herds of cattle dotted the fields that stretched out to the wild bush.

“Ricky!” his mother yelled. “Get me another mango to replace the one you’ve eaten!”

“Yes, Mama!”

Ricky jogged over to the tree he’d planted with his brother when he was nine and plucked two mangoes from its branches. Placing them in his basket, he headed down the rutted paths of the cassava field.

Once Ricky had delivered the mangoes and sweet potatoes, he sprinted to the village. Now that school was out for the holiday, the promise of long days spent fishing and hunting with his brother and friends lightened each step as he raced between huts. Nearing the fire pit, he dodged groups of mothers balancing large bowls of food on their heads and swaddled babies on their backs. The infants cooed and laughed from the security of their colorful obenos as Ricky ran past.

He found Thomas, Andrew, and John gathering small branches and dry twigs for the evening fire.

“We’re hunting tomorrow, right?” Thomas asked, pulling on a tree branch.

“I don’t know,” Ricky said. “I have to ask my mother first.”

Thomas yanked the branch free and tossed it to Ricky. “C’mon, boy. We’re just hunting rats.”

Thomas lived to hunt. At seventeen, he was the oldest of their group and Patrick’s best friend. He was fearless, and Ricky loved to listen to him tell tales of his latest adventure in the bush. Unlike the elders of the village, who used only their voices to weave tales at the wangoo each night, Thomas told a story with his whole body. He stalked around the fire, leaping high above

the flames and pouncing at children as he reenacted a lioness hunting an impala.

“What’s your mama afraid is going to happen?” Thomas asked, breaking off another dead branch. “Does she think a rat will nibble your toes?”

“No. She thinks you take too many chances.”

Thomas’s mouth fell open in pretend shock. “Me? Put you in danger? When have I ever done that?”

Ricky, Andrew, and John stopped their work and laughed at him.

“What?” Thomas asked.

“Have you forgotten about the python?” Ricky asked. “Because my mother hasn’t.”

Thomas waved the question away. “You were never in any real danger. I knew what I was doing.”

Andrew snorted. “No, you didn’t. You were spearing fish. The python just swam in your way.”

“I’ll spear you if you don’t shut up,” Thomas said, chucking a branch at Andrew’s head.

Andrew ducked away. At thirteen, Ricky’s classmate barely passed for eleven, but what Andrew lacked in size, he made up for in nerve and speed. Before Thomas could grab another branch, Andrew retaliated with a clump of dirt. It exploded on Thomas’s back, leaving behind a dusty scorch mark.

“Just wait until we get to the well tonight,” Thomas said, shooting Ricky a mischievous smile. “We still owe you for yesterday.”

“I think there’s still a bit of dirt in your hair,” Andrew said, throwing another clump at Thomas. “You’ll want to wash carefully tonight.”

Thomas jumped to the left, and the dirt hit John’s backside.

Andrew erupted in another fit of laughter. “Beat you to the well!” he said, breaking into a sprint.

Thomas threw down his kindling. “Oh, I’ll beat you, all right!”

“You’ve got to catch me first,” Andrew yelled, darting between two women carrying pots of water and peeled cassava to the fire to be boiled for the communal dinner.

Thomas skidded to a stop before colliding with the women, who scolded him for not being more careful. Mumbling a quick apology, he skirted around them and continued his pursuit of Andrew.

With a shake of his head, John piled an armful of kindling in the fire pit and then dusted off the back of his shorts.

At fourteen, Thomas’s younger brother was the peacemaker of their group, a role he played to perfection.

“I’d better get to the well and make sure Thomas doesn’t kill Andrew,” John said, picking up his brother’s dropped kindling. “Are you coming?”

“I have to get Patrick first.”

“Where is he, anyway? I thought he was going to help us with the fire.”

“He had to do something for my father.” Ricky tossed his

last handful of twigs on the wangoo. "I'll get him and meet you at the well."

Ricky found Patrick in the thatch-roofed hut they shared, hunched over their family radio, the village's only receiver and its one connection to the world beyond its borders. He crossed the small room to grab his bathing bucket and a hollow gourd used for fetching water from the well, careful not to step on the pieces of villagers' disassembled tools, watches, and clocks littering the dirt floor. "It's time to get washed up for dinner," he said.

His brother looked up from the radio. "I need to finish this. Baba's counting on me having it fixed by dinner. It's been two weeks without any news from Kampala. People are getting nervous."

Ricky picked up a large block of dry soap from beside his bucket and rubbed it over his head until flakes of soap clung to his hair. "Do you think you can do it?" he asked, replacing the soap, which they weren't allowed to take to the well.

"Yes," Patrick said, turning his attention back to the radio.

"Mama and the girls are making a special meal to celebrate the school year ending. If we're late, we'll miss all the good food." Ricky stared down at the pieces of the radio still lying before Patrick. "How much longer is it going to take?"

"Not long. I think I've finally figured out what's wrong." He pointed to a small pair of tweezers lying near Ricky's feet. "Hand me those."

Ricky tossed him the tweezers. "Do you want me to wait with you?"

“No, you go ahead,” Patrick said, not looking up from his work. “I’ll meet you there soon.”

* * *

When Ricky arrived at the well, he found dozens of children from his own and neighboring villages already waiting in line with their bathing buckets and gourds, but Thomas, Andrew, and John were not among them. One at a time, the children knelt down beside the small rectangular hole dug deep into the ground several meters from the watering hole used by local livestock. The children dipped their gourds in the clouded water and then poured the water into their bathing buckets. When the buckets were full, they carried them behind the tall grass or bushes surrounding the well for some privacy as they washed. As Ricky neared the well, he scanned the area to make certain his friends weren’t hiding nearby, waiting to ambush him with clumps of dirt. When he was convinced they weren’t, he got in line.

While he waited, he spotted Daniel, a young boy from his sister Margaret’s class, approaching a group of teenagers chatting about their plans for school break.

“May I use one of your buckets?” Daniel asked in a small voice.

“Don’t you have your own?” a girl asked.

Casting his eyes to the ground, Daniel shook his head.

Vincent, the tallest boy in the group, stepped forward. He didn’t live in Ricky’s village, but every kid in the region knew of his cruelty.

“You can use mine,” he said, holding out his bucket, but when Daniel moved to take it, Vincent lifted the bucket higher. “If you can reach it,” he added, smirking at his friends.

Daniel glanced around at the boys and girls, who were watching with amused interest, and his head sank in shame.

“Jump for it,” Vincent said. “Your baba will have your hide if you go home smelling like you do. What were you harvesting today? Manure?”

Daniel jumped. His fingers grazed the bottom of the bucket, but Vincent lifted it higher. “You’re going to have to do better than that.”

Ricky’s stomach burned with anger as the boy crouched lower, preparing to jump again. He’d witnessed Vincent’s bullying before, and when he was younger, he’d been the target of it on more than one occasion. He stepped from the line and held out his bathing bucket. “You can borrow mine, Daniel.”

Daniel wiped away his tears and reached for the bucket, but Vincent snatched it from Ricky’s hand and pushed Ricky to the ground. A sharp breath burst from Ricky’s mouth and gravel tore into his palms as he fell back on the dirt path.

“Wait your turn with the other babies,” Vincent said. He then turned again to Daniel. “Now you have two buckets to jump for.”

Tears slid down Daniel’s round cheeks.

Ignoring the sting of cuts on his hands, Ricky pushed himself up from the ground. “Leave him alone.”

Vincent laughed and shoved him again. Ricky stumbled back, but managed to stay on his feet. He drew in a shaky breath.

“Aw, what’s the matter?” Vincent taunted. “Did I hurt your feelings, baby?”

Ricky felt children staring at him from all sides. The teens behind Vincent laughed and jeered.

“I think I see a tear!”

“Does the baby need his mama?”

The rest of the kids watched in silence. Humiliation and anger simmered behind Ricky’s eyes, and his hands trembled in fear. He balled them into fists, hoping no one noticed.

“I’m not a baby.” His voice wasn’t as loud or strong as he’d hoped, but it was steady.

Vincent leaned in closer. “What was that, baby?”

“I’m not a baby,” Ricky repeated, his voice gaining strength from his anger.

Vincent spread his arms wide and splayed his fingers in invitation. “Then what are you waiting for?”

Lifting his chin, Ricky stepped forward and tensed in anticipation of the first strike. Vincent laughed and moved to shove Ricky again, but Patrick stepped between them.

“I’m not a baby,” Ricky’s brother said, staring down the bully. “Why don’t you try pushing me?”

Vincent stepped back at the threatening tone in Patrick’s voice.

“Well,” Patrick said, “what are *you* waiting for?”

Vincent glanced back at his friends, but they'd all moved away, so he dropped Ricky's bucket at Patrick's feet. "You're not worth it." Then, turning away, he stalked back toward his village.

With the excitement over, the children returned to the task of bathing.

"Thank you," Daniel sniffed, wiping the back of his hand under his nose.

Ricky gave him his bucket, and Daniel joined the children at the well.

"You all right?" Patrick asked when they were alone.

"Yes," Ricky said, wiping his hands against his thighs to clean the blood and calm the trembling. "Every night it's a new kid. You'd think he'd get bored."

"It makes him feel big."

"He is big. He's almost as tall as Baba."

"He may be big, but he obviously doesn't feel big." Patrick took Ricky's hands in his and flipped them over to inspect the cuts. With the same careful precision he used when fixing the villagers' broken possessions, he picked bits of gravel from the deeper scrapes on Ricky's palms. "He thinks acting like a jerk will make him powerful and earn him respect."

"No one respects Vincent," Ricky mumbled. "No one even likes him."

Patrick extracted the last piece of gravel from his brother's palms. "True, but they fear him."

"Not you. Did you see his face when you told him to try

and push you? I thought he was going to have to take another bath.”

The brothers laughed. As they neared the well, a clean and smiling Daniel handed Ricky his bucket before running back to their village.

“Vincent only picks fights when he knows it’s a sure win for him,” Patrick said, kneeling down to scoop up a gourdful of water from the well.

“Which is why he was picking one with me,” Ricky said, holding the bathing bucket for Patrick to fill.

After several scoops, the bucket sloshed with water, and the brothers walked behind a bush to bathe. Standing on a flat rock, Patrick cupped water in his hands and poured it over his body before dousing his head. “I don’t know. I think you surprised him. He’s not used to kids standing up to him.”

“I’m not a kid,” Ricky said, rubbing water into his hair until the soap flakes blossomed into suds, tickling his scalp.

Patrick took another handful of water to rinse the soap from his hair and body. “You know what I mean.”

Suds still clinging to his hair and face, Ricky stood as straight and tall as possible. With a long inhalation, he pulled back his bony shoulders and pushed out his chest. “I’m almost as big as you.”

Patrick laughed as he stepped off the rock and picked up the gourd. “You sure you didn’t hit your head when you fell?”

“I am,” Ricky argued as his brother started on the path for

home. “Someday I’ll be bigger and you’ll be my little big brother!”

Dumping the remaining water over his head, he grabbed the empty bucket and hurried to catch up for the twenty-minute walk back to the farm.

SAMUEL

Samuel shuddered from the recollection of his comrades leaving him to die on the battlefield, and he forced his eyes open. He had to stay alert. He could not afford to break another rule. Not today.

Earlier that morning, he'd overheard his captors talking. They planned to move him. He didn't hear where, but knew he had only hours to escape, so he didn't fight when they carried him to a chair on the porch, claiming the fresh air and sunshine would aid in his recovery. He knew it was his only opportunity to see beyond the putty-gray walls of his hospital room and formulate a plan, but to do so, he needed his senses alert. They were the only weapons he had left.

Biting his lip, he pressed down on his wound with two trembling fingers. A spasm twitched through his bare feet, dangling just above the concrete floor. The pain, sharp and lethal, cut through the drug-induced haze. Pain was good. It meant he could still feel. It meant he was alive.

He clenched his hands into tight fists, fighting back tears that must not flow. Tears meant weakness. Weakness meant death. He squeezed his eyes shut until the inferno of pain receded to its normal slow burn.

He stiffened as four adults neared the porch. Placing his hand over the bloody bandage, he strained to listen to their conversation, but cheers from the field drowned out their words, so he concentrated on their tones, examining every pitch and inflection for the long, hushed whisper of suspicion or the short, sharp punch of anger. But the voices fell silent.

A tremor took hold of Samuel's hands. Silence always preceded the kill. It lived in the held breath of a predator preparing to strike. It seized the still air on a battlefield before the first bullet was fired. And though Samuel hadn't deciphered this threat, instinct told him one thing: like the river croc slipping silently beneath the water's surface, death was closing in.

He sat motionless, pretending to watch the soccer game as his four captors approached. The soldier, who'd found him five or six days ago in the bush after he'd been shot on the battlefield and the rebels had left him to die. The doctor, who'd cut the government bullet from his leg and given him medicine to fight the infection. The small, round woman with all the questions about his family, his injury, his time in Kony's army. Questions he refused to answer. And the silent man with the knowing eyes, who made Samuel's palms sweat and his legs ache to run.

The silent man towered over the others. As the group

continued to talk, the man glanced over at the boy. Samuel shifted in his chair, afraid if he looked at the man, the man would see the truth.

The brief conversation ended, and Samuel was seized with the fear of a trapped animal as the adults made their way across the porch to where he sat. His eyes darted along the length of metal fence enclosing the compound, searching the coils of razor wire for any sign of weakness. He found none.

A faded blue sign hung on the fence next to the one exit leading from the compound. Samuel's eyes scoured it for any military insignia. In the center, the outlines of two large hands cradled the country of Uganda. A young girl and boy stood in the middle of the green country, setting a white bird free. Below the image, a banner framed three words: *Friends of Orphans.*

Friends, Samuel thought, glaring at the sign. *Friends don't hold you captive. Friends don't keep you alive, only to hand you over to your enemy.*

He ran a trembling hand over his head. His scalp felt coarse beneath his fingers, where stubble had begun to grow. He felt naked and exposed without his dreadlocks, but the woman had insisted on shaving his head to rid him of the lice infesting his filthy hair.

The adults gathered around his chair, and Samuel's eyes locked on the firearm tucked in a holster on a belt that was slung across the soldier's chest. Samuel's fingers twitched with an aching need to hold the weapon, but the woman was in his way.

He flinched at her touch when she placed a hand on his shoulder. “You’re going to go home today, Samuel.”

He pulled away from her and her empty promise. Adults lied, and Samuel could not afford to break his last rule. He knew the price for trusting adults.

Withdrawing her hand, she turned and addressed the soldier. “Are you sure you don’t mind taking him?”

“We’ll be traveling north by Kitgum tonight. It’s not a problem.”

Samuel’s mind raced. It didn’t matter if the soldier’s words held any truth or not. He could never go back to his family.

He gripped the armrests until his fingers ached. He had to escape. From the corner of his eye, he studied the soldier’s gun and the metal snaps holding it in its leather holster. He’d fired a gun just like it many times. It held only six bullets, if the chamber was full. Even if he managed to grab it, he wouldn’t have enough ammunition to fight his way out of the compound.

He needed a hostage.

As the soldier spoke about their imminent departure, Samuel weighed his options.

In his injured state, he’d get off only one round before the adults overpowered him. That left the children. He scanned the compound for the easiest target and found him seated on the edge of the playing field. The boy was no more than nine years old, giving Samuel two years of height, weight, strength, and experience over his unsuspecting victim. He just had to

wait for his moment to strike. He took a deep breath as his plan took shape.

I have to strike, he reminded himself. *They've given me no choice.*

His target bounced to his feet with excitement when a teammate scored, and Samuel looked away from the child.

There's never a choice.

"Thank you," the doctor said, extending his hand to the soldier.

The soldier reached over Samuel to shake the doctor's hand, and his sidearm hung centimeters above the boy's head. Samuel's fingers flexed, preparing to snatch the gun from the holster until the silent man's knowing gaze caught his own.

"I'll start preparing for our trip," the soldier said, stepping back. "We'll leave at seven this evening." And then he was gone, taking any chance of escape with him.

Samuel averted his eyes.

"I'll fetch fresh bandages to change your dressing," the doctor said, checking his watch. "Do you need another pill?"

The pain in Samuel's leg and the temptation to cocoon himself in the medicine's numbing spell begged him to say yes, but he had to devise a new plan, so with a resolute shake of his head, he stared out at the elephant grass swaying beyond the compound's fence and listened to the scratchy grind of the doctor's footsteps as they faded back into the building.

The soldier was still the key. Samuel would wait until they drove beyond the fence and deep into the bush that separated

Pader from Kitgum. Only then, when tall grass and dense trees framed the dirt road, would Samuel say he needed to use the bathroom. When the soldier stopped the truck, he would take his time exiting and hobble to the side of the road, careful not to draw the soldier's suspicion, but the moment he set foot in the bush, he'd run. His injury would slow him, he knew this, but Samuel also knew the bush, and how to disappear within its tangled wilds.

"Why don't I get you something to drink while you wait?" the woman said.

Samuel listened for two pairs of retreating footsteps. He heard only one, the hurried steps of the woman. Like the oppressive heat, the giant's gaze pressed down on him. He shifted away from the man.

After a moment, the man pulled up a chair and sat down. Samuel cringed, but kept his eyes fixed on the soccer game. The man cleared his throat, and Samuel said a silent prayer, asking Kony to spare him and begging for the Holy Spirit's forgiveness.

The man didn't wear the uniform of a soldier or the baggy green pants and short-sleeved shirt of a doctor. He wore tan pants and a blue button-front shirt. He was different from the others. Though he'd arrived only that morning, everyone looked to him for approval. The pecking order was clear here, and this man definitely commanded the others' respect or fear. Samuel couldn't tell which.

Government, he thought as the man laced his fingers together in his lap.

“I know what you’ve been through, Samuel,” he said, “and I’d like to hear your story.”

Samuel began to pick again at his bandage. “I have no story.”

The big man’s gaze traveled from Samuel to the world beyond the compound’s fence. “We all have a story,” he said.

RICKY

When Ricky and Patrick arrived at the wangoo, a hundred men, women, and children were already seated around the fire to celebrate the end of another school term and the upcoming Christmas holiday. Whispering a quick apology for their tardiness, they squeezed in beside their neighbors, Okot and his sons. Ricky studied his brother's profile as he waited for Okot to pass the bowl of pigeon peas. The boyish features he and Patrick once shared were gone. Patrick's cheeks had narrowed over the last year, stretching long like his legs and arms. Ricky wondered if he was getting a glimpse of what his own face would look like in two years. Would he, too, become a soft reflection of their father, Michael, whose strong brow and firm jaw inspired respect from the men of the village and admiration from the women, or would he retain the looks of his mother, Mary, whose round cheeks and gentle eyes welcomed smiles from everyone she met?

By the time Okot finished taking his share, there were only

two handfuls left in the bowl. Ricky nudged his brother. "I told you we'd miss all the good stuff if we were late."

Patrick scooped out a small amount and handed Ricky the larger remaining portion. "So someday you can be my big little brother."

While the villagers ate, Ricky's father addressed the children. "What story shall I tell tonight?"

"The Story of Nambi and Kintu, Lapwony," a small boy said, using the Luo word for "teacher," a title given to Ricky's father as headmaster of the Acholi village school.

"Tell the story of the Fairy Bee, Baba," Ricky's sister Margaret said. The oldest of three girls, nine-year-old Margaret functioned as the unofficial spokesperson for the trio, a responsibility she carried out with great pride.

Seven-year-old Betty, who sat next to her big sister, clapped her hands. "Oh yes, the story of the Fairy Bee. Please, Baba."

Christine, nearing her fifth birthday, bounced up and down on her mama's knee. "Fairy Bee. Fairy Bee."

"Lapwony told that one last night," an older girl complained.

"And the night before that," a boy added.

Christine stopped bouncing, and her plump bottom lip pushed out into a pout. Mama leaned down and pressed her lips to her daughter's ear. "I'll tell you that one before bed."

Christine smiled and resumed her bouncing.

"How about the story of the King of the Snakes?" Ricky suggested.

Several children voiced their approval, and the air around the

wangoos hummed with excited giggles and whispers as Ricky's father stood.

"Once . . ." His voice, deep and rich as the Ugandan soil, silenced the children. Only the crackle of the fire dared interrupt Lapwony Michael. Ricky sat up straighter, his chest filling with pride that with one simple word his father commanded such respect.

"Once there was a beautiful village, tucked between the hills and the great lake. The people of the village lived in peace, tending to their fields and goats. But one day a big snake called Sesota slithered down from the hillside and into the village."

Ricky smiled as the younger kids giggled nervously and huddled closer.

"Sesota came across a family working in the fields, and despite their pleas for mercy, the evil snake devoured them whole."

A branch teetering on the top of the burning pile broke free and tumbled from the fire pit, kicking sparks into the darkening sky. Margaret and Betty squeaked and scrambled back from the smoking log. Ricky laughed and nudged Patrick with his elbow, but he hurried to help his brother replace the branch on the fire when his father shot him a warning look.

"Every day for years," Father continued when the brothers were seated again, "Sesota came down from the hillside until all the people had either fled or been eaten. When the king heard the news, he challenged his best fighters to go kill Sesota, but not one was brave enough to volunteer."

“Waswa!” Christine squealed, jumping down from her mama’s lap. “Waswa was brave enough, Baba!”

A chorus of shushes hissed around the fire. Patrick scooped up his baby sister and placed her on his lap, and Ricky leaned over and whispered in her ear. “If you listen quietly, I’ll make you a clay cow tomorrow.” Christine nodded and then leaned back against Patrick’s chest, tucking her head under his chin.

“Yes,” Father said. “A simple peasant named Waswa told the king all he needed to defeat Sesota was some jewelry and a water pot. The king thought Waswa foolish, but gave him the items, and Waswa and his son set off to face the feared snake. As they approached the village, Waswa played his reed pipe and sang a song.

*“Sesota, Sesota, King of the Snakes,
Beautiful presents I bring.
The King of Uganda has sent me today
With bracelets and beads and a ring.*

“The great snake heard the song and was curious about the man and boy who dared enter his territory, so he slithered down the hillside, singing.

*“I am Sesota, the King of the Snakes;
Two bold intruders I see.
But if they bring me the gifts of a king
They will be welcomed by me.”*

Deep shadows and glowing light from the fire danced across Father's face as he snaked his hand in the evening sky. The lean muscles of his arm glided beneath his dark skin like Sesota slithering through the countryside to face the unarmed peasant and his son. The children at the wangoo leaned closer in rapt attention.

"Sesota found Waswa and his son at an abandoned home. As the great snake peered into the water pot to see the king's gifts, Waswa continued playing and singing.

*"Sesota, Sesota, King of the Snakes,
Enter this water pot here.
The King of Uganda has sent you a bed
On which you shall sleep for a year.*

"The King of the Snakes entered the pot, where he coiled around and around. As the snake settled into his new bed, Waswa sang him to sleep.

"And what did he sing?" Father asked.

"Sesota, Sesota, Sesota, Sesota," the children sang as they swayed. Ricky hissed the snake's name and tickled the bottom of Christine's bare feet with a blade of grass. She squealed with laughter and tucked her feet under her legs.

"When the snake was asleep," Father continued, "Waswa and his son put the lid on the pot and carried it back to their king, who commanded his servants to make a huge fire for the wangoo. That night, the people burned the King of the Snakes on

the fire and rejoiced in their freedom from the terror Sesota had spread across their land for years.”

The fire sizzled and hissed like an angry serpent as another heavy branch crumbled under its flames, and Ricky imagined it purging Uganda of the evil snake.

Father sat down, and Betty climbed onto his lap. “Tell another one, Baba.”

“Yes, tell another story, Lapwony!” the children begged, but he held up his hand and the pleas stopped.

“I will tell another tomorrow night, but for now, you children go play before it is time to sleep.”

The young ones groaned in protest, but they obeyed their teacher and scurried off to enjoy the waning hours of the day.

“It’s time for news from Kampala,” Mama told Patrick.

Patrick handed Father the large transistor radio he’d kept tucked at his side during the story, and Father wound the end of a wire around the extended antenna.

“Is it fixed?” Ricky whispered to his brother.

“I had it working earlier,” Patrick whispered back.

Father handed the other end of the wire to Patrick, who scrambled up a nearby tree and secured the wire to a high branch. When Patrick was back on the ground, Father switched on the radio. For a moment they heard only silence, but then the radio crackled to life. Ricky smiled at his brother as Father tuned the dial and a distant voice echoed from the radio’s speaker.

“Well done, son,” Father said to Patrick.

“Thank you,” Patrick said, unable to contain the pride-filled smile stretching across his face.

One by one, the adults of the village joined Ricky’s parents around the radio. The light of the fire cast flickering shadows across their faces as they listened to reports from the capital of the civil unrest among the country’s many conflicting tribes. The shadows carved under their furrowed brows and beneath their downturned mouths, deepening the looks of concern they could no longer mask.

The politics of Uganda held no interest for thirteen-year-old Ricky. He dug his toes into the dirt, waiting for Mama to excuse him, but as the news continued, static eroded the newscaster’s voice, and Father motioned him over. “Hold the wire, son.”

With a disappointed sigh, Ricky stood next to his brother and placed his hand on the thin metal cable. The volume and clarity of the broadcast improved instantly.

Father patted him on the shoulder. “Good. Stay right there.”

Ricky glanced over at a group of children gathered near a tangerine tree. The children huddled around Thomas, hanging on the animated teen’s every word. John motioned for Ricky to join them, but Ricky pointed to the wire and shrugged.

“Thomas is probably telling the python story,” Ricky whispered to Patrick. “You should go listen.”

“I want to stay here,” his brother said.

“Why?”

“I’ve heard Thomas’s story a thousand times. Each time the

python gets bigger.” He pointed behind them. “This time it will be bigger than that tree.”

“It’s better than listening to the boring news,” Ricky mumbled. Patrick held a finger to his lips. “Shhh.”

With nothing else to distract him, Ricky listened to the voice scratching through the radio speakers. He was always amazed that the voice belonged to a man sitting in front of a microphone in the city four hundred kilometers away, a place he had never visited.

The National Resistance Army fought back against Acholi rebels today. President Museveni vowed to bring an end to such attacks and reestablish peace in northern Uganda.

“Why is the government attacking the Acholi?” he whispered to Patrick.

Patrick shushed him again.

“But we’re Acholi,” Ricky pressed.

The rebels, part of the Lord’s Resistance Army, retreated deep into the forests, but their leader, Joseph Kony, promised swift retribution for the attack and threatened severe consequences for any group providing support to the military, threats he carried out in nearby villages, where the rebels looted homes and attacked resisting civilians with guns and machetes. The LRA slaughtered dozens of villagers in the attack, and left hundreds homeless when they set fire to their huts.

“Are we at war with the government?” Ricky asked.

“No,” Patrick whispered.

“But we’re Acholi.”

“Shhh.”

After several more stories about Ugandan politics and the war, the newscaster bid his Luo-speaking Acholi audience from northern Uganda good night and the station began the news segment for its Lugbara-speaking audience in the West Nile districts. The second Father turned off the radio, Ricky dropped the wire and grabbed Patrick’s arm. “Come on.”

Patrick pulled his arm away and sat down. “Go ahead. I want to stay and listen to the elders’ conversation about the war.”

“Why?”

“Because if we are to become men someday, we need to know what’s happening in our world.”

Ricky glanced at the adults and remaining children gathered around the wango. They owned no weapons, only tools for farming and spears for fishing and hunting. They were peaceful people who worked together and supported one another.

“War is not our world,” he said. Turning away from his brother, he headed over to listen to the end of Thomas’s story.

“You’ll have to grow up someday,” Patrick called after him.

“Yes,” Ricky yelled back. “But not today.”

After the last embers of the fire had dimmed, Ricky and Patrick followed the family back to the compound and retired to their small hut. As Ricky drifted off to sleep, he thought of the

fun he and Patrick had planned for the following day, when their school break officially began. He dreamed of picking berries and nuts with their sisters, hunting in the bush with the men of the village, swimming in the river with Thomas, and playing cobo lawala with their friends. He smiled, imagining himself throwing his spear through the center of the wooden lawala hoop as Patrick tossed it high into the air.

But as the night deepened, the elders' whispers of war burrowed into his dreams. A wild beast with long, sharp claws, dripping with darkness, stalked his family. The monster's eyes burned blood red as it slithered around the village, setting fire to the huts before turning its evil gaze on Ricky. Ricky woke with a start, his face and body slick with sweat.

"Patrick," he whispered.

His brother did not answer.

"Patrick?" he whispered more loudly, nudging his brother.

"What?" Patrick said with a groan.

"Never mind," Ricky said after a moment. But by then, his brother had already fallen back asleep.

SAMUEL

The big man glanced from Samuel's face to the constant twitching of the boy's right index finger, as if he were gathering evidence. The gunshot wound, the scars, every flinch and tremble wove into a thick rope of guilt, tightening around Samuel's neck.

Samuel stilled his twitching finger and focused his attention on the field. The children had finished their game and were lining up for the next match. The captains pointed to players, separating former teammates in the selection process.

Same game.

Same field.

Same players.

As Samuel watched the boys take their new positions, fear led his thoughts back to the soldier waiting to take him from the compound. He had faced too many former rebels on the battlefield to believe the soldier meant to take him back to his village. The military would arm him, just as the rebels had, and he would be positioned once again on the front line.

Same players.

Same field.

Same game.

Different team.

He did not trust the words of the soldier or the man sent to interrogate him. The man could bury him in accusations, but Samuel would not speak. He'd witnessed the consequences of giving voice to one's crimes. He wouldn't make the same mistake.

From the corner of his eye, he studied the man, searching for any sign of danger: the clenching of his jaw, a shift of his weight on the chair, the tightening of muscles along his forearms, a taut stretch of his fingers before they coiled into fists. But the man's round face showed no sign of anger or impatience. His hands, clasped loosely before him, showed no hint of restrained anticipation. Samuel had faced the lash of accusations before, and the man did not hold himself like a man in judgment. He held himself like a man in prayer.

The tremble in Samuel's finger took hold of his entire hand. The harder he fought to control it, the more pronounced it became. He had seen men raise their faces to the heavens before. God saw into the hearts of all and whispered his judgments in the minds of praying men, commanding that they carry out his will. God did not forgive or show mercy.

Nor did his servants.

Samuel concentrated on the field of elephant grass beyond the razor-wire fence. He poured every thought into picturing himself racing through the field of tall blades. Farther and farther from this place. He'd run until he reached the safety of the bush, where the darkness would devour him and no man would find him.

RICKY

Reports of LRA attacks in northern Uganda monopolized the news reports and fireside conversations in Ricky's village for over a year, but as they faded from shocking events to common occurrences, Joseph Kony and the red-eyed beasts of Ricky's nightmares abandoned his thoughts. Occasionally they returned to gnaw at his stomach during quiet moments at school or as he drifted off to sleep, but as Ricky neared his fifteenth birthday, he quickly dismissed them as childish fears. That all changed one sunny January afternoon.

After an exhausting morning spent preparing the fields for planting, Ricky relaxed in the shade of a young mango tree with his father and brother. Patrick laughed at Ricky's failed attempt to reach the high notes as he sang along to his favorite Lingala song playing on the family radio. The music pulled Ricky up from where he lay, and he danced over to where Patrick worked on a dismantled clock.

"Careful," Patrick said, shielding the small wire coils and

screws. “I promised Okot I’d fix this for Paul before he returns from university.”

“When will he be home?” Ricky asked as he sat back against the tree. “He promised before he left he’d take me hunting during break.”

Father had plucked a mango from a low-hanging branch and was slicing the fruit with a small knife he kept in his pocket. “Okot said his son will be home on Monday. He told me Paul is doing well in his first year.”

“That’s not surprising,” Patrick said, tightening a tiny screw in the back of the clock. “He had a good teacher.”

Father handed them each a large slice of mango. “I cannot take credit for the hard work Paul put into his education.”

Mango juice spilled over Ricky’s lips and dripped down his chin, quenching the thirst of hours of working in the field. “Okot said his son wouldn’t have an education if it wasn’t for you, Baba.”

“I simply made sure it was available to him. The rest was up to Paul.”

Ricky and Patrick smiled at each other, both well aware of the long hours their father had spent with Paul at the wangoo convincing him of the importance of working hard at school, but neither was willing to contradict their father’s humble opinion of the influential role he played in the lives and futures of many Acholi children.

As a favorite Afrigo Band song flowed from the radio, Ricky laced his fingers behind his head and closed his eyes. “What do you think Paul will—”

A loud crack cut off his words.

Father held up his hand and, turning off the radio, stared beyond the trees lining their property. Ricky searched for thunderclouds, but found only crisp blue skies stretching far above the horizon. After several seconds of silence, another sharp noise tore through the air. The boys flinched, and Father stood.

“Get up,” he said.

They scrambled to their feet.

“What was that?” Ricky asked.

Several more cracks and a deep boom shook the ground. Mama hurried out from the girls’ hut, where she and her daughters were preparing dinner.

“It’s coming from Lira Palwo,” Patrick said, pointing in the direction of the marketplace two kilometers away, where people from the surrounding villages gathered to trade crops and goods.

Ricky sucked in a sharp breath as another series of rapid cracks echoed over the trees. Lira Palwo was only a forty-minute walk from their home, if he took his time. “Are those gunshots?” he asked, but before Father could answer, another loud explosion rocked the ground.

Ricky’s sisters drew closer to Mama, who wrapped her arms protectively around them.

“What’s happening, Michael?” she asked.

Father picked up the radio. “I don’t know.”

“Could it be the National Resistance Army?” she asked. “They promised to drive the LRA from Uganda. Perhaps the fighting has pushed east from Gulu.”

“Perhaps.” Father’s jaw muscles strained beneath his skin as he stared off in the direction of the market. As the gunfire and explosions increased in frequency, several neighbors, including Thomas, Andrew, and John, joined Ricky’s family in front of their home, the closest homestead in the village to the main road. News from the market would reach them first.

“Lapwony,” Andrew asked, “is the fighting moving closer?”

“I don’t think so,” Father answered, “but it’s getting more intense and seems to be centered at the market.”

“It’s market day,” Mama said. “There will be many people there.”

Thomas spoke up, his eyes bright with excitement. “I’ll go see what’s happening, Lapwony.”

“No, Thomas,” Father said. “It’s not safe.”

“I can hide in the bush,” Thomas said. “They’ll never see me.”

“I think we should all wait here . . . together.”

“But, Lapwony,” Thomas protested.

Father put a hand on Thomas’s shoulder and looked at Ricky and Patrick. “We’ll learn soon enough what’s happening.”

Before they could argue further, he walked over to speak with the other adults.

Thomas nudged Patrick. “Talk to your father.”

Patrick shook his head. “You heard what he said. No one is to go to the market until we know what’s happening.”

“I’m not saying we go to the market,” Thomas said. “I’m saying we go near it.”

“I agree with Lapwony,” John said. “We should stay here.”

Thomas let his head fall back in exasperation. “Nothing exciting ever happens here. Aren’t any of you curious to know what’s going on?” He looked at Andrew. “Well, aren’t you?”

Andrew shrugged. “Yes, but I’m not disobeying Lapwony.”
“Neither am I,” said John.

Thomas turned his attention to Ricky. “What about you? Don’t you want to see what’s happening at the market?”

The fear that had crackled across Ricky’s skin at the first gunshot had faded as it became clear the fighting was not moving toward the village. In its wake, curiosity prickled and scratched at Ricky’s thoughts. “A little,” he admitted. “But I agree it’s too dangerous to go anywhere near the market until we know what’s going on there.”

John nodded at Ricky’s sensibility.

“How are we supposed to know what’s happening there if we don’t go see?” Thomas asked.

Ricky glanced at his brother. “Maybe we could wait by the road. In case anyone from the market passes.”

Patrick stared off in the direction of the market, his brow furrowed in thought. “We’ll go only as far as the road,” he said, “and only if Father gives us permission.”

A broad smile stretched across Thomas’s face as he slapped Ricky on the back.

“If he says no,” Patrick added, “no more plans or questions. We wait here with the others.”

“Of course,” Thomas said, pushing him toward his parents. Patrick shoved his friend’s hands away and stood outside the

circle of adults. "Father?" he asked. "I was wondering . . ." He hesitated when Father turned to him. With a quick glance back at Ricky and his friends, he cleared his throat. "We were wondering if we could wait by the road in case anyone from the market passes."

Father shook his head. "We're safer here."

"But, Lapwony," Andrew said, "we'll be safe by the road, and you'll be able to keep an eye on us easily from here."

"We'll come back at the first sign of trouble," Ricky added.

Father glanced at Mama, who nodded. "You are to stay right by the road where we can see you at all times."

"And if you see anyone who looks dangerous," Mama added, "you come home right away."

"We will," Ricky and Patrick said as Thomas and Andrew raced down the path leading to the main road.

John lingered behind near the adults, so Ricky grabbed his arm. "Come on! Before we miss everything."

"Patrick, watch after your brother," Mama called after them.

"I will," he said. "I promise."

For the next hour, the five friends sat beside the road listening to sporadic gunfire and watching plumes of smoke rise above the trees to the east. Staring down the dirt road, they speculated about what might be taking place at the market and who might be involved.

Thomas kept them entertained with tales of how he would fight off any invaders with only his hunting spear and cunning.

Andrew countered each boast with a joke about Thomas's spear-throwing ability, which led to several wrestling matches on the side of the road. During their fourth tussle, the crunch of gravel drew the boys' attention.

"Look!" Ricky said, pointing to a man on a bike approaching from the west. "Someone's coming."

The boys watched as the man slowly pedaled toward them.

"Should we go home?" Ricky asked Patrick.

"It's only one man," Thomas said, releasing Andrew from a headlock, "and he's not coming from the market."

"Looks like he's headed there, though," John said. "He's probably from one of the other villages."

Andrew dusted off his shirt and shorts. "I bet he's going to the market to investigate."

"I've never seen him before," John said. "Do you think he's a government soldier?"

"Of course he is," Thomas said. "Look at him."

The thin man's shaved head revealed the shadow of a receding hairline. A short-sleeved moss-green shirt clung to his body, and the cuffs of his matching pants puckered along the rim of a pair of leather military boots that sagged like the hide of an old elephant, creased and dull with age.

"He has a gun," Patrick whispered as the man drew closer.

A chill quivered through Ricky at the sight of a thick black strap cutting diagonally across the man's chest. A rifle pressed down the length of his spine, with the curved magazine of the weapon jutting out from the side of his hunched back.

John shifted next to him. "I think we should go back and tell our parents."

"Tell them what?" Thomas asked. "We don't know anything. Let's see what he says."

"He might have news about the market," Andrew said. "Right, Patrick?"

Ricky's brother continued to study the stranger. "We'll see what he wants," he said. "If he seems dangerous, we'll run home."

"Look how slow he's moving," Andrew added. "We could easily outrun him."

Dust kicked up in a thick fog around the bike's tires as the man braked before the boys. "Young children," he said, smiling down at them, "what are you doing here?"

"Waiting for news." Patrick answered without hesitation, but Ricky heard the forced confidence in the way his brother dropped his voice, trying to sound older.

He glanced back to the homestead. His parents were still huddled together with the other adults, talking. They hadn't noticed the appearance of the stranger.

The man readjusted the strap of his weapon, but remained on his bike. "News of what?" he asked.

"Of the fighting," Thomas said. "We heard guns and a few explosions."

The man glanced toward the market and then back at the boys. "You heard gunfire and explosions and you ran toward the fighting, not away?"

The boys looked down, each waiting for one of the others to

answer. Ricky pulled at a tuft of grass, ripping it up from the roots. He was certain the soldier would lecture them about being so foolish as to put themselves in danger's way, but instead he nodded. "You, young children, are very brave."

The compliment lured the boys' eyes back to the man's face.

Thomas puffed out his chest. "We wanted to get closer to see what was happening, but our parents wouldn't let us."

The man looked toward the homestead, where Ricky's family and neighbors were gathered, and his smile broadened. "That is good."

Instinct gnawed at Ricky's stomach and whispered warnings in his mind. Images from faded nightmares sharpened into focus, and his muscles tensed, preparing to flee, but Ricky remained still, scolding himself for childish fears.

This was no monster standing before him. No beast with deadly claws dripping with death or blood-red eyes burning with evil.

He was just a man.

A smiling man on a bicycle.

The man remained with the boys for several minutes, asking questions and complimenting them on their bravery.

Thomas was eager to answer all the questions. "I could go with you to the market," he offered.

"No," the man said. "I think your parents are right; it's best you wait here."

Ricky glanced back at his hut. The adults were now watching the interaction between the stranger and the boys. Mama waved for him to come home.

Ricky nudged Patrick to tell him, but then a second man stepped from the tall grass onto the road.

Unlike the clean military uniform and shaved head of the man on the bike, this man wore torn, faded pants and nothing else. Dark stains streaked the worn green material that clung to his legs, and sore-covered skin thinly veiled the sinewy muscles and protruding ribs of his chest. A rifle, identical to the one carried by the smiling man, rested at an angle on his back, and the broad, curved blade of a panga hung from his waist.

“They attacked before me,” he growled between clenched teeth. His sunken, predatory eyes looked everywhere and nowhere. The whites of them, a cloudy pus yellow, made him look more reptile than human.

Ricky thought of the python in the river; how it flailed and coiled around Thomas’s spear, searching for prey to strike. He also remembered Patrick’s voice behind him on the riverbank that day.

“Don’t move, Ricky.”

“It was mine,” the wild man yelled as he paced before the man on the bike.

Gnarled dreadlocks swayed below his bare shoulders with each angry step. His dark skin, slick with perspiration, glistened in the sun, and his chest heaved with labored breaths. He stopped pacing and glared in the direction of the market, where thick plumes of black smoke billowed above the trees.

As the wild man turned to face the man on the bike, Ricky looked back to his parents. The adults and children had scattered with the wild man’s screams. Some had grabbed their

children and run for the village. Others ran for the bush. Only Ricky's parents and sisters remained.

Father motioned for Mama to take the girls and run, but she shook her head and gestured again for Ricky to come home. Ricky turned to whisper to Patrick when the wild man screamed again.

"That was my market!"

Ricky sat still, afraid to breathe. He glanced up at the man on the bike. The smiling man adjusted the strap on his shoulder again, but did not reach for his weapon, even when the wild man charged him.

"How many have I killed today?" the wild man demanded.

The smiling man shrugged. "Eleven, maybe twelve."

John gasped, and Thomas moved closer to his brother.

"That's all!" the wild man screamed, his hands trembling at his sides. "They took my market."

"Do we know who it was?" the man on the bike asked.

The wild man kicked at the ground. "Another LRA brigade."

Cold terror washed through Ricky, numbing his senses. The wild man's voice grew dull and distant as he continued to rant about the raid on the market. Paralyzed, Ricky stared at the men. They did not belong to the Ugandan military and they weren't here to help. They belonged to the Lord's Resistance Army. They were the rebels led by Joseph Kony that the radio announcer spoke of every night by the village fire.

The wild man gripped the hilt of his machete. "I will not leave here with nothing!"