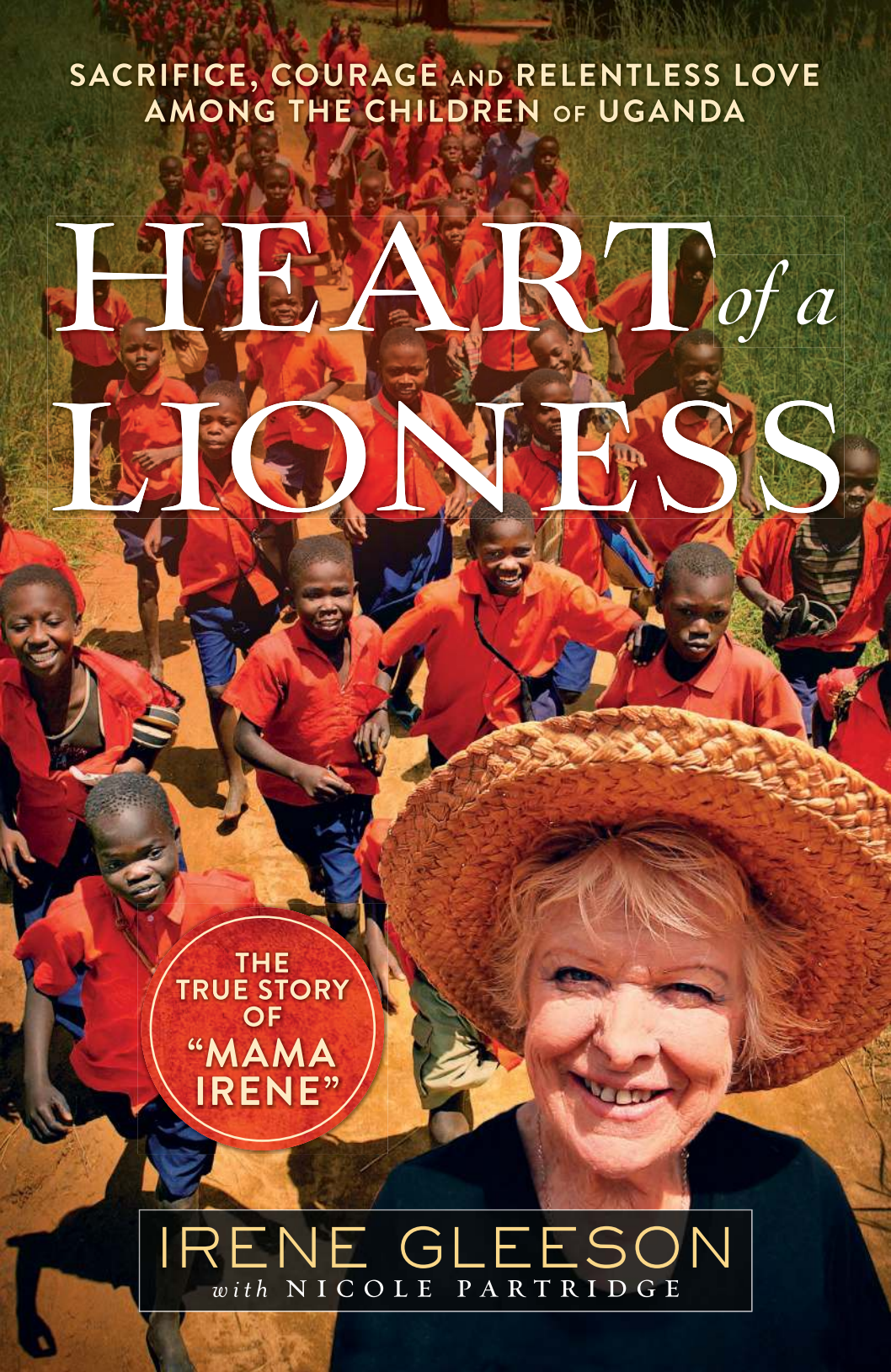
SACRIFICE, COURAGE AND RELENTLESS LOVE AMONG THE CHILDREN OF UGANDA

HEART *of a* LIONESS



THE TRUE STORY OF "MAMA IRENE"

IRENE GLEESON
with NICOLE PARTRIDGE

HEART *of a* LIONESS

SACRIFICE, COURAGE AND RELENTLESS LOVE
AMONG THE CHILDREN OF UGANDA

IRENE GLEESON
with NICOLE PARTRIDGE

Authentic

1

AMBUSHED

KITGUM, UGANDA, NOVEMBER 1992

IT WAS 2 A.M. and I was having trouble sleeping. I turned restlessly in my bed and thought about my new home near Kitgum Town, in the dusty north of Uganda. It seemed thousands of years as well as thousands of kilometres from my former beachside home in Sydney, Australia.

I reached for the iridescent shell next to my bed, and held it close to my ear. As the shell breathed out the sea's song, I imagined the surges of the waves lulling me to sleep.

THUMP! Something hit the side of the caravan with a loud thud.

I sat up, startled, then rose quickly and peered through the window only to see a man ducking out of sight.

Opening the small metal door, I stepped down onto the dirt.

"What do you want?"

A man, ugly as a gargoyle, his face distorted with rage, was crouching at my feet. He sprang up, shoved a rifle barrel in my face and sneered.

Four other men closed in, waving AK-47s and sticks. One pointed a bayonet at my ribs.

I yelled out.

My husband, Jeff, appeared behind me muttering, "What's going on here?" He shone his torch in their faces.

A stocky man swung a cane stick against Jeff's head. His ear began to drip blood. Panic welled up in my throat as I watched blood trickle down onto Jeff's pyjamas.

Tonight we die, I thought. *Hmm, short career as missionaries. Okay, get ready. We're coming to see You, Jesus. I wonder if I'll feel the bayonet*.

I stood there with my eyes closed.

Ker-shunk. Ker-shunk. Bullets were dropped into a gun chamber.

"Dear Jesus," I said out loud, "Yours is the next face I will see."

I could hear Jeff praying loudly behind me.

Time stood still.

I opened my eyes. The men were prancing around me, wild-eyed, barking at each other, "Shut them up. Stop their mouths." They paced backwards and forwards.

Facing their macabre ballet, I screamed out repeatedly, "The blood of Jesus . . . the blood of Jesus."

The five armed thugs were in total confusion. One ran at me with a threatening expression and then scampered away like a frightened animal. Another watched him, puzzled, and then lunged at me menacingly. He too reeled backwards.

I pounded on my annex table to my war cry: "Jesus Christ . . . Jesus Christ." My throat grew hoarse, but I dared not stop.

It seemed as though there was an invisible shield of bullet-proof glass between us.

Our fear turned into anger at the men's intimidation. "In Jesus' name, go!" we commanded, pointing to the bush.

Without a word, each of the men dropped their weapons. As quickly as they came, they disappeared into the black night.

Standing out in the dark, still dressed in our pyjamas, Jeff and I danced and sang victory songs. We raised our hands to heaven and declared the miracle-working power of God over the forces of evil.

The next morning, shy villagers crept into our compound.

"Why didn't you come to help us?" I challenged them.

"We thought you were having a prayer meeting!" they responded, with smiles on their faces, wondering about the power of this God who had been introduced to their dusty African village.

The following day, still badly shaken from the attack, we were visited by a security official.

"You are a security risk living in that caravan in the bush without any guard," the thickset army officer explained. "You are inviting robbery . . . You see that army barracks?" he said, pointing to a nearby hill. We could distinguish some small grass huts. "One thousand men who have been retrenched will be processed there on their way back to their villages. Many have suffered and we can't be responsible for their actions once they leave the army."

Undeterred by this news, God gave us a plan of attack.

"We're not going to sit here, quivering in fear. Let's go to the camp and show them the healing power of God's Holy Spirit," I declared.

Like David, we ran towards Goliath.

On a sweltering Saturday afternoon, Jeff and I loaded up our car with a generator, a TV screen, video player and the evangelistic movie *The Jesus Film*, and drove ten kilometres (approximately six miles) to Pajimo army barracks. With permission, we set up our equipment under a grove of mango trees.

Soon, a crowd of about 500 soldiers and village families gathered. They sat in the dirt in rapt attention as the life of Jesus unfolded on the screen. At the end of the movie, at least a hundred rugged khaki-clad soldiers knelt before us, weeping, and asked for the healing touch of Jesus.

A few weeks later, we drove to the army barracks to baptise them. Eighty soldiers and wives were gathered on the edge of a dam. It looked like a scene from the Bible with long-garbed church officials grumbling on the hillside. After sharing the benefits of water baptism, we carefully descended the slippery mud path to stand in the middle of the cloudy, weed-filled waters. I could feel huge African snails or eels nibbling at my toes. Nevertheless, we continued. A corporal called Darius helped each person kneel in the water. As they bowed under, we proclaimed them no longer slaves to sin (see Rom. 6:6). Rising in a shower of sparkling drops, surely Jesus now lived within them, giving them courage to withstand their clan's criticism.

The response was exhilarating, and in that moment I knew this was my mission. But it had been quite a journey getting to this point.