

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Southern Sudan, 2009



For three days, the air around Nya's home was filled with the sound of the drill. On the third afternoon, Nya joined the other children gathered around the drill site. The grownups rose from their work pounding rocks and drifted over, too.

The workers seemed excited. They were moving quickly as their leader called out orders. Then—

WHOOOSH!

A spray of water shot high into the air!

This wasn't the water that the workers had been piping into the borehole. This was *new* water—water that was coming out of the hole!

Everyone cheered at the sight of the water. They all laughed at the sight of the two workers who had been operating the drill. They were drenched, their clothes completely soaked through.

A woman in the crowd began singing a song of celebration. Nya clapped her hands along with all the other children. But as Nya watched the water spraying out of the borehole, she frowned.

The water wasn't clear. It was brown and heavy-looking.
It was full of mud.

Ifo refugee camp, Kenya, 1992-96



Salva was now twenty-two years old. For the past five years he had been living in refugee camps in northern Kenya: first at the Kakuma camp, then at Ifo.

Kakuma had been a dreadful place, isolated in the middle of a dry, windy desert. Tall fences of barbed wire enclosed the camp; you weren't allowed to leave unless you were leaving for good. It felt almost like a prison.

Seventy thousand people lived at Kakuma. Some said it was more, eighty or ninety thousand. There were families who had managed to escape together, but again, as in Ethiopia, most of the refugees were orphaned boys and young men.

The local people who lived in the area did not like having the refugee camp nearby. They would often sneak in and steal from the refugees. Sometimes fights broke out, and people were hurt or killed.

After two years of misery at Kakuma, Salva decided to

leave the camp. He had heard of another refugee camp, far to the south and west, where he hoped things would be better.

Once again, Salva and a few other young men walked for months. But when they reached the camp at Ifo, they found that things were no different than at Kakuma. Everyone was always hungry, and there was never enough food. Many were sick or had gotten injured during their long, terrible journeys to reach the camp; the few medical volunteers could not care for everyone who needed help. Salva felt fortunate that at least he was in good health.

He wanted desperately to work—to make a little money that he could use to buy extra food. He even dreamed of saving some money so that one day he could leave the camp and continue his education somehow.

But there was no work. There was nothing to do but wait—wait for the next meal, for news of the world outside the camp. The days were long and empty. They stretched into weeks, then months, then years.

It was hard to keep hope alive when there was so little to feed it.

Michael was an aid worker from a country called Ireland. Salva had met a lot of aid workers. They came and went,

staying at the camp for several weeks or, at most, a few months. The aid workers came from many different countries, but they usually spoke English to each other. Few of the refugees spoke English, so communication with the aid workers was often difficult.

But after so many years in the camps, Salva could understand a little English. He even tried to speak it once in a while, and Michael almost always seemed to understand what Salva was trying to say.

One day after the morning meal, Michael spoke to Salva. "You seem interested in learning English," he said. "How'd you like to learn to read?"

The lessons began that very day. Michael wrote down three letters on a small scrap of paper.

"A, B, C," he said, handing the scrap to Salva.

"A, B, C," Salva repeated.

The whole rest of the day, Salva went around saying, "A, B, C," mostly to himself but sometimes aloud, in a quiet voice. He looked at the paper a hundred times and practiced drawing the letters in the dirt with a stick, over and over again.

Salva remembered learning to read Arabic when he was young. The Arabic alphabet had twenty-eight letters; the English, only twenty-six. In English, the letters stayed

separate from each other, so it was easy to tell them apart. In Arabic words, the letters were always joined, and a letter might look different depending on what came before or after it.

"Sure, you're doing lovely," Michael said the day Salva learned to write his own name. "You learn fast, because you work so hard."

Salva did not say what he was thinking: that he was working hard because he wanted to learn to read English before Michael left the camp. Salva did not know if any of the other aid workers would take the time to teach him.

"But once in a while it's good to take a break from work. Let's do something a wee bit different for a change. I'm thinking you'll be good at this—you're a tall lad."

So Salva learned two things from Michael: how to read and how to play volleyball.

A rumor was spreading through the camp. It began as a whisper, but soon Salva felt as if it were a roar in his ears. He could think of nothing else.

America.

The United States.

The rumor was that about three thousand boys and

young men from the refugee camps would be chosen to go live in America!

Salva could not believe it. How could it be true? How would they get there? Where would they live? Surely it was impossible. . . .

But as the days went by, the aid workers confirmed the news.

It was all anyone could talk about.

"They only want healthy people. If you are sick, you won't be chosen."

"They won't take you if you have ever been a soldier with the rebels."

"Only orphans are being chosen. If you have any family left, you have to stay here."

Weeks passed, then months. One day a notice was posted at the camp's administration tent. It was a list of names. If your name was on the list, it meant that you had made it to the next step: the interview. After the interview, you might go to America.

Salva's name was not on the list.

Nor was it on the next list, or the one after that.

Many of the boys being chosen were younger than Salva. *Perhaps America doesn't want anyone too old*, he thought.

Each time a list was posted, Salva's heart would pound as he read the names. He tried not to lose hope. At the same time, he tried not to hope too much.

Sometimes he felt he was being torn in two by the hoping and the not hoping.

One windy afternoon, Michael rushed over to Salva's tent.

"Salva! Come quickly! Your name is on the list today!"

Salva leapt to his feet and was running even before his friend had finished speaking. When he drew near the administration tent, he slowed down and tried to catch his breath.

He might be wrong. It might be another person named Salva. I won't look too soon. . . . From far away I might see a name that looks like mine, and I need to be sure.

Salva shouldered his way through the crowd until he was standing in front of the list. He raised his head slowly and began reading through the names.

There it was.

Salva Dut—Rochester, New York.

Salva was going to New York.

He was going to America!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Southern Sudan, 2009



Even though the water spraying out of the borehole was brown and muddy, some of the little boys wanted a drink right away. But their mothers held them back. The men kept on working with the drill. Their leader talked to Nya's uncle and father and some of the other village men.

Later, Dep explained things to her. "Don't worry!" he said. "The water is muddy because it is still mixed with the old water that they were using from the pond. They have to drill farther down, to make sure of getting deep enough into the good clean water underground. And then they have to put in the pipes, and make a foundation with the gravel, and then install the pump and pour cement around it. And the cement has to dry."

It would be several more days before they could drink the water, Dep said.

Nya sighed and picked up the big plastic can. Yet another walk to the pond.

Nairobi, Kenya—Rochester, New York, 1996



The Lost Boys.

That was what they were being called in America—the boys who had lost their homes and families because of the war and had wandered, lost, for weeks or months at a time before reaching the refugee camps.

The aid worker explained this to Salva and the eight other boys he would be traveling with. The woman spoke mostly English. Sometimes she said a word or two in Arabic, but she did not speak that language well. She tried her best to speak slowly, but she had many things to tell them, and Salva worried that he might misunderstand something important.

They rode in a truck from the Ifo refugee camp to a processing center in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. Endless forms had to be filled out. Their photos were taken. There was a medical examination. It was all a blur to Salva, for he was too excited to sleep, which made him too tired to grasp everything that was happening.

But there was one clear moment: when he was given new clothes. In the camp, he had worn an old pair of shorts and an even older T-shirt. He had taken as good care of

them as he could, but there were holes in the shirt, and the waistband of the shorts was stretched out and threadbare. The camp workers handed out clothing whenever donations came in, but there were never enough clothes for those who needed them.

Now Salva's arms were piled high with new clothes. Underwear, socks, sneakers. A pair of long pants. A T-shirt and a long-sleeved shirt to wear on top of it. And he was to wear *all* these clothes at the same time!

"It's winter in America," the aid worker said.

"Winter?" Salva repeated.

"Yes. Very cold. You will be given more clothes in New York."

More clothes? Salva shook his head. *How can I possibly wear any more clothes?*

Salva could hardly believe his eyes when he boarded the plane in Nairobi. Every person had a seat, and they all had luggage, too. With all those people, hundreds of heavy padded chairs, and all those bags, how would the plane ever get off the ground?

Somehow it did—not like a bird lifting off lightly with a quick flapping of wings, but with shrieks and roars from the engines as the plane lumbered down the long

runway, as if it had to try as hard as it could to get into the air.

Once the plane was safely aloft, Salva stared at the scene outside the small window. The world was so big, yet everything in it was so small! Huge forests and deserts became mere patches of green and brown. Cars crawled along the roads like ants in a line. And there were people down there, thousands of them, but he could not see a single one.

"Would you like a drink?"

Salva looked up at the woman in her neat uniform and shook his head to show that he did not understand. She smiled. "Coca-Cola? Orange juice?"

Coca-Cola! Long ago, Salva's father had once brought a few bottles of Coca-Cola back from his trip to the market. Salva's first taste had been startling—all those bubbles jumping around in his mouth! What a rare treat it had been.

"Coca-Cola, thank you," Salva said. And with each sip, he remembered his family passing the bottles from hand to hand, laughing at the tickly bubbles, sharing and laughing together. . . .

The journey to Salva's new home required not one, not two, but *three* planes. The first plane flew from Nairobi to Frankfurt, in a country called Germany. It landed with an

alarming thump, then braked so hard that Salva was thrown forward in his seat; the strap across his stomach caught him hard. He took a second plane from Frankfurt to New York City. It, too, landed abruptly, but this time Salva was ready, and he held tightly to the armrests.

In New York City, the aid worker led the boys to different gates. Some would be making the final leg of their trip alone, while others were in groups of two or three. Salva was the only one going to Rochester. The aid worker said that his new family would be waiting for him there.

On the plane to Rochester, most of the passengers were men traveling on their own. But there were some women, too, and a few families—mothers and fathers and children. Most of the people were white; beginning at the airport in Frankfurt, Salva had seen more white people in the last few hours than he had seen before in his whole lifetime.

He tried not to stare, but he couldn't help studying the families closely. Thoughts kept looping through his mind.

What if my new family isn't there? What if they have changed their minds? What if they meet me and don't like me?

Salva took a deep breath. *A step at a time*, he reminded himself. *Just this flight to get through, for now. . . .*

The plane landed at last, its wheels screeching, while Salva gripped the armrests and braced himself for what was to come.

There they were, smiling and waving in the airport lobby—his new family! Chris, the father; Louise, the mother; and four children. Salva would have siblings, just as he had before. He felt his shoulders relax a little on seeing their eager smiles.

Salva said "Hello" and "Thank you" many times, for in his fatigue and confusion, these were the only words he felt sure about. He could not understand what anyone was saying, especially Louise, who spoke so quickly that at first he was not sure she was even speaking English.

And yes, they *did* have more clothes for him!—a big puffy jacket, a hat, a scarf, gloves. He put on the jacket and zipped it up. The sleeves were so bulky that he felt as if he couldn't move his arms properly. He wondered if he looked very foolish now, with his body and arms so fat and his legs so thin. But none of the family laughed at him, and he soon noticed that they were all wearing the same kind of jacket.

The glass doors of the airport terminal slid open. The frigid air hit Salva's face like a slap. Never had he felt

such cold before! In the part of Africa where he had lived all his life, the temperature rarely dropped below seventy degrees.

When he inhaled, he thought his lungs would surely freeze solid and stop working. But all around him, people were still walking and talking and moving about. Apparently, it was possible to survive in such cold temperatures, and he now understood the need for the awkward padded jacket.

Salva stood still inside the terminal doors for a few moments. Leaving the airport felt like leaving his old life forever—Sudan, his village, his family. . . .

Tears came to his eyes, perhaps from the cold air blowing in through the open doors. His new family was already outside; they turned and looked back at him.

Salva blinked away the tears and took his first step into a new life in America.