

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—

WHOOSH!

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!