

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Southern Sudan, 2009



After the excitement of seeing that first spray of water, the villagers went back to work. Several men gathered in front of Nya's house. They had tools with them, hoes and spades and scythes.

Her father went out to meet them. The men walked together to a spot beyond the second big tree and began clearing the land.

Nya watched them for a few moments. Her father saw her and waved. She put the plastic can down and ran over to him.

"Papa, what are you doing?"

"Clearing the land here. Getting ready to build."

"To build what?"

Nya's father smiled. "Can't you guess?"

Rochester, New York, 1996-2003



Salva had been in Rochester for nearly a month and still had not seen a single dirt road. Unlike southern Sudan, it

seemed that here in America every road was paved. At times, the cars whizzed by so fast, he was amazed that anyone on foot could cross safely. His new father, Chris, told him that dirt roads did exist out in the countryside, but there were none in Salva's new neighborhood.

All the buildings had electricity. There were white people everywhere. Snow fell from the sky for hours at a time and then stayed on the ground for days. Sometimes it would start to melt during the day, but before it all disappeared, more snow would fall. Salva's new mother, Louise, told him it would probably be April—three more months—before the snow went away completely.

The first several weeks of Salva's new life were so bewildering that he was grateful for his studies. His lessons, especially English, gave him something to concentrate on, a way to block out the confusion for an hour or two at a time.

His new family helped, too. All of them were kind to him, patiently explaining the millions of things he had to learn.

It had taken four days for Salva to travel from the Ifo refugee camp to his new home in New York. There were times when he could hardly believe he was still on the same planet.

Now that Salva was learning more than a few simple words, he found the English language quite confusing. Like the letters "o-u-g-h." Rough . . . though . . . fought . . . through . . . bough—the same letters were pronounced so many different ways! Or how a word had to be changed depending on the sentence. You said "chickens" when you meant the living birds that walked and squawked and laid eggs, but it was "chicken"—with no "s"—when it was on your plate ready to be eaten: "We're having chicken for dinner." That was correct, even if you had cooked a hundred chickens.

Sometimes he wondered if he would ever be able to speak and read English well. But slowly, with hours of hard work over the months and years, his English improved. Remembering Michael, Salva also joined a volleyball team. It was fun playing volleyball, just as it had been at the camp. Setting and spiking the ball were the same in any language.

Salva had been in Rochester for more than six years now. He was going to college and had decided to study business. He had a vague idea that he would like to return to Sudan someday, to help the people who lived there.

Sometimes that seemed like an impossible notion. In his homeland there was so much war and destruction, poverty, disease, and starvation—so many problems that had not been solved by governments, or rich people, or big aid organizations. What could he possibly do to help? Salva thought about this question a lot, but no answer came to him.

One evening at the end of a long day of study, Salva sat down at the family computer and opened his e-mail. He was surprised to see a message from a cousin of his—someone he barely knew. The cousin was working for a relief agency in Zimbabwe.

Salva clicked open the message. His eyes read the words, but at first his brain could not comprehend them.

"... United Nations clinic . . . your father . . . stomach surgery . . ."

Salva read the words again and again. Then he jumped to his feet and ran through the house to find Chris and Louise.

"My father!" he shouted. "They have found my father!"

After several exchanges of e-mails, Salva learned that the cousin had not actually seen or spoken to his father. The clinic where his father was recovering was in a remote

part of southern Sudan. There was no telephone or mail service—no way of communicating with the clinic staff. The staff kept lists of all the patients they treated. These lists were submitted to the United Nations' aid agencies. Salva's cousin worked for one of the agencies, and he had seen the name of Salva's father on a list.

Salva immediately began planning to travel to Sudan. But with the war still raging, it was very difficult to make the arrangements. He had to get permits, fill out dozens of forms, and organize plane flights and car transport in a region where there were no airports or roads.

Salva, and Chris and Louise as well, spent hours on the phone to various agencies and offices. It took not days or weeks but *months* before all the plans were in place. And there was no way to get a message to the hospital. At times, Salva felt almost frantic at the delays and frustrations. *What if my father leaves the hospital without telling anyone where he is going? What if I get there too late? I will never be able to find him again. . . .*

At last, all the forms were filled out, and all the paperwork was in order. Salva flew in a jet to New York City, another one to Amsterdam, and a third to Kampala in Uganda. In Kampala, it took him two days to get through

customs and immigration before he could board a smaller plane to go to Juba, in southern Sudan. Then he rode in a jeep on dusty dirt roads into the bush.

How familiar everything was and yet how different! The unpaved roads, the scrubby bushes and trees, the huts roofed with sticks bound together—everything was just as Salva remembered it, as if he had left only yesterday. At the same time, the memories of his life in Sudan were very distant. How could memories feel so close and so far away at the same time?

After many hours of jolting and bumping along the roads in the jeep—after nearly a week of exhausting travel—Salva entered the shanty that served as a recovery room at the makeshift hospital. A white woman stood to greet him.

"Hello," he said. "I am looking for a patient named Mawien Dut Ariik."