

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*Southern Sudan, 2009*



"What do you think we are building here?" Nya's father asked, smiling.

"A house?" Nya guessed. "Or a barn?"

Her father shook his head. "Something better," he said. "A school."

Nya's eyes widened. The nearest school was half a day's walk from their home. Nya knew this because Dep had wanted to go there. But it was too far.

"A school?" she echoed.

"Yes," he replied. "With the well here, no one will have to go to the pond anymore. So all the children will be able to go to school."

Nya stared at her father. Her mouth opened, but no words came out. When at last she was able to speak, it was only in a whisper. "All the children, Papa? The girls, too?"

Her father's smile grew broader. "Yes, Nya. Girls, too," he said. "Now, go and fetch water for us." And he returned to his work scything the long grass.

Nya went back and picked up the plastic can. She felt as if she were flying.

School! She would learn to read and write!

*Sudan and Rochester, New York, 2003–2007*



Salva stood at the foot of one of the beds in the crowded clinic.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," the patient replied politely.

"I have come to visit you," Salva said.

"To visit me?" The man frowned. "But who are you?"

"You are Mawien Dut Ariik, aren't you?"

"Yes, that is my name."

Salva smiled, his insides trembling. Even though his father looked older now, Salva had recognized him right away. But it was as if his eyes needed help from his ears—he needed to hear his father's words to believe he was real.

"I am your son. I am Salva."

The man looked at Salva and shook his head. "No," he said. "It is not possible."

"Yes," Salva said. "It's me, Father." He moved to the side of the bed.

Mawien Dut reached out and touched the arm of this tall stranger beside him. "Salva?" he whispered. "Can it really be you?"

Salva waited. Mawien Dut stared for a long moment. Then he cried out, "Salva! My son, my son!"

His body shaking with sobs of joy, he reached up to hug Salva tightly.

It had been almost nineteen years since they had last seen each other.

Mawien Dut sprinkled water on his son's head, the Dinka way of blessing someone who was lost and is found again.

"Everyone was sure you were dead," Mawien Dut said. "The village wanted to kill a cow for you."

That was how Salva's people mourned the death of a loved one.

"I would not let them," his father said. "I never gave up hope that you were still alive somewhere."

"And . . . and my mother?" Salva asked, barely daring to hope.

His father smiled. "She is back in the village."

Salva wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. "I must see her!"

But his father shook his head. "There is still war near Loun-Ariik, my son. If you went there, both sides would try to force you to fight with them. You must not go."

There was so much more to talk about. His father told Salva that his sisters were with his mother. But of his three brothers, only Ring had survived the war. Ariik, the oldest, and Kuol, the youngest, were both dead.

Little Kuol . . . Salva closed his eyes for a few moments, trying to picture his brothers through a haze of time and grief.

He learned more about his father's illness. Years of drinking contaminated water had left Mawien Dut's entire digestive system riddled with guinea worms. Sick and weak, he had walked almost three hundred miles to come to this clinic, and was barely alive by the time he finally arrived.

Salva and his father had several days together. But all too soon, it was time for Salva to return to America. His father would be leaving the clinic shortly as well. The surgery he



had undergone had been successful, and he would soon be strong enough to make the long walk home.

"I will come to the village," Salva promised, "as soon as it is safe."

"We will be there waiting for you," his father promised in turn.

Salva pressed his face tightly to his father's as they hugged goodbye, their tears flowing and blending together.

On the plane back to the United States, Salva replayed in his mind every moment of his visit with his father. He felt again the coolness on his brow when his father had sprinkled the water blessing on him.

And an idea came to him—an idea of what he might be able to do to help the people of Sudan.

Could he do it? It would take so much work! Perhaps it would be too difficult. But how would he know unless he tried?

Back in Rochester, Salva began working on his idea. There were, it seemed, a million problems to be solved. He needed a lot of help. Chris and Louise gave him many suggestions. Scott, a friend of theirs, was an expert in setting

up projects like the one Salva had in mind. He and Salva worked together for hours and days . . . which grew into weeks and months.

Along the way, Salva met other people who wanted to help. He was grateful to all of them. But even with their help, it was much more work than he had imagined.

Salva had to raise money for the project. And there was only one way to do this: He would have to talk to people and ask them to give money.

The first time Salva spoke in front of an audience was in a school cafeteria. About a hundred people had come to hear him. There was a microphone at the front of the room. Salva's knees were shaking as he walked to the mike. He knew that his English was still not very good. What if he made mistakes in pronunciation? What if the audience couldn't understand him?

But he had to do it. If he didn't talk about the project, no one would learn about it. No one would donate money, and he would never be able to make it work.

Salva spoke into the microphone. "H-h-hello," he said.

At that moment, something went wrong with the sound system. The speakers behind him let out a dreadful screech. Salva jumped and almost dropped the mike.

His hands trembling, he looked out at the audience. People were smiling or chuckling; a few of the children were holding their ears. They all looked very friendly, and seeing the children made him remember: It was not the first time he had spoken in front of a large group of people.

Years before, when he was leading those boys on their walk from the Ethiopian refugee camp to the one in Kenya, he had called a meeting every morning and evening. The boys would line up facing him and he would talk to them about their plans.

All those eyes looking at him . . . but every face interested in what he had to say. It was the same here. The audience had come to the school cafeteria because they wanted to hear him. Thinking of that made him feel a little better, and he spoke into the mike again.

"Hello," he repeated, and this time only his own voice came from the speakers. He smiled in relief and went on. "I am here to talk to you about a project for southern Sudan."

A year passed, then two . . . then three. Salva spoke to hundreds of people—in churches, at civic organizations,

in schools. Would he ever be able to turn his idea into reality? Whenever he found himself losing hope, Salva would take a deep breath and think of his uncle's words.

*A step at a time.*

*One problem at a time—just figure out this one problem.*

Day by day, solving one problem at a time, Salva moved toward his goal.