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.

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?”


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 any-
one 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 disap-
peared, 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 be-
wilderating 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 hun-
dred 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 im-
proved. Remembering Michael, Salva also joined a volley-
ball 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 busi-
ness. 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—at 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 Atiik."

"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.