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.

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