

SAVING MIREMBA



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CHAPTER 1

A barrage of thunderous pant-hoots, shrieks, and barks filled the air, echoing from the trees in every direction. Grace stopped dead in her tracks, frozen despite the warm sun filtering through the lush canopy of the tropical rainforest. The dense bushes ahead began to shudder in a furious line moving toward her. Something was advancing, and quickly. Before she could jump out of the way, two large dark figures emerged from the deep green thicket of the forest floor and barreled past, close enough to brush her sleeve.

“Chimps!” she whispered, chills running down her spine. Her feet were rooted to the forest floor, and her breath came in little gasps as a combination of terror and amazement flowed through her. Many times she had heard their distant clatter from her home in the village at the edge of the forest, and she had devoured every book about apes the library had to offer. But for the first time in her life, she was close enough to see the coarse, patchy hair on their broad, fiercely powerful backs. She’d read about the chimpanzee’s explosive strength, but at this range it was palpable. Her heart fluttered as she watched in awe.

The two apes dashed wildly toward the most magnificent tree Grace had ever seen. Its ancient trunk with its buttress roots was as wide as her family's entire hut. It wore a coat of moist moss stretching from the earth to its far-reaching branches, which glowed in the slivers of sunlight peeking through the overhead leaves. Thick, tangled vines draped over the tree from high above as though hanging from the sun itself.

The smooth buttress roots were most peculiar. Unlike the roots of trees in the village, which stretched low across the red Ugandan soil, these roots began extending from the tree above Grace's head and swooped several meters out from the trunk, forming narrow wooden walls. Like a long-lost relic, this was the sort of tree that made time stand still in its presence. And it felt like time did stop, at least for a fleeting moment, until one of the unruly chimpanzees leaped onto a swooping root and pounded on it with its fist. *Boom, boom, bah, doom, boom!* The sound reverberated through the forest like a gigantic *ngoma* drum.

Grace's eyes grew as wide as the jackfruits on the tree that shaded her home as she recalled her mother's story about the drumming chimpanzees. Every night after sunset, her mother would sit beside Grace's sleeping mat made of papyrus reeds while her father, sitting on his stool, read scripture and then led a family prayer. After that, it was story time. Grace's mother called her stories "Tales of the Forest," and they always started the same way.

"In a wild and wondrous rainforest not so far away . . ." she'd begin.

Sometimes the stories were so outrageous, Grace wondered if

they were actually true or if her mother just enjoyed seeing her reaction. “Mama! Drumming chimpanzees?” Grace once spouted incredulously when she was no more than eight years old.

“Yes,” her mother had said with a gleam in her eye, “they were pounding on the roots! They even have rhythm, you know! Ah, it’s the most beautiful sound. I can’t wait to show you someday.”

Grace stared deep into her mother’s dark brown eyes, which reflected the dancing light of a candle resting on a small table beside the mat. She searched for any sign of teasing but found only wonder. Refusing to break eye contact with her mother, she decided to seek her father’s input: “Papa?”

“Yes, darling?” her father chuckled, pushing aside some clothes that were hanging from a line across the center of the grass-thatched hut and peering at her through the mosquito net.

“You’ve been to the forest. Do the chimps really drum on trees?”

Papa laughed. “The chimps do a lot of things that would surprise you, Grace. And one day when you are old enough, you will get to see those beautiful creatures for yourself.”

Grace was fifteen now, and that day had finally come.

The eerie sound of whooping and hooting erupted once more, startling Grace from her reminiscences. This time it was even louder than before.

The drumming, she thought. *They are reacting to the drumming!*

Suddenly, at least a dozen more chimpanzees emerged from the undergrowth. Her mother’s tale was coming to life! The national park, though just a short distance from her home, was far more wild and wondrous than she ever could have imagined.

“Let’s move,” the park ranger instructed in a low, calm voice, motioning with two fingers pointing forward. A tall woman with a confident posture, the ranger had black hair tied up neatly under her cap, and her camouflage ranger’s uniform demanded respect, though she wore it with an inviting charm. The name tag on her shirt read “Norah,” and a long, intimidating rifle hung from her left shoulder, giving Grace pause as to how dangerous this adventure could be. But the fearlessness in the ranger’s voice and the smile on her face suggested otherwise, so Grace followed the woman farther into the rainforest, anxious to see what awaited her.

It was comforting to know she was not alone. A small group of tourists from countries all around the world was trekking with them as well. Grace was the only one among them born and raised right there in Uganda, a fact she was quite proud of.

After plowing a short distance through the undergrowth, Grace stopped abruptly. Not ten steps away was a large and powerful chimpanzee seated upon a fallen tree. “This one is Leo,” the ranger introduced proudly. “He is the leader of the troop. See how his eyes are moving to and fro?”

“Yes!” Grace responded excitedly. “As the alpha male, he’s looking for the others in the troop, making sure everyone is safe and accounted for. That’s his job.” Grace spoke quickly, so immersed in the troop that she had almost forgotten there were others in the group.

“Wow, he looks like an effective leader,” remarked a tourist with bright red hair. “You can tell he really cares for the others!”

“Yes. Chimpanzees do look out for one another. They are like a family,” the ranger said, winking at Grace.

“Mama—I mean, uh, Mrs. Ranger, ma’am!” Grace felt heat creep into her cheeks and spread up to her ears. She had hoped to hide the fact that the guide was actually her mother, for she knew her mother took her job as a park ranger seriously, and chimpanzee trekking with tourists was her favorite part. Grace had planned to blend in with the others and let her mother do what she did best without the distraction of their kinship. However, this was Grace’s first time on a trek, and she just couldn’t hold back her enthusiasm.

Norah laughed. “It’s okay, sweetheart,” she said. Turning to the rest of the group, she explained, “Ladies and gentlemen, this is my daughter, Grace, and she has been studying chimpanzees since she learned to read! I think she’d like to share something she’s learned.”

“Thanks, Mama.” Grace smiled and continued. “A moment ago one of the chimpanzees beat on the roots of that tree, and the other chimps went crazy.”

Norah’s eyes lit up. “Ah, yes! That was Oscar. He’s a wild one, isn’t he?”

Oscar. Grace committed the name to memory before launching into a mini-lecture about Oscar’s behavior. “I read that chimpanzees sometimes drum on the buttress roots of several types of trees to communicate with each other. But scientists have yet to decipher their signals. They may be relaying their location in the dense forest, or perhaps they are communicating about food sources. One thing is certain, though: These creatures are incredibly intelligent—and musical, too!” Grace tapped on a nearby tree, trying to imitate Oscar’s signature rhythm.

Everyone laughed. Grace hadn't meant to be so outspoken on the trek, but once she started talking about chimps, it was difficult to hide her excitement. And despite her fears, the group was not bothered by her commentary at all; if anything, her fellow trekkers were amused by the passion for chimpanzees she shared with her mother.

"It looks like you have a ranger-in-training here, ma'am!" remarked a trekker in a wide-brimmed hat.

Grace beamed. Ever since she was a little girl, she had wanted to be a park ranger, just like her mother. Grace had always loved nature and animals, and as she grew up, her mother had shared more about how she helped preserve the forest and protect the creatures who called it their home. Grace's understanding and admiration for the work had expanded over time, and now, seeing her mother in action, Grace felt something bright and restless building inside her chest, filling her from her ribs to her fingertips. She wanted to be a part of it more than anything. And the wonder of it all was just beginning.

For the next hour, Norah led Grace and the group through the forest, following the chimpanzees as they threaded through the trees. Some chimps lounged casually on low branches, while others groomed one another, carefully picking bugs out of thick fur. Still others were effortlessly climbing up and down vines, and Grace's fascinated eyes darted after them as they swung and scrambled. Norah introduced each chimpanzee by name and explained their behaviors as guests observed them. But she had saved the best for last.

"Okay, there's one more thing I'd like to show you," she said

with a grin. “This way, everyone.”

Grace recognized the expression on her mother’s face—that familiar, involuntary quirk of her lips appeared whenever she tried to stay calm and professional yet couldn’t quite hide the joy bubbling inside. Grace had learned that whenever she saw this look, she should brace herself for something extraordinary. She battled her way with the others over fallen trees and under low-hanging limbs, trying to keep pace with Norah’s eager tempo. The trek’s allotted time was running out, and Norah seemed determined to give her guests one last thrill before their journey in the rainforest came to an end.

At last they rounded the roots of a giant mahogany tree and spotted a female chimpanzee, her back to them, seated peacefully on the black soil. Sensing their presence, the tranquil creature turned and locked eyes with Grace.

For a heartbeat, the world was silent as the ape and the girl gazed at each other. Grace drank in every detail of the chimpanzee’s features and committed them to memory—her small frame, the lighter skin around her close-set eyes, her round face with small ears that comically protruded from each side, and the high brow ridge that created a look of innocence and curiosity. The air shimmered, and Grace felt all her childhood dreams—the desires of a little girl who had studied chimpanzees from afar—gather and solidify within her.

“Mama,” she whispered, her voice full of awe.

“Yes?”

Grace’s deep, dark eyes shone bright. “They are glorious, yet people forget how fragile their world is. I want to protect them

and make sure they always have a place here. One day, I'm going to be the best ranger this park has ever seen."

Norah nodded proudly. "And I believe you will be." She turned to address the whole group. "This little chimp is the sweetest of the bunch. She's playful as a goat and gentle as a lamb, and she seems to trust humans more than the others, though she is still cautious, especially around those she is unfamiliar with. I thought you all would like to meet her before we head back to the van."

None of the chimpanzees Grace had met thus far had looked her in the eye, but this one was different. There was something strangely personal in the way she regarded Grace, as if there were a shared understanding between them. There was no other way to describe the expression on her face except—

"Peace," Norah said as she stood by her awe-stricken daughter. "She has peace in her eyes, doesn't she? In fact, that is the meaning of her name."

Grace leaned her slender frame into her mother's side, eyes still fixed on the beautiful creature. "What *is* her name?"

"Her name is Miremba."

Grace knelt down and smiled at her new friend. "Miremba . . . peace," she whispered. Peace, indeed, is what she felt—more than ever before.

The contented girl from the outskirts of Kalamugwe had always preferred predictable routines, but spending the long school break—most of December and January—with her mother on the first of many chimpanzee treks was one change she accepted with glee. There in the forest with Miremba, Grace felt like she had reached a peak in her life.

Indeed, she was so enthralled by the chimps that she lost all awareness of everything else. Only when Miremba began retreating high into the trees did she look around and notice with a start that her mother and the tourist group had disappeared into the distant thicket. She panicked for a moment, unsure of which way they had gone. Taking a deep breath, she remembered the van was in the east parking area. Drawing on her father's lessons, she hastily looked toward the afternoon sun, noting that it had moved far enough west for her to know which way was east.

Frantically, she darted through the deep green wilderness, weaving through bushes and bounding over logs like a bushbuck, the small antelope that lived in the rainforest.

Through her heavy breathing, she prayed, "Please, God. I need to get to the van. Help me get there safely—"

Thud!

She had hardly gotten the words out before she forcefully tumbled to the forest floor, landing with a grunt. *What happened?* she wondered. As she attempted to push herself up, she discovered that her left foot was wedged in a small but deep hole hidden beneath the leaves.

"Of all the places I could have stepped!" she grumbled, pulling her foot free and standing shakily as she brushed herself off. But after one glance ahead, her grumbling was swallowed up in a mix of gratitude and horror. The hole was not just the cause of her fall; it was an answer to her prayer.

Nestled perfectly beneath the small broad-leaf plants on the other side of the hole was an oddly shaped metal contraption. It was worn and rusty, like an old piece of farming equipment. A

long, slender arm was attached to a round platform about the size of a man's hand. At each end of the platform were two semicircular arms with several appendages that looked like sharp teeth. Though she had never seen one, she suspected it was an animal trap, and had she not fallen, she would have dashed right into its jaws. Voices nearby snatched Grace's attention, and a rush of relief came over her.

Despite her delay, she arrived at the van right on time and quietly climbed inside. The tourists were enthusiastically recounting the adventure to each other, but Grace couldn't share in their excitement. The whole bumpy way back to the ranger station, she pondered in silence. *Not once in all her "Tales of the Forest" did Mama ever mention traps, she thought. So why is it there? And who put it there? Oh, I've got to find out!*

To keep from alarming the other visitors, Grace impatiently waited until the last guest had left the station before she anxiously told her mother what had happened and described what she had discovered.

Norah was reasonable and compassionate, as she always was. "I am glad you are okay, Grace," she said. "But let this be a lesson to you. The forest can be a dangerous place . . . apparently now more than ever."

"What do you mean, Mama?"

"Before now, in all my years as a ranger, we had never found a single trap. But now, this is the third one we've found within the last few days. I'm afraid we may have poachers in our midst. Someone is after our beloved chimpanzees. The question is not just who are they, but why are they suddenly here?"

SAVING MIREMBA



When an ominous discovery threatens the safety of a beloved chimpanzee in a Ugandan rainforest, a local village girl is determined to discover the truth and restore the peace.

However, she needs the help of an unlikely ally whose own mysterious story challenges her in ways she could never have imagined.

Join Grace as her quiet village life suddenly becomes a wild, vine-swinging adventure full of imminent dangers, unsolved mysteries, and international visitors. *Saving Miremba* is a powerful tale of love, understanding, and empathy that is sure to warm the heart like the East African sun.

