



A  
Bird,  
a  
Girl,  
and a  
Rescue

J. A. Myhre  
ILLUSTRATED BY ACACIA MASSO



A  
Bird,  
a  
Girl,  
and a  
Rescue

Rwendigo  
region

national  
park

Bumuli

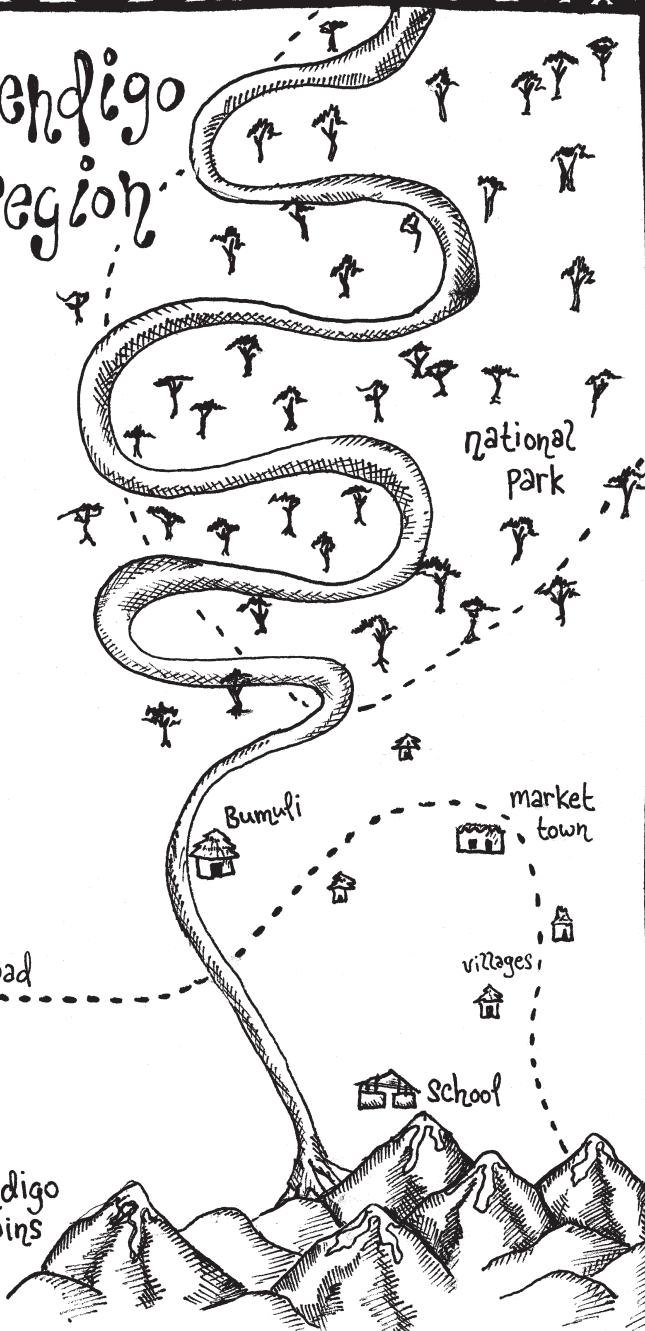
market  
town

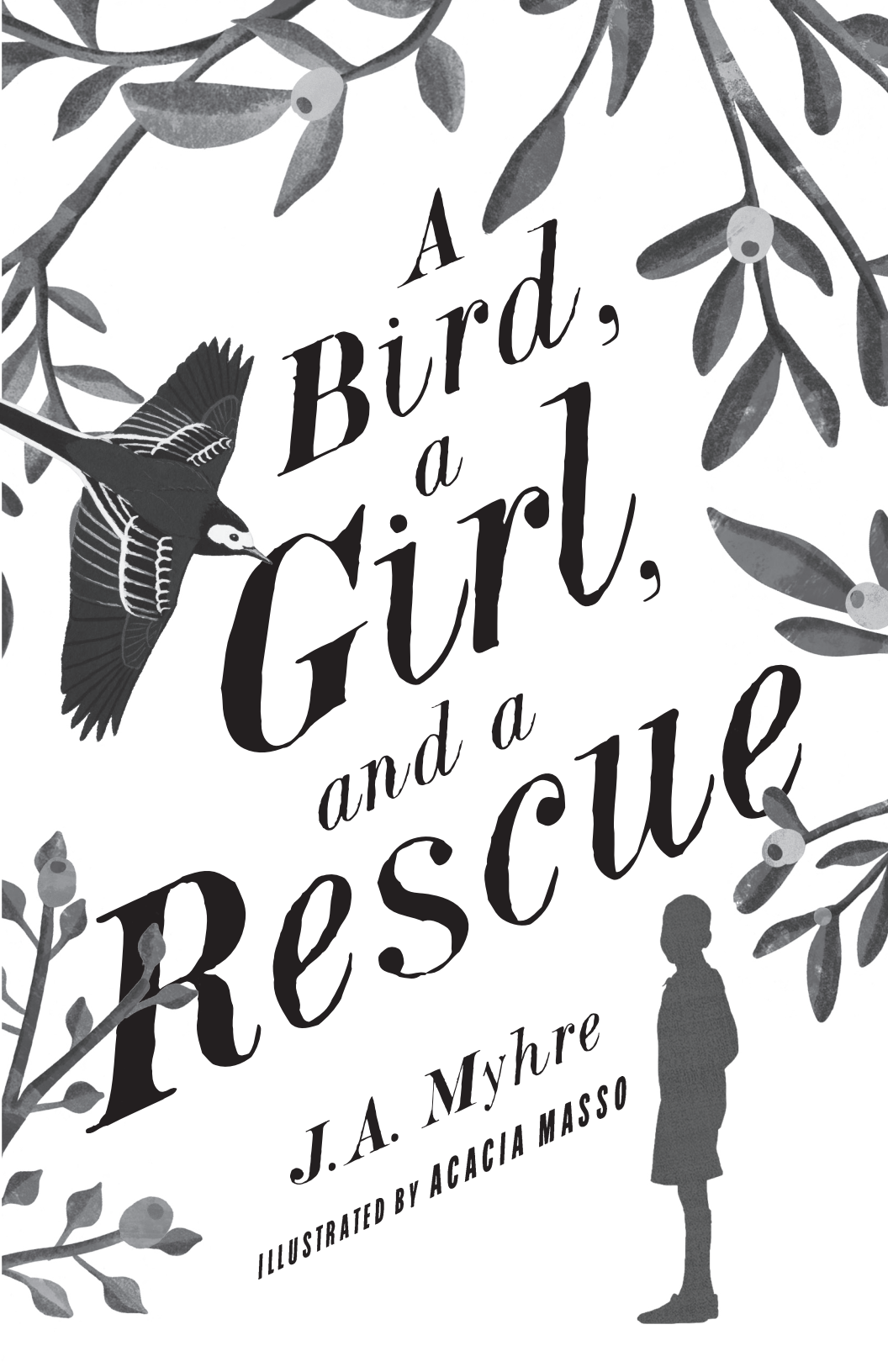
main road

villages

School

rwendigo  
mountains





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Rescue

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For Luke, Caleb, Julia, and Jack,

*African Adventurers*  
&  
*Readers Extraordinaire*

*(but mostly Julia on this second book, whose courage,  
determination, kindness, and football skills are reflected  
in this heroine)*

— CHRISTMAS EVE 2006





*Dear Reader,*

You are holding in your hands the second story I wrote for my children when we were living in a place very much like Rwendigo: the border between two African countries, isolated by mountains and rainforests, where life went on in a glorious messiness of football and wild beauty in spite of the disruptions of rebel warfare. Not far from our home, some of the events woven into this story actually happened to real teens. I hope that as you read, you will grow to respect their lives and glimpse the power of forgiveness. May this tale point you to hope in the true forces of goodness that will, one day, win.

*J. A. Myhre*



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## CHAPTER 1

# *A School and a Parting*

**The rain swept in from the north** as Kiisa and her father, Mugisa, reached the school. Mugisa pulled the admission letter from his satchel, and the gatekeeper waved them in. They nearly ran across the football field as gray clouds began to hurl the first heavy drops of cold water on their heads. Thunder rumbled, adding to the impression of an approaching force. Kiisa shivered as they finally reached the shelter of the administration porch, just as the drops consolidated into sheets of powerful water. The *mbati* roof magnified the percussion of the rain, enveloping them in a cocoon of pounding noise. She moved closer to her father. Even the equatorial jungle could be cool in a rain like this one. They watched older students pull clothes off the fences where their laundry had



been draped and scurry into their dorms.

Finally, the rain tapered off into mist. Mugisa cleared his throat politely, since they had not been noticed by the secretary; she seemed to be asleep with her head bent down on the reception desk, a plain wooden table just inside the door. She looked up sleepily, surprised at their appearance. Unlike most prospective parents, the man before her did not look at all intimidated by the surroundings of school and office. In fact, he looked regal, dressed in a colorful woven cloth not traditional in that area, and he stood taller than most of the local tribe. The girl beside him, however, seemed to be trying to disappear under his arm, shivering more than could be explained by the coolness of the afternoon rain.

“Ahem, *olayo*,” he began in a proper greeting.

“*Olayo*,” she replied, fully awake now and curious, as the clarity of his local dialect clashed with the hint of the foreign in his dress and manner.

“I have come to bring my daughter to enroll in the Senior One class.”

“Of course, of course, please have a seat on the form just inside the door. The headmaster is not yet back from lunch.”

Slowly the school began to emerge once more from the mist as Kiisa and her father sat waiting. They saw neat gravel paths criss-crossing a grassy square whose perimeter consisted of low white-limed buildings with matching blue *mbati* roofs. Students in uniforms of drab gray skirts or pants with neatly pressed white shirts emerged from the doors when a bell rang, but within five minutes the schoolyard emptied again. Kiisa noted smoke rising from somewhere behind the classes, down

a hill perhaps, and wondered what kind of food would be offered. Kiisa had a healthy appetite, and food was one of her greatest anxieties about the whole boarding school plan.

Just as she had begun to think of steaming fresh milk from the cow at home mixed with sugar from canes in the valley and a bit of cocoa dried and pounded from trees on the hillside . . . her daydream was abruptly ended by her father standing and gently leading her by the hand into the Headmaster's office. There a surprisingly small man sat behind a surprisingly large desk. He stood to shake hands with Mugisa, who then handed Kiisa's admission letter to him for inspection. Kiisa did not listen very carefully to the entire proceeding. She was vaguely aware that the Headmaster seemed familiar with her father, and she supposed that may have been from Mugisa's work in the district more than a decade before she was born, when he met and married her mother. The stories she had heard from that time made her curious, but fearful. Her older brother, Mujuni, had not been sent back here for schooling, and at twenty-one he was already nearly finished with the five years of University instruction that would qualify him as a medical doctor in the capital city. But Kiisa's parents felt that she needed some exposure to her mother's culture, and that she was ready for the challenge of boarding school. Kiisa was far from convinced.

The Headmaster passed them back to the secretary, who directed them to the bursar's office where Mugisa produced a bank slip confirming his deposit of the requisite school fees in the proper account. Mugisa also left a generous stash of cash at the bursar's office for Kiisa's weekly "et cetera" allowance for

items like pens and biscuits and toilet paper and cells for her torch. The school nurse gave Kiisa a cursory exam and checked her immunization record. The nurse seemed surprised when she wrote down “age 11 years.” Mugisa later explained that although most of the girls in her class would be a similar size, they also would be two to three years older by the time they entered secondary school. Normally this information would have led into Kiisa’s usual argument against attending a school that was not exactly known for its educational excellence, but instead they were met at that point by a teacher who led them into the girls’ dorm area of the compound.

There they waited in a small *kitubbi*, where a handful of other parents and girls had gathered. The adults greeted one another, and Mugisa squeezed Kiisa’s hand gently, reminding her to also respectfully greet each of the families by bending her knee in a slight curtsy while looking down at the ground and quietly murmuring *olayo*. She knew the older people would approve, and that would make her father proud. Just as she finished, another teacher appeared, a tired-looking woman who asked the girls to open their trunks for inspection. She removed food (“attracts ants and roaches,” she explained) and advised against one girl’s retaining a rather fancy looking clock (“no use tempting anyone to steal”). In the last trunk she found two crude tin *kadobbas*, homemade lamps that burned paraffin for nighttime studying.

“Ayy, these country girls. Don’t you know we have electric power here? These *kadobbas* are for uneducated people who live in the dirt. We have real buildings, and we aren’t going to have them burned down by careless country girls.”



Kiisa felt sorry for the girl who quickly passed the contraband lamps to her mother, a woman dressed in a simple wrapped *kitengi*. The girl's mother made the lamps disappear into a fold of her dress.

"Madame, we applaud the safety concerns of the school," Mugisa spoke up, "but we also applaud the diligence of this student who wanted to be prepared for long hours of study, and the cleverness of her mother who provided her with light. In fact, I had planned to buy two *kadobbas* in the market for myself as soon as I left here." Turning to the woman with the lamps, Mugisa continued, "If you would humbly accept my offer to purchase your *kadobbas*, you would save me the extra trip." Mugisa folded his hands over some money, and Kiisa could see it was much more than such common lamps were worth. Her father received the lamps and held them up, praising their ingenious design and efficient recycling of used cans. The girl who had been singled out relaxed, and her mother smiled gratefully. The teacher was so flustered by Mugisa's gallant rescue that she simply shut all the blue tin trunks and announced the inspection was complete.

Mugisa winked at his daughter. "For such a time as this," he whispered. "Remember that phrase, and try to open your trunk soon. You'll find something rather unexpected inside."

Kiisa wondered what he meant, but she had no time to ask. The parents were hugging their children goodbye; they would leave the girls to proceed from the *kitubbi* to the dorm with the teacher. Kiisa felt tears burning behind her eyelids, and her stomach seemed to be in her throat. She had never before felt as alone as she did in those long minutes of watching her

father walk back across the field to the gate, knowing that for the next three months (she refused to think of four years) she would live away from home for the first time. She could hear Mujuni challenging her, “You say you trust our parents, but you’ve never had them ask you to do something that you did not agree with. Don’t preach to me about trust until you’ve obeyed when you didn’t want to.” Well, Kiisa thought, the time had come. So far, the word *trust* sounded much lovelier and nobler than it felt.

What it felt like was hunger, emptiness, nothing to look forward to for a long time, and a stiff metal trunk she had to carry alone into a dormitory full of strangers. As she bent down to lift the box, she remembered her father’s peculiar last words and heard what sounded very much like a chirp.