

JOHN GRISHAM

== A NOVEL ==

SOOLEY



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| Sooley |

John
Grisham



DOUBLEDAY

New York

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[*Author's Note*](#)

To the memory of
MICHAEL RUDELL
(1943–2021)

Not only the finest lawyer I've ever known,
but a perfect gentleman and a loyal friend

| Part One |

CHAPTER 1

In April, when Samuel Sooleymon was invited to try out for the national team, he was seventeen years old, stood six feet two inches tall, and was considered to be a promising point guard, known for his quickness and vertical leap, but also for his erratic passing and mediocre shooting.

In July, when the team left Juba, the capital of South Sudan, for the trip to America, he was six feet four inches tall, just as quick but even more erratic handling the ball and no more accurate from the arc. He was hardly aware of his growth, which was not unusual for a teenager, but he did realize that his well-worn basketball shoes were tighter and his only pair of pants now fell well above his ankles.

But back in April when the invitation arrived, his neighborhood erupted in celebration. He lived in Lotta, a remote village on the outskirts of Rumbek, a city of 30,000. He had spent his entire life in Lotta doing little more than playing basketball and soccer. His mother, Beatrice, was a homemaker, with little education, like all the women in the village. His father, Ayak, taught school in a two-room open-air hut built by some missionaries decades earlier. When Samuel wasn't pounding the basketball on the dirt courts throughout the village, he tended to the family's garden with his younger siblings and sold vegetables beside the road.

For the moment, life in the village was good and fairly stable. Another brutal civil war was in its second year with no end in sight, and though daily life was always precarious, the people managed to make it through the day and hope for better things tomorrow. The children lived in the streets, always bouncing or kicking a ball, and the games offered a welcome diversion.

Since the age of thirteen, Samuel had been the best basketball player in the village. His dream, like every other kid's, was to play college ball in America and, of course, make it to the NBA. There were several South Sudanese players in the NBA and they were godlike figures back home.

When the news of his invitation spread through the village, neighbors began gathering in front of the Sooleymons' thatched-roof hut. Everyone wanted to celebrate Samuel's breathtaking news. Ladies brought pitchers of cinnamon tea spiced with ginger and jugs of tamarind juice. Others brought platters of sugar-coated cookies and peanut macaroons. It was the greatest moment in the village's recent history, and Samuel was hugged and admired by his neighbors. The little ones just wanted to touch him, certain that they were in the presence of a new national hero.

He savored the moment but tried to caution everyone that he had only been invited for tryouts. Making the Under 18 team would be difficult because there were so many good players, especially in Juba, where the leagues were well established and the games were played on tile or even wood floors. In Lotta, like other remote villages and

rural areas, the organized games were often played outdoors on concrete or dirt. He explained that only ten players would be chosen for the trip to America, and there they would be joined by five more players, all from South Sudan. Once combined, the team would play in showcase tournaments in places like Orlando and Las Vegas, and there would be hundreds of college scouts. Perhaps a few from the NBA as well.

Talk of playing in America added more excitement to the occasion, and Samuel's cautions were ignored. He was on his way. They had watched him grow up on the village courts and knew he was special enough to make any team, and to take their dreams with him. The celebration lasted well into the night, and when Beatrice finally ended it, Samuel reluctantly went to bed. But sleep was impossible. For an hour, he sat on his cot in his tiny bedroom, one that he shared with his two younger brothers, Chol and James, and whispered excitedly with them. Above their cots was a large poster of Niollo, the greatest of all South Sudanese players, soaring high above the rim and slamming a dunk in his Boston Celtics uniform, one which Samuel often fantasized wearing.

He rose early the next morning and collected eggs from the family's flock of chickens, his first chore of the day. After a quick breakfast, he left for school with his backpack and his basketball. James and Chol followed him to their neighborhood court where he shot for an hour as they retrieved the ball and fed it back to him. Other boys joined them, and the familiar noise of bouncing balls and friendly banter echoed through the sleepy morning.

At eight o'clock, the games reluctantly broke up as Samuel and his brothers left for classes. He was in his last year of secondary school and would graduate in a month. He considered himself fortunate. Less than half of his peers—boys only—would finish secondary, and only a fraction even dreamed of university. There were no classes for the girls.

As Samuel dribbled off to school, his dreams were now drifting to colleges far away.

CHAPTER 2

Two weeks later, early on a Friday morning, the entire family made the long walk to the bus station in Rumbek and watched him leave for Juba and a long weekend of vigorous competition. They waved him off, with his mother and sister in tears. He would return the following Monday.

The departure was an hour late, which for South Sudan was quite prompt. Because of bad roads and crowded buses, the schedules were flexible. Often there was no bus at all and breakdowns were common. It was not unusual for a bus to quit in the middle of the road and its passengers be sent off on foot to the nearest village.

Samuel sat on a crowded bench in the front of the bus, wedged between two men who said they had been riding for three hours. They were headed to Juba to look for work, or something like that. Samuel wasn't certain because their English was broken and mixed with Nuer, their tribal tongue. Samuel was Dinka, the largest ethnic class in the country, and that was his first language. English was his second. His mother spoke four.

Across the narrow aisle was a woman with three children, all of them wide-eyed and silent. Samuel spoke to them in English but they did not respond. The mother said something to the oldest child and Samuel understood none of it.

The bus had no air-conditioning and dust from the gravel road blew through the open windows and settled onto everything—clothing, bags, benches, the floor. It rocked and bumped along the main gravel road to Juba, occasionally stopping to pick up a hitchhiker or let off a passenger.

Once it was known that Samuel was a basketball player who just might be headed to games in America, he became the focus of attention. Basketball was the new pride of South Sudan, a bright promise that sometimes allowed the people to set aside their violent history of ethnic conflict. Generally, the players were lean and tall and they played with a fierceness that often surprised American coaches.

So they talked basketball, with Samuel holding forth. They stopped in every village and took on more passengers. Full capacity was a moving target and before long the younger men, including Samuel, were ordered by the driver to crawl on top of the bus for the ride and to make sure none of the bags and boxes fell off. As they approached Juba, the gravel turned to asphalt and the constant bumping eased somewhat. The passengers grew quiet as they passed miles of shantytowns, then blocks of sturdier homes. Six hours after he left Lotta, Samuel got off the bus at the central station where swarms of people were coming and going. He asked directions and walked for an hour to the University of Juba.

He had been to Juba once before and was again struck by its modern facilities, paved streets, frantic traffic, tall buildings, vibrancy, and well-dressed people. If he failed to

make the team, he planned to continue his studies in the city. If at all possible, he wanted to live there and pursue a profession.

He found the campus and then the gym and stepped nervously inside. It was new, cavernous, with three full-length courts and few bleachers. There were no intercollegiate sports in the country, no college teams with schedules and logos, no fans to watch the excitement. The gym was used for intramural sports of all varieties, and for assemblies and rallies.

At the far end he saw a man with a clipboard and a whistle tied around his neck, watching a four-on-four scrimmage. Samuel walked around the court and approached him.

Ecko Lam was forty and had spent his first five years in southern Sudan. His family narrowly escaped a guerrilla attack on their village and fled to Kenya. They eventually settled in Ohio and assimilated into an American lifestyle. He discovered basketball as a teenager and played four years at Kent State. He married an American of Sudanese descent and pursued his dream of coaching at the Division I level. He bounced from job to job, rising to the level of an assistant at Texas Tech, before being hired by a nonprofit to scout for talent in Africa. Two years earlier he had been selected to establish leagues and coach summer all-star teams in South Sudan. He loved his work and was still driven by the belief that basketball could make a difference in the lives of South Sudanese players, male and female. Taking his Under 18 team to the U.S. for the showcase tournaments was by far the best part of his job.

He had never seen Samuel play in person but had watched some tape of the kid. A coach from the country had passed along a glowing recommendation, saying that he had the quickest hands and feet he had ever seen, not to mention an astonishing vertical leap. His mother, Beatrice, stood six feet tall, and the scouting report predicted that Samuel was still growing. At 6'2", he was the shortest invitee.

On film, a video from a cell phone, Samuel dominated on defense but struggled with the ball. Because he lived in a village, his experience was limited, and Ecko suspected he would have difficulty competing against kids from the cities.

Twenty players from around the country had been invited to try out, and they were trickling into the gym as the afternoon went on. Ecko noticed Samuel as he slinked around the edge of a court, obviously a kid from the country intimidated by the surroundings. He finally approached and timidly asked, "Excuse me, but are you Coach Lam?"

Ecko offered a wide smile and replied, "Yes sir, and you must be Mr. Sooleymon."

"Yes sir," he said and thrust forward a hand.

They shook vigorously and touched each other on the shoulder, the standard Sudanese greeting. "A pleasure to meet you," Ecko said. "How was your trip in?"

Samuel shrugged and said, "Okay. If you like the bus."

“I don’t. Have you ever flown on an airplane?”

“No sir,” he said without the slightest embarrassment.

Of the twenty invitees, Ecko was almost certain that none had ever seen the inside of an airplane. “Well, if you make my team, we’ll fly halfway around the world. How does that sound?”

Samuel couldn’t stop smiling. “Sounds wonderful.”

“It will be great, son. The locker room is over there. Get changed in a hurry and start shooting.”

Samuel entered a long room lined with small wire cages. He picked an empty one and changed quickly into gym shorts, a tee shirt, and his well-worn shoes. Five minutes later he was back on the court. Ecko tossed him a ball, pointed to an empty basket at the far end of the gym, and said, “Stretch and warm up, then start shooting from the arc.”

“Yes sir.” He dribbled away, using only his right hand, went through a quick series of rather lackadaisical stretches, and began shooting. Ecko smiled at the fact that yet another seventeen-year-old was bored with the notion of stretching.

Ecko monitored the scrimmage while watching every move Samuel made. His shot needed work. On the plus side, he delivered it from the top on an impressive, fluid jump. But he cocked low, at his forehead, and his right elbow strayed. Not uncommon for a kid with little coaching.

He missed his first ten shots. Nerves, thought Ecko.

By late afternoon, all twenty players had arrived. Ecko gathered them in a corner of the bleachers and asked each one to stand, give his name, and describe where he was from. Half were from Juba. Two were from Malakal, a war-ravaged city three hundred miles away. A few others were from the country, the bush.

Ecko’s next order of business was the most problematic. He said, “We are all South Sudanese. Our country is torn by civil strife, where warlords fight for power and our people suffer, but this team will be united as one. You will be followed closely by our country. You will be its newest heroes. The quickest way to get cut from this squad is not by a lack of talent or hustle, but by any show of ethnic rivalry. Understood?”

All nodded in agreement. Ecko Lam was a legend in their circles and they were desperate to impress him. He and he alone held the key to a trip to America. They envied his coolness, his perfect English, and, most especially, the latest Air Jordans on his feet.

He picked up a uniform and continued, “This is what we will wear.” He held up a jersey. “As you can see, it is plain, simple, reversible, something you might see in a gym class here in Juba. Gray, no color, no fancy logo. We wear this to remind ourselves of where we come from and of our humble roots. I wish I could give this uniform to all twenty of you, but I cannot. Only half will make the team and I do not look forward to giving the other half the bad news. But ten’s enough, and will be joined by five more South Sudanese now living in the U.S. My assistant coach, Frankie Moka, is holding a similar tryout in Chicago. We will meet his players in Orlando for a few days of practice before the games begin. There will be sixteen teams in all, four from the U.S.,

the others from places like Brazil, the U.K., Spain, Croatia, Senegal, Italy, Russia, and I can't name them all. There will be eight teams in Orlando and we will play each one. The other eight will compete in a similar tournament in Las Vegas. The top four from each tournament will meet in St. Louis for the national showcase. Any questions?"

There were none. The boys were too shy to ask and none wanted to appear too eager.

"And just so you'll know, this trip is sponsored by the big shoe companies. You know their names and they're being very generous. Some of the money is also coming from the Manute Bol Foundation, and some has been donated by other NBA players from our country. At some point, when we're over there, we'll write thank-you notes and do photographs. There is a chance that we'll meet Niollo, but no promises."

They were too stunned to respond.

He split them into four teams, assigned their positions and matchups, warned them against excessive fouling, and started the two scrimmages. With no refs to interfere the play was extremely physical, and that was okay with Ecko. He whistled a few of the more brutal fouls, but for the most part let them play. After twenty minutes of nonstop action, he called for a break and offered them water. As they sat sprawled in the bleachers, dripping with sweat and catching their breath, he paced with his clipboard and said, "Nice work, men. Lots of good hustle out there. I expect that to continue because we are South Sudanese and we play from the heart. Nobody quits, nobody loaf, nobody goofs off on the court. Now, in about an hour we will walk around the corner to a dormitory where you'll stay. We'll have dinner there, then watch a movie, then go to bed. Get a good night's sleep because tomorrow will be a long day."

CHAPTER 3

On Saturday morning, Ecko marched them back to the gym, half of which had now been taken over by a city youth league. Confusion reigned for the first half hour as Ecko argued with a recreation official and threatened to call someone with clout. An uneasy truce was ironed out and the Under 18 practice was given two of the three courts. Once the youth league coaches realized who Ecko was, they grew quite cooperative. Their younger players watched Samuel and the others in awe.

Two assistant coaches arrived to help Ecko with his day. They organized the first event, a series of suicide sprints from mid-court to the baseline, about fifty feet. Racing in three groups of guards, forwards, and centers, the winners faced off for a two-out-of-three contest. All of the players were quick and fast, but none could touch Samuel. He won every sprint going away.

One coach then took the four centers under a basket for a rough session on rebounding and blocking out. Ecko took the guards and forwards and, using two cameras, filmed their jump shots. Samuel had never had a coach break down his shot, and it was not a pleasant experience. "A mess," was how Ecko described it, but with a smile. They started at the beginning and with the basics. "Think of all the shots you've ever taken, Samuel. Probably a million, right?"

"At least."

"And they've all been wrong. Time and time again all you've done is reinforce bad habits. If you want to play at a higher level, start over and start now."

They watched the film again and again. Ecko had averaged 15 points a game his senior year at Kent State and knew what a perfect jump shot looked like. "No two are the same," he explained to Samuel, "but the great ones have the same basic parts. Three things. Start just above the head, aim the elbow at the basket, and take the pressure off your left hand."

Samuel was eager to be coached and tried to unwind his bad habits, but it would take time. Ecko sent him to the free throw line to do nothing but shoot for ten minutes with both feet on the floor. Before each shot he was to say out loud, "Aim the elbow at the rim."

The drills continued throughout the morning and by noon the boys were bored. Ecko finally split them into four teams and unleashed the scrimmages. He again warned them about rough fouls and for good measure assigned an assistant coach to referee. He took a seat in the bleachers and studied every player.

By far the best point guard was Alek Garang, a well-known player from Juba who had starred on every tournament team since he was twelve years old. A scout had passed along his name to some American coaches and he was getting letters. The trip to the U.S. was crucial for his future.

The dreams and best-laid plans were to play well enough to be noticed by an American coach, who would then pull strings and “place” the recruit in a boarding school for a year of elevated competition and more stringent classroom work. Ecko knew every college coach, every boarding school, every high school basketball factory, and every rule in the NCAA handbook. He knew the cheaters, their bagmen, the schools to avoid, and the facilitators who should be indicted. He also knew that every kid on the floor right then in Juba needed an extra year of coaching and polishing before entering the rough world of American intercollegiate basketball.

After showers and pizza for dinner, the tired players stuffed themselves into two vans and rode through central Juba to a modern shopping mall near the capitol. Ecko let them go with instructions to meet at the cinema on the first level promptly at eight for a movie.

The boys stayed together as they drifted from store to store, gazing into windows, shaking their heads at price tags, trying on caps and shoes they could not afford. Samuel had a few coins and wanted to buy souvenirs for his younger sister and brothers, gifts they were certainly not expecting.

The movie was *Focus* starring Will Smith, the most popular American actor in Africa. Though he didn't say so, watching it was Samuel's first experience in a real cinema. It was a thrill and only reinforced his desire to live in the city, but he also kept thinking of his brothers, James and Chol, and his sister, Angelina, and how proud they would be to see him in such modern surroundings.

Watching Will Smith race through the streets in a sports car with a slinky woman on his arm was certainly entertaining. And Samuel, along with the other nineteen players, believed in his soul that it was not just a dream. The Miami Heat were currently paying Niollo \$15 million a year to play basketball, money they could not comprehend. And Niollo was one of them, a poor kid from the bush of South Sudan, a Dinka, now starring in the NBA and most likely driving fancy cars and living the big life.

Back in the dorm, Ecko gathered the players in a television room and ordered more pizzas. Growing boys who were tall and skinny and burning thousands of calories each day could not be fed enough, and they devoured the pizzas. They were curious about his life, his upbringing and education, and how he discovered basketball. Why had he not made it as a pro? Why had he chosen to become a coach? Now that he had seen them play, could he say they were good enough for a college scholarship? Could he tell who might just make it to the NBA?

No, he could not. They were still growing and their skills were developing and in need of competition. Some had plenty of natural talent but all were rough around the edges and inexperienced. At least four of them would be sent home at noon the next day.

At the moment, Samuel was on the bubble. Alek Garang was the number one point guard, with Samuel a distant second.

Ecko talked to them, listened to them, and watched them carefully. For young men who had seen plenty of war, poverty, and violence, they, at least for the moment, preferred to talk about basketball in America, and movies and pizza and girls. Ecko was always listening and waiting for words or comments about the conflict. Each of them had been touched by it. Each knew someone who had died or disappeared.

But on that Saturday night, in the safety of a modern dormitory on a campus, the boys were safe. Their future was nothing but basketball.

CHAPTER 4

At only six feet two inches, Samuel still had trouble folding his legs onto his bunk for a night's rest. Above him, his bunkmate, Peter Nyamal, was five inches taller and somehow slept with his feet dangling in the air. Early Sunday morning, Samuel eased from the room without making a sound and left the dorm. He strolled through the campus and enjoyed the solitude and again vowed to study there, if, of course, things didn't work out in the NBA. He sat on a bench and watched the sunrise and smiled as he thought of his family back in Lotta. He had never left them before and they seemed so far away. At that moment, James and Chol were gathering eggs for breakfast while Angelina stood at the kitchen table with an iron heated by a fire and pressed her dress and their white shirts, their Sunday best. They would walk as a family to the village church for nine o'clock Mass.

Samuel roamed some more and found the student center, the only building open at such an hour on a Sunday morning. He paid five cents for a carton of mango juice and smiled at a pretty girl all alone at a table. She was pecking on a laptop and ignored him. About a year earlier, he had actually seen and touched a laptop. There had been only one in his school, and for a brief period of time there had been internet service in Lotta. That, along with cell phone coverage, had been knocked out by the guerrillas. Roads, bridges, cell towers, and utility lines were favorite targets. They were destroyed so often that the government stopped building them.

His mother, Beatrice, had no education. His sister, Angelina, was being taught at home by their father. How, then, was it possible for some young women in South Sudan to make it to college? He rather liked the idea. He had watched several college games on television and had always been surprised at the number of female students screaming in the stands. Another reason to play basketball in America.

In a reading area, he flipped through the *Juba Monitor*, one of two dailies in the country, neither of which made it to Lotta. He found a copy of the other one, *The Citizen*, and reread the same news. As he was finishing his juice, three college boys came in and looked him over, then ignored him. They chatted away in their big-city English. Their clothes were nicer; their shirts had real collars. Samuel knew it was time to leave.

He found the gym and the front doors were locked. As he walked away, he saw a janitor exit from a side door. He waited a moment until the janitor was gone, then tried the door. It opened and he walked into the same locker room the team had been using. The courts were dark but the early sun was flooding one end of the building. Samuel found a bag of balls and, without even a hint of stretching, began shooting.

An hour later, Ecko Lam entered through the same side door, and as he walked through the locker room he heard the familiar sound of a bouncing ball. He eased into

the shadows and peeked around the bleachers. Samuel was glistening with sweat as he fired away from twenty feet. He missed, sprinted after the ball, dribbled between his legs, behind his back, fainted right then left all the way to mid-court where he turned around, took a few quick steps, and fired again. Another miss. And another. The form was better and he was trying mightily to break old habits, but the elbow was still straying too far. And, for the moment Ecko really didn't care. The gorgeous part of his jump shot was the point of delivery. Off the dribble, Samuel pulled up and in a split second rocketed upward and flicked the ball away at a height few other guards could match.

If only he could hit.

After a few minutes, Ecko strode onto the court and said good morning.

"Hello, Coach," Samuel said, flinging sweat from his forehead. It was not yet 8 a.m. and the gym was thick with humidity.

"You have trouble sleeping?" Ecko asked.

"No sir. Well, yes, I guess. I wanted to walk around and see the campus, and I found a door back there that was unlocked."

"I watched your last fifteen shots, Samuel. You missed twelve of them. And you were as wide open as you'll ever get."

"Yes sir. It will take some work, Coach."

Ecko smiled and said, "The scouting report says your mother is six feet tall. Is that right?"

"Yes sir. All my people are tall."

"When do you turn eighteen?"

"August eleven."

"You could try out next year, Samuel."

"Thank you, Coach. Does this mean I'm done for this year?"

"No. You want to shoot some more?"

"Yes sir."

"Okay. Go to the free throw line. Keep both feet on the floor. We know you can jump. Take the ball higher. Aim your elbow directly at the rim and deliver it slowly. When you make ten in a row, come find me."

"Yes sir."

. . .

The first drill was a shooting contest, held on two courts. Every player took 20 shots from the free throw line, and the hits and misses were recorded. The top four were then put in a shootout, complete with banter, catcalls, cheap shots, laughter at misses, all manner of verbal abuse. "This pressure is nothing," Ecko kept saying as he offered up his pointed observations. "Imagine you're in the Final Four with the game on the line and a hundred million people watching, including everyone here in South Sudan. This pressure is nothing."