

Scarred Lions

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CHAPTER 1

There was blood on my fists. And blood on the boy's face. His name was Jonathan. A crowd had gathered around us in the school hallway. Jonathan lay there on the floor, looking up at me. His eyes still challenged me. He smiled as he wiped the blood away from his eye.

'Lucky shot!' he said.

'You want some more then?' In an instant my mind replayed the blow that floored Jonathan. The tension in my muscles. Teeth grinding. Eyes meeting eyes for only a moment. The pain shooting through my fist and up my arm as the blow hit home.

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The crowd around us were like a pack of hyenas, hungry for more.

And then the teacher came.

There was trouble in the air. I just knew it. For days now I could feel it. It pushed up through the cold, wet streets. I breathed it in everywhere I went: the crowded trains in the London Underground, school classrooms, the newsstand on the corner, up through the streets. It had been going on for weeks now. And it made me scared.

It was late in the afternoon. Friday. I took the escalator and finally stepped out of the musty underground tunnels. Behind me I could still hear the echo of the underground railway and a busker playing the saxophone. The morning rain lined the streets. Specs of light from shop windows reflected on the wet pavement. Like scattered diamonds under the soles of the passers-by. I could hear their footsteps and suddenly wondered if they could hear

mine. I wondered if they even listened. I wondered if they even cared.

Of course not, it was Friday. They all wanted to get home as soon as possible. Grey clouds covered the city. It would rain again very soon.

Trouble, I thought again.

There was trouble in the air.

The gripping fear made me quicken my pace. I tried finding comfort in the warmth of my jacket; in the familiar surroundings, the graffiti covered walls. But the uneasy feeling followed me still. It hunted me like an animal.

I caught a sudden glimpse of my reflection in a shop window. Black face, fearful eyes, jaws clenched with cold. The cut on my lip.

And I felt like a stranger.

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How could this be? I had lived in London all my life. I lived here with my mum in a two-bedroomed council flat above the street. I went to a state school here.

But somehow I was a stranger.

Was that what was bothering me?

Buyisiwe. My name echoed in my head. A stranger's name. Why not James, Chris or Peter? Or even Jonathan for that matter? Why not any other name, like most of the boys in school?

Buyisiwe. That is what they called me.

A Zulu name that meant: returned.

The rain was coming down in drifts as I got within a block of our flat. I hurried home. My clothes were cold and wet when I reached the front door. Determined to leave my fear outside, I breathed out forcefully. I stepped inside without glancing back.

Inside it felt warm. Safe.

I pushed back my cap and took the stairs to the second floor.

Shouting voices came from one of the flats. I ignored it like I always did. It would die down in a while anyway. But not before there'd been a banging of doors and maybe breaking glass. I didn't know any of the people living around us. I saw their faces every now and again. But I didn't know their names.

They certainly didn't know mine.

They didn't care, and neither did I.

Mum wasn't home yet. I switched on the TV on my way to the kitchen. The cartoon sounds of Tom and Jerry drowned out the world. In the kitchen I gulped down some milk straight from the carton. If my mum could see me now . . .

'How many times do I have to tell you to use a glass?'

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That's what she would say.

Sometimes I do it just to piss her off.

There was some leftover pizza in the fridge. The cheese had turned an unappetising dull yellow in a sea of scattered bits of olive, pineapple and some sort of meat. I heated it in the microwave and went back into the living room. I made myself comfortable on the couch. Images flashed by on the TV screen. I didn't really take any notice. My mind drifted back to the fight I'd had at school. I tried telling myself that Jonathan deserved everything he'd got.

'Zulu!' his voice still rang in my ear. 'What are you doing here, Zulu? Why don't you go live with your people?'

Your people.

This was my home. I didn't know any other place.

I changed the TV channels and got up to fetch the pizza.

Somehow I knew that Jonathan's words weren't the only thing bothering me that day. There was something else: a hurried conversation mum had had with me that morning.

'We have to have a talk,' she'd said.

'Not now, I'm late.'

'It's important, Buyi.'

'Mum!'

'Tonight then. When I get back from work.'

I knew something was troubling her too. It had been for more than a month now. I didn't want to ask her about it. I knew she would tell me when she was ready.

Trouble, said a voice from the back of my mind.

Trouble was brewing. And it wasn't something I could simply lock out. The trouble was already inside the flat.

CHAPTER 2

Mum sighed as she came in through the front door. Her eyes had dark rings under them; the rest of her face was paler than usual. Her blonde hair was in a mess, her clothes wrinkled. She tried to keep the door open with her foot, as she had shopping bags in one hand and a pizza box in the other.

‘Well, don’t just lie there, Buyi, come help me.’

‘What? Pizza again?’ I complained as I got up from the couch. ‘We had pizza last night.’