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MD VILLIERS

City of Blood

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PART ONE

THE PLACE OF GOLD

I

The woman lay bleeding on the pavement on the corner of Loveday and Jeppe Street. The circle of people who'd gathered around had grown into a small crowd, spilling over into the road, causing the traffic to snake by in a single lane. I had been there from the start, from the moment the Nigerian had pulled the knife. I could see it coming. The Nigerian had that way about him. I'd watched his approach, the way his eyes never left the woman.

She had been busy behind her stall, a blanket wrapped tightly round her shoulders to keep out the morning chill, her hands rearranging the mangoes by putting their red sides up to give them a better chance of being bought. So busy was she that she had not seen him, had not seen the knife until he was right in front of her. He had stabbed her twice and pulled the knife from her as she fell down. He wiped his hands on a rag and took a mango before walking away. He'd looked at me as if he could see straight through me, as if I were a window in an empty house.

The crowd shuffled round, whispered, stared and did nothing but wait for the woman's life to ebb away. Sirens screamed further down the road – at least someone had phoned

for an ambulance. The woman's eyes were open, her hands clutching her bloody belly. I thought she was looking at me, at my feet, and I glanced down myself. Old running shoes, blue and white, with the sole of the right shoe loose at the back. And I thought about shoes, about how they were all you could see when you were lying on the ground surrounded by strangers.

That was the moment I stepped out of the crowd. I did not know why. Perhaps because I didn't want to be part of something this dead and silent, because I didn't want to do nothing, like everybody else. I knelt next to the woman.

'Sister?' I ripped off my shirt and covered her stomach. 'You hold on, sister.' Around us the city held its breath. The street vendors, the passers-by, the Nigerian knifeman, all watched with surprise. Above me a thin strip of blue showed over the skyscrapers. It made me wish that I was somewhere else.

'You hold on, sister.' Blood was pooling on the pavement next to me. My shirt was soaked in it. Why was I doing this? She would not live and I could feel the Nigerian's eyes on my back.

The ambulance stopped, a police car behind it. The silent crowd parted to let them through. One of the paramedics was a woman. She knelt next to the wounded woman and talked softly, while her hands got busy. She spoke English, but with a heavy accent. An Afrikaans woman here in the middle of Johannesburg. There was kindness in her eyes – these things you noticed when you watched closely, as I did. Kind eyes and clever hands, but surely they would not save the woman. She'd lost too much blood. In the distance gunshots punctuated the city noise. Someone else, somewhere, dying.

They took her away in the ambulance and left her blood in a pool on the street. The crowd stirred when the police pushed forward. Four of them, two black, two white. Two in uniform, the other two wearing ordinary clothes, but with bulletproof vests and guns. They were throwing questions around. The crowd, like ants, rushed off to work. I should have left too, but my thoughts were still with the woman and, before I could move, one of the white cops marched over to me. He offered me a cigarette, which I took. He was a young man, not much older than me, with pale skin and freckles. When he held out a light, I noticed the muscles playing in his forearms and the size of his hands. Fingers like bananas.

'What's your name?' he asked.

I didn't like the look of him. He looked like a man who knew how to use his fists.

'Siphiwe Modise,' I said.

'OK, Siphiwe, you have an ID?'

'No.' Of course I had an ID, but I kept it at the shelter, where it was safe, and I saw no reason to tell him about it.

'You saw what happened here?'

I shook my head. His shoes were black and shiny. It would take hours to polish shoes to look like that.

'Can you look at me, Siphiwe?'

'I saw nothing.'

'Ja, I bet. You saw nothing and heard nothing, eh? But you sat by the woman and held her hand. You must know her.'

'I don't know her.'

Another cop joined us, a black man with sharp eyes.

'I swear he saw everything,' the younger one said. 'He's suddenly gone blind and just about mute.'

Behind his back the Nigerian stood in the door of a shop, eating his mango, looking on as if it had nothing to do with him.

'We'll talk some more later, OK, Siphiwe?' the young policeman said. 'Where do you live?'

I waved my hand to the east.

'On the streets?'

'Yes.'

'Maybe we should take him to the station with us,' the white cop said, but the other one had already turned his back on us.

They left me alone on the pavement. I stood there for a while, not knowing what to do, then I started to pick up the mangoes from the upturned boxes on which they were displayed. I put them all in one box. People were getting back to what they were doing before as if nothing had happened. Two women were talking to each other on the opposite side of the road; one of them pointed in my direction. I glanced at the shop again. The Nigerian had gone.

Around me the city went back to normal. The rhythmic voices of the street vendors blended with music blaring out from shops, traffic, horns blowing, sirens screaming.

I crossed the road, turned the corner, and walked straight into the Nigerian's fist. He was a strong man and he hit me hard. I dropped the mangoes and raised my arms to protect my face. His fist found my stomach. When I fell, he kicked me twice, bent over me and twisted his fingers through my hair. He forced my head back.

'You listen to me, boy. I'll fucking kill you.' I felt the edge

of his knife against my throat. 'You talk to the cops and I'll cut your throat, you hear?' He let go of my hair.

Dragging my knees up to my chest, I covered my head with my arms, expecting more kicks. I focused on the patterns on his shoes, the little dots in the shiny brown leather. He spat at me and walked away. I stayed still, waiting for the pain to stop. This was a very bad day. I had lost my best shirt. I'd been beaten up and there was spit running down my arms. Why did people think they could spit at me as if I were a dog?

'Siphiwe!'

I opened one eye as wide as I could, tried to open both, but my right eye was swollen shut.

'Siphiwe, are you dead?'

Msizi was nine years old. He had no parents, like most of the children at the shelter. Small and tough, he followed me around like a puppy. I groaned. The box of mangoes stood next to me.

'Look, I picked them up for you,' he said. 'I ate one.'

He showed me his hands, which were stained yellow with the juice.

'Do you want one?'

I struggled to my feet and wiped the blood from my nose with the back of my hand.

'Do you want one, Siphiwe?'

'No!' He was a nuisance, this boy, always chattering like a monkey, pestering me with questions.

'I'll take you home,' he said and his sticky fingers closed around my wrist.

I went down on one knee to lift the box, wishing I could

leave it, but we could do with fruit at the shelter. Each step brought agony, each breath sent needles into my chest. Msizi babbled on, but I did not listen. I tried to think of other things, of this city and its people and my life here.

They called it the Dark Continent – the people who did not live here – and they called this Egoli, the Place of Gold. The place of gold? I had lived on the fringes of this city all of my life and I'd never seen a single ounce of gold. I had seen the miners crawl out of the earth's dark belly, drinking in the bright blue sky as if they'd not seen it before. I'd seen their faces and heard their talk and had promised myself I'd never go down there. There were better ways to die.

And they called this the greatest city in Africa: Johannesburg. People came from all over, from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and places up north: Ghana, Nigeria. All flooding this place, hoping things would be better here. More than a hundred years of city built on nothing but gold and the dreams of fools.

Without the shelter, I would not have made it. My mother died when I was fourteen, leaving my brother and me alone. The next year, a month before his seventeenth birthday, my brother too was dead. That was when I came to the shelter. They took me in, asking questions which I refused to answer. They took me in despite that.

There were three women at the shelter. One was called Grace. She was the cook and the one who looked after all of us. Everyone talked to Grace. Everyone listened when she spoke. Grace had two pairs of shoes, one brown, one black, both lace-ups with flat heels, because she was on her feet all day.

One of the others was Lungile, a young Zulu woman who talked loudly and constantly. She was different from any Zulu I knew, because she was rich. She had been to a private school, went to England to study and came back home to change the world.

The third was a white woman called Dr van der Sandt. She was old enough to know you didn't go about changing the world with talk and good intentions. I had been there almost a year before I noticed her eyes. Blue eyes that asked questions and never left you alone. Before that day I noticed other things about her. She wore a different pair of shoes every day. She even had a pair of red shoes with needle-thin heels. She had thick ankles and strong, short legs criss-crossed with veins.

Once she had asked me, 'Siphiwe, what are you running from?'

That was the day I'd noticed her eyes. I'd glanced up from my work and down again. It was an unfair question. What would it mean to her, a white woman in high heels? What would it be to her that a Sotho boy, whose parents had died, had also lost his brother?

I had been living in the shelter for four years. They made me finish school. Grace had found a man who gave me free lessons in mathematics. She'd said that I'd fallen behind because my schooling had been badly interrupted. Lungile had helped me with the other subjects. I had to work hard. I didn't want to disappoint them. In my spare time I worked in the garden where I taught myself about growing vegetables. I also helped Grace in the kitchen and listened to her talk and talk about what was wrong with this country. About the

people coming from all over Africa to take our jobs, about the crime rate and corruption and the government not keeping their promises.

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Letswe lit a cigarette while he watched the man die. He took his time, the blood bubbling in bursts from his mouth. It was always amusing, those last few minutes of a man's life, from the moment it dawned on him that his time was up. You could learn a lot about a man by watching him die. Some begged, some tried to argue their way out, a few would put up a fight – he respected that – but most tried to run for it. One time he'd pulled out his gun to shoot a man and the man leapt over a fence and dived through a gap in the prefab wall around the next property. He hadn't seemed exceptionally athletic, but he'd covered twenty metres in less than two seconds. Could have qualified for the Olympics. Letswe chuckled. For all he knew, the man was still running. Anyway, he got away, that one.

'Eh, William,' he said to the man standing next to him. 'The way a man dies reveals a lot about his character.' The irony of it had him laughing.

William said nothing. He had no sense of humour, no understanding of the finer nuances of life. Brute force, that was William's way, but that was OK by Letswe. He had seen William beat a man to death with his fists. He'd watched