

WARRIOR BOY

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For Justin, Amelia and PJ

Reto oreeto olaashe lengeteng'ai
Earth, animals, people – all are one



The African plain lay wide open in front of him – hot as hell, dry as death.

Limbs stiff with fear and readiness, lungs burning with fatigue. His shallow, uneven breaths brought no relief – merely pain and yet more dust. He tried to swallow, but the sides of his throat stuck together for a moment. No water, not even a breeze to cool his parched skin.

Only the hot, hard stare of the lion before him penetrated the haze.

Never look a predator in the eye . . .

Too late. Its amber eyes bore into him, scanning for fear, finding terror.

And then it moved.

As the animal crouched down and set him in its sights, he realized there was only one thing left to do – the worst possible thing in this situation.

Run.



CHAPTER 1



Yes, I know it's freezing outside,' exclaimed Ms Matthews, 'but please take your coats off in class, otherwise you won't feel the benefit. Right! Today we are learning about the sucking chest wound.'

A wave of sniggers rippled around the room, but Ben didn't join in. Out of all the lessons at The Hill, emergency first aid was the only one worth taking seriously. There were never any tests or homework, and for forty magical minutes Ben could dream that he had made it to medical school.

'Who here has ever seen a gunshot wound?' Ms Matthews continued. The students looked around at each other, nervous grins spreading across their faces.

‘OK then, who knows someone who has been stabbed or shot?’ Three or four hands were raised tentatively. Ben wondered if they were genuine – his neighbourhood wasn’t *that* bad.

Ms Matthews cleared her throat. ‘A sucking chest wound occurs when the chest cavity is pierced, the pressure balance is disrupted, and the control of air, in and out of the lung, is lost. Oxygen cannot reach the brain, the victim becomes unconscious very quickly, and they will probably die if they don’t receive help from YOU!’

She pointed at Jake and Liam – the McAllister twins – who had already been moved to the front before they could cause any trouble. They jumped slightly, then elbowed each other in the ribs, their faces flushing.

‘Statistics tell us that by the time you leave school, every one of you will know someone who has been shot or stabbed. Just a reality of growing up in this part of London, I’m afraid. So concentrate, please, class – what you learn now could save someone’s life.’

Ben’s dad had saved a life before he’d lost his own. *What it would feel like to be a hero*, wondered Ben, *to be the one everyone looked up to for a change?*

‘OK!’ said Ms Matthews. ‘Take out your school ID, and put it on the desk in front of you.’ She strode around the classroom, checking everyone had followed her instructions, then stopped in front of Ben.

‘This,’ she said, pointing at the ID card in Ben’s hand, ‘is your best friend for a sucking chest wound.’

‘What, Ben Olmorán, Miss?’ said Liam McAllister, and Ben knew that a joke about his name was coming next. ‘All-Moron? He’s no one’s best friend!’

Not-very-funny name jokes were about as far as the McAllisters ever went with Ben, but he was well aware that it wasn’t like this for everyone.

His rich brown skin and soft, sandy-tipped curls were features that he shared with several other kids in the school, but Ben’s eyes were a dark yellow colour, like old gold and his voice sounded more like he was from Harrow than Hackney. Ordinarily, the McAllisters would destroy someone like him, but he was pretty sure the reason they didn’t, was because of his dad.

Ms Matthews marched back towards the twins and picked up Jake’s ID from the desk in front of him. He folded his arms and stared at her. ‘This card,’ she

continued, unfazed, ‘or a credit card, or your bus pass, is all you need to save someone’s life when they’ve been shot or stabbed in the chest. But before I tell you what to do with it, can anyone guess how you recognize a sucking chest wound?’

‘There’s a vampire running away from the body, Miss?’ quipped Liam, and the class erupted. But Ben thought about the question. It must be the sound, he thought – a sucking sound.

‘It’s the sound of sucking, of course!’ said Ms Matthews. ‘There will be bright red, frothy blood bubbling from the wound, but the sound is the giveaway.’

Ben’s stomach rose into his throat. No one at school knew about his phobia. They wouldn’t understand, so he kept it quiet.

Blood.

Just the thought of it was enough to make him dizzy, but as long as he didn’t see it, he probably wouldn’t faint. He just wished Ms Matthews would stop talking about it. Today was his birthday and if there was one day in the year when he’d like to forget about blood – this was it.

‘So,’ continued Ms Matthews, ‘once you have

identified it as a sucking chest wound, all you need to do is clear the area – which might involve ripping the person’s shirt – then you cover the wound with the card and hold it down as firmly as possible. A card like this is good because it forms a tight seal. If you use something soft like a T-shirt, it will be sucked into the hole.’

There were a few snorts of disgust, but most of the class were concentrating now, imagining themselves as lifesavers.

‘Finally,’ she said, ‘you call an ambulance or have someone else do it, keeping the card in place until a paramedic says it’s OK to let go.’

As she went over the steps again with the class, Ben began to relax – the immediate danger had most likely passed.

‘So, we have established that wounds need pressure to stop the bleeding, but how would you know it was a more serious arterial injury and not just a vein that had been ruptured?’ she asked.

Lyra Cohen’s hand shot into the air. ‘The blood would pour out, Miss?’

Ben’s stomach began to churn again.

‘Yes,’ agreed the teacher, ‘it would definitely pour

out, faster than blood from a vein, but sometimes it might even squirt.’ The class was silent now, and Ben was convinced they must be able to hear the sound of his heart thumping against his ribs. ‘Arterial blood coming out of a wound can reach amazing distances,’ Ms Matthews added, reaching for a large plastic water shooter that was lying on her desk.

Then, as she raised it in the air, Ben could see that it was filled, not with water, but a thicker red liquid. His arms and legs went ice-cold.

‘This toy gun is filled with stage blood,’ she continued. ‘I am going to fire it at the whiteboard to show you just how powerful arterial blood can be. How far back do you think I should stand?’ she asked the class. Most people opted for the first row and Ms Matthews obliged them by standing there for a few moments. But then she turned dramatically and marched away from the first row, past the second and eventually she took her position next to Ben, on the third.

‘The furthest recorded distance for an arterial blood spurt is four metres,’ she said. ‘Like this!’

Crouching suddenly, she fired the shooter in the direction of the whiteboard. As the bright red paint hit its pristine canvas, the class exploded into whoops

and shouts of ‘Sick!’ and ‘No way!’

But no one had noticed that a little bit of fake blood had squirted out of the back of the gun and landed on Ben’s face.

He automatically wiped it away with his forearm, then glanced down at his shirt sleeve. The scarlet paint against the bright white cotton was dazzling, almost beautiful. And that was all it took.

Everything around him seemed to slow down, voices deepened and his face, like his limbs, turned to ice. He tried repeating, ‘It’s just paint, it’s just paint,’ under his breath, but suddenly felt like he might be sick.

He lurched to his feet. As he did so, his chair screeched backwards, and several people turned to find Ben swaying like a cartoon skyscraper. They began pointing at him and nudging each other, drawing yet more attention to Ben’s stricken face.

A wave of dizziness swam through him, and the sea of faces now leering at him became strangely grotesque, stretching and dripping like molten wax. He rubbed his eyes, but it just made everything more blurred.

As his field of vision narrowed, a high-pitched

ringing sound grew in his ears. The two things seemed to be related somehow, like an unseen force was squeezing his eyeballs into dark tunnels and making them squeal in pain.

Then finally, as the last splinter of light in Ben's eyes was extinguished, his legs folded beneath him, pulling the rest of his body with them in a slow-motion slide to the floor.