

HEART STRINGS

By Tracey Farren

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CHAPTER 1

Let me tell you the story of Black Mozart. It started with a rock.

The new girl is fast. She has blonde dreadlocks and skin as white as a shining dinner plate. She comes in at half time as centre and runs like the wind. Over and over she gets a foot to the ball and tap taps it to her wing, setting up the Tigers women's team to pass it down the line.

She is useless at long passes. They fall short or fly too far, like her legs are too long to be accurate. The legs that are so skinny it looks like you could fold them at the joints and pack them in your bag, like a guitar stand.

I've finished playing and am watching the women's team. Seven minutes to go and they have three goals each. The Hawks are on their own turf, their supporters yelling from the side.

“Take it, take it!”

“Tackle!”

The white girl tries a long pass to her striker, Kholeka, but it lands neatly at the feet of the enemy.

“Aagh,” Kholeka groans in frustration.

“Shit!” the white girl swears, then she’s off like a streak of lightning, blonde dreads whipping, to get the ball back.

The Hawks’ and the Tigers’ women’s teams have been rivals for the top of the log three years running.

This girl is the only white person on the field, her face red with effort now. She is wet with sweat, not fit enough, but she forces herself into a full sprint. She lunges for the ball, but as her boot touches it she jerks like she has hit a bomb planted in the grass. She crashes to the ground. The game goes on as she rolls, clutching at her hip.

“Who did that?” she groans.

“Lisa, are you okay?” Kholeka shouts.

The girl points at the yelling spectators.

“Someone threw a rock at me!”

“Haai,” someone growls. “Voetsek!”

CHAPTER 2

The play stops. Her team mates hunt around for signs of the weapon. Kholeka struts along the side-line, asking the spectators, “Who threw a rock? Sies!”

The stocky goalie from the Hawks’ men’s side shouts back, “She’s talking rubbish. Get lost!” He taunts: “Umhlope!”

The referee looks bewildered. The muscular Hawks man advances over the side-line, threatening, “There’s no rock. Go home, whitey!”

These girls are from the club, so I’ve got to do something. I jog onto the pitch, wave at everyone with much more confidence than I feel.

“It’s okay! It’s okay!”

I crouch down at the white girl’s side. She smells like sweat and lemons. I hiss at her furiously, “Shut up about the rock! When you pop a muscle, it feels like something big hit you.”

“Huh?”

“Get off the field!”

She tries to stand, but collapses in agony. I’d like to throw the white girl into the dustbin but I have no choice. I sling her arm around my shoulder and lift her up. Kholeka helps me half carry her off.

The ref blows the whistle. The crowd retreats to the side-lines and the game goes on.

Disaster averted.

On the side-line, the white girl says pitifully, “I really thought—”

“Why would they throw a rock?” I glare at her, contemptuous.

“Because I’m white.”

The pain has turned the skin around her mouth as white as bone. I walk away, deeply disgusted by her racist assumption. From a distance, I watch as she calls the stocky, angry man to come closer. He marches up to her, still furious.

“Sorry,” she says.

He spits at her feet.

“Sorry!” she shouts after him.

One thing is for sure, the white girl doesn’t give up easily.

CHAPTER 3

The Tigers’ play is scrappy and has no heart, as if they are embarrassed. Their defence without Lisa’s speed is weak. The Hawks score in the last two minutes.

Kholeka comes panting to the side after the final whistle. She studies her friend’s leg.

“Oh no. You can’t drive.” She asks her teammates, “Who else has a licence?”

They all shake their heads. Kholeka asks me, “What about you, Langa?”

I only have a learner’s licence, but I drove my brother’s car in Soweto.

“Where do you stay?” I ask her.

“Fish Hoek.”

I have no excuse. I share a flat near Fish Hoek station, for easy travel on the train. I can drop her and jog home myself.

I get into the driver’s seat with the girl, Lisa next to me. As I drive the other four players back to Masi township, she asks me quietly, “How long to fix it?”

For a second I think she means the whole of our angry South African history. But she is pressing on her injured hip.

“Ten weeks at least. You need to go for an X-ray today.”

“Who will fetch you from the hospital?” Kholeka asks, from the back seat.

“My mom’s working. I’ll try my brother.”

“Let me come with you.”

“No don’t, Kholeka. Seriously. It’s not necessary.”

When we have dropped off the others, Lisa says sincerely, “Sorry for embarrassing you.”

There is something about her honesty that plucks at my heart strings. I shrug. “This country.”

I’m not sure if she is fighting back tears of humiliation, or of pain from her torn hip.

“How far do you run, between soccer practices?”

She shakes her head, says, “Nought kilometres.”

“That’s asking for trouble. You need to do at least ten kays.”

“I don’t have time. I have to practise guitar.”

“What guitar?” I can’t help asking.

“Classical. UCT. They want you to practise in your sleep.”

I hide my surprise. “I’m final year jazz.”

“Oh!” she says, startled. I feel her studying me. “I haven’t seen you.”

“Different buildings,” I say, shrug off her interest.

She sighs. “You’re lucky. Classical’s killing me.”

I park at the Casualty entrance of the local hospital and fetch her a wheelchair. The sooner I get rid of this girl the simpler my life will be.

My very last loyal deed to my soccer club is to take her in my arms and lift her from the car seat.

But some kind of electric pulse strikes through both of us, and only recedes as I drop her in the wheelchair.

“Thank you,” she says shakily, as I hand her the car keys. “I’m fine from here.”

She swivels and tries to roll her wheels over the steel ridge of the door frame. She rocks back and forth, scrabbling at the wheels. The security guard and I smile at each other over her head. I give her wheelchair a little nudge. This time she makes it through. She rolls to the Reception window but she is too low for the man there to see her. She waves to him in vain as he continues with his computer work.

I am considering going in to help her when a Xhosa woman untangles herself from the long patients’ queue and takes Lisa’s identity document from her. She puts it on the counter and speaks in Xhosa on her behalf.

“Lisa Andrews.”

I get out of there.

CHAPTER 4

I don't see the white girl for three weeks. As I said, we study in different buildings and I don't hang out in the music school café, because it will definitely blow my budget.

I try not to look out for Lisa but flashes of her green eyes keep hijacking my mind – short, sudden memories of her pride, then her shame.

My good friend, Bonani, asks me to play guitar for a recording of his main Marabi piece. The two of us are specialising in the rebel township jazz of the sort that Hugh Masekela and those old guys gave us. We are clattering towards the studio with our instruments when I see Lisa on a bench, jiggling her feet, looking pale and haunted.

A weird jolt of current courses through my system. She is in no better condition than when I saw her last, but this time biting her nails so violently that she doesn't even see us.

“Don't you need those nails to play classical?”

She jerks her fingers from her mouth. Her face lights up when she sees me.

“I do.” She points at a closed door. “I'm doing a prac exam in there.”

“How's your hip?”

“So, so slow.”

“When do you go in?”

She checks her watch, groans, “Twenty-five minutes.”

Something in me refuses to walk away.

“Come and hang with us for a bit. We’re recording.” The sun breaks through the clouds as she smiles.

Lisa sits quietly in the corner as we play, shining with appreciation. She is beautiful, really. I play fluidly, somehow at ease, a strange happiness singing through me. Bonani is on form, his timing with his sax humorous, yet suffering. I don’t know how he does it. Lisa claps at the end of the track, her green eyes bright with emotion.

“Wow. Beautiful. I would stop classical right now if I could play like that.”

Bonani raises his eyebrows. “Ooh classical. Oh so colonial.”

It’s an old taunt between the two schools of music. She takes the insult graciously, smiles with her slightly crooked, sweet teeth.

“It’s boring me to tears.” She touches my sleeve. “I’ve got to go. Thank you.”

Electricity zips between us, like we got caught between two amps. She blushes red while I hold my breath, try to act casual.

“Good luck for your exam,” I say. She limps out, and I notice her bum’s not as skinny as I would have expected. She stops at the door.

“Can we maybe jam some time?”

Now it’s like I swallowed an amp.

“I’ll find you on Facebook.” I manage to sound calm and detached but some strange music is plucking through my system.

CHAPTER 5

That Saturday, I knock on the door of Lisa’s house. A middle-aged woman, with dyed red hair, opens it.

“Sorry,” she says. “I’ve got nothing for you.”

Inside I cringe with embarrassment. She thinks I am a beggar.

“Mom!” Lisa squeals behind her. “It’s for me!”

Her mother watches us suspiciously. A tall, unwashed-looking boy with a fashionable wise man’s beard shuffles in to take a look at me, as Lisa virtually drags me through the kitchen. Out of a door on the other side is a little music room that she seems to share with the clean washing. Four rows of washing hang above a drum kit, a microphone on a stand and a child’s violin.

“The sound’s not great in here,” Lisa says. “The washing sucks it up.”

I wave at the washing. “At least we have an audience.”

We both laugh at the empty sleeves and hanging pants waiting to hear us play. As we start to tune our guitars the dishevelled boy sidles in and joins the crowd of clean washing.

“David,” Lisa says. “What the hell?”

“Mom sent me.”

Her mouth goes white with anger, just as when she was in agony with her hip.

“Get out,” she orders him. But the boy lays his head against the wall and seems to drift into a haze.

“Stoned,” she says to me. “As usual.” She pleads with me, “Play something, Langa. I’ll try and follow.”

And this is what we do. We don’t bother to plug into the amp at the washing machine, as I launch into a defiant, rocking Marabi piece. Lisa watches carefully, tries her best to mimic me.

She plays in a way that is completely opposite to her soccer. Her chord changes are precise, her passes too perfect. Her fingers are sticky on the guitar frets, slow to veer into a different melody.

I stop for a second, tell her gently, “You need to miss. Go too short or too long. There’s no right or wrong. Just feel it and ... I don’t know ... swing.”

She loosens her sticky fingers and lets her notes run. She catches it from me, the feeling.

I find myself trying some of her stuttering. Sometimes I halt and play unusual, picky riffs that tell a tighter tale.

Together we create a fusion of daring, of worry, of deep, excited peace. We play short and long, fast and slow, wrong and right – all in the middle of a stiff, white suburb that is frightened of my dark skin.

A sleek, brown dog with white snow spots trots in and drops a pebble on my toe. I flick it away. The dog darts to fetch it and tips it daintily back onto my shoe. Now and then it runs outside to collect another pebble as a gift.

Our music seems to spiral into the limp boy in the corner. He unravels slowly and starts to jive. Without even trying I seem to have won over the suburban dog and the stoner brother. I think I catch a glimpse of Lisa’s mother hovering uncertainly outside the door for a moment. I think I hear her sigh a helpless sigh.

I smile, play even more indigenous, get Lisa’s fingers tucking jauntily into her strings, get her druggie brother jiving with real rhythm.

After the last, long piece the three of us laugh as if we have all been smoking her brother's weed. The spotty dog is dripping spit on my foot. There are little pebbles everywhere.

I pick them up one by one and give them to Lisa. Some kind of current shoots through my fingertips into her palm as I touch her. It's crazy. Even the dog jerks still for a second.

Her brother says, "You guys should start a band. You could call it ..." He gazes at the roof, thinking. "Black Mozart." He slopes out, tactful for a stoner.

"Not a bad idea," Lisa says softly.

I face the tentative hope in her eyes. Something cruel slashes through me. This is not the way my life was meant to go, never mind my music.

I was raised by a mother whose own mother worked herself to death in a big white house. I shake my head, laugh contemptuously.

"That's like ebony and ivory. I hate that black-and-white-uniting stuff. A bit convenient."

My sarcasm makes her step back and gasp for breath. She is not sure how to read me, despite years and years of recognising musical notes and playing them perfectly.

I'm not sure how to read me either. I pack my guitar into its case, hit the clips.

“Thanks for the jam.” I am careful not to pass too close and risk triggering the raw charge between us. I stride out, followed by the eager brown dog I seem to have impressed more than her mother.

Lisa presses the buzzer to let me out. I feel her waiting for me to turn and meet her eyes, but I sweep out, punishing the both of us.

CHAPTER 6

But the wound I inflicted festers in me. It’s like Lisa and I are of the same damn flesh. Over the days the yearning grows from an ache to a burning in my chest. What on earth is happening to me?

I phone my mother in Soweto.

“Mama, what would you do if I had a girlfriend who is white?”

“No, Langa. It can’t be.”

“I don’t. But what if I did?”

“Sies.”

“Why, Mama? You educated me. You made sure I can get somewhere, and that ‘somewhere’ has good white people in it.”

“No. They have been ruined. They will only use you. You can be friends, but never go too close.”

“Mama, that is the old thinking.”

“Langa, please, I want you to keep your roots. Not go and make coloured children.”

“Mama, how can I keep my roots if I have no father, even?”

“Your uncle Dumile gave you something special. He taught you his music to give you a strong future.”

Oh, my word. My mother is clever. She is persuasive. She digs deeper and deeper with the sharp edge of her spade. Let's face it, my mother has always been quite psychic. She senses the voltage running between Lisa and me. It's like she knows that this thing might not only be about making music. It might also be about making babies.

I sigh.

“Okay Mama, relax. Keep it cool,” I back down; cowardly. When I end the call I feel gutted inside, drained of joy.

At least Lisa's mother will be happy. It is like our two mothers are tearing at us from opposite sides, with all the bitterness of their prejudices.

After a week Lisa texts me on WhatsApp.

You want to jam again?

I ignore the surge of eagerness that moves through me. I don't answer, but the electromagnetic radiation of our

cellphones seems to hiss between us. She knows I read her message; she would have received those two blue WhatsApp ticks. She is too proud to keep trying.

CHAPTER 7

It is two, heavy, empty weeks later when this guy from Laos comes to UCT to moderate our final pieces. I'm facing a red brick wall, strumming at the air, practising my chords to try and soothe my fear, when I smell lemons in the passage. I spin around. Lisa has stopped in mid stride, staring at me. She smiles awkwardly.

"Hi, Langa."

Someone nudges her from behind. She keeps walking but her eyes betray a flash of sorrow. I stare at her fingertips, loose and helpless at her side as she walks away from me. It feels like she has an invisible wire wound around them, drawing me towards her. I stumble after her and grab her hand. I squeeze it too hard. Our pulses seem to crash violently, then synchronise.

"I want to jam with you," I say. "I'm sorry I didn't answer." I shrug. "I'm just ... it's just a shock."

I don't need to say anything more.

"Me too! Weird, isn't it?" Her grin is beautiful.

I point at the door. "My turn to be scared."

"That man from Laos?"

I nod, swallow.

“You’ll kill it,” she says. She tries to kiss me on the cheek but she gets my chin.

We laugh like children.

Lisa nods, serious. “Just do your thing.”

And I do. I do my thing, powered by Lisa’s stubborn trust, her sweet confidence in me.

I play full force in the choruses, soft and soulful in the quieter parts. I let my guitar laugh in the syncopated bits, let it sob, heartbroken, mourning the lives of the people who died under apartheid. I play a solo, but it could be played by seven men.

The music teacher from Laos is blown away.

“This is one to watch,” he says to my lecturer. He turns to me, “Langa, you play like you are ...” He shakes his head, wondering. “... channelling the feelings from the old townships.”

I shake his hand in a dignified manner. “That’s my mission.” I have just earned my distinction, I know this without a shadow of a doubt. I will qualify for a bursary to do honours next year. I drift from the room, almost sick with happiness.

Lisa has disappeared from the passage. I switch on my phone. She has left a text.

See you later. Xxx (on the chin)

I laugh freely in the red brick corridor.

It won't be easy, I know this. I will build my mastery of Marabi and always be true to its emotional beauty.

And Lisa and I will make such unusual, gorgeous music that our mothers will be silenced by it.

That's what we do.

Together we jam, we rock, we drum, we pluck at the heart strings of our guitars.

We play soccer on Saturdays.

One day we will tour the country, one day the earth.

This is the story of Black Mozart.

It started with a rock.

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