

A NOVEL

*The battle over a man's past.
A fight for a boy's future.*

THE FIGHT

LUKE WORDLEY

Praise for *The Fight*

“Found myself hooked from the very first page . . . an astonishing debut novel. With well-developed characters, a strong moral, and an engaging finish . . . compares favorably with the finest male-orientated action novels in the mainstream today. Highly recommend.”

—**DAVIS BUNN**
bestselling author

“I loved *The Fight*. It is so realistic and true to life. I can’t recommend this book enough.”

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two-time world champion boxer

“A powerful page-turner—brilliant and deeply compelling.”

—**ANDY HAWTHORNE**
founder of The Message Trust

“A high-paced, gritty, and beautiful redemption story.”

—**SARAH WYNTER**
editor of *Youthwork* magazine

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The Fight

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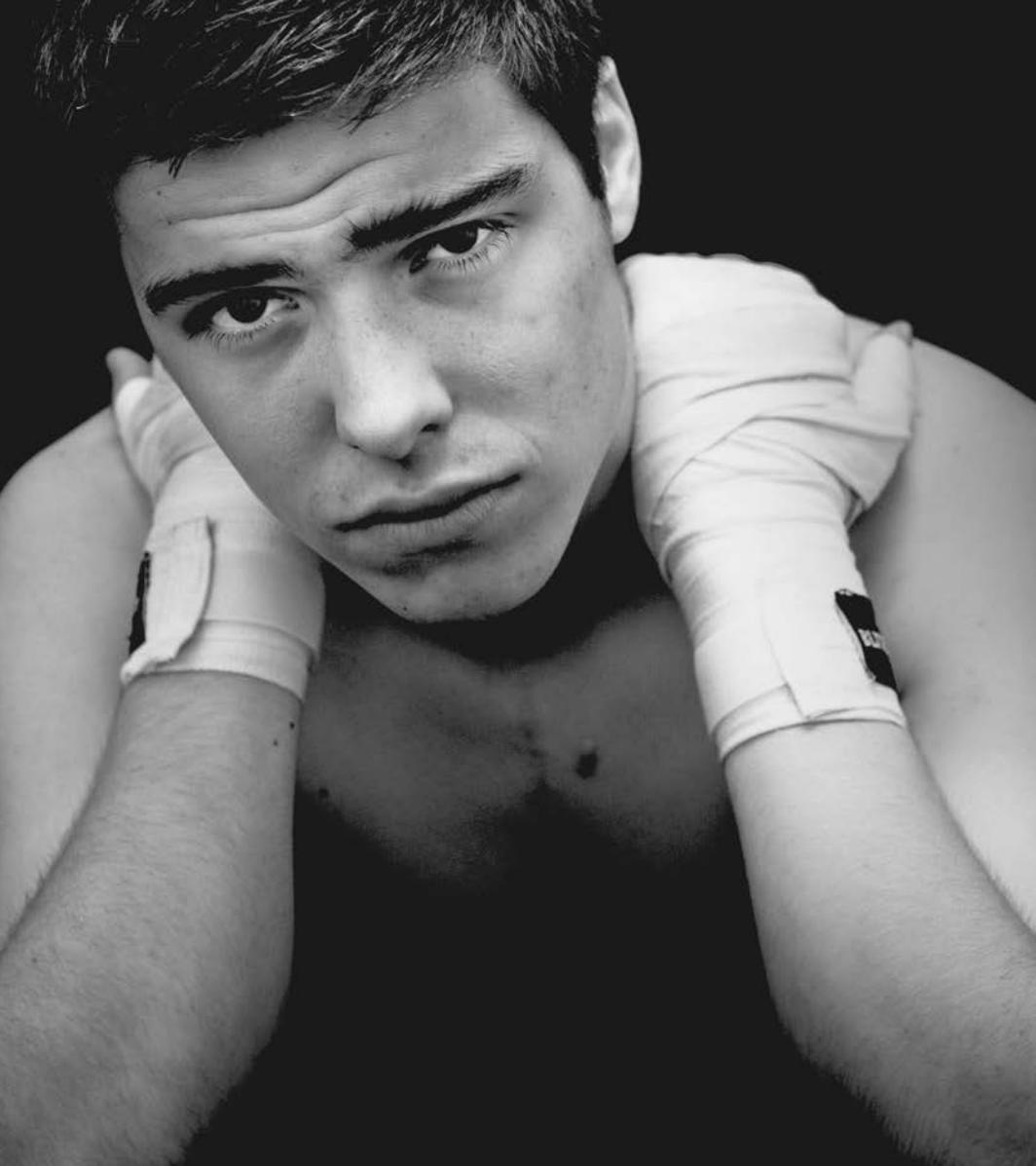
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PART
ONE

1

Sam Pennington crouched in the filthy concrete stairwell, his eyes scanning the wasteland that the boys would have to cross. Slowly the three brothers emerged into view across the rubbish-strewn ground.

Gypsies. Sam was sure of it. They might live in the flat across the road and not in a caravan, but they were gypsies nonetheless. The white van and their dad's two greyhounds gave it away. They were the type who had stolen tractor diesel from Sam's family's farm and chased the rabbits and hares with their dogs, trampling all over the fields without a care about the crops they were ruining.

Yep, these boys were going to be trouble. Sam had seen them across the street, talking and staring when he and his mum were moving into their flat. The next day the oldest one had knocked on the door and asked if Sam wanted to

play football. Sam had refused. He knew what they were trying to do—lure him out. A fight was just a matter of time.

Sam crouched even lower as the boys, unaware of him lying in wait, got closer. The brothers jostled, competing to kick an empty Coke can into an imaginary goal. Their easy sibling manner jarred Sam and made him even more determined as they walked forward, oblivious of the danger a few yards ahead.

He jumped up and sprinted from the stairwell, going straight for the biggest brother. The boy didn't even have time to raise his hands as Sam punched him hard in the mouth. He crashed to a heap on the ground, screaming. Perfect. Sam had felt teeth break and knew the boy wasn't getting up. That left one kid about his own size and the runt.

Sam turned toward the bigger boy, whose gaze shifted fearfully from his screaming brother to his assailant. The boy lifted his hands to protect his face, so Sam lowered his aim and smashed his fist into the boy's chest. He fell on his backside, fighting for air.

Sam glared at the youngest brother, who was standing a few yards away, frozen in fear. A large wet patch appeared on the little boy's trousers. With one last look at his brothers, he turned and ran away as fast as he could.

"I'll get you later!" Sam shouted after him, letting him go. The kid wasn't important. Sam had done what was needed. Both older boys were sniveling on the ground, cowering in the dirt.

"You scum. Leave me alone," Sam snarled.

The younger boy glanced at Sam warily. "We only wanted to play football."

Sam looked down at the boy. “Leave me alone,” he repeated before walking casually back toward his flat.

When he knew he was out of sight, he broke into a run and sprinted home. Order had been established.



Janet Pennington sat by the window and watched the street below, her back turned to her new home. The second-floor flat, part of a run-down public-housing complex, consisted of just four rooms—a living room with a built-in kitchen, a moldy bathroom, and two bedrooms so small that the beds touched the walls at both ends. The flat had been filthy when they moved in, the threadbare carpet covered in dirty marks and nicotine-stained wallpaper peeling at the edges. She had spent three days scrubbing, but the floor still stuck under her feet.

They were lucky, the housing officer had said. With the government’s big public-housing sell-off in full swing, unless you were a teenager with babies, you stood little chance of getting one. They had gotten one. Their unusual circumstances had obviously struck a chord with the world-weary housing officer. Janet had felt that perhaps their luck was changing when it was confirmed that they had a place. There were some charming government-owned houses in the villages near Copse Farm, where she had lived for seventeen years since marrying Sam’s father. However, her hopes had plummeted when she first drove into the Mandela complex eight miles away in Romford, Essex. Litter was strewn everywhere, and intimidating gangs of kids stared as their Land

Rover pulled in. It couldn't have been more different from the life they had known. But now 28C Soweto Rise was her and Sam's new home.

As Janet gazed out the window she saw Sam charging down the street. Seconds later he burst into the flat, slamming the door and bracing himself against it.

"Hi, darling. How was your first day at school?" she asked brightly, craving communication after a day alone in the flat.

"Crap," he said, panting.

Janet noticed his hands were shaking. "Come on. It can't have been that bad," she said with little hope.

"It was crap, and I'm not going back."

"Please stop swearing, Sam. You never used to swear."

"My life never used to be screwed."

Janet's eyes welled up with tears. "Well, that's not my fault." Her voice quivered, unconvinced.

Sam grunted and made for his room.

"No, please stop and t-t-talk." Janet's last word was drowned by the sound of Sam's door slamming shut.

She sighed heavily as her gaze returned to the street below. It hurt so much to see her only child like this. Once he had been a happy boy, full of laughter and smiles. But he had changed completely. Since the accident, he had assumed an almost permanent aggressive frown. Indeed, the only time she had seen him smile was when he had admitted with a satisfied smirk that he was responsible for the black eye miserably worn by an older boy at the guesthouse where they had stayed for a while before moving to the flat. From that moment, Janet had known she was losing her grip. Since they

had moved, little had changed. Sam was out of control. She couldn't cope with him. And he knew it.

Just then Janet saw two of the brothers from across the street hurrying up the road before disappearing into the stairwell of their flat. The older boy was cupping his mouth as if about to vomit, while his brother held on to his shoulder. Their mother soon appeared, looking furious as she stood with hands on hips, searching up and down the street. *Those kids look like they're in trouble*, Janet thought, noticing the mother's scowl as she kept glaring up at their flat. Janet could almost feel the mother's anger. She sighed again. If only she could muster up something similar, perhaps she might have a bit more control over Sam. Janet's husband, Robert, had done most of the disciplining in their house, although, in reality, apart from a bit of overexuberance that had to be checked once in a while, Sam had been an easy child.

The smallest brother appeared, his little legs a blur as he ran up the street. Even from this distance, Janet could see the boy was upset. His mother didn't tell him off but gave him a brief hug and quickly checked him over as she questioned him. In between sobs, the boy was clearly retelling a story, pointing back down the street and then up toward where Janet was sitting.

It was only when the mother sent the boy indoors and marched straight toward their flat that Janet realized what might have happened. A wave of nausea rose in her stomach as she counted the steps to her flat in her mind. Her gaze lifted to the door and the security chain hanging loosely

by the doorframe. She jumped up, rushed to the door, and fumbled with the chain, trying desperately to secure it. The safety chain found its slot just as the door shook violently under the onslaught of hammering fists on the other side. Janet jumped back, terrified.

“Open the door! I know you’re in there. I saw you at the window,” the woman shouted.

Janet stood rooted to the spot.

The banging got louder. “Open the door now!”

Janet opened the door to the limit of the chain and stood back. “Can I help you?” she said timidly.

The other woman’s face appeared through the gap, her eyes full of fury. “Can you help me? Can you *help* me? I’ve got three boys scared witless, and one is missing a front tooth. Thanks to your son in there!”

“I’m . . . I’m sure it wasn’t Sam,” Janet stammered instinctively. But she didn’t believe her own words, and it showed in her voice.

“Well, let’s ask him, shall we?” And with that, the weighty woman began throwing herself, shoulder first, at the softwood door. After three hefty barges, the door smashed wide open as the chain bracket splintered off the doorframe. Janet screamed as they came face-to-face.

“Where is he?” the woman shouted, scanning the dingy flat.

“Please leave,” Janet whimpered, standing between the woman and her son’s bedroom.

“Get out of my way!”

Janet staggered and fell awkwardly against the sideboard

as the woman pushed past her and opened Sam's bedroom door.

"No, please . . ." Janet sobbed. She had never seen such aggressive behavior from anyone before, and she was terrified. Sam was tough, but this woman would kill him.

The furious intruder left the bedroom and searched the rest of the flat.

"Where is he?" she yelled as Janet sat confused and frightened on the floor, shaking her head. The woman moved closer and demanded an answer.

Janet, looking up at her with terrified eyes, started to stammer. "I don't . . . I don't know."

The woman bent over Janet and pointed in her face.

"You better pray I don't get hold of him and that my kids never get touched again. If either of you mess with my family again, you're dead."

With that, the woman left as quickly as she had arrived.

Stunned, Janet pushed herself to her feet and limped to the door, slamming it shut. With shaking hands she attempted to push the shattered chain bracket into the hole it had been ripped from. It was futile. Janet dragged an old armchair they had brought from the farm across the thin nylon carpet. She jammed it against the door before staggering in confusion toward Sam's bedroom.

He wasn't anywhere to be seen. She knelt by his bed and looked underneath, but the space was full of boxes with nowhere to hide. There was only one possibility left. Janet stepped with trepidation toward the open window, hoping she wouldn't find her son's broken body on the concrete

twenty feet below. Sam wasn't there. Janet's relief lasted only a moment before the shock of the last two minutes overwhelmed her. She slumped to the ground. A second later the small flat was filled with desperate sobbing.

Janet finally rose, limped to the kitchen, and took a dirty mug from the sink. She opened the cupboard under the sink and, reaching to the back, pulled out a half-empty bottle. Her hands shook violently as she clasped the cool glass, causing the wine to spill as she filled the chipped porcelain mug. She grasped the mug in front of her face. The remnants of tea gave the pale liquid a murky, grayish-brown color. Janet shut her eyes, took a large gulp, and swallowed. She took another swig and exhaled deeply to calm her racing heart. Filling the mug again, Janet crossed the room and sank into the old upright armchair that, a month earlier, had been in the corner of the sitting room at Copse Farm.