



BLACK & GOLD: SECRET ORIGINS

Southend, 2005.

Inside his dingy cubicle Simon waited for the call to fight. He could already smell the boozy breath of punters walking up the stairs towards the Milton Elite Fighting Club. Floorboards that were never meant to bear the weight of so many people creaked and shifted above him as they took their seats. Simon was one of four local fighters billed for *Cage Carnage 13*, the series of mixed martial arts events all the local fight fans had been flocking to see since the turn of the millennium. Monday to Friday the cavernous area above him – nothing more than an empty warehouse – was the gym Simon trained in seven days a week. But not this week. In the weeks leading up to fights Simon tapered his training, slowing down, laying off sparring, and keeping efforts down to long runs and skipping. Tonight he was ready for his opponent, Jake Dregan, a young man bred of fighting stock from the travellers' side of Basildon. Dregan had a good rep, and had not been put down in nine fights, but Simon's record was good too. At 26 years of age, Simon was fit, strong and at his peak, and the only reason he didn't make top billing or have an easy shot at the light middleweight title was because of his quiet, introspective demeanour. But he wasn't prepared to change for anyone. Simon knew who he was.

He hated the cubicles. They opened out onto the same cold grey corridor as the stairs up to the club. The stairwell area was virtually an outdoor space. The door and frontage of the Fight Club was no more than a black and red board with a gate cut into it. Silhouettes of kicking fighters were painted on it, with all the gym opening times listed. The owner's name was emblazoned over the door. *Marcus Trent's Milton Elite Fighting Club*. Marcus was a man about town. Everybody loved him and his big white smile, his back slapping ways and all the drinks he bought for people along the way. Simon had quickly liked him after meeting Marcus two years back when aged just twenty four, and signed as one of his fighters because of his warmth and charm. Simon looked up to the man, wanting to one day be like him. But within a year of signing he'd started to hear rumours which chipped at his admiration. Rumours were always rife in this town, and they came with any kind of reputation, so Simon never put his faith in gossip alone. He was far too sensible for that. The first deep crack in his admiration for Trent came during his very last fight, two months back. Simon had beaten Chelmsford's Fergus Driscoll in a straight forward knock out. The KO came from a sweet round-house kick to the head while the man was getting ready to deliver his trademark uppercut. It was a great result - in spite of what happened immediately before the fight.

There had always been rumours about the KwikMart the twenty four hour convenience store. It was housed on the ground floor underneath the gym, right beside the cubicle rooms. Even before Simon had trained at the Elite, he had heard the rumours. They went something like this.

The people who ran the shop were in a gang. The people who ran the shop were

dealers. The funniest one – was that the shop owners kept a mattress out the back and anyone who slipped them a twenty could have a bounce on the girl they kept back there. Simon had sneered at the rumour. It sounded like bad joke without a punch line. KwikMart was run by some straight talking Asian guys who put customers' backs up sometimes. Maybe the rumour started from bitterness or racism. But the original KwikMart was consigned to history when Marcus Trent arrived in town and bought the lease. Trent took over the gym and the KwikMart beneath it and put his own little faces in charge. Immediately the rumours stopped. If KwikMart was Marcus's place, it had to be kosher, didn't it? At least, that's what Simon thought. But on the night of the Fergus Driscoll fight, Simon broke his own habits and arrived early. Rumours or none, the cubicles were small and damp. Simon wanted to get in early to clean his room and get himself psychologically prepared for the fight. Trent had given him a key. But something had gone badly wrong, because when Simon opened the door at three pm, he found something which turned his stomach. A girl with bleached blond hair lay on her back in the middle of the room on Simon's bench, her naked knees in the air. Behind her, opposite Simon was a young ratty faced guy in a sky blue hoodie. The guy was making faces like a rodent at a feast, his eyes rolling as he performed. The girl was exaggerating her pleasure with grandiose groans. Simon and the rodent made eye contact. Simon didn't apologise or act hasty. He retreated and closed the door. He leaned against the wall outside, and waited for the little scumbag to finish up. When they were gone, Simon watched the girl go. They didn't hold hands. At the door/gate of the club, the girl waved without any

sign of emotion and the teenager was gone. There was no shadow of a doubt in Simon's mind that the girl had been pimped out. And now he knew why Trent always insisted that the cubicles were free of clutter but for the plain wooden bench in the centre of the room. Those benches weren't for the fighters. They were for the tarts. That night two months back anger helped him win against Driscoll. Anger because Simon felt like an abject fool. Simon had looked up to Trent believing he was suave, cool and interesting, but most of all, he believed the man was good. But Trent wasn't good at all. He was scum all dressed up in gold. Simon wanted to forgive and forget, but he couldn't. He had been humiliated by Trent. Simon knew that his admiration for the man had been obvious. Marcus Trent must have seen how much Simon looked up to him, but it was all built on a lie. The crack in their relationship only got wider from there. Whenever he remembered Marcus after that night, it seemed obvious that the man was a villain. Marcus was a man made good without ever explaining how he'd done it. But there was more. He began to hear the other tales of the hard Marcus, the cruel Marcus, the cut-throat Marcus. And now Simon believed every bit of it.

Tonight was another fight night. In the last two months Trent had frequented his own club less and less as he networked and built his profile across town. Simon was glad about his absence. He had been badly stung, and didn't want to face the man. But that raw emotion - all that feeling... it was only a matter of time before it was diverted elsewhere. And it was. Somewhere dangerous.

Ever since Marcus Trent had started branching out into other business areas of the town, Mrs Joanna Trent, the man's wife, had been making appearances at the club wearing fine business suits, carrying leather folders. Mostly Simon would hear her talk shop with the Conor, mixed race fighter and gym manager, or finances with the trainer and fight arranger, Horace Newman. With her confidence and bearing, Simon naturally assumed she was on her husband's business. He wondered if she knew all of Trent's business, but the woman was inscrutable.

Looking at Joanna Trent never told him much, but it did tell him she was beautiful. She was thirty years old, tops, with a flat cascade of long light brown hair, a sculpted face and soft brown eyes, Joanna Trent was very easy to look at. She was talkative and friendly to all the fighters. She made a big deal of speaking to each of them and making jokes, even with introspective Simon. The first few times Simon found himself struck dumb in her presence. But seeing her week after week in Marcus Trent's absence he soon built something of a rapport with the woman. He should have realised that was dangerous.

Then tonight, with just one hour to go until the big fight, something happened again. It was life changing - the kind of moment that defines everything and creates a domino effect of consequences that can never be reversed. After that moment, Simon understood everything about Marcus and Joanna Trent. But he also started to learn an awful lot about himself. It was his very first step on a dark and lonely road

Simon needed a break from staring at the four grey walls of his damp cubicle. He was sweating and gently breathless from five minutes of skipping. But the sight of the bench caused ugly thoughts to flash into his mind. Maybe some oik had been rumping another one of Trent's little girls just before he'd arrived - dumb innocent being exploited every step of the way. The thought of all the bacteria they left behind made him feel ill. He needed air if he was going to keep himself right. Simon walked out into the buzzing Saturday night as cars streamed by with too much acceleration and music thumping from their windows. He bought a can of Red Bull and a banana then stepped around the corner to keep out of sight. He didn't want to speak to Conor, the other fighters and especially not Trent. Taking the corner onto Barrett Road, Simon heard raised voices nearby. The voices were close but he couldn't see them. One was female. It jarred him. He recognised it, only the pitch of it wasn't right. He heard fear and anger in that voice. Simon's eyes were drawn to the big gate at the back of the convenience store's backyard. There were sections cut out of the wood around the latch. Simon pressed his face to the gap to check that the woman was all right. But Joanna Trent wasn't all right.

Simon wished he could put it all back. But he couldn't. The genie was out of the bottle.

“You can't get out of this one, Joanna. Here's the thing. I know you need this. He doesn't know how bad you're into this, does he? So here's what we do. I'll keep supplying what you need. You do what I tell you,

and I'll even throw in an extra wrap free of charge. Now I can't say fairer than that, can I?"

"You're not giving me any choice, are you?"

"It's not me who's not giving you the choice. It's you. You're a junkie, Jo. You're a beautiful one, but you're a useless junkie all the same."

"You know what? I should tell him. I should tell him about this and what you're saying to me. Do you know what Marcus would do to you? What he could have done?"

"Yeah. Nothing at all. Your man's got money, he acts the part, but he's out of this depth. He's not a proper gangster. Believe me, I know people, and they're the real thing. Your man's a cheese ball. A wannabe."

"Yeah? If you said that to him he would..."

Simon watched the tall man jerk his arm forward and grab Joanna Trent by her wrist. The woman was dolled up just fine for fight night. She wore a red satin sequined dress; a little number cut half way up the thigh. A neat black jacket hid her body. The tall guy had a sharp, aggressive face, and he gritted his teeth as he yanked her towards him. He pressed her as close as a lover, pulling her body to him, but the woman pushed back. Simon saw her fingers whiten as she pushed hard against the man's chest, and slapped him across the face, but he was too strong. He would beat her every time. The man held her close with one hand while he delved into his pocket with the other. His hand came into view holding a plastic bank money bag. Inside was a ball of shining foil all crumpled up. Simon was no expert, but that had to be drugs. Probably coke. The girl stopped struggling and looked at the plastic and foil

package that the man held in front of her face. She was mesmerised by it. The guy's hand slackened on Joanna Trent's shoulder, but she stayed in place.

"Tell me you'll do what I say, and you can have this now. It's a bumper supply, Jo. And it's all yours. Just don't snort it all in one night."

"Fuck you."

"What are you going to do?"

"I've got no choice, have I? You know that."

"Oh, there's always a choice, honey. You could go and admit to your husband that you've been buying charlie off me and you're hooked. Or you can carry on lying to him and letting him think you're a good little wifey. But from the way you've been lying for the last six months, I guess you think being a good wife isn't an option."

"Marcus hates drugs of all kinds. But the secrets and using his money for this stuff... he'd kill me."

"Not literally, I hope."

Simon watched the man's hand slide up the woman's shoulder. He began to gently massage her shoulder. He touched her neck. Seeing the man's lust made Simon seethe. Anger and darkness swept in like the first winds of a coming storm.

"No... but it would be the end of us... what are you doing, Sam? Stop it."

"No. See, you don't mind keeping secrets from old Marcus the plastic gangster, do you?"

"Stop it."

"You like a little secret, don't you? So keep your voice down, and listen."

The woman pushed at the man's chest again. But he held firm. He dangled the big wrap close in front of the woman's face.

"See this. This, all of this is yours. Right now. All you have to do is tell me what round McGettigan is going down. I know you know. The McGettigan fight is rigged. I know that. All I want to know is which round. Then I can go and make some money."

"It's not rigged, Sam."

"Yes, it is. Now tell me."

Simon's mouth opened. McGettigan was the home fighter. One of Conor's protégés and tipped as a future champion. He saw the tall man's hand grip her shoulder tighter.

"Six!" said Joanna Trent. "I heard Marcus say, six!"

"Good girl. That's better. Now there's just one more thing I need you to do. I need to scratch a little itch I've got. You see, I've been wondering what you've been giving that plastic gangster that makes him so happy, and now I think it's time I found out."

"What? You said..."

"Just do what I say. You like secrets. This can be another one just between you and me. We'll do it right here, and then this bag's all yours..."

The tall man pushed the woman back far enough to start unzipping his jeans. Simon had seen enough. No matter what the woman had done, she didn't deserve any of that. Simon laid a hand on top of the gate and pulled up. His upper body strength was powerful. His body was light. He threw one leg over the gate, swung over the top and dropped down into the yard. Tall Sam stopped playing with his zip and looked at the

stranger on his left. Simon was wearing an anonymous grey towelling dressing gown over his training clothes. His brightly coloured fight threads were back in his room. Simon looked at Joanna Trent. There were tears in her eyes, and shame on her face. She looked weak, but still burned bright. Somehow, the lies, the fragility, it all made her seem more beautiful. She was a treasure that needed saving and protecting.

“Simon?” she whispered, putting her hand to her mouth.

“Who the fuck is Simon?” said the tall man, turning his body towards him. Simon sized him up. Taller and heavier than him. The man looked like he trained. His stature and upright body proved it. The look in his eyes was feral. Yes, the man was a fighter, and probably a tough one, though Simon didn’t yet know his discipline. And the man was older too. At least five years, maybe more. But by then he knew that age and build didn’t matter too much. All that mattered was who had the power and the aggression. The rest flowed from there. And he couldn’t know that... not until the first blow landed.

“That would be me.”

“You’re interrupting, Simon. You’ve got five seconds to get out before I stamp on your face, *Simon*. You understand?”

“You’re not going to harm this woman.”

“Is that so?”

“That’s the way it is. Stay clear, Joanna.”

Tall plastic crates were stacked around them beside metal cages full of compressed cardboard boxes and waste paper for recycling. There wasn’t as much space as inside the octagonal ring of a martial arts bout, but Simon didn’t care. This wasn’t going to be a spectacle. It was going

to be a dismantling. Just like in the ring Simon stepped forward with care, his eyes fixed on the tall man. The tall guy seemed to enjoy the prospect. As Simon closed in, the guy smiled. “You’re a fighter, aren’t you?”

Simon didn’t respond. The tall man was arrogant. His eyebrow dropped and his eyes hardened. Before he said it, Simon already knew. “I’m a fighter too. So bring it on.”

The guy had long legs and long arms. He would have the advantage of reach. But who knew, he could have been slow. Simon wanted to test him. He sent out a prodding jab and walked in behind it. A deft hook punch came behind his guard and slammed into the muscle of his jaw. It shook Simon’s head left to right. The guy was fast too. Simon jumped back and took a second to regain his composure.

“You like that one, Simon? I’ve got some more for you. Plenty more.” The tall guy loosened up and moved toward him. So now maybe he thought Simon would be easy.

“You shouldn’t have interfered here, Simon,” said Joanna, behind him. Simon ignored Joanna standing behind him. Of course he should have interfered. What else was he going to do? Let the man force himself on her? He felt the mockery in the man’s eyes.

“When I’m finished with you, Simon, I’m going to start with her again... you know that right?”

Simon knew it wasn’t just mockery. The man had said it for the both of them. It was a declaration of intent. It was a declaration of war. Rage flooded his senses again. His jaw bunched, his teeth clenched, and anger filled his vision. He saw nothing but the tall man leering at him, goading

him, pulling him in like a fish hooked on the line. *Be angry, but be smart*, Simon told himself. But emotion was in charge. The woman was behind him now and he was her shield. He dared not lose. Simon needed to draw him out. One punch had shown Simon the man was arrogant. Now he wondered how arrogant. Simon stepped forward like a cautious boxer, orthodox, arms high and rigid, probing for an opening, but shifting around his opponent with surgical care.

“You prissy little bastard... stop moving. Jo, look... your hero’s terrified of getting hit.”

Yeah. Let him think I’m scared. Let him think I’m limited. This man doesn’t know me at all. Simon shifted round then acted like he had changed his mind.

What the tall guy saw was a man who’d made mistake and wrong footed himself. His smile turned into a growling sneer and the big man leaned into a right cross. It went straight through Simon’s guarding hands, and there was only so much of the blow he could avoid. Most of the punch hit home on his cheek bone. His head shook again. Simon knew he couldn’t take another of those, but he also knew the guy was holding back. He thought Simon was easy meat. If Simon hung his head for any more hits like those, tall Sam was going to be proven right.

“Simon!” said Joanna. He heard the care in her voice. The fear. It was time to show the man what he could do. The tall guy’s arms were low now, his face full of grinning pride and mockery. “This was fun, Simon. Maybe we could do this again some time,” said Sam.

“As many times as you like,” said Simon. The tall man’s hands were down by his waist. He stood square and flat, ripe for a knock down. Tall Sam thought he had won already. Simon plotted his strikes in a

nanosecond, and then delivered. Strike one - on his laughing jaw. It was a must. Simon threw it from where he stood - a long right cross with added momentum from his hip thrown in. Sam's head got knocked back. But Simon wanted the man upright. Sam's fists flew up from his hips to cover his face, but it was too late. Simon drilled a body punch deep into his guts to make him bend forwards, then switched into kick boxing mode and smashed a strong knee up into his face. The guy was thrown back and upright on his way to the ground. In the second he was still upright Simon dealt him a catastrophic left-right which sent him clattering against the trolley cage full of cardboard. The tall guy's eyes blinked and rolled as he fell. He slid to the floor with blood oozing from his nose and his eyes shut. Simon took a breath and turned. Joanna stood against the stack of plastic boxes. Her eyes glimmered and she held a hand over her mouth. "I thought you were hurt, Simon..."

"I lured him in. The man was arrogant."

The woman stayed back by the crates and Simon kept his distance. But their eyes probed one another.

"What did you hear, Simon?"

"I heard a scumbag threatening a woman. I saw a man about to take advantage of you."

The woman nodded and pulled her hair from her eyes. There were tears. In red sequins and full of emotion he had never seen Joanna Trent look more vulnerable or alluring. Simon took a step back, worried about the surge of feelings within... what he wanted could not happen.

"You didn't hear anything else?"

The question was foolish. Rhetorical. He had seen and heard everything and she knew it. Simon thought about his answer. He stayed quiet and the woman waited for him. Simon bent down and picked up the money bag with the shining foil wrap inside it. He held it in his hand and looked down at it, and then he handed it to the woman. She came near and slowly took it from his hand while she looked up into his eyes. “I didn’t hear a thing, Joanna.”

She nodded in relief. She was so close. He could smell her perfume and her sweet breath. He could see the fine-line texture of her lips beneath the shining lipstick. He could see the dot of light in her wide black pupils. “Promise me one thing,” he said quietly.

“What?” she whispered, her eyes flicking between his.

“This is the last bag you’ll ever touch. People like him will always use this against you. It’s a weakness, Joanna. You’re far too good for that.”

A tear filled the corner of her eye and she caught it with a fingernail before it could ruin her make up. She didn’t back away from him now. Instead she put the wrap inside her jacket pocket and laid a hand on his arm.

“You’ve got to fight tonight.”

“Yes, I do.”

“You’re a good man, Simon. I didn’t know that until now.”

She leaned up and offered him her lips. He looked down at those lips so close to his own, and wanted nothing else. But he felt it was wrong.

Instead he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him. The kiss reached the skin beside his lips, and lingered. Heat seized his

body and lust made his throat tense. She was slender and almost frail, but so warm and soft to touch.

“Yes... you are *good*...” she whispered and then she broke away and he watched her move to the gate. “Marcus will be expecting me. I’ll say a prayer for you before the fight, Simon.”

Simon offered a thin line of a smile. It showed no joy.

“But I must warn you... what you did... I’m grateful... but there may be consequences for you. I won’t be able to stop them, Simon.”

Simon shrugged. He couldn’t worry, not tonight. He’d deal with all that as it came. The woman opened the gate, and stood in the gap as if she was struggling with something. Her eyes poured with emotion and warmth. At first he thought she was going to come back and kiss him. If she did, he knew he wouldn’t be able to withstand her a second time. She would be his undoing. But the woman stayed where she was and whispered. “Thank you, Simon.” He watched her go, and felt the emptiness of the night for the first time. He’d been victorious for Joanna, and yet he felt hollow and sad. Everything he admired seemed tarnished and broken. He wondered what might be next. But he couldn’t afford such thoughts. The fight was coming soon. Simon left the big man slumped in the yard and opened the gate onto the busy street. He made his way back to his cell.

At nine o’clock, Simon Haskell walked out into the blackness towards the brightly lit octagonal cage. As the audience gave him muted applause, a dance tune with thumping drums sounded and Simon raised his fist. He would fight, but he knew he was in trouble. His heart wasn’t

in it. He'd saved Joanna Trent, but she was out there in the audience somewhere, suffering, needing the comfort he could have offered her if he hadn't been so damn moral, and so damn cold. He'd denied himself, and he'd denied her too. He would never have another chance. He took one gaze around the big dark room, and didn't see her. Instead he saw the twenty something girls with bosoms all out in the open, eyes all pushy and smiling. They looked fine enough, but they offered him nothing but a warm body. He looked past them. Some of them had boyfriends sitting beside them, but still made lusty eyes at the fighters all the while, making silent offers which their boyfriends would never see. He ignored all of them and scoped the darkness as he stepped up into the octagon. And then he caught her. At the end of a row, the woman in red sequins was made a silhouette by the light. Disco lights flashed as the sound system boomed, and he saw her eyes. She was smiling and she looked far more awake than before – maybe she'd used some of that powder by now – but there was concern in her eyes. Simon froze with his fist raised and kept looking as she fell into darkness once again. The light flashed. Yes, he saw fear and anguish on her face. He looked at the figure of Marcus Trent beside her in his chair. The men looked into each other's eyes as Marcus talked into a mobile phone. There was no joy or positivity in Marcus. Simon could only wonder. The last vestiges of his confidence ebbed into confusion. He looked to his opponent's door, but it didn't open. The music carried on. But it went on for far too long. The door remained shut and there was no sign of it opening. As the dance tune abruptly ended, the MC stepped up into the ring. "Ladies and gentleman. It seems we are having some technical difficulties

tonight. The Haskell-Dregan light middleweight contest is going to be delayed for a short while, folks. Why not take this opportunity to top up your drinks and we'll be back very soon."

When the old MC finished speaking, the room filled with a mix of curious chatter and derisory comments. Simon laid his hand on the announcer's arm. "What's going on here, Horace?"

"I don't know. There's something up in the Dregan camp. Anyway, you should be glad of the break. You look like shit, Simon. Go and sort yourself out or the boy Dregan will wipe the floor with you."

"Thanks, Horace."

"Whatever."

When old man Horace stepped out of the ring, Simon followed. "Where are you going, Haskell?" called one of the punters.

He looked to Marcus Trent's seat. This time both Marcus and Joanna Trent were nowhere in sight. Their seats were empty. Simon suddenly felt cold inside. He'd never seen either of them desert their seats on a fight night. Something *was* wrong.

He walked out through the double doors, and past the stairs of the outer area that led back down to the cubicles. Down below he saw Marcus Trent and his wife. They looked at odds, yet they were bickering quietly, not with one another, but with a wide fat man in a pinstriped suit. The fat man was angry and gesticulated as he spoke. Simon's eyes gravitated to Trent's wife. Whatever was going to happen, whatever the problem was, it didn't matter to Simon so long as they left her out of it. She'd been through enough already. Simon was about to announce his

presence by stepping down the rickety stairs when his ears caught hold of something which made him freeze.

“Jake says he won’t fight. And it’s because of something one of your people has done. You know what that means?” The big man had a big rough Essex accent. He was full of himself, inflated and waving his arms around like he was a big man. What the hell was Marcus Trent doing, standing there and taking it? Simon pressed back against the cold brick wall up high beneath the corrugated roof.

“Mr Nelis, if Jake won’t fight, how is that my problem? That can’t be my responsibility.”

“No?” The big guy turned his eyes to Joanna Trent. Simon was tuned in now becoming protective. Marcus Trent wasn’t paying attention. He was strangely humble before the big man. Simon should have known, Marcus Trent was only thinking of himself.

“It’s *someone’s* responsibility here, isn’t it Mrs Trent?”

The big man and Joanna Trent exchanged a look charged with hidden meaning. Marcus Trent was too busy shaking his head to notice. Simon gritted his teeth. This idiot was making the woman suffer all over again. She was a junkie, so what? There were plenty around, why single her out. Besides, Simon was going to help her off that stuff. No one would ever be able to blackmail her ever again.

“Look, Mr Nelis. Whatever has happened... I’m sorry, but really, I don’t know how you can hold us responsible for it. Our fighter is still out there in the ring, waiting for your guy to show up...”

“Well he’s not going to show up. Because...” the big man’s eyes flicked onto Joanna Trent’s once more. “Because some wicked son of a bitch

has just broken his big brother's face in. Do you hear me? His head's all shot. The only thing Jake can think of is finding the son of a bitch who hurt his brother."

"Why don't you just tell him to get in the ring, Mr Nelis?" said Joanna Trent, playing it dumb, but Simon saw the big guy in the suit knew exactly what she was saying.

"Yeah. I would if I could. But when Jake's too emotional, he's worried he won't perform. Anyone can understand that, right? If your head goes, you're finished in the ring. He can't afford to put himself at risk, and neither can I. There's a lot riding on this. Did you know that, Mrs Trent? Did you tell her what's riding on this, Marcus?"

Marcus Trent looked up at the man with darkly troubled eyes. "No, Mr Nelis. We're very close... but we don't share every aspect of our business together."

"That much," said Nelis as he stared at the woman, "I gathered already. But secrets are a very bad thing, Marcus. For the both of you. How about we all get a little more honest with each other right here and now?"

Marcus hung his head as if he expected bad news. The big man smiled at Joanna Trent. "Honesty's the best policy, wouldn't you say?"

"It depends on who we're being honest about, Mr Nelis."

"Oh? Well let's start here. One of your people had an altercation with Jakey's brother Sam around these parts a little while ago. It didn't go well for Sam, so I hear. But Sam was always a showboat. Always too big a risk for these productions. But he tags along to the fights because he's

a wannabe. The problem is that he dabbles in some things the rest of us don't approve of, but there we are, boys will be boys.”

The muscles in Simon's jaw tensed. How was he supposed to know it was Jake Dregan's brother? And really, who gave a shit? The man was bad, really bad, and deserved what happened to him. As the big man spoke, Simon felt the implied threat in the rhythm of his words. The old bastard was building up to dishing the dirt on Joanna Trent, just as some kind of perverse punishment for the both of them. Simon slowly peeled off his fight gloves one by one. He laid them down slowly and quietly on the upper platform, looked at his bandaged knuckles then tensed and untensed his fingers.

“Now, seeing as it was one of your people, Marcus... you're going to have to settle all the accounts of all the people on my side who've made their Dregan-Haskell wagers tonight. If the fight doesn't happen, they lose their bet, and every penny they laid out in good faith. That's how this works. We came here tonight KNOWING a fight was going to happen. Not only that, but Dregan has been invincible in his recent bouts. Jake had this fight down cold. It was in the bag. Knowing all that, my people put down a stack of cash on an easy knockout.”

“But that's gambling, Mr Nelis. Some you win, some you lose.”

“Oh no, no. We don't gamble unless we know we're going to win. Understand? And we were going to win. But a problem which your people manufactured has stopped that from happening. And to tell you the truth, none of my people are going home tonight without that money. You're going to settle it with us. You'll pay every penny owing. Because it's your fault.”

“With due respect...”

“*Don't you due respect me, Trent!* Your slick-dick shit doesn't work on me. Mrs Trent, it seems to me you people need to be a little more transparent with each other. So here's why your man is going to pay up. We put twelve thousand down on a Dregan victory by knockout. We were set to win another easy twelve back on top. That's a good night out, wouldn't you say? But you lost it for us. And the crazy thing is, you lost out too, didn't you, Marcus? We used the same bookie. I know you stuck two grand on our man, too, didn't you? Did you know that, Mrs Trent? Your man here is betting against his own people. Not so slick now, are you Marky boy?”

Simon gulped. His throat ached with the news. But if the McGettigan fight was rigged it should have come as no surprise. Hearing that the man had bet on him getting slammed inside the ring was merely a headstone, an epitaph on everything that had happened between them. Simon saw the woman's mouth open in disbelief. She looked at her husband. He didn't meet her gaze but he shrugged as he felt her eyes on him.

“And you, Mrs Trent. You've got plenty you should be sharing too, don't you think?”

Simon stepped down the first of the steps deliberately. The stairs rattled and all three of them looked up to see Simon descending in his green and red satin robes.

“What's this?” said the big man in the suit. “The other one's running now? It must be something you put in the water round here, Marcus...” said the big man wheezing with laughter at his own joke. Simon didn't

show any humour. He kept moving steadily down the steps. Marcus Trent watched him the whole way.

“You shouldn’t be out here, Simon. You should be up there in the middle.”

“But nothing’s happening, Marcus. Jake Dregan didn’t show. But it looks like there’s plenty of action down here.”

“And it’s none of your business, Simon.”

Simon met Trent’s eyes. The man was fifteen years his senior, and still looked in his prime, but Simon was a fighter and could read the signals. Trent’s eyelids were tight and flickering a little. His face muscles were stretched like he had a headache. He didn’t look well.

Joanna Trent looked at Simon with kind, beautiful eyes that gave him a sense of peace. But he saw her fear too. Without saying a word he tried to reassure her by being calm. He was not going to rat on her, and neither was the big guy in the suit. The man looked Simon up and down, turning on him as his feet reached the dirty concrete floor.

“Have you got twelve thousand in your pocket, Haskell?”

“Why would I have twelve thousand?” said Simon, bouncing the remark back to the tough guy. The old guy smelt of cigars and hard liquor. He wasn’t drunk but his sharp eyes were tinged a little pink.

“I was asking, because some jerk-off here just cost us twelve thousand on account of us losing our stake. We laid out twelve grand between us on Jake Dregan to knock you flat out. I heard good things about you, Haskell, but you’re no Dregan. He was going to win, and so were we. Both of us were, ain’t that right, Marcus?”

Trent couldn’t look Simon in the eye.

“Look,” said Trent. “I’ll see what I can do. But I don’t keep that kind of money around here, Mr Nelis.”

Trent was acting like he would bend down and shine the guy’s shoes if he ordered it. Simon watched it all with quiet shock. Whoever this big guy was, he was still just a man. He ate, drank and shat like everybody else, didn’t he?

“You don’t need to do that, Mr Trent,” said Simon.

At first Marcus looked at Simon in wide-eyed shock. In the next second he frowned. “Simon, don’t start this here and now... I know you mean well.”

The woman’s eyes sought his, and Simon let her into his gaze. She shook her head at him. The big old guy was razor sharp. He saw the shared look and grinned. “Your wife here keeps more secrets from you than most women I know, Marcus. I can tell the type. Am I right, Mrs Trent?”

Joanna Trent dropped her eyes to the floor. Simon stiffened and shifted on the balls of his feet. It was an involuntary gesture. He didn’t even notice it. It happened when he got angry, when people did wrong, when they tried to hurt those weaker than themselves. Especially someone like Joanna.

“I don’t *mean well*, Marcus. I mean you don’t have to pay this fat old bastard a single penny tonight.”

Marcus Trent’s head snapped up like someone had just pulled his strings. Joanna Trent looked suddenly hopeless. The big guy turned upon Simon and invaded his space, sticking a fat finger into his chest.

“How dare you talk about me like that, don’t you know who I am?”

“You’re a fat old bastard looking to intimidate people. I bet you never even lost a single pound, tonight, did you? There was no twelve grand. You’re a scam artist.”

The old guy’s big bull dog face turned dark red. It was good to see. Rage was a feeling the young Simon knew well tonight. But being a fighter had also taught him its practical limits.

“I’ll have you chopped and tinned into fricking dog food, Haskell. No one knows who you are. No one cares. This is the last fight night you’ll ever be billed on, do you understand me? You’re a nothing. But soon you won’t even be that.”

Simon listened passively, making a face like he was listening to the shipping forecast.

“Is that so?” said Simon.

“Get out of here, Simon,” said Marcus Trent.

“You’d better go,” said his wife. The hopelessness remained in her eyes.

“You hear that, Haskell? Nobody wants you no more.”

“It looks like people are scared of you, fat man. But I’m not.”

“As of now, you should be. *As of right now.*”

Simon turned away only because Joanna asked him to. But it didn’t feel right to abandon her like that. He kept his pace slow, turned towards the steps and laid his foot on the first one.

“We’ll pay up, Mr Nelis,” said Trent. “I’m sorry you had to hear all that.”

“*You’re sorry?* You’re going to end up paying more now, Trent. Call it compensation. It’s Haskell who will be sorry,” said the big man staring across at Simon. “Sorry he was born.”

A storm cloud rolled quietly across Simon's mind. It was black. It churned and swirled as he climbed another step.

"Look, I can pull twelve together tonight, but any more than that? I don't think I can. Come on Mr Nelis," said Trent.

"Do you think I'm asking? I'm not asking you, Trent. You might be a cheese round here, but we both know the real pecking order in this world. You're a small dick, Marcus." Simon watched the big man turn his head to Joanna Trent for emphasis. "He's a small dick, right? That's probably why you're interested in big guys like Sam Drake, right Mrs Trent?"

Simon watched her face. He saw Marcus Trent's questioning eyes land on his wife's face in the same instant. And the big man laughed out loud like he'd told the joke of the century. The thundercloud in Simon's head burst. Upstairs, behind the doors of the old gym, the crowd began to whistle and boo at the lack of a show. But outside the show was about to start.

Simon jumped back down the steps, and landed at the old man's side.

"What you said is a lie, Nelis. I saw Sam Drake. He was going to try and take advantage of Mrs Trent."

Marcus Trent's face moved from upset, to anger. He looked at his wife and at Simon. "Dregan what?"

"I heard Sam Dregan making threats against your wife, Marcus."

"Yeah, because she's a fucking..."

Simon twisted on his hip and drilled the big old man deep into his barrel gut. His fist sunk deep into lard. Simon was young, and trained hard.

Nelis was old and fat. For all his anger and status he was weak. The guy

grunted and wheezed. Simon slapped him around the head with a flat hand and the old guy fell against the wall. He looked up with shock in his bleary eyes. “Haskell, your life is over...” wheezed the old man. “I mean *over*.”

“What the hell are you doing, Simon. Max, are you okay?” Marcus Trent dropped down to the big old man’s side. Simon stood facing Joanna Trent. They looked into one another’s eyes. Her eyes captivated him. But they still spoke of despair. In amongst their darkness he saw a spark of warmth. Simon wanted to reach out to hold her, to protect and comfort her. He wished he could kiss those lips and make her feel safe. But it could never be.

“Marcus...” wheezed the old man. “Get my boys. Go and tell them what this piece of crap has just done.”

“He’s sorry, Max. I know he is. He just didn’t know who you are, that’s all. He’s a stupid kid. When he learns who you are I’ll send him to you to grovel.”

The big old man seized hold of Trent’s jacket collar and pulled him low into his cigar breath.

“Get my boys and all I take from you is that twelve grand. If you don’t get my boys now, then I know where we stand. Do you understand me, Marcus?”

Simon and Joanna Trent listened but looked at each other the whole time. In the fraction of time before Marcus stood, Joanna Trent’s full lips mouthed two silent words. “Thank you.” Simon offered one nod in return.

“Simon... you just opened the biggest can of worms in history. You took out Sam Dregan, didn't you? *You're* the reason this fight isn't going to happen.”

“I'm ready for Jake Dregan,” said Simon.

“It's too late for that, Simon. It's far too late.”

Marcus Trent left through the flimsy door out onto the street as the big old man pushed himself upright. “He's right,” said the old man. “You don't know who I am, do you?”

Simon shook his head. “Should I?”

“Yes, you should. Next time before you hit someone, you better check to see who they are. Except there won't be a next time for you, Haskell, will there?” The old man grinned and leered at Joanna Trent. “If you'd played along with big Sam in the first place, none of this would have happened, would it? Now that's something worth thinking about while you're snorting a line.”

Simon slapped the big man in the chest and slammed him against the wall. “You listen here, you old bastard. You're leaving here tonight without a penny. And you're never going to come back here, not ever again.”

The old man looked at Simon and grinned. “You really want to fuck her, don't you? Believe me, boy, no woman is worth dying for. But you've already made your choice.”

The blackness came down inside and Simon's fist burst across the big man's jaw. He fell to the concrete as the street clattered inwards, and two tall men walked in followed by Marcus Trent. The first man was a sombre, shamed looking Sam Dregan. The second was someone Simon

recognised all too well. He'd seen that face on fight posters for the last two years. It was Jake Dregan, grinning from ear to ear, staring with feral eyes.

"Well, well, it looks like I will get to fight you tonight," said Jake Dregan.

"And when you've finished with him, I'm going to gut him," said Sam Dregan. He pulled out a shining stick from his pocket and flicked the blade open.

They came at him together. Joanna Trent yelped and got out of the way. Jake leapt in and spun a roundhouse kick past Simon's face. Simon pulled away to the stairs, but Jake saw he was trapped. He could only go back up the steps. There was no way he could step back and fight at the same time. He lunged and leaped at Simon with a kick designed to smash through his face. Simon shifted at the last moment, but the kick struck home and sent him crashing against the wall and sliding down the stairs. Jake Dregan stepped up and leaned over Simon. Simon tried to push up to standing, but he was stunned and could hardly shift his weight. His eyes caught Marcus Trent's. Trent's eyes said nothing. But then the blows came in. Left and right, each one like a car crash slamming his head, every one opening up his skin. "I told you we would win that money, Marcus. Hands down." Simon heard the voices but loudest of all he heard his own breath. It felt like they were a mile away from him.

"It's my turn next," said Sam.

"No," said the old man. "It's my turn. I owe this bastard."

The big old boy tried a kick at Simon's body, and though his head was fuzzy, Simon shifted in time to block the kick. The old man tried a

different angle – Simon shifted and blocked. “Damn this bastard, I’m going to ruin him,” said old Nelis. He kneeled down and stared into Simon’s bloody face. “I’m going to hurt you badly. One way or another.”

“Your time is finished, Max,” whispered Simon. With gritted teeth he pushed off the wall and slammed his forehead onto the old man’s big nose. It crunched and the old man toppled back. Sam Dregan roared and raised his knife. “That does it. Cover your eyes if you’re squeamish. This bastard’s dead.”

Simon breathed deeply. He saw big Sam Dregan leaning over him. He saw the flash of the blade, and knew he had a split second to act or he was dead. As his breath left him, the knife plunged down. It moved like a lightning bolt towards his stomach, and yet it never reached him.

Simon rolled to the side. The knife clanged into the rickety steps and Simon punched his knuckles hard across into the tall man’s wrist. Sam Dregan’s arm was momentarily caught when the blow struck, the knife caught in the gap between the metal steps. The strike broke his wrist in two. Sam Dregan howled and stood up, dropping the knife away. It slid under the steps.

“What the fuck is the matter with you tonight, Sam?” said Jake. He shook his head. “If you want something done properly, do it yourself, right?” Jake stepped towards Simon. “Good night, Haskell. Nothing personal and all that.”

Jake Dregan had trained hard. He was young and mentally prepared. And right now he was ten times healthier than Simon. He dragged Simon to his feet. Simon glanced at Trent and then at his wife. He saw

pity in her eyes. But Simon had one thing Jake Dregan didn't have. The strongest motivation in the world. *Survival. And the affection of a woman.*

Simon stood in the man's grasp and watched as Jake Dregan lined up a simple punch straight from his right shoulder. Simon watched the man take aim. "How did your training go, Jake?" said Simon, with blood oozing down his lip. The man hesitated. "What? Good thanks. Now shut your mouth,"

"Really? But so far you're all fists, Jake. Have you forgotten this is a mixed martial arts bout?"

"Of course I haven't you stupid..."

Simon shifted his feet with a snapping jump and lashed a kick up and through Dregan's jaw. It contained everything he had. Simon groaned with effort and shock as the kick connected while Jake Dregan curled back over his own body and fell.

Marcus was shaking. He looked down at the big old man cowering by the steps. The old man looked back. Simon wiped the blood from his face and took a deep breath to keep upright. Trent saw something shine at him from beneath the steps. He ducked and snatched it up. Simon blinked as Marcus Trent, the man who he once adored threatened him with the flick knife.

"Marcus...?" said Simon, slowly.

"It's not personal, Simon."

"Yes, it is. Violence. Murder...? Marcus, it's always close up and personal. You know that."

"I'm sorry, son," said Marcus. The man came at Simon with the knife and his wife screamed "Marcus, no!"

But Marcus Trent was no fighter. He was a poser and always had been. Simon swatted his stabbing arm aside, and with a chopping hand, the knife came loose again.

Simon looked around at them all and smiled. “Looks like you got it wrong, Nelis. Your boy Jake is the one flat on his back, not me. But then again, I’ve got a feeling you’ve always had it wrong.”

“You’re dead, Haskell.”

“Yeah? How about another bet, Nelis? On which one of us dies first?”

The old man said nothing. Simon set his eyes on Marcus Trent.

The man looked pale and sick with himself. He stood before Simon, his arms at his sides, ready to take the beating he deserved.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Marcus.”

The man shrugged in disbelief. “Why not?”

“Not for your sake. I’m not going to hit you because I’ve chosen a side, Marcus. Life’s a battle. And if you don’t choose what side you’re on, then you’ve already sided with scumbags like these. You don’t have to be scared of them Marcus. They’re nothing. Do the right thing.”

Simon looked one more time at the forlorn eyes of Joanna Trent – eyes that would haunt him forever. As Simon opened the door and stepped out into the night, Marcus Trent spoke.

“And what about you? Should I be scared of you, Simon?”

Simon didn’t look at the man. He looked out into the busy urban night, into the streaming traffic, and the packs of loud roving youths.

“That all depends, Marcus, on what you do next.”

Simon slammed the door and left them with the noise of the baying crowd filling their ears while Joanna Trent hid the tears in her eyes...

Justice Starts Here...

*Ten years on and Simon has donned the mask to take on all those who don't know goodness or humanity... Restless and relentless, Simon, the Man in The Mask continues his vigilante justice adventures in the **Black & Gold** series...*

...available at Amazon today!