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Fighting Dirty

Written by June Hampson

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FIGHTING DIRTY

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PROLOGUE

The hand around his throat tightened. Paulie wrenched at the powerful arm but the grip was rigid. It was difficult for him to breathe and all his power seemed to be draining away. Then the boy shoved his thumb into Paulie's eye. This sudden further pain gave him the strength to buck and he slithered through the boy's grip, but then the boy's palm connected with Paulie's chin. He registered the salty taste of fresh blood and knew he'd bitten through his tongue. Blood dripped from Paulie's mouth and his knees buckled.

He was falling …

The man named Heinz yelled above the jeering crowd, 'Git up, you little bastard, I got a lot of money ridin' on you!'

Paulie, naked, slippery with his own blood and sweat, squatted on the floor. Standing in the corner of the room was the well kitted-out Jamie Lane who was often at the fights but who rarely spoke. Suddenly a mighty kick bounced Paulie back against the bars of the cage surrounding them and the other boy, red-haired and muscular, aimed a further kick that connected with Paulie's shoulder. When Paulie tried to raise his neck the boy took a few fighter's dancing steps, then with a light leap in the air landed both his feet on Paulie's skull.

Too late to fend off the kicking attack, Paulie lay there, a rushing sound in his head. He put up his hand and cupped

his ear then saw the blood that had trickled on to his fingers.

The noise from the crowd seemed muffled. He curled himself into a foetal position and lay there, unmoving. He felt confused and broken, like a doll that's been stamped on. Then he saw Heinz pushing through the people and the cage door was unlocked.

Despite the noise and pain, Paulie's spirits rose.

'Bout over,' the blond man yelled, his tone decisive. More booing erupted from the crowd crammed in the stinking basement. Stamping feet caused the smell of sweat and filth to swirl like fog. Despite the egg cartons pinned to the ceiling and walls to absorb the sound, the noise was tumultuous.

Through blurry eyes, Paulie saw Jamie Lane turn away, pulling up the collar of his leather jacket as he did so. Heinz raised the redhead's arm, pronouncing him the winner. Still dancing about, the boy looked triumphant. His freckled body was pale except where Paulie's teeth and fists had left bloodied marks.

Paulie roused himself and shook his head to restore his failing eyesight and scrambled brain. After a while the buzzing in his skull stopped. Bare feet on his head had hurt, but not as much as an opponent wearing boots would have done.

'Pay the fuckers!' Heinz yelled into the fifty-odd crowd who were still calling out and protesting about the shortness of the fight. Paulie's eyes alighted on the beefy man guarding the door. Heinz yelled again, 'Then get all the bastards out!'

Heinz snarled at the redhead, 'Get fuckin' dressed then push off. You'll get your money later.' His face peered into Paulie's. Paulie could smell his tangy aftershave and it made his stomach heave. 'You'll be as right as rain tomorrow.'

The red-haired boy disappeared and Paulie sat, still in the cage, getting his wind back. He watched the last punter collect

his winnings from the beefy bloke then exit through the paint-peeled front door – and then there were only the four of them: Jamie Lane, Heinz, Beefy, and himself.

Paulie felt a little better now and wiped away the blood on his arms, making the skin smeary with the red grime. He noted with satisfaction that there was dirty blood belonging to the redhead beneath his nails.

'What's it to be this time for their wages?' Beefy nodded towards Paulie. 'Second-hand BMX bikes or Atari consoles? Or money? We done all right tonight.' He locked and bolted the door.

'We'd have done better if that little shit had won.' Jamie Lane gestured towards Paulie while still keeping his eyes on the money Beefy was counting.

'He's tired.' Heinz was smiling.

'He's a fuckin' kid. They don't get tired, wanker!' Jamie snapped. He tucked the roll of notes handed to him by Beefy in his inside pocket and approached Paulie.

'Get up,' he said.

Paulie crawled out of the cage to freedom. Every bone in his body was aflame. 'Me 'ead hurts,' he mumbled.

'And my fuckin' 'eart 'urts where it pains me most, an' that's in me bleedin' wallet.'

Paulie knew he'd disappointed Jamie Lane. He tried to excuse himself.

'I don't feel well.' The vision of the man swam, melting into two people then back again to a single figure.

'You looks like you've gone ten rounds with fuckin' Muhammad Ali, not a kid your own age,' said Beefy.

Paulie felt a rush of something sliding and put a hand to his ear. It came away covered in bright red, wet blood. He looked at it as though it didn't belong to him.

'Don't you worry about that, mate, it 'appens sometimes. You'll get used to it,' Heinz said dismissively. Perhaps it didn't matter, thought Paulie. Perhaps the man was for once telling the truth. After all, he supposed the man saw far more blood at the dog fights that he organised.

Jamie Lane stared at him for a few moments before walking to the front door and announcing, 'I'm off.'

When the door closed, Paulie looked expectantly at Heinz.

'Can I be paid now, before I goes home?'

'You expect to be paid for losing me money, do you? You'll get something, lad. An' I knows I can trust you not to squeal about these fights. You'll be dead meat if it comes back to me that you been shoutin' your mouth off. Keep your trap shut an' you'll get a bit extra. But you gotta give to get, you know? Stand up and follow me.'

Paulie knew what was coming next and his heart fell. He badly wanted to cry but knew he daren't show this man his true feelings. Of course he'd keep his mouth shut. Not just about the fighting but about the other stuff. If anyone at school found out about it they'd make his life a misery by calling him names. The fact he could fight his way out of trouble meant nothing. He'd never be able to shake off the label they'd stick on him. Heinz had him by the short and curlies.

Somewhere, close by, a transistor was playing 'Chariots of Fire' by Vangelis. Paulie liked that music.

Gloom descended over him again. He couldn't see a way to rid himself of Heinz, or how to stop doing the other stuff he hated, and he needed the money.

He was just glad that, unlike some of the other boys who fought in Chestnut House, his mother and his nan hadn't been there to see him lose. It must be a terrible thing to hear

your family shout and stamp and yell at you to finish off your opponent.

Heinz sat down on a stool and once more Paulie obediently fell to his knees. The blond man unzipped his fly and eleven-year-old Paulie's head, as usual, bent forward.

CHAPTER 1

'Be careful what you wish for, you might just get it.'

Daisy Lane looked into the slate-grey eyes of her lover, eyes that had been replicated in their three-year-old daughter. She creased her forehead with disbelief at his words then tentatively asked, 'You'd really take my Jamie back to London for a while, Roy?'

The radio was playing 'Apache'. The music gave the hallway a welcoming feel. Daisy automatically pulled the cashmere scarf from Roy's neck and looped it over the stair rail. He slid out of his black wool overcoat and slung it after the neckpiece.

The gangster put his big hand on her shoulder. His eyes scoured her face.

'He's a fuckin' head case, Dais, so you've got to let me 'ave full rein.'

'I needs you to keep an eye on him, not beat him to death if he upsets you.'

She shrugged off his hand, but still he looked intently at her.

'He upsets you right enough. 'Ave you looked in the mirror lately, girl?'

Daisy knew she'd lost weight, lost her sparkle; knew her hair wasn't the shiny blonde she'd once been proud of. Worry and hard work were taking their toll and there were times

when she felt she was losing control of situations she had sailed through in the past. She needed to gather together her thoughts, her life and her health before the disintegration of her family finally spiralled out of control.

Even if it meant Roy Kemp taking her beloved eighteen-year-old son away with him.

'I'm just tired.' She put her arms around Roy and nuzzled her face into the hollow of his neck. The fresh scent of Imperial Leather soap comforted her. She said carefully, 'Jamie has money an' I don't know where he gets it from. When I ask he just shrugs his shoulders. I'm not bleedin' stupid, Roy. Jamie's up to something.'

'Dais, do you always think the worst?'

'With my Jamie I do. If he's out from under me feet, I'll 'ave more time to spend with Gypsy.' She looked at Roy, the villain it seemed she'd been tied to for most of her life. She knew him and loved him, and he would always be a part of her.

Years ago he'd told her he'd look after her boys. He'd been like a father to Eddie, but Jamie had been aloof and ignored Roy's offer of friendship. Perhaps it was now time for Jamie to leave the nest and find out what life was like outside the family unit.

'He'll jump at the idea of being in the Smoke, always says Gosport's a dead an' alive hole.' Daisy stepped back then ran her fingers through her limp hair. 'Besides, I need to work. And between you and me, I enjoy bein' behind the bar down at the White Swan, sometimes I even forget me troubles …'

'You sure it ain't the attention of the blokes makes you forget?'

She thought how funny it was that after all these years his nearness could still make her go weak at the knees, even when he was upset, as now. Grabbing hold of her arm, he said,

'You don't need to work at all, especially not in a poxy pub in Gosport. Why won't you let me take care of you?'

The same old argument, thought Daisy. Why wouldn't he realise once and for all that she needed her independence?

'The White Swan's not poxy.' She could feel the heat of his hand on her skin. 'And neither is Gosport. It's my home! An' I earn my living here.'

Roy gave a huge sigh that seemed to deflate his big frame. He stepped back, letting go of her and shaking his head with just a hint of a smile turning up the corners of his generous lips, and Daisy was reminded of why he only had to snap his fingers and half the tarts in London flocked to his side. Whatever had he seen in her, only five foot three in her bare feet, and with eyes some said were like those of the film star Joan Collins but which she thought were too large for her thin face. She marvelled that all those years ago Roy had wanted her, and that he still hankered after her.

'Anyway, I don't need you to give me money. I can work to keep me own family, thank you very much!'

She knew he wouldn't continue with this argument so she gave it her parting shot. 'I been working all me life and I'll continue until the bleedin' daisies flower above me grave!'

A great rumble of laughter filled the hall and followed Roy as he ambled down to the kitchen.

He pulled out the bench from beneath the table and sat down heavily. 'But I can buy Gyp and you a few presents from time to time?'

'Yes. And you'll find Jamie will take everything you offer.'

Daisy went to the kettle and plugged it in. Then she set about taking mugs from the cupboard.

Roy said, 'I'm glad at last you've stopped seein' that boy through rose-coloured spectacles …'

Tears filled her eyes. 'I don't want him to end up in prison. He wants someone to need him, Roy.'

'He's got plenty of people to care about him, or he did 'ave before he did the dirty on 'em all. Even his own brother don't want to know 'im … And how's it going to work out with both of them working for me?'

'Which is the point I'm *making*, Roy. You treats my Eddie like he's your own son. It'd be nice if you could do the same for Jamie.' Daisy slapped a plate of Bourbon biscuits down on the scrubbed wooden table so hard two fell off the edge of the plate. Roy put out a hand to stop them sliding to the floor.

'Eddie's a good boy,' he said. 'So 'e's in prison for killin' a bloke, but he didn't do that for his own gain, remember, he did it to save your life, Daisy.'

'I know that! And Eddie's not a boy any longer, he's twenty-one.' Daisy stood in front of Roy with her hands on her hips. She thought about that night when notorious murderer Gaetano Maxi had tried to kill her and Eddie had knifed him to save her. Five years in prison was his punishment. Even to think about her Eddie inside made Daisy's heart ache, but she knew life had to go on. 'Enough about Eddie, he'll be out soon,' she said. 'And I'm glad you're willing to give Jamie a chance to make something of his life. Just make sure he doesn't get shot on the streets of London like that bloke Stephen Waldorf.'

Roy's face was impassive as he said, 'The coppers thought Waldorf was that escaped prisoner, David Martin.'

'Yes, and a good way to start nineteen eighty-three. His family will always remember this as the year the coppers made a bleedin' mistake. Just you look after my boy!'

Roy's long legs were stretched out in front of him. He was dressed as usual in a suit and a silk shirt. His Italian leather

shoes looked soft and comfortable. While the tea stewed she pulled out a chair opposite him, sat down and gave him a smile.

He picked up one of her hands and said, 'I'm a gangster and Jamie's father's a police DCI and yet it's me you want to look after him?' His face was suddenly grey, and she saw he was tired, too.

'His father's not interested in him, you know that. Not now Vinnie's set up home again with his ex-wife.' Daisy felt suddenly ashamed at the sadness in her voice. 'Besides, I know you won't have him doin' anythin' you won't want Eddie to be involved in. He'll be safe with you.'

The radio was now playing 'Tainted Love'. The music was so low, Daisy could hear the clock ticking.

'When Eddie gets out of prison he'll turn to me, Daisy. Him and Jamie hate the sight of each other. What'll Eddie think?'

'You'll soon 'ave Jamie eatin' out of your hand, and – who knows – my two sons might even make up their differences. Besides, who's the boss of your fuckin' empire? Not you by the sound of it!'

A shadow crossed Roy's face. His grip on her hand tightened and she could see his thoughts were taking a different direction.

'Jamie's not been hurting my Gyp? He might seem to care for her but he's a heavy 'anded bastard where females is concerned. Is that why you need a break from him? Tell me the truth, Dais.'

Daisy jumped up from the chair, freeing her hand from his and reeling away from him. 'How could you even think such a thing? Jamie loves Gypsy. He wouldn't hurt or let anyone else hurt a hair on that little girl's head. Take back those 'orrible

words, Roy Kemp! Jamie idolises your child. He loves her as much as he loves me and sometimes I think we're the only two people he really cares about!'

'Come 'ere.' Roy had risen and he pulled her into his arms. She slid close, feeling the contours of his body. It was as natural as sliding her feet into her comfortable slippers. 'I'm sorry, Dais.' His voice wavered. 'It's just that Jamie 'asn't got a very good track record with young girls, has 'e?'

'I've sorted that.' Another of Jamie's messes left for her to clear up. A tragedy that had produced her first grandchild.

For a moment, there was silence, only the fast beating of her heart.

It was then and only then that she allowed herself to cry, her face buried in his shirt. She felt his arms tighten about her. His lips brushed her hair.

'I've got a nasty feelin' I'm goin' to get a lot more than I bargained for,' Roy said, his lips lowered to her ear. She lifted her face and her eyes met his.

'Let's go to bed,' she said.

He pulled away from her. 'You don't have to thank me that way.'

'Ever considered I might *want* to go to bed with you, Roy Kemp?'

He smiled down at her and she felt as though a large dark cloud had suddenly lifted.

'You can twist me round your fuckin' little finger,' he said. He kissed her lightly on her nose then, yanking out his shirt front, squinted at it. Daisy saw his eyes held laughter as he said, 'An' look what you done to me new clobber.'

'Just as well you keeps a spare in me wardrobe then, ain't it?'

Daisy took his hand and pulled him from the kitchen towards the hallway. At the bottom of the stairs, he paused.

'We're letting a pot of your good tea go to waste,' he said.

Daisy put out her hand and touched the bulge in his trousers.

'Bugger the tea. This mustn't go to waste,' she said.

He laughed. 'What you goin' to do to me, Daisy Lane?'

'Whatever I bleedin' wants, I 'ope,' she said, leading him upstairs.