



“THE PUGILIST”

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“Have you talked to him lately?” Kate asked the delicate question louder than one might think, but the noise level in the bar required it. The only person who heard the question was its intended target, and Anne answered over the din.

“We exchanged a couple texts,” she said with a shoulder shrug and no emotion in her voice. Kate knew Anne, however. They’d been best friends for a long time.

“You’ve done more than exchange texts,” Kate noted, and Anne responded by draining her beer. “Spill it, girl.”

“We’re not teenagers anymore,” she replied.

“Come on, Anne. What’s going on between you two? It’s been eight months since you broke up. Neither of you has moved on so there must be something still...” Kate let her sentence peter out in hopes that Anne would finish it. She wouldn’t bite, though. “I’ll get us a couple more beers,” Kate muttered.

They were sitting in the far corner of the bar, and with it being a Friday night, the bar bustled with patrons and Kate had to squeeze and shimmy through the bar’s usual clientele. Webb’s was a neighborhood establishment, and everyone knew each other. In fact, Mitch, who owned the place, was Kate’s cousin and manned the bar with her other cousin Mandy. Mitch acknowledged Kate’s order with a nod, and she leaned against the bar waiting. Mandy swung by with two martinis and nodded her head towards the end of the bar. Kate followed her nod and saw Ty, Anne’s ex. He was nursing a beer and appeared oblivious to the raucousness around him. His eyes, however, scanned the room and Kate saw them stop in the far corner.

“Thanks, Mitch,” Kate said and took the bottles from her built cousin. In addition to the bar, he owned the gym next door. During the day he trained the muscle-bound and hopeful boxers, and at night, he ran the bar.

“The next two are on me,” Anne said when Kate set the bottles down. They had just started, and their limit was usually four over the course of a couple hours and a pizza. Anne’s eyes flicked over to the bar and Ty.

“Seriously. What’s going on between you?” Kate asked. Anne rolled her eyes, took a drink of beer, and let out a big sigh.

“Ty wants to get back together,” she said.

“That’s not really a surprise,” Kate replied. “You’re the one that called things off. He’s been heartbroken since.”

“Shut up,” Anne replied, and Kate knew she hit a nerve, a truthful nerve. “And heartbroken is such a stupid word. Get your mind out of fairy tales.”

“You know what I mean,” Kate said with irritation. Since the breakup, it was hard to be supportive of her best

friend. To be honest, Kate was on Ty's side when it came to the relationship even though Kate could see where Anne was coming from also.

"I'm going to the bathroom," Anne said and rushed off before Kate could acknowledge her departure. It was her turn to sigh, and she looked over at Ty. He paid his tab, and she watched as he slipped his leather jacket on and pulled on a beanie to protect his bald head from the January cold. In support of his sister who had been diagnosed with cancer several months ago, he shaved his head. The two were close, and her battle was wearing on him. Ty doted on her; her prognosis was not good.

Ty still wore his work shirt – he worked as a delivery man for a local appliance store – and it showed off the muscles he'd built at the gym over the years. In his spare time, he was an amateur boxer, and it was that hobby that drove a spike between him and Anne.

Since high school, Ty had been boxing, and in the twelve years since his first match, he had yet to win. He didn't

give up; he wanted – needed – to win at least one match but after a dozen years, the hobby was taking its toll. After his last bout eighteen months earlier, he experienced a small brain bleed. The doctor advised him to retire from boxing, but he refused. Bobby, Kate’s boyfriend and Ty’s cornerman, tried to talk some sense into him but Ty wouldn’t listen. His first win was just so important, and Anne told Kate she gave Ty an ultimatum – her or boxing.

He chose the wrong ring.

It was a chilly night, but Ty didn’t notice as he waited on the stoop. He had to try again to talk to Anne even though his previous attempts were failures. He cared too much about her, and it was important he try again to talk some sense into her. It was just one more fight, and then he was done. Ty was confident he could beat Cal Gilbert. Ty had been training harder than ever, and he knew victory was finally within reach. His time had finally come. Now, if he could only convince

Anne that. It would mean a lot to him if she was there at the bout.

He saw her turn the corner, and his heart raced. Not because he was madly in love with her, as cliché as that sounded, but because he was nervous she would refuse to talk to him. All he wanted was a chance, but Ty knew that after his last attempt, she was pretty final in telling him to leave her alone.

As expected, Anne was not happy to see him. “I’m not doing this again, Ty,” she said and brushed by him into the foyer of the walk-up they shared for almost seven years. Since kicking him out, he’d been sleeping on the couch at his mother’s house and helping her and Sarah. He was supporting them financially but also putting a little money away for the day he and Anne got married. When he was kicked out, they were engaged, and the last time he saw her, she was still wearing the small diamond ring.

“Anne, please. I just want to talk,” Ty pleaded as he followed her up the stairs. “Face to face. No more texting.”

“In-person or through technology, nothing has changed,” she said and quickened her steps, but Ty just matched her pace.

“Do you want me to beg?” he asked as she stopped at 4A.

“No, I want you to go away,” she replied.

“Five minutes. Please?” Anne slipped the key into the door but didn’t turn it. Her back was to him, and he couldn’t see her face. He took a chance and turned her around so he could look into her hazel eyes. “Five minutes after seven years. That’s all I’m asking.”

“Nothing has changed, Ty. You made your choice. You’d prefer to get the shit beat out of you again despite what the doctor said, despite me begging you to stop.” Anne pulled her left glove off, revealing the engagement ring. “We wanted children, but I want my children to have a father who remembers their names, who can play with them.” She slipped the ring off and handed it towards Ty. “It’s over. You made your choice.” It wasn’t the fact that Anne was giving him the

ring back that shocked him; it was the fact that there was not one waver of emotion in her voice. “Take the ring, Ty. Move on. Put your energy into taking care of Sarah.”

“But...”

“No, Ty. No more words.” Anne picked up his left hand. It was tender, as was his right one, after extended workouts on both the heavy and speed bags the day before. She placed the ring on his palm and folded his callused fingers over it.

“I won’t move on,” he said, his voice low.

“That’s your choice, Ty.”

“Are you moving on?” he asked.

“Go. Please,” she said, and for the first time, her voice wavered just a touch. Before he could say anything more, she was in the apartment, and he heard the lock being thrown and the chain sliding into place.

Cal Gilbert was a brawler. Ty had seen him fight before, studied video of him. Cal was tall which slowed him

down, but because Ty was a bit on the short side, this gave him an advantage with his feet. Ty knew his feet were faster and that's why he felt confident he could take him. He could dance circles around Cal, tiring him out before he had a chance to attack with his typical single knockout punch. It might not have been the best plan, but when Ty bounced the idea off of Mitch, his trainer didn't give him an alternative plan. This disappointed Ty a bit. Mitch wasn't doing much beyond reminding him of form. Mitch, it seems, had taken the same stance as everyone around Ty – that the fight was not a good idea.

The anger from that fueled Ty, and he trained harder than any fight before. If no one else was going to build up his confidence than he'd do it himself. He was tired of everyone – from Anne to his mother to just about everyone he encountered – telling him he should cancel the fight. But he couldn't. No. He had one more fight left in him, and he was going to win. Yeah, he'd never won a match and refused to become a journeyman when asked early on his career. He

wasn't going to be a patsy for others to look better and pad their stats. He was a fighter, a boxer. He was going to win, doctors be damned. Ty couldn't count the number of times his dad had been told to stop by the doctors, but he still pushed on and continued winning. If his dad could do it, so could Ty.

Besides, there was no choice now. He'd lost Anne and the only way to show everyone that he made the right choice was to win. And then he would retire, and hopefully, Anne would come back, and they could get married. That was the real prize at hand. He was on the undercard and his portion of the gate – whether he won or lost – was minimal but his boxing was never about the money. He was an amateur; it was his hobby. Ty had grown up watching his father train and fight and when he saw the admiration in his father's face at his first fight – even though he had lost – he was hooked. His dad sat him down afterward and went through each moment of the battle, telling Ty what he could have done better and pointed out his strengths. John Hudson was Ty's biggest supporter, and

the first fight after his father died was the hardest for Ty. Now, he was facing yet another difficult match.

Ty barely made weight at the weigh-in that morning no thanks to his nerves which had barred him from keeping much food or liquids down the last couple of days. He made his middleweight class by a hair whereas Cal Gilbert topped the class. Ty hoped to be equal weight, but that didn't happen, and he had no one but himself to blame for that. There was nothing he could do about that now as Bobby, his cornerman, began taping Ty's wrists and hands.

"You've got this, Ty," Bobby said. "I know you can do it tonight. You've got your pops looking down on you and Mitch has your mom and Sarah set up in his box."

"Sarah shouldn't be here," Ty said, worried. "Her counts aren't high enough."

"That's why Mitch put them in his box. It's still a good view but away from everyone and their germs. She's never missed one of your fights before, and she's not going to let a little thing like cancer get in her way. She's just as stubborn as

you and your old man,” Bobby explained and ripped the final piece of tape. “How’s that, Ty?” He clenched and flexed and punched his heavily taped hands. They felt sturdy, strong.

“Good job, Bobby. Just like always. Glove me up,” Ty replied, and Bobby slipped the red boxing gloves on. Ty punched them together and took several deep breaths. “This is the night, Bobby.”

“You bet, Ty,” Bobby said and slapped Ty on his bald head.

The small auditorium adjacent to Webb’s Gym was not even a third full yet when it was time for the Hudson – Gilbert fight. Bobby had Ty’s corner all set up, and as he watched his childhood friend climb into the ring among the weak applause, he said a silent prayer that the bout would be over soon and Ty wouldn’t need a trip to the hospital like the last few matches.

“You’re looking good, man,” Bobby lied to Ty, who was already wet with sweat and looking a bit green around the

gills. “Remember, he may be the brawler, but he’s slow. You’ve got the feet. Work ‘em. Use ‘em to your advantage. Wear him down before he throws the one that counts. Got it?” Bobby asked and forced Ty’s mouth guard in before he could verbalize anything. He nodded, and Bobby gave him a light slap and a sly smile. Ty and Bobby were best friends, but Bobby knew that Ty was nothing but a skinny palooka. He had no idea what kept Ty going. His pops was a fighter, not the best, but at least he won a few at his peak. Nothing spectacular, nothing extraordinary to make Ty try and fight at the same level. Ty revered his pops but never had Bobby heard him say he had something to prove because he was John Hudson’s son. In the annals of boxing, only those in the neighborhood even knew who John Hudson was.

Bobby had no idea what Ty’s motivation was when it came to boxing. If Bobby were as bad as Ty, he would have quit a long time ago, but Ty wasn’t a quitter, and that was what worried Bobby. Everyone who cared about Ty was worried about him, and Bobby didn’t have the balls to tell Ty the reason

why Sarah came was that she was afraid Ty might not make it out of the ring. She was sick – the chemo was taking a toll on her – but she was there with Mrs. Hudson. Ty’s coworkers came along with the regulars from Mitch’s bar. The people weren’t there to see Ty’s first win; they were there out of a sick fascination about whether Ty would be alive or not at the end of ten rounds. *Ten rounds*, Bobby thought to himself. It had been five years since Ty had made it that long before either being knocked out or Bobby had to throw the towel in and stop the fight.

The only person Bobby was surprised not to see was Anne. He had spoken with her a few days earlier when they ran into each other around the corner. She asked about Ty and how his training was coming. *Do you think he has a chance?* she had asked. Bobby had been honest; it was his way. *No*, he said. It was a simple answer to a simple question.

Anne had cried, and Bobby pulled her into a hug. She was a terrific girl, and Bobby thought Ty was being an asshole for picking boxing over her. Bobby was confident Anne would

show up, but as he scanned the crowd, he could not see her. She was the best thing for him and boxing the worst, and now it was time for the ugliness to begin as Ty and Cal were introduced to the crowd.

The air in the auditorium was stale, even a little chilly as there weren't enough people to warm the place with their body heat. When it was main event time, the place would be hot and muggy, but now it was cold which fit the situation. Ty and Cal touched gloves, and with a ring of the bell, the match was on.

Ty gave it his all during round one, and if the bout were decided on just that one round, Ty would have won for effort, but that's not how boxing worked. Cal was going through the motions, and instead of Ty trying to wear Cal down, the opposite was happening.

“Run him ‘round the ring, Ty,” Bobby advised at the end of round three as he tried to stop the bleeding from a cut above Ty's left eyebrow. Cal could deliver equally hard

punches with either hand and Ty's right eye was about swollen shut.

"Trying," Ty gasped and hocked a bloody lugs into the spit pail. "Bobby?"

"What, bud?" he replied and wiped the boxer's face with a wet towel.

"Don't throw the towel in for me," he asked in a voice that was not free of a slight slur. "I decide. 'Kay?"

"Ty, I don't..."

"My decision," he insisted and stood up. Bobby steadied him. The referee looked at Bobby, and the look on his face asked a very appropriate question – *Is he done?* Bobby shook his head, and round four began with a ding. It would just be a matter of time now. Bobby doubted Ty would make the decision himself. Cal was just waiting for the right time to throw the punch that would bring the bout to a much-needed end. Outside of the ring, Cal was a standup guy and not known for bloodying an opponent unnecessarily. Bobby didn't know what was taking him so long to do the deed.

Ty threw several sloppy punches – an uneven series of jabs and hooks – that did little to Cal. His feet were slowing down, and he stumbled after Cal cut him across the lower jaw. Ty bounced against the ropes, and Cal advanced on him, but Ty rolled out of his way. He was not done yet.

By the end of the eighth round, Ty was a tomato can. Bloodied, unsteady on his feet, and challenging to focus. Bobby waved salts beneath Ty's bloody nose, and this perked him up a little.

“What should I hit him with?” Ty slurred. “What’s my next move?”

“Ty, it’s over,” Bobby said and cleared Ty’s eye of blood. “Quit now before the damage is too much.”

“Can’t... quit...” Each word seemed to take his friend's effort to say. “Lost her. Lost... Anne...” Bobby sighed. He knew what Ty was trying to do now and this angered Bobby.

“You’re not going out this way, buddy,” Bobby said, and he reached for the towel over his shoulder, but Ty put his glove on his hand.

“No,” he replied. “My decision.”

“You’re in no shape to decide, Ty. It’s over. If I don’t end it, you know the ref will. He’s not going to let this beat down continue.”

“When I say,” Ty insisted and stood up. Bobby put a hand on his upper arm to steady him, but Ty brushed it off, and he walked towards the center of the ring where he was met by the ref. Bobby slipped through the ropes and watched his boxer with worry. Cal hadn’t left his corner yet. Even he knew that it was over.

The ref asked Ty something, but he didn’t answer. His gaze began moving over the crowd. The place was packed now. They were ready for the title match but were being treated to the humiliation of a broke down boxer. It killed Bobby. Ty didn’t deserve this.

Again, Bobby reached for the towel on his shoulder, but before he could throw it, Ty wavered and went down to one knee. The ref went to one knee also and talked to Ty, but Ty's focus was a few feet away to the front row. Sitting there was Anne. Ty was looking at her. Her face was unreadable to Bobby. His attention went back to Ty who fell sideways, propping himself up on the mat with a shaky arm, his attention never leaving Anne. The ref spoke one more time to Ty and Bobby knew he was asking Ty if he could continue. He held his breath waiting for the answer. With a drop of his head and shoulders, Ty slowly shook his head.

It was over; he had made his decision. Gazing at Anne, he gave her a single nod which she returned.

THE END

