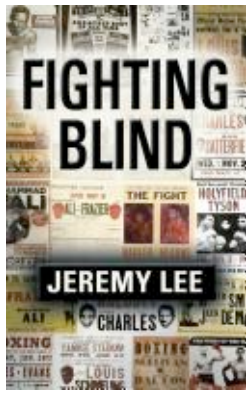


# FIGHTING BLIND

**JEREMY LEE**



Fighting Blind is a story about the battles we all fight. Ezzard Pearl Riley lost his mother at age eleven to a suspicious accident and was left with his drunken father. Teddy Rose was a devout family man who had been training his entire life but struggles after losing his most loved fighter. Fighting Blind is a story of our human condition to overcome and win the fight of life.

# Fighting Blind

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# **Fighting Blind**

Jeremy Lee

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## Chapter 1

The fight is never over. Not when the bell rings, not after twelve rounds, not when the gloves come off, not at the end of the day, the struggle is never over. The battle is inside the fighter, and few ever rid their lives of the fight no matter how many wins they have, or how long they punch on the bag. E Z Pearl was the kind of boxer who loved to hit the bag. For hours he would dance with the stuffed leather mirror of his frustrations. The continual assault upon the worn spots of his angers focus was more than just training; it was release, and momentary relief of the weight of his past. The continual pounding, the pop pop pop on the surface was a soothing cadence to his mind, heart, and soul. This day he was especially energetic and violent in his assault.

E Z Pearl had been born Ezzard Pearl Riley to a doting Irish mother. His namesake had come from the heavyweight champion boxer Ezzard Charles who was said to be his fathers' distant cousin. His mother Pearl had married E Z s father after finding out that she was pregnant; it had been the right thing to do. Pearl was a kind and gentle women, always wearing her kitchen apron, cooking or cleaning and taking care of her one great love in the world, her only child Ezzard. E Z s father Dickey was a mixture of so many different kinds of peoples he used to say he was a mutt. He had been a great boxer in his day, with a thundering right that was legend in his hometown of Muncie Indiana. The problem was Dickey Riley

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couldn't put down the bottle long enough to win consistently in the ring. Skill becomes useless when it's drunken. After E Z was born, Dickey drank more and more until his life became an endless cycle of going to work, coming home drunk and drinking more, and then arguing with Pearl before passing out. The next day the cycle would repeat, and so became the abominable life of young Ezzard and Pearl Riley.

At a very early age young Ezzard displayed a tremendous athletic ability. He wasn't born a big child, but soon with the nourishment and attention of his mother he became a strapping boy with long arms and a towering stance much taller than the other kids. It was evident that he was going to be big, but it was his advancement that surprised his parents. The kid had learned to walk at eight months old, ran around the house by nine months, and was throwing and catching a ball like a toddler before he was a year old. As Ezzard became school age he was outrunning kids older than him and out muscling them in their wrestling contests. Young Ezzard was fascinated by his father's boxing pictures and loved to hit around on the bag Dickey kept hanging in the garage. When half-drunk Dickey's rambling regularly captivated young Ezzard Riley with stories about the boxing greats of old. Ezzard was proud of his namesake and the great boxer that it had come from and loved to hear the stories about Ezzard Charles' fights with Joe Louis and Rocky Marciano. Before he even knew what being a fighter was, that is what young Ezzard wanted to be. He wanted to be better than his father

who could have been a great athlete, but instead became a great drunk.

On this day twenty five year old E Z Pearl could feel the hate inside him dissipate through the punches he landed in the seemingly non-stop barrage. Fourteen years ago to the day his mother had died. He fought the memory of waking up to hearing his mother and fathers' argument, and then his mother falling silent. He fought the memory of the policemen telling him his mother had fell and hit her head and was being taken to the hospital. He fought the memory of the doctor telling him, while his father looked on, that the blow to his mommas head had been too great and she didn't make it. There he stood, fists pounding out the memories as he fought and fought.

Standing there watching the fighter he loved like a son, pound out his sad memories was painful to Teddy Rose. On normal days he would be shouting instructions to his fighter, keep your right up, elbows in, punches in bunches, all the guiding encouragements that a trainer tells the athlete during observation. Today was different; Teddy had been on duty the night Dickey Riley had called and said his wife had fallen and hit her head. He had been there at the hospital and seen the young boy crushed by the news of his mothers' death. He knew this day.

Today Teddy had watched E Z set the time clock for thirty rounds and hoped he wouldn't go that long. As the digital read-out approached round twenty Teddy knew his fighter was going to come off the bag soon. Whenever E Z was ready to come off he would

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start looking around during the rest periods, looking for Teddy to get the mitts, looking for a water boy to fill his bottle, looking for a partner to spar with.

Teddy smiled as E Z hit the off button on the clock after round twenty. He knew his fighter well, and eighty minutes was long enough for a fighter who had already trained hard three times that day. He had a fight coming up in six weeks; it was almost time to start the taper down of training that comes just before fight week.

E Z walked towards Teddy with a very unfamiliar look on his face. Teddy knew and said, “You done?”

Almost with embarrassment E Z said, “Yeah for now.” The kid hated to quit.

Teddy replied, “It needs to be for today, it’s time to start your taper.”

As Teddy started taking off the bag gloves E Z said, “Are you sure it’s not too early to start backing off, I thought you said we had a lot more stuff to work on?”

The kids’ hands felt like hot irons as he unwound the wraps and looked into E Z s eyes and said, “We can still work on techniques and combinations, you’re in great shape already so back off to one ten mile run tomorrow morning and we’ll spend the third workout on your footwork, strategy, and defense.”

“What about number two?” E Z asked.

“We’re gonna work the mitts some and then spar with some new blood.” Teddy replied with a twinkle in his eye. He knew that E Z didn’t like surprises and



that was exactly what he needed to shake things up and get him prepared for a tough opponent.

“New blood!” That’s exactly what’s going to be on this canvas you bring some hotshot in here trying to make a name for himself.” E Z said with fire in his eyes.

“Now now I’m just bringing in some of Reggie Rowes fighters from Philly. They’ve got that Philadelphia style like Danny B.” Danny B was E Z’s next opponent and a tough one too.

Danny Banks was a Philadelphia fighter with a national Golden Gloves championship under his belt complemented by a silver medal in the Olympics. He was fast and agile with an elusive boxing style that required relentless pursuit and efficient counter punching. Danny B had just moved up from the cruiserweight division and hadn’t really fought anyone with real power and talent in the heavyweight divisions. E Z was that and more so Danny B would be trying to rely on his ability to punch and get away after scoring. If Teddy had anything to do with it, and he did, Danny B was in for a big surprise.

E Z knew Teddy was a keen trainer, so he just said, “Alright I’ll whip them, just like I’m going to Danny B.”

“I know you will, I know you will.” Teddy chuckled.

He motioned for E Z to get on the scale and wrote the number right next to the weight that he had been at the beginning of the day.

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Teddy reached on the table and handed E Z a protein, electrolyte, and vitamin smoothie, plus a liter of water. He said, “Drink both of those before you get in the shower, and I’ll tell you how much more water you have to drink for tonight.”

Looking around his establishment Teddy became nostalgic. The reflection of all the memories he saw in the poster boards and fight flyers on the walls was a rush of emotions. This day was getting to him also; suddenly the memories flooded his senses.

The day Pearl Riley died he and his partner had been called to the Riley home. He had been witness to how drunken Dickey was, had heard the neighbors say the arguments were an every night occurrence. He had known Pearl and Dickey all their lives and knew Dickey was a no good drunk. He also knew dickey had friends in the police force and that they believed his story that Pearl had fell and hit her head on the table. Everyone had doubts; many people thought Pearl was pushed to her death.

Teddy had even fought Dickey a couple of times before his hand was crushed in a motorcycle crash that also left him with a sore leg most days. He did have a great right, but was sloppy with his protection and didn’t work hard enough out of the ring to have any serious wind.

Whenever the memory of young Ezzard being told that his momma was dead flickered in Teddies head he could feel the pain of that day. He understood why E Z punched and punched out the anger that would otherwise be spent buying trouble or death.

Teddy Rose had taken an early medical retirement from the police force, spending most of his time at the Police Action League teaching neighborhood kids how to box and stay out of trouble too. Teddy was a natural teacher who understood the sweet science of boxing like very few do. He also understood growing up in a home with parents who weren't the best and in a crummy neighborhood with thugs and hoodlums for role models. Since he couldn't become a professional boxer after the bike wreck he wanted to help the city by cleaning up the streets. He became a cop and quickly found out that the police department was full of corruption and political backbiting. The job was already wearing his soul thin when Pearl Riley died and after Dickeys friends looked the other way for their buddy, he had to get out. The settlement from the crash had given him a nice cushion so he retired for medical purposes. The PAL club just seemed like a natural place for Teddy to be; he was involved with his first love of boxing, and he could be a role model for the kids, and teach them some discipline.

The weathered trainer looked over the building he had bought so many years ago. He had closed the deal just a couple of years past the first time he had seen young Ezzard since his mothers' death. The memory replayed in his mind.

The fourteen year old angry boy had come into the PAL club looking for a fight with one of the regular kids who had stolen his girlfriend. His heart was broken and he was looking for a head to break to make it feel better. Teddy told Ezzard that day, "The

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only fighting that goes on here is in the ring, so if you still want to fight, get some gloves.” He had marched over and struggled to put on a pair of sparring gloves and got right on the canvas. Marvin Easley was no chump in the ring so Marvin met him in the square circle and was ready to go himself. Teddy refereed and from the beginning you could see Ezzard had some talent, but he was mad as hell and out of shape too. No one got any pointers that day, there were no rounds, no corner men, no seconds, just two pubescent boys taking out their sexual aggression and anger on each other.

The fight didn't last long, maybe one or two minutes. Young Ezzard was wild with rage after the first few punches that Marvin landed on his face. His punches were wild and brutal, no control at all. Marvin could see his opponent was an easy win and took advantage. When the whipping began to turn into a beating Teddy stopped the boys and sent Marvin to the locker room. He got the gloves off of Ezzard and told him to come with him.

He sat the boy down and put an ice pack on his face first and then gave him a wet towel. He said, “You were fighting blind out there kid.”

“Huh?” shrugged Ezzard.

Teddy explained, “When you let your anger control you, you're fighting blind. You have to control your emotions and let your skill dominate. Letting your emotions lead you, shuts off the thinking parts of your brain, and you make mistakes, you don't think!”

Ezzard looked at Teddy like he had just told him to learn to fly and said, “How in the hell am I supposed to control my anger when I am being punched in the face?”

The great trainer laughed out loud and asked, “You wanna learn?”

Teddy looked the boy in the eye and asked a question he already knew the answer to. “How do you control your anger when you’re not being punched in the face?”

Ezzard thought for long minute and spoke the truest words he ever had. “I don’t.” Then he just stared at the ground. The shame of what he had just said mixed with the whipping he just got took the boy to the low place where he always thought of losing his momma.

Teddy could see where he was and said, “I knew your momma.”

“Really.” Was Ezzards shocked reaction.

“Actually I knew your dad and your momma grew up with them all my life.” He lamented. “What is your dad doing nowadays?”

“He’s being the drunken piece of shit he has always been. When he comes home from work I’m gone and I don’t go home until he’s passed out most nights. We communicate by notes mostly, keeps me from having to deal with him much.”

Teddy thought of how he ought to go over there and just beat Dickey Riley senseless for what he has done, and not done. He thought better of it though, it would just make his hand hurt, and Dickey would be

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so drunk he wouldn't feel it or remember what had happened to learn the lesson being taught.

Teddy looked at the young boy and asked. "You wanna learn how to fight?" If he could give the kid some pointers, and a place to hang out, maybe it would make the kids life better than the hell he had been living in for so long.

Young Ezzard said. "You would teach me?"

"Be here after school on Monday, that'll give your face enough time to heal up some." Teddy was kidding but not really, he wanted to give it a couple of days for the wounds to the kids face and pride to heal before he hauled him into the lion's den with fresh blood dripping.

Ezzard half smirked and shyly said, "I'll be here."

After that day the kids of the neighborhood, and the school, started calling Ezzard, E Z because of how easy he had been whipped in the ring. It would be a name that would stick with him even after it wasn't easy to beat him, in or out of the ring.

The boy had shown up that Monday wanting to rip the head off of Marvin Easley. Teddy had to keep him under control and put him to work on some beginners lessons. Exhaustion had quenched his temper fast and soon he was clay in Teddy's hands. A beginning.

That was so many years ago. The seasoned trainer looked around the gym he and that wild boy had built together. Just a couple of years after E Z showed up at the PAL club Teddy decided he wanted to have his own place. He searched for a big cheap building in the worst part of town and bought the place for a steal. No

one wanted to buy it because of the neighborhood, but it was perfect for Bad Boys boxing gym. Teddy gave it the name “Bad Boys” in hopes of bringing the kids from the neighborhood that had been told they were bad, but Teddy knew they were just misguided and needed discipline and role models.

The building had been just an empty shell, full of trash and vermin, and spray painted with every gang tag in the city. Before he even cleaned or painted a thing Teddy had walked the whole neighborhood with a big group of the kids from that part of town, talking to all of his neighbors and the other kids. His cop friends said he was crazy, but he knew that his vision went much deeper than most peoples. Those kids and that neighborhood just needed to be cared about and they would care back.

All the kids pitched in and helped clean and paint the run down place like it was their own. Teddy guessed it was their own, and tried to make them all proud of what they were doing. The fledgling E Z was there every day; he had found a new way to stay away from his drunken father. His skills were still amateur, but his conditioning was exceptional. He had long gotten use to the nickname, using it himself as a turnaround expression saying. “They call me E Z because I can whoop you easy.” Behind his back though the other kids would say if you get him mad, he can be beat easy. Ezzard Riley had a temper and everyone knew it.

On the day of the gyms grand opening a lot of the neighborhood kids were there along with Teddy’s

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friends. That was the first day that E Z met Teddy's wife. Maggie Rose was a beautiful woman whose body was being stolen away from her by ALS or Lou Gehrig's disease. Maggie and Teddy had met when he was still fighting. Maggie's brother Jim Stepp was a golden gloves champion on his way to stardom when his life was cut short by some punks bullet who was afraid of the ass whipping he was about to get. Jim had been Teddy's good friend and training partner. It was at Jim's funeral service that Maggie and Teddy met and started hanging out, and then hanging out soon turned into dating, and their romance blossomed. When Teddy wrecked his motorcycle Maggie was there, unflinching in her dedication to rehabbing him back to health. It was then that Teddy knew he had found the woman he would dedicate his life too. At their wedding Teddy still had a cast on his hand from a follow-up operation to set some more bones right, but that didn't take away from their happiness. Two girls and a boy later and the family was complete.

Maggie had been diagnosed with ALS after Teddy finally convinced her to go to the doctor to see why she was tired all the time, and had become so clumsy. After seeing several specialists it was finally determined what was causing Maggie's problems. The diagnosis was grim and at first they took it hard. After some time the fighter in both of them came back from the blow of finding out Maggie's life was going to be much shorter and hard while she lived. Slowly they started researching and preparing for the road ahead. Maggie was adamant that when she got real bad



Teddy was not to neglect his gym and life as a trainer. He would have to live on after she was gone and that gym and life would keep him going. If he was training a fighter to make it through the battle of his life, it would carry Teddy in the battle of his life. People are connected like that and Teddy Rose was the best trainer at helping people overcome, he would be training her to live while she was alive, and training his fighters to survive in the ring. By doing all that, he would be training himself to survive when she was gone. Maggie thought like that, a true tactician.

At the grand opening Teddy's daughters May, short for Maybelle, which she hated, and Tessa, short for Contessa, which she loved, were there to help Maggie around to get what she wanted and needed. The girls took turns taking care of their mom when Teddy was at the gym, or away for a fight event. Teddy's son Rocky lived in California working in Silicon Valley. Rocky had rebelled against his fathers' love of boxing and the name sake he had given him and became a computer geek. Teddy didn't mind, he was happy and successful, that was all that mattered. He just missed his boy and wished he lived closer to home. Still it was pleasing to have four of the five family members there and the extended family that the boys were.

Teddy saw him before E Z did. Dickey was pulling up in his pick-up truck and nothing good could come from him being there. Teddy wondered just how drunk he was and what he wanted. Being right in front

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of the place everyone noticed too, and was watching, including Maggie and the girls.

Teddy may have seen him first, but E Z was the first one to get to him. "What are you doing here dad?" E Z practically cried.

"I came to see where my son spends all his time." Dickey said with an indignant chip on his shoulder.

Teddy, just a few feet away could see that the man had been drinking, but wasn't fall down drunk. He shouldn't be driving, especially with all these kids around.

"Dad I have told you over and over again where I have been, can't you leave me alone?" E Z was getting furious fast, he couldn't stand the sight of his drunken father.

"You think your little notes are good enough?" Dickey spit, I hardly ever see you cause your asleep in the mornings when I go to work, not home all day, and you come home after I'm... His words trailed off as he thought about what the truth was. He picked back up with, "I never see you."

E Z s temper got the best of him and he said. "I don't want to see you; ever. The look of defiance and hate for his father was like an inferno, and too much for Dickey to swallow.

Almost as fast as anyone could think to react, Dickey leaped forward and shoved his son hard to the ground. The surprise showed on every ones face except for Teddy's who was already to Dickey before E Z hit the ground.

“If you want to shove someone why don’t you shove me?” Teddy gritted through his teeth, two inches from Dickey’s face. Dickey looked into the eyes of a man who was not afraid of him, and whom he had fought before many years ago. The two were locked in a pugilistic stare down when E Z stood up from the ground and took his father down with a blow that came from the suspicion in everyone’s mind about Pearl’s death.

“That’s what you did to momma you son of a bitch, isn’t it?” “You pushed her down and she hit her head, you killed her didn’t you?” I hate you, I hate you. I hate you. E Z said as he ran down the sidewalk as far away from his father and the accusation he had left hanging in the air.

Dickey Riley’s anger was shattered, as much as his heart was crushed by his sons’ words. He deflated like a popped balloon. He started to turn around and go for his pick-up truck when Teddy stepped in front of him.

Teddy said, “You don’t need to be driving Dickey, you’re in no condition.”

There was no fight left in Dickey Riley and he just walked away down the street but couldn’t just leave things the way they were. He turned and looked at Teddy with drunken malice and said, “Someday I’m gonna teach you to mind your own business.”

The man who would never be afraid of Dickey Riley said, “Anytime, anywhere.”

Teddy turned around to see his loving wife standing there struggling to stay on her feet, steadfast

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in support of her husband and E Z. Stress made Maggie's condition worse and he instantly felt a sting in his heart for the pain he knew had been caused to her. He lovingly embraced her and whispered to her that she ought to go home and relax. Maggie nodded and squeezed her husband in an embrace of appreciation. Teddy looked over her shoulder and said, "Maybelle and Contessa take your momma home and I'll be there after I round up E Z and get him settled down."

The girls knew that when their father used full names not to say a word and just do as they were told. May wrinkled her nose up and kissed her dad on the cheek. Tessa squeezed him and kissed him to and they led their mom off to get their coats and purses and head home.

Teddy told everyone to eat up all the food, and help get the place straightened up. He was gonna go looking for E Z. He had a real good ideal where the young man was going to be. Over the years Teddy had learned where the teenager went when he was sad or upset.

Since the days when he first starting training at the PAL club, E Z had increased his wind tremendously. He ran practically every day. That day, instead of running for something, he was running away. Not just his father and their confrontation, not just the accusation he had thrown like a straight right, he was running from himself. He ran nowhere, but he knew where he was going. His subconscious mind took him there every time great stress put him on the run.

When Teddy pulled up, E Z was already there sitting on the ground clearing grass from the edge of Pearl's headstone. He never even looked as the man he considered more of a father than his own got out of his car and began to amble over.

When Pearl first died Ezzard had spent many hours at the cemetery talking to his mother. Ever since then he continued to talk to her often; sometimes he would lay on the grass of her grave and sleep just to be near her. He couldn't, he wouldn't, talk to his father.

The old trainer kneeled down and started helping clear grass and weeds from the base of the beautiful red granite stone that had been placed in memory of his old friend. Not a word was spoken for a good long time; Teddy figured it would be best to let the boy break the silence.

"I know I shouldn't have said what I did." E Z nearly whispered still looking down at the ground and worrying little blades of grass away.

Teddy replied as he stood up. "Well it prolly wasn't the place or time for it, but it had to come out some time or another. You're becoming your own man now and that means expressing how you feel instead of holding it in until it explodes out of ya."

E Z rose to his feet too and looked at Teddy and said, "Thank you for being what my own father can't be."

Teddy gave E Z a hook on the chin and said, "It's alright I kinda like you a little, and besides your gonna

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be a world famous boxer someday and make me rich as your trainer.”

Ezzard laughed and said, “A little huh, returning the hook, and your right, He said, I’m gonna be champion of the world someday.”

Teddy smiled from ear to ear as they got into his car and pulled out the key he had planned to give to the young man earlier. He dangled the key out in the air as he sat down.

E Z just looked at the key for a moment and said, “Is that what I think it is?”

The old trainer said, “It’s your own key to the gym and you better take it before I change my mind.”

In his prime Sugar Ray Leonard’s hand couldn’t have moved so fast as the fledgling boxers did in grabbing that key.

Teddy Instructed, “You can come and go as you please, but no one in the gym but you after hours unless I know about it first. No training or boxing until your homework is done, and no weight training by yourself. And of course all of the posted gym rules apply to you too.”

As they pulled up in front of the gym, Dickey’s truck was gone. Teddy thought, “That son of a bitch, wasn’t that what Ezzard had called him, must have walked around and came back for his vehicle.” Oh well there was nothing he could do now, he just hoped he hadn’t run over someone on his watch. He would deal with Dickey Riley another time.

Teddy told E Z to stay there at the gym for tonight and go home early in the morning after his father had

left for work and get ready for school. He told the young apprentice to call him if he had any problems. He had a sick wife to go home to and knew Ezzard had a girl or two he could be calling if his homework was already done.

That night was the first of many nights that Ezzard Pearl Riley stayed at the gym that couldn't really be called his second home, because he was there more than any other place.

As those old memories cleared from Teddy's mind he looked around at the gym as it was now. four regulation size rings, ten speed bags, twenty heavy bags, five suspended bags, men's and women's locker rooms, an office they had built not long after moving in, and a full blown fitness center and weight room. The gym had less than a hundred regulars, but Teddy didn't count his success by numbers of people. The kids who came to the gym were more than just numbers, they were Teddy's kids and if they didn't have passing grades, and stay out of trouble, they couldn't work out at the gym and they all wanted to be able to work out at the gym. The old trainer was like a father and grandfather to a lot of kids. Teddy had built his reputation up and hosted local Golden Gloves and AAU tournaments with a lot of his fighters winning. In the nine years since the gym had opened there were many marquee boxers coming out of Teddy's gym and he was considered one of the best trainers in the country.

No fighters Teddy trained over the years had as much potential, or were as good as E Z Pearl. The

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young hot head was turning into a great boxer but Teddy worried about him falling off track again. He had come in second in the national Golden Gloves tournament when he was nineteen and was doing well when the kid just lost interest and quit training. E Z still spent a lot of his time at the gym, but it was mostly to hang out and help other fighters. Teddy knew not to push him because that would just have made things worse. He could have applied for and received his pro card at any time, but he began to drink on the weekends and before anyone knew it he was drinking all the time, getting in bar fights, and going to jail. It seemed the kid was fighting himself, and he was losing on both sides.

Once after getting arrested Teddy had left E Z in jail for three months. He checked on him regularly and was told the kid seemed to be content in the jail. The trainer was disturbed by the fact that his fighter wasn't bothered by being in jail. The whole ideal of leaving him there was to give him a good taste in hopes that he wouldn't want to come back. He was afraid that now E Z would have animosity towards him for not getting him out. Teddy was glad that he sent money and wrote often. Maybe the man, who was no longer a kid, would remember that someone did care for him no matter what.

When Teddy couldn't find E Z he would go by Pearls grave, sometimes he would be there, but most times he wasn't. He had found him passed out twice leaning on the headstone. That sad vision of the boy he had raised for the last five years lain out like his



father every night of the week. He could see the cycle repeating and didn't know how to stop it.

Maggie is the one who stopped it, shortly after the last time Ezzard was released from jail. Margaret Maybelle Rose went to be with the lord at the age of forty seven. Maggie's lungs had been unable to labor the air she needed to survive. The doctors said that no person had fought so hard against the final stages of the disease. The effort was a perfect example of a true champion's fight in a life battle. In her final time Maggie had continued to plan for Teddy and her children, the fight trainer's tactician was always strong in the women Teddy loved more than life itself.

In her final days when Maggie was in the hospital Ezzard showed up just out of know where. Teddy didn't know how he had heard but the old trainer had a feeling that the fledgling had been keeping a close eye on them all.

Ezzard would sit with Maggie while the family would rest and she would talk to him the best she could in her laboring state. He would tell her to rest but Maggie wanted to show him what real fighting was and to tell him how he could get there himself. Maggie said, "Ezzard child you have got to stop trying to fill that hole that was left in you when your momma died. You can never fill it up, with whatever you try to put in it. No amount of booze, no drugs, no amount of pain you try to cause yourself. The hole has to be healed up, not filled up."

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Ezzard cried, “But I don’t know how to heal it Maggie May, I miss her so much and I hate him more.”

Maggie laid her whole hand on E Z s face and looked him deep in the eyes and said, “We all miss the people we lose something terrible, there’s no way out of that, but ask yourself would your momma want you to live your life the way you are. I think your momma would want for you to live your life the way that makes you happy, and honor her in memory. Success in all things in your life comes from how you handle the fight. Some battles’ you win, some you lose, what matters is that you fought your hardest. That’s what your momma wanted for you; for you to seek victory in yourself.”

To say so much took Maggie great effort, she rested a long while collecting her thoughts and energy and staring into Ezzards eyes. Ezzard was filled with such love and thoughts of his own mother who had been gone for seven years now. It seemed like an eternity since the last time she rubbed his head or pinched his cheek. He could remember the last time she had tucked him in and told him that he would be a great man someday. Pearl was always telling her son what he could accomplish, how smart he was, how much she loved him for the boy he was. He knew she was trying to balance out the lopsided void that his drunken father left in the upbringing he was getting. He loved his momma more for that and this dear dying matriarch of the world reminded him of that love.

Maggie opened her mouth with a new compassion and said, “No one but those two know what happened that night between your mom and dad. Whatever did happen you can’t change it, but you must let it go. Unless you want to go over and just beat it out of your dad, and then what if he was telling the truth and she did just fall. Ezzard until you know the worst for a fact, don’t ever think the worst about anyone, especially your father. You do know for a fact that your dad is a drunk, and that’s bad enough, but the rest you have got to let go. If you want any peace in life child let it go. You have to learn to forgive, or you will eat yourself up from the inside. No matter what he did, or if you have any relationship with him, you must forgive so you can go on with your life.”

The fragile woman was exhausted from speaking so much. Maggie took on an Angelic facial expression and lay there resting. Ezzard heard every word she said, the problem was listening. He had been angry for so long, angry that his mother had died, angry his father was just a drunk who earned the money to pay the bills, but was not a dad who raises their son, angry at himself for not getting up that night and protecting his momma. He had tried to be more than his anger, but life kept taking him back to that place where anger is the only protection that keeps you from more pain. That is what had made the hurt young boy want to learn to box. It was a mixture of being able to protect himself and the desire to be able to whip his father. After he began learning how to box he discovered how much he loved the sport, loved to hang out with

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the guys at the gym. He really loved the fact that Teddy seemed to care about him. Teddy had quickly become a father figure and now that he thought about it, there really was no void there because Teddy was more of a father to him than his own dad had ever tried to be, and if he looked at the big picture, Teddy was more of a dad to him than most guys dads were to them.

Maggie had at least helped him understand the direction he needed to be heading. He didn't know how he was going to get there, but he did know it was going to be a long rough journey.

From the day that Ezzard and Maggie had last talked, the frail woman only lived forty eight hours more. When she passed away she was surrounded by her family. Teddy, the girls, and E Z had been there all along. Rocky had come from California after Teddy had called him and told the rebellious son that his mother didn't have long.

When Maggie had pulled her last breath Teddy asked everyone to leave him with her for a while. The fight trainer had watched the most important fighter he ever trained, the one he never expected to see counted out, lose the fight of life. They had been married thirty years, there were some hard times, everyone goes through hard times, but those hard times were nothing compared to all the wonderful years they had had. As Teddy looked upon the mother of his children the words Maggie had spoken to him came to mind. She had said, "You will be their rock and shore, their voice of reason, you will continue to

be the great father you have always been because they will need you now more than ever.” Teddy would be all he promised and more for his children and for Maggie; he had promised her and Teddy loved his children and now that is all he had left.

Being the great tactician that she was, Maggie pre-planned her entire service. She had dragged Teddy with her to fine tune, down to the last detail, everything so that when she was gone, the family would not have that burden while trying to mourn. Sitting through the wonderful service Teddy was amazed that Maggie’s love was still enveloped over the family even as they were preparing to put her to rest.

After Maggie died, E Z never left Teddy’s side. During the funeral services Teddy noticed May and E Z seemed to be getting close. He really didn’t know how he felt about his sweet little girl dating a young man who was having such a hard time staying sober and out of trouble. The two had always been close and it seemed like they had been getting closer lately.

Teddy asked May one day, “What’s going on between you and Ezzard?”

May looked at her daddy shyly and said, “I don’t know dad, we have just been leaning on each other for strength, and you know I’ve always liked him.”

No, that Teddy didn’t know, but it didn’t really surprise him any. It did seem natural since they were both nearly the same age and had been around each other for so many years. He wondered if May and E Z had been spending any time together over the years

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when Ezzard was running around doing everything but training. His girls were social butterflies so May could have been spending time with Ezzard and he wouldn't have known.

Not long after Maggie's funeral Tessa had ran off to Green Bay Wisconsin with her high school sweetheart and got married. Her husband Remy had accepted an internship out there with a firm his uncle worked for. Soon it was Remy's company and he and Tessa were doing really well for themselves. Teddy was happy for his little girl, but he hated to have two of his children so far away.

Three days after Maggie's funeral Ezzard came to Teddy and said, "I want to fight!"

A small spark of life ignited in Teddy and he asked, "Did you run this morning?"

"Five miles." E Z beamed.

Teddy smiled the painful smile that comes during grief and your heart feels guilty for any joy, he said, "Then we'll train this evening, five o'clock and then we'll get some dinner." Teddy wanted to talk about May.

Then E Z threw teddy for a loop when he said, "I want to change my name."

Teddy said, "Don't you speak like that your momma would have your head and mine if she was alive."

E Z looked down at the ground and said, "I want to keep the names my momma gave me, I just wanna drop my last name. I can honor my momma by having my last name as her first name, Pearl. You have to

admit it's a great fighting name to: E Z Pearl, heavyweight champion of the world."

Teddy thought it did have a nice ring to it and he understood the young man didn't want to be associated with his father anymore. He said, "Are you talking about a legal name change, or just a ring moniker."

E Z said firmly while looking him right in the eye, "I want to change my name legally."

Teddy said, "We'll get Jesse Hawkins on the phone first thing in the morning and see what we have to do. Now eat a good lunch and stretch your whole body out this afternoon."

Teddy's gym was doing well enough financially and promoting several good fighters that he picked up a full time lawyer on retainer who specialized in sports related legal affairs. Jesse Jackson Hawkins was an old Golden Gloves champion, part time agent, and a fine attorney. Teddy and Jesse had been friends from back when they were boys just starting boxing, and continued that friendship after Jesse got back from law school.

That evening's workout was a challenge for both men. Teddy had E Z jump rope for three rounds, then move to the heavy bag so that the trainer could call out combinations for the young fighter to work. E Z made the common mistakes fighters make who have taken a long layoff, the constant instruction to keep his guard up, snap his hands straight back after throwing a punch, tuck his elbows in, all the molding would take a while to bring him back. This was all

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basic technique that if not practiced constantly fades away from the nervous systems automatic sequencing. The body must repeat the same motion five hundred to a thousand times for it to start to become automatic. The key is to make sure that the fighter is using the proper technique or they will be teaching their nervous system to do the motion wrong. After seven rounds on the heavy bag Teddy got the mitts and told E Z to get in the ring. The young fighter was having a hard time staying on the balls of his feet but that kind of fatigue was normal for an out of shape athlete. Teddy wanted to test his fledglings speed and accuracy which leave fighters when they get tired unless perfect form is used. The young man still had it, but he was getting tired. Teddy waited for E Z to say he needed to quit, but he didn't have it in him so the veteran ring man let the struggling fighter off the hook before they worked too hard and hurt his technique. Teddy told E Z to get the gloves off and get cleaned up, he was hungry. E Z was relieved that he didn't have to say he had enough.

The two practically exhausted athletes, trainer and fighter, went to the best steak house in town to buy the biggest piece of beef they could find. They ordered appetizers and were eating hungrily not wanting to wait on their dinners. Teddy looked at E Z and asked, "Your twentieth birthday is coming up, have you made any plans?" He had caught the young man off guard, it was obvious by his reaction to the question, but he wanted to break the ice open so he could talk to E Z about May.



E Z broke the ice because saying, “Actually I have been meaning to talk to you about something really important to us both.”

Teddy lowered his head a little to take on a more serious expression and said, “Go on then”

The steaks arrived just then which gave E Z a few moments to get his courage up while the waitress took the other dishes away and sorted out the order.

E Z began to cut his steak and said, “You know I think of you as a father figure and I love you like you are family.”

Teddy nodded and beamed at the mature young man he had seen grow so much.

E Z continued a little redder then before, “May has been a good friend to me every since we met”, he seemed to lose his confidence a little but muscled on, “We have been getting closer.” The look of nervousness on the young man’s face was almost comical to the very protective yet understanding father. Had May not told him, and then he filled in some of the blanks, maybe his reaction would have been a little different, but he trusted his little girl.

Teddy smiled to put the young suitor at ease and said, “So what are you saying Ezzard?” Ezzard Pearl could feel the relief come over him when he saw the smile and broke out of a laugh and said, “You knew, I knew you could see, I told May you knew.”

Teddy said,” Actually I was pretty oblivious until May told me she liked you and then some things I wondered about made since.” Is May the one who told

you about Maggie being in the hospital?" Teddy asked.

E Z said, "Yeah her and I have kept in contact the whole time when I was out acting like an idiot. She has been there for me through everything and that is when I realized that I cared for her more deeply than a regular girlfriend.

That took Teddy for a loop and made him think of Maggie, he wanted to say something but E Z went on.

"You remember this last time when I was in jail? That was for getting in a fight with these two guys because they had called May a name and I couldn't take it. She told me to let it go but I lost my temper and went after them. May went to Jesse Hawkins and told him what happened, swore him to secrecy, and Jesse got me out of trouble. I couldn't tell you what happened because May made me promise to keep quiet. She's a great person. Better than I am."

Teddy could imagine the name his daughter had been called, a young Irish boy and pretty black girl out together probably acting like more than friends. The world was still partially racist no matter where you were or what advancements have been made in the last fifty years. He had taught his daughter to overlook and forgive peoples ignorance as their way of rising above such nonsense.

E Z continued by saying, "What I'm asking for is your blessing in dating your daughter and hopefully make her my wife someday; if she will have me."

Teddy was crying he couldn't help it. In an attempt to regain his toughness he said, "Don't you

hurt my little girl Ezzard Pearl.” Looking away and looking back he said, “You have my blessing and my support.”

Teddy said, “Now let’s eat this fine food our bodies need so badly, it’s killing me smelling so good.” Teddy would never forget that day, to have E Z back was enough, but to think that he could be his son-in-law soon was special.

Teddy came back to the present and saw E Z coming over. After drinking his protein shake and water, and taking a shower the twenty five year old E Z Pearl, up and coming nationally ranked boxer came towards Teddy with that slink and swagger that a jungle cat has when it walks through the rain forest. The man was really coming along as a fighter, his technique was solid, his stamina was a ten, his chin was like granite, and he had speed, tact, and poise under pressure. E Z s big problem was impatience, and when he lost his temper he quit thinking. A fighter who can’t think in the ring is beat.

Teddy did some figuring on the chalk board and looked at E Z and said, “You sweated like a whore in a convent today, you have to drink three more liters of water tonight and if your piss is still dark then you should drink one more. Don’t stay up late either we have those guys from Reggie Rowes coming tomorrow, I want you sharp and fast. This will be the last time you get to spar before the fight since were at the six weeks out mark.”

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E Z danced and shadow boxed around saying, “I feel sorry for those guys, they have to face the hungry lion in his den.”

Teddy started flipping a towel at E Z s punches and saying, “Remember only ten miles tomorrow morning, water, food, sleep and get home to that wife before she starts to worry that I killed you by working you too hard.”

E Z laughed out loud and said, “You couldn’t work me to death, you’ve already tried that, and it didn’t work.”

Teddy thought that was true as he watched the fighter tread towards the door. The man had the greatest level of stamina Teddy had ever seen. He was fully capable of running a full marathon, could punch off thirty rounds on the heavy bag and be ready for mitt work five minutes later. Regularly E Z would do sets of twenty dead hang pull-ups that had his back looking like he was part cobra and his biceps like they were softballs. When the young fighter was talked about in magazines and newspapers his stamina was said to be his greatest skill.

Teddy thought back to when the nineteen year old wild child came back to boxing. The newly named E Z Pearl had to shake off the dust and ring rust, and clear his body of all the crap he had put in it. Teddy had a few good fighters who were doing well on the circuit and E Z was kind of jealous. Teddy had done well with the gym and also developed a training system that produced great fighters.

It had been E Z's turn to earn the respect of the other fighters, not just in the gym but in the state and country.

Teddy would have E Z running first thing in the morning, at first five miles per run. As he was able to run five miles in thirty minutes, which took a while, then he could increase to six miles, and when he could do that in thirty six minutes, then he could go up to seven and so on. Teddy really didn't think the young man would be able to keep increasing mileage, but he did until eventually he could run ten miles in just a little over an hour. For a two hundred pound man Teddy knew that was special.

One of the seemingly easy things to learn was hard for Teddy to teach the young boxer and that was to never look away from his opponent. Every boxer keys to their trainer's voice, so when they are in a loud arena or event center they will only listen to that voice. E Z would look at Teddy instead of just listening and keep looking in front of him. Teddy would get so mad and tell him, "You're gonna get knocked out because you wanna look at my ugly mug." It took too long for Teddy to break the kid of the stupid habit; he just chalked it up as one of the flukes or quirky things about fighters. They will have all the greatest qualities and then have some profound weakness that just stands out like a sore thumb. As a trainer it is your job to wipe that out, or cover it up because weaknesses get you killed in the ring.

After nearly a year of work E Z was ready to get his pro card. It was time to move him from the

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amateur level into the world of the working boxer. He was ready to start making money from his skill and start the climb up through the levels of that skill to try and reach the pinnacle at the top.

Jesse sent E Z off to get his physical and blood tests for his pro card, and then handled all of the application paperwork to get him in front of the athletic commission. E Z did great when questioned by the commission and couldn't believe they wouldn't give him their decision right then. "They would let him know their answer to his application in the near future." Is what they had said.

Teddy knew that was normal, sometimes when an athlete has taken long breaks from a sport or been in a lot of trouble they want to investigate to make sure they aren't giving any loose cannon a license to get themselves, or someone else killed.

How great he had done in the questioning was now overshadowed by his attitude and you couldn't tell E Z anything, he was livid. Screaming and hollering at everyone that he had worked his ass off to get that card, and he deserved to be able to fight like the other guys who weren't as good as he was. Truth be known he almost ruined his chance at getting a card at all. The athletic commission doesn't want to license anyone who can't control their temper. Teddy finally had enough and told E Z to shut his mouth and get to the car before he screwed up his life by running his mouth. The young man was mad, but he did what he was told. He didn't speak to Teddy for the rest of

the day and night. He was over it the next day and tried to apologize.

Teddy's response was the same as it always was when E Z lost his temper. You have got to learn that when your anger takes over, you are like a blind man in a boxing match, and we all know the end result.

After much talk about how things were going perfectly normal for a first time license application, E Z finally calmed down. Teddy was tired of telling this hot head that his temper was going to get him killed one of these days.

Two weeks later Jesse called and said the commission had made a decision and would be mailing their response to E Z s application any day now. They would not give any indication of the result over the phone. Teddy didn't even tell the fighter anything. When E Z asked Teddy about the delay he just told him that things take time and to be patient. The fledgling would just role his eyes and go back to training.

On E Z s twentieth birthday the envelope came in the mail at the gym. The letter was addressed to Ezzard Pearl so Teddy left it unopened and Called E Z to let him know to come over Right away. It wasn't fifteen minutes and the fighter was there like a panting tiger. Then after he got the envelope in his hands he couldn't muster the courage to open it. E Z gave it to Teddy and said, "You open it." Teddy didn't have any hesitation and tore the end right off and pulled out the letter. He was tempted to mess with the young hot head but he didn't want to have to calm him down. He

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read the letter out loud to the whole gym. Ezzard Pearl was granted his professional boxing license at the age of twenty years old.

Now it was time to find E Z a promoter. Promoters are a necessary evil that can either make or break a fighter's career. Teddy knew a couple of guys who would fit E Z s lifestyle and ability, he just didn't know if they had the time to take on another fighter. It had to be someone trustworthy and that is hard to find in the world anywhere, let alone in the profession of sports promoters. Teddy knew he had some work and research to do.

The seasoned trainer then began to think of an opponent for E Z s first pro fight. Trainers and managers, which Teddy was both, set up matches for their fighters that will progressively take that fighter through the levels of skill and rankings to get them the best shot at being successful. They also have to make money, as most boxers train full time. The first fight needs to be with someone that is either new or just starting out too, or is old and on their way out. Either way the opponent needs to be someone that is beatable, but gives enough of a challenge to make a good fight that will teach the fighter new skills, along with gaining much needed experience. The fight has to be a good fight because promoters make money from ticket sales for a fighters first fifteen or twenty fights, and undercard showings on pay per view events and for title fights. The size of the purse for the fighters is a reflection of the ticket sales and concessions. People do not want to pay to watch a



boring fight; the more exciting the fighter, the more promoters will want to put that fighter on their cards. Boxing is entertainment; the entertainment has to be balanced with challenge. When a fighter builds a reputation as an exciting fighter and people see that name on the fight card they will want to buy tickets. An exciting fighter will be invited to compete at more events and get a chance to improve their skills and record. Good fighters are exciting fighters and find their way to the top of the rankings and the high dollar contracts for fights faster. Promoting is a small part of boxing but a very important part.

That had been so many years ago. Before Teddy turned off the lights to his place, he looked around the gym he and that wild child had built with satisfaction and thought Maggie would be proud. He missed her so much some days and then others he knew she was there with him all the time. She had made him promise to continue with his life as a tribute to her and their years together. After Maggie died he didn't see his girls nearly as much and no matter how much he pleaded he couldn't get Rocky to even think about coming back to Indiana. The kid had put down roots in California.

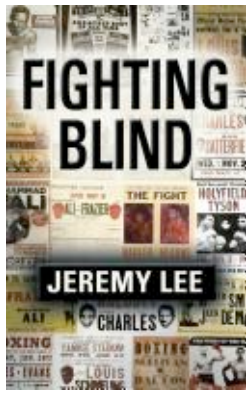
As he drove home Teddy thought he wasn't really lonely, he had his fighters, the gym, and he did see his girls pretty often. He was a good father and had stayed involved in their lives without being intrusive. It was his home that made him feel like he was only half a person when he was there. Everywhere he looked Maggie was there, in all the furnishings she had

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picked out, all the wall hangings she had placed herself. He still slept in the bed they had together. He hadn't even looked at another woman in that way since Maggie had died.

Teddy had noticed a for sale sign on the house next to the gym. Looking over the house he had shared for so many years with the woman he loved, he decided right then to sale what was only half his, and move into a place that was his own. He hoped the girls wouldn't be offended, but Maggie had also made him promise to live his life for him. She was such a great woman, that even after she was gone she was giving his life direction.

Teddy lived his life as an athlete even though he was getting up in years. He prepared his meals in advance weekly, and froze them in individual containers thawing daily what he needed. As he pulled from the fridge a container of baked chicken breast, broccoli, and sweet potato and put them in the microwave he looked around the kitchen that was decorated by Maggie. He had to get away from this place if he was going to be able to go on with his life. Maggie was everywhere but she was nowhere he could hold. That is where the loneliness came from.



Fighting Blind is a story about the battles we all fight. Ezzard Pearl Riley lost his mother at age eleven to a suspicious accident and was left with his drunken father. Teddy Rose was a devout family man who had been training his entire life but struggles after losing his most loved fighter. Fighting Blind is a story of our human condition to overcome and win the fight of life.

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