



**THE FINAL ROUND**  
WITH ABI SMITH

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF  
**JANE  
COUCH**  
MBE



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# Foreword

**T**HERE aren't many people in the world who I respect and admire as much as my mate Jane. I have known her for many, many years and we became good friends in a world where she wasn't welcomed. And that's putting it nicely!

I was able to fight in the ring as soon as I made the decision I wanted to; Jane had to fight to be allowed to box. I have known a fair few boxers over the years and met a lot of fighters but Jane is both. Five times world champion? That took training, hard graft, dedication and commitment. But away from the ring she was a fighter too.

Fighting for her right to box.

Fighting for her right to box as a woman.

Fighting for her right to box as a woman in a man's world.

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And I'm really proud of her. I'm proud of everything she has achieved in the boxing ring, I am proud that she stood up and took on the fight with this powerful establishment and I'm proud to call her one of my best mates.

It's down to her determination and grit and willpower that not only made her a great fighter but also made her a pioneer for women's boxing. There are several talented female boxers in Britain today that are doing us all proud. I just hope they realise they wouldn't be where they are today doing the sport they love if it wasn't for the hard work and dedication Jane put in not that long ago. She paved the way for women to be free to box in this country without fear of discrimination or abuse. No one else took on that fight and I honestly believe if it wasn't for Jane, women's boxing wouldn't be the celebrated sport it is today.

And well done for finally writing a book about it all. It's about time people see you for what you are: a history-maker, a phenomenally talented boxer, a cheeky, doggedly determined friend with a heart of gold. Someone to be celebrated.

**Ricky Hatton**

Prologue

## My funeral

*'It takes courage to live through suffering;  
and it takes honesty to observe it.'*

C.S. Lewis

**T**HE sun streamed in through the kitchen window but I barely registered it as I sat there, at the table, broken.

Uncontrollable shaking had taken over my whole body. I could feel every part of me shuddering, shivering, trembling in a frenzied way and I had no power to make it stop. I looked down at my hands and saw the shaking there too, my hands which had been my power force, my fight, now just a feeble, useless extension of my body that I couldn't control.

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This was as bad as it ever was and I could see it in Kim's face as she sat opposite, her hands – steady and still – clasped together on the kitchen table. Her head was tilted to one side as she scrutinised me. She had let herself in the house earlier that morning. I had listened as she called out my name but I didn't have the strength to answer. I had summoned up all my willpower to get out of bed, to make it downstairs and now I was sitting at the table, a mug of hot tea in front of me, and Kim, one of my closest friends, staring at me like I was some sort of freak show, an exhibit. The worry in her eyes gave her away. These past few weeks, everything had gotten worse, everything was an effort. I hated leaving the house, I didn't want to see anybody or talk to anybody. Leaving the house meant going out to the unknown and I would sometimes get to the front door before I would feel my breath start to quicken and in an instant I would be having a panic attack, right there in the hallway, all from the thought of opening my front door. That feeling of panic, the ringing in my ears, the cold sweat, the sense of dread ... it would be like a heavy weight pumping through me, filling every part of my body. And then the tears would start. And once that tearful feeling took over, I would be sobbing for the rest of day.

Just getting myself dressed, getting myself out of bed, was an effort. Sometimes the effort became too much and I would stay in bed all day, just lying there, just ... I don't

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know what I was doing really. Just breathing I suppose. Listening, breathing, surviving.

It wasn't like I could rest or sleep as I lay there. Sleeping was a joke; sleeping at night was just a distant memory to me now. I must have been able to sleep once. Of course I did; I would sleep like a baby after the training, after the fights, my body giving in to the sheer physical exhaustion. But now it was my mind controlling me and I was powerless to stop it. I would start each night thinking it would be different, thinking this was the night I would get a good rest. And then I would feel my teeth start to chatter, so I would grind them together, hard and forcefully, to make them stop, make them still. But my jaw would ache then and the tension would move down to my neck and my shoulders and I would toss and turn to try to get comfortable.

Kim told me to drink some tea. I wanted to, I really did, but I was anxious that my trembling hands would fail me. I felt a loud pulsing in my ear as I sat there, staring into the mug, head bowed because even the effort to lift it seemed too much. She started to speak but I couldn't make out what she was saying at first, the intensity of the pulsing had grown louder and I closed my eyes to try to concentrate on her voice.

'You need help ... you can't carry on like this ... look at me Jane ...

'We need to go to hospital, Jane ... let's get you help ...'



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I could hear the distress in her voice as she talked; she was afraid. I was afraid. I had no answer to how I was feeling, I just knew I had never felt like this before in my life. So utterly out of control of my own body. I was an athlete, a fighter. I was strong, I was all of those things once, but I couldn't remember what they felt like now. My life had spiralled out of control since I had retired from boxing and the only life I had ever known.

Kim moved off from her chair and knelt down beside me. I had started rubbing myself all over, you know how you do when it is cold? I was rubbing my hands up and down my arms constantly, my legs jiggling up and down at the same time. I wasn't cold, it wasn't cold, it was the bloody middle of summer, but I couldn't stop. Kim made me look at her; she spoke to me. I lifted my head enough to see her lips move.

'C'mon love, let's go.'

I couldn't reply as my mouth had gone all dry, but I nodded. It was time to go. I knew she was right. I felt butterflies in my stomach as I got up. Kim held out her hand to me, to guide me out, but my hands were balled up into fists. The fighting instinct had kicked it. That fight or flight moment, the moment when you have a clarity of mind. Can I go? No. I don't need to go. I am safe here, I should just stay here. But I did go. I moved on an autopilot setting that had kicked into gear and I found myself following her out of the door and out into the unknown.

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The hospital was only over the road so I didn't have chance to dwell on whether I should be going or not, simply that we were going and Kim was guiding me over the road. And then before I knew it we were inside and sat down together on a line of beige-coloured plastic chairs in the waiting room. It was a warm morning and I made an effort to look around, to see how many staring eyes would be looking then looking away in embarrassment. But there couldn't have been more than a handful of people around us and no one was interested in a middle-aged woman who didn't look like she had any obvious illness or injury.

The reception area was big and Kim had guided me towards the back wall of the room, next to a table that had a few dog-eared magazines. Not that *Woman & Home* was my cup of tea, but I couldn't stop staring down at the front cover, trying to work out why it said August 2001 on the it ... 2001? ... that wasn't now ... that was years ago wasn't it? My brain was trying to make sense of the date; was it really 2001, was there a mistake ... what was the year? It was like my brain was trying to make sense of something so silly, so trivial and yet it couldn't get past it.

Kim was scribbling next to me on a clipboard; she was filling out my details. 'It won't be long now', I heard her say. 'The doctor won't be long.' I know people often say there is a distinctive smell to hospitals – the medicinal smell, the antiseptic smell, the smell of fear – but I don't think I could tell you what I smelt that day. My senses

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were switched off, they didn't care about my surroundings. I had lost all sense of attention and contemplation. I felt empty. And this emptiness, this nothingness, had come from being part of the only thing I had ever wanted: to box, to be a boxer.

All those years, I had been told what to do, where to go, when to get up. I hadn't earned much money from it. And then you're done and the people you think care about you, the ones in the boxing world who you think have your back, who actually give a toss, say, 'OK, that's it. Fuck off now. Next!'

And then, nothing.

I heard my name being called. I was staring at a notice on the wall as I heard it. It was a poster about domestic abuse. I had read and reread the small print over and over again; it gave me something to focus on. Something else, something that wasn't to do with me.

'Physical abuse, threats, controlling behaviour ... call the Respect Phoneline ...'

'Physical abuse, threats, controlling behaviour ... call the Respect Phoneline ...'

Kim stood up first and started pulling me up next to her. I followed her towards a woman who had called my name.

Hand on my heart, I will honestly never forget the encounter I had with the doctor I saw that day. She changed my life.

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She motioned over to a bed and asked me to sit on it. She drew a noisy set of curtains around the bed and stood looking at me for a while. She went through some questions – questions about my physical health, questions about my mental health ... then she stopped.

She was no-nonsense, I could tell that from the astute way she was looking at me. It was like she could see right through me. Like she had seen everything I had described about feeling low, about feeling down, about feeling lost all before. And then she surprised me with a question.

‘What do you see when you look at me, Jane?’ she said.

And the first thing I could think of saying was, ‘You’ve obviously done well for yourself.’ It was the obvious answer. She was a doctor, she was well educated, she was earning good money.

‘Do you think I have a husband and kids?’ she said. ‘Do you think I have a big house and a nice car?’

‘Yeah,’ I heard myself say. Makes sense, I thought. She probably has a holiday villa somewhere sunny too.

‘Well, when I was 34 years old I had a breakdown,’ she said. She was very matter-of-fact about it. She wasn’t winding me up. She wasn’t trying to make me feel better, she was dead serious.

‘I had a nervous breakdown and I lost my kids and I lost my husband,’ she said. And then she paused. She wasn’t trying to elicit a response from me, she didn’t want me to acknowledge what she was saying it seemed; it was

like she was saying it because she was getting to a point. The conclusion of her story would be what I could now do to help myself.

‘You have to do something important now Jane,’ she continued. ‘You have to put boxing in a coffin and bury it. Actually bury the boxing. Treat boxing like a person and have a funeral for it, grieve for it and then move on.’ The way she talked to me, the way she explained things ... it was like a cloud was beginning to shift in my head. It might have sounded completely idiotic to anyone else, but she was speaking to me, and something about the way she explained it, that my life was in a state of limbo, made sense to me. *She* was explaining something about the way *I* was feeling and it made absolute perfect sense. How can that be?

She said that I was at a crossroads in my life, that I could go down one path and never escape the hold boxing had on me or I could turn around and go down the path she was suggesting. I needed to move on and the best way to do it was to bury boxing and get closure. So, as fucking crazy as it sounds, that is exactly what I decided to do. Right there on that bed, I knew I would be having a funeral later.

I walked out of hospital with a sense of purpose. I felt I had something important to do and I just had to do it now. This was my focus; I had to have a funeral for my boxing career and I had to have one today. Nothing else mattered now, I had a job to do. Kim took me back to the flat and she hung around. I knew she wanted to see if I would be

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OK or if I would need her, but I was completely focused on what I had to do now. And I had to do it alone. As soon as she left, I jumped into my Jeep and drove.

I guess that has always been me: once I have an idea, once I have a mission, that's it. Determined, focused, driven, strong-minded. It's that mentality that has gotten me this far; it got me through many a fight and now I am using that same instinct to put an end to it all. I'm like a dog with a bone, I won't give up.

The church wasn't more than a ten-minute drive away and I parked up in the small, gravelly car park. I got out and realised for the first time that day how warm it was. The sun was shining; there were only a few clouds in the sky. Had it been this warm earlier? Was it this hot yesterday?

I started walking over to the graveyard. There was a small black gate that was just under waist high and I lifted the latch. Not a sound. There was no one else here, just me and the church that stood to my left and the gravestones to my left and right. There was a little stony path leading up past the gravestones and to the church and I started walking on the uneven stones. But I wasn't going to the church. I stopped and started walking on the grass now. I was walking past the headstones; some were leaning forward, like they were bowing, others stood straight upright, erect like soldiers. I started reading a few as I passed. 'Dennis Peddar, beloved husband and father ...', 'Rosemary Carter ... much loved mother ...'

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Then there were some that were so old and weathered you couldn't see anything anymore. Were the people who used to visit these graves dead themselves now? Does anyone come here and lay flowers at this beaten-down old stone?

I wasn't looking for one particular spot but being near the older graves felt right. The grass was dry and prickly as I sat and crossed my legs. There was no noise at all. Nothing. Peace. I didn't have a plan or anything in my head. I hadn't been to that many funerals in my life and I wasn't particularly religious. This just felt right. It felt good. It felt controllable.

'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,' I said out loud, to no one but myself. I probably looked like a right nutter, but I didn't care. It wasn't like the gravestones were judging me! They didn't mind. Besides, saying something out loud felt right. I had to speak the words, this had to be a proper funeral. I closed my eyes and started reciting the Lord's Prayer. I spoke each line slowly. I didn't think about anything but the words I spoke, getting a rhythm as I spoke them.

I rubbed the rosary beads that were around my neck. I had dug them out at home as soon as Kim had gone, and put them on. I don't think I had worn them properly before now. They had been a gift from a gypsy lady years ago when I would be sparring with travellers. There was a travellers' camp near where I used to train and they would come into

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the gym wanting to fight with anyone. They didn't care if I was a woman, they enjoyed a good spar and I certainly gave them that! After a few times of sparring with me that was it, they only ever asked for me. Every time they came back in the gym they'd ask for me by name; they weren't fussed with anyone else and I'd always be happy to get in the ring if I was around.

I smiled down at the beads as I twisted them in my fingers. This is what happens isn't it, at a funeral? The memories, the smiles of recollection, the remembering ... those fights were good fun. And the lady who had given them to me had watched me slog it out with one of the boys one evening when I had gone over to their site. She had held her hands out and quite simply said that I should have them. There was no refusing. 'Take them,' she had said, and if I ever needed anything, I was to ask Jesus for exactly what I wanted.

There is no way she could have known this day would come, that I would be sitting here now, on a warm summer's afternoon, asking Jesus to help me, asking him to help me put the boxing to bed, to forget, to bury. But that is exactly what I did.

'Please let me bury this,' I said, and closed my eyes again. 'I have had some great times and some bad times, but now I need to say goodbye. Goodbye.' I kept my eyes closed and concentrated on my breathing. In and out. Nice and steady. I didn't feel like I was losing control but



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I wanted to keep myself steady, in charge. I had to do this properly.

I made myself think of some of the worst-ever moments from my career. I had to bury all the bad bits. All the hours and days and weeks of training and training and pushing myself. The time I would have happily died in the boxing ring if it meant winning my first world championship belt. Of all the hatred and venomous attacks I faced from the media and the boxing promoters when I took the British Boxing Board of Control to court because I wanted to fight legally, as a woman, in this country. Of all the lies and crap and bitterness that I faced when I won. Of all the boxing matches that I won but lost in other ways, through corruption, spite, greed. I remembered a fight I had in America. I thought I had won. I knew I had won but the judges were all American and they had given it to my opponent. It was dishonest, it was wrong and it wasn't the first or last bitter encounter I had with the world of boxing. I sat there in the changing rooms in shock.

I had been battered and I had lost a fight because of the fucked-up immoral nature of the judging. I had just lost my title and I had been ripped off by the judges; can you imagine that happening in any other sport? Could they get away with it in any other professional sport, awarding a win to the home athlete even though the opponent had clearly won. Would it happen in running? Or swimming? Of course it wouldn't! But there is so much money involved in

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boxing, the away fighters will always lose out when it comes to scoring because the home fighter has the judges and the crowd and everything on their side. I'm not the first person to have lost an away fight unfairly and I know I certainly won't be the last.

But I carried on. I suppose it was like staying in an abusive relationship. I stayed because all I wanted to do was box.

Breathe, breathe, breathe ... I didn't want to lose it now. Breathe, breathe ...

My mind suddenly went back in time, back to Fleetwood, to our terraced house on Albert Street and I was 11 years old, standing in the kitchen with my mum having a conversation about my future.

'I'm gonna do something big Mum, it's gonna be mental and it's gonna be big.'

Is it Jane? What are you going to do love?'

'I don't know Mum, but it's gonna be big.' I smiled at the memory. I was so young and so passionate about something I was going to do, without having any idea what that something was! I thought about my younger self and then I pictured me, 26 years old now, all those years ago, eager and excited about the thought of boxing for the first time. When I had finally found something that I thought I could do and do well. 'I'm sorry,' I thought to that young version of me. 'I'm sorry you went through all that crap. I'm sorry you made choices that hurt you and I'm sorry you

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thought you were unworthy. You weren't ever unworthy. You did your best.'

I then said the Lord's Prayer again, I don't know why, maybe it felt right to finish on it. And then, I stood up. I bowed my head, I said, 'Goodbye', and that was it. The funeral was over.

There wasn't an immediate feeling of anything at that point, that came the next day, when I woke up and felt that there was something missing in my life. I was still the same me, I had still gone through the same horrible things – the damage still existed – but I wasn't going to let the damage control my life anymore. I had left this huge weight of fear, of anxiety, of panic; I had left it somewhere and I felt lighter. So much lighter. The weight had been lifted.

As I walked back to the Jeep I took one last look around and said 'goodbye' again. Perhaps to the other gravestones, perhaps to no one. Goodbye to the old me.

I walked back to the car calmly and with my head held up.

Ready to face the world again.

\* \* \*

It's a funny place to start my story isn't it? Celebrating the death of my boxing career. You're probably thinking I've had one too many blows round the head, probably thinking that the fights have finally taken their toll. Ha!

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I am proud of being strong enough to tell my story now because I am actually living my life now, and back then, when I was boxing, I was just surviving. I didn't set out to change history, to be the one who fought for women's boxing to be accepted.

I can't explain, even now, why I loved it. It was a mission I suppose. I wanted to box and when I found out that women couldn't do it, that was it, I had to do it. But if someone had told me the abuse I would suffer, the ridicule, the loneliness, the intimidation, the bullying, the heartache, the neglect ... would I have done it? Would you? I have no feelings towards boxing now, I am detached from it and it means nothing to me.

I have given the best years of my life to boxing, I would have given my life itself for it in those early days and now I feel nothing and that sort of detachment helps you to move on. So I have, but sometimes it's important to tell a story so I am, my story.

This is the first book I have written but it isn't my first autobiography. Tex wrote the first one, straight after we won the court case. I had no interest in writing a book or being involved and however much he pestered me to contribute I refused. I just let him get on with it. But that book paints such a terrible picture of me; had I checked it or even read it, I would never have let it be published. And that's why this book is so important to me. I am ready to show people the real me, to speak honestly and frankly

about my life and boxing. I'm older and wiser now and it's time I shed light on not only being 'The Fleetwood Assassin' but being 'Jane', someone who just wanted to follow her dream.

This isn't meant to be a depressing, feel-sorry-for-me tale, this is simply the truth. The truth about a world that some of you might know about. It's a story about a woman who has been battered, and has done her fair share of battering.

I hold my hands up, it's not a pretty tale and you've probably already got an idea of me being a mouthy, brassy, ballsy woman. But there is more to me than that, much, much more.

My silence about this world was, for many years, simply because I was exhausted. I was tired of fighting. And now I'm telling you about my past, it's not for you to feel sorry for me or pity me. It's so you can understand who I am, and why I am who I am. I try to go out of my way to make people feel loved and wanted because I know what it's like to not feel loved and wanted. I know what it's like to just be used and criticised. To have a dream but be torn to shreds for even thinking it.

I don't know how people are OK with themselves knowing they emotionally destroyed me, for no other reason than they didn't agree with what I wanted to be. It was a dream and I followed it through. It wasn't a childhood dream though, boxing wasn't on my radar from the word

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go. I didn't have a clue what I wanted to do when I was younger. And thinking back now, it's a wonder I didn't become a punk ...