





T.S.EASTON



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
NEW YORK

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK
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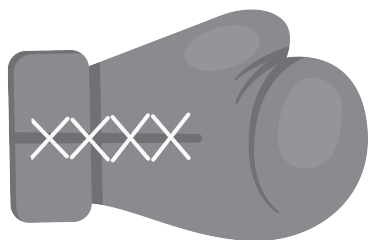
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For my daughters. Who can.

*With special thanks to Alice and Rikke and everyone at
Farnham Boxing Club—Where Champions Are Made!*



PART ONE



THE CONTENDER

THE DISHWASHER

I groaned inwardly. It was a cold Tuesday morning in May and my parents were arguing about the dishwasher again.

“Honestly, Liz,” Dad said, “you don’t need to rinse the plates before putting them in. That’s the whole point of a dishwasher.”

“If you rinse the plates,” Mum said patiently, “then the dishwasher is more effective. Otherwise, you get potato starch streaking the glasses.”

“Look,” Dad said, “why don’t you go and sit down and let me do this?”

“Oh no,” Mum said. “I’m not falling for that. You’ll start putting wooden spoons in.”

“You CAN put wooden spoons in,” Dad said. “That’s why we bought the German one.”

“If you two don’t stop arguing about the dishwasher,” I butted in, “I will throw it into a quarry.”

“We’re not arguing, darling,” Mum said brightly. “We’re just discussing.”

Other unimportant things my parents ~~argue about~~ just discuss include:

- Whether to butter both pieces of bread in a sandwich, or leave one side for condiments only.
- Whether to put your coat on a few minutes before leaving in order to “get toasty” or just as you leave so you “feel the benefit.”
- Whether jam or cream goes first on a scone.
- Whether Jaffa Cakes are cookies or cakes.
 (“There’s a clue in the name, Liz!”)
- Whether you’re allowed to fold the corners of book pages over to keep your place.

None of these issues will ever be resolved. Ever.

I love my parents dearly, but they drive me crazy sometimes. Aside from her dishwasher obsession, my mother is possibly the most terrified person on the planet. She panics over the tiniest things and she won’t let me do anything that she considers even remotely dangerous. She made me wear a neon vest on my walk to school right up to eighth grade before I rebelled and threw it into a duck pond. Even now she insists I wear a blinking light on my backpack. Last month I asked her if I could go to London with my friend Blossom to attend a Knitters Against War protest march and she immediately had palpitations and got a migraine.

“A march? There might be terrorists!”

“Mum, they’re knitters.”

“There’ll be an extremist wing. Don’t you know how dangerous London is? A man knocked me over on a tube platform once.”

“By accident,” I reminded her. I’d heard the story before.

“I could have fallen in front of a TRAIN,” she said dramatically. “My life would have been snuffed out in a moment.”

“Dad would have found someone else,” I said. “He’s resilient.”

My father drives me mad, too. He’s one of life’s fence-sitters. To Dad, there are always two ways of looking at things. “Faults on both sides,” he says about the conflict in Israel and Palestine. “Both candidates make good points,” he says whenever two lunatic politicians argue with each other on the radio. “There are two schools of thought,” he explains when I ask him what he thinks about the death penalty. Apparently there are two schools of thought about the death penalty, but only one about rinsing plates before loading the dishwasher.

I watched the two of them edging around each other in the narrow kitchen. One would put something in the machine, only for the other to reposition it, or take it out altogether.

“You CERTAINLY can’t put that knife in,” Mum said.

“Why not?” Dad asked.

“That’s a paring knife. It’s vital that it remains sharp. The water will blunt it.”

“So how would you suggest I wash it?”

“In the sink!”

“Using what? Sand?”

They drove my sister, Verity, batty, too, which is why she moved to New Zealand a year ago, along with Rafe, my two-year-old nephew. I missed Verity and Rafe dreadfully, but I didn’t miss the arguments. Mum and Verity fought like stoats in a sock.

“Fleur? Fleur?” I realized my father was trying to get my attention.

“Yes?”

“What do you think?” he asked.

“I think you are both insane,” I replied.

“Yes, but what do you think about putting paring knives in the dishwasher?”

“I think,” I said, getting up from the table and grabbing my schoolbag, “that there are two schools of thought on the issue.”

IAN BEALE

Ian Beale intercepted me as I reached the door. “Don’t let him out!” Mum yelled. “He’s on antibiotics.” Ian Beale is our old dog. We got him when the last dog died, maybe ten years ago. The last dog’s name was Patch, which I thought quite dull. I was so upset when he died that Mum made the mistake of letting me choose the new dog’s name. I was a big *EastEnders* fan back then. Even now one of my favorite things is when Mum calls him in for tea. “Ian Beale! Ian Beale!”

Not a lot happens in our village.

Ian Beale suffers from any number of chronic ailments

and I believe may be Britain's most medicated dog. He has to take so many potions and remedies that he sometimes can't manage his dinner. I feel very sorry for him and wonder sometimes if he wouldn't be better off being allowed to run wild, even if it means he goes to the big kennel in the sky a little sooner. But that sort of thinking isn't allowed in our house. I dropped to one knee and gave him a big hug, holding my breath as I did so. Ian Beale is rather whiffy. As I opened the door narrowly and squeezed through, he watched me go, a slight look of betrayal in his bloodshot eyes.

It was early to be leaving, but I needed to escape. After all, better to arrive early at school than to be sent to prison for stabbing your parents with a paring knife. We live in a village about two miles outside the town of Bosford, sort of between Hastings and Brighton, about an hour and a half from London.

School is in Bosford, and I usually walk with my friend Blossom, who also lives in the village. Sometimes we get a lift with another friend, Pip, who has a car but shouldn't be allowed to have a tricycle in my opinion. He is a terrible driver. He doesn't go fast, and I suspect he's never even broken the speed limit. But unfortunately driving slowly doesn't stop you from hitting things, or crossing the white line into oncoming traffic. When he parks he creeps incredibly slowly into the space, showing brilliant clutch control, then invariably, at the speed of an exhausted snail, he'll hit the wall with a soft crunch.

I ran into Blossom by the church. I've known Blossom forever and she is the best person in the world. She has mad curly hair and twinkling green eyes. She's a bit taller than me, but most people are.

“All right, Fleur?” she asked.

“All right, Blossom?” I replied. She fell into step beside me and we strolled down the Bosford Road.

“So are you going to Battle on Saturday?” I asked. Going to Battle was a thing we did. Battle is a small town near Hastings and the place where the actual Battle of Hastings was fought in 1066. When I was a child I used to think that battles were called battles because the first one had been fought in Battle.

But of course Battle is called Battle because it was named after the battle. There wasn’t anything there before the battle except some cows in a field and, I guess, a really rubbish gift shop. English Heritage is always looking for people to work there, and we take the bus down on a Saturday morning to earn money dressing as Saxon peasants and relating the details of the battle to jet-lagged American tourists. We know a LOT about the Battle of Hastings, although we may have made some of it up. Like once I told some lovely people from Iowa that William of Normandy had married his own horse. Also I have to admit our accents are a bit hit-and-miss. I do a sort of West Country pirate accent; Pip does Scouser because that’s the only one he can do. Blossom usually ends up doing a sort of *Mary Poppins* cheeky, chirpy Cockney thing.

I love going to Battle, but the only problem is you have to dress up in period costume and you get funny looks on the bus when you’re wearing a wimple. Since Pip got his car he usually drives us down, which is a lot easier because it means he doesn’t have to argue with the bus driver about whether he can put his halberd in the

luggage rack. Blossom and I mostly do crafts with the kids, and sometimes she helps out with the ghost walk through the abbey. Pip is a guard. He wears leather armor and tries to scare the children, but they just laugh at him. We're very much Team Harold when it comes to the battle; Saxon blood courses through our veins. In my opinion, there are two types of people in the world: Normans and Saxons. And there are two types of Saxons: the noble thanes and the peasant churls. I'm definitely a Saxon churl. A defender. Minding my own business. Keeping myself to myself, not sailing about the world conquering people and marrying horses.

PIP

As we walked down the narrow lane, fat bees lurching drunkenly from poppy to cowslip, Blossom was moaning about her boyfriend. He comes from Glasgow, calls himself Magnet and works in a tattoo shop as an assistant piercer. I quite like him, but Blossom finds him irritating. Also he's never around. He's a total hippie and wants to live off-grid, but all that means is he sometimes turns off his iPhone.

"For someone who is all about peace and harmony in nature, he's often really grumpy," Blossom said.

"He's not grumpy," I replied. "He's just Scottish."

"He's got himself involved in something called the Project," Blossom went on. "It's an experimental, self-sufficient community that he and his friends from the

Socialist Action Group are trying to set up in a thistle-strewn field in Essex.”

“Why?” I asked.

“They’re all convinced that capitalism is about to implode and society will crumble into anarchy,” she said. “They’re basically left-wing survivalists. It sounds pretty grim, and apparently when you’re in the field you can’t get a phone signal.”

I shuddered.

“He told me he wants me to move there and live with him when it’s finished.”

“What?! What did you say to that?”

“I told him that if the apocalypse comes,” she said, “and capitalism does crumble, then I’m determined to go down with the sinking ship, clutching my lifeless iPad.”

“Shush a minute,” I said. “Can you hear something . . . ?”

We stopped walking and held our heads at a slight angle in that way you do when you want to make it clear you’re listening really hard. I could hear a blackbird shouting madly at us, and the sound of our neighbor Mr. Palmer’s tractor in a nearby field, but those weren’t the sounds that worried me. It was a clunking, roaring sound of a badly tuned engine chugging through the hedgerows.

“Is that . . . ?” Blossom began just as the car came trundling slowly around the tight corner of the narrow lane. At the speed it was going there should have been ample time to stop. The driver saw us, and his eyes widened in alarm, but the car carried on coming, heading right for us. We squealed and leaped into the hazel hedge

as it missed us by inches. I heard a scraping thump. Blossom groaned underneath me and I peered out of the hedge to see the little white Clio had crashed into the hedge on the other side of the lane. We got to our feet and I emerged from the scratchy branches. I stepped toward the car, brushing myself off, as the driver's-side door opened and a long leg emerged. That long leg was followed by a succession of other long limbs and necks and heads and all the other bits you'd expect to see attached to an extremely tall human male. Atop all this gangliness was a grinning, pale face under a shock of bright red hair.

"Pip!" Blossom yelled. "Why didn't you stop?"

"My foot missed the brake," he said.

"You nearly killed us!"

Pip blinked at us in surprise. "You were walking in the middle of the road," he said. "To be fair." If I was asked to describe Pip in two words, I would probably choose "drunk giraffe." Watching him walk, I sometimes wondered if his joints had been put on backward because everything seemed to bend the wrong way.

"You need to work on your braking skill set," Blossom said.

"Would you like a lift to school?" Pip asked.

"Yes, please," Blossom said.

"Magnet wouldn't approve," I told her. "After all, when capitalism crumbles there'll be no more cars and we'll walk everywhere."

"I know," she agreed. "But let's cross that bridge when we come to it."

"If we come to a bridge, Pip will drive off it and we'll drown," I pointed out.

"I'll take my chances," she said. "I have a blister." She got into the backseat of Pip's Clio.

"Is your car okay?" I asked him.

"Yes, think so," he replied. "Why?"

"It's just that you crashed into the hedge," I explained.

"I didn't crash," he said. "I parked. Are you getting in?"

Deciding I was probably slightly safer as a passenger inside Pip's car than a pedestrian out of it, I got into the back with Blossom. Pip folded himself back into the driver's seat with difficulty before putting off down the lane, blowing black smoke, me calling out directions. I always feel like the navigator for the world's slowest rally driver when I'm in a car with Pip. "Right-hand coming up in twenty . . . fifteen, ten . . . eight . . . five . . . three . . . one . . . TURN . . . TURN FOR THE LOVE OF GOD . . . left-hand sharp . . . keep going . . . now straighten the wheel . . . mind that horse . . . red light . . . red light . . . RED LIGHT!"

I'm only sixteen and have never so much as depressed a clutch, but I'm still a better driver than Pip. I've broached the subject with Mum of driving lessons when I turn seventeen, but just the thought brings her out in a cold sweat. She showed me a very long and unnecessarily detailed article she'd found featuring statistics that said there was a much lower mortality rate for people who waited until they were nineteen before taking their test. I didn't push it. It's pointless to argue with her when she's made up her mind.

OH, FLEUR

Pip dropped us at the school gates and drove off to find a parking space somewhere in the side streets. The school is quite modern. It was built about ten years ago and is starting to look tatty. It's all wooden clapboard and brick and floor-to-ceiling windows that never get cleaned. Originally there were going to be loads of playing fields, but half of them got sold off for affordable housing and now there is an entire community of people right behind the school with dozens of tiny children who spend the whole day peering through the fence calling you rude names. It's quite disconcerting when you're trying to eat your lunch in the sunshine and a six-year-old is calling you a cockwomble.

As Blossom and I headed toward the main entrance I sensed someone charging up behind me. I turned and my heart sank to see it was Bonita Clark. Bonita doesn't suit her name in any way. She should be petite and balletic and smiley, but Bonita is none of those things. She is strong and stomping and sweary. And here she was, almost sprinting as she tried to get ahead of me and through the door first. The thing about Bonita is that she is the most extraordinarily competitive person on the planet. She's captain of the netball team and the field hockey team. She runs cross-country and plays soccer with the boys, and she's good. There is much to be admired in Bonita.

I'm afraid to say that Bonita doesn't feel the same way about me. Our difficulties started a couple years ago when I was forced into the field hockey team against my will

eagerly seized my opportunity for sporting glory. Bonita was captain and tried to explain the rules and tactics to me before our first game. She put me at fullback. It didn't end well. I let my attention wander, and the other team scored a goal while I was texting.

Bonita was furious. "It's not that I expected you to be the best of the best," she said. "But I thought you'd at least watch the game." It wasn't much better when I *was* paying attention, to be honest. I got overexcited at one point and I took out one of my own teammates with a wild swing of the stick that a Saxon yeoman would have been proud of. Anyway, after that I somehow found myself off Bonita's team and onto Holly Frobisher's, though what poor Holly had done to deserve that I really don't know. Now I often have to play *against* Bonita, and she's always knocking me over, or running rings around me, trying to humiliate me, which isn't difficult, I have to admit. After all, I have as much sporting endeavor as Kanye West has humility. Bonita thinks sports are important, competing is important, winning is important. I don't. We're just different. What I don't understand is why it bothers her so much.

Most upperclassmen aren't required to take any kind of sporting activity. But Bosford is an exception. Our glorious motto is *Mens sana in corpore sano*. A healthy mind in a healthy body. The theory goes that only by exercising the body and the mind together can true excellence be reached. "Try telling that to Stephen Hawking," I said to Miss Collins, my advisor, when she told me I had to sign up for field hockey again this semester.

"When you're as brilliant as Stephen Hawking, you can stop playing competitive sports," she said, handing

me a field hockey stick and a pair of shin pads. "Until then you're at fullback."

So that's Bonita; she just has to be best at everything. At netball, at field hockey, at soccer, at running. And now she wanted to be first through the school door. It was a double door, but only one door was ever open. The other was bolted shut. Now, what I should have done, of course, was just stop and let her go by. Who cared who went through the door first? I didn't care if she scored a dozen goals against me in field hockey, so why should it matter if she got through the doorway into the school before me? But I was feeling mischievous today.

I think sometimes I just get bored with doing the sensible thing and so I end up doing something idiotic just to see what happens. Like the time I took up the sousaphone. The teachers had told us all we needed to choose an instrument. Most people were sensible and went with flute or clarinet. The boys all chose guitar or drums. But because I thought it would be funny, I went with the most bloody inconvenient instrument I could think of, which is a brass monster so huge you have to wear it. I could hardly lift the thing, let alone get a noise out of it, and of course I gave up after a few weeks. Anyway, today was one of those days, and I pretended I was going to let Bonita pass through the doors first, but at the last second I lunged forward and got there at exactly the same time as her. We got stuck like two corks in the same bottle. She glared at me.

"Sorry," I said. "So sorry. My bad."

But as she pushed forward, I pushed forward, too, ensuring she couldn't go through.

"Sorry," I said again as other students stopped to watch the fun.

Then Blossom, who had already gone through, reached up and released the bolt holding the other door closed. It flew open with a ping. Bonita and I sprang forward, sprawling on the hallway floor, schoolbags flying. A huge cheer rose from the students who'd had their Tuesday morning brightened enormously. Bonita got to her feet first and glared at me.

"Seriously?" Bonita snapped. "This is the thing you choose to get competitive about? Going through a door? Why don't you push this hard on the field hockey pitch?"

"I don't care about field hockey," I replied. "But doors are important to me."

"You'd better watch yourself, Waters," she snarled, and I realized I'd crossed the line. My heart pounded and I kept my mouth shut. Luckily, Blossom stepped in between me and Bonita. She's completely fearless.

"What are you doing, guys?" she asked, pleading. "We're never going to bring down the patriarchal edifice if we're fighting each other."

Bonita stepped forward, fuming. But my edifice was saved by the patriarchy in the form of Mr. Singh, who came along and told us all to get to class. "This isn't over, Petal," Bonita called as a parting shot. She thinks it's funny to get my name wrong. She does it to Blossom, too, and calls her Flower. It's an irritating coincidence that Blossom and I do have botanical-sounding names. Throw Pip into the mix and we sound like the panel of *Gardeners' Question Time*.

I felt shaken after the incident. Honestly, why do I do these things to myself? In third grade, Mrs. Fowler told me I was an attention-seeker. All the jokes and mucking around were just ways of seeking acceptance. A

defense mechanism. I'm not sure if that's true. When Verity lived at home, and she and Mum would fight all the time, I think I tried to play the clown to ease the tension. I don't like it when people fight. Unfortunately, cracking a dumb joke at times of high drama often just makes things worse.

I was relieved when Pip joined us just before we went into the LRC for English. Pip, for all his oddness, is a quietly reassuring figure. If people like him can exist and function in society, then there's hope for all of us. If that sounds horrible, then I don't mean it that way. He's an intensely warm and caring person, and I don't know what I'd do without him. Blossom told him what had happened with Bonita, and he wrapped his spindly arms around me, like a ginger Groot. "Remember the old saying," he muttered. "Tricky days make us stronger."

"Thanks, Pip," I said.

"Or they kill us," Pip added. "Tricky days can also kill us."

BLOSSOM PANKHURST

At lunch I went looking for Blossom. It didn't take me long to find her. She was standing in the main foyer, holding a piece of paper and remonstrating with Mrs. Turvey, the PE teacher.

"Who do they think we are?" she was saying. "Second-class citizens? What did the suffragettes fight and die for?"

Mrs. Turvey frowned. "I think they fought and died for votes for women. I don't know if they had strong feelings about the membership policies of community sports clubs." I snatched the paper out of Blossom's hand and inspected what turned out to be a cheaply produced flyer.

Bosford Boxing Club

Did you know boxing is a great way to keep fit?
Now signing up new members.

Wednesday

Adult sessions: 8:00-9:00 p.m.

Saturday

Junior session: 9:00-9:45 a.m.

Adult sessions: 10:00-11:15 a.m.

Thursday

Ladies session: 8:00-9:00 p.m.

Whether you're looking to spar, compete in tournaments
or just lose some weight, boxing is for you!

"I know, right?" Blossom said to me. I noticed Mrs. Turvey sneak off while Blossom's attention was diverted.

"What," I said. "You don't like boxing?"

"You can't see what's wrong with that flyer?" she asked. I read it again.

"Is it the missing apostrophe in 'Ladies'?" I asked. I've inherited my mum's obsession with punctuation.

“It’s not the missing apostrophe,” Blossom replied. “It’s the missing chromosome. Why should women be forced to attend on a different night than men?”

“That’s what this is about? You want to hit men?”

“Maybe, but that’s not the point!” Blossom snatched the flyer back from me and held it up. “Fleur, this kind of segregation is illegal under the Equality Act 2010. Clubs can’t stop people from joining on sex grounds.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“I’m going to go down there on Saturday and tell them they have to change their policy. Then a letter to the council, copying in my MP, then if they still refuse, direct action. Like the suffragettes.” She smiled grimly, her eyes lighting up at the prospect of a fight to the death.

“Do we have to go on a hunger strike?” I asked. “It’s just that Mum’s doing roast beef on Sunday. With Yorkshire pudding.”

“Fleur!” Blossom snapped. “This is serious. Are you going to support me in this?”

I sighed. “Yes, of course I am.”

Blossom smiled with satisfaction. She knew I’d give in. I always do.

PRINCE GEORGE

On Wednesday after school my boyfriend George came to pick me up. George is the exact opposite of Magnet in every respect except one, which is that he’s usually absent. Wednesdays and Sundays are the only days I see George. He’s a few years older than me, is at

Hove Naval Academy doing officer training and has a very busy schedule. Wednesday is Date Night. He also comes up for Sunday lunch with my family and sometimes Blossom. I'm not really sure how that started, but start it did, and George isn't the sort to change tradition. It's a tidy arrangement, George keeps telling me. He gets on very well with my parents and they talk about things like the economy and the situation in the Middle East. Mum is happy for me to go out with George, even though he's nineteen, because he's a military man, and Mum thinks I'm safe.

As it happens, I am safe with George, though not necessarily in the way Mum thinks. Sometimes I wonder if he couldn't be slightly more daring in that regard, if you get my drift. I suppose that's another point of difference between George and Magnet; George doesn't seem to be into piercing things. He's old-fashioned. Not particularly religious, just very, very proper.

"I have firm ideas about things," he says.

There's lots about George I love. He's hot, for a start, and he has a car and money, which is nice. He has quite a plummy accent, at least in comparison to the rest of us yokels. I secretly find posh boys a bit sexy, which is not something I would ever admit to Blossom, but hey, we all have our weaknesses.

Most important, though, George makes me laugh. Which sounds like such a cliché, but it's a true cliché. I met him at school when he was an upperclassman. He was confident and charming and handsome. He was known around the school as Prince George, which isn't very original but suited him. Even then he was in the

Naval Cadets. I used to watch him across the playground until one day he just came over and started talking to me.

“You’re Fleur Waters, aren’t you?”

I nodded. “How do you know my name?”

“I asked around,” he said.

“You asked around?” I replied. “Like a cop, knocking on doors?”

“Um . . . well, I actually had to ask a few people because at first no one seemed to know who you were. Someone thought your name was Fiona.”

“I clearly make a big impression on people,” I said.

“You made an impression on me,” he said. Then he laughed and looked embarrassed.

I wonder if that’s what made me fall for him. His admission that I’d made an impression. The first boy to notice me. Maybe that’s all it took, for someone to notice me and to take the time to find out my name wasn’t Fiona. He asked me if I wanted to have lunch with him in the cafeteria the next day, and I said yes straightaway and that was sort of that.

Blossom was unsure about him, though. “Are you sure he’s right for you?” she asked one day when he wasn’t around. “I bet he votes Conservative.”

“He’s just different,” I replied, shrugging. “I thought you were all about the diversity.”

“Hmm . . . he’s not the MOST diverse person on the planet,” she pointed out diplomatically.

“Did you ever stop to think that maybe he’s the person everyone else is diverse *from*,” I suggested. “Without George, NO ONE would be diverse, and who wants to live in that world?”

“I like him,” Pip said. “I didn’t have any money yesterday, and he bought me a cheese roll.”

Being bought a cheese roll was enough for Pip, and we could all learn a lot from him. So George was made a permanent fixture. Before he went off to the academy that September he came around to my house for “a talk.” I wondered if he was going to break it off. I remember that night very clearly. It was still just about warm enough to sit out, and we walked down through the large rear garden that overlooks Mr. Palmer’s wheat field. Early windfall apples dotted the lawn. We sat at the old picnic table at the foot of the garden and watched the swallows swooping, plucking evening bugs from midair. “I think we can make this work,” he said after quite a lot of preamble. “I’ll see you twice a week at least. And maybe you can come down to Hove for weekends sometimes.”

“Weekends in Hove,” I said. “Living the dream.” I felt I should say more, but, rather like my dad, I was of two minds. George was safe, and lovely, and I quite liked the idea of seeing him just twice a week, knowing when, and for how long. So that all that side of things, the romance-y, emotion-y side of life, was taken care of and kept in the proper box. I wouldn’t have to worry about it. *Why not give it a try?* I thought. I know what’s behind Door Number One. From where I was sitting I couldn’t even see Door Number Two.

So that’s how I ended up at Chickos on this Date Night. Chickos wasn’t our normal sort of place; we usually went to a little Italian restaurant he knew or a great Thai pop-up a friend had recommended or an intriguing new Lebanese café that had opened up in someone’s front room near the Lewes roundabout. We take it in

turns to choose, and he always pays. But sometimes you don't want fancy food and World Music. Sometimes you just want greasy chips and cheesy tunes. So tonight I'd chosen Bosford Chickos, which I quickly realized he wasn't happy about.

"So explain the ordering system again?" he said, for the third time.

"It's not as complicated as you're making it," I said. "You just go up to the bar and order your meal, and they give you a little rubber chicken with a numbered wooden spoon shoved up its bum so the waiter knows where to bring your food."

He turned in his seat and looked over at the bar. "But there's a queue."

"Do you want me to go?"

"No, it's just that we already queued to get the table. Now we have to queue again to order the food? This is really inefficient."

"Yeah, but the chicken's delicious."

"What about drinks?"

"Same system, you queue up," I said.

"Another queue?!"

"To maximize efficiency," I suggested, "you could order the drinks at the same time as the food?"

"I like to have a drink while I inspect the menu," he complained. I kicked him under the table and he yelped.

"Remember you asked me to tell you when you were being whiny?" I said.

"I never said that."

"Didn't you? Well, anyway, you're being whiny now." George laughed like I knew he would and went off to stand in the queue. I shook my head and smiled at the

same time. He was nineteen going on thirty-nine, but he didn't lack for self-awareness and he always took it the right way when I teased him. That was a side of him that Blossom just didn't see.

He came back after a while carrying a rubber chicken with a wooden spoon up its bottom.

"See?" I said.

"And you come here often?" he asked.

"No," I lied. Pip, Blossom and I ate here quite a lot on Saturdays after we got back from Battle. It's not everyone's cup of tea, of course, but they let Pip store his halberd in the umbrella stand. Mum doesn't like Chickos because (A) it's in rough West Bosford and (B) she suspects there should be an apostrophe in the name but isn't quite sure, and that unsettles her.

"Just thought it was something a bit different," I said.

"It certainly is," he said, looking around. He wasn't really dressed for Chickos, in his jacket and pointy shoes.

"Maybe we could go to a club afterward," I said. "Do some dancing?"

"You're only sixteen," he pointed out. "And also you hate dancing."

"I don't hate it. I'm just really bad at it," I said. "But it doesn't matter at Lick'd because it's so dark no one will see me. And they never check your ID either."

He frowned. "I don't know. I have an early start tomorrow. We have Navigation with Major Horton."

"So what about Saturday night?" I asked. "Come up on Saturday. Take me dancing."

"But I'm coming up on Sunday," he pointed out. "For lunch, like always."

"So come up on Saturday and stay over?" I suggested,

rolling my eyes. He stared at me, wide-eyed, as if I'd suggested he throw me onto the table and ravish me then and there. "I'm sure Mum wouldn't mind." Actually I'm sure she would mind very much. She'd definitely put George in the spare room, but that was fine with me. If nothing else it would be nice if George and I could sleep under the same roof for once. Even sleeping in the same county would be an improvement.

The food arrived. We'd both asked for a quarter of a chicken. I'd ordered chips and coleslaw. George had gone for a baked potato and sweetcorn. He tries to keep the fats to a minimum because there are constant fitness tests at his college and he has to go for ten-mile runs every couple of days. It doesn't sound like very good training for a war to me. If the Russians attack, our junior naval officers will be starved of calories and exhausted from ten-mile runs.

"Here are your meals," the waiter said quickly before turning to go.

"Excuse me," George said. "I ordered some drinks? Two Diet Cokes?"

"You'll need to wait for the drinks guy," the waiter said abruptly. "I don't do drinks on Wednesdays. Monday night and Sunday lunchtime I do drinks, but never Wednesdays."

"Never Wednesdays," I repeated solemnly to George. "Still think Wednesday is best for Date Night?" George sighed, and started picking the skin off his chicken. "That's the best bit," I protested. "That's where all the flavor is."

"A hundred and fifty calories per thirty-five grams," George said automatically. "I'm running tomorrow."

“Well, you need some flavor,” I said, reaching across to the next table and swiping two bottles of peri-peri sauce. I inspected the labels. “Medium and . . . ooh, extra hot. Wanna try?”

“No,” George said. “I’ll try some of the medium.”

I splashed some onto his chicken. “Whoah whoa!” he cried.

“Don’t be a wuss,” I said. He took a tiny morsel on his fork and tasted it gingerly.

“Oh, that’s quite hot,” he said. As I went to splash some on my own food he shook his head. “Don’t give yourself as much as you gave me. You won’t like it.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Is it . . . is it because I’m a girl? You think I can’t handle spicy foods?”

“No,” he said hurriedly. “I just think medium is quite hot enough for . . . for anyone.”

“It *is* because I’m a girl,” I said.

“It’s not,” he protested. “Honestly.”

“If you were with one of your navy chums, you’d be egging him on right now,” I said. I was looking for an excuse to have some fun, but at the same time I was a little cross at his casual misogyny. “You’d probably be pantsing each other and pouring extra-hot peri-peri sauce over your genitals.”

“I really don’t think you’ve got a good idea of what goes on at college,” he said, frowning. “Look, just put a bit of the medium on and leave it at that.” But it was too late. I grabbed the extra-hot sauce and splashed it on, laughing like a maniac. Two splashes, three.

“That’s enough,” he said, looking anxious.

“Hahaha!” I cried. Four splashes. Five. George tried to snatch the bottle from me, but I was too quick, holding

it out of his reach. We glared at each other. He held out a hand. "Give me the peri-peri sauce, Fleur."

"Shan't," I said.

"Please, Fleur. Give me the peri-peri sauce." We sat for a while, watching each other, trying not to laugh.

"Fine," I said. "Here you go." I held out the bottle, but as he tried to take it from me I quickly turned it upside down and splashed more sauce onto his chicken. He finally got a hand to it and we struggled over it, snorting with laughter. Eventually he got it away and hid it under his chair.

"Now," he said. "Eat your chicken."

"You eat yours first," I said.

He reached over and took my hand in his. "We'll do it together," he said. And so we did. Together we picked up our knives and forks, together we cut off a piece of chicken, together we ate, chewed and swallowed. Together we looked into each other's eyes.

"It's not so bad," he said.

"I don't think it's kicked in yet," I replied, just as I felt the beginnings of a tickling, burning sensation in my mouth.

"I think it might be kicking in now," he said, his face suddenly crumpling. I wanted to agree but couldn't speak. I knew if I opened my mouth fire would shoot out and turn my boyfriend into a flaming ball. And then who would protect us from the Russians? The burning sensation had by now become a raging fire. It felt as though dystopian overlord fire imps were roving around in my mouth burning rebels with flamethrowers. George didn't seem to be coping any better. Sweat poured down his forehead, making him blink furiously. He'd gone deathly

pale and was clutching his knife and fork so hard it looked like they might snap. As I snatched up a napkin and started dabbing my swollen tongue in a vain attempt to scrape off the residue, I saw, through streaming eyes, George stand and wave furiously toward the bar before gasping, “Where’s the drinks guy? Where’s the flipping drinks guy?”

BOUDICCA

George wasn’t the only one who had to undergo grueling physical training the next day. Thursday was PE with Bonita, specifically field hockey. There were other girls playing, too, I think, but Bonita was the only one who paid any attention to me. If it weren’t for her I could happily spend the game sitting in a corner making daisy chains and thinking about death. The other girls knew I was a slacker and just ignored me, but Bonita made it her mission to drag the game in my direction and make sure I had to get involved and try to stop her from scoring, which I was never able to do, of course.

I hadn’t slept well after Date Night. The chili sauce had wreaked such destruction across my ravaged mouth parts that they continued throbbing all night, and not in a good way. George and I had joked about it afterward, but neither of us really felt like kissing when he dropped me off at home, and I was regretting what I’d done. I lay in bed and thought about George. *We do have fun. He makes me laugh and I make him laugh. And I like that we see such different things in each other and appreciate them.*

George would never have gone to Chickos if it weren't for me. I would never go to Akvars on the Hastings Bypass if it weren't for George. But as the clock ticked over past one a.m. and I still couldn't find sleep, I lay in the dark and wondered if the only reason I was with George was *because* he was different. Was I just doing it for a laugh? Was he just another sousaphone?

So I wasn't entirely match-fit the following afternoon, and when I saw Bonita and her pals thundering toward me like Boudicca and her Iceni warriors, my heart sank. I groaned and held up my field hockey stick like a Roman legionnaire with a short-sword. Needless to say, I was trampled and went down heavily, my skirt flying up around my ears. Someone, probably Bonita, stood on my wrist as she charged through. I lay there in darkness with my skirt over my face, rubbing my wrist furiously, listening to the guttural whoops of the Iceni tribe celebrating the scoring of another goal.

I'm not competitive at heart, but it would be nice, just once, to get the better of Bonita.

RICKY

On Saturday, Pip and Blossom picked me up early in Pip's car. It was overcast and I'd worn a coat and comfortable shoes, suspecting that Blossom might make us stand outside the boxing club for most of the morning. I was hoping I might be able to pop off to Superdrug at some point, because I needed some face wipes and tampons. Maybe I could even sneak into Accessorize to

buy something for Blossom's birthday. Pip was wearing a long black coat over black trousers and a sweater. He had wraparound shades and would have looked like Neo from *The Matrix* if it hadn't been for the stovepipe hat. Blossom was in full protest regalia. Her black jacket was covered with little badges, from Save the Whales through Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament to a picture of Jeremy Corbyn made to look like Che Guevara.

Pip's driving seemed even more erratic than usual. He never stopped to let oncoming cars go by, even on the narrowest lanes. They'd flash their lights and beep their horns, but Pip would just trundle on through, oblivious, sending them swerving up onto the pavement or sometimes into fields. Because we were going so slowly, there was usually someone right behind us, flashing their lights in annoyance or roaring past. It was never very peaceful driving in Pip's car.

The boxing club was in the Bosford Memorial Hall, near Saint Peter's Church, not far from the train station and in a slightly disheveled part of town. Just by the church was the boundary of the largest public housing project in Bosford, the Gladwell Estate. Pip parked and we walked down the street toward the hall.

"What did the club organizers say?" I asked Blossom.

"I haven't spoken to them," Blossom said.

"You didn't phone them?"

"I find it's always better to talk to someone face-to-face," she said confidently. We stopped in front of the church and I swallowed nervously.

"It's just that . . ." I began.

"It's just that what?" Blossom asked impatiently.

“Well, they’re boxers. What if it’s full of men with tattoos on their faces and no teeth?”

“Come on, you two. Where’s your backbone?” Blossom said as she turned and marched straight in. Pip and I looked at each other, shrugged and followed, more hesitantly. A lady with gray hair sat at a trestle table just inside the door. She wore a tracksuit and had a ledger open in front of her along with a little box of coins. Blossom frowned at the woman.

“Hello,” she said. “Can I help you?”

I peered past the table. Beyond the woman, in the main part of the hall, about two dozen children of various ages were skipping rope, or at least trying to skip. A very large, stocky man with a shaved head was glaring at them. Most of the children looked about as coordinated as Pip. The oldest looked to be in his early teens, the youngest maybe five or six. They were mostly boys, but there were a few girls. I wanted to point this out to Blossom, but she was busy talking to the lady at the trestle table.

“I’ve come to talk to you about this,” Blossom began, holding up the flyer.

“Yes, dear,” the lady said. “Are you interested in our Thursday session?”

“Why can’t I come to the Saturday session?”

“Well,” the lady said. “Thursdays might be more suitable.”

“Why?” Blossom asked politely. “Are Saturdays men-only?”

“You’d better talk to Coach Ricky,” the lady said. I turned to see the huge man approaching, his brow furrowed.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

“Are you in charge?” Blossom asked.

“This is my club, yes,” Coach Ricky said. He had a deep voice and a South London accent.

“Are you aware it’s an offense under Section 4 of the Equality Act 2010 to deny membership of a club on sex grounds?”

“What?” Ricky said, looking confused. “Sex what?”

“You can’t stop someone joining your club just because they are a girl.”

Ricky turned to the children who’d all stopped to watch the exchange. “SKIP!” he roared. They all leaped to it. “You’re a boxer?” Ricky asked, turning back to Blossom.

“No,” she said. “I think sports are patriarchal, especially martial arts.”

“So what’s the problem then?”

“Just because I don’t want to box doesn’t mean you’re allowed to exclude me.”

“Look,” Ricky said. “The women we get coming to the club are just doing it for conditioning. Y’know? To get fit? It takes commitment and focus to be a proper boxer, and when you tell me that you don’t like sports, then I’m wondering why you’re even here.” I looked around the hall as they argued. It looked a little shabby, to be honest. I saw a couple of ancient punching bags hanging from racks. The lady with the gray hair smiled at me.

“Are you a boxing coach, too?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I run the ladies’ session. We do boxercise, no pads or sparring. I’m Coach Sharon, that’s Coach Joe.” She pointed to a grizzled old man in track-suit bottoms who’d taken over leading the skipping

exercise. He hardly looked able to walk, let alone skip, but he leaned over slowly, grunting with the effort, and got his fingertips to the skipping rope Ricky had left behind. Then he raised himself with difficulty. He flipped the plastic rope over his head and, almost without seeming to move, hopped his feet over it.

Pip and I watched, fascinated, as the old man started skipping. Slowly at first, then gradually quicker as the kids shouted at him to hurry up. His hands twirled faster and faster, becoming a blur as his gnarled old frame bopped up and down steadily, bouncing like a twisted spring. Then he did that odd flipping thing that fit people do with skipping ropes where they seem to twist the rope back and forth. Joe closed his eyes and concentrated as the rope became a whistling blur, his feet seeming to move in slow-motion, lifting just high enough to let the rope hiss by underneath.

“He’s amazing,” Pip said breathlessly.

“Would you two like a cup of tea?” Sharon asked. I think she could tell our hearts weren’t in Blossom’s protest. Sharon led us to a trestle table and went to an urn to make our drinks. Blossom was still remonstrating with Ricky. I could see her pointing to something on the flyer.

Sharon came back with two cups of tea and some papers. She placed them down in front of us. “Have you ever thought you might like to box?” she asked kindly. Pip looked up at her in alarm.

“Not really,” he said.

“We’re a bit short of numbers, you see,” Sharon said hopefully. “What about you, dear?” she asked, turning to me.

“Me?” I asked.

“Yes, why not?” she said. “You could come on Thursday, that’s ladies-only boxercise. It’s quite gentle.” Boxercise and nattering with a bunch of old women? I might as well be at Mum’s Pilates class.

“Hmm,” I said.

“What about Wednesday nights?”

“Can’t do Wednesdays,” I said. “Date night.” Blossom came over then, having finished with Ricky, or having been dismissed by him perhaps; I’d missed the end of their discussion. She looked cross.

“Would you like a cookie?” Sharon asked. “While you read through the forms?”

“No, we wouldn’t,” Blossom said. “Thank you very much.”

“I’d like a cookie,” Pip said.

Sharon brought a selection over on a plate and Pip grabbed one gratefully. Blossom shot him a look. “Don’t tell me you’re going to sign up?”

“No,” Pip said.

“Then why are you taking a cookie?” Blossom hissed. “You take their cookies and then they’ve got you.”

“It’s not some gateway drug to the patriarchy,” I said. “It’s a custard cream.”

“I’m just saying that maybe it’s a bit rude to be taking cookies when you have no intention of signing up,” Blossom said impatiently. “Now can we go? We’ve made our point.”

“What’s the hurry?” I asked. “Haven’t finished my tea yet.”

Blossom sighed and took out her phone. I looked at the forms. There were a lot of them. None were particularly reassuring. Health warnings, disclaimers, statutory

obligations, next-of-kin, a list of local osteopaths. Even if I had wanted to take up boxing, I wasn't sure I wanted to sign my name at the bottom of a set of documents that seemed to give someone the authority to inflict hideous damage upon my person. I wasn't Anastasia Steele.

Coach Ricky had taken over the training session again, and Joe limped gratefully off for a sit-down. "All right, my little champions," Ricky roared. "Are we going to train hard today?" The kids screamed a big YES. "We're a team, here," Ricky said. "We don't poke fun at each other. If you see someone else struggling, you help them. Give them encouragement, all right? Show them how to do it better. And finally, what we learn here today stays in the club, got it?" The kids nodded solemnly. "I say this every week, every session, because it's important," Ricky went on, wagging a finger. "If I hear any of you have used your boxing skills out there on the street to hurt someone else, you're out of the club. Understand?"

The kids mumbled general agreement. I saw one little lad at the side looking a bit guilty. "UNDERSTAND?" Ricky roared.

"YES, COACH RICKY," the kids yelled in unison, even the guilty-looking one, who I suspected might be resolving to lift his game in the future.

"I wish Coach Ricky was my dad," Pip said unexpectedly. I knew what he meant about Coach Ricky, though. He was gruff and unsmiling, but he was one of those people you just know you can totally trust just by looking at them. The sort of person you were desperate to please. The kids seemed to agree. They watched him constantly, followed him around, listened when he spoke

and jumped when he said jump. We drank our tea and watched the kids leaping up and down. At one point some of them put gloves on and took turns tapping two big pads Ricky wore on his hands. "One, two, duck," Ricky would say. "One two, one two, duck." Whenever he said "duck," he'd reach out with the pads and they were supposed to duck underneath, but they couldn't ever time it right and he kept tapping them on the side of the head.

"Keep your guard up," he said to the guilty-looking boy, who nodded and punched himself in the head to help the new information sink in. I liked Guilty Boy. He seemed the sort of person who was constantly striving to improve himself without ever quite managing it. Pip eyed the kids as they waved their massive gloves around unconvincingly. "I reckon I could take some of these guys down," he said.

"Not that one," Blossom said, pointing to a mean-looking boy with close-cropped hair and an earring. He looked about eight.

"No," Pip agreed. "Not him." I was enjoying myself. It felt restful there, sipping tea while fifteen mad children leaped about taking swings at one another.

"Are you going to fill it out, then?" Coach Sharon asked, appearing behind us.

"Oh, yes," I said, sitting upright. "Just reading through the fine print."

"Okay, let me know if you need anything. Another cup of tea? Another cookie?"

"No thanks," I said.

"I'd like another cookie, please," Pip said. Blossom stared at him darkly. Just then a young man walked in through the door. Late teens, a little older than me.

He had olive skin and dark hair and eyes. He looked Mediterranean, or maybe Middle Eastern. He wore a loose T-shirt but even so I could see he was ripped.

"Tarik!" Ricky called to the new arrival. "Nice of you to show up."

Tarik. *That's a nice name*, I thought as I watched him stretch. He was lithe and muscular. He turned and of course caught me staring and I quickly pretended I was inspecting an interesting light fixture just behind him.

Pip brought another cookie to his mouth and was about to bite down when Sharon said, "So, are you going to fill out these forms or not?" Pip looked panicked.

"You did take two cookies," I reminded him. Pip shrugged. Then he reached over and grabbed one of the forms and the pen and signed his name. Blossom sighed.

"And what about you?" Sharon asked me.

"Me?" I watched the boy as he put on a pair of boxing gloves.

"Yes, dear, what about you?" Sharon said, slightly impatiently.

The boy stepped up to a hanging punching bag and started hitting it. He was fast, two quick jabs with his left hand then a big whack with his right. He hit the bag so hard I heard the bolts creak where it was attached to the ceiling. He dropped back, his guard up, and I saw him grin, exposing perfect white teeth.

"Maybe," I said. "I might come next Saturday."