

EXTRACT I: Lunch-time kickboxing in Mayfair

“Keep your guard up! Block!”

Andy Harris ignored the advice from Ken, his trainer, and turned back to face the kid.

The kid was twenty years younger than Andy. He was hopping from toe to toe at the other side of the canvas mats, lithe and fit, maybe one hundred and eighty pounds and full of muscle.

By contrast, Andy was lucky if he made the gym once a week. Lucky if he got out for a run once a week – and that was three miles tops. He was an enthusiastic weekend drinker, he smoked at least ten roll-ups a day and weighed around fifteen pounds more than he should. And he was pushing forty.

But life had made Andy Harris hard. And he was brutal. And that was all he had over this kid.

The two men stood at opposite sides of the mats in a kickboxing joint Andy visited during his lunch hour. He was sparring with this kid and it was one round apiece. They were fighting the best of five. It may only be sparring but there was no way he was going to let this kid win.

Ken the instructor – sixty-odd if he was a day and fit as the butcher’s proverbial dog – called time. Round three.

Andy and the kid stepped in to the DoJo, nodding a bow to each other. The kid whirled round and kicked at the empty air, showing off. He was ready for anything, ready to rumble. Andy hauled himself forward and bounced from toe to toe, trying to make it look as if he, too, were ready to rumble. The kid was inching across the canvas at him, jabbing even before he got near. All energy and passion, so far the kid had been fighting like the young man he was: too much haste, not enough thought.

Andy stepped up, watching the rhythm of the kid’s fists get nearer. Now the kid jabbed at his face. Andy responded with a jab of his own and the kid whacked his guard up. Andy

bulldozed through his guard with a haymaker then front-kicked him in the guts, above the band of the kid's red shorts.

To his credit, the kid tried to stay on his feet, even shot a foot up a towards Andy's guts. Andy saw it coming and took the kid's foot out with a glove. The kid went down, splayed out on his back. Round three to Andy: two-one in this battle of youth versus age.

But the kid got up again, wanting to prove himself. Ken was taunting them both, dressed in his fifth Dan black-belt robes:

“Come on, lovebirds, let's try again, shall we? Now: watch your hands and feet – make your hits count. Five seconds. Ready? Round Four – go!”

Andy took a couple of paces forward and swung a left hook that missed, then snapped his leg up for a roundhouse. The kid parried the roundhouse and jabbed a right to Andy's ribs: Andy dropped back a pace and shot for the spectacular, a reverse kick to the kid's head.

Three-quarters of the way round... and he lost his footing and ended up on the canvas. Again. He looked up at the posters of Bruce Lee and Chuck Norris on the walls. Er, no. Not today. Or anytime soon.

The kid retreated back to his side of the DoJo. Ken walked over, all imperious in his black kimono. He peered down at Andy, who lay before him like a drowned elk bathed in sweat on the matting. Andy knew what he was going to say: hands and feet, keep going forward, controlled aggression, et cetera.

But he didn't say any of that. Instead Ken looked at Andy with pity, then said in his gruff voice:

“That was pretty sad, mate. It's not so much kickboxing you're doing as pizza-boxing. Time to lay off the junk food a little, I'd say. Now – last round. See if you can do us old men a service and beat this little knacker, you get me?”

Us old men. Jesus. But Ken was right, thought Andy: I'm thirty-nine now. A long way from the Navy, back when I used to run ten miles a day with forty pounds on my back.

Right – last time in. No way was the little bugger having this round.

Andy stepped up to the kid and gave him a volley of the best – four shots, left and right jabs then an uppercut – and the kid blocked them all. Then some nifty footwork from the younger man, a jumping side-kick that Andy dodged, leaving them facing each other on reversed sides of the DoJo. Andy was where the kid had stood seconds before, facing a younger, fitter version of himself, the posters of heroes and fights of the past taunting Andy from the walls. Come on.

Sweat was pouring off him. He couldn't give up. He stepped up again and shot for a forward right roundhouse. Missed. The kid came at him with punches to the head and body. This time Andy kept his guard up, backpedalled, looking for the opening.

“Harris!” roared Ken. “Keep going forward! Hands and feet! Come on!”

Andy heard him. Went for the kid's feet again. The younger man's turn to drop back. Then Andy was all arms, leaning forward. He took one in the face and gave the kid a battering kick on the left side in return. Then more head shots.

The kid skittered to one side but Andy had him now, he was sure. Moving close to the edge of the mats, punching left and right. Still the kid kept dodging, his short buzz cut dripping sweat straight in to his deep-set eyes. Here he comes again, back with those scissoring kicks. Andy took three kicks, one in the face that opened up his eyebrow. But he never stopped going forward, into the kid's face, invading his space. Finally he pushed forward with his right leg, set up a giant leap.

The kid slipped and Andy's kick missed him as he fell. Then once the kid was on the mats he stayed down and Andy was still standing. Three rounds to Mr Andrew Harris, certified old bastard—and sweet victory.