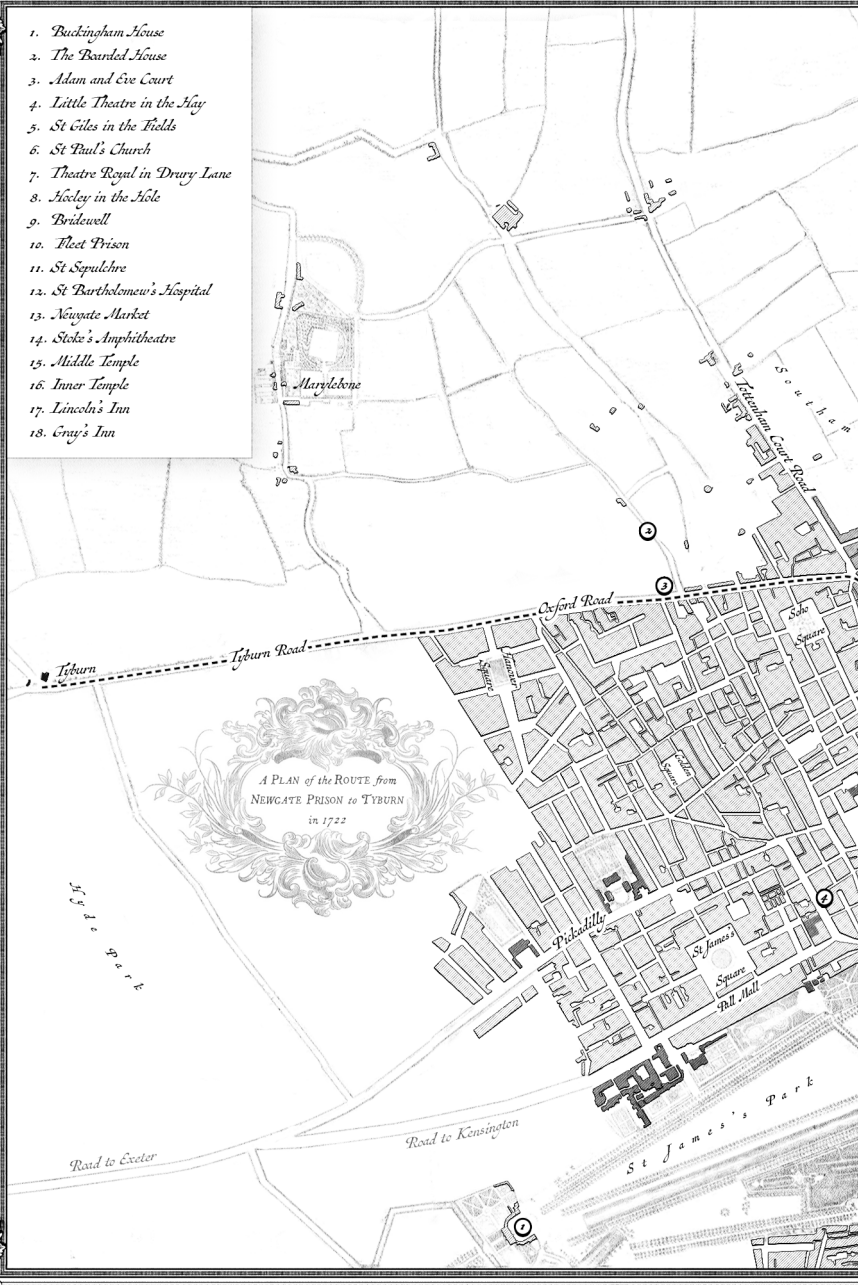
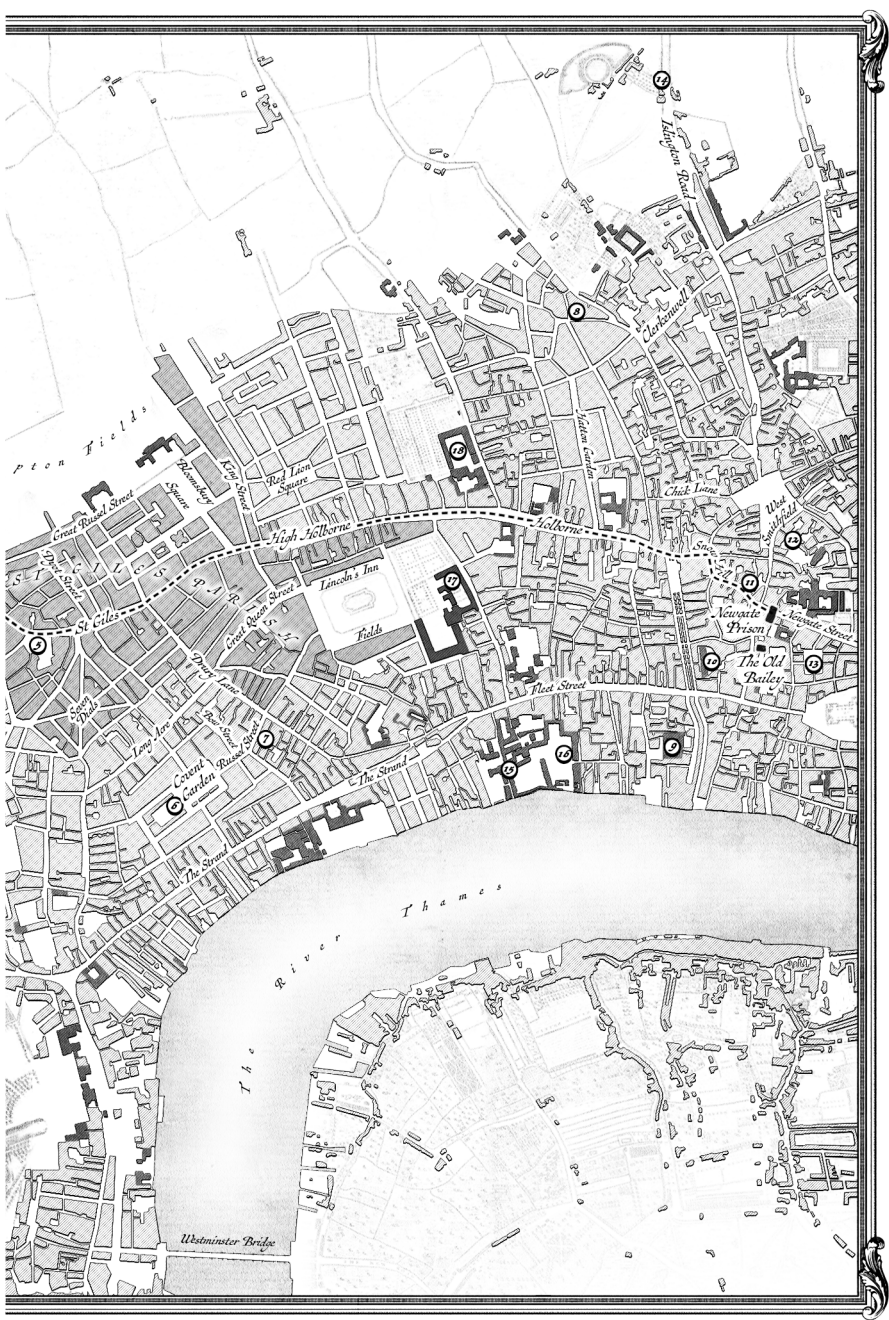


UNDEFEATED

1. Buckingham House
2. The Bearded House
3. Adam and Eve Court
4. Little Theatre in the Hay
5. St Giles in the Fields
6. St Paul's Church
7. Theatre Royal in Drury Lane
8. Hooley in the Hole
9. Bridewell
10. Fleet Prison
11. St Sepulchre
12. St Bartholomew's Hospital
13. Newgate Market
14. Sloe's Amphitheatre
15. Middle Temple
16. Inner Temple
17. Lincoln's Inn
18. Gray's Inn





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A NOVEL

UNDEFEATED

Gillie Basson



Gillie Basson is a British-Canadian writer. She's a lawyer by trade (motivated by warm hugs, podcasts and wanderlust), a foodie and a workout junkie who started Thai kickboxing and Brazilian jiu-jitsu as part of her research into what it feels like to be punched, kicked, pinned down and thrown to the ground. *Undefeated* is her first novel.

She lives with her family and fur babies in Aberdeenshire, Scotland. When she's not out bagging munros, she is reading, writing or spending quality time with her girls.

She loves to connect with other creatives and discuss all things book-related. You can follow Gillie on Instagram at @gilliesbookaddiction.

*For my family, and especially my girls, Eloise & Mia – be strong
enough to forge your own path in this crazy world*

Author's note

Very little is known about Elizabeth Wilkinson-Stokes. This novel is a work of fiction but inspired by a real person. It is intended as a story for entertainment rather than a biographical memoir.

The details of Elizabeth's life are obscure, and one can't help but wonder if the records are intentionally vague, given boxing was seen to be a male sport and unbecoming for a woman.

What we do know are dates: dates of some of her recorded fights, which span a six-year period between 1722 and 1728. I have used creative licence with the timing of these bouts for the purposes of the story. In addition, I had Robert Wilkinson's execution at Tyburn take place in the spring rather than autumn of 1722. Known dates are listed in chronological order on the next page.

It is also worth noting that some characters in this novel are real while others are fictitious, as are some of the locations, such as the Tippling House and The Black Hog. Street names are drawn from sources, but there are some conflicting citations when it comes to street names at that time, depending on the map. Similarly, some streets north of the Oxford Road – such as Henrietta Street – were not yet built, as urbanisation of the Marylebone area was still in its infancy. Real persons are listed on the next page. You can assume that all other names are fictitious for the purposes of the story.

Finally, a quick word about the legal system in London at this time. There was as yet no formal police force. In 1720, the Lord

Mayor served as the Chief Magistrate, who dealt with accusations of criminal offences and served as chairman of the criminal court, the Old Bailey.

The City of London was at that time divided into twenty-six city wards and each ward elected an 'Alderman'. An alderman was an administrative leader who sat on the Court of Aldermen, which included and was presided over by the Lord Mayor, who was elected every year, serving a term of twelve months.

Wards in the City of London were divided into precincts. At an annual meeting, all householders of a precinct had the right to choose a constable for the following year. Constables were unpaid, non-experienced ordinary citizens. They were considered ward officers, although they had authority to act anywhere in the City. A constable's general obligation was to preserve peace in his neighbourhood by preventing infractions that might lead to its being breached. They had the power to arrest, imprison and break into houses to carry out their duties. They could be accountable for illegal activity and fined for negligence but not general inactivity. Constables remained at home to be available to respond to requests for help.

As such, constables at this time were often corrupt and lazy.

Patrolling of streets during the day was a duty of city marshals and beadles. Marshals were salaried city officers appointed by the Lord Mayor and aldermen. Beadles also took to lighting the ward lanterns. The night watch were appointed and manned watch-stands, taking turns to patrol their designated area every thirty minutes. The watch house was a point of assembly and where anyone arrested would be held until the morning and taken before a magistrate.

Given the concern about high levels of crime in London in the late seventeenth century, the government adopted the practice of offering substantial rewards for apprehending and convicting individuals guilty of certain crimes. Known as the rewards system, it encouraged the development of more proactive policing, but also turned the practice into a business. Motivated by the prospect of a reward, many constables and ex-constables, and other law enforcement officials, worked hard to help victims find and prosecute the culprits who had wronged them. Some observed that the reward system created conflict between those seeking justice and those seeking financial gain and power. Indeed, dozens of men turned this into a business and became thief-takers, who engaged in multiple prosecutions in order to profit from the rewards, the most notable being Jonathan Wild.

Thief-takers used their knowledge of the criminal underworld to profit from both unofficial and official rewards. Thief-takers negotiated between thieves and the victims of thefts to return stolen goods in exchange for a fee. They also used their insider knowledge to inform on criminals and prosecute them at the Old Bailey. While this second activity facilitated the administration of criminal justice, more corrupt thief-takers went further: they blackmailed criminals with threats of prosecution if they failed to pay protection money. Some even became ‘thief-makers’ by encouraging gullible men to commit crimes, and then apprehending and prosecuting them in order to collect the reward. Such practices illustrate the point that not all ‘crimes’ prosecuted at the Old Bailey had actually taken place; some prosecutions were malicious.

Building on the practice of thief-taking, but attempting to control and legitimise the practice, Justice Henry Fielding established the

Bow Street Runners in 1749. Henry, and later his half-brother John, hired thief-takers and ex-constables on a retainer, and sent them out from their Bow Street office to detect and apprehend the culprit when a crime was reported. They became known as the ‘Runners’.

With that being said, there were several notable persons who lived in London at the same time as Elizabeth. The following are of particular relevance in the context of this story:

- James Figg: prize fighter, trainer, promoter, known as the Father of Boxing and the first ever boxing champion;
- Jack Sheppard (‘Honest Jack’): lovable rogue of a petty thief and prison escapee (hanged at Tyburn on 16 November 1724);
- Jonathan Wild (Thief-Taker General): ran a criminal empire alongside his work as a public-spirited thief-taker (hanged at Tyburn on 24 May 1725);
- William Hogarth: painter, engraver and pictorial satirist; he created his portrayal of the evils of gin-drinking, *Gin Lane*, set in the London parish of St Giles, in support of the Gin Act, passed in 1751;
- Moll King (born Elizabeth Adkins): a shrewd businesswoman who was a prominent figure in London’s underworld during the eighteenth century. She owned King’s Coffee House in London’s Covent Garden with her husband, Tom King. She was, allegedly, a member of the notorious Jonathan Wild’s gang of thieves and, while in Newgate, she met Daniel Defoe, who allegedly used her as the inspiration for *Moll Flanders*.

Make no mistake, Elizabeth was real – she fought in a brutal era of London’s history and won, defying eighteenth-century gender roles. Courageous and tough, she proved there are no limitations

to what a person can do. Remember her name, or don't – but my hope is that after reading this story, you are inspired to conduct your own research and form your own views. I, for one, am in awe of this woman, who forged her own path and made a name for herself at a time when London's underworld was cutthroat and brutal, with an inhumane legal system. It was a time of informers, spies, bullies, gangs and thief-takers ... and of the gin craze. After her last documented fight in 1728, she disappears from historical record as mysteriously as she entered it. When my dad told me about her, I knew I wanted to write a story about her.

Dates

23 June 1722

Elizabeth Wilkinson v Hannah Hyfield

June/July 1722

Elizabeth Wilkinson v Martha Jones

24 September 1722

Robert Wilkinson executed

8 August 1723

Elizabeth Wilkinson v Joanna Hatton/Heyfield

1 September 1725

Joseph Hamilton and Thomas Philips v Ned Sutton and George
Bell

1 October 1726

announcement for forthcoming fight between Elizabeth Stokes v
Mary Welch (it is not known if this fight ever took place)

17 July 1727

Elizabeth and James Stokes v Mary Welch and Robert Barker

7 October 1728

Elizabeth Stokes v Ann Field

Real people

Elizabeth Wilkinson-Stokes

Robert Wilkinson

James Figg

James Stokes

Tom and Moll King

Hannah Hyfield

Martha Jones

Joanna Hatton/Heyfield

Mary Welch

Robert Barker

Sir Gerard Conyers

Ann Field

CHALLENGE – *Whereas I, Ann Field of Stoke-Newington, ass-driver, well known for my abilities in boxing in my own defence wherever it happened in my way, having been affronted by Mrs Stokes, styled the European Championess, do fairly invite her to a trial of the best skill in boxing, for 10 pounds, fair rise and fall.*

ANSWER – *I, Elizabeth Stokes, of the City of London, have not fought in this way since I fought the famous boxing-woman of Billingsgate 29 minutes, and gained a complete victory, (which is six years ago); but as the famous Stoke-Newington ass-woman dares me to fight her for the 10 pounds, I do assure her I will not fail meeting her for the said sum, and doubt not that the blows which I shall present her with, will be more difficult for her to digest than she ever gave her asses!*

Source: *Daily Post*, 17th July 1728

CHAPTER 1



I REMEMBER THE FIRST time I hit someone.

Mary.

I was six years old. She was seven or eight. A ridiculous girl with silver-blond hair, sea-blue eyes, strawberry lips and porcelain skin, who resided at the same orphanage as I did, one run by a sour wire of a woman called Mrs Dierdre. Mary was a human doll. The kind of girl who bounced everywhere she went. *Bloody bounced.* Who bounces in an orphanage?

A crow crows through the window, drawing me out of memory lane. To here. St Giles rookery. How many winters have I spent in St Giles now? It's been at least eight or nine. I can't remember: too drunk. Days merge into night, and nights turn into day, and in between I drink, fuck and fight. Not in that order. At least, not all the time.

Nothing but battered timber buildings joined together in the air like birds' nests in the highest tree branches. Air and privacy are as coveted here as bread and clean water. Crumbling tenements surrounded by doss-houses, gin shops and brothels. You're as likely to be robbed or beaten as you are to eat and sleep. I can't recall the last time any parish constable or beadle set foot here. Rubbish and excrement and dead dogs line the alleyways, only ever to be washed away by the rain, which pours down from broken gutters on rooftops. Unlighted and unpaved, the streets are airless due to

the overcrowding of seedy bodies. This black hole, where shiftless good-for-nothings come to be entertained – criminals, prostitutes, drunks and immigrants. Bloody immigrants. Irishmen everywhere, piling in on top of each other like a verminous habitation. I hate the Irish. Have done ever since I worked at the Stockton Estate. And St Giles is the worst place to live when you hate the Irish. They're everywhere, just like the rats, drinking, breeding and spouting their holy beliefs while battering their women and children behind closed doors. Damn hypocrites.

I'm not a prostitute or an immigrant, and I wouldn't call myself a criminal (not today anyway), and my appetite for gin isn't something I care to dwell on. And I don't hit children, or women unless they want it. Ask for it. Or deserve it.

I hesitate. Thinking. My mind racing. I can't put my thoughts together. I know there is something there. My brain is trying to tell me something. The hairs on my arms and the back of my neck rise.

Hmph.

I force myself to focus on my surroundings. Yes. This makes sense. The back-alley den, opening onto Church Street, which looks more like a cow house than a room for people. This I know. It's familiar. And familiarity, I find, breeds a sense of comfort, even if it really shouldn't. Light bleeds through rags that have replaced the broken glass in the small square panes of the windows. Lanterns burn, flickering a golden glow. That precarious flicker, akin to life here in the rookery – rebellious, resilient but unreliable. The light no longer wishes to stay on here than the sun in the sky over London, with its forever passing clouds. One moment you feel safe, assured even, with visibility of what's coming next. Then, without warning, you're thrust into darkness, helpless to its wayward ways. The

ground beneath my feet smells more like animal muck than soil. My eyes dart around the room.

What a hellhole.

Waiting. I'm used to waiting: for food, for drink, to piss and to fight. I'm not a spectator today. No sitting with the mob, cheering and cursing at whatever enters the pit. No. It is my turn today. The sludge of gravel and mud squelches beneath my boots.

Slish. Slosh.

My feet sink into the sludge as I move my weight. I bounce a few times, to see how far my feet drop – enough to satisfy my curiosity and boredom. The ground is cold, much like the gin bottle in my left hand. I take another drink, priming myself for what is to come. I hear the mob through the wooden planks, stomping their feet on the stalls as they wait impatiently for their next show. It's a private show, of course, not attended by high society – the sort who drink cups of hot tea and dine on venison. No, this show is for the ornery: the throwaways of society.

The air is thick; I can smell the people without seeing them. The stench of stale booze and filth is unavoidable when it's fight night. My mind drifts back to Mrs Dierdre. The woman sold me to Sir Frederick Stockton when I was only nine years old. An Irishman. I press my eyes shut, willing the memories to go away. They don't. They never do. Despite my efforts to drown them at the bottom of a gin bottle ... or bottles. My breathing deepens and my palms start to sweat. I begin rubbing my fingers together and crick my neck. Nothing helps remove the images of my old guardian and possessor. So I do what I always do when I can't control my thoughts: I punch something. In this particular instance, the

wooden door keeping me penned up like the animal that belongs in this back room bears the brunt of my anger.

It has the desired effect. The tips of my mouth quirk up.

It has to be said, I enjoy fighting. I like punching someone in the face. It's a useful release from everything else. All my life, it seems, all I've known is fighting. But fighting takes its toll on the body, which is a shame, because I'm good at it. I can't help but wonder when will be the last time I walk away from a fight.

'You – it's time,' a man barks at me from the door I just hit. My head automatically turns towards his voice, but I don't look at him. Distracted by my thoughts, I didn't hear the door swing open, but now the waves of noise from the spectators in the next room wash over me. I nod and finish the gin before tossing the empty bottle into the crate next to me.

As usual, I think of Mary. Of the day everything changed for me. That spoiled wretch had taken something of mine. I remember how my rage flapped around my head, like a frantic bird stuck in a cage, trying to find a way out. They rolled into fists, tightening without effort. My teeth clenched. By then, I didn't care if she apologised or not. I remember Mary turning her head to look at me. There was no escaping what happened next.

I hit her. Not in the way Mrs Dierdre hit us, with a stick across our palms. No, I hit her the way I had seen Mrs Dierdre's husband hit her before he abandoned her: with a closed fist. I hit Mary across her perfect cheek with as much force as I could. I heard the crack as my fist connected with bone. I felt the crunch beneath my knuckles as I swiped her perfectly smooth skin. I saw the fear in her eyes as she flew backwards. I had knocked the smile from her pretty face. Her head hit the ground and the other girls screamed,

running away from me. I stood over the silver-blond-haired, sea-blue-eyed girl with porcelain skin and watched as she cried. Bouncing from her sobs.

I got a lashing from Mrs Dierdre after, but it was worth it. Mary and all the other kids avoided me after that day. Pity.

Yes, I remember the first time I hit someone. And it felt fucking good.

Now. In the cold, dark, it's that time again. I don't hesitate. This moment is as ingrained in me as the ability to walk and breathe. I'd already piled my hair as tightly as possible on top of my head, but I hadn't stripped yet. I pull off my blouse. The cold air stings my breasts. The man by the door gawks, even though he's seen them before. Flesh and bone. That's all I am. *Better that than a prostitute*, my mind snaps.

I walk towards the door, leaving my garment on the floor. I push past the man into the next room, ignoring his protruding elbow, which brushes my nipple.

There's no need to look around as I enter the room. I know the set-up: drunkards sitting, standing, hanging from wherever they can to get a glimpse of the event. Drunk prostitutes singing and swaying; one has a baby dangling from her tit. Young boys weave in and out of the crowd, picking pockets as they dance around the unaware adults. The men huddle together in their groups, shouting, either at one another or at no one at all. Gambling is the order of the day, and fighting is the game. For where there is fighting, there's gambling and there's drinking. A wrought-iron basket hangs from the ceiling; in it sits a man – punished for not paying his debts, no doubt – hunched over in an uncomfortable and ignominious way, muttering his apologies. A warning for

others. The noise is thunderous as spectators shout bets and roar abuse and encouragement at me, a contestant.

Robert will be in his usual spot, next to the bookkeeper above the entrance. I won't look at him, though, not until after the fight. I know what I have to do. What he wants. What the people expect.

As I approach the round enclosure, I see some men removing the corpse of a bear – something I will never understand. Bear-baiting, bull-baiting and even tiger-baiting! Cock fights, dog fights and prize fights – yes, I can see there is a certain appeal. But what is the appeal of watching a chained animal being torn apart by a pack of rabid dogs? It isn't a sport – it's savagery, but, then again, everyone has their vice. And mine is drinking and fighting other women ... or men – I don't discriminate. But I can't dwell on my fellow Londoners and why they enjoy the things they do. There are important tasks at hand. Like survival. *My* survival. I say a silent prayer for the bear and then forget about the beast.

My opponent is already in the centre of the blood-spattered wooden enclosure, pacing and watching as the bear carcass is dragged away. I make it past the crowd, but not before being groped several times by a number of rowdy men. It's not admiration, but impatience.

'Nice teats!' one man shouts.

'Hurry up, wench!' another yells. I can't help it; my lips curl into a smirk. I know exactly what they want.

'Shut your gob, you wretched ass!' I shout back. I reach for the one closest and ram my head against his, knocking him to the floor. The people roar with laughter.

Before jumping the wooden fence that borders the centre circle, I grab another bottle, handed to me by one of the regulars, and

take a gulp, tossing it back without thanks – realising too late that it's filled with brandy, not gin. Still, the cold booze trickling down my throat burns my insides, fuelling me. I clear the barricade and drop into the pit. The cheers ring in my ears. The sight of two bare-chested women about to fight sets the spectators off. This scene gets most of them excited. My ears don't register the grunts and heavy breathing any more.

Once inside the pit, I don't let the baying mob distract me from my opponent. While the woman continues to pace around, I stand still, looking her up and down. She isn't as tall as me, but very few women are. I can see the woman has been in battles before. The scars on her torso and arms are as evident as the fear in her eyes. This should be easy.

Should.

A boy standing on the wooden fence, balancing against an elderly man's head – he looks half-dead – shouts to the audience that our fight is about to begin. Most ignore him – too riled up and energised to pay him any heed. I glare at my opponent, a woman I now know is called Sally, thanks to the young tyke. He hops down and that is it. Our fight begins.

There is no waiting. I raise my fists, ready to strike, and launch myself across the several feet of mud between us. Sally reaches out to grab at me but I'm too quick. I feint, side-step and land a quick left-hand punch on the woman's cheek, cracking it immediately.

Sally stumbles back a few paces as I press forward. I hit her another two times across the face: the second blow busts the woman's nose and blood pours down her mouth and chin. A deafening rumble ripples through the audience.

I bob from side to side, focusing on my opponent's movements, then throw a right hook, which connects with her left cheek. I don't stop. I continue my assault as I chase her across the dirt to the other side of the enclosure. In a desperate attempt to defend herself, the woman throws her left fist, catching my jaw. It hurts like hell but not as badly as the bite that follows. The woman sinks her teeth into my right shoulder.

I scream as I feel my flesh being pierced by her jaws. She latches on and doesn't let go. She begins clawing at my skin, scratching my back, neck and arms. I have to get her off me, preferably without her taking a chunk of my shoulder with her.

With all my strength, I wrap my arms around Sally and swing her over my hip; my own body weight throws her off balance to the muddy ground. The landing knocks me free of her bite, as I had hoped. Sally jumps to her feet. It seems she isn't going to be beaten that easily. And she is a biter. Lucky me.

Ignoring the pain, I wipe blood from my shoulder where Sally's teeth punctured my skin, and then turn to face the woman. The people are shouting for more. So I answer them – I lick the blood from my fingers and smile at my opponent.

She yells and runs towards me, but I move out of the way, grab her neck as she passes and, using the momentum, smash her head down on the wooden planks of the pit enclosure. Her head bounces back and she falls to the dirt. Before she has a chance to push herself up I jump on top of her, straddling her stomach and punching her head, ribs and chest – anywhere she isn't protecting. Over and over and over again, I rain punches until I hear the woman's chin crunch. Her arms go limp, no longer defending against my attack.

Confident the fight is over, I stop my assault and spit at the woman. I stand up and take a few paces backwards. I'm livid at the bitch for biting me, but I don't wish her dead. She is here for the exact same reasons as me and, despite what this mob thinks they know, it takes a certain type of woman to enter the pit and fight. Men, sure – it's widely accepted. But women? No.

Not yet, anyway.

But here in St Giles rookery? Well, anything goes. Something as taboo as females fighting adds to the interest. The secrecy of it all. I'm not complaining, as more people coming to watch me fight means more money being thrown in the hat. And I'm going to win. Every time. The alternative is too grim to contemplate. No. I won't go there. No one is beating me.

I will the woman not to move; if she wants to have any chance of recovering, she'll remain firmly on the cold, damp earth.

Just. Stay. Down.

My breathing is heavy, like the weight of my arms. I want the fight to be over. I'm ready to leave and put my blouse back on. I need a drink to ease the pain. But then, to my horror, Sally stirs. She looks up. She looks around and her eyes meet mine.

Damn.

I know that look. It's the look of fear: not fear of me, not of what is happening right now, but of what will happen to her later. This is a brutal sport, but husbands can be crueller. Afterwards. When no one is watching. No one to step in and end things. To call the fight and end the violence. The pain.

Sally realises what is coming as soon as she locks eyes with mine. I press my eyelids shut. The mob is chanting, 'Finish her! Finish her! Finish her!'

I instinctively look up at Robert. He nods. He wants me to please the crowd. And I have to please him. I take a deep breath. I have to do it. There is no choice in the matter. No mercy.

So I do what I have to do, yet again. I trot forward, gathering pace, and begin kicking and stomping on Sally with all my might until I am certain she is unconscious: on her face, her chest, stomach, legs – everywhere.

I kick the last breath out of the woman; I pray not for good. Most of Sally's teeth are gone: either swallowed or lost in the dirt surrounding us. A man suddenly appears, pulling me off, stopping the fight. I step back. The air is stale with the metallic smell of blood and ale.

Before the fight can be called, the shouts change from cheers to confusion. I look around. My body aches, or perhaps it is just my hands and shoulder that hurt, I can't tell. There is only pain.

'Constables!' someone yells. Disoriented, I watch as bodies scramble to get out of the den. My eyes darting in every direction, trying to make sense of the chaos.

Constables? Not here, I think to myself. As whistles pierce the gloom, everyone tries to flee the scene. I see one constable getting attacked by a group of men. I run over and yank the men off him one by one, hitting and kicking them as I peel them away. When I turn to see if the man is hurt, I hear more screams from behind and whip around to find out who they are coming from. I scan the crowd to find the only face I know intimately, but he isn't where he normally stands; the spot is now a blur of people mashed together, scrambling to exit. Stunned, I follow the madness back to the pit. Sally begins to stir. Thank Christ.

Daylight pours in from the opened doors and I am forced to shield my eyes. Distracted, I'm knocked over when somebody runs into me. Everything is foggy as the mob pushes me to the ground, stampeding over me.

I struggle to keep my eyes open. A combination of hunger, pain and exhaustion conquer my body at last.

I blink.

Constables and beables are wrestling Robert to the ground, his body still writhing beneath their weight. He's eventually shackled.

I blink again.

A man crouches next to me, the man I helped. *A constable?*

Something soft is draped over me.

Then nothing. Darkness.