

THE SWEET SCIENCE OF BRUISING

Joy Wilkinson

Characters

PROFESSOR CHARLIE SHARP

VIOLET HUNTER

MATILDA 'MATTY' BLACKWELL

ANNA LAMB

POLLY STOKES

AUNT GEORGE

EMILY (*also plays* NANCY)

GABRIEL LAMB (*also plays* LORD CAVENDISH)

PAUL STOKES (*also plays* CAPTAIN DANBY)

DR JAMES BELL (*also plays* DR FORSTER and REFEREE)

This text went to press before the end of rehearsals and so may differ slightly from the play as performed.

ACT ONE

Scene One

1869. An amphitheatre in Islington, London, moments before show time.

In the middle of a boxing ring sits PROFESSOR CHARLIE SHARP. He seems old and sickly, huddled beneath a blanket. When he walks, he needs a cane. When he speaks, he needs to cough. When he wishes it, he needs neither.

When the audience is almost settled, the PROFESSOR clears his throat and speaks, weakly.

PROFESSOR. Ladies and gentlemen. I am very sorry to have to tell you... that I shall not be fighting tonight. (*Smiles. A little louder.*) A delicate child, I. Never felt a blow from my fretful parents, except to get the air into my lungs. I was schooled in my sickbed, an early observer of the fisticuffs below my window. How I longed to be down in the streets with them. The sweaty stuff of life right outside whilst I tried to memorise my declensions. The only sweat I shed was in fevered dreams. The only muscle I trained to bulging was my brain – (*Louder, rising to his feet.*) but I have used it since to bring my dreams to life, to put the gutter up onstage and elevate it to an art, a science: The Sweet Science of Bruising! (*Moving around now, surprisingly light on his feet.*) The theory of evolution wrenched into sweat-drenched reality, with each contender fighting to be the best. The personification of progress! And where could be more progressive than Islington? (*Beat.*) Tonight at the Angel Amphitheatre, I, Professor Charlie Sharp, bring you, ladies and gentlemen... *ladies*. Please welcome them, as they do battle to be named the greatest of them all – the very first, the one and only, Lady Boxing Champion of the World –

Four women announce themselves.

VIOLET. Violet Hunter.

MATTY. Matilda Blackwell.

ANNA. Anna Lamb.

POLLY. Polly Stokes.

A beat – they look at each other. The PROFESSOR takes VIOLET HUNTER's hand and brings her to the fore. The others stand down, for now.

PROFESSOR. Violet Hunter, the one and only Lady Boxing Champion of the World.

Or rather, she will be. She's still only a lady and she's barely heard of boxing. She's in a West End theatre at a matinee. A world away...

VIOLET takes a seat beside EMILY and AUNT GEORGE, sisters in suffrage. They are watching a play. The boxing ring has become a stage where a 'cup-and-saucer drama' nears its end. At a table laid for tea, two gentlemen, LORD CAVENDISH and CAPTAIN DANBY, tensely eat crumpets. They stand as DR FORSTER enters, grave.

CAVENDISH. What news, doctor?

DANBY. Will she live?

FORSTER. Her heart is weak and cannot stand the strain of choosing between two such worthy suitors. To save her life, it is left to me to diagnose who is truly deserving of her love.

CAVENDISH. Then, good doctor, I submit everything I own for your examination. My name, my estate, my body and soul, every atom of which is devoted to Miss Laura. Upon thorough assessment, there is no doubt about whom you must choose.

FORSTER. Most convincing, Lord Cavendish. And Captain Danby?

DANBY. I, too, love Miss Laura, but I cannot allow her agony to last a moment longer. Certainly not long enough for a thorough assessment of our suitability. All that matters now

is that she lives. For that gift alone, would I willingly give her up.

CAVENDISH. Good man!

A triumphant CAVENDISH passes DANBY the plate of crumpets. FORSTER stays his hand.

FORSTER. I have made my diagnosis. The right man is... Captain Danby! For only true love recognises the demand for sacrifice over the compulsion to possess.

DANBY. Then I shall marry Miss Laura!

CAVENDISH. And I shall make my way in the world alone, but with a new understanding of the true nature of love, and a readiness to embrace it afresh!

FORSTER. That's progress!

Beaming, he takes a hearty bite of a crumpet. Curtain.

As they take their bows and retreat, AUNT GEORGE claps politely. EMILY claps with fervour. VIOLET is oblivious, lost in her thoughts.

AUNT GEORGE. Dear Emily, I sometimes suspect that you come to the theatre to see the plays.

EMILY. How funny! (*Dabs eyes.*) It's hard not to get caught up in it all though, isn't it?

AUNT GEORGE. On the contrary, I find it the perfect opportunity to think of other things. A place for us to gather, safely in public, seditiously alone, and while everyone's attention is directed elsewhere, we are free to contemplate what really matters and imagine – if it were all swept away, what might we put in its place?

EMILY (*enthused*). What about a death scene for the heroine? Why should Miss Laura remain offstage during the most dramatic moments?

AUNT GEORGE. I said what *really* matters, in the real world – the enfranchisement of women!

EMILY. Oh, yes, well, I had an idea for that too. For a petition. For the right of all women to higher education.

AUNT GEORGE. Didn't we already do that one?

EMILY. No, we did the right of all women to *secondary* education. And surely we must keep the pressure up? It's no good to waver in the breeze each week. We must pick an issue and petition, petition, petition until we achieve a result.

AUNT GEORGE. We still haven't heard the result of the last petition.

EMILY. Ah, well, I have yet to send it... (*Sheepishly produces petition from her purse.*) Getting the wording right is essential. Mr Disraeli is a writer too. And it would benefit from a few more signatures first.

AUNT GEORGE *inspects the petition, unimpressed. She hands it to VIOLET, who takes it, disinterested, then sniffs it, frowning.*

For some reason, people seem rather jaded with petitions.

AUNT GEORGE. Perhaps we need a new form of protest to inspire them again?

EMILY. I know! I could write a great speech and we'll have one of the actors deliver it. Mr Swanley would be so moving!

AUNT GEORGE *considers*. VIOLET *cuts in* –

VIOLET. *Moving?*... Moving people to what? To clap? Cry?

EMILY. Why not? That's more than a petition ever achieved.

VIOLET. It is men that we have to move. Some scented paper and fragrant wording isn't going to cow them into giving up half their power. It's not enough simply to think and write and speak, we need to *do* something!

A stunned pause, then AUNT GEORGE *claps, delighted.*

AUNT GEORGE. Bravo, Violet. What exactly had you in mind?

VIOLET. Last night, I was caught in the dissection room.

I pretended I was on an errand for Dr Bell, but they saw my

notes and had the porters throw me out. One porter confided about another nurse like me, who is studying to be a doctor in Paris. Elisabeth Garrett Anderson – MD. Or she will be soon. Imagine...

EMILY (*startled*). Imagine!

VIOLET. Imagine if that was me. If she wasn't dismissible as a one-off, but was the start of something unstoppable. A hurricane instead of a breeze. Everything is changing. Mr Darwin's book began it, but we need to seize the initiative now. Make men take notice of us instead of monkeys – of where we're going, not where we've been. When I've been to Paris, I can stand as an example, scientific evidence of progress, a living petition to change!

AUNT GEORGE. That's quite an idea, Violet.

VIOLET. So let's make it real. If I put in all my income, I would only need a little extra funding. How much can we spare?

Silence.

Surely we can sacrifice a few new dresses?

EMILY. It's not that, Violet. It's just... he'll know.

VIOLET. It's your money.

EMILY. It's not now that I'm married. And besides, any extra funds I have must go towards my research trip. Yes, I know what you think of my novel, but we must each pursue our own paths to achieving change.

VIOLET. That's exactly what we mustn't do. We won't get anywhere if we're not unified. Aunt George? I appreciate that you already pay my way –

AUNT GEORGE. – and the rest will all be yours one day.

VIOLET. But I can't wait for 'one day'. Aunt George, please think what this will mean? I'll be able to take care of you when you're old.

AUNT GEORGE. I am old.

VIOLET. Don't be silly.

AUNT GEORGE. I would miss you.

VIOLET. Come with me. You could study too. Make the most of your life instead of...

AUNT GEORGE. What? Wasting it?

VIOLET. Waiting. How long must we just – watch and wait?

Pause.

AUNT GEORGE. I shall see what I can do, my dear.

VIOLET *kisses her, thrilled.*

It won't be the full sum. You shall have to find the lion's share elsewhere.

VIOLET. Of course.

She looks to EMILY, urging.

EMILY. I'll talk to him. And I'll rewrite my letter to Mr Disraeli, highlighting your plight... In some ways it makes a better story that you can't go. A tragedy!

Scene Two

As VIOLET and her ladies make their way out, the PROFESSOR brings MATILDA 'MATTY' BLACKWELL forwards.

PROFESSOR. Matilda Blackwell, the one and only Lady Boxing Champion of the World. Although she's still Matinee Matty, flashing her ankles instead of her fists, waiting at the theatre doorway, sizing up the likely contenders when she spots Mr Gabriel Lamb. She hasn't seen him here before...

MATTY *spies GABRIEL as he leaves the theatre. She smiles and approaches.*

MATTY. I wonder if you'd escort me out? My aunt had to leave at the interval, and it's not right for a lady to be seen here alone. People might get the wrong idea.

GABRIEL *looks around, concerned.*

My aunt doesn't live far.

She slips her arm into his. He doesn't reciprocate, nor does he push her away. They walk out.

GABRIEL. If anyone approaches, act like a lady.

MATTY. I am a lady, I told you.

GABRIEL. Oh. I'm sorry. Let me get you a cab.

He's blushing, flustered. She laughs and leads him away.

MATTY. Let's walk. It's a nice evening. We can talk. You look like you need to – talk.

GABRIEL *is tense, silent. She has to draw him out.*

So – do you go to the theatre often?

GABRIEL. Never. Not unless I really have to.

MATTY. So what was the emergency today?

He's blank.

That forced you to partake. Are you an admirer of Fanny perhaps?

GABRIEL. What?

MATTY. The actress – who played Miss Laura. You did watch the play?

GABRIEL. I sat there, but I – had other matters to occupy my thoughts.

MATTY. I understand, sir.

GABRIEL. I very much doubt it.

MATTY. You'd be surprised. I have a special gift for Cartesian duality.

GABRIEL. For what?

MATTY. The separation of body and mind. I read a lot – to keep my thoughts occupied, when my body is otherwise occupied. What matters are preoccupying you, sir?

GABRIEL. Lots of things.

MATTY. Such as – why you go to the theatre, when you don't even like it?

GABRIEL. I didn't know where else to go. My office is full of tedious cretins, my club is full of odious fools, my home is full of *women*... I work *so* hard, day after day, but no one gives me the respect I deserve.

MATTY. I understand that too, believe me.

He doesn't get her joke, but her manner is disarming, and he feels able to open up a little.

GABRIEL. I was promised a place on the Board and they passed me over for some idiot who can barely hold a pen, simply because of who his father was. As if my father was no one! As if I am... No one even noticed me leave. I walked along the river for what seemed like miles. I had half a mind to throw myself in.

MATTY. But the thought of the theatre kept you going?

GABRIEL. The thought of finding some *life*... but it was just the same old charade.

MATTY. I don't reckon you're ready for the Thames yet. You just need a change.

GABRIEL. What do you suggest?

MATTY. Most men would have gone for a beer. For some company.

She touches his face. He pulls back.

GABRIEL. I'm not like those men. And you said you were a lady?

MATTY. I can speak nicely if I choose and I know which knife and fork to use.

GABRIEL. That doesn't make you a lady.

MATTY. It does if you marry a gentleman.

GABRIEL. I'm not marrying you!

MATTY. You might find yourself increasingly compelled to, when you realise I'm the only one who truly understands you – like a lady of leisure never could.

GABRIEL. You never had an aunt, did you?

MATTY. You never believed me, did you? Deep down you knew – I'm why you went to the Haymarket, working up the courage to approach one of us and not quite managing it. But luckily I'm braver than you and I knew – I'm what you need.

She touches his face again. A connection between them.

GABRIEL. I should go.

MATTY. Where? Office, club, home? Or somewhere else, for a change?

He doesn't move. She has him, mesmerised.

I spend every afternoon at the matinees, every night at *The Times*, and every morning minding someone's brat until the matinee. Every high day and holiday, I have to see the fiancé, which is the same as work, but without the play or the pay. So you see, I am trapped in my routine just as you are

trapped in yours. But perhaps we can help each other to break out a little. What do you say, sir?

He's still mesmerised except on one small point –

GABRIEL. Did you mean – *The Times newspaper*?

MATTY (*laughs*). Told you I had class. It's a shame that typesetting pays a pittance, steals my sleep and leaves me with the fingerprints – see?

She pulls her gloves off to show him her ink-stained fingertips.

Stained black as my heart. It's all right, you don't have to act like a gentleman.

He looks around, and then, touches her hands.

GABRIEL. Does *The Times* know that you do this?

MATTY. No, but if it bothers them, they should pay more.

GABRIEL. Does your fiancé know?

MATTY. No, but if it bothers him, he should earn more.

GABRIEL *laughs, loosening up –*

Your wife needn't know that you do this.

He tenses, lets go of her hands. Not quite ready to let go of the whole charade.

GABRIEL. I don't have a wife.

MATTY. That's what they all say.

GABRIEL. I don't. She's dead.

MATTY. I'm sorry. I can act like a lady, if you'd like?

GABRIEL. No, I wouldn't.

They kiss, passionately.

Scene Three

The PROFESSOR brings ANNA LAMB forward, installs her at the table, as he introduces –

PROFESSOR. Anna Lamb, the one and only Lady Boxing Champion of the World. Anna is the very definition of a lady – devoted wife, mother and domestic angel, with a lady's maid to do the more terrestrial domestics.

NANCY, *the maid, brings on a silver tea tray.*

Anna has more silverware than any trophy cabinet and no need to fight for anything. Or so it might appear...

NANCY. I brought a fresh pot, my lady. In case it's gone cold.

ANNA. Thank you, Nancy. How are the girls?

NANCY. Ready for bed. Saying their prayers.

ANNA. I should go up and see them.

She gets up, but hesitates.

NANCY. Go on, my lady. If he comes, I'll tell him –

GABRIEL *enters, carrying a bunch of red roses.*

ANNA. Tell the girls I'll be up later.

NANCY. Very good. Good evening, sir.

GABRIEL. Thank you, Nancy.

He waits for NANCY to go... and gives the flowers to ANNA, keeping his distance.

I'm so sorry, angel. I had to work late and then I went out of my way to get you these as an apology, but they've ended up making me later.

ANNA. They're beautiful, thank you.

GABRIEL (*taking off his gloves*). Next time you mustn't wait.

ANNA. I'm not hungry. I should put these in water.

GABRIEL. Leave it. Let's eat. I'm starving.

He tucks in. ANNA puts the roses down, watches him, curious.

ANNA. I hope your day wasn't too dreadful?

GABRIEL. It was fine. Tediously average.

ANNA. Oh, I thought today was when –

He looks up sharply.

– but I must be wrong. It doesn't matter.

GABRIEL. No, it doesn't. Please don't just sit there staring.

ANNA. Sorry.

She looks down, picks at her food. Now he watches her.

GABRIEL. Why don't you talk to me?

ANNA. What about?

GABRIEL. How was *your* day? You never say. You could be up to anything.

ANNA. What on earth could I be up to?

GABRIEL. I have no idea. Why don't you tell me?

ANNA. Well, let me see... This morning, I was busy here, setting the girls' lessons and trying to find a new governess. They're growing up so bright, Gabriel, they put me to shame...

She waits for him to comment, but he doesn't so she goes on, nerves making her speed up.

So I interviewed a candidate, who seemed perfect, until her references revealed that she had previously been engaged by – (*Scandalised.*) Lady Campbell, so of course I said she was unsuitable and I was proven right when she responded in a quite vulgar manner. So then I called on Lady Carter, from the women's committee, who invited me for a game of tennis, which I of course declined –

GABRIEL. What women's committee?

ANNA. Oh, not a *women's* committee. We confine ourselves to charitable works. Organising the bazaar for Southwark.

Whereas I heard Emily Bancroft's group went to the Haymarket unchaperoned today, can you imagine?

GABRIEL *coughs on his food.*

Oh dear. Let me –

She comes to help. He bats her away.

GABRIEL. I'm fine. I've just – had enough. Would you pass me the newspaper, please?

She picks up The Times and is about to pass it to him when she pauses.

ANNA. But surely you've read it? You have those little smudges on your face from the ink. (*Looks at his outstretched hand.*) Although your fingers are clean.

He pulls his hand back, tense.

GABRIEL. I washed my hands for dinner.

ANNA. But you came straight in, wearing your gloves.

GABRIEL. I read the *Standard* at work.

ANNA. But you loathe the *Standard*.

GABRIEL. I thought it would make a change.

ANNA. But you were so busy at work.

GABRIEL *smashes his hand down on the table, breaking a piece of the crockery.*

GABRIEL. I was busy! I was very busy. I don't ask you to understand, after spending all day pleasing yourself. I just ask you to be nice. Why can't you just let everything be *nice*?

His hand is bleeding.

Now look what you've made me do.

ANNA. I'm sorry.

Her fear – and relief as NANCY enters with a silver rosebowl. GABRIEL quickly wraps his hand with a napkin and snaps.

GABRIEL. What is it?

NANCY. For the flowers, sir. Before they die.

GABRIEL. Oh... well, get on with it.

He goes out. A look between the women.

ANNA. Thank you, Nancy.

Scene Four

The PROFESSOR brings on POLLY STOKES, dressed in the filthy trousers and smock of a pit brow lass. She's a livewire, constantly on the move.

PROFESSOR. And finally – Polly Stokes, the one and only Lady Boxing Champion of the World. She's always been a fighter. Left on a doorstep when she was born and almost died, but she battled herself better and won a brother for her troubles.

PAUL STOKES *enters, putting on boxing gloves.*

Paul Stokes – he's a fighter too.

POLLY *laughs, landing jokey jabs on PAUL.*

POLLY. Get 'em off! Real fighters don't wear gloves.

PAUL. Oi! Give it a rest, Poll. You have to wear them. 'You must not fight simply to win, you must win by the rules.'

POLLY. Says who?

PAUL. The Marquess of Queensbury.

POLLY. Haven't seen him around here lately.

PAUL. The Professor will expect it. They say he's coming all the way up north to find fresh talent so I've got to be ready. This is my big chance.

POLLY. The Professor can't be all that smart if he's not up here already. Anyone on this pit brow could hammer those soft southerners.

PAUL. He won't be looking for brawlers. That's why I've got to fight Big Billy by the rules and prove myself. It's how they do things in London.

POLLY. It's not how we do it here. Can you imagine? Betty Webb starting up and me, like: 'One moment, Betty dear, I just need to put on my gloves.' I'd be dead!

PAUL. You'd be dead in London if they took their gloves off. The fighters down there are the best in the world – the Hammersmith Hercules, the Streatham Slasher, the Bermondsey Butcher –

POLLY. You'll be better than any of them. Your Professor will see that in a – (*One-two.*) flash. You'll be champion before the year's out, I bet. As long as you don't get – (*Lands a punch.*) distracted.

PAUL. Come with me, Poll?

POLLY. I'll even be your second if you want. Help you leather Big Billy.

PAUL. To London, I meant.

POLLY. As your second?

PAUL. No, Poll. Come on.

POLLY. How can I? I've got to work.

PAUL. I'll be making a fortune. I can afford to keep us both and send money back to Mum and Dad.

POLLY. They'll make my life hell.

PAUL. So to hell with them, let's both go, together. You know what I'm saying, Poll.

POLLY. Don't think about that now or no one will be going anywhere. Concentrate. Pretend I'm Billy. Two foot taller than you.

PAUL. He's not that big!

POLLY. Two inches then. It makes all the difference. And he's got a longer reach.

PAUL. No he hasn't.

POLLY. And massive hands.

PAUL. Are you winding me up?

POLLY. He's asked me to go to London with him if he wins.

PAUL. You'd better bloody not.

POLLY. You'd better bloody win then, hadn't you? So concentrate!

The PROFESSOR enters, unnoticed, watches avidly as they trade an impressive flurry of punches. When they've finished, the PROFESSOR claps. PAUL and POLLY are startled.

PROFESSOR. Don't mind me, I was just admiring the view, when I caught scent of you.

POLLY. Oi, it's only coal dust. We ain't dirty.

She goes to hit him. PAUL holds her back. The PROFESSOR laughs.

PROFESSOR. I wasn't suggesting you were, my dear, unless you think that this – (*Conjures a silver coin.*) is dirty.

PAUL. Keep quiet, Poll, can't you see he's a gent?

PROFESSOR. Thank you. And who are you, sir?

PAUL. Paul Stokes.

POLLY. Boxing champion to be.

PAUL. This is my sister, Polly. Bragging champion.

POLLY. There's gonna be a proper fight here later if you wanna stay and watch him win?

PROFESSOR. I've seen as much as I need to. (*To PAUL.*) A fine student of the pugilistic science with a firm grasp of the gymnastic art and a muscular and elegant form, quite ready to go into the ring. (*To POLLY.*) And something quite other... incredibly rough, but completely intuitive, a quickness of punch scarcely seen, but severely felt. Great heart too, I shouldn't wonder.

POLLY. Are you the Marquess of Queensbury?

PROFESSOR. No, my dear, I'm Professor Charlie Sharp, of Islington. And about to head back there, with both of you.

He flicks the coin to POLLY. She catches it, impressed.

Scene Five

VIOLET is at work in the surgery of DR JAMES BELL, an older man, who is squinting, trying to thread a needle. GABRIEL is in the patient's chair. VIOLET cleans the cut on his hand. It stings.

GABRIEL. Can you give me something – for when he's stitching it?

VIOLET offers a leather strap for him to bite on. GABRIEL is not impressed.

Perhaps I wasn't clear – something to ease the pain?

VIOLET. We wouldn't anaesthetise for such a minor procedure.

GABRIEL. Is that Dr Bell's decision? It is a doctor that I'm paying for after all.

JAMES hurries over to smooth the situation.

JAMES. A small dose of laudanum should do it. Nurse Hunter, would you mind?

He hands the needle and thread to VIOLET. She threads it as he administers the laudanum and reassures GABRIEL.

Apologies, Mr Lamb. It may be a minor cut, but it is deep and inflamed and I am no advocate of unnecessary suffering. There – now you won't feel a thing.

GABRIEL. Thank you, doctor. You need to keep an eye on that one.

JAMES. Oh I am doing, don't worry. But thank you for the advice.

GABRIEL *nods and relaxes, the laudanum is working fast.*

GABRIEL. She needs to know... who's in charge...

JAMES. Why not use this – (*The strap.*) too, just in case?

GABRIEL *acquiesces, takes the strap in his mouth.* VIOLET *hands JAMES the threaded needle. He doesn't take it.*

I was thinking, perhaps you would like to do it?

A moment between them.

VIOLET. Thank you, doctor.

She goes to begin. GABRIEL *realises – protests, weakly, through the haze and the strap.*

JAMES. Now who do you think will be the better seamstress here?

GABRIEL *relents, drifting off.*

When you're ready, Nurse Hunter, my advice would be to start at the –

She is already stitching the wound, skilfully.

It seems you've been studying me.

VIOLET. I've been practising.

JAMES. On cloth?

VIOLET. On cadavers.

JAMES. You're quite a lady.

VIOLET. Or not quite a lady. In fact, that's what I was thinking when I read your article.

JAMES (*flattered*). Oh? (*Fishing.*) What did you think?

VIOLET. I was thinking about your argument against evolution – that an eye could not possibly evolve. It is either an eye or not, it cannot be 'not quite' an eye.

JAMES. Precisely.

VIOLET. Yes, but I think it could.

JAMES. Oh?

VIOLET. The eye may still be evolving for all we know. We think it's fulfilling its ultimate function, but we are still blind to what it could be, given the chance.

JAMES. It's an interesting notion, but without a scientific basis –

VIOLET. And is it truly a scientific principle that the female physiology has a fixed degree of energy for all of its actions?

JAMES. Absolutely! It has been proven.

VIOLET. Well, then surely you should not simply warn against the dangers of sapping that energy before it's required for motherhood. You should celebrate the ways in which it could be used if motherhood is not a factor.

JAMES. Suturing wounds, for instance?

VIOLET. To start with.

JAMES. You are hardly a standard case study, Violet.

VIOLET. I may be, one day.

VIOLET finishes stitching. She holds out her hand.

Scissors?

JAMES. You may be a doctor one day, but I shall never be a nurse.

VIOLET. Sorry, doctor.

She gets the scissors herself and cuts the thread. JAMES *inspects her work and smiles.*

JAMES. Perfect. Wouldn't you agree, Mr Lamb?

VIOLET gently shakes GABRIEL awake.

VIOLET. How was that, Mr Lamb?

He looks at the cut and then up at JAMES.

GABRIEL. It will do, thank you, doctor.

JAMES. Try to rest until the effects wear off, and have your wife keep the wound clean and dressed. Nurse Hunter will see you out.

VIOLET. This way, Mr Lamb.

She leads him off, decided. JAMES takes a breath, paces, making his decision. When VIOLET returns, they both blurt out at once –

JAMES. Violet, will you marry me?

VIOLET. James, will you sponsor me?

Pause. They're both thrown, recalibrating.

JAMES. Sponsor you to...?

VIOLET hands him a document and watches, anxious, as he reads it. Finally he looks up.

In Paris?

VIOLET. It would be an investment. I'd come back straight after to work here, with you, as your partner... As your wife, if that's still what you want?

JAMES. It is.

VIOLET. Then my answer is yes.

JAMES. But only if my answer is yes? You will not marry me now?

VIOLET. If I marry you now, will you still sponsor me?

JAMES. If I sponsor you now, will you still marry me? Of course not, you will change.

VIOLET. I will keep my word, if you do this for me.

JAMES. If you stay, I will teach you myself. Everything that a doctor knows, that a doctor can do, I will show you. In this room, you will be as good as a doctor. You will be a doctor, in everything but name.

VIOLET. I need the name, beyond this room. The whole point is for the world to know!

JAMES. The whole point is to help people. If that doesn't matter, perhaps you are not truly called to be a doctor after all.

He leaves her with a severe look.

VIOLET. No, that's not true! I am –

He's gone. Infuriated, she knocks the tray of instruments to the floor.

A beat – she's taken aback by her rage.

She composes herself quickly as the PROFESSOR enters.

PROFESSOR. I'm looking for Dr Bell?

VIOLET. Is it an emergency?

PROFESSOR. It could be. My usual man has let me down and all the others have turned me down. For some reason, physicians get sniffy about my line of science, but I've heard your man might be more open-minded. What do you think, might he be up for a fight on Saturday night?

VIOLET. James is no fighter.

PROFESSOR. He'd only have to watch – and step in to tend to any injuries beyond the usual cuts and bruises.

VIOLET (*intrigued*). What kind of fight is this?

PROFESSOR. A boxing match, my dear. Most places would rather dump the offcuts in the river than fork out for a doctor, but at the Angel we strive to be more civilised. Is there any chance Dr Bell will help us out for a modest consideration?

VIOLET. No chance whatsoever. But I might be able to help you.

Scene Six

POLLY and PAUL train in separate rooms backstage at the Angel Amphitheatre. PAUL trains with a punchbag whilst POLLY regards a seamstress's mannequin, resplendent in a pretty dress with crinoline and corset. Neither is happy. As the PROFESSOR tries to placate PAUL, POLLY attempts to change into the dress.

PROFESSOR. Try to see it as a chance to get the crowd on your side before the title fight. How else is a slugger from up north going to get any support against a Highbury boy?

PAUL. And you reckon they'll rate me for hitting a girl?

PROFESSOR. For entertaining them. It's simply an exhibition match before the main event.

PAUL. I'm not a freak show.

PROFESSOR. No, you're the star.

PAUL. So Polly's the freak, is she?

PROFESSOR. Do you really believe she's normal?

PAUL. Oi, she's my sister!

PROFESSOR. Is she really?... Then perhaps you are both freaks.

PAUL turns on him, threatening.

I am an expert in love as well as fighting, though I partake in neither. And something tells me you partake in a little more than brotherly love? You must be honest with me, Paul, or I cannot manage you.

PAUL (best come clean). She's not my sister by blood. Her mother left her for dead as a baby. We took her in, brung her up. There's nothing funny about it.

PROFESSOR. So you just say that you're her brother so you can play chaperone and lover?

PAUL. It's not like that. We've not partaken in nothing. She's just like, a part of me.

PROFESSOR. And if you say she's your sister the rent is cheaper, the room is warmer –

PAUL (testy). If it's a problem, I'd just as soon make her my wife.

PROFESSOR. No, no, sister is better. You're putting on a show so the crowd full of brothers will be rooting for you. Put her in her place onstage and come back for the title fight a hero. We really don't need to exhibit a husband and wife fighting. They can see that in their own homes easily enough. Sister it is.

PAUL. Just until I win the title, then it'll be wife.

PROFESSOR. So this really is for one night only?

PAUL. Just a warm-up, you reckoned? Unless you weren't being honest with me?

PROFESSOR. I was just thinking, if it is a one-off, we might be able to charge a little extra.

PAUL. Should've known, you only think about one thing!

PROFESSOR. I think about everything. But I only care about one thing.

He turns to watch POLLY. PAUL keeps pummelling the bag, muttering –

PAUL. The money.

PROFESSOR. The science!

POLLY is struggling to fasten the dress with her boxing gloves on.

POLLY. You need to be a scientist to work out how to do up this bloody thing!

PROFESSOR. Here, child, let me help you.

He assists her with the deftness of a professional dresser.

POLLY. I thought you were going to train me. Not dress me up like some daft doll.

PROFESSOR. I am teaching you the art of the show – getting into character, putting on a costume. It will all help you feel more powerful when you're out there.

POLLY. It'll make me feel like a prize pillock!

PROFESSOR. If you feel like a fool, use that as fuel. But don't strike blindly. Channel your anger wisely, choose the right move at the right moment, and with your ability and my technique, we might just elevate the science to a whole new level.

POLLY. I have no idea what you're on about.

PROFESSOR (*laughs*). No, well, if I could fight like you, I wouldn't bother with the ambiguities of language either. (*Finishes dressing her.*) Now, what do you think?

He shows POLLY her reflection in a mirror. She stares. So does he.

POLLY. I dunno, what do *you* think?

PROFESSOR. I think you look beautiful.

POLLY. Hopefully Paul will think so too, then I can knock him out in one.

She starts to limber up. The PROFESSOR frowns, troubled.

PROFESSOR. Hasn't Paul spoken to you – about the choreography?

POLLY. Corree-what?

PROFESSOR. You won't be knocking Paul out. You'll be following a planned set of moves. His hook. Your block. Your jab.

POLLY. How can I plan to get hit? The bell goes and I'm off!

PROFESSOR. This isn't a proper match, Polly. Think of it more like a dance. You learn the steps, then talent and practice make it look natural.

POLLY. I don't want to be a dancer. I want to be a fighter.

PROFESSOR. As far as the crowd knows you are: the British Lady Boxing Champion.

POLLY. Why can't I really be that?

PROFESSOR. Because there are no other women to fight, unless you want to pull hair with some drunken strumpet in a Southwark pub.

POLLY. I'm not fussy.

PROFESSOR. You should be. You are a pugilist, Polly Stokes. Not some pedestrian out for a punch-up. You may not be able to fight for a title out there, but back here, under my guidance, you have the capacity to be a true scientist.

POLLY. I've got a better idea. If there's no other lasses, let me fight Paul proper.

PROFESSOR. Not for an instant.

POLLY. Why not?

PROFESSOR. Because he wouldn't.

POLLY. He would if I wound him up enough.

PROFESSOR. That would *not* be entertaining.

POLLY. So why bother training me at all? If I'll never get to be a champion.

PROFESSOR. I wanted to be a champion, with even less hope of succeeding than you, but I dedicated myself, learned all I could. And now I find myself creating something unexpected, extraordinary. This is only the beginning, Polly. Trust in me and this could be the next step in our evolution.

POLLY. If you say so. You can beat anyone with those words of yours. (*Fidgets with her corset.*) Can't I leave this top off at least?

PROFESSOR. I don't think that's a good idea, my dear.

POLLY. Surely *some* men in London like looking at ladies?

Beat.

PROFESSOR (*uneasy*). I don't know what you mean.

He's been busy adjusting the dress. Now he pulls back, vulnerable. POLLY smiles, warm.

POLLY. It's all right, Professor. I don't care what you are. I just want to be able to breathe. And if I took this off, I bet you could charge a lot more.

PROFESSOR. To see a lady fight topless with her brother? Londoners aren't that depraved.

POLLY. I dunno! And besides, he's not my real brother.

PROFESSOR. I know, and I doubt he would like them looking at you either, would he?... He'd like to see you looking beautiful though. Come along, let's show him.

He takes POLLY's hand and leads her to PAUL, who stares at her, stunned. POLLY laughs.

POLLY. Don't recognise me, do you? Hardly recognise myself.

PROFESSOR. You are not yourselves. You are Paul and Polly Stokes, brother and sister boxing champions, doing battle, for one night only! Shall we dance?

The PROFESSOR beats time as PAUL and POLLY rehearse the moves for their fight. The PROFESSOR exhorts them to do it again and again. After the final run-though, they touch gloves and part.

Scene Seven

GABRIEL arrives at the Angel Amphitheatre with a single red rose, looking for MATTY. ANNA follows him, hidden inside her cloak, hood up. She hangs back, hides in the shadows and watches as GABRIEL meets MATTY, gives her the rose. MATTY sees the dressing on his hand.

MATTY. What happened to you?

GABRIEL. Just a silly accident.

MATTY. As long as you can still use your hands –

She goes to kiss it better. He pulls his hand away, self-conscious.

It's all right, Gabe, we're a world away from the Haymarket here.

GABRIEL. What kind of place is this?

MATTY. The kind of place you can go whenever you really need to feel alive. (*Leads him to see the ring.*) It's calm yet, but just you wait, once the noise and the heat take over, you'll be baying for blood instead of jumping off bridges.

GABRIEL. Isn't it rather uncivilised, watching the lower orders tear each other apart?

MATTY. It's civilisation laid bare. And to be fair, this place is pretty refined. You should see what's it like out east or in the back rooms of Southwark pubs.

GABRIEL. Can't we just go back to *your* room? That's where I can feel everything I need.

He goes to kiss her. She holds him off.

MATTY. That's very sweet of you, but if we keep just going back, we'll never progress.

He doesn't follow.

Now that this isn't just a business arrangement, I'd like to enjoy it, and I can't do that with you all wound up tight like a watch-spring – in a watch that only ticks for a minute at most.

She laughs. He tenses, defensive.

GABRIEL. Are you laughing at me?

MATTY. Course not, Gabe, I'm just saying... There's nothing that makes a woman feel more alive than a little death, if you know what I mean... You don't, do you? Your poor wife, God rest her soul. How can I explain?... Look, if there's two fighters in the ring and one is just leathering the other, who lies there taking it, it's not much of a match, is it? You need them putting in equal effort, equal expertise and then they might both stand a chance of winning. *(Strokes the petals of the rose.)* I can teach you the moves, Gabe, but first you need to unwind, release some of that tension. Then you can be gentle, take your time...

Her fingers reach the centre of the bud. GABRIEL realises what she's doing, shocked, aroused.

GABRIEL *(laughs, blushing)*. For God's sake, Matty!

She offers the rose to him to inhale.

If *The Times* had any idea what you were like –

MATTY. *The Times* would rather women like me didn't have any feelings. They were all set to run an advertisement last week for clit-oro-nectomies, until one of the God-fearing girls made a fuss and shamed them into pulling it.

GABRIEL. An advertisement for what?

MATTY. A revolutionary procedure to eradicate hysteria. Prune the wild ones back to best behaviour.

She mimes snipping off the head of the rose. He stares.

GABRIEL. Does it work?

MATTY. I doubt it or my boss would get the whole lot of us done and have no more fuss! But in truth, Gabe, I need the opposite. I've been a machine for too long. I want to feel things again. Nice things.

She kisses him. He kisses her back, hungrily. She pulls away, considering.

Not bad, but still a little more unwinding to do. Come on.

She leads him to the far side of the ring. ANNA emerges from the shadows, goes to follow him, but is accosted by VIOLET, who arrives in a hurry, with a black bag.

VIOLET. Excuse me, do you know where I can find Professor Charlie Sharp?

ANNA panics, shakes her head and backs away. VIOLET goes to the ring, asks the REFEREE.

The Professor, do you know where I can find him?

REFEREE. You'll have to wait till the break, sweetheart. Show's about to begin.

The lights go down. VIOLET falls back, watches from ringside. ANNA watches from the same side. GABRIEL and MATTY watch from the other side, as the PROFESSOR enters and begins.

PROFESSOR. Ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to say we have an additional treat for you. Something to tell your pals at the tavern, your grandchildren on your lap, and your nag of a sister when she's asking for a slap. Will you put your hands together to welcome them, enacting the battle of the sexes for your pleasure, for one night only, our brother-and-sister boxing champions, Paul and Polly Stokes!

PAUL and POLLY enter from opposite corners and climb into the ring. The PROFESSOR rings the bell and they commence the fight as choreographed, watched over by the REFEREE.

GABRIEL and ANNA watch the fight from opposite sides of the ring, getting drawn in. GABRIEL supports PAUL. ANNA supports POLLY. Their support gets more vocal as the fight progresses.

Also riveted, VIOLET supports POLLY. Enjoying GABRIEL's immersion, MATTY supports PAUL.

GABRIEL and ANNA get closer to the ropes until they are right opposite each other, shouting.

They see each other. They stare at each other in silence, charged with built-up aggression. MATTY touches GABRIEL, confused, concerned.

MATTY. Gabe?

GABRIEL. Get off me!

He lashes out, hitting MATTY in the face. ANNA runs off.

POLLY sees GABRIEL and forgets the choreography, incensed.

POLLY. OI!

She lashes out, knocking PAUL to the ground, then goes to climb out of the ring after GABRIEL, who is following ANNA off. Panicked, the PROFESSOR steps in and blocks POLLY, and the REFEREE holds her back.

PROFESSOR. Get back in the ring, Polly!

POLLY (*shouts at GABRIEL*). Get back here, you coward!

GABRIEL has gone, leaving MATTY alone, smarting.

MATTY. You can still use your hands then, you bastard.

MATTY covers her face with the rose, limps off. POLLY calls after her.

POLLY. Are you all right, love?

PROFESSOR. She's all right. It's your brother you should be worried about.

POLLY turns back to PAUL, who's flailing on the floor, dazed.

POLLY. Oh shit, I'm sorry, Professor.

PROFESSOR. Look and learn, the art of the show – (*Hisses to PAUL.*) Stay down, change of plan. (*Keeps him down with one foot as he turns to the crowd for the count.*) Six... seven... eight... nine...! Doctor! We need a doctor!

VIOLET remembers herself, shows her bag.

VIOLET. I'm a doctor! Let me through.

POLLY stares as VIOLET clambers into the ring and tends to PAUL. The PROFESSOR beams.

PROFESSOR. A cautionary tale indeed – you see what could happen if we don't keep the little ladies in check? My assistants will be coming around for donations to pay the doctor's fees. Got to keep her in ribbons, don't we, gents? And whilst we're at it, please show your appreciation for our winner, Miss Polly Stokes!

He raises her hand in triumph.

Scene Eight

Backstage. POLLY paces, breathing hard, exhilarated, but troubled. VIOLET enters, on a high.

POLLY. How is he?

VIOLET. He'll be fine. How are you?

POLLY. In deep shit. That wasn't meant to happen.

VIOLET. Physically, I mean. How do you feel, Polly?

POLLY. Honestly? I feel bleeding invincible!

VIOLET. Your lips are blue – you're about to pass out. Come here, let me loosen that.

She loosens the corset. POLLY gets her breath back.

POLLY. Oh aye, that's better. Thanks, doctor.

VIOLET (*flushes, flattered*). You can call me Violet.

POLLY. Didn't know they had lass doctors down here. Ladies, I mean.

VIOLET. No, well, I wasn't aware of lady boxing champions before tonight either.

POLLY. I'm not a proper champion – not yet. I need the world to catch up with me.

VIOLET. I'm not a proper doctor yet either. I had to borrow this bag.

POLLY. The Professor reckons it might be years till I get the chance to be a champion.

VIOLET. My aunt thinks I'll never get the chance to be a doctor. But we'll show them, won't we?

POLLY. What's your last name?

VIOLET. Hunter.

POLLY. 'Dr Violet Hunter.' That sounds good. All you need is your own bag.

VIOLET. And a small fortune to cover my studies.

POLLY. You need a rich man who wants to marry you.

VIOLET. No, I need a rich man who doesn't want to marry me and just wants to give me his riches.

The PROFESSOR enters, takes in the sight of them – close, laughing together.

PROFESSOR. What's going on here?

They let go of each other's hands, chastened, though struggling to suppress their euphoria.

POLLY. Dr Hunter was just checking me over.

VIOLET. She's fine. Paul will be too. It's mainly his pride that's wounded.

PROFESSOR. His pride and my pocket – not to mention my reputation!

POLLY. But they were cheering like they loved it.

VIOLET. And they gave you extra for my 'ribbons'.

PROFESSOR. That's nothing up to what I've had to pay out for the cancelled title fight.

POLLY. I could've done the title fight, if Paul wasn't up to it.

PAUL enters, patched up, but still smarting.

PAUL. I was up to it! I still am if you'll let me, Professor?

PROFESSOR. Not straight after a knockout. No fighters have died at the Angel and I don't intend to change that tonight.

POLLY. I'm really sorry. Does it hurt?

She goes to look. He bats her away.

PAUL. Does it heck! It wasn't that hard. Just caught me off-guard.

PROFESSOR. It caught us all off-guard, but we shall be better prepared next time.

Beat. A small smile cracks his stern façade.

POLLY. There's gonna be a next time?

PAUL (*unequivocal*). No. There's not.

PROFESSOR. You owe me for my losses – and for your rent and board. I've had some thoughts – we're going to change the story, re-choreograph the routine so Polly wins. The crowd did seem to like that twist.

POLLY. That'd be much easier. If you do the moves, Paul, and I'll just do what I do, but without hurting you.

PAUL. You didn't hurt me!

PROFESSOR. So we can do this all again next week?

PAUL. No. I told you, this was a one-off.

PROFESSOR. Until you got the title, which you still haven't.

PAUL. And I never will cos no one will let me get at it if I do this kind of stunt again. I'm not some bloody novelty act. I'm a proper fighter.

POLLY. So am I.

PAUL. Then have a proper fight.

POLLY. Then fight me proper. Go on, put your guard up, then you'll have no excuses.

PAUL (*slamming out*). I'm not fighting a girl!

POLLY (*shouting after him*). Who am I meant to fight then?

Her glance alights on VIOLET. POLLY grins. Another spark between them – briefly.

VIOLET. No, I don't think so.

POLLY. So don't think about it. Just get up there and get on with it.

VIOLET. I've spent my life trying to alleviate pain, not inflict it.

POLLY. It's not about that. It's a science – you tell her, Professor?

The PROFESSOR is already sizing VIOLET up, assessing –

PROFESSOR. There's a myth that a strong intellect will hold you back, but in fact it can be an advantage, especially when combined with the kind of passions it masks. Imagine being able to unleash all that energy. (*Locks eyes.*) I think you may have what it takes to be a contender.

VIOLET (*moves away, unnerved*). I'm afraid you are mistaken, sir.

POLLY. He can tell. He can smell 'em. You're a lady an' all. A genuine lady boxer!

VIOLET. Whether I'm a lady is debatable, but I am most definitely not a boxer.

POLLY. You're not a doctor, but that hasn't stopped you. Look –

She throws a punch. VIOLET evades it.

See? You've got the instinct. Go on, Violet, you know you can do it. Why don't you show the world?

VIOLET. I couldn't possibly.

POLLY. You could if it was worth your while – if it helped to pay for your studies? Come on, doc.

She shadowboxes. VIOLET watches her, considering. She shakes her head.

VIOLET. I'm sorry, Polly, I can't.

POLLY. Why not?

VIOLET. Because I wouldn't win. So there's no point.

VIOLET takes her bag and goes. POLLY punches the door.

POLLY. Dead right you wouldn't win, soft cow!

PROFESSOR. She's not soft. With that attitude to competition, I suspect she's ruthless. But fear not, I hear there are other women in London. I'm sure I can find one.

Scene Nine

The morning after. ANNA sits stiffly at the breakfast table. GABRIEL enters.

GABRIEL. Good morning, angel.

He comes to sit down. She tenses.

ANNA. Won't you be late for work?

GABRIEL. I thought I should take the day off. We can spend some time together, the two of us.

ANNA. I have to give the girls their lessons.

GABRIEL. The girls can miss their lessons. It's not important.

ANNA. Yes, it is.

Pause. Her quiet defiance troubles him, but he pushes on, upbeat.

GABRIEL. Later then.

ANNA. I have a committee meeting later.

GABRIEL. I'm not sure about this committee.

ANNA. It's only charitable work.

GABRIEL. In Southwark though.

ANNA. *For* Southwark. Why? What's in Southwark that's any worse than Islington?

Pause. He's struggling to stay upbeat.

GABRIEL. I really think you should miss it.

ANNA. I can't miss it. And perhaps you shouldn't miss work, when it's so busy?

Pause.

GABRIEL (*gets up*). Very well. But you do know, don't you, angel? I am sorry.

ANNA. I know. Thank you. You're going to be late, Gabriel.

He goes to kiss her. He stops, frowns. Her dress is unlaced at the back. A glimpse of bruises.

GABRIEL. What's this?

ANNA. It hurts when I try to fasten it. And I didn't want Nancy to see –

GABRIEL. Then don't let her see you like this.

He pulls the laces tight. She gasps in pain. It pains him too.

Everything will get better, angel, if you will only help me. I'm trying to be nice, to make things right for you and the girls. But all you want to do is punish me. Why do you do that?

ANNA. I'm sorry. It's all my fault.

GABRIEL. Tell me it won't happen again?

ANNA. It won't happen again.

He kisses her, grateful, and goes. Alone, ANNA makes a fist. She studies it carefully, as if for the first time. NANCY enters, starts to clear the table.

Nancy, am I right in thinking your family lives in Southwark?

NANCY. That's right, my lady. I go back and see them every Sunday.

ANNA. Are there fights there?

NANCY. In our house?

ANNA. In places where people go to fight.

NANCY. Not on a Sunday.

ANNA. But on other days?

NANCY. Most other days, my lady.

ANNA. Are there ladies who do it?

NANCY. Not what I'd call ladies.

ANNA. Would you take me?

NANCY. To watch them?

ANNA. To begin with.

NANCY. The master wouldn't like it, my lady.

ANNA. The master wouldn't find out, would he?

A moment between them – a pact.

Scene Ten

An alleyway in Islington. MATTY, with a black eye, is trying to attract punters. The PROFESSOR approaches.

PROFESSOR. Shouldn't you be getting your beauty sleep, Miss Blackwell? You look like you need it.

MATTY. I have greater needs than sleep. *The Times* didn't believe it was an ink smudge and nor will the theatres. I can still look after the brat, but if I could make a living at that I'd have never left home.

PROFESSOR. Your assailant has hurt you badly – your face, your pocket, and your heart?

MATTY. Do you mind moving on, Professor? Don't mean to be rude, but I'm trying to get some business here.

PROFESSOR. I have a business proposition for you, Matilda Blackwell, the one and only Irish Lady Boxing Champion –

MATTY. Whoa, Professor, let me stop you there. Do I look like I want to go another round with anyone, let alone that freak?

PROFESSOR. She is extraordinary, isn't she? You'd be lucky not to lose, but perhaps you'll try your luck?

MATTY. I've got no luck so I've had to be smart and this doesn't sound smart to me. I've spent my life trying to avoid getting hit.

PROFESSOR. And yet the blows keep falling. Perhaps it's time for a new career?

MATTY. If that bitch breaks my bones I'm down to begging, so thanks for your concern, but I'll make my fortune some other way. I'm a fast learner.

PROFESSOR. It strikes me that you might be a good dancer, Miss Blackwell, am I right?

MATTY. I might be, but what's that got to do with it?

PROFESSOR. And acting. I imagine that's been a valuable skill in your line of work?

MATTY. What of it? This ain't the Haymarket you're running here.

PROFESSOR. What's the difference – if I were to pay you to *play* the Irish Lady Boxing Champion and to perform a little dance with Miss Stokes?

MATTY. And might that dance involve her landing a few fists on my fizzog?

PROFESSOR. All perfectly safe, prearranged, with a guarantee that you won't get hurt.

MATTY. I thought you didn't rig fights at the Angel. Thought it was 'a science, an art'?

PROFESSOR. Is dancing not also an art?

MATTY. Is ripping off the punters with a fake fight?

PROFESSOR. Surely you of all people can appreciate that art has its commercial aspect? A fast learner should see this as a great opportunity, a short cut to fame and fortune. With my backing, you could have a whole new career with the punters loving you from afar and coughing up for not so much as a touch.

Pause – MATTY's wavering.

MATTY. You can guarantee she won't bury me?

PROFESSOR. Polly will have to learn too. A fake lady is better than nothing.

MATTY. Maybe she'll have to learn to lose.

PROFESSOR. We can discuss the details over a steak.

MATTY. For breakfast?

PROFESSOR. For your eye. Look and learn, my dear. Look and learn.

Scene Eleven

AUNT GEORGE and VIOLET are practising fencing. They go through their warm-up moves as EMILY stands to the side, reading aloud from a hefty manuscript.

EMILY. 'Imprisoned in the precipitously high tower, Lady Constantia was faced with a choice between marriage to the vicious Count Wolfgang or falling to her death on the vicious, precipitous rocks below. She had no choice.'

In a melodramatic reading style like Dickens, EMILY cries out as if falling to her death.

AUNT GEORGE (relieved). Is that the end?

EMILY. Well... it doesn't have to be. I suppose she *could* marry the Count. (*Enthused.*) I could begin another volume – *The Trials of Countess Constantia!*

AUNT GEORGE. I disagree, Emily, it really feels like it must end there.

EMILY *re-reads the text, considering.*

EMILY. 'She had no choice.'

VIOLET. Of course she did. (*Her fencing moves become livelier.*) How about the next time the Count comes to woo her, she's ready for him?

EMILY. I really don't see how –

VIOLET. Maybe she steals his sword during a clinch and finishes him off.

EMILY. She couldn't do that.

VIOLET. Why not?

EMILY. Because of his henchmen.

VIOLET. Maybe she has henchwomen? Yes – she's got the maidservants on her side.

EMILY. No. It's impossible!

Exasperated, EMILY looks to AUNT GEORGE.

AUNT GEORGE. It was my understanding that she has to kill herself in order to drive home our political point.

VIOLET. But why can't we make the point by showing what she *could* do? Aunt George has never married and she's managed not to impale herself on anything precipitous. I'm going to be a doctor. Did you ask your husband about Paris?

EMILY. It's difficult. He doesn't like to discuss finances.

VIOLET's moves become aggressive.

VIOLET. How can we ask for equality – for a voice and a vote – when you can't even ask that fool for your money back?

EMILY. There's no need to be rude, Violet. I've been doing my best. Oh, and – in all the excitement of my novel, I quite forgot – I got a reply.

AUNT GEORGE. From Mr Disraeli?

VIOLET. What did he say?

EMILY. That he is 'fully supportive of the women's suffrage movement.'

VIOLET. Is that all?

AUNT GEORGE. It's something.

VIOLET. It's nothing! He said that three years ago, but what is he going to *do*? What is he going to do for *me*?

VIOLET *rounds on AUNT GEORGE with a flurry of moves.*

AUNT GEORGE. It's not only about you, Violet. Didn't you say we must be unified?

VIOLET. Unified behind what? Killing ourselves because we have no choice?

EMILY. Violet – stop!

VIOLET *realises that AUNT GEORGE is wheezing, beaten.*

VIOLET *goes to help, but AUNT GEORGE waves her away, making light of it.*

AUNT GEORGE. It seems there is still chance for me to be impaled!

EMILY *shakes her head.*

EMILY. Sneer at me all you like, Violet. I'm a better writer than you are a doctor.

She leaves in disgust.

VIOLET. I'm sorry, Aunt George.

AUNT GEORGE. A valiant attempt to secure your inheritance early.

VIOLET. It's really not about the money.

AUNT GEORGE. You are just like your mother was in our childhood scuffles. Even though I was bigger and stronger, she always knew exactly how to get the better of me. She was a force to be reckoned with.

Beat.

VIOLET (*intrigued*). You never told me she used to fight.

AUNT GEORGE. Why do you think she found God? She had to put her energies into something. And she took that to the extreme. Abandoning you, marching off around the world to spread the word. None of us could stop her. Even the cholera had its work cut out! You won't be stopped either, Violet. You will find a way.

VIOLET (*inspired*). I think I already have, if I'm not too late.

Scene Twelve

An alleyway in Southwark. ANNA in her cape, exhilarated by the fight she's just seen with NANCY.

ANNA. Did you see them, Nancy?

NANCY. Yes, my lady.

ANNA. Have you ever seen women like that?

NANCY. Yes, my lady.

ANNA. I thought I might faint – I thought I really ought to faint – but then I stopped thinking and realised – I didn't feel like fainting at all. I felt like – like them!

She laughs, giddy. NANCY looks around, on edge.

NANCY. Have you seen enough, my lady? We'd better be getting back home.

ANNA. I need you to speak to that man who was in the ring. Who is he?

NANCY (*wary*). The referee – and landlord. Why would I need to speak to him?

ANNA. To ask how I might get to do it.

Beat – her sense of release at saying it aloud. NANCY's horror.

NANCY. You can't – you'll get killed. I'd never tell, but the master's bound to find out.

ANNA. That's why I need to learn to fight. You think if I do nothing, he'll treat me better? Everything will be *nice*?

NANCY. No, but – together we can manage.

ANNA. You think you hear everything, Nancy? How can you hear when my face is pressed into a pillow?

A different kind of horror. And fear.

NANCY. We shouldn't be speaking of this.

ANNA. I used to think that he loved me so much, he couldn't help it. That I loved him so much, I could bear it. And if I died, that would be the most romantic ending there could be. But that's not love, is it?

NANCY. I wouldn't know about that.

ANNA. You're lucky. You can work for a living and marry who you choose and be – exactly who you are.

NANCY. There's nothing romantic about my life, I promise you. And nothing romantic about you getting into that ring.

ANNA. Good. Because I've had it with romance. Those flowers are already dead when you put them in water. They don't want to be picked and arranged and left to slowly rot. They want to live.

The light is back in her eyes. NANCY shakes her head.

NANCY. That still sounds pretty romantic, the way you put it.

ANNA (*a little laugh*). Perhaps... (*Then determination.*) Will you speak to the referee, Nancy, or shall I?

Scene Thirteen

VIOLET *is studying. She reads aloud from a book.*

VIOLET. No man engages to fight unless he himself feels convinced that he shall win. (*Pause, daunted.*) And next to this moral conviction, will be his desire to train properly.

A sequence begins with VIOLET, MATTY, ANNA and POLLY – all four women start to train separately, lightly to begin with

The three great objects sought to be attained in training are strength, activity and wind. These inspire a man with courage or pluck.

His regular exercise may be from twenty to twenty-four miles a day, with meals of beef steaks, mutton chops underdone, stale bread and old beer.

Spirits, gross feeding, stimulants, tobacco, onions, pepper, and the sexual intercourse, must vanish and be no more heard of.

Sweat he must and sweat he shall – profusely – to remove the superfluities of flesh and fat.

The intensity of their training increases.

Vomiting is a very proper and easy remedy for foul stomachs. It must be resorted to in all cases where the pugilist feels nausea.

During the whole day, both body and mind must be constantly occupied in every kind of exertion, such as cricket, bowls, quoits, and, of utmost importance, sparring.

Attack – the jab, the cross, the hook, the uppercut.

The intensity increases.

Defence – slip, bob and weave, parry, the cover-up, the clinch...

The sweet sock – a blow to the most vulnerable areas of the anatomy – the solar plexus, the liver, the heart – that can stop the pulse and result in death.

Everyone freezes for a moment. When they restart, the intensity increases.

Purposely bruising these areas will cause a callus to form, protecting them from such blows, so that you are no longer vulnerable.

VIOLET *punches her heart and repeats, with conviction.*

No man engages to fight unless he himself feels convinced that he shall win.

All the women break into shadowboxing. When they reach maximum intensity, they stop.

ANNA *goes off.* POLLY *does press-ups.* VIOLET *writes a letter.*

I, Violet Hunter, having reflected upon the challenge of Polly Stokes and now, requiring satisfaction, do invite her to meet me upon the stage and box me for the sum of – (*Beat. Bold.*) twenty-five pounds. She may expect no favours, only... (*Grins.*) a good thumping!

She gives the letter to the PROFESSOR. He reads it, smiles, and announces.

PROFESSOR. Ladies and gentlemen, the Angel Amphitheatre brings you an unprecedented fight for an unprecedented purse of – *five* English pounds and the first official title of British Lady Boxing Champion. Please book your tickets now to see Miss Polly Stokes, a pugilist from the pit brow, take on Miss Violet Hunter –

POLLY (*punches the air*). Yes!

PROFESSOR. She may be born and well-bred in London, but just like our beloved capital, her cultured façade masks a brutal determination to conquer the world!

MATTY. What the hell? What about me?

PROFESSOR. You're resourceful, Miss Blackwell. I'm sure you'll think of something.

The PROFESSOR, VIOLET and POLLY go off, excited, leaving MATTY alone, gutted... Then inspired, as she starts to pose in her boxing outfit. As she strikes each pose, there's a FLASH as if from a camera. This is a photo shoot, and with every shot MATTY shows a little more, but leaves us wanting more as the last FLASH goes to blackout.

End of Act One.

ACT TWO

Scene 1.1

The following scenes are a sequence and should flow into each other...

VIOLET and POLLY return to their rooms, initially alone.
We can see POLLY won and VIOLET lost.

POLLY enjoys a moment of triumph, VIOLET re-runs her mistakes in her head, feeling the pain of losing more strongly than physical pain. The PROFESSOR comes to POLLY.

POLLY. What do you reckon, Professor?

PROFESSOR. It was clumsy, ugly, a bloody horrible mess, but so is anything when it's born. (*Wipes her hair from her face, tender, proud.*) Was it all you'd hoped for?

POLLY. I want to do it again! Can I?

PROFESSOR. Yesterday it was a problem. But tomorrow – word will get around. Of your prowess. Of my profits. Our only problem will be keeping hold of your title.

POLLY. That's no problem!

PROFESSOR. We'll have to move fast –

PAUL (*entering*). Where's my Lady Boxing Champion?

The PROFESSOR watches, troubled, as POLLY bounds over to PAUL, who picks her up, spins her around, laughing, and then turns to the PROFESSOR.

Will you give us a moment, Professor?

PROFESSOR. What for?

PAUL. I thought you were the expert in love? So go on, sling yer hook!

PROFESSOR. I'll be waiting for you, Polly, when you're ready to train.

The PROFESSOR leaves them alone, reluctantly. POLLY is beaming at PAUL.

POLLY. Feels like I've been waiting for this all my life.

PAUL. Me too. (*Gets down on one knee, gets out a ring.*) Will you marry me, Poll?

POLLY (*stares, stunned*). I thought you wanted your title first?

PAUL. I want you more than any title. I saw you up there and I knew – I couldn't wait another moment to make you Polly Stokes proper at last.

POLLY. I always was. I always will be. But if we're wed, will I still be a fighter?

PAUL. You'll be my wife. Like we always wanted. You still want that, don't you?

POLLY. Course I do. I just wish I could be both.

PAUL. You are. Cos you're part of me. You've got it all, Poll. So what do you say – will you...?

He offers the ring again – a sense of now or never. POLLY takes the ring and smiles.

POLLY. Not got much choice, have I?

PAUL *picks POLLY up and kisses her.*

Scene 1.2

AUNT GEORGE comes to VIOLET, holds her, harrowed.

AUNT GEORGE. I never want to see that again.

VIOLET. Did you see what happened?

AUNT GEORGE. I couldn't watch.

She has to look away now, wincing, as VIOLET sets to work, tending to her wounds.

VIOLET. I knew she'd throw that left. I should have been ready.

AUNT GEORGE. At least it's over now. You never have to do it again.

VIOLET. But I want to do it again. I can't give up after one fight.

AUNT GEORGE. You have to. It's barbaric. Behaving like animals – and in front of those *men*.

VIOLET. It's who we really are and it's vital that they see it. I want to make them think about what a woman can do.

AUNT GEORGE. They were certainly thinking about that!

VIOLET. You don't know what you're talking about. You weren't even watching me.

AUNT GEORGE. Look at you. You lost. You have to stop this now, Violet.

VIOLET. I won't lose next time. I'll get better and I'll show you. I'll show everyone.

VIOLET *pushes through the pain, begins to limber up.*

Scene 1.3

There's a box on ANNA's table. She opens it. She takes out a white lace mask – the kind worn for a masquerade. NANCY is waiting with ANNA's cape, watching, worried.

NANCY. That won't protect you.

ANNA. It will – and it will protect you, him and all of this – (*The home.*) No one will know who I am. And yet I shall be more myself than ever. I shall be – (*Strikes a pose.*) 'The Angel of Death'! What do you think?

NANCY. I'm scared, my lady.

ANNA. Of me or for me?

NANCY. A bit of both.

ANNA. I've been scared all my life. The last time I wore this mask, I was scared stiff. Covering up one set of bruises and braced for more later that night if I looked the wrong way or said the wrong thing. But nothing can scare the Angel of Death. She can look and say and do whatever she likes.

She puts the mask back in the box and turns to take her cape.

NANCY. There's still time to change your mind, my lady.

ANNA. But then where would the fear go? No, it's time to let it out. Come on.

They sweep off.

1.4

MATTY *stands centre-stage, in the spotlight.*

MATTY. Gentlemen, welcome! No ladies allowed. Except me – for this is my story – the tragic tale of a poor Irish girl, born into squalor and wronged by the squire.

She poses as if acting in a burlesque tableau, a damsel succumbing to her seducer.

A pretty penniless young mother, forced to give away her beloved baby.

She poses, clutching a baby bundle to her heaving cleavage then distressed, letting it go.

But she doesn't give up. She teaches herself to read and write – and to fight!

A triumph-over-tragedy pose, fist raised like Scarlett O'Hara, skirt raised for a flash of flesh –

She fights her way to fame and fortune. Matilda Blackwell, the one and only Lady Boxing Champion of the World! Everybody loves her... and hates her.

She reveals more skin beneath her shawl and skirts – she's covered in bruises. She beams.

But she lives happily ever after – thanks in particular to her ability to separate body and mind. So she can enjoy these flights of fancy, while her clients do whatever they fancy to her... I can take it. I deserve it... *(To the baby bundle.)* Don't I, baby?... Sometimes it's better not to feel anything at all.

She unwraps the baby bundle. Inside is a bottle of whisky. MATTY opens it and drinks, finished.

Scene 1.5

The PROFESSOR takes centre-stage at the Angel.

PROFESSOR. Ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted by how my lady boxing phenomenon is catching on elsewhere, but I must warn you that all those other professors are pretenders, peddling anything in a skirt that'll take a punch for money. We've no time for such shams at the Angel, home to the original British Lady Boxing Champion –

VIOLET *bounds in, taking the spotlight, pushing the PROFESSOR aside.*

VIOLET. Violet Hunter! Thank you, Professor. And thanks especially to Polly Stokes, for retiring early so I can take the title – and take this show on the road!

PROFESSOR. I beg your pardon?

VIOLET. Taking on all those pretenders, defending my title and managing myself – showing audiences across the country what a woman can do. Get them bursting out of their drawing-room cocoons and flying, feeling their power!

Scene 1.6

Ecstatic cries from somewhere... The spotlight finds POLLY and PAUL, in a post-coital glow.

PAUL. We shouldn't have done that.

POLLY. The vicar won't know. I can still wear white.

PAUL. Cos of my fight, I mean. I'm knackered! In the second round, my legs'll go and it'll be all your fault.

POLLY. Doesn't it make you feel invincible?

PAUL. Aye, up to a point and then... *(Shattered.)* nah.

POLLY *(laughs, straddling him)*. It's not like that for me. I could keep going all night.

PAUL *(pushes her off)*. Sorry, Poll, not till after the fight. It's my last shot at the title.

POLLY. Let's practise then, come on.

She tries to spar with him, but he bats her away, tired. She gets up and shadowboxes instead. He lies back, watching her.

I could take the title, add it to my list. Proper Boxing Champion, British Lady Boxing Champion, and Mrs Polly Stokes... Is that why you won't fight me? Cos you'll feel like a wife-beater? Like Punch 'n' Judy? Here, do you reckon that's how we'll be, you and me? And our babies.

She acts out a boisterous Punch and Judy routine using his boxing gloves as puppets, pummelling each other and throwing the 'baby' glove out of the window, doing the voice –

That's the way to do it!

PAUL *(quiet)*. I'm sorry, Poll.

She pulls off the gloves.

POLLY. It's all right. You go to sleep. I'll bake or scrub the floors or summat.

PAUL. I mean, for making you stop.

POLLY. We can do it non-stop when you've got the title.

PAUL. Fighting, Poll. I know you miss it.

POLLY (*beat*). Nah, it's not the same now anyhow. Everyone's at it.

PAUL. You'd be the best.

POLLY. I'm better off here.

PAUL. Do you really mean that?

POLLY. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you. I'd be six-feet under, or even deeper in the pit. But I'm not. I'm here, on top of the world. I'll win when you win. My world champion... then we can make us a proper baby – (*Cradles the glove.*) and it'll have the best of everything and never have to fight for nothing, will it?

She looks back at PAUL for an answer. He's sleeping. She holds the 'baby' close, wondering.

Scene Two

AUNT GEORGE *waits backstage for VIOLET. She coughs, covers her mouth with a handkerchief. She hides it quickly as VIOLET comes out, triumphant, clutching a trophy. VIOLET puts it down and hugs her aunt, surprised, delighted.*

VIOLET. I thought you never wanted to watch me again. Or is it different when I win? Did you see me – (*Notices blood on AUNT GEORGE's lip.*) Are you bleeding?

AUNT GEORGE. Oh – no – it's from you, my dear.

AUNT GEORGE *dabs her mouth and then pretends to dab VIOLET's face. VIOLET bats her away.*

VIOLET. It's fine – I can't feel it. Turns out winning is the greatest cure for anything!

AUNT GEORGE. I came because I wanted to see you, Violet.

VIOLET. Did you hear me out there? It's like Emily's idea with the actors, except that I'm real, and talking to real people, showing them real change.

AUNT GEORGE. I heard you say that you'll manage yourself. So you're making money?

VIOLET. Just a butter dish so far – (*The trophy.*) but it'll get better and until then I can give up work at the surgery and manage on what you give me.

AUNT GEORGE. That's why I wanted to see you... I miss you. I want you to come back and – look after me.

She's vulnerable. Her defences go up as VIOLET laughs.

VIOLET. Is that all you think I'm good for? Trailing around to lunches and bad plays?

AUNT GEORGE. I'm sorry you feel that's all we achieved.

VIOLET. It's the fight – gives you a taste for stripping away all the niceties. The lies. I'm grateful for your support, Aunt George, but this is what I'm meant to do. This is everything we talked about, put into action.

AUNT GEORGE. We don't have to be like them, Violet.

VIOLET. Why not – don't you want equality?

AUNT GEORGE. Is this equality? For one to be the best and all the rest to get beaten? That's not my idea of a better world. Our strength is in collaboration, helping each other.

VIOLET. No one collaborates for anything other than self-interest, not in the real world.

AUNT GEORGE. I've done nothing but try to help you.

VIOLET. And I'm trying to help you see – I want women to take control of their own destinies. Like it is in the ring. Total control. Over yourself, your opponent, the crowd, even time. When that bell rings, your life is entirely in your hands.

AUNT GEORGE. I don't think you really care about anyone else's destiny. I think you're too blinded by that spotlight, too deafened by that crowd. This has to stop, Violet, or I can no longer support you.

VIOLET. What are you saying, Aunt George? That you'll cut me off?

AUNT GEORGE. If you won't give this up... You've left me no choice.

VIOLET stares at her. AUNT GEORGE holds her stare, steely, unflinching.

VIOLET. I'm not in control, am I? You are – you have been, my whole life. No wonder you hate seeing me break free.

AUNT GEORGE. That's not true. If it was anything else –

VIOLET. You didn't want me to go to Paris either. Or to marry James.

AUNT GEORGE. You don't want to marry James.

VIOLET. I'd rather that than be married to you!

AUNT GEORGE. You always were a selfish little girl.

VIOLET. And you're a selfish old woman. Keep your money. I'll look after myself.

Scene Three

ANNA waits at the table. She's lost some of her stiffness, a new ease about her posture. After a few moments, she helps herself to some food, pushing it in her mouth quickly with her fingers. GABRIEL enters with something hidden behind his back.

GABRIEL. Caught you.

He grins. She giggles nervously, chews fast and swallows.

ANNA. Sorry, I thought you must have been working late.

GABRIEL. I went out of my way to get you this.

He presents her with the box. She stiffens. He opens it, revealing the mask.

ANNA. Wherever did you find that?

GABRIEL. Where you put it.

He takes it out and puts it on her.

I got it for you for the Spring Ball, remember? We danced all night. You were the most beautiful woman there.

ANNA. I remember.

GABRIEL. Dance with me now.

ANNA. I'm tired, Gabriel.

GABRIEL. It must be tiring, all those calls you have to make.

ANNA. I really do very little.

GABRIEL. Then dance with me, angel. *(Takes her hand and dances with her.)* My Angel of Death.

She pulls away. He pulls her back, makes her keep dancing.

Don't stop.

ANNA. I'm sorry –

GABRIEL. Don't worry, Anna. I'm not angry. I'm relieved. I thought you were seeing another man, so I followed your example and I followed you. I saw you.

ANNA. You're not angry?

GABRIEL. How could I be? It's my fault. Presumably
I introduced you to that world, unless you've been doing
this for years behind my back?

ANNA. No, of course not. Only since I followed you.

GABRIEL. Then I'm sorry. I thought I'd made that clear.
I thought we were happy again.

ANNA. We are. I am.

GABRIEL. Then why do you do it?

ANNA. I don't know.

He stops her dancing, takes off the mask.

GABRIEL. Please, don't hide from me any more, Anna. I want
to understand why you'd do something like this – when you
have everything you could possibly want?

ANNA. If you really want to know... At first I went to defend
myself. Then I learned to attack. And the power that came
with that... The pleasure... The release. Somehow, I began
to enjoy it. I had to go back and do it again – and again.

GABRIEL. So it's a kind of compulsion? Something seizes you
and you cannot stop?

ANNA. You must understand that, surely? If you remember the
Spring Ball – beneath the mask, I wasn't so beautiful. You
made sure of that... Do you really want to understand? Or do
you just not want someone else to hit me?

GABRIEL. I don't understand why a mother would want her
children to grow up without her.

ANNA. That wouldn't happen. I'm careful. I'm good at it.

A smile of pride passes across her face.

GABRIEL. But is it worth it? Risking everything we have?

ANNA. I didn't feel I really had anything. Not of my own.

NANCY *enters without knocking.*

NANCY. It's all ready, my lady –

*She stops as she sees GABRIEL. The mask. He takes in her
reaction.*

GABRIEL. What's ready, Nancy?

Beat.

NANCY. The girls are ready for bed, if my lady would like to
see them now?

GABRIEL. My lady won't be seeing the girls, now or later,
thank you, Nancy.

NANCY. Very good, sir.

*She glances at ANNA – and goes. ANNA stares at
GABRIEL.*

ANNA. You can't, Gabriel. Not that.

GABRIEL. You're not safe to be around children. Who knows
what you could do?

ANNA. I can stop. I can do anything you want, but please –
not that.

She's tearful. He relents, wipes her eyes.

GABRIEL. You know I hate it when you cry, angel. I never
want to hurt you.

ANNA. Whatever you want, I promise –

GABRIEL. Your promises are pointless. You can't help
yourself, can you?

ANNA shakes her head, defeated.

Do you want my help?

Scene Four

POLLY *helps PAUL into their room. He's limping, beaten, and worse for wear, drinking a beer.*

POLLY. So... do you want to do it now?

PAUL. Bit tired to be honest, Poll.

POLLY. Fair enough... You did really well.

PAUL. Thanks.

POLLY. That right hook at the end of the first. I thought you had him.

PAUL. Me too.

POLLY. You can try again. I bet you'd win.

PAUL. We'll never know, will we?

He gets another beer. POLLY watches, worried.

POLLY. Before you have any more, I've got you something to soak it up.

She goes off. He starts the beer. She comes back with a homemade cake.

PAUL. What's that?

POLLY. I made it. *(Puts it down.)* Can you imagine?

PAUL. What's it for?

POLLY. To celebrate the start of our new life together. You can hang up your gloves now, do whatever you want.

PAUL. I wanted the title. I've never wanted nothing else.

POLLY. Charming! I'll have this – *(The cake.)* myself then, shall I?

PAUL. Yeah you have it. You enjoy it, Poll. You're the champion after all.

POLLY. That's got nothing to do with this.

PAUL. Course it has. It's all your fault.

POLLY. Cos we did it the other night?

PAUL. Cos he laughed at me, Poll. Cos he knew. Everyone knew.

POLLY. Knew what?

PAUL. That you beat me.

POLLY *(laughs)*. That's just daft.

PAUL. Yeah – hilarious! Especially as you're right there all the time, yelling at me from the crowd. Telling me what to do.

POLLY. I was supporting you.

PAUL. He was pissing his sides.

POLLY. You should have got angry then. Shut him up.

PAUL. You should shut up! Telling me if I can have a beer or not. It's my home.

POLLY. It's our home.

PAUL. It's never been your home. You pushed your way in from the first and took everything ever since. My home, my family, my fight, my heart, my balls. I can hear them all – 'He can never be the champion, he got beaten by a girl.'

She can't help herself – another nervous giggle.

POLLY. You're just imagining it –

He hits her, knocking her to the floor.

PAUL. Don't you laugh at me, don't you dare!

After several seconds of stillness, she picks herself up.

POLLY. Well you can tell them now. You beat me back. You can be champion.

PAUL. No, Poll, I'm sorry –

POLLY *(rubbing her jaw)*. Only I'd get some help with that right hook. Never quite good enough, is it?

She goes.

Scene Five

JAMES's surgery. Back in her nurse's uniform, VIOLET pounds on her chest, steeling herself. She stops, and starts cleaning up as JAMES enters. He admires her.

JAMES. I'm glad you decided to stay, Violet. I wasn't relishing the prospect of being doctor and nurse in your absence.

VIOLET. What if we are both doctor and nurse, equals in this room at least? You once said that was a possibility.

JAMES. What about Paris?

VIOLET. I don't need to go to Paris. But if we are to marry, I do need... freedom.

Beat.

JAMES (*bravely*). I understand. You have – needs.

She can tell from his face that he doesn't understand.

VIOLET. Dear James, I don't mean other men – that's the last thing I need! I mean the freedom to do as I choose, to pursue my own interests with your full support.

JAMES. I believe there must be full support for each other in a marriage. I will be proud to give you whatever you need to succeed, if you will be there for me.

VIOLET. Thank you.

She kisses him on the cheek. A pause, awkward on both sides, as they almost kiss properly... A knock at the door saves them. They pull back. He clears his throat, acts professional.

JAMES. Nurse?

VIOLET smiles and goes off. JAMES feels his heart, beams, then composes himself as she returns with GABRIEL and ANNA.

Ah, Mr and Mrs Lamb, come in. Will you settle the patient, please, nurse, while I confer with Mr Lamb?

He takes GABRIEL off to the side. VIOLET takes ANNA to the seat, looking at her.

VIOLET. Have we met before?

ANNA *shakes her head* – only slightly.

You look familiar. I'm Violet. What's your name?

ANNA *doesn't answer*. VIOLET *frowns*.

Have you lost your voice? Is that what we're helping you with today?

ANNA *doesn't answer*. VIOLET *takes up her instruments*.

Do you mind if I check you over?

Correctly expecting no response, VIOLET checks ANNA over – her mouth, her eyes, her heart.

JAMES *returns with GABRIEL, who sees VIOLET, disturbed.*

GABRIEL. What is she doing to my wife? I don't remember you telling her to do that.

JAMES. Is the patient settled, Nurse Hunter?

VIOLET. She seems to be in excellent health, except for an apparent inability to speak.

VIOLET *fixes on JAMES, challenging. Embarrassed, he turns to GABRIEL, showing his authority.*

JAMES. Mental disturbance can be one of the symptoms.

VIOLET. Symptoms of what?

JAMES (*continuing*). – as can disturbed sleep, restlessness, a fondness for novelties, a desire to escape, monomania and a tendency for – peripheral excitement. Few of these may be detected upon examination, but they would be well known by those close to them, who are concerned for their welfare.

GABRIEL. And this will alleviate the symptoms?

JAMES. Rest assured, I have recently read of a successful case where the patient has resumed her place at the table – a happy, healthy wife and mother.

VIOLET. Sorry, what procedure are we performing?

GABRIEL. Do you really feel it appropriate to have another female in the room?

JAMES. Nurse Hunter is quite professional.

VIOLET. May I speak with you, doctor?

GABRIEL. Is it professional of her to question you?

JAMES. Would you strap in the patient, please, nurse?

VIOLET. Certainly, doctor, if you will first tell me why?

GABRIEL. If there's a problem, we can go elsewhere. I don't want my wife to endure any more upset.

JAMES (to VIOLET, *firm*). This is not a matter for one of our little debates. A woman is suffering and it is our job to help her. I hope I can count on your full support.

Chilled, VIOLET appeals to ANNA.

VIOLET. Do you want to do this?

JAMES. Nurse, please strap in the patient.

VIOLET. No.

Pause.

JAMES. Then you are free to go.

VIOLET (to GABRIEL). Is she free to go?

GABRIEL. Absolutely. Free of any burden.

VIOLET. Will you come with me?

VIOLET holds out her hand. ANNA looks up.

ANNA. I'm not well. Please can we get on with it?

GABRIEL takes ANNA's hand, comforting, casting a glare at VIOLET. JAMES ignores VIOLET and sets to work, strapping ANNA in. He straps her legs in first and then parts them wide.

VIOLET walks out.

Scene Six

The PROFESSOR cleans up blood from the ring, despondent. POLLY enters, rough and ailing.

POLLY. Sorry to keep you waiting, Professor. I'm ready now, to start training again.

She summons a hopeful smile. He's cold, hard.

PROFESSOR. Well, well, Polly Stokes, I thought I caught the stench of a bad penny. Or have you been back in the gutters where you belong?

POLLY. Are you jealous? I heard that you go skulking through the rookeries, on the look out for new talent. I kept hoping you'd come by and spot me, but after a couple of weeks I'd had enough. Swallowed my pride, so here I am.

She coughs. He looks her up and down and turns away.

PROFESSOR. You're well past your best. No use to me.

POLLY. I was a sickly child too, but without your medicine and featherbeds. It flares up now and again, but it's nothing a few nights sleeping indoors won't fix.

PROFESSOR. So go and sleep indoors with that 'brother' of yours. That's what you chose, after everything I did for you.

A flash of his hurt – and hers. POLLY takes it.

POLLY. I'm sorry, Professor. Will you let me make it up to you?

PROFESSOR. You're too late. Everywhere has their Lady Boxing Champion except here. I've lost them all along with my punters and a substantial sum of money. I shall have to sell the Angel.

POLLY. You can't!

PROFESSOR. The science has evolved beyond me. Natural selection. I am obsolete.

POLLY. Not now I'm back.

PROFESSOR. Violet took your title and ran away with it. You're nothing to anyone, Polly. And nothing to me but an extra mouth to feed. The last thing I need!

POLLY. So what – you're just going to leave me on the street, like everyone else has? I don't know why I expected any better from you – but I did. I do. Come on –

She raises her fists as if sparring with him. Throws a punch. He backs off.

PROFESSOR. Have you lost your mind?

POLLY. If we've lost, we've got nothing to lose. Come on, put them up!

She throws another punch. He blocks her. She moves around, making him defend himself.

PROFESSOR. What are you trying to prove? That you can beat up an old man?

POLLY. That you are a champion – *my champion* – and us champions never give up. We get up and keep going, don't we?

They're properly sparring now. He has no choice, and he's good at it.

You see – we're a great match. You train me and I'll make us both a fortune, take the title back from whoever reckons they have a claim to it –

VIOLET *enters and watches them, unnoticed.*

And put this place back on the map. The proper home of the sweet science!

They're both exhausted, coughing and clinging onto each other.

PROFESSOR. Dear Lord... look at the pair of us!

VIOLET. Looks like you're in need of a doctor.

The PROFESSOR pulls back as VIOLET makes her way over.

PROFESSOR. What happened, Miss Hunter? Could you not manage yourself?

VIOLET stays fixed on POLLY as she climbs into the ring.

VIOLET. It doesn't matter what happened. The fact is I'm back and I'm the best.

POLLY. You wanna bet?

She puts her fists up again.

PROFESSOR. Polly, please, have a rest.

POLLY. I will, when I'm dead. But now – I'm feeling better already.

They start to spar, playful but hard. Their spark still there, stronger than ever.

VIOLET. Been out of training, Polly? I think you've lost it!

POLLY. Can't lose what you're born with, but you can forget what you've learned. How do you fancy trying to win the title for real?

VIOLET. You want a rematch?

POLLY. I want a contest. Get every fake Lady Boxing Champion here and let's find out once and for all who's the best in the world. What do you say, Professor?

The PROFESSOR's eyes are sparkling, rejuvenated, inspired –

PROFESSOR. The World Champion... the biggest contest ever!

VIOLET. With the biggest prize. Enough for the winner to support herself.

POLLY. Yes – for a whole year.

VIOLET. No – for life. Let her win her independence.

PROFESSOR. I can't afford that! And you're hardly in any position to bargain.

VIOLET. It's our idea.

POLLY. Oi! It's my idea actually. Get your hands off it!

POLLY throws a punch at VIOLET. VIOLET evades it and lands one back, sending POLLY reeling.

VIOLET. You seem less than invincible, Polly.

POLLY. Don't you believe it, doc!

She's coming back for more, but the PROFESSOR gets between them.

PROFESSOR. That's enough, ladies! Rest, eat, sleep, and tomorrow, we'll begin training.

POLLY. So we're doing it?

VIOLET. What about the prize?

PROFESSOR. Let's see how many tickets we sell. How many competitors we get. How big this thing could be...

He turns out to the audience to make the announcement.

The venerable Professor Charlie Sharp calls all contenders and pretenders to the title of Lady Boxing Champion of the World –

As he speaks, he distributes handbills, including one to NANCY... who passes it on to ANNA at her tea table, and one to MATTY, slumped with her bottle. They read it aloud, overlapping –

MATTY. To prove their prowess and win a handsome purse –

ANNA. In the first official world championship contest –

MATTY and ANNA. To be held at the Angel Amphitheatre, Islington –

MATTY puts the bottle down – ANNA puts her teacup down – then they put the handbills down and slowly, unsteadily, start to train.

MATTY, POLLY, VIOLET and ANNA begin their training routines, similar to Act One, but all four of the women are more on edge: VIOLET more frenetic and desperate; POLLY suffering waves of sickness and fatigue; MATTY struggling, woozy from the drink; ANNA, in post-operative pain.

VIOLET tries to recall her regime, between gasps.

VIOLET. No man engages to fight unless he himself feels convinced that he shall win.

Strength, activity and wind... inspire a man... courage... pluck.

Exercise... beef steaks... beer.

Spirits, stimulants, tobacco –

The sexual intercourse –

Sweat – flesh and fat.

Vomiting – nausea.

Body – mind – exertion.

No woman engages to fight unless she herself feels convinced that she shall win.

The women stop, shattered.

One by one, they pick themselves up and go.

Scene Seven

The PROFESSOR takes centre-stage.

PROFESSOR. Thank you for bearing with us through the messy scraps of the heats. Tonight, I am delighted to tell you that the remaining contenders for the title will be fighting in our semi-finals. First we have two superlative strains of the genus Lady, fighting for a chance to earn their own small fortune. Islington's very own 'Dr' Violet Hunter.

VIOLET *enters the ring, intense, ready to win this.*

And an unbreakable beauty, who may hail from Bucharest or Buckingham Palace, nobody knows, but she is quite at home here. Please welcome the Angel of Death.

ANNA *enters in her mask and squares up to VIOLET.*

The bell rings. The fight begins, elegantly at first, as though they were two dolls on a music box, trading a few deft punches. Then VIOLET lands a hard one that makes ANNA stagger. She cries out, but not from the pain of the punch.

VIOLET *notices and asks, between gasps.*

VIOLET. Are you all right?

ANNA *nods.*

Are you sure?

ANNA. Please can we get on with it?

VIOLET. I know your voice.

ANNA takes her chance, lands a blow. VIOLET strikes back. ANNA doubles up, hurting. VIOLET's fists drop, horrified.

You can't do this. You're in pain.

ANNA *goes to hit her again. VIOLET blocks her.*

I can't do this.

ANNA keeps fighting, VIOLET keeps blocking. They're close, almost hugging. A rapid exchange.

ANNA. Good. Then give up now.

VIOLET. You're not well.

ANNA. Your doctor fixed me. I'm fine. I'll be even better when you hit the floor.

VIOLET. I don't want to hurt you. I'm doing this for all of us.

ANNA. I'm doing this for my children. You have no chance.

She breaks up the hug and comes back at VIOLET hard, overriding her agony.

VIOLET tries fighting back, but can't bring herself to take advantage of ANNA.

ANNA takes advantage of this and soundly beats VIOLET.

As VIOLET lies, beaten, and the PROFESSOR counts her out, ANNA runs off.

PROFESSOR. Ladies and gentlemen, the winner is... The Angel of Death!

He looks around, but ANNA has gone.

Scene Eight

Backstage. NANCY waits, anxious. ANNA rushes in, elated, pulling her mask off.

ANNA. Did you see me, Nancy? I did it! We're almost there.

She hugs NANCY, who gasps in pain.

What is it? What's the matter?

NANCY. I'm sorry, my lady.

Her fear, as GABRIEL enters behind ANNA. ANNA sees her fear and freezes – turns, seething.

ANNA. How dare you put your hands on her?

GABRIEL. Really, Anna? You have defied me, destroyed our family and you're angry at me for disciplining a *maid*?

ANNA. She's my friend.

NANCY. Please be careful, my lady.

GABRIEL. You should listen to your friend.

ANNA. Listen to me for once, Gabriel. Really listen – one more fight and we'll be free. Don't you want that? I'm not destroying our family. I'm saving us.

NANCY. Don't listen to her, sir. The fight makes her like this. She doesn't mean it.

GABRIEL. Have you no shame? What kind of world do you think we're living in?

ANNA. I know exactly what kind of world – look at me – we can change. We have to. We can't let our girls to grow up thinking this is how they have to live – that *this* is what love is.

GABRIEL. My girls won't know a thing. I have seen to that.

Beat.

ANNA (*chilled*). What have you done? Where are they?

GABRIEL. They're safe – from you. And I'm going to make things safe for you too. Put you away in a place where you can never harm yourself or anyone else again.

ANNA (*to NANCY, panic rising*). What is he talking about?

NANCY (*weeping*). I tried to warn you, my lady.

GABRIEL. The girls will remember you as you were and for that you should be grateful – you'll always be an angel to them.

ANNA. No!

ANNA *flies at GABRIEL, knocks him down and punches him, over and over. NANCY screams.*

Scene Nine

NANCY's scream is lost in the roar of the crowd as the PROFESSOR bounds back into the ring.

PROFESSOR. A first-class result from a first-class lady... But for our second semi-final, we must delve down to spy on the fighters slugging it out in my Petri dish. First, a scrapper who scraped through the heats with little hint of science, but with two black eyes on the prize. The gentlemen's favourite, Matilda Blackwell.

MATTY *enters, putting on a smile as she poses, though she's taken a hammering to get here.*

Taking on – a force of nature with a ferocious fist and a formidable heart, as yet unbeaten. Please welcome, the people's favourite, Polly Stokes.

POLLY *enters and takes to the stage, trying to stay focused. She squares up to MATTY.*

The bell rings. The fight begins. POLLY is on the attack. MATTY defends, takes blow after blow.

POLLY. Come on, don't be shy. They want a show. You can at least try to hit me back.

MATTY. I might if you let up for a second.

POLLY. That's not how it works. You've gotta take a chance.

MATTY. It's got me this far. You might be grand at punching, but that's only half the battle. The other half is taking it, and I can take way more pain than you.

POLLY. You reckon? Try me!

MATTY. I'm good, thanks. Keep it coming.

POLLY *hits her again.*

That's it. And again... Oh no, you missed. Are you getting tired?

POLLY. Am I heck!

But she is. MATTY dodges another blow.

MATTY. Already? I thought the great Polly Stokes would hammer me longer than this, before she started to make – mistakes.

MATTY takes her chance and lands a hit. POLLY staggers, gasping.

POLLY. Give us a moment. I don't feel right.

MATTY. I'm taking my chance. Don't expect me to go easy on you.

MATTY lets rip with a volley of punches, most of which POLLY bats away, but another lands.

POLLY. Oi! I said give us a mo!

POLLY thrashes MATTY, flooring her.

As the PROFESSOR counts to ten, POLLY stands over a groaning, battered MATTY.

PROFESSOR. Eight... nine...

The bell rings.

As I suspected, it seems Miss Blackwell is only capable of lying on her back. And Miss Stokes is through to the final.

He takes POLLY's hand in triumph – then freezes as –

A bell rings – not the fight bell – more ominous, tolling, over and over...

Scene Ten

Everything is set up for the final, but something is not right.

PROFESSOR. Ladies and gentleman, I am very sorry to tell you, that Anna Lamb, the Angel of Death, will not be fighting...

ANNA enters in her cloak. She is hanged.

The PROFESSOR, POLLY and VIOLET gather at her grave. MATTY joins them and lays a posy of red roses at the grave.

POLLY. Feels like someone should say something. You've always got some words, Professor?

PROFESSOR. What can I say? I didn't know anything about her.

POLLY. Anyone who knew her wouldn't be seen dead here, paying their respects... But I respect her. I saw her fight.

VIOLET. I know she had children. I was taught motherhood sapped your energy, but it made her stronger. Made me hold back. Maybe if I hadn't, she'd still be alive.

MATTY. You couldn't have saved her. She was dead already, according to her husband. But at least she came back to life long enough to bury the bastard.

PROFESSOR. I know the best fighters don't always win. They often lose – to bad luck, circumstance, a less talented opponent finding a weakness and exploiting it. We may believe they should have won, but they never really stood a chance. The world was set against them.

A moment of silence for ANNA. POLLY lays a pair of boxing gloves next to the roses.

VIOLET (to POLLY). I suppose this makes you World Champion. Last woman standing.

POLLY. I never wanted to win like this. I want a proper final.

PROFESSOR. There can't be any more fights, haven't you read what the papers are saying?

POLLY. Who cares about the papers?

PROFESSOR. People who can read, Polly – ‘A cautionary tale!
You see what happens when we don’t keep the little ladies
in check?’

VIOLET. So one man gets killed and it’s all our fault? How
many women get killed?

MATTY. No one’s counting. No one cares. The papers only care
about Anna because she was from money. If it had been me,
I’d be fish food by now. Forgotten.

POLLY. *The money...* Professor, you’ve still got the prize
money, right? We can still have the final – me versus Violet.
(*To VIOLET.*) You said you held back – because of her kids.
How about us two trying again, with no holding back?

MATTY. The last women standing. A rematch of the originals,
with some kinda twist...

*MATTY looks at them, inspired, excited. VIOLET is excited
too, cautiously.*

VIOLET. Should we even be talking about this? She’s not cold
in her grave.

MATTY. Fighting the final’s a more fitting tribute than a bunch
of flowers.

POLLY. Dead right! We don’t give up. We carry on fighting –
for Anna.

VIOLET. For Anna – and for us. She’d understand. We’ve still
got to live.

MATTY. I’ve got some ideas –

PROFESSOR. I’m sorry, ladies. We really do have to give up
this time. The prize money was impounded. I was almost
arrested. I have to keep my head down now.

MATTY. So you keep your head down – leave it to us. These
two can have their final and I can run the show – Professor
Matilda Blackwell at your service.

PROFESSOR. You’re no professor!

MATTY. Neither are you! It’s all an act. So why should I have
to lie on my back when I can stand up and count as well as
you and I’m a damn sight easier on the eye? Don’t you think
the punters would like something new – an *evolution*?

POLLY. That’s a great idea!

MATTY. You could put some of your own personal fortune in to
replenish the prize pot.

VIOLET. Of course – it’s only fair!

PROFESSOR. No, it’s not! I’ve not got that much. Why should
I give it to you?

MATTY. Because we should stick together, us scum in the Petri
dish. I know what kind of talent you go looking for in the
rookeries and let’s just say it ain’t ladies.

POLLY. Who cares if he likes blokes?

MATTY. The punters. The papers. The police. Violet Hunter, by
the looks of her.

*VIOLET has been staring at the PROFESSOR, confounded.
She checks herself, back to business.*

VIOLET. I don’t care what he does, as long as he puts up the
money.

MATTY. If you really want to save your reputation, you have to
do this, Professor.

*He looks around at them – three formidable women, no
escape.*

PROFESSOR. I cannot believe you’re threatening me, after
everything I’ve done for you all.

POLLY. It’s not a threat. It’s a dare.

VIOLET. It’s the conclusion of the experiment.

MATTY. It’s a business proposition. You put up half the prize
money. I’ll make the rest from the takings, minus a small
consideration for my services.

PROFESSOR. What makes you think anyone will even come to watch it?

MATTY. Look and learn, my darling, look and learn...

Scene Eleven

Backstage before the final fight. POLLY warms up. PAUL enters, carrying a posy of red roses. She ignores him, keeps pummelling the bag, as he watches her.

PAUL. Save something for the match, eh?

He laughs. She blanks him.

Nah, you'll never run out of fight. I remember when I first saw you. Thought you was a pile of rags left on the step. Then I seen this little fist, small as a kitten's paw, but strong. You smacked me in the face as soon as I picked you up, and picked fights with me ever since. But it's different, I know – all those times we've hit each other – and *that...* that *hate*. For myself. It was like I wanted to hurt myself.

POLLY. Well you didn't. You hurt me. Was there another reason you came?

PAUL. I just wanted you to know... you don't have to fight tonight.

She stops, stares at him, incredulous.

POLLY. I thought you didn't want to stop me.

PAUL. I've got a proper job now. (*Shows her a wage packet.*) It doesn't pay much, but I can take care of us both. I don't want you feeling you've got no choice.

POLLY. I've got no choice because this is how I was made – in violence, most likely – and then my mother looked between my legs and knew I'd be better off dead. I was never meant

to live. I've had to fight for every breath, every crumb, even for your love. How long would I have lasted in that house if I hadn't made you love me, Paul? How else would I have made it this far?

PAUL. So – what – you never loved me?

POLLY. Course I loved you – I love anyone who'll let me live! But I'm not part of you. I'm just me. And I'm going to find my own way to live, to take care of myself. (*Silence as this sinks in. Nods at the wage packet.*) Go and bet that on me. It'll give you a reason to keep cheering.

PAUL. I'll be cheering for you whatever, Poll. Give me chance and I'll show you – I can change.

POLLY. Good. You should. But it's not about you. It's about me – showing everyone – I was born to live and to win this!

VIOLET's room backstage. AUNT GEORGE waits, sitting down in a chair. VIOLET enters, startled –

VIOLET. Aunt George... what are you doing here?

AUNT GEORGE. I've come to support you.

VIOLET. Really? Well, that's wonderful, thank you –

AUNT GEORGE. Don't thank me, Violet. Just go out there and win. You have to beat her.

VIOLET. I know –

AUNT GEORGE. No – you think you do, but you have no idea. You still harbour notions that you're doing this for the good of us all and that I'll be here to support you whatever. But I won't be here and you cannot afford to lose.

VIOLET. I don't understand – why won't you be here?

AUNT GEORGE. No one can tell me why precisely. Only that they cannot cure me and I do not have long left. Maybe only weeks, days.

VIOLET (*reeling*). That's why you wanted me to come back? Why didn't you tell me?

AUNT GEORGE. I tried, but you wouldn't listen. And it seems you were correct. We are all on our own in the end. No one cares, unless there is something in it for them.

VIOLET. I would've come if I'd known you were sick. I'm not that callous.

AUNT GEORGE. You should be. I am... I lied about your income – it would have stopped anyway. I've spent everything and more on doctors, trying to save myself.

VIOLET (*horrified*). Everything?

AUNT GEORGE. Would you have come to look after me for nothing? You are not that dutiful and nor should you be. I was dutiful to my sister and what has it profited me?

VIOLET. That inheritance was her money too. It was my money!

AUNT GEORGE. You see, Violet, we are selfish. However pathetic my life may seem, I would pay anything to save myself, for one more day, even if it costs you your future.

VIOLET. So why come here now? How is this your idea of supporting me?

AUNT GEORGE. If I can't give you anything else, I can at least give you reason to beat that girl. I know you like her. I know you still think of the cause, helping other women. But now I know the truth – unity is an illusion and self-sacrifice is a lie.

She coughs – VIOLET goes to help – AUNT GEORGE holds her off.

No – be honest! It's futile. You can't win for yourself and still care for others. You must be ruthless and do whatever it takes to win. Can you do that, Violet?

VIOLET (*hardens*). It seems I have no choice. Thank you, Aunt George.

AUNT GEORGE *takes her hand, exhausted, relieved.*

VIOLET *pulls her hand away and goes off.* AUNT GEORGE *smiles, sadly.*

AUNT GEORGE. Good girl.

Scene Twelve

The PROFESSOR, PAUL and crowd members gather to watch. MATTY sits in the boxing ring, covered by the blanket.

MATTY. Ladies and gentlemen, I am very happy to tell you, that I shall not be telling my life story tonight. Tonight isn't about the past. Tonight is the future.

She throws off the blanket and stands, moves around the ring, owning it.

This isn't his microscope slide, it's my looking glass through time, showing all my daughters, coming out of the back streets, the brothels, the sweatshops and sweating their way up on to the world's stage, taking control and holding the purse strings – (*Takes out a gold purse.*) Independence and an expensive purse – what every woman wants the right to fight for! The fuse of progress is being lit in Islington tonight and the explosion will echo around the world. Let your applause echo too for our finalists – Polly Stokes and Violet Hunter!

POLLY and VIOLET *enter from their corners and climb into the ring.*

Both powerful women. Both hellbent on winning. But only one can succeed... When you're ready, ladies? Round One!

The first round is impressive, the women trading a volley of blows to the delight of the crowd.

The bell rings and the fight breaks. MATTY steps back in.

Very impressive. I wouldn't know who to bet on. But I can bet you it's only going to get better – especially for you gentlemen. You're all winners tonight.

(*Winks.*) When you're ready, ladies?

POLLY *pulls her corset off, so that she's naked from the waist up except for a chemise.* VIOLET *hesitates.* MATTY *comes in to confer.*

Violet?

VIOLET. I'm not ready.

MATTY. You have to. That's why they paid more. Don't you want the prize money?

POLLY. It's fine, Violet, at least we can breathe. That bloody thing was killing me!

VIOLET *looks at POLLY and frowns.*

VIOLET. You're bigger, Polly.

POLLY *grins and throws warm-up punches.*

POLLY. Better watch out then.

VIOLET. No, wait, let me see...

VIOLET *checks her over.*

MATTY. What's going on, ladies? Stop stalling and get it off.

VIOLET. If you wanted to get rid of it, you should have come to me outside the ring.

POLLY. Get rid of what?

A beat. MATTY understands.

MATTY. Oh lord...

POLLY. What?

VIOLET. You're having a baby, Polly.

POLLY *looks from VIOLET to MATTY to PAUL out in the crowd. He waves his betting slip at her.*

PAUL. Come on, Poll, show her what for!

PROFESSOR. Come on, ladies, get on with the show!

MATTY. I can't stop the fight or they'll all want their money back. And trust me, you need that money now.

POLLY. I'm going to fight.

VIOLET. No, Polly, I can't –

POLLY. If you can't fight me proper, you can let me win.

VIOLET. I can't hold back again. I have to win this time.

POLLY. Me too.

MATTY. So you're ready for Round Two?

VIOLET. At least let her wear the corset – some kind of protection?

MATTY. No – you know the deal. There's nothing else we can do.

VIOLET *and POLLY lock eyes, desperate –*

POLLY. We could share it. The prize. Whoever wins, we share the money.

MATTY. It doesn't work like that. You can't both win.

POLLY. As long as we have a proper fight, who cares? As long as you don't hurt it.

MATTY. How can she promise that – if you have a proper fight?

VIOLET. We could aim high. Nothing below the solar plexus.

POLLY. The what?

VIOLET *(indicating on her torso)*. Here, Polly. Let's keep the punches above here.

MATTY. Can you do that? What about the rules?

VIOLET. We're up here. We can make our own rules. Fight to win, but not to harm. Fight to save, not to kill. *Fight together.*

A beat between them – unified –

POLLY. I love you, doc.

VIOLET. You too, Poll.

MATTY. Thank you, ladies. Let's do this...

She pulls VIOLET's corset off, leaving her only in the chemise.

Round Two!

The bell rings. VIOLET and POLLY tense, terrified.

POLLY. I hear that and bang. I'm not good with rules.

VIOLET. Concentrate.

PROFESSOR. Concentrate!

POLLY. Tell you what. What if I say – Face!

VIOLET. What?

POLLY. To help me concentrate. Like the corree-whatsit, but on the spot. Face!

POLLY lands a hit on VIOLET's face. VIOLET shakes off the punch, a little stunned, but getting it.

VIOLET. So you mean, I say – Jaw!

She says it too early, giving POLLY chance to block her.

POLLY. Got to be faster than that, doc.

PROFESSOR. Come on, Polly!

PAUL. Finish her off!

POLLY glances away at them.

VIOLET. Jaw!

She delivers a swift upper-cut to POLLY's jaw.

POLLY. You're getting it. Now get this. Heart!

The fight really begins. They run through a series of moves as they call the shots. It's awkward, staggered, at first, but gradually gets into a rhythm and then catches fire. They're equal and in tune, it becomes something sublime. Total collaboration. Until –

Heart!

She lands a hard one on VIOLET, who takes it well and instantly trades her hardest one back.

VIOLET. Heart!

Her blow stops POLLY's heart. Everything stops. POLLY drops to the floor, knocked out. VIOLET is triumphant. MATTY starts the count.

MATTY. One, two, three, four –

PAUL. Polly, get up!

MATTY. Five, six, seven –

Still counting up to ten, MATTY realises there's something wrong with POLLY. She looks at PAUL, who reads her concern –

PAUL. Polly!

He goes to get in the ring. The PROFESSOR holds him back, calls out.

PROFESSOR. Doctor!

VIOLET doesn't hear, doesn't realise what's going on. MATTY comes to her –

MATTY. Violet – you're a doctor – do something!

VIOLET sees POLLY – not moving. VIOLET pulls off her gloves and goes to her, checks her breath, pulse, tries to revive her – fails.

ANNA enters at back, in her cloak (no mask).

VIOLET finally tries the sweet sock – once – twice – still nothing – she looks back at MATTY –

MATTY. Keep going – keep going!

VIOLET tries one last time –

The sweetest sock. POLLY's heartbeat kicks in. She jolts up, gasping, coughing –

POLLY. What happened?

VIOLET. You lost, Polly! You lost...

VIOLET holds POLLY, laughing and crying. The crowd cheers. MATTY announces –

MATTY. And the winner is – Violet Hunter, the one and only Lady Boxing Champion of the World.

*She holds out her hand to VIOLET, to lead her to the front.
A beat, then VIOLET announces –*

VIOLET. Matilda Blackwell, the one and only Lady Boxing Champion of the World.

She takes MATTY's hand. A beat, then she holds her other hand out to POLLY.

Polly Stokes, the one and only Lady Boxing Champion of the World.

POLLY takes VIOLET's hand – and holds out her other hand to –

POLLY. Anna Lamb.

ANNA comes forward, takes POLLY's hand. The four women all speak in unison –

POLLY, MATTY, VIOLET and ANNA. The one and only Lady Boxing Champion of the World.

Beat. ANNA holds her hand out to the PROFESSOR –

ANNA. And Professor Charlie Sharp, champion of lady boxers.

The PROFESSOR smiles, takes her hand. Inspired, PAUL steps up and joins hands. United, they all look out at the audience.

PROFESSOR. Ladies and gentlemen, there will be no more fighting tonight.

MATTY. But tomorrow, the fight goes on...

They raise their hands, and we hear the sound of hooves galloping, as the lights go down.

The End.