

Joanne

By Al Harder

Mike Wilson hadn't expected to be mauled.

Oh, he'd been ready for a hard fight -- everyone knew that the women at the Palace were tough and strong.

He just wasn't ready for the sheer ferocity of the woman he was paired with that night.

The place was called Sheena's Palace -- it was decked out with fake jungle decor, and the hostess, Sheena -- a tall, athletic brunette -- walked around in a tiger-print thong bikini. She'd inherited some money from some dead aunt sometime back and started this fight club. Nobody knew her real name, but rumors abounded about her past -- she'd been in the Marines; no, the Army Special Forces; no, the Navy SEALs. She'd killed seven men with a knife; no, it was a dozen men and she'd used a knife for some and a garotte for the rest; no, two dozen with her bare hands.

Whatever the truth, Sheena kept it to herself. Her business now was running a fight club. She'd gathered some of the strongest, toughest women in the world and threw them in the ring against all comers -- male, female, it didn't matter. There were two dozen women on her payroll at the moment. She also had a semi-regular group of men who filled out cards when not enough outside challenges came in. Mike Wilson was one of these guys.

He didn't particularly like getting beaten by women -- hell, he didn't like getting beat, period. He was a former pro boxer who'd been accused of taking a dive in a fight. Truth was, he hadn't done it. The promoter had bribed his trainer, a guy Mike had trusted, to put something into the water bottle that made him groggy enough for his opponent -- a club fighter who had no business in the ring with Mike -- to knock him out. When the investigation started, the promoter told the commission that he'd paid Mike to take the dive, and the commission believed the sleazebag.

Anyway, Sheena had approached him and offered to keep him on salary if he'd make himself available to fight once a week or so. He also got a purse for every bout, win or

lose -- though the winner's share was greater, so the men had an incentive to try their damndest to win. It was decent money, and he had no other offers, so he'd agreed. Along the way he'd picked up some wrestling and martial arts training -- some from Sheena's other employees, but mostly from Sheena, who really knew her stuff.

He'd won two matches, both straight boxing, had one draw and a whole lot of losses at Sheena's place. Mike always gave a good account of himself in his matches, though, and he fought to win. Most of the women Sheena had found could beat just about any man Mike had ever seen, and he didn't feel ashamed at losing. And the matches weren't fixed -- it was skill against skill, may the better fighter win.

He still didn't like to lose, though.

The call from Sheena had come through about noon. "Mike? Sheena. You available tonight?"

"Yeah, what's up?"

"The usual -- not enough challenges. I've got a new fighter who's supposed to debut tonight and nobody to fight her. You game?" Sheena asked.

"Absolutely. What kind of match?"

"Freestyle." That meant a combination of wrestling, boxing, and martial arts, with only a few rules. "She's about your size," Sheena added. Mike knew that meant little -- he'd seen two hundred and fifty pound men get trashed by women who weighed half that, but the men in question had no real training. "You'll be on last." That was good and bad -- good, because the last match was usually the "main event" and commanded a higher fee, bad because it meant the woman must be damn good.

"Great," Mike said. "I'll be there."

"See you," Sheena said, then hung up. Mike trained light that day and took a nap in the afternoon. By the time he got to the Palace he was well-rested and ready to go.

Sheena's Palace was on the outskirts of the city. Not really part of any town, the piece of land bordered the city and two of its suburbs. Not too far off the main highway, and with a good access road and large parking lot. Mike pulled into the employee's lot and locked his Camaro. He noticed Linda Anderson locking up her 'Vette and waited for her to join him. Linda was one of Sheena's best fighters, a black belt in taekwondo. She and Mike had met three times, each time resulting in a victory for the broad-shouldered redhead. They'd developed a mutual respect and had been lovers for a while, but were now simply close friends.

Linda was six-one in her stocking feet, and her costume tonight included boots with four-inch heels. Well-muscled arms stretched the silk of her blouse, and her long, sinewy legs looked even longer in her miniskirt. She grinned down at Mike and ruffled his brown hair. "Hey, pal, what's up?"

"Not much, Lin. Keeping pretty busy with my business."

"How's the market for personal trainers these days?"

"Real good -- everyone's trying to sweat off the Thanksgiving dinner."

Linda laughed. "And in a couple of weeks they'll get tired of all the hard work and fire your ass, right?"

Mike grinned back. "You got it. At least it keeps me in shape -- gotta show 'em what they can accomplish if they try, right?" They linked arms and headed for the building.

The "Palace" was a two-story brick building, fairly good sized. The back -- the part the customers never saw -- was filled to overflowing with practice and training facilities, all state of the art. The arena, where the bouts took place, resembled a theatre in the round -- a circular platform with an octagonal ring, surrounded by plush seating for three hundred. The balcony consisted of a dozen "luxury suites" -- small suites with couches, wet bars, telephones, televisions, the works. These were reserved for the "gold circle" subscribers to Sheena's club.

One of the perks of having a luxury suite was the availability of "instant replays" of all the matches, in slo-mo if you wanted it, from every camera angle imaginable. The patrons

could ask for a tape of the bouts too -- for a fee. God knew -- as did the gold circle club members -- what Sheena charged for the luxury boxes and the tapes. The lowest price for one of the seats "downstairs" was five hundred dollars a night.

The outside of the Palace was unadorned -- not even a sign to proclaim what it was. Those people Sheena wanted to allow in knew where and what it was, and that was enough.

Mike asked Linda who she was fighting. "I've been challenged by some guy who's into Muay-Thai boxing," she said. "He says he's gonna knock me out in three rounds."

They both had a laugh at that -- Linda had never been knocked off her feet since Mike had met her, and he didn't think there were many people who could even come close to doing it. Six-one and a hundred ninety pounds, she was rock hard and lightning fast. "Should be easy money," he told her.

"What about you?" she asked.

"I don't know who I'm fighting -- Sheena says it's somebody new."

"Yeah, I've seen somebody around the last few days -- she looks pretty tough. Watch yourself." Linda ruffled his hair again and said, "Meet you for drinks later?"

"Sure," he replied, then headed to the men's locker room.

He was the only regular to be fighting tonight, he saw. There were five other men in the room, all strangers. He figured the man in the purple trunks was the guy Linda had drawn -- he was shadow boxing in front of a mirror. Big guy, maybe six-five and two sixty. Mike watched him warming up and shook his head. "Too slow, meat," he thought to himself. Linda would make mincemeat out of him.

The men went out one by one as their matches were called. Mike got dressed -- navy blue trunks and white boots -- and carefully taped his left wrist. He'd sprained it a couple of weeks before when he'd punched his opponent in the stomach and she'd just tightened her abs -- it had felt like hitting a brick wall, and the right cross she'd thrown in response had dropped him to the mat for the ten count. The wrist was okay, but Mike

wanted to make sure he didn't re-injure it. The guys came back, mostly the worse for wear. One staggered badly as he was assisted to a bench. "What happened?" Mike asked the attendant.

"Dumb-ass didn't give up when Sheila locked him in a neck scissors," was the response. Mike could only laugh. Sheila was a seventeen year old powerlifter, and her legs were legendary even though she'd only been fighting for three months. She didn't know just how strong she was, and sometimes got carried away when her opponent didn't surrender immediately. The usual result was that her opponent then got carried away -- often on a stretcher. "She knocked him out without realizing it."

Then it was just Mike and the guy in purple. "Good luck," Mike said as the other man's match was called. Mike peeked through the curtains. Linda was in an emerald green sports bra and trunks. Her rock-hard body seemed to glow under the lights, her muscles rippling under her creamy skin.

The 'match' didn't even go the three rounds the man had predicted. He'd tried some kicks to her thighs, but Linda's return kicks nearly collapsed his legs. After Linda bloodied his nose and blackened one eye with a barrage of punches and kicks in the first round, she knocked him out with a devastating overhand right early in the second. Mike caught her eye and gave her a thumb's up. She grinned at him and mouthed, "Easy money."

Attendants revived the man and helped him to the back. Sheena climbed into the ring and grabbed the mike. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is the final bout of the evening. A freestyle match, most knockouts, pins, and submissions gained in a one hour time period wins. Introducing first, at five feet ten and one hundred ninety-five pounds, one of our regulars, Mike Wilson!"

Mike trotted down the aisle, acknowledging the applause and good-natured booing that greeted him. Most of the people in the crowd were here to see the women win, and the guys usually got razed. A few of the women in the audience let out with wolf whistles, and Mike grinned. "Still got it," he thought.

"Mike's opponent is making her debut at Sheena's Palace," Sheena continued. "She is five feet eight inches tall and weighs one hundred eighty-two pounds, please welcome Joanne Lewis!"

Mike recognized the name immediately. He thought back over what he'd heard of her career.

Joanne Lewis was a legend in women's sports.

She was British, had exploded on the powerlifting scene at fourteen when she'd set the world records for her weight class in the squat and bench press. At sixteen the British Olympic Committee had approached her about competing in the shotput. With less than a month of training, and with her technique leaving something to be desired, she'd nonetheless set a women's world and Olympic record in the event. There were suggestions of steroid use, but she'd passed her drug tests with no problems, then taken a lie-detector test and stated unequivocally that she'd never taken performance-enhancing drugs. She'd passed that as well.

At eighteen she'd turned to bodybuilding. The hard-core fans loved her, with her great looks and incredible physique, but she was too "extreme" for the judges. She also had a temper. After overhearing one judge wondering when she'd "had her operation -- no real woman could have muscles like that", she'd pinned him against a wall with one arm and taken a handful of his gonads with the other. "Maybe you should have **your** operation right now!" she'd hissed.

She was convinced to let him go, but her bodybuilding career was over after only six months.

Since she'd had karate training since age four, she'd decided to try professional boxing. The trouble was, there were no other women in her weight class and no commission would sanction a match against a man -- her real goal. She'd entered the "World's Toughest Woman" contest, which had no weight classes, and won easily. Her final match was against a big American farm girl who outweighed her by thirty pounds.

The girl never had a chance.

Early in the second round the American, who'd been pummeled badly in the first round, tried a left jab. The British girl's overhand right crashed into the American's chin, dropping her to the canvas like a sack of potatoes. The referee had immediately stopped

the contest and called for a doctor. The American girl got off fairly lightly -- a slight concussion and one tooth knocked out.

This didn't lead to more fights, though, since now nobody wanted to climb into the ring with her. Going on to the women's Ultimate Fighting Championship, she'd become the champion with little trouble. Her ferocious attack in the first match -- she'd lifted the other woman (who outweighed her by fifty pounds) upside down, tossed her to the mat, then dropped onto the women's back and wrenched at her arm, dislocating the shoulder -- totally intimidated the other women in the contest. She'd barely had to touch them before they surrendered so she couldn't hurt them.

Professional wrestling beckoned, hoping to make money on her reputation, but she spent only a week as a pro wrestler before she'd nearly crushed a promoter's throat for suggesting she throw a match to the women's champ.

Joanne Lewis was just twenty-one and she was a legend.

And now she was coming to Sheena's Palace to do what she'd never been allowed to do before.

Fight a man.

Mike edged closer to Sheena and murmured, "Fink. No wonder you wouldn't tell me who it was."

"Now, now," the tall woman replied, "no need for that. I had to find a match for her, and you're the best man I could find. She insisted on a man, by the way," Sheena added before Mike could ask why she hadn't set Joanne up against another woman.

Joanne Lewis wanted to prove a point.

A product of incredible genetics -- her mother and father had been circus people, the father a catcher for an aerial act, the mother doing a strong woman act -- she'd also had the benefit of hard physical work to build her strength.

It's not easy putting up the big top and tearing it down again, and everybody has to help, even the kids. Joanne had been doing it since she was five -- the year after she'd started karate training with one of the tumblers, who had a black belt and was willing to teach her. As a result, she was even stronger than her muscular physique might indicate. Bodybuilders don't train for strength, they train for symmetry and beauty. Sure, they're stronger than someone who doesn't train at all, but put them next to a powerlifter or someone who did hard physical work and they didn't match up.

Joanne was strong first and a bodybuilder later. Strength came from her genes as well as the hard work she'd done.

And all her life men had been telling her she couldn't do things.

Not her dad -- he was terrific, encouraging her to try her hardest at whatever she did. But other men tried to deny her the chance to do what she wanted to.

It was a woman who'd spotted her strength in the circus. Joanne was a member of the tumbling troupe by that time and her special act was to hold five other tumblers -- men and women -- up in a type of pyramid with one girl as the only support. The woman had suggested that Joanne train at powerlifting, and two years later she'd set her records. It was another woman -- the former British lady's shotput champ -- who'd suggested to the British Olympic Committee that they ask Joanne to train and compete in that event. The men on the Committee had been skeptical, but since Joanne was the only woman who volunteered for the event, they'd reluctantly agreed. The only comment by a member of the committee after the Olympics was, "Not bad, young lady. But you're going to have to work on your technique if you wish to remain on the team." No, thanks, thought Joanne. Too many other things to do.

During this time she'd blossomed into a classic British beauty -- except for the massive muscles she showed off with her sleeveless tops and miniskirts. She decided to sculpt her body, treating it like fine art. She worked hard, until her body resembled a drawing in an anatomy book. All the muscles were visible, rock hard and bulging. Encouraged, she'd entered a bodybuilding contest where the fans cheered wildly for her every second she was on stage.

She finished eighth out of nine. "Not symmetrical enough," the judges said publicly. "Too much muscle," they said privately.

In her second contest a judge made an insulting remark and she'd threatened to remove his reproductive equipment. The resulting banishment had turned her off any sport where the results were determined by any judge. Head-to-head competition, may the better athlete win -- that was better.

Boxing caught her fancy. But women's boxing was still in its infancy. That American woman -- billed as the "pound for pound champ" -- wouldn't get in the ring with her. She claimed it was because of the forty pound weight difference. "Fine," Joanne replied. "Get someone in my weight class -- a man, preferably."

"Oh my dear, that just isn't done," came the reply from the boxing establishment. "Now just run along -- someday there may be a woman who's in your weight class who'll box with you."

The Toughwoman Championship was a joke -- most of the women involved were Americans, most were "club fighters" in small gyms, and most had no business in the ring. And the rounds were only one minute long! None of her matches had gone more than two rounds before the referee stopped them or her opponent was on her back counting the ring lights.

The UFC promised to be more of a challenge, but her savage treatment of her first opponent caused the other competitors --all supposedly tough, courageous fighters -- to fear getting in the cage with her. She'd barely had to twist an arm or leg before they'd given up.

Pro wrestling offered a great deal of money, and Joanne had jumped to grab it. Then the unfortunate incident when the loudmouthed jerk who promoted matches in Southampton suggested she "job" to another woman. "Everybody does it when they're rookies," he'd told her.

"I don't," she'd replied. When he'd tried to explain that it was best for the business, she'd taken his throat and told him, "I only do what's best for me." The men running the show paid her off to leave.

She'd returned to the circus where she joined her mom in the strongwoman act, but before too long she was bored bending iron bars and snapping chains with her biceps. Then she received a letter from America.

It was signed Sheena. She offered Joanne a guaranteed contract -- however often she wanted to fight, against either a man or a woman, any rules Joanne wanted. Joanne called the number in the letter and had a long talk with Sheena, who explained about the fighting clubs.

They were mostly in the States, though there were several in Germany and Scandinavia as well. None in stodgy old England. The clubs put on private fights -- sometimes between women, sometimes women against men. "Who runs your club?" Joanne asked Sheena.

"Me," came the response.

"You don't front for a man, do you?"

Sheena laughed. "Honey, there ain't a man alive who could convince me to front for them. I do what I want, when I want, where I want."

"That's my philosophy too," the British girl told her. "By the way, I'll only fight men."

Sheena wired her the money for the ticket and Joanne packed her bags and headed for America.

She heard Sheena announce her name and murmured, "Time to prove a point." Pulling the curtain aside, she started for the ring and the man she would use to prove her point.

The curtains leading to the women's locker room parted and a broad-shouldered blonde woman emerged. Her hair was tied back in a pony tail. She was dressed in a peach-colored sports bra under a black wrestling singlet, emphasizing her thick chest and showing off her washboard abs. The singlet had been customized -- Mike had never seen one with a thong-back before. The high-cut legs of the costume showed Joanne's thick, vascular thighs to great advantage. Peach-colored wrestling boots completed the ensemble.

Joanne's skin was a golden tan, and she showed the results of great genetics and hard work -- her muscles were huge and incredibly defined. Mike swallowed hard -- damn, she looked incredible. She didn't smile or acknowledge the cheers as she trotted to the ring, and the slight pucker of her brow indicated she was concentrating on the match ahead.

Mike was impressed, but not intimidated. He knew he was in for a hard match, but determined that Joanne would also have a tough time in the ring.

Sheena went over the rules -- no choking, the groin was off limits, no eye-gouging, no hair pulling, one minute rest between falls or knockouts, etc. "English rules for the pins -- you must hold your opponent down until they submit to the pin." Mike stared at his feet, not making eye contact with his opponent. Finally Sheena said, "Okay, let's have a good match. Shake hands and come out fighting."

Mike looked up to find Joanne's pale blue eyes staring at him, He held out a fist and Joanne tapped it with hers in a fighter's handshake. "Nothing personal," the blonde murmured in a low, melodious voice with an intriguing English accent, "but I'm going to hurt you."

There was no mistaking the steely resolve in that voice. Mike said nothing, just turned and walked away.

Sheena signaled for the bell and the match started. Joanne quickly moved to the center of the ring, and Mike met her there. They feinted and grabbed at each other, but neither was able to get a clean hold. Joanne held up her hands, offering a test of strength, but Mike remembered this woman's reputation and shook his head with a grin. She shrugged and they continued to grab at each other's arms. Then Mike took a step toward the blonde, grabbing at her leg.

Joanne surprised him with her speed. Before he could react she'd grabbed him behind the head with one hand. Joanne easily pulled his head down so it rested against her lower abdomen, then wrapped her arms around his waist. With no sign that she was straining at all she snapped him up and held him upside down, her arms crushing his midsection with amazing force.

Before Sheena could ask Mike if he wanted to give up, Joanne tossed him to the mat. Mike flew several feet and landed hard on his stomach. He lay there for an instant, and that was all it took. Joanne dropped her full weight across his back. Levering herself up slightly, she rose a foot or so in the air and then dropped on him again. Whatever air had remained in Mike's lungs after the inverted bearhug quickly exited, and he gasped for breath.

Joanne dropped herself onto Mike's back twice more, using her granite-hard body as a battering ram. Then she got up and stepped back. He looked up at her and she beckoned him to rise. The frown of concentration still puckered her brow, he noticed. He slowly got to his hands and knees, then rose to his feet.

Joanne waited until he was fully upright before she attacked. He tried to push her away, but she brushed his arms aside as if they were toothpicks. Wrapping her own arms around him just under the rib cage, Joanne lifted him off his feet as if he weighed nothing.

Mike grunted in pain as her biceps dug into his sides. Locking her hands into a double-fist, Joanne slammed them into his back, then let up for a second and repeated the move. Mike felt as if his back was on fire. He pushed at her chin, trying to force her to release the hold, but Joanne slammed his back with her fists three more times. "Remove your hand or I'll break you in half," she growled, and Mike believed her. His strength waning fast, he dropped his arms to his sides. Again Sheena moved in to see if Mike wanted to give up, but before she could ask him the question Joanne tossed him halfway across the ring.

He was on his back now, and totally defenseless when Joanne dropped her hundred eighty-two pounds on top of him. Once again she used her body to batter him, dropping on him twice more before standing up and stepping back. "Come on," he heard her say. "Get up."

He rose slowly to his feet, gasping for breath. She stepped in and pulled his head down again, this time holding it between her thighs but not squeezing. Then she wrapped her arms around his torso again and kicked her legs back, dropping to her knees. Mike had nowhere to go but down.

After relaxing the grip of her arms slightly, she suddenly pulled up with all her strength. Her locked hands crashed into his sternum with frightening force, and he was crushed between her arms and her thick chest. Joanne repeated the brutal move twice more, driving more air from Mike's lungs.

She let him go and, deprived of the support of her arms, he fell to his face. Hearing a grunt from his opponent, he had an idea of what was coming next.

Sure enough, she dropped across his back, crushing him to the mat. Her body was the consistency of granite and Mike was being battered unconscious by her tactics. Again and again she dropped on him, finally relenting and rising to her feet.

"Up," was all she said.

He tried -- he honestly tried -- to get up but his body wouldn't listen to what his brain was telling it. Joanne shrugged and bent over him. Wrapping those massive arms around him again, she picked him up so he dangled upside down, helpless. Another grunt of effort from the British woman and he flew ass-over-teakettle for several feet before he crashed to the mat. Then Joanne was seated on his chest, her hands wrapped around his wrists, holding him firmly to the canvas.

Mike kicked and struggled, but there was no way he was going to dislodge her -- especially since her thick thighs were on either side of his torso, ready to scissor him if he was foolish enough to try a bridge. "You're pinned," Joanne told him.

"You're right," he responded. "I submit to the pin."

Sheena called for the bell. "First fall, by pin, to Joanne Lewis," she announced. "There will be a one minute rest period."

Joanne rose gracefully and stalked to her corner, not offering to help him up. Sheena grinned and hauled Mike to his feet, then asked him, "Whaddya think so far?"

"Shit," Mike gasped. "I hope I last an hour. She plays rough."

"Dirty?" Sheena asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Nope, clean but very rough. If you'll excuse me, I'm a bit behind on my breathing." He made it to his corner and sipped some water. "How do I handle her?" he wondered. "Hell, I'd better just worry about making it through in one piece." He glanced at the clock, surprised that less than fifteen minutes had passed. It had seemed like a lot longer than that when he was being bashed around by the British bombshell across the ring.

"It's gonna be a long night," he thought as the bell rang for the second fall.

He turned to find Joanne rushing across the ring at him. He retreated, trying to fend her off, but she caught one of his arms and pulled him in. Then those arms went around him again and she went back to crushing the life out of his body. Hammering her clenched fists into his back several times, she quickly had Mike gasping for breath. A quick toss to the canvas, then she dropped on him -- seven, eight, nine times in quick succession she lifted herself up and dropped back down until Mike could feel the bruises forming on his chest. Joanne used her iron-hard body to hammer him into a pulp, and Mike couldn't do anything about it. Then she locked her arms around his head and pulled his face into her chest. He felt her pectoral muscles swell as she crushed his head in her brutal embrace. He'd almost blacked out when he heard Sheena ask if he wanted to submit to the pin. His "No" was muffled by Joanne's chest, but Sheena heard him.

"That was foolish," the blonde murmured deep in her chest. He felt her legs snake around his, then she'd grapevined him and was spreading her legs out, nearly splitting him in two. She released his head and Mike was able to take a deep breath. Her hands on either side of his head, Joanne lifted her hips and then slammed them down into his belly, and the breath he'd just taken left his body in a rush. Five, six, seven, eight -- Mike lost count of the number of times Joanne pistoned her hips into his weakening body. Lowering her chest, Joanne wrapped her arms around his head again and pulled his face into her chest hard. Once again Mike heard Sheena's voice ask if he wanted to submit to the pin. He couldn't respond -- there wasn't enough air in his lungs to say anything. He "tapped out" -- slapped the mat with one hand, the signal for surrender.

Joanne immediately released him and rose. Mike noticed a red stain on her peach-colored top and knew it was his blood --he could feel a trickle from his nose. "The winner of the second fall, by pin, Joanne Lewis. She leads two falls to none," Sheena announced, holding Joanne's hand in the air.

Mike rolled over and tried to stand. It took him three tries before he could get to his feet and he could stagger to his corner. Glancing at the clock, he saw that Joanne had beaten him in less than five minutes this time -- there were over forty minutes left. "At this rate she'll beat me seven falls to none," he thought. "Damn!" He was sweating profusely and he wiped the moisture off with a towel. A glance across the ring showed Joanne breathing calmly. She wasn't sweating at all -- the only sign she'd been in any kind of a fight was the smear of blood on her bra.

Sheena went to Joanne's corner. "Impressive," was all she said.

"Thank you."

"How badly are you going to beat him?"

"I'm here to make a statement," Joanne replied calmly. "I'm going to show everyone just what I'm capable of."

"Don't kill him, okay?" Sheena said, only half kidding. "The paperwork's murder."

Joanne smiled slightly. "Very well, if you insist," she replied. "I'll just torture him a bit." She adjusted her suit, stretching the thong between her legs. "Bloody thing's a bit small," she complained. "Really cuts into me."

"Guess you'll just have to live with it," Sheena said.

"Quite."

Then it was time to go back to work.

The bell rang to open the third fall and Mike decided to be more aggressive. He charged at Joanne and drove a shoulder into her unyielding belly, but he was able to pick her off her feet. Wrapping both arms around her tree-trunk thighs, Mike straightened up. Joanne was draped across one shoulder, her head dangling down his back. Mike spun around twice in the hopes of making her dizzy, then dumped Joanne to the canvas.

When he turned Joanne was on her back, looking winded and vulnerable. Mike dropped all his weight on her, giving her a taste of her own medicine. He lay across Joanne's thick chest in a good pinning position. He scissored one of her arms, then struggled to keep her pinned to the mat.

Joanne kicked her legs, nearly dislodging him. Mike reached back with one arm, trying to capture one of her legs and cradle her. He realized his mistake when Joanne crossed her ankles, scissoring the arm. A quick flex of her titanic thighs and his hand went numb. Mike moaned and tried to pull his arm free but Joanne's legs had it locked tight.

"Having a spot of bother?" Joanne asked. She freed her arm from between Mike's legs with little difficulty and sat up, rolling Mike to his back. "That wasn't a bad move, actually," she said conversationally. "It just won't work on someone as strong as me. Pity." She maneuvered her body so it was across his chest, his arm still trapped by her legs. "Ready for some more pain?" she inquired pleasantly.

Then she raised up a bit and dropped across him again. Her hundred eighty-two pounds of bone and muscle drove the air from his lungs once more. "You always seem to be short of breath," Joanne murmured as she dropped across him with a grunt. A third, fourth, fifth time her body smashed into him until Mike was wheezing and gasping for air.

Then she released his arm and swung her body across his lengthwise so they lay chest to chest. She forced Mike's arms over his head and pinned the wrists to the mat, using just one hand. With the other she brushed a tendril of hair out of her face. Mike struggled to free himself, but couldn't get loose. Then he made a mistake.

He tried to bridge her off.

He'd forgotten about her legs, those thick, powerful legs which were on either side of his body. So far she hadn't really used her legs. Her arms and rock-hard body had done most of the damage to him. But now she wrapped those oak-tree thighs around him and locked her ankles.

"Oops," she said. "I really don't think you wanted to do that." And she squeezed.

"You're right," he gasped as her legs bit into his sides. Pain unlike any he'd experienced before wracked his torso as she slowly increased the pressure.

Mike had been trapped in body scissors before. Many times. By many women. Strong women. Women like Sheila, who could leg press three-quarters of a ton. For reps.

But none of them compared to the agony he was feeling with his body trapped between this British woman's mancrushers.

Mike almost passed out from the pain, and he whimpered softly as Joanne's huge thighs pythoned his midsection. Fortunately for him Sheena was close by, because his "I give" couldn't have been heard more than five feet away.

Sheena called for the bell and ordered Joanne to release him, which she did immediately. "Third fall, by submission, to Joanne Lewis. She leads, three falls to none."

For almost the entire one minute rest period Mike lay on the canvas. "Want some help?" Sheena asked, offering him a hand.

"No thanks, it hurts too much to stand," he gasped. "Ask me again just before the next fall starts."

Sheena said, "Then you'd better get up now -- next fall in ten seconds."

Mike took her hand. "Damn," he said, "time flies when you're having fun."

She heaved him to his feet. He winced as he felt his sides. "Anything busted?" Sheena asked.

"If there is will you stop the fight?" She shook her head. "Didn't think so. Anyway, nothing's broke." Then the bell rang.

Mike decided to play to his strength and took up a boxing stance. Joanne raised an eyebrow. "Want to box? Is that your specialty?" she asked in that lovely accented voice.

He nodded.

"It won't help," she told him, bringing her own fists up. Mike snapped out a jab that was short, then another that Joanne slipped. They began to circle. Mike tried to stay at long range, since he had a slight reach advantage. Joanne easily slapped his hands aside or just moved her head, making him miss. "You're pretty good," she told him.

"Stand still and I'll show you how good," he growled.

"You just aren't in my class," she told him.

The fans were getting restless. "Come on, quit dancing and fight," one female voice rang out above the general hubbub.

Mike tried another quick jab and it caught her on the cheek. He slipped her counterpunch, then tried a hook that Joanne took on her deltoid. Mike's fist bounced off, doing no damage, then he avoided her uppercut, leaning back just out of the way. Gaining confidence by the second, Mike stepped in and fired a vicious right to the body.

It never arrived.

Joanne's left hook, thrown over his lowered right arm, crashed into his jaw and snapped his head around. His legs went noodly, and he staggered back for ten feet. He looked up and saw three blondes in peach and black moving in. He couldn't decide which he should try to hit.

He never saw the left uppercut that landed in his belly and lifted him off his feet, nor the follow-up right that hammered him to the mat. He lay there, face down, trying to unscramble his brain.

Since one of the ways to win a fall in this type of match was by knockout, Sheena waved Joanne to a neutral corner and started to count. When she reached ten Mike had rolled over and was struggling to sit up. Sheena called for the bell. "Fourth fall, by knockout, to Joanne Lewis," she announced.

Kneeling beside Mike, Sheena snapped open the smelling salts she carried -- nobody knew exactly where she concealed it, her "jungle queen" getup didn't have much slack in it -- and waved it under his nose. He snapped his head to the side -- something he

regretted when it felt like his head exploded in pain. "You okay?" he heard Sheena ask -- it sounded like she was across the room, but he could see her right next to him. He wanted to ask her when she'd learned to throw her voice, but she waved the bottle under his nose again and asked, "Mike! You okay?" This time she sounded like she was next to him again.

"Yeah, just fine," he lied, and she helped him up.

"Grab a drink," she told him, glancing at the clock. "In another fifteen seconds the next fall starts.

Mike grabbed the water bottle in his corner and squirted some into his mouth. When he spit into the bucket, the water was pink. Feeling carefully, he found his lip was bleeding slightly and a molar was loose. "Add a split lip and loose tooth to the bloody nose," he thought. Glancing at the clock, he saw that the next (Fifth? He was beginning to lose track.) fall was about to start, and that the British bomber across the ring had knocked him down and out in less than three minutes -- there were still thirty-one minutes left in the match. "Once more into the breach," he thought as the bell rang.

Mike went out and tried to grapple with his muscular opponent, but Joanne would have none of it. A quick grab behind the head, arms around the body, a sudden heave and he was dangling upside down again. Adjusting her grip, Joanne raised him even higher so his back was across one of her shoulders.

Mike's back complained to him about this mistreatment, but he was fairly helpless to do anything about it. He kicked his legs and waved his arms, hoping he could dislodge himself. And miracle of miracles, it worked!

Joanne was unable to keep him across her shoulder and unlocked her arms. Unfortunately for Mike, that meant a five foot drop to the hard ring. He tried to rise, but Joanne was on top of him immediately, her body slamming into his and pounding him against the mat.

Then he felt her arms snaking around his and frantically tried to get loose. A full nelson from this brawny British beauty might actually dislocate his shoulders. "Stop wiggling,"

Joanne grumbled. A couple more body drops and Mike was too winded to struggle any further. Then, the full nelson secured, Joanne stood up, taking Mike with her.

Mike dangled from Joanne's arms like a rag doll. Leaning back, Joanne lifted Mike off his feet. The pressure on his neck and shoulders was unbelievable. "Give," Joanne ordered. Mike moaned as she pushed his head further forward. "Come on, give."

"Aaaarrrrrrggggghhhh!"

"I said GIVE!"

"Aaaarrrrrrggggghhhh!"

"GIVE DAMN YOU!"

"AAAARRRRRRGGGGHHHH! Okay, okay, I give! I GIVE!"

Joanne released him and he crumpled to the mat. Sheena announced that the fifth fall was history and Joanne had won yet again. The brunette knelt next to Mike. "Twenty-three minutes to go," she whispered. "You gonna make it?"

"I'll do my best, boss," he groaned.

"Look, I didn't know that she was going to be so dominating. If you want, I'll stop the match."

"I've never done that and I never will," Mike told her. "I'll go the distance."

"You don't have to prove anything to anybody," Sheena told him.

"Just to myself," he replied. At that moment the bell for the sixth fall sounded.

Joanne didn't wait until Mike was on his feet -- the rules in this match didn't say anything about a fighter being on his feet to start a fall. She grabbed an arm and pulled him across her broad shoulders, face down. Two spins to dizzy him some more and she dumped him

to the canvas. He fought his way to his knees and reached out his hands, ready to grapple with her.

Joanne took his hands and they were locked in a test of strength that was no contest. In his weakened state Mike had no chance. It was unlikely he'd have had a chance if he was at a hundred percent.

Joanne rotated her wrists outward and bent his hands back, torturing him. She enjoyed the feeling of power as this man --who represented to her all the men who'd told her she couldn't do things -- groveled before her in misery. "Get up," she told him, releasing his hands and pulling him to his feet.

Mike closed with her, his spirit unbroken although his body was battered and bruised. She pushed him to the side and he nearly fell. Then she wrapped her enormous right arm around his head and they crashed to the mat.

Mike was trapped under her. Her arm was locked around his head, the forearm against his cheekbone on one side, her bulging bicep on the other side. She locked her hands together and began to really squeeze.

The patrons in the luxury boxes leaned forward as one as the camera zoomed in. Veins were bulging under the skin of her forearms, the thick sinews beneath forcing them to the surface until it seemed as if they'd burst through her skin. The bicep of Joanne's left arm grew to gargantuan proportions as she crushed Mike's skull in her steely grip -- the onlookers could only imagine what damage the bicep of her other arm, the one jammed against Mike's face, was doing to the man.

Joanne moved slightly and the camera zoomed in further until Mike's face filled the screens. It was contorted both from the pain he was suffering and the sheer force that was being exerted by Joanne's eighteen inch biceps. It was turning from red to a shade of purple, and the gasps from that tortured face were picked up by the microphones until they filled the arena.

Joanne groaned with the effort of trying to pulverize the man's head, and Mike's face distorted even more from the pressure she applied. Sheena watched in amazement,

wondering just how strong this woman was, and just how much Mike could take before something in there broke.

Joanne worked her right arm like a pump handle, and the bicep responded by becoming even larger and harder. Sweat poured from Mike's face as if Joanne were squeezing him dry -- and maybe she was. She was sweating as well, from the effort of crushing the man's head.

"Give up," Joanne demanded. She knew no one living could stand up to this hold. She applied another ounce of pressure on his trapped skull and he moaned. "I said give up," she said.

Sheena leaned close to hear Mike's response, but all that escaped his lips was an soft "uuuunnnnnhhhh". "You're not going anywhere," Joanne said, and Sheena knew that she was talking for the microphones. Mike was beyond hearing her. "Give up!"

Breath wheezed from Mike's mouth as the uneven battle between his skull and Joanne's arms went on. Now Joanne shifted position again and lay atop him, adding her hundred eighty-two pounds of weight to the pressure on Mike's trapped head. "Give, damn it!" Joanne commanded again.

"Huuurrrrtssssss," Mike whimpered. "Huuuuurrrrrrtssssss."

"I know it hurts," the brutal blonde told him. "And it's going to hurt worse if you don't give up."

"Huuuuurrrrrrtssss." Mike raised one arm and tried weakly to indicate his surrender -- he could hear nothing beyond the roaring in his ears and didn't know Joanne had been demanding his surrender for the last several moments. He was almost too far gone, but the arm raised an inch and then fell to the mat.

Sheena leaned close and screamed at Mike, "DO YOU GIVE UP?"

Her loud voice barely penetrated through the roaring in his ears. "Yyyeessssssssssssss," Mike sighed.

That was enough for Sheena. "That's the end of the fall," she announced, standing up. She was surprised when Joanne didn't release Mike immediately. "Joanne, he submitted! Let him go!"

"I didn't hear him."

"I did! Let him go now!"

"Oh -- all right." Joanne unlocked her arms and Mike's head limply hit the mat with a soft thud. Joanne rose to her feet and looked down at the man lying at her feet in a crumpled heap.

"Next time you let go when I tell you," Sheena hissed as she raised Joanne's arm.

"I'm sorry," Joanne replied. "I didn't hear him submit."

"You don't have to -- I do." Sheena sighed. "All right. Get to your corner." Looking at the clock, Joanne was amazed to see that only seven minutes remained -- Mike had been trapped in that savage headlock for over ten minutes. Once again she produced the smelling salts and waved them under Mike's nose.

Mike didn't respond at first, and she checked that he was still breathing. She helped him to a sitting position and held the bottle to Mike's face. After two or three whiffs he snorted and opened his eyes.

"You okay?" she asked, realizing as she said it how inadequate it was. But Mike looked alert, his eyes moving around and taking in the arena.

"Sure I'm okay," he said, sounding wide-awake.

"Where are you?"

"The Palace."

"Who am I?"

"You're Sheena," Mike replied with a snort.

"Who are you?"

Mike shifted his eyes from side to side and answered in a hoarse whisper, "I'm Batman!" At that moment the bell for the seventh fall sounded.

"Maybe I should stop the fight," she thought, but then figured that Mike could take it for another six minutes. Then looking at Joanne, Sheena had second thoughts.

But it was too late. Joanne picked Mike up and wrapped her huge arms around him, then lifted him off his feet in another bearhug. Mike's face contorted as Joanne crushed him mercilessly in her arms, then dropped him disdainfully to the mat. Rolling him to his back, Joanne pinned his arms above his head with her hands and grapevined his legs. Arching her back, she forced Mike's legs apart.

"Aaaarrrrrrgggghhhh!"

"Is that all you can say?" Another arch of the back, more pressure on Mike's legs, and another moan was torn from his throat. "Come on, you're beaten!" More strain and another groan. "Give!"

Now Mike began to whimper. Tears rolled down his face as Joanne's legs nearly tore him in two.

"GIVE!" It was almost a sob from Joanne, and Sheena could see that she was putting all her power into the hold.

"Okay."

Sheena almost missed it. Mike was barely able to whisper the word. "Let him go!" she ordered and Joanne released Mike at once. "Winner of the fall, Joanne Lewis. She leads seven to nothing."

A glance at the clock revealed only one minute and twenty-seven seconds remaining. "The winner of the match is --"

"Hold it," Joanne exclaimed. "After the rest there's still almost half a minute left."

"You want the last twenty-seven seconds?"

"I told you, I'm here to make a statement."

Another glance at Mike, who was sitting up, and Sheena said, "Okay. But don't break anything, please?" Sheena realized she was begging this young woman not to hurt her opponent, and was surprised at herself -- she usually gave the orders and her fighters obeyed. "Am I scared of her?" she thought as she watched Joanne smile and nod before heading to her corner.

The bell rang and Joanne raced across the ring. Grabbing Mike, she pulled him up and into the full nelson. Then she sat down and wrapped her legs around his waist.

"Oh my God," Mike thought. "She's gonna break me in half."

Pushing forward with her arms and pulling down with her legs, as well as crushing his midsection, Joanne could hear Mike's spine pop. "Unnnnnnhhh," was all he said.

"Give up," she told him. "Come on, you know I can break your back with this hold. Give up!"

"Fifteen seconds," Mike thought, "I only have to survive this for --." Then the pain increased and he nearly passed out. "Aaaarrrrrrggggghhhh! Okay, okay, I give!" Mike tried to shout, but the words were barely audible.

Luckily Sheena heard them.

"He gave," she told Joanne. "Let him go!" Joanne released him just as the time expired. "The winner of all eight falls, Joanne Lewis," Sheena announced, holding the blonde's brawny arm up.

Mike was lifeless on the mat, only the rise and fall of his chest betraying that he still lived. A soft whine escaped his lips with every breath. Sheena called for the medics and they attended to the beaten man carefully.

"I didn't kill him," Joanne said as Sheena turned to her. "You did ask me not to, didn't you?"

Sheena glared at her. "I'm not sure I want you to stay."

"Look, I said I was out to make a statement and I made it. Now maybe there'll be some interest from challengers -- there are always men around who won't be scared to challenge me. I can hear them now -- 'She's only a girl', 'It was a fluke', 'No woman can beat me'. That's why I did it. Like I told him, nothing personal -- I'm a bit surprised he took so much. I had to work quite hard to get him to submit."

"There's very little quit in that man," Linda Anderson said from behind her. Joanne turned around and looked up at the tall redhead. "If you've hurt him badly, little girl, I may be your first challenger."

"Lin," Mike rasped.. All three women looked down at him. "It's cool. I could've spent the match running away from her, but I didn't. I could've given up the instant she put me in a hold, but I didn't. Of course, then she would've won twenty falls instead of eight." He smiled, then winced as one of the medics probed his side. "Careful, doc, I'm not a side of beef." The woman grinned. "Where was I? Oh, yeah. I wanted to see what she was made of -- and I did." He winced again. "Solid muscle. Nice match, lady. No hard feelings." He weakly held up a hand.

"Yeah, good match. You gave a hell of an effort," the blonde replied, shaking his hand.

"Mike, are you sure?" Linda asked. He nodded. "Well, okay," Linda said. "As long as you're not pissed, I won't pursue it."

Joanne looked at her. "He must be a pretty good guy to have a friend like you."

Linda nodded. "He's a keeper."

"Then I'm really sorry -- most of my life I've seemed to run into the other kind. We need to protect the good ones." She turned and left the ring.

As Joanne made her way back to the dressing room men and women from the crowd congratulated her. Several asked for autographs -- she signed for the women, not the men. One man asked to touch her bicep, and she shook her head and said loudly, "The only way any man will touch these," -- she flexed both arms hard and her biceps grew and grew until they had the size and consistency of boulders -- "is if he gets in that ring with me." She leaned closer. "Do you really want that? Oh, you'll feel my biceps -- you'll feel them as I wrap them around your feeble body and crush you in their deadly embrace. You'll feel them when I enclose your empty head with just one of these powerful limbs and squeeze so hard the bones of your skull bend. You'll feel them when I lock you in a full nelson, pick you up, and shake you until I dislocate your puny shoulders. Are you willing to endure the torture you've just seen me give that man simply to touch my arms?" The man gulped and shook his head. She smiled wolfishly and said, "I thought not."

Joanne continued to her trip up the aisle. The men in the crowd watched with awe and fear while the women shook her hand and patted her back.

"She's got quite a way with words, doesn't she?" Mike asked after taking in Joanne's performance.

Linda giggled.

"How is he?" Sheena asked one of the medics.

"The bloody nose and split lip you can see," she replied. "In addition he's badly bruised, has two cracked ribs, a slight concussion, and a broken tooth." She snapped the first aid kit closed. "Other than that, he's fine."

"You forgot to mention Excedrin headache number two million," Mike told her.

"He shouldn't be alone tonight," the second medic said.

"He won't be," Linda said.

The first medic picked up the first aid kit and stood up. "He shouldn't go to sleep for at least eight hours, in case the concussion is more serious than I think."

"Don't worry," Linda said. "I'm sure I can figure something out to keep him awake." She grinned down at Mike.

"Nothing too strenuous," the second medic cautioned.

"Spoilsport," muttered Mike. Linda giggled again.

Sheena looked at Mike and shook her head. "Okay, pal, you're on the shelf for at least a month. Full salary for that time, natch, and I'll pick any medical bills."

"Thanks boss," Mike said. He looked up at Linda and said, "Now if one of you well-muscled ladies will help me up, I'll go take a shower." With some support he was able to stand. "Come Robin," he said to Linda, an arm draped over her shoulder to hold himself up. "To the Batcave."

Sheena broke out laughing.

Mike couldn't stand up very well, so Linda stripped and helped him shower. As they stood under the hot, soothing water Mike asked, "Okay, what's with the Sir Galahad act?"

"Sir Galahad was a guy," Linda pointed out, rubbing soap over his back.

"Lady Galahad then."

"I thought you were hurt. You're a friend."

"That's it?"

"Swear to God," Linda proclaimed.

"And the little song and dance for the medics?"

Linda turned him around and he looked up into her green eyes. "Want to get back together?" she asked softly.

"Sure it won't ruin our friendship?"

"If it does we can quit again."

"In that case, beautiful lady, my vote is yes."

She kissed him softly, then gasped as a low voice with a British accent said, "Is this a private party or can anyone join?"

"What do you want?" Linda asked coldly.

"Look," Joanne said, "I'm really very sorry about some of the things I did tonight. I'm not particularly proud of them, but I had to do them."

Linda bristled, but Mike laid a hand on her arm. "Easy, Lady Galahad." Linda grinned and shook her head. "Look, I'm the one who should be sore. And I am," he added, wincing. "But I think she means it."

"I do, Mr. Wilson."

"I'm Mike. This is Linda. You're Joanne. Now, what did you have in mind?" He looked her up and down, taking in every inch of her powerful, sexy body. "By the way, nice tattoo," he added, seeing the red rose that encircled her left nipple.

"Thank you, Mike. Until Linda stood up for you out there I thought that all men were like the ones I'd always known. Boastful, unwilling to let me do things, insulting, envious. But Linda said you weren't like that. And during our match you didn't once beg, or try to avoid me -- you were willing to meet me head on, even after you must have known how strong and skilled I was."

"That's the way a lot of men are, Joanne," Linda put in. "Mike just takes it to an extreme."

"Anyway, I thought we might be friends."

"Well, I definitely don't want you for an enemy," Mike said. "I'm willing, but Linda's my best friend. If she says no deal, well..."

Linda shook her head. "This is screwy. She beats the hell out of you and then wants to be your friend?"

"You beat the hell out of me -- three times, dammit -- and we're friends."

"Well, tell you what Joanne. You're on probation. I'll be watching you pretty closely. You hurt Mike, and you'll have to deal with me."

Joanne started to cry. "I've never had a friend like that, one who'd be willing to fight for me."

Linda wrapped an arm around her and said, "Not even as a kid?"

"They all said I was a freak!" Joanne sobbed. "A muscle bound freak! All the girls and boys hated me!"

Linda embraced her until she stopped weeping. "Hey, if that had happened to me I'd have probably killed somebody before I was fifteen -- I've got a bit of a temper."

"I hadn't noticed," Mike said dryly, getting a laugh. "Hey, do you think we can continue this shower before all the hot water's gone? Joanne, we believe in water conservation here --want to join us?"

Joanne smiled shyly and said, "No, I'd be intruding."

Linda pulled her in and started lathering her up. "Not really," she said. "Mike and I are pretty broad-minded. And he won't be able to do much for a few days." A snort from Mike. "I take it you're not very -- experienced?"

Joanne blushed and admitted, "I've never been with a man."

Linda grinned and said, "How about a horny redheaded woman?" Before Joanne could answer Linda pulled Joanne's face to hers and kissed her.

Joanne returned the kiss with enthusiasm and Mike ran his hands over both women, glorying in the hard muscles of their bodies. "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship," he said with a grin.