

“Shannon”

By Dirty Dawg

I love the TV show “Brisco County, Jr.” A few weeks ago, there was this episode where Brisco gets into a gunfight with his girlfriend’s ex-husband. They draw down on each other, Colt Peacemaker .45’s held steady in two hands. The ex-husband looks at Brisco across the divide between them and wryly observes, “We’re both in love with the same woman.”

Brisco nods, in that great-tradition of western heroes and observes, just as wryly, “Life’s funny that way.” I remember thinking that a more apt line had never been written concerning matters of the heart.

Life is funny that way. I started thinking about all the trite little phrases I’d heard applied to Life: Life is what’s happening to you while you make other plans. Life is a bitch, and then you marry one, and then you die. None of them are true, and to an extent, they’re all true.

Life is funny that way.

Especially when it comes to Shannon. I never would have thought that Shannon and I would end up where we are today. The road, for us at least, has been uneven and bumpy, filled with twisting little paths and unmarked turnoffs. Neither of us knew where we were going until we got there, and you would be hard-pressed to find two people more surprised than when we both realized what had actually happened between us.

Shannon has been my best friend for more than ten years. We met in college. She was a business major, eager to make her mark on the world and take the biggest companies by storm. I, being a computer science major, was more of a nerdy, geeky kind of guy than your average college stud, so it was pretty incredible that Shannon and I not only met, but became friends as well. It was almost beyond the pale of consideration that we would become the best of friends, as we managed, somehow, to do.

It all started when Shannon had to take a CS 101 level course, Introduction to Computers. I was also taking that course, but more for an easy “A” than anything else. I spent most of my time haunting the school’s computer lab, trying to snag as many cycles as I could for my own pet projects. My private thrill has always been Prime Number Theory, and the VAX system that the school ran finally gave me access to the kind of power I needed to further my projects.

I noticed Shannon on the first day of class. It would be hard not to. She was the kind of girl that stood out in a crowd. Not because she had the best body in the world, or because she was drop-dead model gorgeous. She was very pretty, in an understated, fresh kind of way. The kind of pretty that you know will last for the rest of her life. You know that when she’s sixty, she will still look very, very good, long after some of the more temporarily gorgeous women have come and gone. Her body was fine, it fit her well, but it just added to her overall effect. She looked... comfortable. I know that’s a stupid word to describe a woman’s body, but it was the kind of body that you knew you could press up against every night for the rest of your life. Her legs weren’t impossibly long, her breasts weren’t unbelievable huge. Everything was there, in good proportions. You just knew that she’d also keep that body just the way it was through the rest of her days. What was unique about Shannon was her smile and her eyes.

Shannon had very dark black hair, and these piercing blue eyes that seemed to twinkle whenever she looked at you. When Shannon focused that gaze of hers on you, you felt like you were the only person on the planet. The rest of the world ceased to exist. The only thing that

mattered was you, her eyes seemed to say. And when Shannon treated you to one of her thousand-watt smiles, you felt something melt inside you.

I noticed Shannon, but I didn't do anything about it. I knew my limitations, and to be honest, I wasn't real comfortable dating anyway. Women, unlike computers, were a mystery to me. I could program a computer to tap dance if I put my mind to it, but the program running inside a woman's brain was written in a language I could never decipher or understand. Talk about GIGO! It was more like EIEO, as Emotions In, Emotions out!

About six weeks into the semester, the class was given their first programming assignment. It was a prime-number program written in BASIC. Now, for people that have never programmed a computer before, an assignment like that can be quite daunting. I'd mastered BASIC at the age of 9, and had since moved onto C++ and other high-level languages. I was in the lab, cranking away on a Unix program that was going to deliver me some serious bignums, when I saw Shannon walk in. She was biting her bottom lip and looking around like a deer trapped in the headlights of an onrushing car.

She sat down at a free terminal, and after several tries, managed to log on to her student's account. As a system manager, I had the ability to monitor her session. As a matter of fact, I'd completed a neat little utility a few days ago that allowed any of the system administrators to watch what anyone else was doing by running this little program that displayed their screen on yours. So I ran the utility, called MYSPY, and watched on my screen as Shannon tried to figure the program out. She was going off in a completely wrong direction, and feeling a little sneaky, I decided to have some fun.

WRONG IDEA, I typed, and the words appeared on her screen.

I saw her sit up in shock and surprise. A second later, she typed, slowly: WHO IS THIS?

THIS IS THE COMPUTER, I typed back, trying not to laugh. YOU ARE DOING THIS WRONG.

I saw her sit back and stare at the screen for a good minute and a half. Then she leaned forward and typed FINE. WHAT AM I DOING WRONG?

That's the only opening I needed. WATCH, I typed, and then took control of her program. I moved the loop structures to the right place, declared the variables before they were used, and then rewrote about sixty percent of the program. The entire time, I gave Shannon a running commentary across the bottom of the screen, explaining what I was doing and why, using much more basic-sounding language than the BASIC computer language. SEE HOW THE LOOP IS CLOSED? IF YOU DECLARE THE LOOP VARIABLE RATHER THAN USING A NAKED "NEXT" STATEMENT, THE PROGRAM IS EASIER TO READ AND UNDERSTAND. EXAMPLE:

```
10 FOR X = 1 TO 20
20   FOR Y = 1 TO 10
30     PRINT X,Y
40   NEXT Y
50 NEXT X
60 END
```

IS MUCH MORE CLEAR THAN:

```
10 FOR X = 1 TO 20 : FOR Y = 1 TO 10 : PRINT X,Y : NEXT : NEXT
20 END
```

UNDERSTAND?

YES, she typed. CAN I ASK YOU A QUESTION?

GA, I type, meaning "GO AHEAD."

ARE YOU REALLY A COMPUTER? she asked.

SOME PEOPLE THINK SO. WHAT MAKES YOU THINK I'M NOT A COMPUTER?

BECAUSE I CAN HEAR YOU TYPING BEHIND ME, GREG. And then Shannon stood and walked over to me, treating me to my first thousand-watt smile. She sat down next to me and cupped her chin in one perfect hand. "So," she said, "Why did you help me?"

I just smiled at her. "You looked like you needed it," I said. "And I was glad to do it. If you have any questions, please ask me. I'm really good at this, and I like to help."

"I will," she said softly. "You've made what could have been a horrible assignment a little bit better. Thanks." And she stood, leaned down and kissed me on the cheek. Then she left, leaving me stunned, and to be honest, a little turned on.

For the rest of the semester, I tutored Shannon in basic computer theory. I explained the concepts of computer programming in English first, and then demonstrated how to translate those ideas into something the computer could understand and then execute. Shannon is very intelligent, and I had little problem teaching her everything she needed to know to get an "A" in CS 101. The semester brought to an end our association, and over the break I got a little depressed. Most business majors tend to take the minimum requirement in MIS courses, and I knew that she would probably be concentrating on Management and Finance courses, and that I'd probably never have a chance to help her again.

Shannon and I had become sort-of-friends. I helped her study, and she let me, and that was the end of it. We never went out, never had a beer, never went to each other's dorm room. I was vaguely aware that Shannon belonged to one of the sororities, but since that life had never appealed to me, I made no attempt to investigate which one. (I later found out that she was a TriDelta.)

When we got back to school for the new semester, it was about four or five days before I saw Shannon. I was in the lab, working on another one of my pet projects, when I sensed someone behind me. I turned and saw that it was Shannon and I felt something in my heart lift and soar free. She looked beautiful, standing there in a sweatshirt with our college's logo on it, and wash-faded jeans and sneakers. Her long black hair was pulled back in a ponytail, her freshly-scrubbed face free of any but the tiniest makeup.

"Hey, stranger, how was your break?" she asked, plopping down in the chair next to mine. We laughed and talked about what we'd done over the holidays.

"So, " I asked, "You taking any MIS courses this semester?"

"No," she said, and I thought that I detected a hint of something in her voice. "Listen, Greg...I want to talk to you about something. When are you going to be done here, anyway?" I glanced at my watch. "Well, unless some time frees up on the Vax, I can leave anytime, really."

"You want to go get something to eat?" I just looked at her for a long, hard moment, and then I slowly nodded. I wasn't sure what the hell was going on, but a little voice inside my head was screaming warnings.

In the months and years to come, I would learn to heed that little voice. But for now, it was a new experience to be having dinner with a beautiful, sexy woman.

We went to a burger place just off campus, and after we'd ordered, Shannon took a big sip of her beer and leaned forward. "I never really thanked you for all your help last semester... and... um...well, this is kind of hard...Listen, Greg...we got to be kind of...friends last semester, and just because you won't be helping me anymore with my work, I don't want tolose that. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yeah," I said. "I kind of missed you, too." She smiled, and then reached across to quickly squeeze my hand. "So, we'll hang out a little, keep in touch, that sort of thing, right?" She nodded.

“Yeah,” Shannon said, “I still want you as a friend. A good friend.” I nodded, understanding my role in life. Friends.

Life’s funny that way. Even then, I knew that I wanted to be more than friends with Shannon, and even then, I knew that it was probably not going to be that way. I just... It just wasn’t going to happen.

The semester went on, and I saw Shannon on the average of about twice a week. Usually for lunch at the caf, or in the library. We would stop and talk and laugh and catch up on things. Towards the middle of the semester, I spotted Shannon in the library with a young man. I knew him from around campus; He was popular, a jock and big in the fraternity scene. Watching them together, it wasn’t hard to deduce that they were dating. Shannon was all smiles, and she took every opportunity to touch him, running her hands up and down his arms, across his back.

I stayed away, not wanting her boyfriend to misinterpret my attention towards Shannon. She...sensed what I was doing, and the smiles she gave me made it all worthwhile. Back then, especially at that age, friends, true ‘friends’ of the opposite sex are hard to explain to your significant other. Shannon and I had never talked specifically about it, but we both knew that we were, somehow, more than ‘just friends,’ yet less than boyfriend-and-girlfriend. It was something unexplainable and undeniable, but it existed, it was valid and true and one-of-a-kind. We were comfortable with it, as it was, and didn’t want to jeopardize it by exploring it any further.

Seeing her with her boyfriend made me realize something too. Somewhere along the line, I’d fallen in love with Shannon. Quietly, desperately in love with a girl that I could never have. And that presented a problem. It wasn’t the burning hormonal passion that marks ‘love’ at that age. I’d be lying if I said I never thought of making love with Shannon. But that wasn’t all of it. The feelings I had for her ran true and long and very, very deep. I knew, even then, that I’d have a special place in my heart for that woman for the rest of my life. Everyone has a person like Shannon in their life.

Life’s funny that way.

The semester went on, and Shannon and her boyfriend (who I found out had a name: Eric,) grew closer and closer. I attended a midnight movie put on by one of the student committee, and spotted them in the back, necking urgently. Shannon looked like she was in another world, and I envied Eric at that moment more than I ever had envied another person in my entire life.

That’s when I made a conscious decision to try and distance myself from Shannon emotionally. I wanted to be her friend, I knew that, but the feelings I was having for Shannon were just too painful. I decided then and there to be just her friend, nothing more, and set about actively trying to forget the fact that I was in love with her.

That worked for all of a week.

One Thursday night I was in my dorm room, studying for a calculus test. The numbers and squiggles were beginning to blur when I heard a soft knock on my door. Calling for whoever it was to come in, I shut the book and turned to see Shannon standing there, looking very pensive.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Can I talk to you? You got a minute?” I nodded and indicated that she should take a seat. My roommate and I had...performed some construction on the room. The beds had been lifted off the floor onto specially constructed lofts, and there was plenty of room underneath, which we’d furnished with second-hand couches. An unused steamer trunk acted as a combination coffee/card table. I took the couch opposite Shannon and looked at her expectantly.

“What’s up?”

“Eric and I...” she started, and I knew this was going to suck big time. Shannon continued, “Eric...wants...” She sighed, looking around, searching for the words, searching for a way to tell me what I already knew.

“Eric wants to make love to you.” I suggested, and Shannon’s head snapped around.

“He TOLD you?”

“Of course not,” I laughed.

“Then how did you know?”

“Because Eric and I are both men. And I know how men think.”

“Oh.” Her voice was quiet. I knew that Shannon was a virgin, just as she knew I was. “What do you think I should do?”

If that wasn’t a conversational, emotional and every other kind of --otional land mine, I didn’t know what was. I stalled for time, thoughtfully stroking my chin.

“What do you think?” I finally managed to ask, falling back on that old therapist’s trick of answering a question with a question.

“Well...I do love him...” As she trailed off thinking about *that* particular topic, I felt my guts knot up in agony. “...but,” she continued, “...I’m not sure I’m ready for this.”

“Is he pressuring you?”

Shannon was silent for a long moment, and then she slowly nodded. “Yeah. He keeps telling me that if I really love him...” She smiled ruefully, knowing that I understood the position she was in.

“So tell him you’re not ready. If he loves you, then he’ll understand.”

“I tried that,” she said softly. “It didn’t work. Eric is... insistent. I’m almost afraid to be alone with him. Every time we get together, he starts...making moves, trying to get my clothes off... touching me where I’m not sure I’m ready to be touched yet.”

At that moment, had Eric been in front of me, I could have cheerfully strangled him. “Tell you what,” I said slowly, “why don’t I have a little...talk with Eric? I’m sure that if I explain things to him, he’ll understand what’s happening here.”

The hope and happiness on Shannon’s face made any physical discomfort I was sure to feel over getting the shit kicked out of my by her boyfriend worthwhile. I found Eric the next day in the library. He was hunched over a history book, his face a scowl of concentration as he tried to figure out why Germany invaded Poland.

I sat down across from him.

He looked up. “Hey,” he said, and then returned to his book, studiously ignoring me.

His hand was spread over the page, tracing the words as he read, his lips moving. Without a second thought, I reached over and swiftly slammed the book closed on Eric’s hand.

“Ow! HEY!” he said, starting to stand. I applied more pressure and he sat back slowly, holding his wrist. I stood, leaning even more of my weight down on the cover. Leaning close, I whispered, “If you ever, and I mean ever, threaten or pressure Shannon to sleep with you again, you *will* be sorry. Am I making myself clear?”

“I...I didn’t-” I gave him another little nudge with the book.

“Stop talking and start listening. I mean it, Eric. Shannon is a dear, sweet friend of mine, and if you don’t stop screwing with her head, you *will* be sorry. She loves you, you asshole. Let her work up to what you want to do in her own sweet time.” I slowly released a little of the pressure, and then applied twice as much. Eric yelped and tried to pull his hand out of the book. “If I have to talk to you again about this...” I warned. He just nodded. “Don’t put this hand where it isn’t wanted, you

fucking jerk, or I'll be back." I lifted my hand and turned, leaving him sitting there, massaging his fingers with his good hand.

Shannon came to me two days later and threw her arms around my neck. "Thank you," she said. "For whatever you did, for whatever you said, THANK YOU!" And then she kissed me on the mouth for the first time. It was a quick, chaste kiss, but it shook me to my toes.

"Eric is completely changed. It's like he's a whole other person! What did you say?"

I grinned at her. "I think it was more how I said it than what I said."

"Well, whatever it was, thank you."

Three weeks later, it all came crashing down. I was again in my room, studying chemistry this time, when Shannon showed up. She was crying, her eyes red-rimmed and puffy.

"Greg!" she wailed, running into my arms. Her face was against my chest and I could feel her shaking, she was sobbing so hard.

"What's wrong?"

"Eric! I.I..." and then she lost it. She dissolved into wracking sobs. I just held her, stroking her back, wondering what the fucking bastard had done this time. If he'd hurt one fucking hair on her head!

Finally, Shannon managed to get herself under control. She sat on my couch, drying her eyes, sniffing as she tried to tell me the story. Apparently, she'd gone to visit him unannounced, and found him fucking another girl in his dorm room.

I sat down next to her and knew better than to say anything. I just wrapped her up in my arms and held her, rocking softly. She fell asleep that way, and I held her for a few hours. Towards midnight, she woke up, looked at me sleepily, and then stood, holding her hand out to me. I took it and she pulled me upright, and then led me to the ladder to my bed. She went first, and lay down. Not knowing exactly what was happening, I followed her.

What happened was that two friends slept together. Not in a sexual way. We didn't even take our clothes off. I was on my back, and Shannon nestled her body against mine, throwing one lean thigh across mine, snuggling her head into my neck and shoulder. Her arm came across my chest, and we slowly drifted off.

As sleep slowly took me, I thought that I could get used to the feeling of Shannon sleeping next to me.

Life's funny that way.

When the morning came, there was no awkwardness, none at all. Shannon woke shortly after I did and kissed my cheek again. "Thanks," she said. "I just needed to be held...without any of that other stuff."

"I'm glad you felt you could trust me," I said.

"Of course I can trust you, silly! You're my best friend!" I felt a wave of conflicting emotions. Glad she felt that way, and sad that she felt only that way about me.

She went on her way, and I got ready for classes. I was walking across the quad when Eric found me.

"Hey, asshole!" I heard him shout. I sighed and stopped. He came up behind me. "Just couldn't wait, could you?" he asked. "Just couldn't wait to get your hands on my girlfriend."

I turned to face him. “First off, Eric, not that it’s any of your goddamned business, but nothing happened. We just slept together. She needed someone she could trust. That obviously means you’re left out. Secondly,” I said, taking a step forward, “I don’t think that Shannon is yours’ or for that matter, anyone’s girlfriend right now. We’re just friends, ok?”

Eric took a couple of deep breaths. “I’m sorry,” he finally managed. “Look, ya gotta talk to her man, you just gotta! I love her! I don’t want to lose her!”

“You should have thought of that before you cheated on her!” “C’mon, man...you know how it is. She wasn’t giving me any...a man has needs, you know! It didn’t mean anything to me! It was just fucking!”

I shook my head sadly. “I’ll tell you what I’m going to do, Eric. I won’t talk to Shannon about you, and I mean that I won’t say anything either way, good or bad, unless she asks me. But you have to figure out what is important to you. If you want to be with Shannon, then you’re going to have to respect her wishes and be faithful to her. If you don’t, and you need to...fuck...as you so eloquently put it, find someone else. Shannon’s just not ready for that yet.”

And with that, I left him to his devices.

Eric and Shannon broke up shortly after that. Shannon dated on and off, a few different guys, never getting serious. That summer, I took two classes and worked as a part-time systems manager for the school. Shannon became a summer camp counselor somewhere near Boston. When she returned for the fall semester, she was bursting with news.

Apparently, during the summer, she’d met her True Love, a man who waited until the moment was right, waited until Shannon was ready to give him her most special gift. They’d made love under the stars in the woods one night, and Shannon was sure that she was going to marry this man.

I was happy for her, because she seemed to happy for herself. That lasted until a three-day weekend, when Shannon conned me into driving her to her boyfriend’s school for a surprise visit. After seeing how Shannon’s last surprise visit to a boyfriend had turned out, I wasn’t sure I wanted to go along, but as always, Shannon knew that I could deny her nothing.

The drive was about four hours, and I waited in the car while she went up to his apartment. I wanted to make sure that he was home, and that everything had turned out ok. Ten minutes later, Shannon came back downstairs, got into the car and told me to drive back to school. Right that minute.

It had happened again. He’d had a girl in the apartment. They weren’t naked and fucking, but they were obviously headed in that direction when Shannon had knocked on the door.

We drove back to school in silence.

The rest of our college careers passed rather quickly. Shannon dated off and on, but never allowed herself to develop any serious feelings for any man. I’d started to date to, but could never get past the necking stage. It wasn’t that I was trying to, mind you, but I just got the feeling from the girls that I was dating that they weren’t looking to deepen the relationship.

So, I graduated college still a virgin. It wasn’t a big deal for me, but it was mildly annoying. Shannon and I started the process of getting a job. Interviews, resumes, the whole works. My degree in computer science helped a little, because back then computers were still a young science.

I interviewed about a dozen times, and then my break came. A rather large computer company was expanding in our area, and was looking for hardware technicians that had software experience. I covered both bases pretty well, and was hired on the spot.

I returned to my new apartment and immediately placed a call to my best friend Shannon. The phone rang about six times and then a breathless Shannon answered: "Hello?"

"Hey! I got some great news!"

"Greg! I have great news, too!" We both started talking at the same time, and then I graciously said, "Go ahead. You first."

"Well, a friend of mine got me an interview today for a sales and marketing position. The job is really good, and the money's great! I killed them in the interview, and I got hired! I've got a job!"

"That's great! I got a job too!" I went on to talk about my new job, and after I was finished, there was dead silence on the other end of the phone.

"Shannon?" I said.

"CyberDyne? You're going to be working for CyberDyne?"

"Yeah. In the business systems divisions, why?"

"Because I'm the project manager for the business systems divisions of CyberDyne. We're working for the same company!"

We shared a moment of stunned silence, and then burst out laughing. "You have *got* to stop following me around, Greg!" Shannon teased.

The next year passed relatively quickly. Although Shannon and I worked for the same company, we really didn't work together. I was on the customer service and technical side, and she was in sales and marketing. Technically, she was in a higher position than I was, but she never held it over me. On the two or three occasions we had to work together, Shannon always treated me as an equal, a member of the team, rather than as an underling.

And something else cool happened; I finally got a girlfriend. Her name was Molly, and she was a techie like me. The only thing rarer than a hardware engineer that was also a programmer was a female hardware engineer and programmer. Molly was smart, scary smart, and we got along great. A

friend of mine told me after she and I had been working together for about six months that Molly had a crush on me, and had been looking for a way to let me know how she felt and that she wanted to go out with me.

We started dating, and settled into a comfortable existence. Shannon was dating off and on, too, and the four of us double dated a few times. I wasn't sure that I wanted Molly and Shannon to get together, seeing as how a little piece of my heart still belonged to Shannon. Shannon, if she knew, handled it perfectly. I was just an old college friend of hers, and we took great pains not to share private jokes or tell old war stories around either of our dates.

Molly and I finally slept together. It happened after the company picnic when we were both drunk. It was clumsy and awkward, but loving. Neither of us really knew what we were doing, but we managed somehow to get it done.

Afterwards, we fell asleep, and in the morning, Molly told me that she thought we needed to do a little...research on the subject. She went out and got some books and we taught each other everything about sex.

Which brings me to that topic. I had a lot of affection for Molly, but no passion. I liked her, a lot, but I didn't love her, and I knew that I wasn't *in love* with her. Maybe it wasn't fair of me to

lead Molly on, but as I look back on it now, I realize that we were using each other. Not in a bad, cold way, but using each other nonetheless. She wanted someone to sleep with and snuggle with, and I wanted the same thing. Neither of us were fooled; this wasn't the world's great romance by anyone's standards. It was basically satisfying, comfortable, familiar sex.

But there was no passion. I missed that. I wanted some passion in my life. About the only thing I could feel passionate about was the fact that I knew I still loved Shannon.

Things with Molly and Shannon came to a head when Shannon's father died. He had a heart attack and died in his sleep. Shannon's mother tried to wake him, and then realized what had happened. The phone call came at about four in the morning.

A ringing phone after midnight is never cause for celebration. As soon as the phone started ringing, I knew something was wrong. Molly was spending the night, and the phone was on her side of the bed. Before I could get to it, she'd answered it.

"Lo?...oh, hi Shannon. What? Sure, just a minute." Wordlessly, her face still buried in the pillow, Molly handed me the phone.

"Hmmm?" I managed to grunt.

"Greg, it's me. Can you come over? I know this is a bad time and that you...have company, but I really need you."

"What's wrong?"

"My father died. I need you, Greg."

I was instantly awake and sitting up in bed. "I'm on my way." I got up and tried to dress as quietly as possible. I didn't even tell Molly what was going on. In retrospect, that was a pretty shitty thing to do. But at the time, my thoughts were focused on Shannon.

I made it over to her apartment in about ten minutes flat. And then I spent the next six days there. Not once did I call Molly. I found out later that she heard about Shannon's father through the company grapevine. But at that time, it didn't matter to Molly why I was gone. She only knew that I was, and that I'd left to be with another woman. Molly knew that there was nothing sexual going on between Shannon and I, but it didn't take her very long to figure out where my heart and head were.

When we got back from burying Shannon's father, Molly was waiting for me in my apartment. She had that We Have To Talk look on her face, and until the moment I'd walked through the door and seen her sitting on the couch, I had completely forgotten about Molly's role in all this. I immediately felt like a shitheel, and thought about apologizing. Then I realized that apologizing would only make matters worse.

I simply walked over to the couch and sat down, ready and eager to talk.

With no preamble, Molly asked, "You love her, don't you?"

I had no answer that would satisfy. I simply nodded.

Slower now, with more emotion: "Are you in love with her?"

"I think so," I said thickly. It was hard to talk. My tongue was swollen and dry.

"So...if I stay with you, if I stay with us...we'll always have this between us. This wall, this...person. Between you and I ever being truly happy." She was getting close to crying, but I knew the worse thing in the world I could do would be to move to take her into my arms. I just sat and let her have her moment. She was due this, if not a hell of a lot more. I'd acted like an asshole, had treated her poorly. She'd done nothing to me but love me. And to my eternal shame, I would never be able to return that love. Not the way she wanted. Molly, too, would have an affectionate

place in my heart. But not the same kind of place that Shannon could claim as her own. It sucked, it really sucked.

But life is funny that way.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," I offered lamely.

"I know," Molly said, and there was more resignation than bitterness in her voice. "That only makes this harder. I knew you didn't do it on purpose. I know you didn't mean to hurt me. I want to hate you, Greg, but God help me, I can't. You just followed your heart, that's all." She paused. "The only saving grace...the only reason that I'm not mad as hell is because Shannon was in your heart long before you met me. I couldn't take it if you'd left me for another woman you'd met after me. That would have killed me. But Shannon...she was a part of your life long before we ever met."

I didn't say anything. There was nothing to say.

Molly got up and moved closer to me. She reached out a hand and found my face, her fingers lightly caressing my cheek. Her friendly, almost sensual touch surprised me. "Listen to me, Greg. I love you, but I'll get over it. I'll go on with my life. We can still work together, you and I. I know that you're man enough to understand what's going on here. But... and I mean this sincerely, as a friend...you have got to do something about Shannon. Either get something started with this woman, or get her out of your life. Living in this constant state of want is going to eat you alive unless you do something about it.

"If you need me, if you need to talk to someone about it, I'll always be here for you. I know that we're still going to be friends, Greg. I know that about you. You're the type that doesn't want anyone to think badly of you. And I want to be your friend. Talk to her, Greg. Go and see her and tell her how you feel. The worst she can say is that she doesn't want to be with you. But then at least you'll know, and you can deal with it and get on with your life.

"Who knows?" she said ruefully. "Maybe, if things don't work out between you and her, we'll get back together." She looked at me for a long moment and then slowly, sadly shook her head. "No...that won't happen. She'll always be between us. I'll always know that you left my side for hers, even when she needed it. We won't get back together.

"But," Molly added as a final note, echoing my own thoughts, "I'll always have a special place for you in my life, Greg. You were my first lover, and so far, my best lover!" Her weak joke made me smile, and Molly leaned forward and kissed me one last time. Then she got up and left my apartment.

Two days later, despite what she had said, Molly resigned.

I brooded over what Molly had told me for the same two days. She was right, she had a good point, but I couldn't bring myself to confront Shannon. Over the next couple of weeks, the need to get it out in the open slowly faded, and Shannon and I faded back into our comfortable relationship. I was basically happy with the way things were, and in the back of my head I guess I was afraid that if I pushed the issue, that Shannon wouldn't be in my life anymore. And that I couldn't bear.

I went over to Shannon's house for dinner the next Friday. She was still on bereavement leave and hadn't returned to work. She answered the door wearing jeans, a man's white T-shirt and a flannel shirt over that. She looked warm and comfy.

Her greeting caught me off-guard. "I heard about you and Molly, I'm sorry." I just nodded and hoped Shannon would leave it at that. But of course she didn't. I followed Shannon into the kitchen and watched as she finished preparing our meal.

“So,” she asked after a few tense moments, “What happened?”

I chose my words carefully. “Molly was not pleased that I got out of bed the instant you called,” I started.

“I thought it might be that.”

Now or never.

“But that’s not all,” I said.

“Oh?” Shannon was still distracted, buzzing around the kitchen. I hoped she was listening closely enough for what I had to say next.

“She thinks...rightly so, I might add...that our relationship was...doomed. Because...um...I have feelings for someone...else.”

There. I’d said it. And Shannon heard it, because she froze. She had been chopping tomatoes for the salad. Her hands went still on the cutting block, her back to me.

“Oh really? Who?”

I took a seat at the table, my elbows on my knees, looking at the floor. I heard Shannon turn and walk over to the table. Holding the cutting board in one hand, she used the edge of the knife to scrape the tomato chunks into the salad bowl.

She was standing next to me. She was less than a foot away. I could smell her hair, and underneath that, her clean, pure scent. Almost as if it had a mind of its own, my hand reached up and slowly stroked her stomach through the shirt. I heard Shannon’s sharp gasp, but she didn’t step back or move my hand away.

My hand moved slowly, gently stroking Shannon through the shirt. Her tummy was flat and firm, and this was a whole new experience for me. This first touch, this first electric, sexual touch between us was incredible. I started breathing deeper, my eyes getting heavy with passion. My hand moved slowly up, a single finger tracing between Shannon’s breasts. I moved it over the top of one breast, just tracing the edge. I chanced a look up. Shannon’s eyes were closed, and she was biting her bottom lip.

My fingers trailed down and over her left breast. I felt the subtle bump of her nipple under my fingers, and as I touched it, Shannon gasped and pushed her breast harder against my hand. One of her own came up to capture mine, and she pressed it still harder against her.

Still not a word had been spoken.

My hand left her breast and moved down again, finding her belly and stroking it softly. Shannon opened her eyes but didn’t look at me. There was something behind them, something I couldn’t describe or identify.

Slowly, I tugged the T-shirt out of her waistband. As soon as there was room, my hand slipped underneath. The feel of her warm skin was incredible. She felt warm and alive, different than Molly ever had. I repeated my actions, this time on her bare skin. As my finger ascended between her breasts, I felt her bra. My palm captured her breast again, and Shannon moaned loudly.

I stood, turning her to face me. My free hand came up and found her face, stroking her cheek with my fingers as I slowly approached her with my lips. Shannon and I had kissed a thousand times as friends. This would be the first kiss as man and woman.

Our lips touched, softly at first, and then harder as the passion and hunger grew. I heard a moan, more of a whimper really, come from Shannon, and then her lips opened against mine. Sucking and kissing my lips, her arms came around my neck, lifting the T-shirt, giving me freer access to her body.

My hand massaged her breast, feeling the nipple stiffen under my loving touch. The dam all but burst then. We were finally doing, finally kissing and gasping and feeling all over each other’s

body. One of Shannon's hands dropped from my neck and found my asscheek. She squeezed it with her hand, making me moan as she pulled me harder against her.

"Make love to me, Greg! Please!" Her plaintive cry drove me crazy. I scooped Shannon up into my arms and carried her into the bedroom. She stared into my eyes as I carried her, and a small smile played at the corner of her mouth.

"You're my best friend," she said softly. "There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you. You've been there for me when no one else would. You've never hurt me, and I know you never would. I love you, Greg. I've loved you for so, so long."

"Why didn't you say anything?" I whispered, setting her down on the bed.

"Because I didn't want to take the chance you didn't feel the same way. I mean, I knew you loved me...but I didn't know if you wanted me."

I stood back a little and crossed my arms, removing my sweatshirt. "I've wanted you for so long...I've loved you forever. "

My jeans and underwear were gone in a heartbeat, and I fell to the bed, naked, ready for love. Shannon helped me undress her, and then I was discovering all the secrets of her body one by one, learning that she loved to have the small of her back kissed and lightly stroked, discovering that the inside of her left knee drove her insane. I finally tasted the woman I love at her very center, and found that the taste was ambrosia itself. I found God in the temple of her body, and I promised myself that I would worship every single day for the rest of my life.

And then we were one on the bed together, our bodies moving in sweaty, urgent harmony, her sex wetly, moistly clutching at me, making me groan into the hollow of her neck as she convulsed around me, her legs around my waist, her hands on my ass, pulling me against her harder.

The night went on and on and on. All those years of repressed desire had finally found an outlet, and we surprised each other with the depth of our love, passion and hunger for each other. The sights and the sounds and the scents in that room will remain with me always. And one more sound, the sound of gentle, comfortable laughter, a sound that should be heard in more bedrooms. Shannon and I snuggled against each other in the wolf hours of the night, softly teasing each other's bodies, telling secrets, giggling at each other, drunk and intoxicated with the knowledge that we'd each found our perfect soul mate, a person that had been under our noses the entire time.

Life's funny that way.