

BEST FRIENDS

By Tina Fleming



ILLUSTRATED BY BRIAN DUKEHART

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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“BEST FRIENDS”

By Tina Fleming

Don Cordon sat at his office desk and stared at the wall in front of him. It was 7:00 p. m. on Thursday evening and the office was deserted. Don didn't have any more work to do, and he could go home whenever he wanted. Actually, he could go home whenever he wanted regardless of whether or not he had any work to do. Don was his own boss.

He worked at an architectural firm that he co-owned along with his best friend, Greg Williamson. Don and Greg had earned their graduate degrees three years ago, earning top grades at the Shadeland School of Architecture. They had worked for a prestigious New York architectural firm for two years, and then last year opened their own firm. Business was good, and their work load grew so much that they had to hire two other architects to assist them. They were only twenty-seven years old, and they were already building an excellent reputation of their own. They were two young men on the way up.

That was nothing new for Greg and Don though. Ever since they had met each other, twenty-one years ago, in kindergarten, their lives had been a string of successes: top grades in elementary school, junior high, and high school, co-captains of the high school football team, dates with prom queens and cheerleaders, and academic scholarships to college.

Greg and Don learned from each other and helped each other in ways that only best friends can. It was because they had each other's support that they were so successful.

But lately that long string of successes seemed to be coming to an end, at least for Greg..

A few months ago, Don noticed that Greg's work was slipping. His designs were becoming uninspired and unoriginal. Greg began making mistakes that only a novice architect should make. His usual grab-a-sandwich-and-a-cup-of coffee twenty minute lunches began stretching into one hour lunches at the local tavern.

Then, last month, Greg's work began to not just slip but to take a nose-dive. He was increasingly absent from work. He was falling hopelessly behind schedule. The one hour lunches turned into two or three hour margarita marathons.

Don was concerned about Greg's shoddy performance from a business standpoint, of course. After all, they were partners in their architectural firm. But far more than that, Don was concerned about Greg from a personal standpoint. It seemed to Don that they were partners in life, not just business. Maybe it was because they shared

the same interests, maybe it was because they shared the same abilities, or maybe it was because the fates has simply decreed it; but whatever it was, they were soulmates. They understood each other.

They felt each other's joy and each other's pain.

That was what was troubling Don now, as he sat at his desk. He knew that Greg was hurting, and hurting very badly. Don was fairly certain that he knew the reason why, but he wanted to hear it from Greg himself.

That's why he joined Greg for lunch that afternoon at the tavern. They both ordered roast beef sandwiches, and to wash it down Don chose iced tea and Greg went with his usual margarita.

Don didn't know quite how to begin the discussion. He wanted to help his best friend but he didn't know how. He had never seen Greg looking so depressed. Finally he decided to just be direct.

“You know, one of your clients called me yesterday. The Falcon Insurance Company. You're a month late with the blueprints for their new headquarters, and they have decided to fire us as their architects. They also want their retainer fee back, and they said that if we refuse to return it, they will sue for breach of contract.”

Greg's jaw dropped and the blood drained from his face in disgrace. Greg may have looked depressed before, but now he looked absolutely crushed.

“Geez, Don, I'm sorry. I had no idea. I'll get right on it. They'll have their blueprints on Monday morning, and we'll get back in their good graces, you'll see.”

Immediately Don knew he had made a mistake by being so direct. He moved quickly to ease his friend's guilt. He wanted to help him, not shame him.

“Hey buddy, look, it's not that bad. We've already got more business than we can handle, and those jerks at Falcon Insurance were a royal pain in the ass anyway. I'm not worried about losing them as a client. The only thing I'm worried about is you. What's going on? Is it Karen?” (Karen was Greg's girlfriend of the past two years). “What can I do to help?”

Greg thought for a few moments before replying. “Is it Karen? Well, sort of. As for what you can do to help, I don't think you can. Don, you know what bothers me about Karen?”

“Yeah, I know. You've told me a million times. Karen doesn't understand you. Her body turns you on, the sex is great, but you don't feel any friendship with her. You two don't have anything in common except a sexual appetite for each other. This is old news, Greg .”

Greg shook his head.

“The thing that's new about it is that I've finally realized that all girls are like that. I've dated a lot of girls over the past two years, not just Karen. Hell, I've been dating since I was fifteen years old. That's twelve years of dating. I must have gone out with over a hundred different girls in that time.”

This was no exaggeration. He and Don were two handsome and successful young men. They had always attracted more than their fair share of girls.

“In all that time,” Greg continued, “I never dated a girl that really understood me. Girls always say they understand you but they never really do. They don't understand anything that a guy really wants and needs. They don't understand why we like to watch football on T.V., when they would rather watch some love story on another channel. They don't understand why we would rather go for a hike in the woods instead of going shopping in a mall. They don't understand that guys need their privacy sometimes, and not be required to always talk about their feelings.”

Don smiled.

“That's your problem? Man, that's a relief. I thought something really serious was bothering you. Greg, welcome to the club! Men and women just don't understand each other. We never have and we never will. Ever since the first caveman got yelled at by the cave woman for not wiping his feet before he entered the cave, men have been scratching their heads over women. Sure, men are easy enough to understand. We're rational, we're reasonable, and everything we do makes sense. It's women who are the crazy ones. Sure, they're cute and cuddly. Their bodies are fun to look at and play with. Hell, their bodies are a lot more than just that. They are downright works of art. But there's no getting away from the fact that women are crazy. They are gorgeous little packages of complete irrationality. They cry when they're happy. If they go to a party and another woman is wearing the same type of dress they have on, they get furious; instead of admiring one another for having the same good taste in clothes. The bottom line is that you can't expect a woman to understand you, and you can't expect to understand her. It's just one of life's mysteries, and you'll have to accept it, little brother .”

Don sometimes teased Greg by calling him *little brother*. At 6'5", Don was three inches taller than Greg).

“But I can't accept that Don. I want a woman who will understand me, the real me. I want a woman who connects with me on all levels, not just the sexual one. I want to have a complete and total relationship with a woman. I want a beautiful sexy girl and a best friend all in the same package,” Greg replied.

Don rolled his eyes and said, “Greg, that's impossible. There is a part of me that wants the same thing you do, believe me. If I ever do get married, I would love it if my spouse was my best friend. But that's never going to happen. Men and women are just too different from each other.”

“That's what has been making me so depressed lately,” Greg said. “I've finally realized that a relationship like that is impossible. The only thing I have ever really wanted in life, more than money or success or anything else, is to have a best friend and a pretty girl together in the same body. Now I finally accept that it's impossible.

“My parents were never friends with each other. They fought like cats and dogs all of their lives, and I hated it. I always dreamed that when I got married, things would be totally different. Now I know they won't. That's why I've been so depressed lately. I feel like I've got nothing to live for. Life is pointless for me. I know I've been letting

you down, and I'm sorry. I'm hurting the architectural firm. Maybe you'd be better off without me.”

“Greg, stop talking nonsense, okay? You're an excellent architect. You're just going through a rough period. What you need is a couple of weeks on a sunny beach somewhere. I'll tie up a few loose ends back on my desk and we'll take a two week vacation. Where would you like to go? Hawaii? The Caribbean maybe? Come on, what do you say? Go home have a beer, and relax. Things will look a lot better to you when we're on vacation. Trust me. I'll be home around seven.”

Home to Greg and Don was a three bedroom apartment on the thirty sixth floor of a downtown apartment building. Greg and Don lived together because it was more economical and it allowed them to bring work home and work on architectural projects together. It was a beautiful apartment, with floor to ceiling windows in every room and a spectacular view of the city. The extra bedroom had been converted into an architect's drawing room. The living room was large and comfortable.

Don's girlfriend, Debbie, was an interior decorator and she had helped the guys choose the proper furnishings.

“Okay Don, whatever you say,” Greg agreed. “Maybe you're right. Maybe I just need some time off to recharge my batteries and get a fresh look at life.” Greg spoke in a weak monotone, and with an utter lack of conviction.

Don decided he would give the situation more thought when the working day was over. It was almost one o'clock and he still had much more to do.

That is where matters stood as Don sat in his office, staring at the wall in front of him, at seven o'clock on Thursday evening. He had no idea of how to help his best friend. He knew Greg needed a lot more than just a vacation. Greg had talked about his fantasy of having a beautiful woman and a great friend in the same body ever since he was twelve years old. It was his goal in life. Don was glad Greg had come to his senses, and finally realized that his fantasy was impossible, but he knew that this realization would devastate Greg. His dream of a lifetime was dashed, and sitting on a beach for a couple of weeks wasn't much compensation.

Greg wanted to help, but how?

He usually thought better on his feet, so he decided to take a walk. He got up, put on his coat, and walked to the elevator. In a few minutes he was walking out of the building and into the chilly early December night. The office building was located in the middle of the downtown shopping district, and the streets and sidewalks throbbed with the hustle and bustle of Christmas shoppers. Don needed peace and quiet in order to think, so he headed away from the center of the city.

He walked and he thought.

After almost an hour of walking Don still had no idea about how to help Greg, and he had entered a section of the city he had never been in before. It wasn't a ghetto, but it was far from prosperous, and not a particularly safe place to be at night. However, Don was big and strong and he wasn't worried about his safety.

As he walked he casually inspected the neighborhood. A few bars, some pool halls, a pawn shop, and a couple of abandoned buildings. And up ahead, a small cluster of stores that still appeared to be open. Neon lights flashed on and off. When Don got closer he could read the flashing signs.

Madame Wong's Occult Shop

Palms Read. Fortunes Told

Caribbean Voodoo Dolls

Your Future Revealed With Tarot Cards

Don had to laugh. Shirley MacLaine would love this place. It was like a mini-mall for the occult. Don could never understand how people got taken in by these charlatans. Still, a part of him wished that these con artists really could do what they promised.

He wished that one of these people could look into a crystal ball and tell him exactly what to do to help Greg. He had to find some way to solve this problem, before Greg did something really stupid. Don hadn't liked Greg's comment about not having anything to live for.

Don didn't know it at the time, but Greg was writing a farewell letter to him at that very moment. He was planning to take his own life on Friday morning. Don had finished looking at the flashing neon signs and was planning to move on, but something made him turn his head and look to his left, down a narrow alley. The alley was empty, except for a few trash cans and a large black door. The door was about fifteen feet away, and in the dim light Don could read a sign on it. It said, simply:

Problems? Solutions!

Don was struck by the directness of the message.

“Man oh man, if only that sign was more than just a come-on. If only I really could walk through that door and find a solution to Greg's problem.”

Then a thought suddenly occurred to him.

“Hey, how do I know it's not true? How do I know for sure unless I check it out? At this point, I'll try anything.”

Don strode over to the big black door and knocked.

It was opened immediately by a short, plump, middle-aged woman. She had a broad smile on her face and a twinkle in her eye.

“Come in, come in, I've been waiting for you.”

Don hadn't noticed any windows in the alley, and he wondered how the woman could have seen him.

‘She must have a peephole in the door,’ he thought. Don stepped inside. The room was beautiful, and not at all like he had imagined it would be. It looked like it be-

longed in one of the finest homes in the city, not in this lonely back alley. A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, and an oriental rug covered the floor. A huge mahogany bookcase was built into one of the walls, and it was filled with row upon row of leather bound books.

Don started to explain why he had come, "I saw the sign on your door and..."

The woman interrupted him...

"Mercy, dear. No need to explain. I know why you've come. Everything's all ready. Please, sit down, and I'll go get the tea."

Don took a seat on the large leather chair next to him and the woman disappeared into another room. Don could hear the whistling of the tea kettle. Despite the odd situation, Don felt completely comfortable and at ease. He liked the friendly plump woman and her ornate house, and he instinctively trusted her to help. Don felt certain he had seen her somewhere before. It was as if she was his favorite aunt, and Don had gone to her for help.

The woman returned with a large silver tray bearing a pot of tea, two teacups, lemon, honey, and sugar.

"Now then, Don. Would you like lemon in your tea, and sugar? Or perhaps honey?"

Don looked at her, startled.

"Oh, you're surprised I know your name?" she observed. "Don't be, I know many things about you. Not only about you, but about your friend Greg."

"What? How could you possibly know my name? And that I have a friend named Greg? Who are you?"

"Questions, questions," the woman mused aloud with a shake of her head. "I also know that your favorite color is aqua, your favorite actor is Sean Connery, and when you were a child your favorite T.V. show was The Man From U.N.C.L.E."

"But let's not waste time on mere details. Who am I? I'm a friend, Don, please believe that. My name is Agatha. I'm a witch, and I'll help you, if you let me."

Don stared hard at Agatha. He absolutely did not believe in the occult or in any kind of hocus-pocus. But, somehow, he believed her.

"Oh, I'm not the sort of witch you read about in fairy-tale books, with a black hat and a broomstick. I'm the real thing. And I'm a good witch. My job is to help people, and I can help you. Will you let me?"

Don was overcome with a sense of wonder and mystery. Agatha had been right about everything. All he could do was nod his head.

"Very well then. I'll help you with your problem, or rather, with Greg's. First though, I want to tell you a little about myself. I am a good witch, as I said. My power comes from the Maker of this world, not from any red-skinned devil.

"A good witch simply uses forces of nature that science does not yet understand. I come from a long line of women who have chosen to use those forces to help others. Science can be used for good or evil. It can be used to create wonder drugs or nuclear

weapons. Beginning with my great-great-great-great-grandmother the women of my family have all pledged themselves to use the forces of witchcraft for good. Almost like an order of nuns. Do you believe me ?”

Don nodded his head. What Agatha was saying was ridiculous, but somehow, deep in his heart, he knew it was true.

Agatha continued.

“Okay, now to the heart of the matter. Your best friend, Greg, is very depressed. All of his life he has wanted to fall in love with and marry a beautiful girl who was also his soulmate; a lovely feminine girl who was also his greatest friend. He has dated many girls over the last twelve years of his life but he has yet to find his dream girl. Greg has come to the conclusion that he will never find her. He is overcome with grief, drinking a lot, and his job performance has suffered enormously. Do I speak the truth?”

Again, Don could only nod.

“You're afraid that if you don't do something now, he'll do something drastic. Your fears are well founded because unless the path of events is altered, Greg will jump off the balcony of your apartment tomorrow morning and end his life.”

Don swallowed hard and finally spoke. “What can I do to help, then? It's the only thing that has been on my mind for hours and I still don't have a clue.”

“The solution is obvious, Don. You must become Greg's dream girl. You are his best friend in the entire world. In a female body, you would be everything he is longing for. Greg will finally have what he has been looking for and you will have saved your friend's life. You would have to be female only temporarily, of course. You won't be Don's real dream girl, only her stand-in. When his real dream girl shows up, she will take over.”

Don was dumbstruck.

“I would have to become a girl? No way! No way am I going to go through a sex-change operation and hormone treatments. Besides, I'd make a pretty big, ugly girl. I definitely wouldn't be the girl of Greg's dreams.”

“Oh, Don, but you would, if you do it my way. One of the powers witches have is the power to make physical transformations. Complete physical transformations. Physical transformations occur all of the time in nature. Caterpillars turn into butterflies. Tadpoles become frogs. There is even a species of fish that changes its sex as a natural part of its life cycle.

“Look at the process of evolution. Every living creature on Earth, from the smallest ant to the largest whale, evolved, over millions of years, from the same one-celled organism.

“How did we get the incredible variety of species that we have today? By an incredibly long process of metamorphosis, that's how. Through countless mutations each species gradually evolved into something different from the other. Witchcraft has simply harnessed the natural power of metamorphosis, re-directed it, and accelerated it.

“Think of it this way. A hot sun can cast its rays for many weeks, months, or even years on a piece of paper before the conditions become right for the paper to burst into flame. But with a magnifying glass, you can re-direct the sun's rays and accelerate the process, so that in only a few minutes the paper will burst into flame.

“Witches do the same thing, except that we use different things, like potions and spells, as our magnifying glass. I also like to use crystal pyramids, because I think you get a better focus. And of course, we call on the supernatural for a little extra help. Good witches call on the Supreme Being, and evil witches, well, they call elsewhere. But their witchcraft isn't nearly as powerful as ours.

“Changing a person's sex isn't as difficult a trick as you think. Witches and warlocks have been doing it for centuries. Remember your history lessons from school? Remember how King Henry VIII married six women to try to get a male heir, but his wives produced only daughters? It wasn't their fault. They actually conceived a few sons, but old Henry had ticked off his court magician very badly, so the magician changed the boys into girls, right inside their mother's womb.

“And do you remember the legend of the Amazons? The all-female tribe of fierce warriors? Even Plato and Socrates wrote about them. They weren't really a legend though, they actually existed. But they weren't always an all-female tribe. They had once been a normal tribe of primitive Europeans, male and female, living on the outskirts of ancient Greece. The Amazons were a very fierce tribe, and they terrorized all of Greece, even Athens and mighty Sparta.

“The Greek sorcerers eventually banded together to rid their land of the Amazon threat. They cast a spell and turned all of the male Amazons into normal females. The Amazons were still fairly good warriors, and that is how the legend began. But they were no longer the threat they had once been. In fact, the Spartans conquered them seven years later and punished them for the trouble they had caused by making love to the former male warriors right in front of the warrior's wives. The Spartans took the transformed males, married the most beautiful ones, and used the rest as handmaidens and slaves.

“So you see, this is nothing new.

“But, even though the technique may be very old, it is far in advance of modern science. Modern medicine, even with their surgery and hormone treatments, can't even come close to doing what we witches can do. Comparing doctors to witches would be like comparing a paper airplane to the space shuttle. No, Don, you are wrong. With my help, you will definitely become the girl of Greg's dreams.”

Such a thing had never occurred to Don. Even if Agatha could perform such an incredible transformation, why should he go along with it? Don enjoyed making love to a beautiful woman, he certainly didn't want to become one. The thought alone was incredibly humiliating to him.

To actually become a girl. A girl! Why should he do such a thing? To save his best friend's life, that's why.

Reluctantly, Don started considering the idea.

“Well,” he asked Agatha, “if I go along with this, how long will I have to stay female? I mean, would it be permanent?”

“As I said, Don, you would only have to stay female until the girl Greg will eventually marry arrives. According to my calculations, that will be take place this coming Sunday.”

“This Sunday!” Don exclaimed with surprise. “That's so soon! Maybe you won't have to turn me into a girl at all! Maybe I can just give Greg the good news that he will meet the girl of his dreams in only three days. Right?” he asked, hopefully.

“No, that's not an option, if you truly want to help. Greg is beyond hope, and he would never believe you. He needs actual physical proof that he can have a best friend and a pretty girl in the same body. Unless you are willing to do that for him, temporarily, he will end his life this morning, without question.”

“I really have no choice then,” Don acknowledged uncertainly. “Okay, do what you have to do. Not that money is any object at this point, but what will this cost me, anyway?” He looked down at the bulge in his crotch. “Besides my favorite appendage, I mean.”

Agatha laughed gently.

“Besides that? I'd say it will also cost you about a foot in height and about one hundred pounds in weight. Other than that, it will cost only what you care to give. Wait until the whole episode is over, and give me whatever you think the service was worth. Deal?”

“Deal,” Don replied.

With that Agatha got up from her chair and disappeared again into the other room. Don could hear pots and pans being clanged around. For half an hour Agatha stayed in there, reappearing only occasionally to consult one of the books in the mahogany bookcase. Agatha was working fast, and with great concentration. Once or twice, when she walked into the room, Don spoke to her, but she seemed not to hear. Finally, everything became quiet in the other room.

'She must be finished,' Don thought. He heard footsteps coming and looked up.

Agatha was walking in, carrying a large mug. She handed him the mug and Don looked inside. The mug contained what looked like thick brown soup.

“What's in this concoction anyway?” Don demanded. “Dragons teeth and a unicorn's tail?”

“No, Don. Nothing quite that exotic. But you mustn't ask, dear. Trade secret, you know.”

Don was hesitant.

“Wait a second, Agatha. Before I drink this, how is this whole thing going to happen? And what am I supposed to tell Greg? I just can't turn up at our apartment as a beautiful girl and say ‘Hi Greg, don't you recognize me? It's your old buddy, Don.’ He'd never believe it was me.”

“Don't worry, he will know it's you for sure. That's the beauty of it. The transformation will take place in front of his very eyes. You see, the spell I'm about to cast takes two hours to work its magic. It's usually that way with witchcraft. All the stuff about instant results with the wave of a magic wand was made up for the movies. Hollywood gave people a lot of crazy ideas about witches. We never say ‘Abracadabra,’ by the way. Witchcraft harnesses awesome and unseen forces of nature, but it takes them awhile to work their effects.

“Anyway, nothing will happen to you for two hours. It's almost 9:30 now, so that makes zero hour 11:30. That will give you plenty of time to get back to your apartment. Just make sure that Greg is around when those two hours are up, because you're right, if he doesn't see it for himself, he will never believe it. The transformation process itself will take about fifteen minutes, and it will be totally painless. It has two parts. During the first part, you will feel you are being gently massaged. The second part is quite exhausting for the body, and you'll probably fall asleep. After that, you will wake up and it will be all over.

“I just want to tell you, Don, I admire you tremendously. What you're doing for your friend is very noble. It takes a lot of courage to assume a whole new sexual identity, even if it is only for three days. I think Greg is lucky to have you for his best friend.”

“Thanks, Agatha. I'm lucky I found you. You've been a huge help. Okay, let's get to it.”

Don ran his hands over his muscular arms and chest, and looked his body over, as if he was saying good-bye to it for awhile.

Then he took the mug and gulped it down.

In a few moments his eyes grew heavy and he fell asleep.

Agatha began speaking an incantation in a strange language, and after five minutes she was finished. Then she walked back into the other room. She returned with four blue-colored crystal pyramids, each about six inches high. She also had three large silver hoops. She lowered the hoops over him, until they rested on the carpet under his chair. Then Agatha placed the crystal pyramids on the floor, one on each side of Don's chair. Agatha began her incantation again, and the hoops began to float in the air around Don's body. Also, the one by one the blue pyramids began to turn a brilliant red. When the last one had completely changed color, the silver hoops slowly returned to the carpet.

Agatha finished her incantation, walked over to the phone, and called for a taxi....

The next thing he knew, Don was being shaken awake by a taxi driver.

“Hey mister, you're home. Hey, are you awake? Your aunt said you were pretty tired, and not to wake you up until we got to your apartment. Well, here we are. The Brookfield Towers, right? Hey, are you awake?”

Don groggily opened one eye.

‘A cab? What the hell am I doing in a cab?’ he wondered to himself. ‘Oh yeah, Agatha and that crazy soup she made me drink.’