

“Here they come, Shannon,” Jenna whispered to her dog. “On your best behavior now.”

Jenna had been walking her dog in this neighborhood for the last month. She loved the tree lined streets and wide walking paths that were always full of people and dogs and felt safe even in the evenings. And every day for the past month she and Shannon had run into a handsome, dark haired man and the rambunctious yellow lab pup he called Barney. Barney was particularly fond of Shannon and would start whining and jumping as soon as he caught sight of her. Shannon, a cool and regal German Shepherd, took the younger dog’s eager attentions in her stride, patiently enduring his overly interested sniffs and occasional sloppy kisses. Jenna knew that Barney was eight months old and that the man had named him after his favorite cartoon character, Barney Rubble of “The Flintstones”. He’d told her he’d rescued the puppy from a shelter after it had been abandoned by its former owner and that the young dog still had separation issues. Jenna knew Barney’s whole life history, but next to nothing about the man’s, not even his name.

From the sheen of his luxurious golden coat and the cheerful sparkle in his eye, it was obvious Barney was well-loved and cared for. Jenna firmly believed that the way a person treated their pet revealed a lot about their true nature. The man’s gentle way of handling his dog told her he was a kind, compassionate person, the kind of person she’d like to get to know better. She sighed. If only she could work up the courage to ask the man his name. She knew it was silly was to be so shy about simply introducing herself and encouraging him to do the same, but she couldn’t get past it.

The puppy started doing his usual excited dance when he saw Shannon. The man held tight to Barney’s leash but his eyes smiled into Jenna’s. His smile never failed to warm her heart while kindling a spark of excitement inside her. Who was he? Did he live in one of the beautiful old homes in this neighborhood? Was he married? She rejected the last question. He wore no wedding band and she’d never seen him with another woman. Besides, the interest in his eyes convinced her he was unmarried. But if he was interested, why didn’t he ask her to have coffee with him at one of the nearby sidewalk cafes? The only thing they ever talked about was their dogs. Was she deluding herself? Maybe all the interest was on her side.

“Hi,” he said. His smile seemed subdued this evening. “How’s Shannon today?”

“She’s fine,” Jenna answered. She launched into a story about how Shannon had dropped her favorite chew toy down a heating vent and she’d had to call a furnace repairman to get it out. The whole time she told the story she mentally kicked herself for her cowardice. Why couldn’t she ask him out for coffee? What was stopping her from asking his name?

She already knew the answer. Fear stopped her. If she asked him out and found he really wasn't interested, the humiliation would be unbearable. Going through a painful divorce had taught her to be cautious where her heart was concerned. Perhaps it was better to be alone than to risk rejection.

"I wanted to tell you that Barney and I are moving," he said suddenly. His eyes were full of regret when he looked at her. "I think Barney's really going to miss Shannon."

"Shannon will miss him too."

Jenna absorbed this information, her spirits plummeting. The idea of never seeing him again caused a knot to form in her stomach, and her heart thumped painfully in her chest. "I know she seems aloof, but that's just because it takes her a while to warm up to others. She doesn't like to let her feelings show."

"Barney's just the opposite," he said. "He wears his heart on his sleeve, but I'm afraid that someday someone will take advantage of his trusting nature. I know what that's like."

"Yes, so do I."

They stared at one another for a long time, the unspoken words hanging between them. Jenna couldn't tear her gaze away from his beautiful dark eyes. There were so many things she wanted to say to him, so many questions she wanted to ask, but she couldn't make the words come out.

Finally he lowered his gaze and knelt to untangle the leashes that had knotted while the dogs had played at their feet.

"I guess we should be going," he said at last.

Jenna swallowed hard and forced a smile. She felt as if a part of her were being ripped away. It was crazy to feel such a profound loss over a man she barely knew. Maybe it was best that they never saw each other again.

But she knew that was a lie.

"Yes, Shannon and I should be getting home too. Good luck with your move."

"Thanks," he said. "I guess this is goodbye." Jenna wondered if she imagined the sadness in his smile or if her heart indulged itself in wishful thinking. She nodded and turned quickly away before she did something stupid like cry.

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Three days later Jenna slipped Shannon's harness over her head and attached the leash. They hadn't walked in the neighborhood with the beautiful old houses and the tree lined streets since Barney's master told her about their imminent move. She simply couldn't make herself go there. She'd been so stupid. Why had she let him slip out of her life? There was something special about this man.

Though she didn't know the details of his life, she knew everything about him that mattered. She knew that while he was a little shy, he was also kind and decent and loyal. Men like that didn't come around very often, she'd discovered. She promised herself that if she ever saw him again, she'd find a way to keep him in her life. At the very least, she'd ask him his name.

She guided Shannon out of their loft apartment and headed for the stairs that led to the street. As they descended the stairs, the door to the street opened, though Jenna couldn't see who entered. A familiar and very excited bark filled the stairwell. Shannon answered with an equally eager bark. Jenna's heart ceased beating for a moment. It couldn't be...

"Shannon? Is that you?" The familiar voice caressed her senses.

Jenna walked carefully down the rest of the stairs, holding tight to Shannon's leash as the dog tugged her along, anxious to see her friend. Barney jumped up and down beside his owner. The man stared at her, a mixture of surprise and pleasure on his face.

"Do you live here?" he asked.

"Yes. I have the loft on the second floor," Jenna said. A thought struck her. "Did you buy the place for sale on the third floor?"

"Yes," he said with an incredulous laugh. "Can you believe it? I thought you lived in the neighborhood where we walked the dogs."

"No, I just liked to go there with Shannon." Jenna screwed up her courage and took a deep breath. "I promised myself if I ever saw you again I'd ask you your name."

"It's Rick," he said. "Rick Thompson. What's your name?"

"Jenna McPherson."

"Jenna." He tested her name on his tongue, and then smiled as if he liked the way it sounded. "I've been wanting to know your name for a very long time. I don't know why I couldn't ask you."

“I wondered the same thing.” Jenna sent a prayer of thanks heavenward for the second chance and vowed not to let the gift she’d been given slip away. She laughed, her heart bubbling over with happiness.

“I think Shannon’s going to love having Barney for a neighbor.” She smiled shyly at Rick. “So am I.”

The two dogs happily sniffed each other, overjoyed by this surprise reunion. Rick smiled at her, and she knew without a doubt the joy she saw in his eyes was real. He was as grateful for second chances as she was. He took her hand, entwining her fingers with his.

“I think I’m going to love being your neighbor too.”