BURNING DESIRES
Twenty-five years later and we’d still totally do her. By Katrina Fox

LONG BEFORE SHE became an icon for gay men in her role on Queer as Folk, Sharon Gless was a “dykon.” The minute she appeared on TV screens in the 1980s as tough-talking detective Christine Cagney, in the hit series Cagney & Lacey, lesbians the world over fell instantly in love with her—and she welcomed us with open arms. Now back in the spotlight as Madeline Westen on USA’s Burn Notice, Gless is definitely one hot mama.

You’re one of those rare creatures who is revered by both gay men and lesbians.

Thank you! I’m honored to have that reputation.

Did you have women coming on to you all the time during the Cagney & Lacey years?

Well, let’s just say there have been many misunderstandings! I remember the first time a girl told me she was in love with me. I was 19; I’d run away from home and lived at the Y for a year. The only person I really became friends with was this gay girl who took me to a gay bar, and one night I went into the ladies room and somebody followed me in there. They looked like they were going to rough me up…and my little friend of about 4-foot, 2-inches came in and said, “Lay off her, she’s straight!” Then I was standing in a phone booth a week later, talking to my brother, telling him I wanted to come home, and my little friend—who had never professed anything to me before—got into the phone booth, closed the door and said, “I love you.” I said I was sorry but I was straight and she said, “I know, but I wanted you to know that.” It was very sweet.

How did you feel about the rumors that you were gay?
All through Cagney & Lacey nobody believed I wasn’t gay. I didn’t even try and fight it. I didn’t matter to me. I thought, How flattering is this? I guess it was because of the character and the following I had—they must have thought, 50,000 women can’t be wrong. And I wasn’t married. I didn’t get married until I was 48 years old.

You married the show’s producer, Barney Rosenzweig, who’s written a book about the show, right?
Yes, and there are still people who think Barney’s my beard.

It didn’t freak you out that people thought you were gay?
Oh no, I was flattered. My lesbian fans made my career.

And even the time in 1990 when a lesbian stalker broke into your house brandishing a gun—that didn’t put you off us?
That was scary, but I knew it was a very specific case. When a policeman talked to me afterward, he asked me if I was afraid and I said, “No, all my fans are smart, educated women.” Then he told me, “She has an identical twin sister, equally anti-social.” If you put that in a movie, no one would believe you. That was when I was the most frightened. So I hired some bodyguards and for about two weeks I had these retired FBI guys. Then I got their bill and I said, “I’m not that afraid!”

You were out of the spotlight for a while before Queer as Folk. What did getting that show mean for you?
It really changed my life because I’d turned 50, put on a lot of weight, and you know how Hollywood is with women, so I wasn’t working a lot. I was doing a play by a wonderful lesbian playwright in Chicago, and while [I was] there an agent sneaked me a script called Queer as Folk. I read it, called Showtime immediately and said, “I want that part.” They offered it to me and said they didn’t care what I looked like. The show also made me much more aware of the heartbreaking aspects of being part of the gay community.

You’d like to play a lesbian. What about The L Word?
Well, everyone is young and beautiful on that show. If they asked me, I’d go do the last season. I think it’s a very fun show. I always look at it like a Victoria’s Secret catalog. The women are beautiful to look at and I love the lingerie!

You’re currently starring in the hit show Burn Notice.
It’s very fun. The leading lady is Gabrielle Anwar, from the movie Scent of a Woman. Oh, you’d love her! She’s very hot and very sexy!