

Winter Squared

Hank and Maeve, both in their winter years, enjoy one another's company, and really like each other, but their nosy friends keep raising doubts about their intentions.

Hank's leg buckled as he turned down the Romance aisle of Jeffery's Books. He gripped a shelf to steady himself then massaged his knee, muttering useful profanities under his breath. When he regained his composure, he stood upright and tested his weight on the weakened appendage. Nothing failed, yet.

Maeve saw the man at the other end of the aisle stumble, then right himself. He was dressed smartly in a checkered shirt with button-down collars, faded jeans, taut over his muscled thighs, and converse high tops. His long, grey hair was tied back into a pony tail with a fluorescent, orange scrunchy. She watched him as he walked slowly down the aisle, running his fingers along the spines, his head tilted to the side, stopping to read the titles and authors.

Hank noticed the older woman at the other end of the row of books when he'd first turned the corner. Her verdant yoga pants accentuated her generous curves, the Celtics hoodie tight across her ample bosom. She smiled at him when he looked up from paying attention to his knee. He smiled back.

She was next to him when he got to the N's. Her hair was streaked with grey and the wrinkles around her eyes betrayed her age, but her face didn't give away much else. She pulled out a hardcover with a brightly coloured jacket. "Till Death" and "Mavis Nicholls" were splashed in gory letters across the front.

"Hi. Looking for something interesting for your wife?" she said, waving the book seductively.

"Uh, no," he said, followed by an embarrassed pause. "It's for me, actually."

"Well, good on ya. There's not many men that will openly admit to being romance readers. At least not many that I've met," she said.

"Really? I guess that's not surprising, although I haven't given it much thought."

Maeve held her book in front of her and said "Maybe I can interest you in this. It's got travel, romance, a little bit of sex, and a murder mystery thrown in for seasoning. Well, a lot of sex, truth-be-told. But it's not dirty. Pretty erotic, if I say so myself, and I should, since I wrote it."

She grinned. He pointed at the cover.

"So that's you, then. Mavis Nicholls?"

"It is."

“Hello, Ms. Nicholls. I’m Henry Palmer, but my friends call me Hank. Pleased to meet you.”

He took the book from her and held out his hand. She shook it and said, “My friends call me Maeve, and the pleasure’s all mine.”

They smiled. Hank turned the book over and looked at the back of the jacket. “Nice photograph,” he said. “Not as good as the real thing, but pretty good.”

Maeve blushed and muttered, “thanks. I’m sure your wife will like it too.”

“She would have,” Hank said. “She passed six years ago. I used to read to her through her treatments. That’s when I got turned onto romance novels.”

“I’m so sorry,” Maeve said, flustered. “I didn’t mean to pry. I just thought…”

“No worries. So, how do we do this? Do you sign it here? Or do I pay for it then come back here?”

Maeve was searching for an answer when Hank said, “Better idea — let’s go across to Kristen’s Coffee after I pay and chat about your book? You can sign it there.”

She stared at him like the proverbial deer-in-the-headlights, for moment. No one had ever taken her up on her offer to buy her book, or to have it signed, and no man has ever invited her to coffee or wanted to talk about it. Finally, she said, “Um, sure.”

“OK. Say, why don’t you go over to Kristen’s, get a table, and I’ll join you there after I pay for the book?”

Maeve’s hopes fell along with her cheery countenance. She was sure this was going to be a brushoff, of her book and her.

“No. It’s OK if you don’t want the book. You don’t have to sugar coat anything. Just put it back and I’ll let you continue your search for something more to your liking.”

“Ms. Nicholls. I’m aggrieved that you would think that of me. I’m sorry if I made you feel that I didn’t want your book. Please, come with me and we can check it out together.”

He arched his eyebrows and his smile lit up his face. Maeve smiled back. He offered her his arm and said “shall we?”

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Hank was knotting his Hubble deep field tie. When he finished fine tuning its position, he turned down the collar of his Blue Brioni shirt and donned his sports coat.

“What do you think, Jack? Good enough for a first date?” he asked.

“You’re looking good, as always,” Jack said.

Hank heard the hesitation in his voice which always meant there was something else he wanted to say that he wouldn’t like.

“What is it Jack?”

Jack hesitated, looked at his feet, then back at Hank. He reached over and batted some lint off his shoulder. “Well,” he started, then cleared his throat and decided to examine his shoes once more.

“Well what?”

“Well, um, how long have you known this woman anyway? Did you even check her out. I know a first date isn’t a commitment or anything, but jeez, how do you know she just isn’t after your money, or she just wants you for the sex?”

“Nothing wrong with that, my friend. Nothing wrong with that at all. And, based on what she wrote, she seems to have a good handle on that part of a relationship.”

“See, you’re talking relationship already. Look, I know it’s been a while since Fran died, and I know I’ve been putting the time-to-move-on bug in your ear, but I do think you’re moving too fast. I mean, look at yourself, you’re even wearing dress shoes instead of your Converse.”

Hank sighed. “You may be right, but, keep in mind that there isn’t a lot of runway left, for both of us. She’s almost 80 and I passed that a couple of years ago. Who am I to complain if she’s only after me for the sex,” he said, a big grin creasing his face. They both laughed.

Maeve was putting the finishing touches on her makeup, her best friend, Liz, besties since their first teaching job together, decades ago, helping her out. She stood in front of her full length mirror, turning from side to side, smoothing her black A-line skirt and tucking at her white blouse. “You’re lovely, Maeve,” Liz said.

“Thanks. I discern a touch of apprehension, though. What’s wrong?”

“I didn’t say anything earlier, because I thought you wouldn’t be smitten with a schoolgirl crush, but I do have concerns, Maeve.”

“Spit it out, woman.”

“Well, what do you even know about this octogenarian? For heaven’s sake, Maeve, he’s old and he’s not stable on his feet. You don’t want to be stuck looking after an old man in your dotage, do you?”

“Of course not, I-”

“Exactly! But that’s exactly what’s going to happen and that’s exactly what he’s looking for. He’s looking for someone to feed him, clean after him and help him to the bathroom. You don’t need that again.”

“Liz!” Maeve raised her voice.

“Sorry. I meant no disrespect to Brian, but it was a burden in those last few years. You even confided as much to me afterwards.”

“Confided what?” Angela said, as she walked into her mom’s bedroom.

“Hi dear,” Maeve said. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Becky’s taking driving lessons from Margaret Chernicky, remember? Hi Liz. You look lovely, mom,” she said, hugging Liz, then her mother.

“So, what are you confiding?” she asked.

“Something from the past and of no importance now, dear. Isn’t that right, Liz?”

“Right. We were discussing your mother’s date tonight—”

“Date?!” Angela exclaimed.

Maeve looked over her shoulder at Angela, furrows lining her forehead, her lips pursed. This wasn’t the first time her daughter’s questioned her life’s choices.

“Well, date! Great. Who’s the lucky man,” Angela stammered.

Liz jumped in. “Like I was saying, I was telling your mother she was jumping into things. She’s only been to coffee a couple of times with him and she hardly knows anything about him except he’s ancient and an invalid.”

“Jeez-Louise, Elizabeth. That is not true. Don’t listen to her. Yes, he’s old, but not that much older than me, and he has trouble with his knees, but don’t we all,” she said smiling.

Angela and Liz exchanged knowing looks behind Maeve’s back. Angela shrugged, sighed and said, “Well, at least remember to practice safe sex.”

“Angela! Really?”

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They did practice safe sex, but not until their third date after Maeve suggested they go see the new off-off-broadway “Together or not”. She heard it featured erotic innuendo and an overabundance of nudity, which was right down her alley, with similarities to what she’d put into

her novel. Hank feigned embarrassment but didn't avert his eyes once. They had drinks at Cerano's afterwards and held hands expectantly in the back seat of the cab.

She invited him into her apartment for a nightcap, but they were in each other's arms like teenagers as soon as they were through the door. They talked about it afterwards, sipping wine, propped up on pillows, a duvet covering their nakedness. It was agreed that the sex was good but they shouldn't let their expectations and imaginations run away from them.

"Good is good enough at our age, don't you think?" she asked.

"Sure, but I think it's always acceptable to strive for better," he said.

"Better, too," she said, lifting her glass to toast the sentiment.

She leaned in and put her head on his shoulder. They sat in silence for a minute.

"My dear friend and daughter have misgivings about you, you know?" she said, glancing at his face to register the reaction.

He cocked one eyebrow and turned his head to look in her eyes. "Oh?" he said.

"Yeah. They said you were just after one thing—"

"And I got it," he interjected, a grin parting his lips over his glossy, white teeth. "And what about you? Did you get it?"

"Uh-huh," she said, a little giggle escaping her.

Weeks passed. There were more dates, and more sex, but always at her place after some performance or event. The sex was sometimes good, and sometimes they just weren't into it, which was alright with both of them. They started to just enjoy laying together and cuddling, taking pleasure in the company. He'd talk about the books he'd been reading and she'd tell him about her struggles with her sequel.

One time after he stayed through the night, her friend Liz caught them at breakfast together. Liz was frosty, but civil, then left after dropping off the dress she'd borrowed.

"That your friend that's having misgivings about me?" he asked.

"Uh-huh?" she said. "She's concerned that you're just after someone to look after you in your advanced years, that I don't need to go through that again." Her eyes teared and her voice choked.

He reached across the breakfast nook and held her hand.

"What do you think?" he asked.

“I don’t know,” she said through more tears, “I like our time together, but I’m wary of the future and what might lie in store for me.”

“You worry needlessly. I’m perfectly capable of looking after myself. I have been for many years already. You shouldn’t let your friend turn your head. I have to ignore the unfriendly advice I’m getting from my friend Jack too.”

“What’s he been saying?”

“He’s convinced you’re after my money, and you’re crawling into my pants to get it?”

Maeve smiled, wiped away a couple of tears and sniffled. She gripped his hand and gave him a weak smile but said nothing. They both realized that they’d maybe crossed some line and this might be the last they’d see of each other.

“Maybe I should go,” he said.

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“Good riddance, I say,” Liz quipped.

Liz, Angela and Maeve were lounging in Maeve’s living room. Maeve was topping up their glasses with the last of the Chardonnay. She tipped some more into her glass and resumed her place on the other end of the sofa from Liz.

“I’m not so sure, Lizzy,” she said. “We had some fun times together, and who knows where it might have gone if we both hadn’t talked about the mice in the room.”

“Elephants?” Angela asked. “Don’t you mean elephants?” Angela was used to correcting her mother.

“No, dear. Elephants are way too big. I think mice might represent the size of the issue more appropriately.”

Angela and Liz sipped their wine and gave each other a knowing look.

Hank and Jack were enjoying a beer on Hank’s sofa in the TV room, the Friday night game on the big screen. Hank mentioned something about maybe getting back in touch with Maeve, just in passing. Jack glanced over, a look of incredulity colouring his face. “Surely you’re not thinking of ringing her up, not after she more-or-less admitted she was only after your money?”

Hank pulled his gaze away from the game. “She never admitted anything of the sort. She has her own concerns of course, so it just seemed wise to give it a cooling off period to see how we really felt.”

“And? How do you ‘really’ feel now?”

“OK. Truth be told, I never felt differently. It was just that I didn’t want her to feel pushed into anything she wasn’t comfortable with.”

“I still say she’s after your money.”

“So what, Jack. What am I going to do with all that money anyway.”

“So,” said Angela, “you don’t think he’s just trying to get someone to look after him when he starts failing?”

“Maybe he does, but maybe I gave him the wrong idea about his money, too. That was far from my intention. Honestly, girls, he can look after himself. He doesn’t need an old lady like me to do that for him.”

“Well, then, why be so stubborn. Just call him up and see if he wants to go out,” Angela said.

“I think I will!”

Liz shook her head, “It’s still a bad idea.”

Hank slapped his knees and got up from the sofa. “I think I’ll give her a call right now, beg her forgiveness, and ask her out.”

“It’s your money,” Jack said.

#

“Hi Maeve, it’s me.”

“Henry? It’s nice hearing your voice.”

“I missed you. A lot.”

“Me too. Look, I’m sor...—”

“Me too. Very sorry. Why don’t we start over?”

“Sure. I’d like that.”

“Let’s meet at the bookstore. I’ll tell you what romantic drivel I’ve been reading waiting for your next book to come out, and you can fill me in on where your heroine is at in your story.”

Maeve felt her heart skip a few beats. “I’d love that, Hank.”