

Receptionist

Hank walked into the squash club Monday morning and a new front desk person was being trained.

"Shirley switch shifts, or what?" Hank asked Carol, the assistant manager.

"Shirley has taken a position in a law office," Carol said. "Eileen, this is Hank, one of our pros."

Eileen had black glasses and a small tattoo on her bare shoulder. "You taught me once," she said.

"I did?"

Eileen nodded. "About five years ago. I was going to Chapin, and we came here for P.E."

"Well at least I didn't turn you off to the sport then," Hank said. "But getting back to Shirley, I have to admit I didn't see that coming."

Carol said, "There's a little more to it. Let me get Eileen situated."

Hank grabbed a cup of coffee and sat on the couch in front of Court 1 watching Jenny DeLong and Megan Walker working a boast-drive-drop drill. They were

Australian touring pros based in New York and the club gave them free privileges, so long as they played and practiced on the show courts.

Hank was pretty sure Jenny and Megan were lesbians, but he still enjoyed checking out their rear ends as they stopped and stutter-stepped and reversed direction through their battery of drills.

Carol sat down with him and said, "You know that guy Damon, right? I think Shirley quit because of him."

"Wait a second. Damon Lackie? The guy I teach?"

"Yes, there was some friction apparently."

"Dang, now that's hard to picture . . . He's the nicest guy in the world. Had me out for a weekend at his place on the Island, took me fishing, the works."

"Well, he did like to hang around the desk. Something creeped Shirley out, is the way I'm hearing it."

"Okay, let's hold it right there," Hank said. "Don't be circulating it like that to anyone else . . . Would you have Shirley's number?"

Carol gave him a look. "I can get you the new work number," she said, "but don't you already have her cell?"

Hank and Shirley had connected briefly a couple years back, and he realized it hadn't been very discreet and who was he kidding. "I might," he said. "Either way, I'll find out the story -- guarantee there's a logical reason she took the other job."

"Makes sense to me," Carol said. "When someone's scaring you, you run away."

"Give me a break," Hank said.

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When Shirley answered 'Gersten and Gersten' Hank said, "What the heck?"

"Oh hi," she said, "hold on a minute." When she came back on, Hank said how about a drink at McKeown's for old times' sake, and Shirley hesitated and then said well, that sounded harmless enough and she supposed she could.

Hank was listening to one of Stan the bartender's jokes when Shirley showed up around eight wearing navy blue sweats. "What, you just worked out?" Hank said.

"The firm gives everyone a membership at New York Sports," Shirley said. "So I tried it."

"No squash though. You want to chase a ball, not stand on a dumb machine."

"Hank, I had no choice," she said. "It got out of hand."

"Is that right. Well I've been teaching Damon for three, four years, and I know him a little bit socially as well . . . What are you saying here?"

"That one day he came in sipping a frappuchino and I made the mistake of saying that looks good. From then on, he brought me one most of the time. Which was nice of him, but then he'd hover near the front desk, never needing to be anywhere else."

"So? That's the way he is. Last Christmas he gave me a three-hundred-dollar tip."

"Then he asked me to join him in West Palm Beach for a long weekend."

"Ooh. He know you're married?"

"He did. It didn't phase him."

"I can kind of see his point, actually. That hasn't sidetracked you before."

"You know what? . . . You need to stop acting like a fraternity boy."

"How's that going by the way? With Brad."

"That's sort of it. When I worked my late shift I started having Brad come in and sit behind the desk the last couple hours until close. To send a message. Damon still did his thing though."

"You mean hitting on you?"

"Yes, flirting but hamming it up with Brad at the same time. Rolling it into one. Brad enjoyed him, they talked sports."

"So there you go. You're a sexy woman, guy's human. What are you getting bent out of shape about?"

"Okay, then the phone calls started. Late at night . . . he'd leave messages."

"What kind of messages?"

"Suggestive stuff. Graphic. He was drinking, maybe."

Hank tried to process this. "How'd he get your number?" he said.

Shirley said, "I gave it to him. I know, go ahead, crucify me."

"Not yet," Hank said.

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Thursday evening, Hank and Damon came off Court 4 and headed down the spiral staircase to the little club bar that overlooked East 86th Street.

"I feel like it's starting to come together," Damon said. "The league match Tuesday, we played R & T. I at least got a game off my guy."

"That's good," Hank said. "You're still not grinding enough though. The rally lasts six or seven shots, you go for the cheap winner."

"I know, that's my Achilles heel. I feel like I'm programmed that way and can't alter it."

"That's a bunch of crap," Hank said. "You just need to get in better shape, so playing a long point isn't a foreign experience."

"Okay, you're right."

"You been doing those court sprints we went over? I even wrote 'em down as I recall."

"No."

"Well how about getting off your ass then? Or do you prefer to keep having this conversation, why you don't win many matches?"

"Jesus, I'm sorry . . . You seem awful worked up."

"I am, if you must know . . . The Shirley thing, it's been bugging me all week."

"Hey, I haven't seen Shirley by the way," Damon said. "She on vacation?"

Hank said, "You know what pal? I'm gonna come out and say it-- you've got a lot of nerve."

Damon cringed, appearing genuinely confused. "Come again?"

"I spoke to Shirley. I got the straight dope. You crossed the line with her, and you drove her out of here."

Hank let it hang. If he lost the guy as a client, well, so be it.

Damon didn't say anything. After a minute Hank said, "And the worst was hearing about the phone calls. Let me tell you something, I were married and you pulled that on *my* wife? Your jaw might be wired back together now."

"What phone calls?" Damon said.

"Oh so now you're taking the Fifth. That figures."

Damon said, "Man, I'm not following you . . . I've called Brad a few times, we've been playing a little golf. I met him at the front desk."

"The ones to Shirley? Late at night? Those."

"Huh?"

"Ah Jesus."

"I don't have Shirley's cell. It was never like that. Yes, I put the moves on at first because she seemed to want me to . . . Weird thing then, I asked her to go to Florida, and for a few days she was all in. Then she said she was having second thoughts. I said me? She said no, she was wrestling with gay thoughts, if you can believe that. Which was part of why her marriage was on the rocks, was what she said."

"You're kidding," Hank said. "She was just feeding you a line, obviously." But he was running his own little fling with Shirley back through his head, thinking is it possible there were tendencies I didn't pick up?

"I don't know," Damon said. "She seemed matter of fact about it, that she wanted to experience a relationship with a woman, plain and simple."

"Well let's forget that part for now," Hank said. "Why'd you keep harassing her?"

"I didn't. Like I said I became friendly with Brad, and I felt bad that I hit on her. Plus they seemed to be enjoying each other, not like two people on the rocks."

Hank took a minute and said, "Okay whatever. Now you got *me* mixed up, frankly . . . Let me ask you one simple question then, Bud: How come she doesn't work here any more?"

"I have no idea," Damon said. "First I've heard of this . . . If I'm not overstepping though, why are you so interested?"

Hank said, "I'm not sure. I guess I don't have a great answer . . . You have that number for Brad though?"

Damon shook his head and dug the number out of his phone. He said, "You've hooked up with her, right? Pardon my French, but it's pretty clear she's still leading you around by your dick."

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Hank figured one person who might know something was Spike. Spike got thrown out of the club

twice last year, first as a pro and the second time as a player in the same morning round robin that he used to run. The first time Spike punched out a husband of one of the round robin participants, and the second time he smacked the same guy over the head with a racquet to stop that guy from clocking another player.

Before he got fired, Spike had managed to get it on with about half the round robin women, largely, Hank felt, because of his New Zealand accent. Hank didn't want to picture it, but it was likely there'd been some dealings with Shirley as well.

"Ay mate, it's good to hear your voice," Spike said from Florida. He'd re-surfaced at a resort in the Keys, having apparently finessed his way into a tennis teaching job, just as he had the squash job at Hank's club in New York, not being very good at either sport.

Hank said, "Listen, there's a situation up here. Shirley, the front desk gal, has left, and I'm getting mixed signals as to why . . . You know anything about that?"

Spike said, "Let me get my bearings a moment . . . Ah yes, Shirley. With the porcelain skin, and the hair up. And the intrigue."

"Pretty sure you cracked the code though somewhere along the way."

"Can't say that I've been in touch with her . . . What's the big to-do?"

"She told me she got driven out by a member who started stalking her. I confronted the guy and he said that's ridiculous, and I think I believe him . . . There's also the part about her maybe being a lesbian."

"What?" Spike said. "What the hell . . ."

"You ever . . . notice anything along those lines?"

"Not in a million years. That's absurd."

"I thought so too, but I'm going to poke around a little bit, out of curiosity."

"Good idea," Spike said. "Now I feel like I should have a look myself . . . I do have some frequent flyer miles sitting idle at the moment."

"You can just take off? It doesn't affect anything?"

"Pretty much, yes."

"They figured out you don't know what you're doing?"

"That doesn't matter. The bloke that hired me said simply feed them balls and tell them that's the way, just give it a bit more shoulder rotation and so forth. The problem is, it's too damn hot, no one wants to play tennis. I spend most of the day in the air conditioning watching the Food Channel."

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Megan, one of the Australian touring pros, had been asking Hank for a while to hit some. This seemed like an okay time because he could ask a few questions. Hank was 37, six years retired off the tour, but he kept himself fit and hadn't slowed down much and was confident he could still handle any female pro. Today with Megan he got on the T and volleyed everything and kept the ball deep and the pace fast, and Megan spent most of the time defending. They played five games and Hank won them all comfortably.

The two of them playing each other was a novelty apparently, and a crowd had gathered outside Court 1, though as soon as they finished everyone left. Hank

refilled Megan's water bottle and they sat on the couch and Hank said, "Not to pry, but you're a gay individual, right?"

Megan reacted as casually as if he were asking what her world ranking was. "That I am," she said. "Though I seldom volunteer it up front, as I'm still a bit shy about the topic with strangers . . . In the States, it is less complicated though."

Hank looked around and lowered his voice. "What about men? Did you ever . . . experience them?"

"Oh Goodness yes. In fact I was nearly married, to a boyfriend from University."

"Oh," Hank said. He lowered his voice even more. "Well this is over the top then, so feel free to shut me down . . . but were you . . . satisfied, in those situations?"

"Not wholly," Megan said, "and that was the thing of it. I knew there was something else out there for me, I was drawn to it, it felt automatic."

Hank was dying to clarify if she meant mentally or physically or both, regarding the satisfaction, but he was afraid to press the issue.

"The boyfriend, the one you almost married," he said. "Doesn't that slap him in the face?"

"Breaking up with him, you mean?"

"No . . . more like, him figuring he's doing the job, and then you turning his world upside down."

"I'll admit, it was something he wrestled with for some time," Megan said.

"I see then," Hank said. "I thank you for your insight . . . And one thing I noticed out there, you were hitting too many cross-courts from behind. You were opening up the court."

"Ah, you're right," Megan said. "I must keep in mind who my opponent is--with the girls, they're more effective, clearly."

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The next Monday when Hank walked in around nine there was Shirley back behind the front desk, talking to Carol.

Hank did a double-take. "What happened to Eileen?" he said. "Among other things."

"Eileen's heart wasn't in it," Carol said.

"So Carol called, and frankly the law office gig, I realized it was kind of dry," Shirley said.

"More social interaction here, I'll give you that," Hank said. Shirley nodded and the phone rang and she got back to business. Hank went outside on 86th Street and called Spike.

"I know," Spike said. "I straightened it out."

"You came *up*?"

"Actually Shirley came down. I was able to transfer my miles."

"Oh . . . what'd you straighten out, exactly?"

"The guy who was calling her, leaving the late-night messages? That part she was okay with."

"She was?"

"Unh-huh. The husband though, he was insecure, he had her *saying* she was gay. Some lesbian at the club got wind of it and came on to her big time. That sent her packing."

"Sheez . . ." Hank said.

"Don't I know it . . . What I told her, it happens again, tell them fuck off is all. She liked that."

"I gotta absorb this . . . So if I'm hearing you right . . . she's still a flaming heterosexual."

"Pretty damn sure. I did catch myself addressing the matter, when we were . . . you know."

"Yeah, well, that's good to hear, actually."

"Still probably something to monitor," Spike said.

"Enjoy the Food Channel," Hank said, and he went back in the club.

Jenny and Megan were drinking coffee on the couch outside Court 1, getting ready for their morning drills, and Hank sat down with them. Shirley looked up, and she gave the three of them a smile and a little wave.