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THE QUESTION OF MAX

Amanda Cross

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To Joan Ferrante

**Art, if it doesn't start there, at least ends,
Whether aesthetics like the thought or not,
In an attempt to entertain our friends.**

W. H. Auden

THE QUESTION OF MAX

part one

{ March }

one

Kate Fansler's life had achieved, within the last year, a neat division between urban elegance and rural simplicity, even if, as was certain, the rural simplicity was a lot simpler than the urban elegance was elegant. Her farmer neighbors observed with ill-concealed scorn her one-room cabin and unmowed grass, while her urban associates placed her on the scale of elegance only so far as their own eyes could reach. If she appeared easily affluent to her colleagues, she was considered, by those of her mother's generation who chanced to come across her, to be close to slumming. At this particular moment in March, she was priding herself on the sharp contradictions in her life, those contradictions which gave flavor to experience and rest to the soul. Such sharp contradictions, of course, require a dexterity bordering upon gymnastics. With a sense, therefore, of an acrobat whose muscles have suddenly frozen, Kate watched Maximillian Reston search in vain the uncut meadow surrounding her cabin for a path to her door.

Max was the last person in the world to whom a wild rural retreat would hold any attraction. But even had her country refuge been run on the elegant lines of Edith Wharton's famous turn-of-the-century mansion

not far distant in the Berkshires, Reston's unannounced approach would have been a cause for astonishment. He was not a man given to excursions into other people's lives. Their work, yes. Friendship, or what passed with Max for friendship, allowed response in beautifully contrived letters to the publications of one's friends. But intimacy he considered a contemporary fall from grace as regrettable as the loss of manners, formality, and sartorial distinctions between the sexes.

Kate, looking down at her mud-stained sneakers and ancient blue-jeans, considered several mad escapes. She could run straight out the back door into the woods and there lurk undiscovered until Max departed. But when and, more importantly, how would he depart? He had dismissed the taxi which had deposited him upon her road, and her house contained no telephone with which to summon another. Flight seemed inadvisable. Disguise? Suppose she were to pretend to be a tramp or a besotted old woman mumbling about goblins . . . Not bad, that, but it presented the same problem as the first alternative. How would Max depart? Nothing for it, perhaps, but to face the man. And Max, once he had seen her in this state, in this house, she who had never dined with him or talked with him in any elegance less than that provided by his club (on those few evenings when his club admitted the other sex to its sacred precincts), would he leave her cabin and her life forever? With a pang, Kate realized that she would regret the loss of him. Damn and blast Max.

Unaware of the curse directed toward him, Reston looked for a moment down the rutted road, longing, perhaps, for his now departed taxi. One could observe, even at this distance, the moment when he had decided

to plunge across the meadow to the greater civilization, he supposed, that lay within the cabin. Kate thought wildly of changing her clothes. But the dishonesty of this disgusted her, nor was she positively beguiled at the thought of being found by Max in, so to speak, the chrysalis stage of nudity. I must stand my ground, she muttered to herself, tucking back the loose strands of hair.

The question was, how had Max found her? She had known him an expert in all the byways of civilization, but rural ingenuity she would not have expected. Cautiously, but accepting her fate, Kate went to the door and opened it, watching Max pick his way across the muddy meadow. When he was still ten feet away, she spoke: "There are two questions. How you found me, and why? It is perhaps unfeeling of me, but I think I am more intrigued by the first."

"Guy told me about it," Max said, stepping inside and viewing the cabin with a critical scrutiny he made no attempt to disguise. "He also told me that Reed had given it to you. When you failed to turn up in any civilized place, I decided to try this on a long shot."

"Did Guy describe exactly in which Berkshire wood it lay?"

"Of course not. He mentioned the nearest town, from where I made inquiries about an isolated cabin and a lunatic woman. Do you have drinking water that runs from a faucet, or must one throw oneself down beside a babbling brook?"

"There are faucets," Kate said. "Sit down and I will get you a drink of water. I'm afraid there is nothing else I can offer you, except tea from a bag, coffee of the instant variety, or California wine."

With visible effort, Max restrained a shudder. "Water will be excellent," he said. He stared about him and Kate looked at the cabin through his eyes. It consisted of one large room with a vaulted ceiling, beneath which, on one side, was a sleeping balcony. For furniture there was another mattress on legs, covered with pillows and a throw, for sitting. Two overstuffed chairs of the sort someone had obviously decided to do away with when he came into money, and a round deal table with two straight chairs completed the furnishings.

"Guy said he and Reed built this with their own hands," Max said, dropping with a mixture of relief and distaste into one of the deep chairs, whose innards hit the floor as they felt his weight. Max was not the sort of man to loll, and he contrived to look more uncomfortable than he would have in a straight-backed chair of rigid proportions. Still, he had found Kate, which said a good deal for his perseverance and, one supposed, for the seriousness of his intentions. What these could possibly be Kate forbore even to imagine.

Max seemed strangely reluctant to come to the point of his extraordinary visit. "This looks as though someone built it with his bare hands."

"Guy built it, with only occasional help from Reed. I thought he told you?"

"One gathered it was of his own devising. He didn't go into details, and I somehow assumed supervision rather than actual fabrication."

"Guy has been Reed's friend for a long time," Kate said. "Years before Reed and I were married, Guy had a breakdown. What is described by the doctors as a 'moderate depression.' Caused, if depressions can ever be said to have a cause, by what the poets call 'the

melancholy of all things completed.' As an advertising man, Guy had great success very young. There was the usual psychotherapy, the usual drugs, but he cured himself or, more accurately, guided himself out of the trouble through work. Manual work. Here. Guy had inherited these woods, oh, years ago. He started to build this house more or less in the middle of his acres, with Reed's help. He said that Reed's quiet presence and assistance had saved him. Later, when he was well again, he sold Reed the house and land, and Reed gave it to me for a retreat. 'It saved Guy,' he said, 'and it may you.' Not that I was collapsing, just nervy. Naturally Guy told you none of this."

"Naturally," Max said, his tone speaking volumes.

"Well, if you want discretion, Max, and the decency of keeping one's feelings to oneself, you've come to the wrong place. I didn't say person, I said place. I'm here alone much of the time, but alone or not, I play no games. This place saves one."

"From what?" Max asked, getting up to look out. "From civilization, I suppose. From gracious living, courtesy, style, and decent demeanor."

"Oh, Max, what a snob you are. I know all the metaphors about ill-tended gardens, with the hedges a thicket, the weeds in the drive, and the wind whistling in the trees. I prefer my nature wild, and don't find it gloomy or demoralizing. In fact, I suspect this is what the Garden of Eden was like, if you want to know. No doubt most people think it resembled an expensive golf course. Can you imagine how many birds I have here in summer, because of the thickets? Of course it's not your style but, if I may assume what I'm sure you would not call decent demeanor, I never supposed it was

nor would have dreamed of submitting you to this wilderness, nor to me within it."

"My dear, of course." Max struggled to reassume his wonted courtesy. "Perhaps I had better telephone for my taxi to return. I ought not to have tracked you down in this obtrusive way, and then criticized . . ."

"There *is* no telephone. I thought you'd grasped the fact that I'm away from it all."

"But what if there was an emergency?"

"Most emergencies are so only in the eyes of those having them, and can await my attentions. Suppose, after all, I were climbing in the Yukon. Reed and one or two of my most intimate friends know of a number down the road. It is that of a grasping and narrow-minded woman who has been promised a large reward for every time she comes and tells me of a call. There have not been many. When you decide to leave I shall drive you to town, and throw myself upon your mercies not to tell anyone where you found me, or how. Do you want to go now?"

"Might I have a cup of tea after all?"

Kate rose to her feet to comply with this request. "Perhaps," she said to Max, "you would be more comfortable at the table. I do have a proper bathroom, by the way, in case you were wondering."

"Did Guy put that in, too?"

"No. Guy built all this, but without indoor plumbing or an actual road in through the woods. I added these, and the Franklin stove over there."

"Do you mean you come up here in the winter?"

"Of course. Its beauty cannot be imagined, though the silence, which used to be its greatest attraction, has been shattered. Don't get me started on that. Those