

Where Lawyers Fear to Tread

A Willa Jansson Mystery

LIA MATERA

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**Willa gets her big break
in law school—unfortunately,
it's over someone's
dead body....**

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Lia Matera

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The law school and law firms depicted in this book are imaginary. So are the lawyers, professors, and law students. Any resemblance they bear to real people and institutions is entirely coincidental. San Francisco, Stanford University, and Ronald Reagan, all used here fictitiously, are not imaginary. Neither is the résumé madness of law students.

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**Published by Ballantine Books*

To the editors of the *Hastings Constitutional Law Quarterly*,
Volume 8, for letting me boss them around.

LAW SCHOOLS DON'T have football teams, they have law reviews. Law reviews may look like large paperbacks, but they are arenas. Legal scholars maul each other in polite footnotes, students scrimmage and connive for editorial positions, and the intellectual bloodlust of law professors is appeased, rah rah.

Law reviews are edited by law students. After three years of competing for grades, jobs, even vending machine food (it's nothing but Fig Newtons after four o'clock), law students will do anything—if it means someone else doesn't get to do it.

"Top ten percent and law review," that's the magic phrase. If you don't want to work in Puyallup, Washington, or Lawton, Oklahoma, if you want to work in a big city law firm, if you want a decent salary, if you want a job in a government agency or a hip organization like the American Civil Liberties Union, you'd better be in the top ten percent of your class, and you'd better be on law review. And if you're not at Harvard, Yale, or Stanford Law, it's best to be editor-in-chief.

I was editor-in-chief of a law review for a while, through

no fault of my own. I replaced an infinitely more qualified woman named Susan Green.

Here's everything I know about Susan Green, former editor-in-chief of the *Malhousie Law Review*:

Susan Green was born to Dr. Sidney and Mrs. Greta Green in 1960, the year I, Willa Jansson, started grade school. While I played with incense sticks and chose my mantra at one of the first alternative schools in San Francisco, Susan Green, super-baby, learned her alphabet from flashcards displayed by an overqualified nanny. While I was hating my first job, washing dishes at a vegetarian restaurant, Susan Green was giving piano recitals and taking ballet lessons. While I organized high school antiwar rallies and refused to salute the flag, Susan Green began using her eidetic memory to memorize patriotic verse. When my parents joined the Peace Corps, Dr. and Mrs. Green began their retirement cruise, leaving Susan in an elegant boarding school in Washington, D.C. So, when I hitchhiked there to join fifteen thousand or so others camped around the White House, Susan Green and I were in the same city for the first time in our lives.

That didn't happen again for four years, when we both ended up at Stanford University, me after much impecunious gypsyism around the country (which did not affect my college entrance exam score), and she after graduating with honors from the toughest of prep schools. Not only did we end up at the same university at the same time, but our families actually met at freshman orientation. My father looked faded and ill after two years of diarrhea in Liberia, but my mother was still rosy and pear-shaped under twenty pounds of African jewelry. Susan's parents looked made-for-TV and smelled faintly of leather from

their new Jaguar. We all ended up at the same little outdoor picnic table for a cafeteria lunch. Two students at the next table were discussing their rapes, and Mrs. Green went white and whispered to my mother that she wished they *wouldn't*.

"I've been raped myself," my mother said in her squeaky, carrying voice. "Twice. And it really is therapeutic to talk about it."

There was a shocked silence. Mrs. Green clutched her fur collar, sidling closer to her pinch-lipped husband.

My mother, characteristically unaware of having given offense, thus noticed the band of endangered wildlife around Mrs. Green's neck. I knew what was coming. I'd already gotten the "Love animals—don't eat them or wear them" lecture once that morning, when I'd ordered a cheeseburger.

So when Mother piously intoned, "Love animals—" I did Mrs. Green a favor. I cut in, "—they're delicious."

My father laughed, but no one else did. The Greens took a few more hasty bites of salad, then fled.

Susan Green and I had one class together that year, and I wrote her off as a walking résumé, an amalgam of dull accomplishments in an impeccably preppy shell, the kind of girl who wore a pearl necklace to class and paid two dollars a bar for Neutrogena soap so her cheeks would be as shiny as the rest of the sorority's. (Her sorority motto was "Learn from the successful and inspire the unfortunate"; luckily, inspiration is cheap.)

In spite of myself, I had to admire Susan's brainpower. She had total recall, a photographic memory. And she spoke in well-edited paragraphs, complete with topic sentence, supporting facts, and brief restatement. She was

long on information and short on insight, whereas I have the kind of sloppy brain that hares off on romantic associations and refuses to memorize.

I had a few more classes with Susan along the way, never did as well on the exams, never impressed my professors, and got into a lot of trouble over some articles I wrote for the school paper (I called Leland Stanford a bloodsucking pirate, which I learned was not beyond dispute, after all).

Then the fates decreed that Susan Green and I begin law school together, make law review together, and end up on the editorial board together.

But here's one thing we didn't do together: the day I argued with Larry Tchielowicz about the war in Vietnam, somebody smashed Susan's head in as she bent over a manuscript.

2

“**L**OOK WHAT THE Communists have done to Vietnam—too bad you radicals didn't keep quiet and let Nixon win the war.”

There were half a dozen other editors in the law review

office, sleepily filling their cups with metallic wastewater from the coffee urn. They regarded Tchielowicz with weary incredulity. Exams were less than four weeks away; only I could be goaded into fighting the old battles.

“You’d have protested too if the government planned to kill your ass on foreign soil.” Tchielowicz was five or six years younger than me; he’d been just a kid during those years of division, death, and defoliation.

“No Republicans in foxholes?” Tchielowicz’s thin lips—the only thin part of the muscle-bound, big-headed man—twitched back a smile. “The army’s paying my way through law school, I’ll have you know. Paid my way through college, too. I’ve already done basic training, and I owe them six more years, after the bar exam.” He rubbed his smallish, bent nose. “So you see, I’ve already consented to let the government do with my ass what it will.”

I treated Tchielowicz to my candid opinion of this arrangement.

Susan Green rapped at the glass of the inner office to try to shut me up. She’d talked the law school into erecting a plywood and acrylic enclosure around the half dozen desks in the basement office, separating them from the sagging Naugahyde couches and encrusted coffee accoutrements. The partitions created an illusion of privacy, but they stopped several feet short of the ceiling to allow for a maze of overhead pipes, and they barely muffled the sound of conversation on the other side.

Since it took sixteen of us to do the proofreading, disparaging, and kvetching known as the editorial process, and since most of us did it in the outer office, Susan’s inner sanctum was less than silent at the best of times. But I honored her request by concluding more quietly, and more

kindly, that Tchielowicz was a prostitute for the crypto-fascist war machine.

Before Tchielowicz could respond, Jake Whittsen strolled in and ruffled my hair—I don't know why men treat small blond women like puppies. "Are you coming to hear Jane Day?" Even Jake's voice was gorgeous, about an octave lower than most men's, and so quiet it sounded like pillowtalk no matter what he said.

Jane Day was one of those damned Republican feminists. You know, Get women out of the home and into the Mercedes for luncheon with the Ladies Against Drug Abuse ("Madame Chairman, I'd like to propose a toast to the eradication of drug use").

She belonged to every bar association committee ever devised; it was spooky how often you ran across her name in bar publications. She was currently on the rubber chicken circuit, trying to win her party's nomination for state attorney general. The law school, which happened to be her alma mater, was hosting a reception for her that afternoon. The editorial board of the law review had been invited; the rest of the student body was not deemed worthy to break bread with our distinguished professors.

I was inclined to go with Jake—it was a chance to sit beside him and become intoxicated by his cologne (probably selected by his stunning and sophisticated wife, alas).

But Tchielowicz remarked that he guessed Jane Fonda was too busy building up her pectorals to worry about the Vietnamese people now that they were being slaughtered by socialists instead of capitalists, and I couldn't leave the fray. I declined Jake's invitation.

A few students drifted in, earnestly discussing the relative merits of squash and raquetball. They drank the dregs

of the coffee, then Reeboked off to a commercial paper class. Professor Haas, a comparative law professor with a lilting Swedish accent and a shy, charming smile, came in to get the latest issue of the review, hot off the presses and stacked on the floor near Susan's desk. Professor Miles, who'd been teaching trusts and wills long before they'd mummified her, stalked in clutching a copy. Through the plywood partition, I heard her shriek to Susan that we'd failed to list all her degrees in the editor's note preceding her article on blind trusts.

That was the last thing I ever heard anyone say to Susan Green.

I left to go to my federal income tax class. I didn't particularly want to go, but I was beginning to suspect Larry Tchielowicz thought I was cute when I was mad.

And while my tax professor lasciviously discussed his favorite tax shelters, someone stood behind Susan Green, raised up a weapon, and brought it down twice on the back of her head.

3

JOHAN HANCOCK HENDERSON, a several-times-removed descendant of the guy with the big loopy signature, hovered over my desk. The look on his face bespoke a great tightness of the nether parts.

“The masthead shows a clear pattern of ascension,” he spat, as though we’d been arguing about it.

“Like Jacob’s ladder?”

“It goes: editor-in-chief on top, then next row, executive editor on the left and senior articles editor on the right.”

“So I sit at the right hand of the Lord?”

“No! Well, yes, but the fact that executive editor is positioned first in the row indicates that it’s next in importance to editor-in-chief.”

“I hope all that fits on your résumé.”

Henderson was looking excessively crabby, even for him. He was of middle height, getting plumper every year, with a complexion that spotted around finals time, and a big face with big features (Mary West called him Mr. Potato Head). “I know what you’re thinking, that this is

somehow in bad taste. But this law review has been in existence eighty-eight years, and we have an obligation to carry on! There's no excuse for getting behind"—he said the word with sincere horror—"so we've got to determine who's in charge."

"Nobody needs to be in charge! I'll do final edits for style and substance, you keep doing the final technical edits, and we'll set the deadlines between us. The only executive decision left for Susan was choosing the articles for the summer issue. The other three issues are either at the printer's or almost ready to go!"

What I didn't say was that there would be a mass revolt of editors if John Henderson started cracking the whip. Susan had spent half her time mollifying John's underling technical editors to keep them from mutiny. He was a good technical editor—he could spot a spacing error in a footnote from a hundred yards—but that was about all you could say for him as a human being.

Anyway, the conversation seemed ghoulish.

"Go be monomaniacal elsewhere, would you, Henderson? I have to finish reading this case before my trusts class."

Mary West came in, looking like a refugee from a *True Sex* article on "Why Leather Makes Me Hot."

Mary had waist-length black hair and a figure that made her pale, lantern-jawed face beside the point. She had a habit of lacing her fingers behind her head to show off a bustline that needed no fanfare. She also liked to spend money she didn't have—hence the tight leather pants and high-heeled Italian boots—and to bed first-year students who didn't know any better.

I'll say this for Mary, she didn't mince her words. "Masturbating over the masthead again, John?"

He flushed pink as an oiled pig and left the inner office, shouting, "I'll take this up with our faculty advisor, thank you!"

Mary sauntered over to Susan's desk, which had been emptied of effects by the police and scrubbed clean by me. (John had delegated the task to the janitor in a chillingly seigneurial way, so I'd felt obliged to do it myself.)

"Christ, who'd want to bash Cotton Panties? Clean, white, and practical"—that had been Mary's assessment of Susan.

I have very long, blond bangs. If I tuck my chin down I can examine the gray streak that is developing on the right side. I did that.

"You don't suppose John killed Susan so he could be the Big Footnote?" She smiled her I've-seen-it-all smile. "What's this shit about him going to the faculty? They're not going to make him e-in-c are they?"

I shook my head. John and I had had many dealings with the faculty. I had recognized their pomposity and worked around it; John had met them with equal pomposity, which they seemed to find disrespectful. If our faculty had to choose a replacement for Susan, it wouldn't be John.

"Damn him!" I flared. "If he gets me made e-in-c, I'll kill him!"

Mary raised what was left of her carefully tweezed and feathered brows.

4

I RAN UP the terraced aisle to the back of the amphitheater-shaped classroom and slid into the seat beside Harold Scharr. Harold is one of those lean European types, with a thin, attentive face, hair like black silk, and expressive eyes that abet a wicked tongue. He turned and flashed his white teeth at me.

Professor Miles called us to order with the words "sale of trust assets." She assumed her characteristic stance: feet, in black pumps, wide apart; hips thrust forward, skinny arms akimbo. She scanned the aisles. I had a feeling she was gunning for me.

"Ms. Willa Jansson." She said my name dryly. "*Palvers v. Executor.*"

I opened my casebook, propped it upright on my desk as though I meant to refer to it. Then I flipped through the illicit, prefab case outlines used by most law students. I read the bold-print caption aloud: "Attorney for Trustor's survivor may not bid on Trust assets auctioned to pay costs." I nearly added, *So there.*