

AMANDA CROSS

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NO WORD FROM WINIFRED

A strange disappearance and a marriage gone wrong teach Professor Kate Fansler a lesson in life.



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**AMANDA
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NO WORD
FROM
WINIFRED

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To Tom F. Driver
For old and new times' sake

One

LAURENCE R. Fansler, the oldest partner of Darwin Darwin Erasmus and Mendel, was chatting with the next oldest partner in the firm. "Chatting" would have been Fansler's own description of what he was doing but the word was, in fact, inaccurate. Fansler never chatted. He either commanded or pontificated, and when these modes appeared inappropriate, he attempted a certain tone of bonhomie for which, had he but known it, he was notorious throughout the firm. It meant Fansler wanted something.

In this case, what he wanted was consolation disguised as advice. Toby Van Dine served in all but his place on the stationery as the senior partner of the firm, the Solomon, the father confessor, the mediator, the consoler. He was a quiet man, quietly brilliant, who, unlike his senior, represented the more liberal

views characteristic of his generation of lawyers. He had noted, with a certain sadness, that those who made partner these days—after eight or nine arduous years—were singly devoted to selfish interests and their own advancement. He tried not to brood about this, not even to think of it often. But occasionally, the cases the firm had fought in the old days returned to him, pristine in their principled glory. The effects of old age, no doubt. Toby Van Dine had just turned sixty, and was afraid.

“You know these parties we always give,” Fansler was muttering. “Started years ago, and became a tradition. One can’t stop, that’s the trouble.” Toby nodded. The Fansler parties, given annually in the fall for the associates, had long since become one of the burdens of the legal life at Dar and Dar, as it was known among lawyers. First- and second-year associates were asked, together with any young professionals in other pursuits whom Fansler’s wife Janice could corral. The original idea had been Janice’s, or so Fansler claimed, and had been designed to make the young “men” feel more at home in New York, and meet people their own age. Fansler had accommodated, grumbling, to the women lawyers who had to be asked, as well as some of the “dates” brought by his very own associates. There was the year one of the young men had come with his fiancée—if there was another way to describe her, Fansler had no desire to hear it—who was a doctor, and who, on being asked, described the process of getting a catheter into the heart through the

NO WORD FROM WINIFRED

femoral artery in detail sufficiently fine and labored to ruin everyone's appetite. But all this was in the past, and could hardly, Toby thought, be Fansler's problem.

"Janice thinks we should ask my sister," Fansler said with a groan.

"But you always ask her," Toby said, "and she never comes."

"I know, I know, but this year the thought is that we should ask her husband—Amhearst, you know. He's teaching at Columbia Law School, and the other partners don't see why we shouldn't cultivate someone on the faculty there, particularly if he's a relative. Janice agrees, of course."

Laurence Fansler had, along with so much else in a rapidly changing world, accepted the fact that his nephews, and even one or two of his nieces, were now lawyers or doctors or working for Goldman Sachs, and had to be asked to his party. But to ask his sister seemed, to Fansler's jaundiced eye, as though Caesar had asked Brutus to brunch.

"I think you're exaggerating, Larry," Toby said. "Kate and Reed aren't that bad. The worst you can probably say for them is that they voted for Mondale and Ferraro in 1984."

"Exactly," Fansler boomed.

"You might try to remember," Toby said, rising to indicate that the discussion was over, "that ours is a two-party system, though you might not always notice it. Anyway, why worry? I'm sure they won't come."

"There is that hope," Fansler said, brightening.

* * *

Janice Fansler, duly instructed by her husband, sent out the invitations, including one addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Reed Amhearst. She was perfectly aware that Kate had kept her own name, but she considered such attitudes trendy and foolish, and refused to notice them. Having sent the invitations and alerted the caterer who ran these functions for her, she put her mind to other things.

The invitation was addressed to Reed at the Columbia Law School, and he contemplated it with a certain wry amusement. He could hear Kate now, flatly refusing to attend. The question was, should he try to persuade her to accompany him?

Hours later, letting himself into the apartment, he decided to try. Kate, who was examining a telephone bill with the expression of bewilderment and horror characteristic of those engaged in such activities, offered him the fourteen pages of the document. "Has anyone considered carrier pigeons lately?" she asked.

"Your brother and sister-in-law, he of Darwin Darwin et cetera, have asked us to their annual party for the firm's associates. Might you consent to come, do you think?"

"You've been drinking," Kate said. "And before you even got home. A bad sign. Is the academic life more burdensome than the quiet, steady pace of things at the D.A.'s?"

"They've invited you as Mrs. Reed Amhearst. I thought maybe you could go as Kate Fansler, and ob-

serve how the other half lives. We can see the young, Fansler and other, which is always enlivening.”

“I would have thought you met enough of the young at law school. Do bear in mind Jane Austen’s descriptions of such parties: ‘a mixture of those who had never met before and those who met too often.’ Reed, I don’t like to sound lawyerly myself, but didn’t we agree, we might even call it a verbal contract, that we would not drag each other into our dreary social obligations? If you want to attend my brother’s party, go, my child, and the Lord be with you, though in my view it marks the sad deterioration of a noble mind.”

“One ought not, in middle age, to get into ruts, or to maintain, unexamined, the assumptions of one’s youth. You have said it, and it’s greatly to your credit.”

“I didn’t think you’d drag it up in connection with families. Because people are blood relations is no reason for intimacy—that was good enough for Margaret Mead, and it’s good enough for me. Reed, is there some aspect to this I’m missing?”

“Connections between law professors and the big law firms are advantageous for all concerned when it comes to placing students and so forth.”

“That I can see. Are these connections impossible to effect without a wife in hand?”

“My going alone would be a statement. Your coming along will be taken for granted. Besides, you always like seeing Leo and Leighton.”

“Do they come to these legal dos? How the mighty are fallen. I know Leo’s a lawyer, but don’t tell me Leighton has gone that way too? Surely all my nieces

and nephews are not going to be lawyers, just like my brothers.”

“All the professional young attend this. If you’d ever behaved like a proper aunt, you’d know that.”

“Reed, I don’t mind telling you, I’m worried. You’re going to be counsel for some big firm next, and giving parties yourself.”

“I promise not. If this party is a nightmare, furthermore, I shall not try to persuade you again. So gamble one evening against a lifetime of discussion about one’s duties to blood relations.”

“You should go into the law,” Kate said. “You have a flair for it.”

Kate greeted her brother and sister-in-law in the acceptable manner by allowing them to place their cheek against hers. Her greeting to Leo and Leighton was warmer: a hug and smiles of pleasure.

“Find me a drink,” Kate ordered, in her happiest autocratic manner, “a martini, of course, and sit down and tell me what you’ve been doing with yourselves.”

“There aren’t any martinis,” Leighton said. “It’s a Japanese feast, and you can have either Midori melon coolers or sake.”

“To be followed,” Leo said before she could ask, “by sushi, or California rolls, and I forget what else.”

“My God,” Kate said. “Well, see if you can find me some tomato juice. If one avoids mixed drinks of suspicious origin and soda pop, one can really find oneself sipping water at these affairs, and I haven’t gone that far. Well, plain soda water, if all else fails, will do.”

NO WORD FROM WINIFRED

But Reed, who felt that, having dragged her here, he should see that she at least had a real drink, had found Scotch for her and himself. "What a relief," Kate said. "If one is going to give up drinking, one ought not to do it under this sort of pressure, don't you agree?" Reed smiled at her gratefully. At least Kate never sulked.

"What are you doing here, Leighton?" Kate asked. "Joined the yuppies when I wasn't looking?"

Leighton winced. "A yuppie is someone born after 1950 and before 1969 living in a city and earning over forty thousand dollars a year. I don't qualify on the last count. I earn three thousand dollars a year when I'm working, and came here because the family orders me to, Leo is here, and they even said you might come, not that I believed it."

"Still acting?" Kate asked.

"That's the hope. Meanwhile, like the others in my profession, I am either a waitress or a word processor. In my case it's word processing, for legal firms, at night. Very good pay, and leaves my days free."

"It's almost worth living on three thousand dollars a year if you ask me," Leo said. "I'm a yuppie by most common definitions, and I work all night and all day and all weekend. The only time you can be away from your desk without arousing the partners' suspicions is on Monday to Friday between nine and five. Then you might be somewhere on business or, in a pinch, at the dentist. But you damn well better be in your office in the evening and on weekends."

"Never mind all that," Leighton said, sitting down

by her aunt. "Did you ever see a movie called *The Lady Vanishes*?" Kate nodded "There's a wonderful piece of dialogue in it between the two cricket enthusiasts. One of them says to the other: 'She did, you know.' And the other says, 'Did what?' And the first says: 'Vanish.' That's what Leo and I want to talk to you about."

"I have a sense of dislocation, of being out of touch," Kate said.

"Leighton always starts in the middle of things," Leo said. "*In medias res*. It comes of having majored in Greek combined with excessive devotion to the plays of Ibsen. It's all quite simple and, in my opinion, uninteresting. Shall I tell it?" he asked Leighton. She nodded.

"But," she added, "I reserve the right to put in the dramatic details. Of which there are many." Kate listened to them with pleasure. She often pondered the ironic rewards of having had three impossible brothers—Larry, and the next two, who had produced, respectively, Leo and Leighton. Her tiresome older siblings had certainly paid off in the next generation.

"Toby," Leo continued, "got Leighton a job doing word processing, after she learned how."

"Not Uncle Larry?" Kate asked.

"Gimme a break," Leighton said.

"So," Leo said, "Leighton would arrive at six, and get her assignment from this woman who was in charge of the firm's word-processing room. One of those women without whom, not. You know. They're damn important, let me tell you, these word processors. The

associate's future can depend on whether they do his or her work on time. Believe me, one keeps on the good side of the word processors, and the supervisor thereof. Partners never set foot in the Wang room, as we call it; they're always sending associates in there with work that's needed *immediately*. If an associate's not in good with the Wang room, forget it." Kate nodded her comprehension of all this.

"Well," Leo went on, "some months after Leighton started—she doesn't work steadily, you know, some weeks on, some weeks off, unlike us better-paid minions—she noticed this woman was gone. 'Sick,' Leighton was told. But the fact is, the woman never came back. And—"

"And," Leighton said. "That was the absolute last anybody anywhere heard of her. She was a damn nice woman."

"Everybody happy here?" Janice said, stopping off on her hostess rounds. "Can I get anybody anything?"

"Since you are so kind," Kate said, "might I have some Scotch?"

Janice looked as though she were about to mention melon coolers, but apparently she changed her mind. It occurred to Kate, not without pleasure, that she was the only person in the room who had no reason to worry about offending Janice, or brother Larry if it came to that, with her demands. Janice nodded, and went off, apparently to summon a waiter. Kate waved Leighton on.

"I asked Toby," Leighton said, "and he said not to worry; people are always disappearing from law firms,

particularly word processors and even supervisors. Not that the partners would notice unless a client disappeared. But this woman was particularly nice to me, you see, and I wondered."

Kate, accepting another Scotch from a waiter, smiled encouragingly at Leighton.

"And what, by the way, do you think her name is? Charlotte Lucas. Doesn't it sound made up?"

"Just because Jane Austen used it? Not necessarily," Kate said. "Made-up names sound made up because originally they were authentic. Take Merrill Ashley, the ballet dancer. Her name was Linda Merrill. Only another dancer named Linda Rosenthal took Linda Merrill as her name. So Merrill Ashley had to find the name Merrill Ashley. But 'Linda Merrill' is more like 'Charlotte Lucas,' don't you think? Improbable?"

Whether through the strange miracle of genes, or time spent in the company of this admired aunt, neither Leo nor Leighton responded to this analysis of nomenclature with the least bewilderment. "You're probably right," Leighton said. "As soon as something looks suspicious, everything looks suspicious; I've often noticed. Anyway, here's the odd thing. When I decided to talk to Toby, he completely changed the subject. Instead, do you know what he told me, in strictest confidence, of course?"

"Of course," Kate murmured.

"Well, I've only told Leo; and now you. Maybe it'll make sense to you. Years ago, Toby made a will for a woman writer. English and famous, is all Toby would

say. She died, oh, ages ago, I don't know just when, and then another woman writer, also English and very scholarly, to whom the first woman had left everything, came to Toby and *she* made a will. Toby had been with another firm when he made the first will, and he brought the writer, the first one, with him when he came to Dar and Dar. Anyway, when the second one got in touch with him a short while ago, wanting to know if the will was all in order and would we be able to find the chief legatees, Toby couldn't find her—I mean one of the two legatees mentioned in the will. He could have found the woman's son, of course, but she knew where *he* was."

"Has this any connection with the disappearance of Charlotte Lucas?" Kate asked.

"Of course not," Leo said. "What possible connection could it have? Leighton is bored by word processing, for which who could blame her, and she's looking for excitement."

"Has Toby any interest in finding Charlotte Lucas?" Kate asked.

"I haven't talked to him about it again," Leighton said. "I've talked to you and Leo. But I do feel we should do something."

"Not, I trust," Kate said, "without consulting Toby."

"We thought," Leighton said, "you might consult him."

"Whyever?"

"Leo doesn't feel he should talk to Toby, being a young lawyer in another firm; he oughtn't to know