

THE PUZZLED HEART

AMANDA CROSS



BALLANTINE BOOKS

More praise for Amanda Cross and *The Puzzled Heart*

“Part of the art of being a successful mystery writer is the ability to create a leading character who remains as compelling the twentieth outing as he or she was in the first. Moreover, a new reader should be able to pick up any book in a series and get enough information about the sleuth to be able to follow the plot without saying, ‘Huh?’ Amanda Cross does this brilliantly in *The Puzzled Heart*.... What makes this book a delight is the literate dialogue with characters quoting everyone from Marmee in *Little Women* to Wendy Steiner’s *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism*.”

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“No one has a sharper eye than Amanda Cross.”

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“Cross is wise in the ways of academe, and her figures speak in literate, complete sentences, which surely is a requirement for nuanced ambiguity.”

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“A new Kate Fansler mystery ... is always a treat for her longtime fans.... Cross clearly hasn’t lost her touch.”

—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“Cross again displays her virtuosity, wit, and keen intelligence in this vintage performance—as strong and satisfying as Kate’s cherished single-malt scotch.”

—*Houston Chronicle*

“Amanda Cross creates a lovable, if acerbic, always credible amateur sleuth.... Much of the fun of the novels, twelve to date, comes from her always astute commentary *on* the horrors of contemporary academe.... Her immediate response to the ransom letter—and this is why I love Kate Fansler—is: ‘I hate people who use *contact* as a verb.’ ... Better than those observations, however, is the elegance with which Cross constructs and then solves the mysteries. In *The Puzzled Heart*, a St. Bernard pup may be the most important clue, or the most adorable red herring, in the history of the mystery genre. As I said, *The Puzzled Heart* may be enjoyed on its own, but treat yourself to some of the best mysteries around, and read all the Kate Fansler novels. You won’t be disappointed.”

—*Bay Area Reporter*

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“[An] entertaining intellectual puzzle.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

By Amanda Cross:

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IN THE LAST ANALYSIS
THE JAMES JOYCE MURDER*
THE QUESTION OF MAX*
SWEET DEATH, KIND DEATH*
NO WORD FROM WINIFRED*
A TRAP FOR FOOLS*
THE PLAYERS COME AGAIN*
AN IMPERFECT SPY*
COLLECTED STORIES*
THE PUZZLED HEART*

**Published by Ballantine Books*

THE PUZZLED HEART

Amanda Cross

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To the very young cousins, Penelope and Matteo, happily puzzled by almost everything

Could go from scene familiar

To an untraversed spot—

Could contemplate the journey

With unpuzzled heart—

—FROM POEM #43

EMILY DICKINSON

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KATE FANSLER'S arrival on Leslie Stewart's doorstep was thoroughly uncharacteristic. Leslie Stewart was, at the moment the doorbell rang, trying to persuade one grandson not to pull out the cat's hair in handfuls and the other grandson, happily ensconced in a high chair, to put his applesauce to internal rather than external uses.

"Will you see to the door, Jane?" she called in what she hoped were plaintive rather than irritable tones. "I'm rather tied up here."

And indeed, Leslie thought, I would far rather be literally tied up or in almost any other situation but this. Grandchildren she cherished, but only, it came to her with sudden clarity at their more adorable moments and in anticipation of departure, either theirs or hers as the case might be. Today, unfortunately, the case was neither.

"Jane," she called again. She could hear, then, a growl of acquiescence and Jane's footsteps as she crossed the loft to the front door, whose bell had again sounded, this time with urgency.

Jane Berlin had long liked to point out that she had remained childless for good reason and had fallen in love with Leslie when she too seemed well past the possibility of childbearing. It was the likelihood of grandchildren that she had failed to take into account. Apparently, having passed one's genes on to one generation, one felt impelled to encourage, even to assist, in the flowering of those genes into yet another generation. Jane felt, in a word, betrayed. *Outraged* was another word that might, without exaggeration, be employed. The strength of her feelings was in no way mitigated by Leslie's assurance that she agreed with her, and that this particular occasion was unavoidable and not likely to be repeated.

Jane's far-from-rapid progress was, toward the end, and at the bell's second ring, hastened by the happy thought that perhaps this was the boys' parents returning. She was almost smiling when she threw open the door.

Kate Fansler stood on the doorstep, looking so harassed that Jane did not even think to mention her disappointment in Kate's failure to be the retriever of the children.

"Are you all right?" Jane asked, somewhat rhetorically, since Kate looked far from all right. "Leslie's in the kitchen preventing cruelty to animals and swathed in baby food." Concerned, Jane followed Kate to the kitchen.

Leslie looked up in surprise. "What is it?" she said, clearly expecting the worst. And with reason. For Leslie, Kate's closest friend, knew that, in the first place, Kate never dropped in never appeared unannounced, considering such behavior uncivilized; and, in the second place, she would certainly not have chosen this afternoon to change in this respect since Leslie had told Kate of her, Leslie's, obligation to babysit for her grandsons. Kate was notorious for her lack of delight in the very young.

These thoughts were the matter of a few seconds. Abandoning the children, she went to Kate and pushed her into a chair. "I'll make some tea," she said. "Strong and sweet, for shock." And she did move toward the kettle.

"I'll do it," Jane said. "Unless you two would rather be alone."

"Reed's gone," Kate said.

“Left you?” Jane asked. Leslie glared at her.

“Not left me. Gone, vanished—kidnapped, if you insist on an exact description.”

Even the boys were quiet, as though sensing the tension. Then the baby began to cry, his mouth turned down in the image of tragedy, his eyes scrunched up. The eyes of the older boy, as though in sympathy, welled up; a tear rolled slowly down his cheek. The car departed, not caring for the atmosphere.

Jane put up the kettle and waited for the water to boil. Personally, she would have recommended brandy, but perhaps Leslie was right. Leslie, being older and subject to more frequent familial perils, had dealt with crises more often than had Jane.

“Start at the beginning,” Leslie said. She and Kate had seen each other through many trials, though it seemed to Leslie that laughter more often marked their conversations. They would begin in despair and end in laughter—that was about the size of it—but nothing, not even Leslie’s losing her husband and taking up with a woman, had seemed as daunting as this. Pray heaven that Reed, the most unlikely man for it, had not had one of those male life crises and run off with a younger woman or, she suddenly thought, a man. Good God.

“We were to meet at a restaurant at six-thirty; we were going on to a concert at Lincoln Center. Reed is never late, or never really late, so after a time I called the lobby of our building to ask the doorman if perhaps Reed had forgotten and was planning to meet me there. The doorman said he hadn’t seen Mr. Amhearst all day.”

By this time the tea was ready, but Kate could barely be persuaded to take even a sip. “It’s hot,” she said.

“That’s the point,” Leslie said. “Do sip it at least.” Kate, obeying, sipped.

By this time the boys had become more vocal in their sorrows. Jane gathered them up, holding the baby on one arm, the older boy by the hand, she left the room with them.

Grateful, and terribly worried about Kate, Leslie nonetheless had the horrible thought that she would have to pay for this. I am becoming a monster, she told herself. “Go on,” she said to Kate.

“Then I called the law school. His assistant Nick, a pleasant young man whom I’ve met, seemed surprised to hear from me. ‘Actually,’ he said, ‘I watched Reed go, from the window; he had said he was going to a concert with you, and I thought how nice, when I would have to spend the evening studying. Then he got into the limousine and drove off.’

“‘What limousine?’ I naturally asked. Reed calls limousines only for rides to the airport. Nick said he thought the men in the car had been waiting for Reed and were giving him an arranged-for lift. He didn’t recognize the men, and when I told him that Reed was supposed to have met me at the restaurant, he became silent. ‘Don’t make too much of this, Kate,’ he said, ‘but now that you mention it, I did notice that the men got on either side of him and seemed to be, well, helping him into the limousine. It wasn’t obvious, or I would have done something. I just think, looking back, that it was, well, funny. Can I do something, Kate?’ I told him to hold off for a while and say nothing at all to anybody. He very nicely said he would be home all night if I needed him, he would go home instead of to the library.”

Kate almost automatically sipped again at the tea. “After that call I went home. It was no perhaps seven-thirty. I didn’t know what to do; every idea I had seemed less practical than the last. By nine o’clock I had about decided on some more telephone calls, when a message was delivered. That was a whole twelve hours ago; I still haven’t thought what to do. The

letter told me to be at home tonight at seven. Meanwhile,” Kate concluded, “I’m here. I didn’t know where else to go. I was afraid if I stayed home I would call the police or feel compelled to do something, anything, and I thought I’d better talk it through first. But maybe I should get back.”

Leslie had never seen Kate so worried, so indecisive, so panicked. “I’d better go,” Kate said. “I ought to be where someone can reach me. It was silly of me to come, but if I had to do something sudden and idiotic, this seemed the best choice.”

“It was,” Leslie said. “We’ll go back together. I’ll just have to get my daughter and her husband to come for the kids.”

“It’s all right,” Jane said, appearing at the kitchen door. “They’re changed and dressed now and can hang out with the less experienced of their two grannies, as Leslie’s daughter calls us.” Here she smirked. “It occurred to me while changing and dressing them that if Leslie’s daughter were homophobic, she wouldn’t have dreamed of leaving her little ones with us. Enough to make a cat laugh, isn’t it? You two go ahead to Kate’s house, after Leslie calls the parents. I’ll stay here till they come, trying to prevent serious injury to animals and children.”

“Jane,” Leslie began.

“Never mind Janeing me,” Jane said. “Just call the parents and tell them to get on their bicycles and pedal over here.”

“Wait a minute,” Kate said. “You must have taken the kids for a good reason. Don’t let—”

“And I’m giving them back for a good reason,” Leslie said. “Nobility has its limits, and they’ve just been reached. Listen,” she added, as Kate looked dubious and worried, “after a certain time in life, friends come first. Perhaps they should always come first. I was just trying to give the harried parents some much-needed time off, remembering my own years of child raising. But Jane hasn’t taken my offer well, to put it mildly, so Tony and Sarah might as well find out how the land lies now as later. Actually, you’re doing me a favor, giving me a good reason to back out now. Jane comes before grandchildren too, any day. Just let me have a word with her. Try to drink a bit more of the tea.”

Dutifully Kate dropped back into her chair and tried to sip the tea, now cooler but still overpoweringly sweet. She too remembered from somewhere, English novels perhaps, that sweet strong tea was good for shock.

* * *

“Was that all the letter said?” Leslie asked when they were in a cab on their way to Kate’s apartment. “Just to be home at seven?”

“For another message, I supposed,” Kate said. “Letter or telephone. The other letter was hand-delivered. I asked the doorman, who said it was given him by a boy—obviously hired for the job, no connection to the kidnapers likely.”

Leslie paid the cab and hurried after Kate into her apartment house. Kate was interrogating the doorman, who said that nothing had been delivered for her except the usual mail. Hurrying upstairs, they found the “usual mail” on the doorstep. Kate flipped through it; there was nothing unexpected or pertinent.

“Let’s sit down,” Leslie said. “I think you’d better start at the beginning. Have you the slightest idea why anyone would kidnap Reed? Some disgruntled criminal from Reed’s D. days, out of prison and bent on revenge? An angry student; a disappointed client from one of

his law school clinics; what?"

"It's me," Kate said. "It's because of me."

Leslie looked dubious.

"I've been warned," Kate said. "I guess you could say I've been picked as the feminist who's being taught that feminism doesn't pay. I've had warnings from some right-wing groups with one of those names—you know, the Institute for Family Values or something, the League for the Protection of Men. I forget what they were called. Anyway, they sounded crazy; I didn't take them seriously."

"These people shoot doctors who perform abortions," Leslie said. "They say God told them to do it."

"I know. I thought the warning was about me, they were going to do something to me. And I couldn't think what they could do except murder me, and I could hardly prevent that. As for those whispering campaigns and false information to the media—that sort of thing—well, I wasn't going to stop living my life on that account. I never dreamed...."

"Of course you didn't. How many warnings were there?"

"Several. I didn't pay that much attention. Something called the League of Right-Wing Women wrote diatribes against everything I've worked for. They seemed to be in favor of sexual harassment, battering women, date rape, and child abuse. Perhaps that's a bit strong. But they certainly don't believe any of these things happen on a large scale, and saying they do is all a plot to harry men. Leslie, I just thought they were crackers. In addition, I thought they were probably sending those warnings to many women. I didn't take it all that personally. The letter last night made it very personal."

"Let me see it," Leslie said.

Kate, who had held on to her purse, now took the letter from it and handed it to Leslie, who read it aloud:

We have taken your husband. If you do not publicly recant your insane feminist position, he may come to harm. Be at home tonight at seven when further more detailed instructions will reach you. Do not contact the police or anyone else if you hope to see your husband alive again.

Leslie let the letter drop into her lap. "Kate, don't hit me, but is there any chance this is a joke? A stupid joke, in frightfully bad taste, but a joke. Some of those academic types you work with might think this was sort of funny; you know, the types who go off in the woods and pee against trees, and pretend to shoot each other."

"There's nothing I haven't thought of during the night," Kate said. "I don't think it's a joke, and the reason I don't is the two men Nick saw putting Reed into the limousine. Some of the guys I work with might try to frighten me, but they would find a time when Reed was away, or they'd think up some other prank. I can't believe they would actually force him into a car that they would go that far, and then send this letter."

"It does seem to be the kind of letter they might write though. It's like kid stuff."

"Leslie, the right wing in this country, Christians though they may call themselves, are besotted with their message. They are like fundamentalists everywhere, certain of their correctness and of being ordered by God to destroy those who disagree with that certainty. I think perhaps we should stop fooling ourselves about them."

"I'm not fooling myself about them. I'm just saying that it's not that easy to distinguish the

letter from a joke letter, the kind of anonymous note sent by nuts.”

“I might agree with you if Reed were here. If I had heard from him, or had the slightest idea where he was. Now that I think of it, it was my certainty that I wouldn’t hear from him that allowed me to go to you. I’m so frightened. And I feel so helpless.”

“Which,” Leslie said, “is why we have to get help. The question is who and how. Let’s come up with several possible plans while we’re waiting for seven o’clock—and their next message.”

By the time they had reached this point, Kate was somewhat calmer, a bit more collected though still capable, Leslie was certain, of collapsing into despair at the slightest provocation. Most ominously of all, she refused a drink, as though, Leslie surmised, Reed was doomed. Kate had a drink without him. By the time seven o’clock came around, and the doorbell rang announcing the delivery of the next message, Leslie had decided that coping with this kind of suspense required a wholly new, and for her unpracticed, support. Thinking of her grandchildren—by now, she hoped, claimed by their parents—she decided that life was never empty of new challenges, but with age one might have the fortitude to resist or meet them. Having, when push came to shove, resisted the grandchildren, she now sat with Kate hoping for the necessary fortitude.

The seven o’clock message demanded that Kate announce, through paid advertisements or articles or op-ed pieces in specific newspapers and journals by the time of their next publication, why she was abandoning feminism and joining the right wing in its efforts to restore true family values. A list of the publications and a concise but terrifying definition of “family values” was appended. If Kate failed to comply with these demands, Reed would be killed. The message concluded: *Neither the police nor any government agency must be contacted*

“I hate people who use contact as a verb,” Kate said. It was, Leslie considered, the first sign that her mind had clicked back into place.

“I thought these people believed in the police,” Leslie said, hoping to encourage the rational bent. “Or is that only for inner cities and against black men and boys?”

“We have to do something,” Kate said.

“You don’t think they’ll kill Reed, not really?” Leslie asked. It struck her that the conversation horribly resembled one of those prime-time programs she occasionally watched when overcome with exhaustion.

“They’ve killed doctors who do abortions; they’re fanatics. But it’s not a very sensible demand. What’s to stop me from denying the whole thing once Reed is back?”

“That’s easy. In the first place, you’ll be tarred with what you said, no matter what explanation you offer. That’s how the media work. You can’t ever correct reporter misstatements, they just go on making them anyway. In the second place, fear for Reed will restrain you. And if it doesn’t restrain you, it will be because Reed insists it shouldn’t, and that will lead to further complications of a marital sort. No, they’re clever all right. It’s always easy to be clever if compassion is not part of your aim. Just think about the way P. Buchanan’s mind works, or Rush Limbaugh’s, and you’ll have a good sense of what you’re dealing with, even though neither of them has anything to do with this particular caper. Kate, are you listening?”

“Listening and thinking, along the same lines. Thank you for coming home with me, Leslie. I’ve just had a thought.”

“Thank God for that. Do you plan to share it?”

“I think I know where to go for help, or at least for an initial conference. There’s a woman I met last year named Harriet. I’ll phone her.”

“Don’t phone. Give me a message and I’ll deliver it. In these days of cyberspace, I don’t trust any phone. If I’m being paranoid, better safe than sorry, as my mother used to say.”

Kate wrote out the note.

WHEN Harriet Furst arrived in response to Kate's note, Kate realized that it was far too long—months—since she had seen her. They had met while both were engaged in more or less temporary capacity at the Schuyler Law School,* Kate in an unfamiliar role and unfamiliar surroundings, Harriet having taken on a new life and a new identity, which seemed to have propelled her wonderfully into the later decades of life. The friendship the two had formed was a lasting one, but they were both busy and neither, Kate realized sadly, had recently called the other. She mentioned this to Harriet.

“Well, here I am, in answer to a billet-doux. Better than a phone call, really. What's the matter, my dear, and what can I do?”

“I thought perhaps you and your fellow private eye might help me. Harriet, I really don't know what to do.”

“Start at the beginning—which was when?” Harriet said.

“Last night. And it seems like each hour has been a week long.” Forcing herself into a appearance and voice of greater calm than she felt, Kate told Harriet the whole story thus far, which hardly took six sentences. Harriet listened with close attention.

“Now tell me about how you came to join a detective agency,” Kate added. She did not analyze if her motive was to stall (action being dangerous) or to decide whether or not to trust Harriet in her new profession.

“Don't you think we'd better call Toni, my partner, and get her over here?”

“Yes. Meanwhile, tell me how all this happened. Of course, you are the perfect private eye.”

“That's what Toni said about me. ‘You're able to move about the world unseen, with that invisibility that age bestows in our society,’ she said. I thought that rather clever of her.”

“How did you meet her? Answering an ad?”

“Hardly.” Harriet, after a long look at Kate, decided that talking was the most helpful activity she could undertake while they waited. “Toni (her full name is Antonia, I had hoped after the Willa Cather novel, but Toni said not),” Harriet began, “had worked in the computer and Xerox copier room that, as you will vividly remember, I ran in that dreary law school. I hadn't seen her since I left there, but suddenly she turned up, offering me a job in a detective agency. The agency was to consist of Toni and me, and if it worked out, in a year or so I would be a partner. Of course I looked at Toni with some bemusement as she laid out the proposition. We were meeting in the office Toni had hired for her new undertaking. It was small and looked exactly like a private detective's office, my idea of which, perhaps like Toni's, had come from movies and TV shows about male detectives. There were two desks, two chairs besides the desk chairs, a rather grubby window, and a filing cabinet. One of the desks boasted a notebook computer, a telephone, and a fax machine. The other seemed to be waiting, hopefully I thought, for its occupant to arrive.” Harriet paused to smile sympathetically at Kate before continuing.

“What really astonished me most about the whole business was Toni's looks—well, not so much her looks as her clothes and makeup. When I had known her at the law school, she had

been thin and rather gawky, dressed always in jeans and, depending on the weather, either a T-shirt or a sweatshirt, both oversize. She now looked like something they might feature in one of those magazines devoted to fashion and the way to get yourself up if you want everyone to look at you with either admiration or horror. I was certainly looking at Toni. Her thinness had become elegance. Her clothes, even to my ignorant eye, were smashing in their expensive simplicity; they, together with her makeup and hairstyle, managed to convey simultaneously a come-on and a don't-mess-with-me message. The whole getup was staggering.

“‘Like it?’ Toni said. ‘I’ve done myself over. This is a power suit, in case you didn’t know.’ ‘I didn’t,’ I said.

“‘Of course *you* mustn’t feel guilty,’ Toni said, seeing me dismayed at the fact that I hadn’t changed an iota. ‘I want you to look just like you look. That’s part of the point of my offer—the way you look, your age, your cleverness, the way you handled all those frightful late school professor bullies, the fact, as you so often pointed out, that nobody even sees or describes women, let alone is able to describe them. All that’s what I want. How about it?’

“Well, what did I have to lose? An adventure is an adventure. I even quoted her a poem I recently came upon by Sharon Barba called ‘The Cycle of Women’:

Until she rises as though from the sea
not on the half-shell this time
nothing to laugh at
and not as delicate as he imagined her
a woman big-hipped, beautiful, and fierce.

“I wanted to add *old* in that last line, but it’s not my poem. Still, that was me: big-hipped, old, and fierce.

“So we settled down to be a detective agency. It was clear from the beginning that we were the perfect pair of operators. Toni got their attention and I worked where their attention wasn’t. We followed errant wives, husbands and lovers, and missing children. That part was pretty grim; they were mostly teenagers who didn’t want to go home when found, but at least the parents and the child were forced to talk to one another, which often hadn’t happened much before.” Here Harriet paused for another look at Kate, who smiled weakly, attempting reassurance.

Harriet continued. “Toni insisted we each have a licensed handgun. I refused, hating guns, but in the end I agreed, figuring I could always stash the thing in my capacious purse and never use it. I was wrong about that. We were hired by a boyfriend to tag along, unseen of course, with a young woman jogger who insisted on running just at dawn. I said I didn’t think we undertook bodyguard work, but Toni said she ran anyway, and if the guy paid our rates, why not? So Toni ran when the girlfriend ran, and it’s very likely that her being in sight and looking as though she could be carrying a gun discouraged a few rapists. All I know is that one day Toni couldn’t make it, because of another case, and told me to go with her.

“‘Are you out of your mind?’ I asked with my usual tact and gracious circumlocution.

“‘Get a bicycle,’ Toni said. ‘You can ride a bicycle, can’t you?’ I admitted that I could.

“‘Well,’ she said, as though that ended the conversation.

“‘Well, okay,’ I said, preserving my dignity. To give Toni her due, she provided the

bicycle, one of those things with ten or twenty or so speeds, which I have never understood. But I can pedal, and I did. Round and round the park we went. The jogger stuck to the road, thank God, and if she wondered why this old bag was bicycling more or less along with her, she probably decided I was clinging to her for safety. People who run at dawn don't wonder too much about people who bicycle at dawn, or so I figured. And then he struck. He must have thought I wasn't any danger to him, since I was clearly aged and breathing heavily—admit it, there were a lot of hills—and he pounced on her and dragged her beyond some bushes. I left the bicycle to its fate and followed, slowly and carefully. I was able to creep up behind him and put my gun to his head, just the way Louise did when Thelma was about to be raped in *Thelma and Louise*. 'Leave her alone,' I said. He looked so unconvinced that I shot the damn thing just past him, to make my point. He got the message, and tried to run off, but she tackled him, and I held him there while she went to call the police. One rapist off the park roads, or so we hoped. I rather enjoyed just holding the gun on him while he contemplated rushing me. 'Don't even think about it,' I said. 'I've got an itchy trigger finger.' Well, I had to get my dialogue from somewhere. I may have been a bit of a spy at the law school, but I'd never been a detective.

"The boyfriend gave us a bonus, but the woman was mad as hell, which I thought unreasonable. Still, that wasn't our problem. And it was just about then that I became a partner, though we still called the agency by Toni's name, Giomatti. I didn't see any point in putting my name on the door."

"Anonymity has always attracted you," Kate said kindly, but glancing at her watch. Just then the phone rang. Kate answered, clearly frightened, but it was Toni. Kate handed over the phone.

"She wants you to go to school tomorrow in the usual way," Harriet said after a moment. "Either Toni or I will come to see you in your office hour; we'll have thought of a reason for doing so. Toni doesn't believe in being seen too often, in her undisguised self, with a client not at first anyway. Sometimes I wonder, but she does seem to know what she's doing—with the gun. I pointed out that an unloaded gun would have done as well. 'No it wouldn't,' Toni said, 'because you would have known it was unloaded and that would have made a difference.' She was right there.

"Now, Kate," Harriet continued, "let's have a drink. I know it's early, but you need one and I need one. Reed wouldn't mind; I'm sure he's hoping you can get all the courage you need, even if the littlest bit of it comes from a bottle."

Kate rose to get the drinks. Harriet sat waiting, believing in the recuperative agency of even the most moderate exertion.

* * *

And so the next day Kate sat in her office dealing with students. It was an effort to force herself to concentrate on their concerns, but her success in doing so relieved the tension about Reed for a few minutes at a time. The sixth student, looking so natural in that person that even Kate was fooled for a few minutes, was Toni, whom Kate vaguely remembered from the law school. Obviously Harriet's partner was talented at disguises, capable of assuming any costume and behavior consistent with her age and sex, and perhaps beyond. She looked exactly like a graduate student.

"I'm the last on line, I think," she said, taking the seat by the desk and staying in her room until the door was closed. "Thank God you don't teach in one of those small colleges where everyone in the place knows all the students personally. New York, I love you."

Kate looked questioning.

"Okay," Toni said. "Down to plans. I was going to mention, however, that we thought of Harriet as a cleaning woman come to dust, but were informed that a cleaning woman dusting during the day or for that matter at any other time would almost certainly arouse suspicion. So it's me, but Harriet sends love. We've been thinking about your case all night. Here we are where we are for the present.

"First, rules of operation. Never telephone. If you absolutely must reach us, call from a phone booth on the street, give us the number, and we'll go out to a street phone and call you back. Wait there for us. If someone else wants to use the phone, just stand there holding the receiver, keeping the lever down in an unnoticeable way. If someone bullies you out of the booth, just stay till you get in again. We'll keep trying. Is that clear?"

Kate nodded, trying to think where the phone booths were near her house or office. She realized how seldom she had used one, and planned to scout them out on her way home. Unobtrusively, of course. She still felt sick to her stomach, but less so now that some action was promised.

Toni continued: "We have lots of other plans, but I don't see any point in going into them all now. I'll be back during your office hours. I've signed up, with a late fee, for one of your courses so that I'll have a right to be here, particularly since I have to consult you often in order to catch up."

"Which course?" Kate asked.

"The big lecture. I don't want a grade, so I don't have to write papers or take a section with a student aide. I don't want them—the people behind this caper—to spot me as a student, but if they do, we can use that for our own purposes. Phony name, of course, but I paid money and I'm not matriculated, so they won't go into my records until later. Believe me, money is all, here as elsewhere." She continued before Kate could question any of this. "Our immediate problem is this ad or article they want you to place. You may have to do it, but right now we want to stall them—partly because by stalling we force them to make some moves, and moves always tell you something, and partly because we don't want you to have to place the damn thing at all."

"But won't Reed be in danger?"

"I doubt it. Remember, Kate, he's only of use to them alive and well. They're planning one of two maneuvers, or so Harriet and I guess. Either they'll try to brainwash him and make him see the point of view of his captors, which often works very well indeed, or they'll try to seduce him—both mentally and physically, so prepare yourself for that. If Reed is half as smart as I hear he is, none of this is going to work, exactly, but he's going to pretend it does."

"You're remembering the abortion doctors they've shot, and the clinics they've bombed and all that?"

"Look, Kate, forget abortion doctors and clinics. They feel morally right about that. They tell themselves they're saving human beings; they can use fanatics to do their dirty work for them. But these people aren't terrorists like the Islamic terrorists—they can't really claim that their god has told them to blow up the enemy even at the cost of lives. It still says 'Thou

shalt not kill' in their Bible, and while the morality of killing abortion doctors—who also kill in their view—or killing in time of war can be argued, kidnapping and killing is another kettle of fish. Are you with me?"

"I'm trying to be. I'm also remembering Yitzhak Rabin."

"Who was, like the abortion doctors, killed in a public place. Try to pull yourself together, Kate. You're no use to us or Reed if you're always in a panic, believe me."

"I'll try. How do I stall my refutation of feminism?"

"We thought of you having a minor heart attack: nothing life-threatening, if properly cared for, but requiring two weeks at least in bed. Don't start protesting. We abandoned that plan not because we couldn't overcome your protests if we had to, but because your not teaching for two weeks doesn't send the right message. Anyhow, we need you here for consultation. We can't come to your home, or Harriet might come as a friend offering consolation but no more than once or twice. No, we're going to be simple and, to a degree, honest. You're going to put an ad in the paper, since you don't know how to get in touch with them, an ad saying 'Need a week at least to write what you require.' Sign it Mrs. A. They'll get it, and with any luck no one else will."

"And at the end of the week?"

"We'll either have Reed back or regroup. Now listen. I've got the ad ready for the paper where they'll see it. They can't very well object if they want your conversion to fundamentalist Christianity to be believable. We'll also give Reed a chance to act on his own behalf."

"How? He's a prisoner."

"True. But he's not what they want, except insofar as he will work to influence you. It's feminism they're after, Kate, all the new laws about domestic violence, affirmative action, Title IX, choice, and let's throw in evolution and the idea that God may not be a man who created this world and meant men to be at the center of it. If Reed can appear to become impressed enough by their arguments, he will be working from the inside. You still with me?"

"I'm listening," Kate said. "You're not suggesting that he is likely to become swayed by their arguments?"

"No, I'm not. Pay attention, Kate. We're talking about a man you've been married to a long time. Of years. Are you asking *me*?"

"No," Kate said, sounding unconvincing even to her own ears.

"While you'll go on living your life, and supposedly pondering the article you're going to write as they demand," Toni went on, leaving in abeyance the question of Reed's compliance. "Harriet and I are going to try to identify the group that's taken Reed. That may not be as hard as you think, though it won't be easy."

"Where do you start?"

"We start, since we have to start somewhere, with a letter that appeared in the college newspaper damning feminists, multiculturalism, evolution, and the abandonment of family values. You may remember it caused quite a furor."

"I do remember. I couldn't imagine anyone being stupid enough to want to make it public. There was some question about why the paper published it, but freedom of speech always wins out as an ideal, and in this case it probably should have. When it's racial slurs in a

academic community, I'm not always so sure, but that's another subject for a quieter time."

"Right," Toni said. "But I'm glad to see your mind grapple with something other than Reed's disappearance."

"Kidnapping. That's what I can't get over. Actually kidnapping a grown man to get even with a woman whose ideas you don't much like."

"Let's not go round this again. Not now—okay, Kate? I'm off. You know what Garrison Keillor says every week on public radio: be well; do good work; stay in touch." And Toni was gone, slouching out of the office in superb imitation of a student whose essay had not received the accolade she thought it deserved.

Harriet turned up that night at Kate's apartment. "We are friends," she explained. "You weren't supposed to tell anyone, so life goes on, right, and your old friends come by to see you? Right? And though it's supposed to look like it, this isn't just a friendly visit. I want to tell you the next step. We'll keep in touch, mostly through Toni-the-student, so don't fret. That is, I know you can't help fretting, but don't fret about our keeping in touch. Any singular malt on hand?"

Kate went to fetch it, but didn't this time feel up to a drink for herself—a terrible symptom, but Harriet decided to ignore it. She herself took a grateful sip.

"We've looked into the background of the college student who wrote that letter to the paper. Always begin with the obvious. That's the place to begin, if not to end. He turns out to be the dutiful son of a widow who thinks every law to help women, the poor, blacks, and anyone else other than the white male holy Christians of this world is the work of the devil. Satan figures rather largely in all this. (Have you read Elaine Pagels on the subject? We'll never mind that for now.) I'm finding this private detective business wonderful, but you do have to keep to the point and your mouth shut—hard tasks for longtime talkers like me. Where was I?" Harriet held out her glass. "And don't ask if it's all right to drink on the job. It isn't, but I'm considering this a friendly visit. I shall breathe heavily at the doorman as I leave, convincing him that I've been having a nice, boozy time."

Kate attempted a smile. "Go on," she said, "about the family of the boy who wrote that letter."

"As I say, spiritual pride is clearly not among what that family considers sin; they know they are always right. But we found out that one of the daughters got captured by a cult, and the other one has lived a life that is, I gather, unacceptable to Mama in every possible way. However, the son is his mother's boy. Papa, by the way, was a minister who died some years ago of a coronary. I get whispers of the fact that his sexual tastes, which ran to the young and male, were not exactly according to the book, but that has all been hushed up. It goes to a certain distance, though, together with the careers of the daughters, in explaining the righteousness of the mother and son. We may get around to cultivating the mother, who is trying to start a movement, which I might join. That may not lead anywhere, but who knows? Meanwhile, your ad goes in all possible journals and papers tomorrow. We shall await results. If you get any messages or communications of any sort, bring them to your office hour."

"Suppose it's not a day for my office hour?"

"I was coming to that. Patience, Kate; do try. You're going to get a puppy. Just sit down

and listen, please. A nearly three-month-old puppy greatly in need of training, not to mention shots and all the rest of the usual attentions from a vet. We've found you an excellent vet, by the way, nearby. We've also managed to get a young man who does occasional work for us, hired as a desk clerk there. People always need competent help; Ovido is very good, and speaks Spanish. There's a dog training center upstairs from the vet. When you go there, which is always on the days when you don't go to the university, if you have a message, leave it with Ovido. He will recognize you and take whatever it is unobtrusively, while discussing your dog's medication. Here's the address."

"And where is the dog?" Kate hardly dared ask. She realized that for the first time she felt her life to be completely out of her control. That she might have a dog foisted on her seemed as likely as anything else that had been happening.

"The kennel will deliver the dog tonight. You will take her around to be examined by the vet after she arrives. She is paper-trained, by the way, so put some paper down in the kitchen. She does like to walk, however. She's going to be a very big dog—she's a Saint Bernard, in fact—weighing between a hundred and fifty and two hundred pounds, so early training is essential while you can still lift her and pull her, in short, while you're still stronger than she is."

Kate looked both blank and stricken.

"Kate dear," Harriet said, "I'm really worried. Talk to me. Ramble on. Quote things. Please, Kate, don't stay in this zombie state. Say something. Reed will be back, I promise you. The dog's name is Bancroft, by the way, because Anne Bancroft is a favorite actor of the kennel owner. Banny for short. She's a very sweet dog; I've seen her. Quite adorable, you'll see."

"And what am I to do with her when she weighs two hundred pounds?"

"Oh, we're just borrowing Banny. She's far too valuable to give away or even sell. She was wanted for shows and then for breeding. Now don't get too attached to her, because she's just visiting. You do see, Kate, don't you? We needed a place you could go regularly, quietly and innocently, where messages can be exchanged. Meanwhile Banny will learn how to sit, lie down, stay, heel, and fetch, and no doubt many other wonderful tricks. She's a present from me, by the way. But for God's sake, for my sake, don't let anything happen to her. That dog's worth a bundle."

Kate still looked stunned. "Harriet," she slowly said, "do you really know what you're doing?"

"We do, my dear, please try to believe that. We'll have Reed back before you know it. Goodbye for now. And look out for Banny; the kennel will deliver her shortly. The doorman will bring her up."

"I hope she doesn't pee in the elevator," Kate said.

"Ah," Harriet said, "that's more like it. Do have a drink," she said, as she left. "I know Reed would want you to."

Kate thought for a while, no coherent idea remaining in her mind for long. Time seemed to have lost its meaning; then the doorbell rang. There on the doormat stood the doorman with an adorable, furry thing with a wrinkled brow who looked as bewildered as did Kate. She took the leash.

"Here's some food they left for him," the doorman said. "I hope you enjoy him, ma'am."

He's going to be a mighty big dog."

"It's a she," Kate said. "Thank you."

Kate and Banny were alone. Banny looked around, then squatted and peed on the foyer floor.

After Kate had cleaned that up and laid paper down in the kitchen and showed the paper to Banny and put some water down, she went back into the living room. The puppy jumped up against her knees, and on an impulse Kate picked up the bundle of fur, hugging it, and weeping onto it. The puppy licked her face.

**See Amanda Cross, An Imperfect Spy*

KATE, in order to set up the ordinariness of her visits to the vet and training class, went there with Banny over the weekend. At least it was something to do. She could spend Ovido behind the desk, and, while paying for the vet's examination of Banny, she chatted with him in a natural way so that, if she should have a message to leave, their conversation would not appear in any way different from her usual behavior.

Harriet and Toni were convinced she was being followed, and Kate had occasionally caught sight of someone who might well have been keeping her in sight. "Their main object is to frighten you," Toni had said, "so they want you to know you're being followed and hounded. But don't underestimate them. Don't do anything you wouldn't do during your ordinary day." (Toni forbore to mention, and Kate did not point out, that no day would ever be ordinary again.)

On Monday, when she had a scheduled office hour, Kate took with her a message that had arrived the previous evening from the group that had kidnapped Reed; she did not need to go the route of the vet this time. The message said that the ad had been seen, and that Kate had exactly one week—that is, until next Monday—to place her article, which would be expected to appear not many days thereafter. If not, Reed would die or be terribly wounded.

Inevitably, this last caused Kate some bad moments, despite Toni's assurance that threats weren't what mattered at this point. Getting Reed back was all that mattered. Meanwhile, Toni went on to say, encouragingly, that she and Harriet were keeping a close record of everything that happened. "We shall be in a position to prosecute when this is all over. Meanwhile, we want you to do something."

"A cat this time?"

"Sarcasm is a nonproductive mode of communication," Toni said with pedagogical hauteur. "Listen, I don't want to stay longer than the other students and call attention to myself, so I won't go into all that Harriet and I are doing. Here's what we want you to do."

Kate looked both frightened and eager, a combination hard to achieve and terrible to experience.

"Don't look so appalled," Toni said. "This is an interesting job. Harriet told you that one of the daughters leads what the mother and son consider an unacceptable life, and I've tracked her down. She doesn't seem to see much of her mother and brother, but I think she's not much in sympathy with them. She doesn't know about Reed; you will have to meet her more or less accidentally, and using your own judgment, tell her as much as you want. My hunch is that she may be able to help us."

"And how do I meet her?" Kate asked.

"Easy. She lives in Putnam County, where she runs a kennel and boards dogs. You and Banny will go and check it out. Here's the address and phone number. You take it from there. But remember, if you have the least doubt, keep it a visit about boarding dogs."

"Perhaps I should cut my class and office hour tomorrow and go to visit her."

"Absolutely not. Don't, whatever you do, change your normal habits. You can go after your class tomorrow. Call first to make sure she'll be there and that a visit of inspection

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