

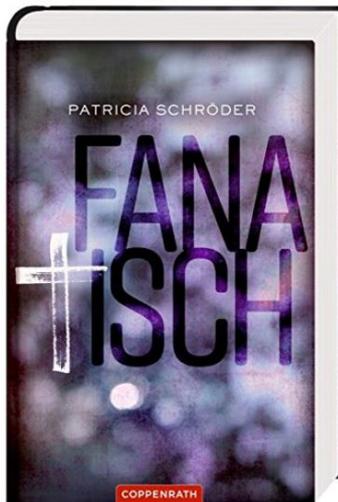
Extract from:

Fanatical

By Patricia Schröder

14+ / 360 pp. / hardcover with dust jacket / € 17.95

ISBN 978-3-649-62454-7



THURSDAY 29 JUNE

Charlotte jabbed me in the ribs while she swiped over her mobile phone screen. “Stop drooling over him.”

“What?” I groaned, “How do you know ...?”

“I know you”, she said, putting the smartphone back in her tiny shoulder bag decorated with shimmering sequins, “In any case, I’ve just caught you in the act.”

“Okay, Mrs Chief Inspector.”

“Chief Inspector will do”, she corrected me, blowing me a kiss.

I rolled my eyes, “Yeah, yeah.”

“The equality between men and women we’ve fought so hard for should gradually be reflected in our use of language”, Charlotte lectured.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah ... Yeah!”

“If, however, even my best friend couldn’t care less about it, things are looking really bleak”, she went on, slinging an arm round my shoulders and steering me resolutely in the opposite direction towards the main entrance to the Anne Frank school.

“It’s not that I couldn’t care less”, I protested, trying to sneak one last peak at Toby before Charlotte removed me (once again) from his sphere of influence, “It’s just that I couldn’t care less at the moment”, I added with a murmur.

“Yes, because a guy has addled your brain!”

“No, he hasn’t”, I contradicted fiercely, “I just think he’s ... well, sexy somehow ...” (...)

“He’s a freak.”

“Toby?” I gasped, astounded by this reply. (...)

You could call Toby Fincham structured or, as far as I was concerned, square, but he certainly wasn’t a freak.

“How on earth did you come to that conclusion?”

“As far as I know, he was thrown out of the Konrad Adenauer school for doing some kind of weird experiments”, Charlotte replied. (...) “His brother was involved somehow. People say he believes in one of those loopy religious conspiracy theories.”

Oh, boy! Now this was turning into a real adventure.

“And you really believe that?”

“Why not?” replied my friend, shrugging her shoulders.

“Because it’s probably just stupid tittle-tattle!”

Charlie snorted again.

“At any rate, he gives me the creeps. I think you should forget about him and start seeing Jamie finally”, she advised me.

“No! No! No! No! No!” I shook my head vigorously, “Forget it! Jamie is my best mate.”

“Yes. And he fancies you.”

“That’s total nonsense”, I retorted half-heartedly, because ultimately, of course, I knew better.

(...) We had known each other since primary school, and somehow we had been friends from the start. More so in key stage one, then less so in key stage two, because the boys Jamie hung around with couldn’t accept that he liked a girl – even worse, one with an Arabic name. At some point we started meeting up only in secret, which was always really tense because he was constantly afraid he’d be found out by his mates. Back then, there were so many days when we didn’t exchange a single word with one another, and Jamie didn’t even give me a surreptitious wave.

Sometimes, I was really annoyed with him, but I usually overcame my despair. I just didn’t know what I should do, as I didn’t want to offend him and possibly lose him altogether in the end. Apart from Jamie, I had no one with whom I could roam through the woods, explore old, dilapidated buildings, or look after a bird that had fallen out of its nest, and back then I didn’t want any other friends, either. So, I got myself a notebook-of-Jamie-moans, and in it, I scribbled down all the frustration I was feeling with an extra thick black felt-tip pen and angry words.

Afterwards, I often had a bad conscience, so I wrote him little letters, wrapped them round caramel sweets – because he really liked those – and tucked them into one of our secret PO Boxes (cracks in walls, knotholes, etc.) The nice thing was: Jamie always replied. He didn't actually write back to me – presumably because he was plagued by a bad conscience, just like me – but instead, each time he took one of my sweetie letters, I found, in one of the other PO Boxes, a small, colourful wooden bead, a pretty feather, or some other little thing he had left there for me.

But when Jamie moved schools, that changed as well. Now he not only lived in a different part of town; he also went to a different school, and he no longer looked for my letters on a regular basis. If I hadn't at one point waylaid him outside his front door, we might even have lost track of each other altogether.

When he was thirteen, Jamie started playing basketball. After only a few weeks, he was the top scorer in his team.

"It's all down to the fact you never gave up", he said back then, and he seemed to be really convinced of this. "You're my lucky mascot, Nara", he stressed over and over again. It was true that I accompanied him to his tournaments and cheered him on avidly when he shot one of his famously infamous three-pointers, feared by all his opponents. At that time, apart from basketball, I was the most important thing in his life. And he was the most important thing in mine. We were virtually joined at the hip. (...)

Everything was fine, until Jamie fell in love with Marita, a girl from his sports club. It would have actually been okay with me, if he had only continued to stand by me and our friendship. But he went back to wanting to meet me in secret, and I wasn't prepared to go through that again. Instead, I gave him the option "Either all or nothing", and Jamie chose nothing by virtue of the fact that he simply didn't call me anymore. For almost three quarters of a year I had nothing left of him but the notebook-of-Jamie-moans and my little Moroccan treasure box in which I had collected Jamie's secret PO Box presents. I was profoundly sad about his decision, but I didn't bemoan the situation – I focused on moving forwards.

This was when I got to know Charlotte from the other form group better. We went on a school exchange to France together and started sharing not only our clothes but also all our worries and secrets.

"You love him, but you don't trust him", she whispered.

Of course, I only passed comment on the second part of her analysis.

“Does that surprise you?”

Charlotte shook her head. “No.”

“Well then ...”

“I still think he’s earned another chance”, she interrupted.

“That would already be the third”, I said.

“Yes.”

Her simple assertion made my heart flutter. Charlotte had articulated what I wished for in those few moments when I was totally honest with myself, and she had formulated it as though there were nothing simpler in all the world. As if all the pain of the past could be undone with a snap of the fingers.

“Don’t you understand that if I get involved with him now and he drops me again...”

(...) “Jamie is totally besotted with you. Even a blind person would be able to see that. If you don’t show Jamie what you feel for him now, the whole thing will start all over again. At some point, Jamie will look elsewhere. There’ll be a new Marita, and you’ll be given your notice again.”

“I know that”, I replied, “But it will hurt less.”

“That may be, but on the other hand you might miss out on ...”

“Just don’t say my one true love.” I was interrupting her this time.

“Because I don’t believe in that.”

“That’s true”, Charlotte agreed, “You would rather get into a game with some guy you don’t know. You feel a spark from out of the blue and imagine you’ve fallen in love.”

“Charlie, that’s complete nonsense!” I retorted, “Just thinking Toby Fincham is interesting doesn’t mean, by any stretch of the imagination, that I have fallen in love with him.”

“Whatever”, my friend replied, “The whole thing is nothing but a massive diversionary tactic. The truth is: you’re only trying to run away from your feelings for Jamie.”

And so what? I thought to myself, as my eyes wandered in the direction of the school building. I’ve no idea whether he had followed us or if it was just pure chance, but ultimately I didn’t care. In any case, Toby was now leaning against the wall next to the entrance. He swiped on his phone a little, shoved it in his trouser pocket and looked at me. I smiled, and he smiled back.

FRIDAY 7 JUNE

Never go against divine will! Terrible things could happen.

Jamie stared silently at the note I had found in my cardigan pocket.

“What did Charlotte say about it?” he asked eventually.

“I haven’t shown her it.”

He raised his eyebrows in astonishment. “Why not?”

“No idea. She ... oh, I don’t know. Charlie would probably have pooh-poohed it and consigned it to the bin without further comment”, I replied. “She doesn’t take anything like that seriously. If she knew I used to be big into chain letters, she’d probably break off all contact with me straight away.” “But this isn’t a chain letter”, said Jamie.

He gave me a slanted grin, and I had to stop myself staring so obviously at the dimple that had appeared beside his right nostril.

After Jamie had split up with Marita and had turned up in my room on my fifteenth birthday, totally unexpectedly, with this same slanted (if also, at the time, somewhat penitent) grin and the latest Birdy CD, I secretly decided that this dimple belonged to me. It was a childish, hopelessly romantic, insane and irrational idea, but I still liked it.

“What are you looking at?” asked Jamie, irritated.

I flinched and looked into his eyes rather too abruptly.

“Why?”

“Well, erm ...” He shrugged his shoulders. He seemed a bit frustrated. “It’s actually you who should be answering my question.”

“Hm, no idea”, I said, with a silly feeling I was repeating myself, “I was just ... thinking.”

“Uh huh?”

We were in his room on his russet-coloured sofa, each of us sitting, well-behaved, in our corners, and it seemed that for some reason my remark had given him cause to move a bit closer to me. He swept a stubborn, copper blonde lock of hair away from his forehead and scrutinized me, expectantly.

“And what about?”

“Well, about how seriously I should take this scrap of paper”, I replied, plucking the note with the ominous message from his fingers.

“Very seriously.” Jamie spoke with a sepulchral voice.

“Thanks a lot”, I said, “You really are a good friend who can always be relied upon for advice and support in times of need.”

“Nooo, so, this time, I’m being totally serious, Nara”, Jamie said, soothingly.

“I think someone from the lower school put it in your cardigan. They sometimes have these funny bets going.”

“And this one went something like: Who can make a sixth-former so stressed that she ends up scared to death. Or what?”

Jamie nodded. “Exactly.”

Okay, I certainly couldn't rule out the possibility of something like that, but at the same time, I found it hard to imagine that a year eight pupil would be up to such things.

"Just look at the handwriting!" I challenged Jamie, "It's totally accurate and ornate. Someone's really made a lot of effort."

"Perhaps it's one of his hobbies", he considered, "A sort of calligraphy, or whatever you call it."

"Hmm. Possibly. The text is still strange, though. Don't you think?"

"Yes, definitely."

Jamie grinned again, and I couldn't help but feeling that this time there was something calculated about it, that he was hoping my gaze would fall again on his dimple and I'd be distracted for a moment. In any case, he seized back the note, crumpled it up, and threw it with a high arc at the waste paper basket under his desk. It came down next to it.

"Well", I said, "No points for that one, unfortunately."

"Doesn't matter." Jamie's grey eyes twinkled with high spirits. "It'd had first aid anyway. And while we're on the subject ... how's the emergency plan for your little brother going?"

"Don't remind me", I replied with a groan.

"Sinan won't make it without outside help. Whenever dad or I try to help him study, he goes into stubborn gear. And my mum needn't bother trying. And yet of all three of us, she's the one with the most patience."

"So that means he won't get better than a two in maths?" Jamie probed further.

"You've got it", I confirmed.

"Well then, we'll just have to hope they find a suitable tutor for him." Jamie frowned and scrutinized me almost gloomily. "Why didn't you actually think of asking me?"

"What?" I looked at him, surprised.

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it? I mean, I'm a maths genius ... and by the way, I would be able to teach Sinan basketball too. Sport and thinking actually go very well together. When you're moving and your brain gets a good supply of oxygen, your logical thinking improves too."

I looked at him inquisitively. "Are you annoyed now, or what?"

"No", replied Jamie, "Just a bit surprised."

"Sorry", I apologized, "It's just that I didn't initiate it – it was my parents. I think it would be much better for him to repeat the year. He could of course still have a tutor. And I think it would be great to have you." I tried to give my voice an effortless tone. "Do you want me to go ahead and suggest it at home? I think my parents said they'd pay twenty pounds an hour."

Jamie's face relaxed. "Yes, of course. Go ahead", he said, touching me gently on my lower arm, "I like Sinan and I'd really like to help him ... you know? For me, it would be a favour for a friend."

“That’s really nice, but ...”

“Nice?” His eyes flashed with something like indignation.

“Did you really say nice?”

“Erm ... yes ...?”

I didn’t know what I was supposed to say in response otherwise; I broke off. I was seriously annoyed. Jamie looked at me with piercing eyes.

“Nara, what do I have to do so that you finally see in me the person I want to be for you?” he said quietly, nervously interlacing his fingers.

“What do you mean by that?” I replied just as quietly, and a second later I knew I shouldn’t have asked, for now he was reaching for my hand and saying exactly what I didn’t want to hear.

“I’m not just your friend, Nara. I haven’t been for a long time now. I just haven’t had the courage to show you until now.”

“Jamie, I...”

“Sssh”, he interrupted me, “If you don’t let me finish what I’m saying, I’ll probably never ...”

He faltered. His pupils were wide open, and the otherwise clear, cool grey of his iris was shimmering within a warm shade of brown. His lips were slightly open, and the right-hand corner of his mouth was morphing, barely noticeably, into a helpless smile. Jamie’s face, his whole bearing, was soft and vulnerable.

I suddenly felt queasy.

I knew I had to cut this short before he did something we couldn’t undo.

“Nara ...”

I stared at Jamie’s Adam’s apple. I saw it moving up and down and his hand disappearing behind his back, trying to get something out from under the sofa cushion.

“I know that I hurt you”, he stammered, “Back then when I ... when we ... and now I’m afraid you’ll ... Argh, shit, damn it!” Jamie slid to the floor and went down on his knees in front of me. “I love you, Nara!”

He was holding a small, dark blue box between his trembling fingers and was about to open it when I felt something inside me harden. It ran across my chest like an iron bolt, separating the past from the present. Right at the moment when my heart should actually have been skipping a beat.

“Jamie, I can’t”, I heard myself say.

His contours merged with those of the furniture. I couldn’t even look him in the eye; I could only shake my head. And I felt absolutely wretched as I pushed past him, whispered, “I’m sorry”, and stole out of his room.

Only once the house door had banged shut behind me and I had run a few paces did my eyes fill with tears. I ran a bit further down the street until I was sure Jamie wasn't following me and couldn't see me from the kitchen window either. Then I huddled into the niche of a wall, pulled out my phone and got Charlotte's number up on the screen.

(...)

It took forever for the voicemail to kick in. The voicemail!

"Charlie!", I shouted, "Damn it, why aren't you picking up?"

(...) I tried a second and a third time and eventually left her a message.

"Charlie, I have to talk to you. Jamie has just admitted he loves me. I think he wanted to give me a ring."

(...)

TUESDAY 11 JUNE

Charlotte didn't get in touch the whole weekend. She neither called nor sent me a text or a WhatsApp message. (...) On Sunday morning I couldn't bear it anymore. I cycled to her house, but I didn't have any luck there either. It looked like the whole family was away. I did think it was strange that Charlie hadn't said anything at all about doing something with her family; nonetheless, I rode home again feeling a bit calmer. But when she didn't come to school yesterday, I tried her at home again straight after the last lesson, but yet again, no one opened the door. Charlotte wasn't there again today, and by now I was seriously worried.

As soon as the bell rang for break, I switched my phone on, and after double maths in lessons five and six there was finally something in my inbox. I opened the message and was almost disappointed when I realized it was from Jamie. It consisted of three letters and an emoji. Sry ☹️. I actually didn't want to reply, because in comparison with what had happened between us on Friday, it was clearly too little. But I had to tell someone that Charlotte had gone missing, otherwise I'd go mad. (...)

Listen, Jamie, Charlotte has disappeared.

What do you mean, disappeared?

I haven't heard anything from her for four days.

Since Friday? he probed further.

Exactly. Why?

Because that's when you had that funny note in your cardigan pocket.

Damn! I'd totally forgotten about that!

Do you seriously think there's a connection?

Not really, replied Jamie, But can we be sure?

“No”, I muttered, trying to remember the exact wording of the text.

Never go against divine will, otherwise terrible things could happen. ...

(Word count: 3.057)

Translation © Marielle Sutherland 2018