Drawn Into the Book (MtF FtM Gender Swap)

FoxFaceStories

A Commission for Azena

Cameron and Wendy's relationship is close to rock bottom. He's been taking her for granted, and she's been retreating into her historical romance novels. When everything comes to a head on Valentine's Day, Cameron makes the mistake of tearing up one of Wendy's new romance novels . . . which is a magical gift from her friend who is secretly a wish. The two are catapulted into the storyline of the romance book, only they are stuck as the wrong genders! Shall they find one another? And is this the life they've been seeking all along?

Drawn Into the Book

When Cameron entered the apartment he and his girlfriend Wendy shared, it was obvious that he was in a huff. He slammed the door closed, which startled the woman so much that she dropped her copy of *Pride and Prejudice* to the floor, losing her place.

"Cam!" she said angrily. "Don't slam the door!"

"Yeah, sure, ask me how I am, why don't you?"

She sighed, resisting the urge to pick up her book again. "How was your day?"

"It was goddamn *shit*. I'm stuck in a hell of bureaucracy and everyone's throwing more and more paperwork at me. I've got responsibilities out the wazoo, I swear! And they just keep on giving me more, and I just have to smile and nod and administer it out because I'm a *floor manager* now, and that means I've got to be loyal to the company and be a *good* worker - it's so bullshit. I don't have a spare moment in the day to relax, and no one asks me how I am. What's for dinner?"

Wendy gulped. "I thought we could do Chinese again?"

"You mean *order* Chinese."

"Y-yeah. Look, Cam, I've been hard at work all day and-"

"You work in an old antique bookstore! It's not the same. And it doesn't mean you can just give up house responsibilities-"

She stood. "Excuse me? I'm working! You can't expect me to be some stay-at-home girlfriend *and* contribute to the rent."

"I contribute more."

"You - forget it. I'll put something together."

"Thanks. I noticed a stain in the hall as well. Might want to take care of that."

He trudged over to the couch and sat down, turning on the television. With a sour look on her face, Wendy chose not to antagonise her boyfriend and instead move to the

kitchen. There were some frozen pastas that she could thaw and serve up, and she hoped it wouldn't make him too irritable. At least it would give her time to get back to her book. Mr Darcy's confession of love was just a few pages away . . .

It hadn't always been like this between the two of them. Wendy and Cameron had gotten together way back in college, years ago now. They'd met in a shared literature class, one which inflamed Wendy's passion for historical fiction, especially the works of Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters. Cameron hadn't been much for it himself, but she'd love telling him all about her favourite books, and he often compared them to his, which were more adventure-driven, such as *Treasure Island*. It didn't hurt that the pair shared a mutual physical attraction to one another. With her jet black hair and petite figure, Wendy often felt like quite the dame out of time herself, like she could be transported into one of her own Georgian or Victorian-era love novels. She had the largest blue eyes that were truly expressive, and Cameron often said it was those that drew him to her.

He, on the other hand, had brown hair and the most magnificent amber eyes. They weren't what she noticed first, though. Instead, she had noticed Cameron's impressive physique. Back then he'd been an obsessive gym nut when he wasn't studying or getting to know her better. He stood tall too, and something about his six-foot-one height was such a big turn on, especially since she was a short little five-foot-five. It meant he could scoop her up in his arms and be her big, loveable defender. Her strong, handsome man.

And for a time it had worked. For a time their love had bloomed. They'd been twenty when they met, though, and now it was seven years on and the wheels were turning but the relationship wasn't going anywhere. Cameron worked for a renewables company and managed orders at his branch. He was always striving for promotions, always wanting to climb that corporate ladder, but the workload and endless paperwork only served to make him more and more miserable. The charming, funny man who often took Wendy on random dates without warning had become predictable and ossified in his interactions, too tired when he got home for even a romantic night in, let alone out.

Of course, she too had changed. The more Wendy was taken for granted and forced into the role of housekeeper instead of a contributing member of their household, the harder it was to find Cameron attractive. Sex still happened, but it was almost something to be done and gotten over, rather than enjoyed. She craved *romance*. It was, in many ways, her foreplay. But because there was so little time for romance and Cameron was too busy taking calls to try and boost his power in the company, she was left to retreat to her ever-growing collection of novels. She loved the Georgian era stuff of Austen, but equally Regency and Victoria as well. *Bridgerton* had been a revelation for her, and she had watched the series over and again multiple times, *especially* season two. The chemistry there was just *crackling* in a way that hers and Cam's wasn't.

And now *this*. Another poor welcome home. Another angry boyfriend. Another day of having one foot out of the relationship already, too attached to leave, too disillusioned to commit to staying. Like a bird lost over an ocean, she didn't know which landmass to fly to, or where would bring her home.

She thought about confronting Cameron about it. She'd never been a confronting sort of person. She'd always been, in fact, quite conflict averse. It was why she resonated so well with the female protagonists of her stories: they were women like her, often put in fragile situations like her, and often underestimated and their interests put down. But they were witty, they were strong-headed, and they were *righteous*. She admired those qualities, and wished she had them. She'd read *Jane Eyre* often enough to practically recite it aloud without a script.

"Just be strong, and tell him," she muttered to herself. "Give an ultimatum. Like Darcy faces in *Pride and Prejudice*. Film obviously, not the book."

She took an opportunity to read a couple more pages while curled up on the bed in their bedroom. She needed the extra push to bring up their little argument from earlier with him. But to her surprise, it was Cameron who crossed that barrier first, knocking his hand on the side of the doorframe to get her attention.

"Hey," he said with an easy smile. "Can we talk? No, scratch that. Can we have a do-over?"

She slowly put the book down, and watched as Cameron stepped out of the doorway, then re-emerged with his workbag. He took a heavy sigh as if this was the first time seeing her that day, placed the bag down, and then came over and kissed her on the lips.

"Hey darling," he said. "How was your day?"

It was like the old Cameron had returned, and it made her beam. "Not bad. We sold a pretty big set of Brontes and that gorgeous copy of Machievelli's *Prince*. Sad to see them go, but that's the business. How was your day?"

"Just another day," he said, taking her hand. "Am I doing better this time?"

"Much better."

"Good, because I thought we could go out tomorrow night for dinner. Does that suit you?"

At this, Wendy found herself almost agape. It had been far, far too long since Cam had taken her out on a proper date. In fact, the last two years he'd forgotten Valentine's Day outright. He must have seen that it was circled on their calendar this time - was that the reason for his change of heart? She hoped not, but she would take what she could get.

"Sounds like a date," she said. "Where would we go."

"I was thinking *Pepys*."

"Pepys! That's glamorous."

“Well, you’re a glamorous girl. We deserve it. We should get together as a proper family.”

He kissed her again on the forehead, then stepped away. “I’ll make a booking for tomorrow night at six.”

She beamed at him, then immediately brought her book back up and pressed it against her heart. He’d actually recognised things weren’t going well, finally! And they were going on an actual date!

Wendy decided she’d do it all. She’d dress up, do her makeup fully, wear those earrings that sparkled. All of it. She wanted this to be an amazing night. Perhaps Cameron really was her Mr Darcy, and he’d finally had his dose of reality to finally turn the romance back on.

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Cameron was getting hungry. He was surprised that Wendy had dressed up so much, and it made him feel dressed down. She looked a bit confused by that, so in the end he put on a better shirt.

“You’ve overdone it,” he complained to her, gesturing to the lovely red dress she was wearing and her matching red lipstick. “It’s just a nice outing, a get together.”

“It’s . . . I mean, it’s Valentine’s Day.”

He paused. Was it? Shit. Well, they hadn’t celebrated Valentine’s Day in a long while. He doubted it meant much to Wendy anymore, anyway. It was just something you did early in a relationship, not year after year.

“Okay, fine. I’ll wear something nicer.”

It didn’t stop her from buzzing with excitement as he drove them to Pepys. His stomach growled with hunger, and she was already planning out the meals out loud.

“Is there any particular reason for this date?” she asked.

“Oh, you know. Big night and all. Thought it would be romantic,” he said. “And there’s a surprise. Something I’ve been meaning to put to you, but I can’t spoil it yet.”

Wendy bit her lip, trying not to let her imagination run wild. Cameron had never been the most imaginative sort, though, so she continued to think of just one thing.

A proposal.

It would be perfect. No wonder he was so stressed lately! He’d been putting money away for an engagement ring and he always got so anxious over money matters and even more with secrets. And now he was worried he didn’t look good enough. She smiled to herself, almost vibrating with anticipation.

But the excitement faded as soon as they arrived and were escorted to their table. Everywhere else, there were romantic couples feeding one another, sampling food, flirting together, exchanging moments of love. But not at their table. It was not a two-seater. In fact, it was a large table, and it already had a number of members at it.

Cam's sister Lucy, and her husband Greg, and their two endlessly bickering children.

Cam's brother Hunter, and his wife Portia. She had one baby in a child's seat and another growing in her belly.

Instantly, Wendy froze. She couldn't *stand* Lucy. Cam's sister was endlessly judgy. And Portia was nice but *endlessly* making comments about how perfect her relationship was with Hunter, which only served to remind Wendy of how on-the-rocks her own partnership with Cam was. Plus, she was pregnant. Again. Wendy had thought she'd have two or three kids by the time she was twenty eight, not *none!*

"Cam," she whispered out of the side of her mouth. "What is this? Why are they here?"

"I thought it would be a fun family outing. We haven't seen my family in ages."

"It's Valentine's Day."

"Yeah, and we're three couples. Come take a seat."

Wendy tried not to look *furious* as she sat down, but Lucy almost immediately set her off.

"My, looking very lovely, Wendy," she said with a fake smile. "I had no idea you could clean up so nicely. You wouldn't think, would you?"

To her humiliation, Cam actually laughed. "I told her she didn't need to dress up *that* much. It's just a family get-together."

"You didn't tell me that," she snapped.

"You bad man," Portia said, tapping Cam on the shoulder. "Now you owe her . . . maybe a ring? Please tell us you two are finally getting married. I'm dying to see what your babies would look like!"

"Don't need marriage for babies, dear," Hunter said. "We should know."

"Still! When are you two finally tying the knot?"

Wendy blushed. She wanted to ask the same of Greg, but she was retreating into herself the more Lucy grinned at this exchange. Her hapless husband failed to intervene, so the spiteful woman chipped in again.

"Yes, when is it happening, *Wendy?* You two aren't on the rocks or something? Right?"

She giggled as if it were a joke, but Wendy started bunching together her fists beneath the table.

"No, we're happy as we've ever been, right hun?" Cam said.

She gave him a fake, unconvincing smile. “S-sure.”

“Exactly! We don’t need marriage. No point. We’re happy as we are.”

Happy as we are. The words had come so easily to Cam, and he saw no issue with saying them. But Wendy drew back into herself even further. Those words had fallen down upon her like asteroids from outer space, crashing into the surface of her world and detonating it entirely.

The rest of the evening passed by in a strange blur for Wendy. Cameron, on the other hand, was having a blast chatting to family, blissfully unaware of the precipice he had just dived over. He laughed, told self-deprecating jokes, and generally charmed as he always did. The only times he felt irritation was when Wendy kept disappearing to the bathroom and then returning, clearly having read more of those annoying ever-present romance novels. At one point she literally got out a copy of *Persuasion* right in front of them all and started reading, as if entranced, as if wanting to be anywhere else. He took the book from her and scowled when no one was looking.

“Seriously, why were you acting like you didn’t even want to be there?” he asked her as he drove home. “You were so excited on the way here.”

“I was excited when I thought it was a romantic Valentine’s Day date. You know I can’t stand Lucy. You know she mocks me. And that thing you said about proposing and marriage, did you mean it?”

Cameron sighed as he turned a corner once the light turned green. “Look, Wendy, I can’t be like one of those silly, broody romantic leads from your romance novels. I’m not going to suddenly make a giant, tear-filled speech in the rain or buy you an elegant gown or reveal my innermost feelings in some stamped letter I wrote longingly in a chaise lounge somewhere. That’s all fantasy. It’s all fiction. And it’s not how real relationships work, okay?”

At this point, Wendy’s eyes were bubbling with tears.

“I’m just not that guy. Maybe I was, once. But now I’m working, and I’ve got to climb this ladder to build our future. I can’t think about anything else right now.”

“Sounds like you’re not even thinking of me,” she whispered.

“What was that?”

She just sighed and looked out the window. “Nothing.”

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Wendy had spent the day looking dour at the bookstore she worked at. Her best friend and fellow coworker Tina kept checking up on her, but got little response. In fact, Wendy had her nose deep into *Wuthering Heights* every change you got.

“Okay, so this is about relationship troubles.”

Wendy looked up. “What?”

Tina smirked and crossed her heavily tattooed arms. “Girl, I know you better than you know yourself. You only crack open *Wuthering Heights* when you want to experience tragedy, lost love, broody gothic revenge. AKA, when you want to feel down about your own love life. You did this last time Valentine’s Day when Cameron forgot it. Did he forget again?”

Wendy closed the book and brushed her long, dark hair behind her shoulders. “Worse,” she said. She checked the shop and found it empty. “He *did* take me on a romantic dinner . . . with his horrible sister and clueless brother present. And their partners. And their loud kids.”

“He didn’t!”

She nodded. “Yup. And then he didn’t propose, which I thought he was going to do. I think this is really it, Tina. I think it’s over. Seven years and only three-and-a-half of them good. It was a slow descent, but I’ve hit my rock bottom. I have to break up with him . . . once I build up the nerve with a bit more reading.”

Tina squeezed her friend’s shoulder. “Hey, lemme work on something. The store’s basically empty right now. If you take the helm for thirty minutes, I can put together a little witchy present for you. Something that will put some magic back into your life for a bit.”

Wendy agreed, mainly because she wanted to have her own space. She didn’t believe in magic, but Tina often claimed that she had magic down her family line, dating all the way back to the Romani people on her mother’s side. And it gave Wendy some peace to know that someone cared. When they were about to close up shop after a not-particularly-busy day, Tina approached with an impressive, rather old tome in her hands.

“Be careful,” she said. “This is fresh magic.”

Wendy looked at the book. It looked like it was Regency era. Or perhaps Victorian.

“*Lady Catherine*,” she said. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“That’s because I just summoned it over a real book - don’t worry, just an old Austen copy with rips. This thing is real. It’s a portal. I’ve put a clasp on it. Only start reading it when you want an adventure. I promise you, it’ll be a grand little tour through romance and everything you love. Time will pass in the experience, but much more slowly out here. It’s literally a *different time and place*, Wendy. Trust me, you’ll be drawn into the book.”

Wendy smiled as she took it. “Well, I don’t believe in magic, but consider me intrigued!”

Tina chuckled. “That’s a good start! Find a good time for it!”

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Cameron scowled. It was his day off, and he wanted peace and quiet from work. And yet, at the same time, something about Wendy's never-ending obsession with those romance books and her own lack of conversation with him was bugging the man. On some level, he sensed he'd gone too far, and was on thin ice.

"Just talk to me, will you?" he said.

She was moving her things to the car, and was giving him the silent treatment. He didn't understand what was so wrong. Sure, she wanted some deep, fiction-driven romantic evening, but he'd taken her to Pepys! That was a good place! It was her that had made a big deal out of it. Didn't she understand how hard he'd been working to give them the life they deserved?

Wendy put some of her things out the front door, then stepped back into the apartment to grab more of her clothing, which she'd packed into plastic bags.

"I don't think talking is a good idea. I - I didn't think you'd be here, Cameron."

He groaned out loud, venting his frustration. He'd come home a little earlier than expected, only to find Wendy trying to move out without him knowing. She'd initially frozen up like a deer in headlights, her timid nature rising up to the surface.

"For God's sake, Wendy. At least have the courage to talk to me about this! I know you've always been a bit of a wilting flower but this is ridiculous!"

"I just think we're done," she murmured. "Cam, the romance is gone. I'm sorry I tried to sneak out, but every time I try to talk about our relationship you just . . . overpower me. In conversation, I mean. I feel like the only thing I can do is go to the bed and read a book and think of better times."

Cam rolled his eyes. "Maybe if you weren't reading silly romance tales all the time-"

"Don't put this on my books! At least I have a hobby. You never do anything anymore except work and then expect me to do everything around the house when you get home. Reading 'silly romance tales' is my escape from a relationship that's already dead."

Cameron scoffed. "What, so you think you'll be happier with just your books? All alone, without a boyfriend willing to pay for so much?"

It was at this point that Wendy fumed enough to reach into her backpack and pull out the clasped tome that Tina had given her. The one that was supposedly enchanted and promised to put 'some magic back into' her life. She thrust it in Cameron's face, her anger enough to overcome her usual conflict-averse nature.

"I think I *will* be happier!" she cried. "My best friend went so far as to get me a new one I've never heard of! A magic book that promises to make me happy! And you know what? As crazy as that sounds, I find it easier to believe in a magic enchanted book existing than this relationship going anywhere."

Something snapped inside Cameron in that moment. Humiliation, wounded male pride, and a toxic mixture of jealousy and misplaced anger roiled up in a manner he could not control. He dashed straight up to Wendy, alarming her greatly, and snatched the heavy book right out of her hands and unclasped it.

"Hey! Tina gave that to me!"

"You want to know what I think of your ridiculous love stories, Wendy? What I've thought all along? *This* is what I've thought of them!"

He opened the book halfway, and without reading a word, he smashed the spine down heavily upon his knee and then pried the book apart where he had broken it. Pages flung everywhere, the book separated into two large chunks that he tossed to either side of the room. Wendy cried out in horror and shock. The wonderful gift was torn in half, and Cameron was standing there, his expression like that of a demon's, panting heavily and his eyes half-crazed. It was only when he truly realised what he'd just done that he froze and blinked.

"You broke my book," Wendy said weakly.

Cameron reached out to her. "Wendy, I - I wasn't thinking. Look, I-"

But he got to finish his sentence, because suddenly the two halves of the book - one beneath the television set, the other resting on the couch, started to glow with a strange, radiant light. They hummed and sang, and words began streaming off of their pages and floated in the air, zipping this way and that, pouring like spilled liquid in outer space, coiling around the pair of them.

"What the hell!?" Cameron yelled, as the words began to spread around the pair, pouring from the halves of the book so that it was almost impossible to see the room beyond.

"Oh my God, she really is a witch," Wendy uttered. "And the book is magic!"

"Make it stop!"

"I can't - you did this! You ripped my book!"

Cameron's jaw fell. He tried to move to grab the half that was on the couch to rejoin it to the other pair, but the couch no longer *existed*. There were only the words and sentences flowing around them, binding them.

". . . but of course, Catherine declined such an invitation. A brutish manner did not make a man, nor such demands. If she were to find a husband . . ."

Cameron spun. Where had those words come from? And why were they pulling him towards them? Wherever one half of the book was, he was being drawn to it.

"William was, naturally, the most eligible bachelor of the season, and yet was oddly reticent when it came to the company of women. Such brooding was the talk of the gathering, given that . . ."

Wendy, in turn, was being pulled away from Cameron. Though she intended to break up with him, such an unnatural split terrified her. She reached out to grab her boyfriend's hand, and he did the same for her, but their fingers only brushed, igniting another sentence.

"It was only the merest brush of skin, the tip of one's fingers, and yet it seemed to ignite a flood of sensation between the pair, a stirring passion that had lied dormant until . . ."

"Cam! Help! I'm being pulled away!"

"Me too! Wendy, I'm sorry, I didn't know!"

But it was too late. The words coiled around their bodies like writhing snakes, pulling them apart towards the two sections of the book. Cam screamed, unable to pull against their might. He was squeezed down, and to his terror he realised he wasn't just being compressed, he was being pushed *into the book*.

Both of them were.

Wendy and Cameron were being *drawn into the book*, its separate halves swallowing them as the words flowed over their bodies. The man squeaked, feeling all sorts of strange pressures, like his very body was being moulded into a new shape. Wendy felt the words enter her, changing her from within, pooling in her body and forcing it to *grow*.

"Ohhhhhh!" she cried, voice growing deeper.

"Help meeeee!" Cameron cried, his own tone rising in octave.

The two halves of the books seemed to grow, the words drawing them in like chains. Cameron squeezed his eye shut, terrified even as he felt a strange weight grow upon his chest, but there was no fighting it. The same was true of Wendy, who experienced a growth in her arms, in her shoulders, in her legs, and yet could focus on none of it. The two halves of the book grew, and then . . .

And then there was a flash of light, and they were gone.

All that remained of the pair was two halves of a book that had been ruthlessly ripped apart. One could only hope that someone would arrive to rejoin them.

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Catherine gasped as she opened her eyes. She was lying in a bed, but not one she had ever seen outside of the ridiculous regency-style romance shows that Wendy watched. It was large, with a canopy over it, and the sheets were resplendent, with a complex pattern of roses upon it. The curtains letting in the merest portion of light were thick and blue, and even the wallpaper was resplendent, with complex vine patterns on them, occasionally peppered with images of swallows and sparrows. A small fireplace stirred the room with its heat. There was even a painting of a mountain scenery in fine romanticist style, though two other spots had once had paintings but now only possessed bare wall behind them.

“What - where am I?” Catherine said as she sat up, only to put a hand to her throat. What was wrong with her voice? Wait, why was she thinking of herself as a she? And why was her name *Catherine* when it was supposed to be Cameron?

It was then that a fountain of fiery red hair suddenly spilled over her eyes as she sat up further. She squeaked in surprise and tugged on it, only to squeak again. This . . . this was *real hair*. And it was hers? What the hell was going on? And why was there such a strange pair of weights on her chest? They almost felt like they were part of her, like they were . . .

Catherine froze. The realisation tumbled upon her, but a strong part of her remained in denial. Swallowing, she very slowly parted the curtain of red hair, which was long, and gathered the strength to *look down*.

There, pert and full upon her chest, was a magnificent pair of breasts that were more impressive than Wendy’s had ever been. More impressive than any woman Catherine had ever dated as Cameron, in fact. They were large and full, contained within a simple sleeping chemise that nevertheless was stretched by their mere existence, a line of cleavage showing above the buttons. She wasn’t wearing a bra, and so Catherine used one hand to undo the buttons and tug the chemise’s collar out further.

“In the name of God,” She uttered, staring at the large pink nipples and the magnificent bosom they sat upon. They were certainly bigger than the oft-vaunted Double-D’s, and probably skipped a bra size after that! They felt half as big as her own head, though that was probably a matter of her perspective. Instantly, she flung a hand down to her crotch beneath the bed covers, and was immediately met by a soft feminine mound and slit, not the penis she had expected and hoped for.

“Good Lord,” she uttered. “I seem to have woken as a right and true lady.”

It was then that she covered her mouth again.

“Why did I utter such a strange sentence so? Goodness, I’m still doing it! Am I possessed of such articulate speech as part of this new existence? I should think so!”

She cringed. It was as if . . . as if she were following the rules of the book she had been drawn into. What had it been called, again? She’d only seen the cover for a brief moment before she’d ripped it up.

“Lady Catherine,” she said aloud, the horror dawning upon her. She looked down at her very female body with a growing sense of dread. “I’ve become the main character. It really was a magical book, and now I appear to have become the reluctant protagonist!”

It was at that moment that there was a knock upon the door, light and respectful. Catherine certainly didn’t want company right now, but found herself going along with it anyway: “Come in, Matilda!” she said.

Who the hell was Matilda?

The question was quickly resolved as a woman in a servant's dress opened the door and stepped into the room, hands clasped before her respectfully.

"Um, good morning?" Catherine said weakly.

Matilda gave a brief look to the rather open cleavage Catherine was now displaying, but quickly looked elsewhere while Catherine blushed and buttoned it up.

"Morning?" Matilda said. "Miss, you have almost missed it entirely! If I hadn't knocked, you might have slept the day away."

Catherine bit her lip. What the hell was happening? How did she get out of this? She couldn't stay in this strange reality as a woman!

"I - I guess I've been rather busy as of late."

"I should think so, what with the gala coming up. The biggest event of the season, and no doubt many prospects for a lady such as yourself, if you'll beg my pardon for saying."

"Prospects?"

"Marriage prospects, of course! The master of the house is rather set on them, and your sister Charlotte cannot stop talking about it! It's a wonder she managed to down her breakfast. Speaking of which, would you like your usual honeyed crumpets and tea this morning, miss?"

It was too much, all too quickly. Catherine was still pushing back her red hair and trying not to jiggle her large bosom.

"I - ah, yes, that would be quite nice. Before you go fetch them, Matilda, would you do me a strange favour?"

"Of course, Miss."

Catherine's heart beat nervously. "Could you explain to me . . . myself?"

Matilda, who was a woman in her mid-thirties, suddenly looked quizzical. "Miss?"

"Who I am, I mean. Summarise me. In preparation for the gala! What is known about me, in this house. My features, my interests, my position in society."

Matilda nodded. "Well, Miss, you are, of course, Lady Catherine Taggart, firstborn daughter of Lord Simon Taggart. You are twenty years of age, of course, and prospects for marriage are now of concern for the household, especially given recent financial difficulties and that Lord Simon has no male heir. Um, is this the sort of thing you mean?"

Catherine leaned forward, trying to ignore the consequent fleshy weights upon her chest. "Yes, yes, that's the sort of thing I mean! Pray continue!"

"Well, you've spoken about your opposition to such matters, as you well know. Many in society are well aware of Lord Simon's 'fiery-haired and fiery-tempered daughter,' if you don't mind my saying. You've spoken to me often about wanting to find love over position, and that you will not stoop to fall so low as to climb high upon the social ladder for its own

sake. Begging your pardon Miss, but I've told you more than once that love is no match for security, not that you've ever listened to me on such concerns!"

"Nor ever shall I, so long as you continue to insist so," Catherine said, only to touch her lips with her fingers. "Sorry, Matilda, my scathing tongue appears to have a mind of its own."

"Another well-known feature of you, Miss Catherine," Matilda said with a smirk. "Well, is that enough? It feels presumptuous of a humble servant to describe you, Miss."

"Oh, presume away, Matilda," Catherine said, the words sliding off her biting tongue. "I'd rather hear it straight from the mouth of a trusted friend than whispered in echoes around some gossipping rumour mill in a so-called 'respectful' high society setting."

"Very well, Miss. If that'll be enough of describing, would you like your breakfast in bed or at the morning table? Your father has mentioned he would like your presence there."

Catherine felt the narrative pushing her forward. She wanted to see more of this world to damn well escape it. She'd had big tits and a womanhood for perhaps ten minutes, and she was already in a dire need to have her male body back. But she had been drawn into the book, and Lady Catherine was, in many ways, her own character. And as such . . .

"Well, you can tell my loving father to wait till kingdom come, because I will take every chance for crumpets in bed as I can get, thank you Matilda."

The woman smirked a little, gave a tiny bow, and exited the room, leaving Catherine alone. She quickly flung herself out of the bed and ran to the tall, person-length mirror at the side of the room, the light filtering in now that Matilda had opened the curtains. The new woman gasped, horrified and enticed.

Her reflection showed the most beautiful woman she had ever seen, albeit one from an entirely different age. She looked somewhat like Keira Knightley from that film Wendy loved. *Pride and Prejudice*. Or was it *Sense and Sensibility?* Or was she in both? Regardless, she had those same intelligent eyes, not to mention those perfect cheekbones. Her noise was aquiline and gave her a refined, intelligent look, and her eyebrows were thick and dark. Her hair, on the other hand, was a bright fiery red, and while it was currently a mess, it was easy to see how it would garner attention for its brightness and beauty. This extended to her freckles, which formed a cute smattering on her face. Not enough to ruin a sense of refinement in her features, but they added a dash of 'imperfection,' like a beauty spot, that somehow only enhanced her looks.

"By all that is civilised," she muttered, unable to swear like she truly wanted to. "And my body . . ."

She removed the chemise, pulling it up over her head. That was when she truly squeaked. Her body was *gorgeous*. Fuller-figured than the more modern view of women, but perfect for this regency-era time. Her waist was slightly thicker, but her hips were lovely, and

her bosom . . . spectacular. The rest of her was bird-like; thin in limb and leg and yet with delicateness that made her all the more beautiful. She could almost imagine her body in a dress, positioned on the cover of a Mills and Boon novel.

"Wendy was telling the truth," she uttered, her perfect lips parted in surprise. "The book was magic. And now I'm stuck as the *main character!"*

***

"One cannot sleep the day away, Mr Barnes!"

William's eyes fluttered open. He groaned, cursing the sudden light that had entered the room.

"Blast it all," he muttered. "I would curse God for making the sun so bright at this moment!"

"And you would be a fool for it, sir. For if he did not make it so, I fear you would never wake. There are matters to attend to for the day, not least of which is your reply to the gala invitation that has lain dormant on your desk for many days and nights by this point. Lady Abigail is in fits of conniption over your possible lack of appearance, given your status as the most eligible bachelor, or course."

William smirked. This was an interesting dream. He sat up and looked over himself in his nightgown. Well, *this* was a surprise. He'd had many unconscious adventures through historical romances. Hell, he'd imagined himself as one of the beautiful women in *Bridgerton* more than once, and another time took the place of Elizabeth Bennet being wooed by Mr Darcy. *That* had been quite the lovely dream, given the sex scene she'd delightfully added to it in her sleeping imagination. But he'd *never* had a dream where *he* was the man, nor one where he felt like a man in mind and name as well - William! How appropriate.

"What a dream I appear to be having," he said. He touched his chest, placing a hand underneath the folds of his gown to touch the hairs on his chest. He'd never had a large pair of breasts as a woman, but so strange to have none at all! And then there was the feeling of a new . . . protuberance from between his legs. Now *that* was a strange sensation, as was the general feeling of having wider shoulders, a stockier build, and . . . were their slight hairs in need of trimming upon his chin and cheeks?

"No dream, sir. I assure you, you've little time for that, today."

William took in the appearance of the manservant who had woken him. He was an older gentleman, perhaps in his fifties, and already near bald. He had a harsh-looking face, but not an unkind one, and was dressed immaculately. The whole room was immaculate, in fact. Enormous and resplendent, and its decorations and paintings very much in keeping with his favourite era to read about. The fireplace was magnificent, and very warm indeed.

“Marvellous,” he said, getting out of bed and enjoying the feel of his strong legs holding up his larger body. God, he felt quite tall indeed! “I suppose in this dream I am to wed a fine woman? Ah, but I am too brooding, yes? Too impatient, perhaps too snappish? Ah, look at this room! No doubt I am possessed of a proud and arrogant manner, and push away any potential marriage suitors by seeing them as too beneath my own social status and class, yes?”

The manservant, who he somehow knew to be named Edward, just blinked several times before composing himself.

“That is indeed . . . quite the introspection, Mr Barnes. I could not go so far as to confirm any of your statements, though perhaps I would suggest that such introspection is always welcome in an ever-wisening countenance such as your own.”

William chuckled. Well, what a dream it was!

“Thank you, Edward,” he said, relishing the sound of his rather baritone voice. “Though it would not be agreeable to change too quickly now, would it? After all, I wouldn’t want to waste my character development too quickly! Is there a fiery-tempered, sharp-tongued woman perhaps to test my aforementioned arrogance?”

Edward smirked, just slightly. “Well, sir, the only woman I have heard to possess those qualities is Miss Catherine Taggart.”

“Ah, a beauty, is she?”

“I wouldn’t presume to judge such qualities sir, though she is said to be far from plain-faced. But she is far too low in station compared to you, Mr Barnes. And the family has troubles, also.”

William practically giggled to himself. “Oh, well I couldn’t *possibly* end up with her now, could I?”

“Presumably not, sir. I shall prepare your clothes for the day.”

He gave a minor bow, and left. William could only cackle out loud to himself. He’d never had a dream with *this* level of detail before! And it felt so real. He couldn’t resist placing a hand down his pants, and his eyes went wide as he felt the very real member between his legs. It was . . . larger than he’d expected. Larger than Cameron’s, that was for sure. And he had balls! Testicles! How bizarre to feel, and even more bizarre that his penis stirred in his grip, growing harder as he felt it.

He pulled his hand away immediately, then got out of bed and looked himself over. Naturally, he removed his clothing and inspected this new form. He really *did* feel like William Barnes, a respectable nobleman whose ancestry could be traced right back through to medieval Anglo-Norman roots. There was a power in his aspect, and his face - just perfect for brooding! He had lovely black hair that fell to one side, just long enough to flirt with the boundaries of this age. He did not possess a square jaw, but rather a soft chin that

complimented his other features. He did not look like some all-American hero, but a refined gentleman. But his eyes! Ah, those were the eyes Wendy had lusted after in her imagination. Piercing blue, almost icy, and yet possessing a hidden passion. The fact that he had a tall, strongly built body helped. Not some ridiculous gym-bro form, but a *real* man's body. It was thick in the right places, and didn't show well-developed abs or massive biceps. Rather, this was the body of an aristocrat who kept in good shape. It was soft in all the right places to hold a woman against, and those shoulders! And something about that black moustache he now had . . . it complimented him well.

"If only I was attracted to this aspect right now," he mused. "Truly, what a splendid dream. Though I would vastly prefer to be this fiery Lady Catherine and field the advances of a man such as myself. But this dream, it feels so . . ."

Memories stirred. Most recent ones that involved a ripped book and a sudden cry. Of words warping the reality around Wendy, and sucking her into the book. Of her body changing, growing, becoming hairier and more muscular and . . .

"Manly," William said, staring into the mirror. His mouth gaped as the realisation hit him. "Oh, by all the chances. I've been drawn into the book. I'm the *male love interest."*

***

Of all the indignities in life, being turned into a woman had to rank in the top three, that was for certain. But almost as indignant was being squeezed into a corset and bodice and having all manner of frippery placed upon Catherine's form. Her impressive bust was heaved upwards by the bodice, and the accompanying dress added to the beauty of her appearance, a white piece that exposed her collar and a hint of her tantalising cleavage, while flowing down her form like a Grecian robe. Hadn't Wendy once said that was an inspiration for Regency dresses? God, why hadn't she listened to much of this stuff!

At least Matilda was the one that was helping dress her, not to mention doing her hair. It was placed into a refined up-do with two small tresses hanging at the front. When she took in her appearance she was astounded. She looked like she'd jumped out of the cover of a Jane Austen novel.

No, that wasn't quite right.

With her none-too-subtle chest, there was more than a hint of Mills and Boon and *Bridgerton* sexual undertones leaking through, even if she looked every part the virginal-yet-confident heroine.

"Thank you, Matilda," she said. "B-but is it not a bit much, do you think?"

"It will have to be more than enough," Matilda said, "what with your attendance at Lady Rotterdam's tea gathering this afternoon."

“Ah,” she said. “Yes, of course. That.”

“Are you sure you’re alright, Miss?”

“F-fine! Just . . . this is very airy, that’s all.” She indicated to her dress. “I’m not used to it.”

“Well, you will have to be,” she said. “Your father wants you to look your best. He’s waiting for you.”

Catherine took a deep breath and felt her bosom rise and fall like the British Empire itself. “Frankly, I’d rather go back to bed. . . but I suppose I have to see him, don’t I?”

It was infuriating. The part of Catherine that was Cameron wanted to scream and yell and smash half the furniture here. He wanted to scream that he was really a man, but the words just didn’t seem to quite want to come forth from his mouth, and besides, he may have become an impatient ladder climber in real life, but he wasn’t *stupid*. If this place really was magical, then for all *she* knew, it was real. Another dimension, or timeline, or a genuine version of the past she’d been transported into. And if she started screaming about being a man, they’d probably fill her with morphine and try to remove her womb for hysteria or something.

So instead she walked out to the elaborate dining table in the equally elaborate dining room (albeit one that clearly once had a grandfather clock that was now just a pale shadow against the wall). Her ‘father’ waited there at the end of the table, his hair white, his appearance older than one would expect for a man with three young daughters. Clearly, he had become a father at an older age. Two sisters were already at the table; an adult woman, perhaps eighteen, in a formal dress and beautiful blonde hair, and a younger teenager with lovely chestnut brown curls and still-fine but clearly at-home wear.

“Sister!” the younger one said with an earnest smile, who Catherine instinctively knew to be called Tabitha. “We thought we had lost you!”

“It might not be a terrible thing. At least *one of us* could take this tea gathering seriously when it comes to our prospects.”

“Come now, daughters,” their father Simon said. “Catherine, I would ask that you do not make these sleeping hours part of your regular schedule, lest I cancel even more social gatherings than I have already.”

If Catherine were still Cameron, she would have scoffed and rolled her eyes and said she *never* sleeps in because she works too hard to climb the corporate ladder. But as the new her had already discovered, it was almost impossible to fight back against how the damn narrative wanted her to act. The best she could be was *snarky*.

“Well, I shall endeavour to sleep all the more, father, so that I might miss every empty gathering possible.”

Her blonde sister Elizabeth stood in a huff. “You *won’t* be like this at the Lady’s house! You simply won’t be! You may wish to wither up as an old spinster, but I have prospects, Catherine!”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, Lizzie, it’s not like-”

Her father waved for calm, and the two girls settled. Even Tabitha, who was ready to take Catherine’s side, apparently.

“You *will* come to the gathering, Catherine. And there *will* be discussions of marriage. Now, it may not concern *your* marriage, though I would wish a good, loving connection for you over my own failing health, but if it does not, then it will concern that of our Lizzie here. And, while she is tactless in her comments on the matter,” at that he gave Elizabeth a pointed look, “she is also not wrong. You will act the part of a true Lady and not bring shame upon this family. The Good Lord knows we’ve already had enough financial shame without the social kind.”

Tabitha bit her lip, clearly wanting to say something. “F-father, the grandfather clock-”

“Helped pay for the food on your plate, Tabitha, so I ask that you eat it, and be ready. You cannot escape this foul fate either.”

At that, there was a twinkle in Simon’s eye. Catherine tried not to be endeared by it. After all, he’d just told her she was going to be a Lady.

Well, she wasn’t going to damn well accept *that*.

***

William Barnes touched the ruffled collar of his white shirt in an attempt to relieve his nervousness. He’d become a *man*. This was *real*. Somehow, Tina really was a witch, and she’d organised what was clearly meant to be a fabulous adventure in an endearingly romantic Regency-era reality. Except something had gone wrong. Something called *Cameron*. Her boyfriend, who was meant to be Wendy’s *ex*-boyfriend, had ripped up the book in anger, and somehow it had made everything all wrong. William had no doubt that he was meant to be the sharp-tongued and pretty young Lady Catherine of the title, not her primary love interest! And yet, here he was, endowed with a sense of arrogance and pride and not a small amount of brooding, standing at the side of Lady Rotterdam’s expansive and well-decorated drawing room.

Naturally, he was staring off into the distance beyond the window rather than strictly engaging in any frivolous conversation, much as the Wendy part of him ordinarily would have leapt at the chance. Lady Rotterdam was an elderly spinster who took a great deal of interest in the comings-and-goings of betrothals, marriages, births, deaths, and every party under the sun. She relaxed on her chaise lounge, directing her servants to continue the tea

and biscuits flowing, all as an excuse to draw various couples together and aid the negotiations between families. Not for nothing was the woman known to be the gatekeeper of all potential suitors and matches. At least, that's what William knew to be the case in this narrative, at least.

It was at this point, among the idle conversation and gossip, that the doors were opened, and a new troupe entered with an overeagerness that exposed their late arrival. William barely paid attention to them - he desperately wanted to, but he was too caught up in brooding. All he heard were the words of an elderly father giving his apologies and two young women voicing enthusiasm - one for the beauty of the estate itself in a girlish teenage voice, the other in a far more obsequious attempt to get into Lady Rotterdam's good graces.

"My, Mr Simon, if your Elizabeth here remains so kindly disposed and sweetly spoken, then there is no doubt she shall find a good match in equally good time."

"That is indeed hoped for, Lady Rotterdam."

"Though I will remind you that there are also matches for your eldest daughter awaiting, and a reputation for difficulty in managing such affairs."

"Indeed!" the daughter's voice carried through. "My eldest sister is as silent on such matters as she is currently in this room. One would think she desires the life of a spinster!"

There was a polite chuckle throughout the room that left William rolling his eyes as he continued to look out the window, brooding in his own thoughts. How could he escape this? Surely Tina would rescue him once she found out the spell had gone wrong? Right?

The conversion turned to the youngest daughter. William hadn't even turned to see the family - probably another empty-headed group befitting this stage in the narrative.

"I think it would be astounding to be married to a loyal man of the navy!" the young one, whose name was Tabitha, said. "I know I am but seventeen, but Mr Grisham is enlisted and seems such a charming man, and I know he would be sweet on me!"

Lady Rotterdam gave a 'tsk-tsk.' "I must say, he is hardly befitting such a betrothal dear. Trust me, a man of the navy may come with respectable title and pay, but it is hardly the status of a *gentleman*. A man of leisure is what you need."

William scoffed privately to himself.

"Something to say, Mr Barnes?" Lady Rotterdam asked.

He turned slightly to take in the rest of the room, which were engaged in the frivolous gossip he so despised - well, despised as William, at least. His inner-Wendy was privately a little gleeful to have it unfold before her. The teen daughter was a cute girl with brunette hair and a slightly plump face, though not unpleasant. The blonde, gossipy one was far more slender and composed, and doing her best to look cultured as she drank from her tea beside her father. Lady Rotterdam had her eyes focused on William, awaiting an answer to her

question. William found himself summoning his inner byronic hero, and injecting his own take into this magical narrative.

"Just that if the status of a gentleman is to possess nothing but mere possession, to do nothing but idle chatter and lounge around consuming books by those who actually do possess passion, then the class of a proper Englishman has indeed fallen far. Would that I had been born to a naval family, and perhaps my surroundings would at least have the depth of an ocean rather than the shallowness of a particularly expensive tea cup."

Lady Rotterdam arched an eyebrow. "Rich words, coming from a man of your rank and station, and your own idleness, Mr Barnes."

He smirked. "One's own hypocrisy does not ameliorate the truth of one's words, Lady Rotterdam. It merely cuts all the deeper for exposing the rot within which I live."

This produced a loud, rather unlady-like laugh. William blinked, his gaze turning to the corner of the room, where another woman remained standing, one he had not fully noticed before and perhaps thought merely to a servant waiting in the periphery. Instead, he took in a marvellously beautiful woman, with fiery red hair and a gorgeous face, and the most magnificent set of blue eyes. She had a smattering of cute freckles, enough to be 'improper', and somehow that only added to her beauty. She was not dressed so fine as her younger blonde sister Elizabeth, but she possessed two particular qualities that could not be disguised easily: a pair of breasts that were mostly covered by her Regency-era dress and yet made their shape known all the same, large and perfect and with a deep line of cleavage just barely hinted at below her clavicle. For the first time, William truly understood the appeal of breasts, and it made him realise just how much his mind had truly changed. He was attracted to women. And to this woman . . . he was *drawn* to her.

"Something amusing, Lady Catherine?" Rotterdam asked, which was enough to make William's eyes widen further. *This* was Lady Catherine. His love interest. That was the body he was supposed to be inhabiting. God, she was a looker. And yet . . . part of him rather liked the idea of appreciating her from the outside. Damn these male thoughts for being so powerful!

"I'm afraid my amusement must come at the expense of brooding Mr Barnes here," she said, her voice as fiery as her hair. "Given that he is indeed the richest individual here, the one with the greatest pedigree and heritage, and yet for all his loathing of the supposedly empty customs of this room, he has not seen fit to either abandon them, publicly disown them, or simply find means of meaningful occupation elsewhere."

She folded her arms beneath her chest, causing her bosom to swell more. Christ, it was hard not to look! William had always been annoyed at the male gaze as Wendy, even if her figure was petite. Now he understood what it was like to possess male arousal. The woman's . . . everything, was hypnotic. Still, her words stung.

“I don’t believe we have been introduced. I am Mr William Barnes. Given that sharp tongue and an equal relish in abandoning the expected roles and rituals of the drawing room gathering, I must assume from your reputation that you are Miss Catherine Taggart.”

She blushed. “It seems my reputation precedes me, despite my having nothing to do with it.”

“Oh, I think you have. You are central to this whole gathering, I *gather*.”

Her brow furrowed. “In what way would you say that? In many ways, I feel like I have only just arrived in this world . . . of tea.”

It was an oddly weak sentence, but William continued, enjoying the playfulness of this moment as he approached her.

“I too feel as if I have just arrived. Still, I have my role to play. A brooding menace, by my own reputation. And perhaps a hypocrite, yes. Or perhaps I simply have more modern sensibilities.”

She arched an eyebrow. “They cannot be as modern as mine. For I believe that a woman has all the powers of faculty and means of pursuit of occupation that a man does, and that the so-called fairer sex is only fairer in-so-much as she possesses greater kindness than a man.”

Lady Rotterdam chuckled in her raspy way. “Well, it seems I know the two members of this room who shall *not*, at least, be betrothed!”

“Perish the thought,” William said. “The inferiority of her birth alone would preclude her, without any offence intended.”

It was enough to get a gasp from the room.

“Offence is indeed taken, sir,” Catherine replied. “You are most peculiar to disparage the customs of this room and yet take advantage of your social status when it suits you.”

William smirked. “Perhaps my hypocrisy has no bounds known. If you’ll excuse me, I have offended the room too greatly. I shall take a walk in the gardens, I think.”

He left, annoyed at himself. Why was he acting like such a jerk? It had felt so romantic when reading from the other side, but William, oddly, hoped that comeuppance was due. He emerged into the sunlight thinking about Catherine. Perhaps if he followed the narrative and indeed came to woo her, then he would be able to return to his life as Wendy?

And where was Cameron?

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Catherine was furious with herself. She’d had another dream. Yet another dream featuring Mr William Barnes, and this one had been . . . rather more *inappropriate* than the first. He’d not had his shirt on, for one. And secondly, neither had *she*. It was the kind of romantic

sensuality that clearly belonged more in the *Bridgerton* class of text than Jane Austen, and it annoyed her that she knew that. Clearly, she'd absorbed more of Wendy's long diatribes about the subject than she cared to know.

Hadn't she rebuked him in that first meeting? His eyes had roamed her body and lingered on her damn big breasts, and then he'd looked at her with such interest that his viper-like words had wounded all the more. Inferiority of birth! Pah! If only he knew that 'Lady Catherine' was actually a man named Cameron who was meant to be born over a hundred years after this story was set. And yet, it was grotesque how easily she had slipped into her character during their meeting. She found him annoying, of course, but she expressed that annoyance just like one of the dainty, quick-witted heroines that Wendy loved. It was humiliating how good it felt to give him a verbal lashing too.

Far more humiliating, of course, was how tall, dark, and most of all *handsome* he had obviously been.

"What are you thinking about, sister, to be so silent for so long?"

Catherine blinked and looked at Tabitha, who walked beside her as they moved down the Fairton streets. She wasn't even sure if it was a real place or not, but it was evidently a market town, convenient for their pursuits.

"I was just thinking about Mr Barnes and his incapable manners," she said.

"You were the one who was incapable," her belligerent sister Elizabeth said from her other side. "Mr Barnes is the most eligible bachelor short of the Royal Prince himself, and you engaged in verbal barbs. No wonder you shall die a spinster."

"Elizabeth!" Tabitha cried. "What an awful thing to say!"

"Well, it is true," she said. "What is the point of getting fitted for gala dresses if Catherine here shall scare off every potential suitor. My mere proximity to her will wound my chances with Mr North, and he is predisposed to me rather kindly."

Catherine had a strong image in her head of shooting Elizabeth in hers. Bad enough to be stuck as a woman, but now she was going for a *dress*. Ugh, she'd always mocked Wendy for taking too long to prepare for dates, and now she was going to be much more overdressed than her girlfriend ever was. Where the hell was she? Surely her witch friend would pull them out soon!

"Mr North," she said. "Remind me of who he is, again?"

Elizabeth groaned. "I simply cannot countenance that you would forget him. That rich auburn hair, that fantastic charm. The man is a true gentleman, and he is the heir to the Northridge Estate."

It was gibberish to Catherine, but she was compelled to follow her character. "Well, I'm sure he'll make you very happy."

It was at this point that Tabitha gave a little squeak and pointed. Their gazes shifted to further down the street, where two men were walking the other way. Catherine wanted to groan and point out how much she hated historical romance cliches that her girlfriend had clung to, because ever-so-conveniently, there was Mr Barnes and, judging from Elizabeth's reaction, Mr North, both coming the other way. The two groups met in the middle. Just as before, Catherine found she had to control her breathing and keep her heaving bosom from rising too high. Thankfully, she was able to lean on her new natural grace and elegance.

"Lady Catherine," Mr Barnes said. "And Ladies Elizabeth and Tabitha."

"How wonderful to see you on such a fine morning!" Mr North said, all charm and smiles. "Miss Elizabeth, you look particularly beautiful this morning. Your smile could brighten the darkest of days, but in sunny weather it carries even more powerfully."

She giggled and gave a slight curtsy that made Catherine want to vomit.

"And you look dashing as ever, Mr North, and with a charm to match."

"I do ever so try."

Mr Barnes, on the other hand, appeared far more aloof. "Well, it is coincidental to be meeting here, to be sure."

"Indeed," Catherine said. "I do not suppose you find yourself predisposed to find a means of occupation at last, Mr Barnes?"

He gave a very slight chuckle, which had a rich baritone to it. It was hard not to appreciate. Why was she so goddamn attracted to men right now, especially this asshole?

"It seems I am cursed to be reprimanded by your sharp tongue, Miss Catherine. Can I presume that you three are undertaking preparations for the upcoming gala?"

"I have no choice," Catherine muttered. "Besides, someone must look after Tabitha while Elizabeth chases Mr North."

They both regarded the other pair, who were already talking, Mr North's words like honey. Mr Barnes frowned a little.

"Yes, I can see that. I wonder . . . never mind. Simply curious about a narrative unfolding before us. I shall be at the gala as well, of course."

"You will be? I would have thought it too much a place of idle laziness and gossip for you."

"Oh, it very much is, and I loathe it entirely. But I would not miss it for all the world. It shall fuel my diatribes against such meaningless excess."

Catherine would have agreed . . . but part of her felt Tabitha's disappointment, and even her rude sister Elizabeth's. They were so keen on the gala, and it was clear that such events were crucial for women to survive in this world. Necessary for them to form betrothals and begin courting so that they could literally depend on a man in order to live.

"What a male understanding of such an event," she found herself saying.

“Oh? And what is that to mean?”

“It means,” she continued, a strange anger building within her. “That it is easy for a man of your status and sex to disparage such events, to mock them from afar even as one participates in them, but for women like myself it is the *only* means we have of self-preservation. This unfair society that men like you have built and uphold does a disservice to women, and yet you then turn around and blame us for the frivolities we have crafted as means of safeguarding our own interests and livelihoods!”

At this, Mr Barnes actually looked taken aback. Catherine was too. Was this . . . was this what Wendy meant about Cameron actually pulling his weight around the apartment? When he failed to contribute and pointed out that he was the ‘breadwinner’ compared to her wage, was she actually scorned by the fact that her own interests and livelihood was jeopardised by his laziness? Had he taken her for granted as easily as Mr Barnes took the world of women?

“Well, you have given me much to think about. If nothing else, Miss Catherine, your lower status has little connection to your clear intelligence. I bid you all good day.”

He left, and Mr North made apologies and left with him, following at his side. Elizabeth smacked Catherine lightly on the arm.

“You ruined the moment!”

Catherine looked back at Mr Barnes, and saw that he was looking back already at her. She turned quickly, blushing. “I rather think I did, in fact.”

Tabitha giggled. “I think he is strangely taken with you, big sister!”

“Certainly not!” Catherine and Elizabeth said as one. It was the first time they were on the same page about anything.

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Try as they might, the two could not stop avoiding one another. The gala was to be held at the end of the month, and so many meetings, drawing room gatherings, tea ceremonies, and long walks were had between the greater and lesser landed gentry across the region. Each time Catherine and William met, they exchanged their usual barbs and witty repartee, and each time they left thinking more and more of the other. This was only heightened when Mr North proposed to Elizabeth and she accepted with her father’s blessing. She was over the moon and obviously smug about it, and it only drew the pair tighter together as they watched this other romance fold. William and Catherine couldn’t stand one another, but the attraction went deeper, and began to slide into arousal, particularly since the narrative was drawing them closer together. It didn’t hurt that they were each fabulously attractive, nor that, despite being in the wrong role, William was actually having the time of his life engaged in this period

romance. Naturally, he was still worried about his real life, and he hoped Tina would find out about him soon, and he wanted to find out what happened to Cameron, but the enigma of the beautiful and wonderfully busty Lady Catherine captured his attention even more. Edward even made wry comments about how often they met.

"It is a mere coincidence, nothing else," he admonished his servant.

But it was a lie. He was deliberately attending every event she would be at, and found excuses to be in her presence and hear more of her opinions. It was strange, it was like she was getting more feminist by the day, and yet he couldn't help but notice that she was also allowing herself to be waited on a little more, not to mention turning up in ever-more-lovely outfits. She still seemed embarrassed about her body, but her attitude towards it was thawing. Truly, she must be interested in him, he assumed.

Which ultimately led to another exploration by William, one he had been putting off for so long but couldn't any longer. He'd been stuck in this narrative as a man for two weeks now. He had urinated as a man, felt his member become stiff, and generally dealt with the discomfort of adjusting his large prick in his trousers when necessary - and subtly at that. But he hadn't yet . . . attended to it.

But after the last sparkling meeting with Catherine, when she had complained of her sister Elizabeth and expressed hope for Tabitha's wellbeing, something in him had melted. Catherine had worn a lovely blue dress that pulled just a little too tight around her bust, and her cleavage was . . . magnetic.

William lay in bed, having instructed Edward to leave him alone until midday. He was overcome with thoughts of Miss Catherine, her fiery red hair and piercing blue eyes, her gorgeous skin, her curvaceous body. And those breasts. Impolite to mention in polite company, but he couldn't stop thinking about them. He truly was attracted to women now, he knew, but this was beyond that. It was arousal and lust and obsession.

And it meant that now, finally, he lowered his hand to his member and began to stroke it. It was already hard, but now he began to tease it, cupping his balls and pulling at his cock, imagining the 'relations' he could have with Miss Catherine. What would it be like, to be a man inside a woman? Oh, it sounded heavenly. The ultimate fruition of his favourite type of story, only experienced from the other side.

"Ahhhh," he groaned to himself. "C-Catherine. Mhmm. Yesss. I want you."

He did. God above, he wanted her. And not just her body, but her personality too. Her quick wit, her passion, her intelligence, her fiery disposition. It entranced him. He masturbated faster, his body urged forth in a way it never had been before. He imagined freeing her from her bodice and releasing those perfect milky orbs upon her chest. He imagined cupping them, sucking on them, and entering her as she gasped.

“C-Catherine!” he almost shouted, and with that he felt his balls tense for the first time, and his rigid mast throbbed. For several seconds there was a pent-up pressure that rose and rose, and then suddenly it was released. He grunted, holding in a bestial roar as he ejaculated into the bedsheets, stream after stream of his seed spilling from his massive cock. The former female shuddered. He’d had multiple orgasms as Wendy, and perhaps they were better in a sense, but this made him feel *powerful*.

Only when he was done did he clean himself off and have a bath. It embarrassed him a bit that his servants would know what had occurred in that bed, but he trusted them not to start gossipping. He was a man, after all. Wasn’t this what men did?

When he was out and dressed again in his gentleman’s attire there was a sudden knock upon the door. William’s heart became instantly elated: could it be Catherine? Had she felt the same spark? She was real, he knew it. As much as this adventure was magical, it was all *real*. A portal to another time and place, but these people were *real*. And that meant Catherine could find him as attractive as he found her, despite his own arrogance and brooding nature.

William was at the door before Edward or any of the other servants could even reach it. He flung it open, an uncharacteristic smile upon his face, only to be hit by utter disappointment.

The auburn-haired Mr Peter North was on the other side of the door, reeking of alcohol and desperation, his clothes far more sodden than any gentleman’s had the right to be. He gave William an embarrassed, lop-sided grin as he staggered on the spot, clearly still under the influence.

“Mr Barnes!” he said, voice slightly slurred. “I’m in a spot of trouble, and I’m in need of some help from a good friend. Do you mind if I come on in?”

It was then that Mr Barnes learned the true nature of his friend, and the troubles he was in.

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Catherine couldn’t help herself. She was repulsed by what she was doing, but the thought of Mr Barnes was simply too overpowering. Her ridiculous female body was just too attracted to his tall, dark, and brooding exterior, and his mind! Yes, as much as he was arrogant and often cold, he was also intelligent and introspective, aware of his own hypocrisies. Somehow, he seemed a man out of time. He reminded her of her own self, back when she was Cameron: failing to understand women, all too proud, and yet . . . there was a hidden sweetness to him, she felt.

And those shoulders . . . those forearms . . . and what could be tucked away in those trousers. She felt herself in her bed, trying to keep quiet to avoid waking Tabitha in the next room over. She truly was a creature in a Mills and Boon style novel, because her skin was remarkably sensitive, particularly her breasts. She played with them, pushing them together and moaning quietly as she rubbed her perfect pink nipples. The pleasure was intense, but it grew exponentially as she touched her womanhood, gliding her fingers across her vulva and teasing her clitoris. It throbbed, growing slightly erect, and she murmured as she began to grow damp.

"Oh f-fuuuuck," she groaned, before realising what she'd said. Perhaps swearing was a little okay when one was in the comfort of one's own pleasure?

"Ahhh . . . mhmm . . . Mr Barnes. William. Take me. Make me yours. I'll be your wife and - ahhh - spread my legs for you and - mhmm! Ohh!"

By this point she had slid her fingers inside her passage, feeling the wetness that waited there. The moistness spread, as did her overpowering lust, and soon she was squeezing her tits and rubbing her nipples with one hand while the other plunged into her own private abyss, drawing her ever closer to ecstasy. It was unlike anything Catherine had ever felt, something far beyond the male act of masturbate. Less powerful, less dominant, but rather a slow dance of ever-growing euphoria magnified as much by imagination as it was sensation. How would it feel to have a man's hard prick inside? How would it feel to have Mr Barnes thrusting into her, penetrating her, cumming inside of her?

"Ohhhhh!"

Catherine barely managed to muffle herself in time as the orgasm hit. Her breasts wobbled heavily on her chest as she writhed, going completely silently but open-mouthed as another orgasm hit, followed by a final third. They overlapped upon one another like waves upon a beach, and it left the former male adrift in a sea of bliss. She curled her toes, imagining that the bliss was from William, the man that made her so angry and so passionate all at once.

It was only afterwards, lying there on her back, her breasts pooling against her upper arms thanks to the effect of gravity and slope, that her thoughts collected themselves.

"God, I really do like him. I need someone to get me out of here. I - I can't keep doing this!"

Of course, that was the exact moment Tabitha burst into her room, causing her to pull up her covers instantly. Her new sister was wide-eyed and concerned.

"It's Elizabeth!" she cried. "Mr North just broke it off with her!"

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Elizabeth was beside herself with tears, and simply could not be comforted, much as Catherine and Tabitha and their father continually tried.

"Why?" she announced, wiping more of her tears away. "Why would Mr North call off the engagement? I don't understand! Was it something I've done?"

"Of course not," said Catherine. "There must be something else going on."

"Indeed there is," their father added, his presence gentle. "You've done nothing wrong, my dear. I've just received word thanks to Lady Rotterdam's rather extensive network of spies. Mr North did not call off the match with you of his own free will."

Elizabeth sobbed, but raised her head. "He didn't?"

"He did not. It seems that Mr Barnes pressured him to end the engagement. I do not know how or why, but I have sent letters to Mr Barnes demanding an explanation, though I doubt I shall get one, given our . . . inferiority of birth compared to his own higher class."

Catherine fumed. She didn't *like* Elizabeth, but she had been happy for her sister. She'd never actually *had* sisters before, and so it was a unique experience. Now she was sharing in Elizabeth's despair. Tabitha had been so excited to attend as well!

"He will answer to me, father," she declared. "Elizabeth, I know we have not always gotten on so well, though our disputes seem perhaps more recent to me than they are for you, but I promise you I shall get an explanation from Mr Barnes, forthwith."

Her father gave her a genial smile as Matilda handed him a letter that had just arrived. He opened it as he talked. "There is my fiery-haired daughter, alright. And perhaps you shall have the chance to do so quicker than you think. Mr Barnes had invited several families to his estate. Ours is one of them."

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Catherine tried not to focus on the fact that this dress was even lovelier than the others, and her wide-brimmed hat suited her just fine. It didn't hurt that her lovely form was less disguised, as this dress was not as flowy as the others. It also cupped her bosom more suggestively, though it would still be nothing much by modern standards. She was growing increasingly accustomed to a woman's life, especially being waited upon. Mr Barnes had called his party together with little excuse, and yet he had yet to make much of an appearance. Instead, his servants saw to their needs, dishing out fine meals and providing tours of the grand estate. It was funny, Catherine couldn't stand Wendy's obsession with books in her real life, but in this world, her eyes instantly widened in amazement to see Mr Barnes' massive library. It far exceeded her own, more meagre gentry family bookshelves, occupying a large room with ladders needed to reach the upper shelves. There were tomes and texts, classics and moderns, and many first editions.

“I cannot believe I am saying this,” she uttered aloud, “but Mr Barnes has fantastic tastes in books.”

“You would know,” Elizabeth said, eyes darting around to look for an absent Mr North. “It’s amazing you haven’t had your head stuck in one for the last two weeks. Had to come up for air sometimes, I suppose.”

Catherine let the comment go: apparently her new self was quite the reader. Of course she was, damn it. Couldn’t exactly remain a sporty person as a woman in the Regency era now, could she? At least the dresses were comfortable. Surprisingly so, in fact, for all the layers. Catherine was constantly amazed at how breathable the fabric was, and . . . and how beautiful she felt.

She felt it even not half an hour later, when a messenger passed on that Mr Barnes wished to see her. Privately. She was ushered to the elaborate gardens and lands behind his estate that were part of his grounds, and there he was, wearing a dark coat and a white ruffled shirt, his hair professional, but his gaze *fierce*. The servant left them with a short bow, and suddenly there was little else but silence, the crackle of distant thunder from the faraway grey skies, and their eyes upon one another’s forms. Catherine blushed a beautiful rose upon her cheeks. As humiliating as it was to admit to herself, she felt absolutely radiant in his presence just from the way he looked at her, and it made it hard to feel the rage she knew she should have felt.

“Miss Catherine,” the man said in his brass baritone. “I apologise for the histrionics in inviting you here. Truth be told, this party is little more than a farce, an elaborate scheme to allow me the company of your sharp wit and unyielding mind. If you would allow it, would you bring such tools with you on a short walk around my grounds?”

Catherine approached him, aware of how her hips swayed just a little, and how her breasts jiggled just slightly in her bodice. She smiled at him, trying not to be too taken.

“I would consent to such proceedings, Mr Barnes,” she said, taking his arm. “So long as you are not overly brooding or condescending, and maintain a gentleman’s poise.”

“I may be a little rusty, but I shall attempt such.”

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Things were going so very well, William felt. He walked beside Catherine, occasionally smirking just slightly in her direction, pointing out the various flowers and shaded spots he liked to visit since he was a boy. That last part was more a compulsion of this romantic narrative, since this was the first time he’d really gone on such a long walk. Still, he found himself enjoying her company, and the two talked about more than just trifles and frivolous things.

“I find myself in disagreement. Voltaire was a great satirist and brilliant mind, but he did a great disservice to Madam du Chatelet when he gave her obituary. He spoke of her achievements despite her sex, but never thought to consider that perhaps her achievements may lay from her unique perspective granted by her fairer nature instead. Though . . . I know not what I say. This is all new to me.”

William chuckled. “It seems far from new to you, and rather intelligent and insightful besides. As is your character, evidently.”

They continued to stroll through the lovely gardens, even as the clouds turned grey above them. Neither knew the other to be their former partner, and all their idiosyncrasies failed as clues due to their inherent nervousness. Catherine found her heart fluttering, and William struggled not to pour out his heart. The compulsions were upon them more fiercely than ever, but so was the suspicion that if they were to carry forward this story of romance, then it would bring them back to their reality at their conclusion.

“You are kinder than I first imagined, I will admit,” Catherine said. “Though it gives me pause on other things you have said and supposedly done.”

“And what things would that be?”

Catherine looked away and bit her lip. “Let’s talk of it another time. Show me more of these gardens.”

“The rain will shortly come.”

“Then we best be quick about it.”

With a smile, William directed Catherine onwards. He was entranced by her figure, by her sunnier disposition, and the way she seemed to breach propriety to show her opinions. She was the kind of woman that Wendy wished she had been in life, and so William now found her very attractive, seeing all these qualities in her. They moved with haste, she laughing lightly as they moved to beat the rain. But soon it was upon them, pouring down in great sheets that had her actually *running*, and him doing his best to cover her with his jacket. He couldn’t help but notice the heavy bounce of her bosom as she moved quickly. How much he had wished to have a bigger chest in his other life, but now he could admire one greater than he’d ever imagined!

Catherine, for her part, felt strangely free. The demands of corporate life were not with her, and instead her largest concerns were betrothals and family marriages. These were, she knew now, highly significant, but they were not inhuman and mechanical the way her old job had been. She laughed freely again as she finally reached the pagoda; her dress was positively drenched, and it was doing wonders to make her breasts all the more visible, drawing William’s gaze for a few embarrassed seconds. When had she last felt so romantic? When had she felt so *chased?* Why was being in a woman’s form so much more . . . right. It was just her character, she tried to tell herself that, but as she panted, her face so close to

Mr Barnes', she found herself doubting even that assessment. Wendy had been right all along, and she a fool; period romance was *exhilarating*, and as she was at the centre of it, she felt recognised in a way that being the corporate, ladder-climbing breadwinner had never once provided.

"Mr Barnes," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

"Miss . . . Catherine," he said, as if choosing to emphasise her first name. In this moment of rain and thunder, the two stood beneath the protection of the pagoda as if they were the only two people in the entire world.

"We . . . we should be getting back."

"Just a moment of your time, please!" he declared. He gazed at her, his eyes piercing. "I cannot stand this any longer. I am cast into the role of the brooding man, distant and cynical, but the feelings you stir within me cannot lay trapped forever. I never expected to be in this situation, least of all as a man such as myself looking at a woman as you do, and yet here I am. Despite everything - despite my situation, despite the inferiority of your birth and your own acts of impropriety and the dangers of one such as I entangling with someone of your world, I find myself compelled to utter these words: I love you, Miss Catherine. Most ardently, in fact. And I would ask for your hand in marriage, if you would take it."

He waited, staring at her expectantly. In truth, William had very little reservations in what he was doing. Part of him wanted to stay in this romantic world forever. He hadn't felt so alive and spirited before, and Catherine's nature had captured him. If he was to be stuck as a man, this was the perfect way to be stuck.

Except that Catherine had not said yes, nor had she smiled. Instead, the young former male trembled, biting her lip and hovering around her uncertainties. Part of her wanted to say yes, but thankfully, for once, her compulsions and her own male pride were hand-in-hand. An anger swept over her, not just an anger at being thrust into this ridiculous situation as a beautiful and curvaceous Regency-era lady, but also for the fact that this domineering man was taking so much for granted! He proclaimed love, and yet he treated her so dishonourably. More than ever, Catherine understood why Wendy had chosen to leave her male self, now that she was on the other side of a brooding, cynical, and dismissive man. She didn't doubt his love, but what an immature presentation it was! She stood a little taller and readied her words, letting them filter through her new vocabulary.

"I apologise if I have given the wrong impression of our relationship, Mr Barnes," she said. "For I cannot agree to such a partnership, and therefore must reject your offer."

William furrowed his brow. His new male pride was shattered. "Do - do you mock me?"

"Not at all, sir. But I roundly reject your offer."

He looked away into the storm for a moment, his mood turning black. “May I ask why?”

“Because I am not in love with you.”

“Have I done anything to offend you? I would demand to know.”

At this, she scoffed, chuckling darkly. “The question is better phrased on whether you have *not* done something to offend me, Mr Barnes. You who insult my family at every turn, who compliment my sharp tongue only to criticise its impropriety, who talkies of your own elite birth even as you scorn the nature of your duties! I have greatly enjoyed our time together, but you insulted my worth in your offer.”

“I am merely projecting honesty as few men do!”

Another laugh, this one in time with the thunder. She didn’t care that her bosom was sleek and wet, or that nothing about their situation was proper. “You would talk of honesty with me? You who so cruelly separated my own sister from her greatest happiness?”

“To what do you refer to?” William asked, though he knew for sure what it was. The sense of narrative arc was in his mind now, and he cringed at his failure to anticipate this. Tina had clearly modelled a great deal of this adventure on *Pride and Prejudice*, and this was to be his first failed proposal.

“You know what I refer to,” Catherine said, who definitely didn’t have a strong idea of this story’s exact roots, and therefore was far more righteously angry. “Elizabeth argues and belittles me, but she is my sister! She loved Mr North, and he asked for her hand, and she was joyous! And now I find that have torn those two apart, do you deny it?”

William straightened. “I do not.”

“So you do not deny splitting apart their future, and for what reason? The inferiority of her birth as well?”

At this, William narrowed his gaze. He loomed over Catherine. “Those would be reason enough, but I split them apart because of the inferiority of Mr North’s manner. He is my friend, but he is also a drunkard and an inveterate gambler who keeps his vices hidden to outside eyes and yet allows them to dominate his life. He would bring your sister to ruin and your house with him.”

Catherine was taken aback. Why was she so invested in this? God, Wendy had been right, the very turns of this story were riveting as much as they shocked her. “You - you are lying.”

“I am not. And I forced no split between them. I approached my friend and offered him a year’s earnings from my estates if he would not marry Elizabeth. It was a test to see his devotion, and he lasted not a minute. He took the money before my sentence was cold in the air. His love was fleeting and his desire to gamble was not. So now he is much richer, but at least your sister is *wealthier*, in spirit and future opportunities.”

Catherine had no idea what to say. “I - I did not know.”

“No, you did not. But then again, there is much you evidently do not know. It was a mistake to propose to you now. I see that. I apologise for wasting your time, and bid you farewell.”

With that, he strode into the rain and left Catherine there, wet and shivering and regret stirring in her stomach, her feminine feelings smothering over her male ones. It was a most ungentlemanly act by William, but he had to move quickly. Otherwise she might have noticed the water flowing from his eyes. They were not from the rain.

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Catherine was utterly appalled at herself. It had been over a week since William had proposed to her and she had harshly rebuked him, and now more of the truth was coming out. Elizabeth still mourned for the loss of the love of her life, and snapped quickly at anyone who reminded her of Mr North’s absence, but their father had received other news.

“You are not to tell your middle sister just yet, Tabitha, Catherine, but I have received news that Mr North made a great embarrassment of himself in town. He became quite inebriated and behaved with such impropriety that I shall not share with you the details, only that his argument stemmed from a great deal of money owed from a particular vice of his that has come to light.”

“Is he in congress with the devil?” Tabitha asked, wide-eyed and full of imagination.

Their father snorted, and Catherine joined him.

“No, my child, nothing of the sort. Though he is certainly in congress with one of his vices: gambling. I had no idea, or I would not have blessed such a potential partnership in the first place.”

Catherine nodded, pretending to have heard of this for the first time. Her face was downcast, and she played the scene of William proposing to her over and over again. Why did it make her heart flutter? Oh, but she was also so very full of rage! The man had acted like such a cad, arrogant and prideful and diminishing her, not to mention his own naked hypocrisy. And yet . . . part of her wanted him present so that she could apologise. He had also done her family a service, and . . .

“I have to take a walk,” she announced. “I need some fresh air.”

“I’ll come!” Tabitha said. “We can talk about-”

“I’m sorry, dear sister, but I would prefer to walk alone. I have . . . much to think about.”

Her father clearly sensed something, but knew enough not to pry. Catherine donned a dress appropriate for a mid-morning walk beneath the spring sun, as well as a lovely

broad-brimmed hat to protect her delicate skin. Her dress was a pale blue, which only enhanced the fiery nature of her hair, and she couldn't help but regard her figure in the mirror as she turned and admired it.

"I never thought I would have liked wearing dresses," she said, smiling despite herself. "Or that I would look so very beautiful in them. Or so . . ."

Sexy. The word was too modern to depart her lips, as she still had the compulsions of this narrative upon her. But she truly did look strikingly attractive, and this dress did emphasise her bust more than most, her lovely chest heaped up thanks to the hidden bodice beneath. She smiled, pleased at least to look and feel good. Matilda brought her a small bag to take with her, one filled with sweet cakes, some water, and fresh fruit plucked from the gardens.

"Thank you, Matilda," she said. "You truly anticipate one's every need."

"It's my job, Miss Catherine. Now don't you walk off too far now. We all know how you are!"

"I shall try, Matilda!"

It was an honest response; she only intended a walk around the gardens to clear her head. She was becoming far too enamoured and invested in this life, she knew. Yes, it had been good for her, she recognised, to understand the female mindset more, to actually *value* the thoughts and feelings of a woman, not to mention appreciate what Wendy saw such narratives.

But that was also the danger of it all. Somewhere along the way, Catherine had started to not only understand her new role, but *embrace* it. Far more than once, she had played with her lovely breasts in private, stirring her loins to fits of feminine ecstasy. She had dreamed of Mr Barnes and his wide shoulders and manly build, imagining him thrusting into her wet tunnel. She had spun around - including just now! - before the mirror, adoring the way her new dresses fitted. And for someone who had once been so obsessed with endlessly working and climbing the corporate ladder, being waited upon and treated like a lady was surprisingly relaxing, even if it could be condescending at times. Being out in the country and away from a city . . . it filled her with a sense of calm.

"Why do I love it all so?" she asked herself as she walked. "I should want to return more. I should want to be a man again. But instead . . . I *want* to be Lady Catherine."

The realisation hit her even as she realised just how far she had walked, far beyond the boundaries of her family's gardens and out onto the roads.

"Oh God. Oh, it can't be. How foolish I've been so long to deny these feelings inside of me. I don't *want* to be Cameron again. I want . . . I want to be Lady Catherine. And I want to be with *Mr Barnes!"*

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William Barnes brooded. His inner Wendy self wanted to snap out of it and stop being such an arrogant jerk, but he couldn't help himself. He had asked very little of Edward this past week, and barely focused on his own meals or needs. He had rejected invites, cancelled others, and retreated entirely inwards.

"That woman!" he announced to himself, brow furrowed. "She haunts me! She burns through my heart and bewitches me body and soul! She makes me never want to leave this place, nor be a woman again. She is the only woman I desire, and yet . . . I ruined everything. In entering this world I took on the same arrogance as Cameron. I took on the same pride, the same haughty demeanour. I understand now what it is to have a man's responsibilities, and yet to fall victim to the pride they bring. And now I have lost her."

It was foolish, he knew. All he had to do was see this narrative through, make some big apology and another more sincere proposal, and things would work out right. That was how such stories worked, of course. And yet . . . the torment in his soul was *real*. His desire for Catherine, soul and body, was *real*. The fact that he had been upon his member a number of times in the privacy of night, thinking of her beauty and her curves, was testament to this fact. The only thing that propelled him to move forward and not try to stay in this place and make things right was the fact that poor Cameron was probably lurking somewhere, not that William had managed to find him.

"I do feel sorry for him . . . and yet, I don't want to deny my heart. I've been such a fool. I must find a way to-"

There was a knock upon his door. William sighed, and asked for Edward to enter. His servant did so and coughed politely.

"Mr Barnes, are you ready for the gala tonight?"

William groaned and lay back on his bed like a huffing child. "What is the point, dear Edward? It will be just another vapid event without meaning, and any fun in such company could only be found at the bottom of a bottle. Besides, there is certain company I doubt will be present, and that is the only company I desire. Too bad I do not deserve it."

Edward showed no reaction on his face, but did withdraw a letter and place it on a nearby desk. "Very well, sir. I shall leave you to your musings. However, a letter from Miss Catherine has arrived for you, and I thought perhaps you should like to-"

"Miss Catherine! Why wasn't this the first thing you said, good man?"

He raced across the room in a rather ungentlemanly fashion and grabbed the letter. It did indeed bare her lovely handwriting on the front, and her family's seal. William's heart beat heavily in his chest as he broke said seal and took out the letter. His eyes scanned

again and again across her delightful writing, taking in her carefully constructed words with the deepest inference.

“Edward, I’d have a change of mind,” William declared. “Ready my best clothing and my finest hat and coat. I will be heading to the gala and its dance at once!”

The manservant appeared to have the tiniest little smile upon his features at this new development.

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Catherine’s own heart pounded as she took in the beauty of the ballroom gala. There were so many other aristocrats and their entourages here, not to mention wealthy and influential merchants, investors, and individuals of local office. And here she was with her family, their station above some yet certainly below others, and yet each of them adorned in dresses that projected beauty, elegance, fineness and fairness, and perhaps a dash of the sensual, not that any of them would admit it.

Tabitha was most gleeful: she wore a pink dress with lovely frills. It was clear that she was still a girl, albeit one coming into her beauty, but her ecstatic nature had her practically bouncing as they moved through the gala space, and their father had to keep reminding her to recall her lessons in ladyship.

Elizabeth was still in dour spirits, and had not spoken of Mr North since his drunken escapades had become public news, but she held her head high. She wore blue - probably to annoy Catherine and maintain a sense of superiority again - and it was a lovely gown piece that flowed around her ankles and made her appear almost like a princess. Her expression was haughty, but they were all willing to let her have that if it meant saving face.

And then there was Catherine. Never in her right mind had she ever imagined looking as she did, or attending such a ball as she was. Her dress was green, with a white pattern down the middle with hanging pearls. Green ruffles, some shaped like flowers, ran down the sides, and her gloves went nearly up to her elbows, that same vibrant, somewhat reflective green. It gave even greater contrast to her fiery hair, which was pinned back marvellously in an up-do, and yet as if defiant against her role still had two tresses at the front either side of her forehead. A string of pearls around her neck sank into her magnificent cleavage, directing the eye to her fabulous bosom, which was more prominently displayed than usual; her large chest displayed her naked upper curves before the top of the dress, and her bodice kept them under control. She was afraid of looking a bit debased by it all, but while many eyes lingered, she only had to see herself reflected again to note the gorgeous stylishness that she embodied.

“I can’t believe I’m smiling,” she said to herself.

“You should be,” her father said. “You and your sisters are beautiful, and you will find many a suitor tonight. I wish you all well.”

With a grin, he set his daughters free, reminding them to keep a sense of propriety, a remark aimed at Catherine’s wit and Elizabeth’s judgement, and perhaps Tabitha’s own indulgent sweet tooth. The former male found herself traipsing across the ballroom floor, entranced by the great chandeliers above, the many flickering candle lights, and the great paintings on the walls. A full orchestra played classical music, and people flitted about, forming connections and remarking upon dresses.

“Oh, Catherine, you shall show us all up tonight!” Lady Helena remarked, a sweet thing also aged twenty. “You look beautiful!”

“I - well, thank you, Lady Helena. I’m hoping for one particular individual tonight, though I’m afraid I shall not see him; I have perhaps scared him off.”

“And straight into another’s arms, no doubt, with that frightening tongue of yours! I jest, Catherine. With that magnificent decolletage you will no doubt draw him back in!”

At that, Catherine blushed a deep shade of red, trying not to giggle or be aghast, or both. She really did feel beautiful, and the flow of her dress was comfortable in a way her corporate suits never had been. It was funny; she hadn’t thought of the internet for days now, or many other modern conveniences other than perhaps more modern flushing services. This life, for all its complex social interactions, had a simplicity to it.

Or perhaps she had simply found the life she never knew she wanted.

But as time passed, there was no denying that something was missing. For all that Catherine was starting to accept that she loved this life, womanliness and all, there was still a William-shaped hole in her new reality. She had written the letter with aching care, each word carefully considered, each plea for forgiveness and desire spelled out upon the page. And still it wasn’t enough. In the end, her new letter had been simple.

My dearest Mr William Barnes

Please forgive my bluntness, just as I ask that you forgive my words to you in the rain that day. If you still harbour any good will towards me, then I ask that you see me at the forthcoming gala. I shall be there, awaiting you and you alone.

With warmest regards,

Catherine Taggart

Had she still been too opaque? She wondered this as the night continued. She nibbled upon the sweetcakes and admonished Tabitha for having too many, and amused herself by watching from the sidelines as Elizabeth, perhaps a little too eagerly, began to talk to Mr Westright and laugh a little too heartily at his jokes. If North had not worked out, why not try

West, she supposed! But other gentleman approached Catherine herself, and she knew that her beauty was what drew them over, for each asked if they would be given the honour of a dance with her. Some managed to keep their eyes from wandering to her full bosom, others were far less subtle, and others still placed their bodies far too close to her for her liking. To each, regardless, she gave the same response.

"I thank you, but I must politely decline this evening. I am waiting for another."

Some took it well. Others, like Lord Hallow, twisted his upper lip and sneered at her, his gaze flicking down to her chest.

"It was merely a charitable offer, my 'lady.' With an outfit and figure like that, one would imagine you dancing in the whorehouse."

"Amusing, for I imagined myself more the kind to dance upon your grace, Lord Hallow," she told the old man. "Though that must be many years away, surely? Otherwise one might accuse you of asking a dance of a woman of twenty years as being akin to the actions of a cradle snatcher."

He strode off with an angered and embarrassed huff, and Catherine couldn't help but smirk at her own efforts. It was good to be so witty, and a woman's wit seemed sharper than hers ever had been as Cameron. And yet her expression turned dour again, for she had been here well over an hour and had no sight of Mr William Barnes.

"Perhaps I truly have destroyed any chance," she said, biting her lip softly and gazing across the dancing cloud, which moved and swayed like pieces of brightly-coloured confetti.

"Any chance of what?" came a baritone brass voice behind her. "Of dancing with that old skeleton? Or perhaps of seeing me?"

Catherine turned on the spot so quickly that she was a little embarrassed of the obvious wobble of her ample chest. There, standing before her, was William Barnes. He was immaculate, his hair to one side, his figure tall, dark, and handsome as ever, but his piercing blue eyes were not so piercing now. Instead, he possessed a vulnerability in his expression, as if despite his height, power, fortune and ancestry, he was at her mercy.

"William!" she declared, forgetting her own sense of propriety. Thankfully, her magical compulsions kept her from leaping into the man's arms. "You - you came!"

Mr Barnes did not smile. Instead, his stare was soulful. "I had to. I saw your letter. Miss Catherine, I had assumed you would not wish to see me again. My proposal, what I said to you . . . I was vain and foolish. I did not consider your feelings, and focused solely upon my own. I am new to this in so many ways, but I am not new to the idea of wanting love. When I finally had the chance to earn it, I was too afraid, and fell back into bluster and arrogance. I ask that you give me one more chance to win your heart. If you do not, then I promise I shall remain silent forever, and bother you no more."

At this, he swallowed, and took one daring step closer.

“But if you would give me but one chance and one *dance* tonight, then regardless of what follows, you will have made me the happiest man in all of creation.”

Catherine’s heart skipped a beat, and butterflies fluttered about in her belly. Slowly, she extended a hand to take his. It was trembling as she took his fingers.

“It is I who should be apologising,” she replied. “Mr Barnes, I did not know the truth about Mr North and the ruin he could have brought my sister. You tried to conceal us all from shame, and he breached that concealment; though part of me is thankful, for only then was I able to know the truth of what you have done for my sister.”

“Then let us both be sorry,” he said. “And let us both be thankful for this chance. May I . . . would you be willing to join me for a dance?”

At this, all sense of Catherine’s male pride evaporated, withering away into nothingness before this handsome, stalwart, and now much more humble man. The desire to be Cameron again was gone, and in its place was a desire to be in this man’s arms, tonight and always.

“It would be my highest honour,” she replied.

It was only in response to this that Mr Barnes finally smiled, a rare event indeed. It was a broad smile, brilliant in its depth of appreciation for Catherine. He continued to hold her hand, leading her out to the dance floor, where a new piece of music was playing. Slowly, the two of them took positions, and then, leaning on their magical compulsions, they began to dance their shared waltz. And because this was a narrative of pure historical romance, this was the most close and intimate dance of them all. William held the woman he had come to love, the woman he had always fantasised about being once upon a time, and began to twirl her about the room. She moved with such elegance and grace, and he was only able to match her through sheer determination. The smell of her hair lingered, or perhaps it was her perfume? Whatever it was, it only made him want her more. Once again he couldn’t stop himself from smiling, and Catherine in turn gazed up with a brilliant grin of her own. While dozens of other couples danced on the ballroom floor, for the pair of them it was as if they were the only two in the world. Several times William could not help himself; his gaze lowered to Catherine’s spectacular bosom, and her grin grew wider.

“Mr Barnes! I thought *I* was the one accused of impropriety?”

To which he responded with his own wit, blushing though his cheeks were: “On the contrary, Lady Catherine, I am giving your features the fullest respect they deserve.”

“Oh, you are a knave!”

The pair laughed, their bodies coming together as the music slowed, becoming even more personal. Several times, Catherine’s chest pressed against William’s own, and there was that tantalising shiver through her body. She ached for him, and it was not just a physical desire. She understood why Wendy left her. But this man was nothing like the man

Catherine had once been, and she knew he was the kind of man that Wendy had deserved. She was content to be a woman for life, here in this new reality, if it meant truly understanding that kind of love and respect.

"I never thought I would be so happy," she said, holding him close. "I never imagined I would be here at all, to be perfectly frank. All of this, right down to the dress, the hair, all of it! And yet . . . I am so very glad, Mr Barnes."

He took her hands, the music slowly petering out.

"I am as well, Miss . . . my Catherine. I have always secretly desired to inhabit a world like this one, to be in the orbit of another, I just never imagined it would be as it is. I fell in too deeply into the character I have become. I'm falling over my own words here, you must think me insane or dull-witted. I could never even explain to you what has happened to me or how I arrived at this moment, just that I felt compelled to be here for this moment and complete it, and all for you."

He looked around, making sure no one was listening in. They were, in many ways, alone in the crowd.

"Catherine, I love you. I truly love you. Not in spite of your birth or nature, not in spite of your sharp tongue and endless wit, but because of these things. Because your very nature is complementary to mine, and because you alone have made me see the fool I was, and how I am willing to change to be the man you deserve. Please, trust me, I have already changed greatly already. You would find it mad to even know just how much but-"

"*Wendy!?"*

William halted, his blue eyes wide.

"*Cameron!?"*

The two stared at one another, a hundred little clues finally coalescing into epiphany.

"You - you're a woman!?"

"And you're a man!?"

"How did you . . ?"

"And how did you . . ?"

A few eyes began to look their way, but the music was starting up again, and it gave them an excuse to leave. Taking the lead, William took Catherine's hand and led her out of the building and into the adjacent overlook of the gardens. Here on the second story they would have some much-needed privacy. The tall and handsome man looked at the gorgeous, busty, yet utterly elegant redhead with amazement.

"Cameron - I never would have guessed you were him!"

Catherine blushed, touching her beautiful cheek as she wrung her hands together. "And I never would have guessed so either had I not lived it. But . . . I'm not really Cameron anymore, William. Just as I suspect you're not really Wendy anymore, are you?"

“How do you mean?”

Catherine approached and placed her hands softly on her chest. It was an intimate moment for the both of them. Her eyes bore into his, and her new wisdom helped her summon the words beyond even that of her compulsions.

“I’ve changed so much in this month, William. I’m not . . . I’m not the person I was. Taking you for granted, always having to be the breadwinner, not attending to any duties I deemed womanly . . . I don’t want to be that person anymore. I know this sounds mad to admit it, but I want to stay like this. As a woman, as Catherine, here. I’ve grown accustomed to so much, and . . . we could try again.”

William looked around, almost as if fearing a prank. “With me? You tore my book apart! You put us here!”

At this, her gaze became fiery. “And do you know what, Mr Barnes? I don’t regret a thing! I’ve become a better person. I should never have done it, but look at us! We’re happier now, aren’t we? You’re more forthright, more confident, more able to take charge. And the good Lord knows I’ve finally been dealt some much-needed humility. We both have what we need. And if you’re to apologise for your arrogance as a man, then I should apologise a thousand times over for my sins as Cameron. But I am not that person anymore, William. I am Lady Catherine. I am a woman. I am here, and strange and embarrassing as it sounds to even my own ears, I have fallen in love with you all over again, not as a man, but as a woman, with a woman’s heart and woman’s love.”

William was taken back. He had not expected this in the least. He had hoped to be free of Cameron, but always wanted him to be safe. And yet . . . now he understood. He too had gone on a journey, why couldn’t Cameron? No, not Cameron. *Catherine*. And as he looked into her eyes he found he could not be angry, or repulsed, or even frustrated. There was just the core of what his heart wanted.

“Catherine,” he said, almost in a whisper. “Are you sure about this? We could find a way out, get back to our former lives. The internet, your football obsession, better plumbing, *cars*.”

She just shook her head, tears appearing in the corners of her eyes. “I don’t want any of that. I want you, William. I want us. If . . if you want that too.”

William gave a chuckle, looking up at the stars as if in disbelief.

“It’s all the romance I ever wanted, and yet totally different. But perhaps that makes it a better story for this book, hmm?”

Catherine cocked her head quizzically, unsure of what that meant. She got her answer just moments later, however, because William reached into his coat pocket and withdrew a fine sparkling necklace that made the woman gasp.

“Consider this a gift, a token of my love,” he said. “My renewed love for you, Catherine, for us to start again. Will you do me the great honour, not of being the boyfriend you were, but instead of being the wife I shall forever adore?”

Catherine could not contain her tears. They flowed down her cheeks, and she let loose a nervous giggle that set her bosom shaking. And, because she still possessed a bit of impropriety, she launched herself into William’s arms and placed her lips onto his, kissing him deeply and holding the man she loved.

“I take it that’s a yes?”

“Yes, and a thousand times more!” she declared. “I will be your wife, William Barnes. The way, I think, it was always meant to be!”

` And for good measure, she kissed him again.

***

Tina entered the apartment. No one had answered her calls, and her friend had not returned her texts. She was worried that her magic spell had gone wrong, but surely Wendy wouldn’t have tried it at the apartment with Cameron, right? They were going to break up first! But still, she felt she had a duty to check up on Wendy after she failed to turn up for work at the bookstore, and ensure she was alright. However, upon entering the living room of the deserted apartment, the witch saw two halves of her magical book separated; one before the television, the other on the couch.

“Oh, shit!”

This was bad. A rip could mean that the user would be trapped, or that the story could not conclude, or all manner of disaster. The witch hurried to grab both halves and check over the arcane story that was developing within.

Wait, still developing?

“How is it still writing? This book is bigger than it should be!”

It also carried the weight of two souls, which made her nervous. Thankfully, she could at least repair the tome with a customary mending spell, but that was only the start. Tina looked over the tome with all its additional pages. The story was going far beyond what it should have been! These things are meant to end in a proposal, and little else! Panicked, the young woman flicked through the pages, getting a sense of the story. William was differently characterised from what he should have been, and Catherine was quite embarrassed and reluctant at points. What was going on?

She soon understood as she flicked to the midway point.

“Wendy!?”

William halted, his blue eyes wide.

“Cameron!?”

The two stared at one another, a hundred little clues finally coalescing into epiphany.

“You - you’re a woman!?”

“And you’re a man!?”

“How did you . . ?”

“And how did you . . ?”

“Oh God,” Tina said. She took up a seat on the couch and read more, scanning through the pages. “Oh God, oh fuck, oh shit. They’ve both ended up in there, and in the wrong body! Wendy, shit, I’m so sorry! I’ll try to . . . wait a moment . . .”

She read further. The pages kept on going.

Catherine had never been so happy in her life. Though she was once a man, and not one who ever wished to get married, she now relished the opportunity to walk down the aisle in her wedding dress. Yes, she had ensured some more modern traditions crept into her wedding, but what was the harm? Everyone knew that she was a spirited young woman, and besides, with a groom like Mr Barnes, she could do what the hell she wanted! And so it was that she marched down the aisle-

Tina frowned, and flicked ahead more pages.

“Ohhhhh! D-don’t stop! God, it feels so strange, William! Strange, but good!”

“I can go more slowly, my darling.”

“N-no! I want to be all yours! I want you inside me, husband. I just - ahhh! - need to get over my old fears. Especially when it feels so good.”

“I don’t mind being on this side of things either. Or feelings these . . .”

At this, he cupped her breasts, suckling on one of her nipples and causing such fits of pleasure that she let loose a -

More pages. Pages of sex, pages of love, pages of walks in the forest and garden and enjoyable parties with fellow peers. Pages of the pair laughing as they compared their experiences, and amusement as they worked with their compulsions instead of against them. Slowly, Tina came to a conclusion, her anxiousness softening as she read the joys and satisfaction that this loving pair made in their own book world.

“How could I ever pull you out now?” she said aloud.

The witch closed the book and let it keep adding page after page. She bundled it up in her bag and left the apartment, certain that the two lovers were exactly where, when, and *who* they were meant to be.

They would be there for the rest of their lives, drawn to one another as much as they had been drawn into the book.

The End