

Mary Foxe had known that it was more than a matter of snapping her fingers and having Mr Fox change his ways – she'd known it would be difficult, but this was beyond all her expectations. She'd been asleep for days, in a four-poster bed in a dark blue room. There wasn't a part of her body that didn't ache. Her brain ached most of all. She'd felt terrible burning his stories, which she'd actually thought were rather good. She couldn't have let Mr Fox get away with beheading her, though. That was exactly the kind of behaviour she had set out to discourage. She was aware of a large clock ticking outside the bedroom door, but it didn't wake her up. Mary was busy having a very long dream.

In her dream, she was a spinster. Fastidious, polite, and thirty-eight years old. Her features were plain and unremarkable – they had always been plain and unremarkable. She had been a dutiful daughter when her parents were alive, and now Dream-Mary lived in the attic of the house her parents had left her. The remainder of the house she had hoped to let to a family – but no family liked the idea of living there with her up in the attic like that. So Mary let the house below to a solicitor named Pizarsky. He was out all day – that was good. He was punctual with his rent – also good. In the evenings, however, he hosted parties that were

exclusively attended by attractive young ladies who giggled for hours on end. That was tiresome.

Mary and Mr Pizarsky kept their exchanges as brief as possible:

'Morning, Miss F.'

'Good morning, Mr Pizarsky.'

'Here's the rent, Miss F.'

'Thank you, Mr Pizarsky.'

'Off home for Christmas now, Miss F.'

'Merry Christmas, Mr Pizarsky.'

On Valentine's Day, Dream-Mary bought herself a single red rose, then immediately ran back into the shop, confused and embarrassed, to return it.

Most days Dream-Mary stayed at her desk until sunset, working in the special quiet of the otherwise empty house, the settling of floorboards and the ticking of clocks. She wrote romance novels under the pen name Wendy Darling. Hers were gloriously improbable tales, stuffed with happy coincidences, eternal devotion and the unwavering recognition of inner beauty. They were in great demand, Mary's novels. They were read-them-once-and-throw-them-away sort of books, really. And Mary had seen people doing just that, throwing her novels away, or very deliberately leaving them behind on park benches and bus seats once they had finished. She tried not to let it get her down. She didn't like to brood. She kept a framed photograph of her parents on her desk, to remind herself of their story, which amazed her. They had fallen in love and kept it up far into old age; that was all. Her father was the hero in every story she wrote, and her mother was the heroine. They had been gone five years, but she brought them together again and again, thirty-five

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lines of cream-coloured foolscap folio at a time. And they never tired of finding each other, even when she was reduced, in the final chapters, to typing with just one finger, her little finger, jabbing out words until her hand curled up and could do no more. She completed a novel every other month and took August and December off.

It was Dream-Mary's custom to read the local newspaper