

I Choose... By: Daniela Ferry

The bustling energy of Manhattan buzzed around Violet Strawberington as she finished her shift at The Curvy Gals, a small coffee shop known for its progressive clientele and liberal decor. The sign above the door was a bold, curvy font, celebrating body positivity and feminist ideals. The shop was a haven for like-minded individuals, a comforting bubble amidst the frenetic pace of the city.

Violet wiped the last table, her thoughts drifting to the mountain of homework awaiting her. She pocketed her tips, bid her coworkers goodnight, and stepped out into the cool evening air. The streets were alive with people, cars honking, and the distant hum of a subway train. She maneuvered through the crowd, feeling the city's pulse beneath her feet.

Her apartment, a cramped space in an old building, greeted her with a stack of past-due letters on the kitchen table. The sight of them sent a wave of despair through her. She tossed them aside and slumped into her chair. With hopeless frustration, she sighed, wiped her eyes, and opened her laptop, determined to channel her anger and frustration into her midterm. The topic was "How to Combat Toxic Masculinity," something she felt quite passionately about. Violet typed furiously, pouring her thoughts and emotions into each word, hoping to at least find some relief in her academic pursuits.

The shrill ring of her phone jolted her from her concentration. She glanced at the screen, seeing an unknown number. With a sigh, she answered.

"Hello?"

"Miss Strawberington, this is Mr. Harlan, your great-great aunt's attorney. I'm calling to inform you of her passing and to discuss the terms of her will."

Violet felt a flicker of annoyance. She had no fond memories of Great-Great Aunt Louisa Marinette, a staunch conservative whose beliefs clashed with hers.

"I see. What do I need to do?"

"I need you to come to my office tomorrow morning to discuss the details. There are important matters regarding your inheritance."

"Inheritance?" Violet's interest piqued. The promise of financial relief was too tempting to ignore. "Alright, I'll be there."

The next morning, Violet found herself in a grand, old-fashioned law office, feeling out of place in her thrift-store clothes. Mr. Harlan, a distinguished man in a tailored suit, greeted her warmly and ushered her into his office.

"Miss Strawberington, your great-great aunt left quite a substantial estate," he began, adjusting his glasses. "You are to inherit one hundred and five million dollars."

Violet's jaw dropped. "What? Are you serious?"

Mr. Harlan nodded. "However, there is a stipulation. You will only inherit the money if you marry a respectable man from the list your great-great aunt chose for you."

Violet's initial excitement turned to disbelief and anger. "Marry a man from a list? This is the twenty-first century!"

"I understand your frustration, but these are the terms. Take some time to think about it. Here is the list of suitors, each with a portfolio."

Back in her apartment, Violet stared at the list and the accompanying portfolios, exasperated. She examined the portfolios containing the suitors' photos, ages, interests, and job details. After consideration, she narrowed it to Erik Chefmore and Robert Mossborn.

Erik Chefmore:

- Age: 29
- Job: Investment Banker
- Hobbies: Sailing, fine dining, classical music
- Picture: A handsome man with a confident smile, dressed in a tailored suit
- Notes: Known for his chivalrous behavior but has a reputation as a womanizer.

Robert Mossborn:

- Age: 31
- Job: Professor of Philosophy
- Hobbies: Reading, hiking, social activism
- Picture: A serious-looking man with sharp features, casually dressed
- Notes: Strong advocate for gender equality but is known for being cold and indifferent.

Determined to find clarity, Violet met both men, hoping to make a more informed decision. Her first date with Erik was at a high-end restaurant. Erik was the epitome of chivalry, opening doors, pulling out chairs, and refusing to let her pay. His charm was undeniable, and Violet felt a flutter in her heart. Yet, she couldn't ignore his reputation as a womanizer. Despite his reassurances that he was serious about her, doubts lingered.

Her date with Robert was a stark contrast. They met at a modest café, and Robert's demeanor was brusque.

"You're a grown adult, you can get your own damn door," he said when she hesitated at the entrance. Their conversation was intellectually stimulating, filled with debates on gender roles. Robert's insistence on treating her as an equal was refreshing but also unsettling. His indifference towards her femininity made her feel unseen and unappreciated.

Conflicted, Violet decided to observe the men more closely. She followed Erik one evening, expecting to catch him in his usual flirtations. Instead, she saw him helping an elderly woman with her groceries. He was ... genuinely kind. It was a side of Erik she hadn't expected, and it softened her view of him.

When she spied on Robert, she witnessed him in a heated debate with a female colleague. His respect for her opinions and his fair, albeit intense, argument impressed Violet. Yet, his lack of warmth and tenderness left her yearning for more.

As weeks passed, Violet's internal struggle intensified. Erik made her feel cherished and special, yet his perceived past and chivalrous tendencies clashed with her feminist ideals. Yet, Robert's equality and intellectual engagement resonated with her beliefs, but his coldness left her lonely when they were together.

One evening, as she sat in her apartment, the weight of her decision pressing down on her, Violet received a call from Erik. He wanted to take her out for a special night. She agreed, hoping to find some clarity. Erik took her to a beautiful rooftop garden, the city lights twinkling below them. He got down on one knee and proposed, his eyes filled with genuine love and sincerity.

"I have never once felt this way before about another soul. YOU, Ms. Violet Marinette Strawberington, are the sole woman I fancy. Will you create a life together with me and honor me by becoming my wife?"

Tears welled up in her eyes as she accepted the ring, feeling a mixture of joy and guilt. Part of her knew she was choosing Erik for the wrong reasons, yet she couldn't deny the happiness he brought her.

Desperate for closure, Violet met Robert one last time.

"Why are you so indifferent to me?!" she demanded.

Robert's cold facade cracked slightly. "I thought you wanted equality, ...Violet. I treated you like anyone else because I respected you. But I see now that's not what you truly needed."

His words stung but also brought clarity. Robert admitted that the inheritance drove his initial interest, but he'd grown to admire her strength and intellect.

"But I won't change who I am or my principles, not even for you. This is goodbye, Ms. Strawberington," his voice firm but tinged with regret. He never saw her again.

With a heavy heart but a clear mind, Violet chose Erik. She found solace in his warmth and chivalry, realizing love often transcends ideology. Erik remained devoted, and their relationship blossomed into a marriage filled with respect and affection. Over time, Violet embraced her decision, balancing her feminist beliefs and the traditional romance she had once scorned.

In the ensuing weeks, Violet reflected on her great-great aunt's stipulation. She began to see it not as a manipulation but as a deeply rooted desire for Violet to find stability and happiness. Louisa Marinette had lived when *ladies'* choices were more restricted, and perhaps her conservative values ensured Violet's future was secure, at least in her mind.

Violet visited Mr. Harlan again to learn more about her aunt. She discovered letters and journals that revealed Louisa's struggles and triumphs, her fierce love for family, and her hopes for Violet's future.

April 14, 1953

This world I live in is one where a lady must always know her place. I find myself constrained, helpless without a man next to me! Just this morning I went to withdraw some funds from our bank, and the bank teller, with a condescending tone said and I quote, "Without your husband present, I will not release your funds, surely madam, you already knew that!" Fury spread to every vein in my body, but since it is considered improper for a lady to outburst in public, I had to, like always, compose myself and smile at this weasel of a man. "Of course, good sir, my beloved John had expressly entrusted me with this errand as he would be kept late at work today." "Good sir! Why?!" Why must I grovel just to accomplish basic tasks! It is though I am seen as a child, incapable of "complex matters" without my dearest John holding my hand. It is infuriating to be treated as less capable simply because I am a lady! This prison would be insufferable if not for my darling John. Thank you, Father, for him; I am filled with felicity and joy because I am by his side, not his rear. He, alone, respects me. I pray that one day, the ladies of our lineage will find as splendid a man as I. Then, life will be worth living.

The more Violet read, the more she understood her Aunt. Shockingly, Louisa's values mirrored hers; she was a Godly woman who yearned for a better life for her family. Violet knew now she had chosen correctly. Erik and Violet's lifelong marriage affirmed this. In the end... chivalry won.