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ELIZABETH BOYLE

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AVON
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And the Miss Ran Away With the RAKE

❁ Rhymes With Love ❁

And the Miss Ran Away With the Rake

Rhymes With Love

Elizabeth Boyle



AVON

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Dedication

To my readers,

This, my twentieth book, is dedicated to each and every one of you.

*To those of you who have been with me since the beginning and to those of you who have found me
along the way.*

*Your letters, notes, e-mails, encouragement and friendship have taught me more about the power of
storytelling than anything else.*

Thank you for being at my side through the good days, and especially through the trying ones.

You hold my heart and appreciation.

Bless you all,

Elizabeth, your devoted fan

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

In a tiny corner of England, there was a village that boasted a curse. Now, most places would rather ignore the fact that they were cursed, but not Kempton. Their curse made them unique, and they clung to it with a stubborn resolve.

Who was to argue with a curse that left every maiden born of the village a spinster for the length of her days? And woe be it to the man who dared marry one of Kempton's ladies. The last courageous fellow, a Mr. John Stakes, tempted the powers that be and married Agnes Perts. A man with such a last name should never have given the Fates such an opening, nor should he have left an unsecured fire poker in the wedding chamber.

Just saying.

And while no one was quite sure how the curse had happened or how to resolve it, Miss Theodosia Walding had once let slip at the weekly meeting of the Society for the Temperance and Improvement of Kempton that she'd been researching the matter in hopes of freeing the village from this plague, and she'd found her investigations met with abject horror.

She never made such an impertinent, and quite frankly ridiculous, statement ever again.

But this is not her story. It isn't even the story of the rather remarkable lady who is thought to have broken the curse, Miss Tabitha Timmons, the now infamous Kempton spinster, who inherited a fortune from a wayward uncle (aren't all fortunes inherited thusly?), went to London and got herself betrothed to a duke.

Yes, *a duke*.

But since Tabitha and her scandalous nobleman are as yet unmarried, and the duke hasn't shown up with some sharp object imbedded in his chest or been found floating face down in the millpond, no one can say definitively that the Curse of Kempton is broken.

However, one intrepid miss from Kempton, Miss Daphne Dale, is about to take her own stab at finding a perfectly sensible husband.

No pun intended.

The Author

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An Excerpt from If Wishes Were Earls

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Prologue

Sensible gentleman of means seeks a sensible lady of good breeding for correspondence, and in due consideration, matrimony.

An advertisement placed in the *Morning Chronicle*

Earlier in the Season of 1810

“No! No! No!” Lord Henry Seldon exclaimed as their butler brought a second basket of letters in the morning room. “Not more of those demmed letters! Burn them, Benley! Take them out of my sight!”

His twin sister, Lady Juniper, the former Lady Henrietta Seldon, looked up from her tea and did her best to stifle a laugh as poor Benley stood there, wavering in the doorway, grasping a large wicker basket overflowing with correspondence. “Set them beside the others and ignore his lordship, Benley. He is in an ill humor this morning.”

Ill humor? Try furious, Henry would have told her. Instead, he vented his anger toward the true object of his ire. “I am going to kill you for this, Preston.”

Preston, being Henry and Henrietta’s nephew, who was also the Duke of Preston and the head of their family, ducked behind his newspaper at the other end of the table, feigning innocence in all this. If only he was innocent in deed.

Hardly. Currently, he was the bane of Henry’s existence. Not only had Preston’s rakish actions—having ruined no less than five young ladies in the past few weeks—put the duke on the “not received list” but now that taint had spread to Henry and Hen, for suddenly they’d joined the ranks of “barely received.”

Guilty by association, as it were.

“You cannot kill Preston,” Hen said, wading in. She wiped her lips with her napkin and set it down beside her breakfast plate. “You are his heir. It would be bad form.”

“Yes, bad form indeed, Uncle,” Preston said over the top of his paper. Preston only called Henry “Uncle” when he wanted to vex him further—there being a difference of only six months in age between the three of them—Preston’s grandfather having added the twins to the nursery at an indecently advanced age.

And making Henry the uncle to one of London’s most notorious rakes.

So if Preston wanted to play proper nephew, then Henry would oblige him by glaring back, taking the bait against his better judgment. “Bad form was what you and that idiot friend of yours, Roxley, displayed when you placed that ridiculous advertisement in the *Morning Chronicle*.”

That one small advertisement, a drunken joke, had now garnered an avalanche of responses. Henry was being buried alive in letters from ladies seeking husbands.

“You should be thanking me,” Preston pointed out. “Now you can have your pick of brides without ever having to set foot in Almack’s.”

“Thanking you? I don’t want to get married,” Henry declared. “That is your business. Why don’t you marry one of these tabbies?”

Preston glanced up, an odd look in his eye. “Perhaps I’ve already found my own tabby.”

“Oh, there’s a lark,” Henry sputtered. “Are you telling us that you intend to marry that vicar’s daughter you’ve been dallying after?”

Before Preston could answer, Hen chimed in, “You should be thankful, Henry, that Preston didn’t place that unfortunate jape in the *Times*.” Her lips curled into a smile before she took one more sip from her tea and settled back in her seat. “Personally, I found Preston’s ad rather dull myself.”

“Dull?” Preston complained, snapping his paper shut and eyeing his aunt. “I am never dull.”

“Then tedious,” she corrected. “I can’t imagine anyone replying to such nonsense, let alone wanting to marry a man who describes himself as ‘sensible.’ ” She glanced up at Benley, who was placing the basket of correspondence next to the one that had arrived earlier. “Just how many lonely hearts are there in London?”

“This will make over two hundred, my lady,” Benley said, warily eyeing the collection that carried with it a competing air of rose water and violets. “My lord,” he said, turning to Lord Henry, “Lady Taft’s footman would like to know how you are going to settle the bill for the outstanding postage. Her ladyship is quite put out at having to pay for a goodly number of these—apparently the newspaper has now reached the outlying counties.”

Hen’s eyes widened. “The letters are arriving at your house?”

“Yes, they are,” Henry told her.

“I wasn’t so foxed that I’d use this address,” Preston supplied. “Can you imagine the clamor and interruptions?” He shuddered and returned to his paper.

“Which is exactly why Lady Taft is not amused,” Henry said. “I promised her when she took my house for the Season that it was the quietest of addresses.”

The house in question, on the very respectable and previously sedate Cumberland Place, was a large residence that Henry had inherited from his mother, though he had yet to live in it. He, Preston and Hen (when she was between husbands) lived quite comfortably in the official London residence of the Seldons on Harley Street, just off the corner of Cavendish Square. With such a good address and all the comforts of a ducal residence, Henry saw no reason to strike out on his own.

Besides, he could collect an indecent amount of rent for his well-situated Mayfair house—though now even that was in question. He glared at his nephew again, but Preston was too busy studying his newspaper to notice.

Probably examining it for more gossip about, what else, himself.

Really, who wouldn’t blame Lady Taft for threatening to quit the lease, what with a bell that was ringing constantly from the steady arrival of these demmed letters?

All addressed to *A Sensible Gentleman*.

Well, right now he felt anything but sensible.

Henry shoved his seat back from the table and got to his feet. Crossing the room in a few quick strides, he caught up the first basket and strode over to the fireplace.

“Good heavens!” Hen exclaimed, jumping up. “Whatever are you doing?”

Even Preston put down his newspaper and gaped.

“What does it look like?” Henry said, poised before the grate. “I am going to burn the lot of them.”

Hen dashed across the room, a black streak in her widow’s weeds, and yanked the basket from his grasp. “You cannot do that.”

He tried to retrieve it, but this was Hen, and she was quite possibly the most stubborn Seldon wife he had ever lived. She turned so the basket was out of his reach and glared at him.

“The ladies who wrote these letters did so with great care. They are expecting responses. You cannot just burn them to suit your mood,” she said, looking down at the basket of notes she held. “You must reply to them. All of them.”

Too busy hoping that the overwhelming *eau du floral* rising from the pages would leave his sister to overcome, Henry gave scant regard to what she was saying. All he could hope was that when Hen went out cold on the floor, he’d have enough time to consign them to the flames before she came to.

But not even the happy image of these annoying reminders of Preston’s prank roasting over the coals could overshadow what Hen was saying.

What she wanted him to do: answer them.

Henry stilled. Answer them? *All* of them?

A notion that Preston found quite amusing. “Yes, Henry, I quite agree,” the duke said. “You wouldn’t want to disappoint so many ladies. That would hardly be sensible.”

Henry ignored Preston and faced down his sister. “You can’t seriously expect me to write to all those women?”

“But of course! Each one of these poor, dear souls is awaiting your answer. Most likely watching the post as we speak.”

He let out a graveled snort at the image of lovelorn spinsters all over London—and from the returned addresses, a good part of England—sitting by their front doors in hopes true love was about to arrive in a scrap of paper, sealed with a wafer. “That is ridiculous.”

“It is not,” Hen said, in that tone of hers that Henry knew all too well meant she would brook no opposition. Hen carried the basket to the table and began sorting through the feminine appeals. “Do you recall what I was like when Lord Michaels was courting me and how distraught I was when I did not hear from him for two days straight?”

Both Henry and Preston groaned at the mere mention of that bounder’s name.

Michaels being her second husband. There had been three to date—with her most recent venture Lord Juniper, having died suddenly nearly six months earlier. Hence the widow’s weeds and the onset of Hen’s sentimental side.

“I had no idea if he loved me or not,” she declared, clutching a few of the letters to her breast, as if to make a desperate point. That is until the competing florals doused over the letters made her sneeze and she had to surrender the missives back into the basket.

“Didn’t stop you from marrying him when he did bother to show up,” Henry muttered. Then again, he’d never approved of Lord Michaels. A mere baron and barely that.

Hen sniffed. “Be that as it may, those two days, when I knew not what he was thinking, those were the longest, worst two days of my life.”

“Really, Hen? Isn’t that doing it up a bit? The *worst* two days of your life?” Henry shook his head and glared at the basket of letters. They were making this the worst week of his life.

“You must answer these,” she repeated, wagging a finger at her brother. “If only to let these ladies know that they have been deceived, just as you were, and you are most sorry for any distress this will cause them.”

“Make Preston apologize,” Henry told her, pointing toward the real culprit in all this. “He placed

the ad.”

“Yes, well, you know he will never do that,” Hen said with a dismissive wave.

“And I wouldn’t have placed it if you hadn’t been so prosy that night,” Preston complained. “Going on and on about how I’d ruined the family’s good name.” He picked up his paper. “I would remind you both, we are Seldons. We have never had a good name.”

“Exactly,” Henry said, latching onto the notion with an idea of his own. “When these ladies discover who has written them, and they nose it about how they’ve been ill-used by a Seldon, don’t you think, Hen, that this will only go to sully our family name further? Might even leave you cut from Almack’s.”

Both he and Preston eyed her speculatively. For while Preston was in name the head of the family, neither of them naysaid Hen. Not if they knew what was good for them.

And it very nearly worked.

Nearly.

“There is no reason for you to sign your own name,” she pointed out. “Sign it . . .” She tapped her fingers against her lips and then smiled. “I know! Sign it ‘Mr. Dishforth.’ ”

“Dishforth!” Henry exclaimed, for it had been some time since that name had been uttered under their roof.

“Dishforth! Of course! I don’t know why I didn’t think of it myself, Hen,” Preston said with an approving nod. Of course he would approve. Dishforth—Henry’s invention when they were children—had become Preston’s shining hero. If something got broken or the apple tart disappeared and all that was left was a plate of crumbs, the always culpable and ever rascalion “Mr. Dishforth” was blamed much to the annoyance of their nannies and tutors.

Dishforth had been the cause of any number of tragedies. And now, it seemed, he could take the reckoning for this newest one.

“That doesn’t get you off the hook, Preston,” Henry told him. “You are going to answer those letters.”

“Trust me to do that?” Preston said, waggling his brows and winking at Hen.

“Preston won’t have the time, Henry. You’ll have to see to this yourself,” Hen advised her brother. And her nephew.

“He won’t?”

“I won’t?”

“No,” she replied. “I don’t see why you are complaining, Henry. I know very well you will assign the task to your secretary and be done with the matter.”

Henry had the good sense to look sheepish, as this was what he had planned from the very first moment she’d suggested he respond to the letters.

Not that Preston was going to escape her wrath either. Looking the duke in the eye, she said, “You will have nothing more to do with this, as you are going to be too busy finding a wife. A respectable lady to bring your reputation—and ours—up out of the gutter.”

“Good God, Hen! Not this again,” Preston moaned. “What if I told you I had already discovered such a paragon? The perfect lady to be my duchess.”

“I wouldn’t believe you,” Hen replied, arms crossed over her chest.

Henry grinned over his sister’s shoulder at Preston, only too pleased to see the tables turned on the scalawag of a duke. For once.

But Henry hardly got the last laugh in.

As Hen was dragging Preston from the morning room, the duke turned and pointed a finger at her

uncle. “Best answer those quickly. Lady Taft is known to gossip. Terrible shame if it were nosed about Town that you’ve been advertising for a wife.” He waggled his brows and was then led off by Henry whatever fate she had in store for him.

For a moment, Henry spared his nephew a twinge of guilt—what bachelor wouldn’t at the sight of a fellow comrade being led to his demise?—though his sympathies didn’t last for long. Not when he realized that Preston would find it all that much more amusing to spread his joke about Town, albeit via Lady Taft.

Bother him! He would do just that. Probably get that jinglebrains Roxley to spill what they’d done and then he, Henry, would be the laughingstock of London.

He hadn’t even considered that horror.

Now in a regular pique over the mere threat of this humiliation becoming public knowledge, Henry realized he needed to nip it all in the bud.

And quickly.

Going to retrieve the first basket, he noticed one of the letters had fallen to the floor, the wax seal having come loose and the page wide open.

Inside, a vivid, albeit feminine, hand caught his eye, her bold script jumping off the pages.

Dear Sensible Sir,

If your advertisement is naught but a jest, let me assure you it is not funny. . . .

Despite his mood, Henry laughed. This impertinent minx had the right of it. There was not one funny piece to the entire situation. Glancing at the letter again, he realized most of the first page was a censorious lecture on the moral ambiguities of trifling with the hearts of ladies.

A composition that would scald even Preston’s thick skin.

Not even realizing what he was doing, Henry sat down at the table, entirely engrossed in the lady’s frank words. Pouring himself a fresh cup of coffee—for while Henry and Preston loved tea, Henry much preferred coffee, and Benley always made sure there was a pot on hand—he propped his feet on Henry’s chair and read the entire letter. Twice.

And laughed both times. Good God, what a handful of a minx. He tossed the letter down on the table, but his gaze kept straying back to the last lines.

However, if your wishes are truly to meet a sensible lady, then perhaps . . .

He paused and looked at that one word. *Perhaps.*

No, he couldn’t, he thought, shaking his head. But then he glanced at the letter again and, again every bit of sense he possessed (for Preston had been correct about one thing; Henry was over-sensible), he called for Benley to bring him a pen and some plain paper.

Chapter 1

Miss Spooner,

I will be frank. Your reply to the advertisement in the paper displayed exactly how little you know of men. No wonder you are as yet unmarried. Either you are a frightful scold or the most diverting minx who ever lived. I suppose only time and correspondence will abate my curiosity.

A letter from Mr. Dishforth to Miss Spooner

London, six weeks later

“Miss Dale, you appear flushed. Are you coming down with a fever? That will never do, not here at Miss Timmons’s engagement ball!” Lady Essex Marshom declared, turning to her recently employed hired companion, Miss Manx. “Where is my vinaigrette?”

While the beleaguered young woman dug through a reticule the size of a valise to find one of the many items Lady Essex insisted Miss Manx have on hand at all times, Daphne did her best to wave the dear old spinster off.

“I am most well, Lady Essex,” she told her, sending a look of horror over at her best friend, Miss Tabitha Timmons. The last time Lady Essex had pressed her infamous vinaigrette into use, Daphne hadn’t been able to smell a thing for a week.

“You do look a bit pink,” Tabitha agreed, a mischievous light flitting in her brown eyes.

Daphne bit back the response that came to mind, for ever since Tabitha had gotten herself engaged to the Duke of Preston, she’d become as cheeky as a fishwife, displaying none of her previous sensible nature.

This is what came of marrying a Seldon.

Daphne tried not to shudder right down to her Dale toes, for here she was in the very heart of Seldon territory—at their London house on Harley Street, where Tabitha and Preston’s engagement ball was being held.

But Daphne couldn’t begrudge Tabitha her happiness—there was no arguing that Preston had her glowing with joy. And the engagement had brought them all back to London. Where all Daphne’s hopes lay.

Ones that rested upon a certain gentleman. And tonight, Daphne carried high expectations she would be . . . would be . . . She glanced over at her dear friend and whispered a secret prayer that when she found her true love, she might be as happy.

And how could she not with Mr. Dishforth somewhere in this room?

Yes, Mr. Dishforth. She, Daphne Dale, the most sensible of all the ladies of Kempton, was engaged

in a torrid correspondence with a complete stranger.

And tonight she would come face-to-face with him.

Oh, she would have stared down an entire regiment of Seldons tonight if only to attend this ball. To find her dear Mr. Dishforth.

“Who looks a bit pink?” Miss Harriet Hathaway asked, having just arrived from the dance floor looking altogether pink and flushed.

Meanwhile, Lady Essex was growing impatient. “Miss Manx, how many times do I have to remind you how imperative it is to keep one’s vinaigrette close at hand?”

Harriet cringed and asked in an aside, “Who is the intended victim?”

Tabitha pointed at Daphne, who in turn mouthed two simple words.

Save me.

And being the dearest friend alive, Harriet did. “It is just Daphne’s gown, Lady Essex. That rich satin is giving her a definite glow. A becoming one, don’t you think?”

Bless Harriet right down to her slippers, she’d tried.

“She’s flushed, I say,” Lady Essex averred. Then again, Lady Essex also liked any opportunity to bring out her vinaigrette and had even now taken the reticule from Miss Manx and was searching its depths herself. “I won’t have you fainting, Daphne Dale. It is nigh on impossible to maintain a ladylike demeanor when one is passed out on the floor.”

Tabitha shrugged. It was hard to argue that fact.

Yet Harriet was ever the intrepid soul and refused to give up. “I’ve always found, Lady Essex, that a turn about the room is a much better means of restoring one’s vitality.” She paused and slanted a wink at Daphne and Tabitha while the lady was still engrossed in her search. “Besides, while I was dancing with Lord Fieldgate, I swore I saw Lady Jersey on the other side of the room.”

“Lady Jersey, you say?” Lady Essex perked up, immediately diverted. Better still, she failed to remember that she should probably be chastising Harriet for dancing with the roguish viscount in the first place.

“Yes, I am quite certain of it.” Then Harriet did one better and looped her arm into the spinster’s, handed the hated reticule back to Miss Manx and steered the old girl into the crowd. “Weren’t you saying earlier today that if you could but have a word with her, you’d have our vouchers for next Season?”

Just like that, the hated vinaigrette was utterly forgotten and so was Daphne’s flushed countenance.

A Lady Jersey sighting trumped all.

With Harriet and Lady Essex sailing ahead, Daphne and Tabitha followed, albeit at a safe distance so they could talk.

“You are taking a terrible risk,” Tabitha whispered to Daphne. “If Lady Essex were to find out—”

“Sssh!” Daphne tapped her finger to her lips. “Don’t even utter it aloud. She can hear everything.”

It was a miracle as it was that the old girl hadn’t discovered Daphne’s deepest, darkest secret—that she’d answered an advertisement in the paper from a gentleman seeking a wife.

There it was. And the gentleman had answered her. And then she had replied in kind. And so the exchange had gone on for the last month, all anonymous and mysterious and most likely beyond the pale and ruinous if anyone discovered the truth.

Certainly if Lady Essex found out that such a scandalous correspondence had been carried out right under her nose, the only notes Daphne would be composing would be answering the messages and condolences for Lady Essex’s fatal heart ailment.

“Do you think he’s here yet?” Tabitha asked, looking around the room.

Daphne shook her head, glancing as well at the crush of guests. "I have no idea. But he'll be here just know it."

Her own Mr. Dishforth. Daphne felt that telltale heat of a blush rising in her cheeks. At first the letters had been tentative and skeptical, but now their correspondence, which was carried out in a daily flurry of letters and notes, had suddenly taken a very intimate turn.

I would write more, but I have obligations this evening at an engagement party. Dare I hope my plans might intersect with yours?

Daphne pressed her fingers to her lips. *An engagement party.* Which could only mean he was here. At Tabitha and Preston's ball. Her Mr. Dishforth.

Wear red if your plans take you to such a festivity, and I will find you.

So she'd donned her brand-new red satin gown and come with breathless anticipation of finally putting the mystery of Mr. Dishforth's identity to rest.

Which would also stop Tabitha and Harriet from worrying over the entire situation. When they discovered what she'd done—*was* doing, rather—they'd been shocked.

"Daphne! How could you? An advertisement? In the paper?" Tabitha had said, clearly taken aback. "You have no idea who this Dishforth might be."

Harriet had been more to the point. "This bounder could be exactly like that horrible man Reading last year who advertised for a wife when he already had one in Leeds. Why, he could be one and the same!"

Daphne had cringed, for her Cousin Philomena, who'd been intercepting the letters being sent by Mr. Dishforth and passing them along to Daphne, had made the very same argument. Twice.

"You won't tell Lady Essex, will you?" she'd begged. Lady Essex did not take her role as the chaperone in London lightly. If she caught wind of this illicit correspondence—given the spinster's strict notions of suitable *partis* and proper courtship—Daphne's chance to discover Mr. Dishforth's identity would be lost.

Forever.

But luckily for Daphne, her friends, who were more like sisters to her, had agreed to keep her secret as long as she allowed them to have the final say in Mr. Dishforth's suitability before Daphne did anything rash.

As if she, a proper and respectable Dale, of the Kempton Dales, would do anything less.

Still, Daphne shivered slightly as she recalled that last line from Mr. Dishforth's recent missive. The one she hadn't read aloud to her friends.

I will be the most insensible gentleman in the room. Insensible with desire for you.

Smiling to herself, she stole another glance around the room, hoping beyond hopes to find some way to distinguish the man she sought from the press of handsome lords and gentlemen who filled out the distinguished guest list.

"Daphne, don't look now, but there is someone ahead who is paying you close heed," Tabitha whispered.

Indeed there was. Daphne tried to be subtle as she looked up, well aware that any gentleman in the room could be him.

But immediately she shook her head. “Oh, heavens no!”

“Why not?” Tabitha asked.

“Look at the cut of that coat. It is not Weston,” Daphne said. No, complained. For if any of the three of them knew fashion, it was Daphne. “My Mr. Dishforth”—for he was her Dishforth—“would never use that much lace. And look at the overdone falls of that cravat.” She shuddered. “Why, with all those wrinkles it looks as if it has been tied by a stevedore.”

Tabitha laughed, for she was well used to Daphne’s discerning and mostly biting opinions of fashion. “No, no, you are correct,” she agreed as the rake sidled past them, casting an appreciative glance at Daphne’s décolletage.

Not that such a glance wasn’t to be expected. The gown was a bit scandalous and Daphne had ordered it in a moment of passion, wondering what Dishforth would think of her, so elegantly and daringly attired.

Lady Essex came to a stop to gossip with an old friend, and Harriet drifted back toward them. “Now quickly, who is on your list, Daphne? Let’s find your Dishforth.”

Daphne plucked the list from her reticule. From the moment she’d learned that Mr. Dishforth was attending Tabitha’s engagement ball, the trio had scoured the invitation list for possible suspects.

“Lord Burstow,” Tabitha read over her shoulder.

The three of them glanced over at the man and discovered their information hadn’t been entirely correct.

“However did we get him so wrong?” Harriet whispered.

“He is well over eighty,” Tabitha said, making a *tsk, tsk* sound.

“And the way he shakes, well, he’d never be able to compose a legible note, let alone a letter,” Harriet pointed out.

They all agreed and struck him from their list, once again going back to their investigation.

“Tell us again what you do know,” Tabitha prodded.

Daphne, with Harriet’s help, had assembled a thick dossier on everything she knew about Dishforth. A compilation that would have rivaled the best produced by Harriet’s brother, Chauncey, who worked for the Home Office.

“First and foremost, he is a gentleman,” Daphne said. “He went to Eton—” a point he had mentioned in passing. “And his handwriting, spelling and composition all speak of a well-educated man.”

That fit most of the men in the room.

Daphne continued on. “He lives in London proper. Most likely Mayfair, given the regularity of his posts.”

“Or at the very least,” Harriet added, “has been in London since the appearance of his advertisement.”

“Nor did he quit Town at the end of the Season,” Tabitha pointed out.

Daphne suspected he might be a full-time resident of the city. “His letters are all delivered by footman in a plain livery.”

“Sneaky fellow,” Harriet said. “Livery would be so helpful.”

Oh, yes, Mr. Dishforth was a wily adversary to track down. The address his letters were sent to had turned out to be a rented house situated quite nicely at Cumberland Place—something the trio had discovered while they’d been purportedly walking in the park.

“It is too bad we have yet to meet Lady Taft,” Tabitha mused, glancing around the room, referring to the current occupant at that address. They had been able to learn—with the help of Lady Essex’s well-thumbed edition of *Debrett’s*—that her ladyship had two daughters and no sons.

Sad luck that, for it meant that Dishforth most likely resided elsewhere. Then again, Daphne was using her Great-Aunt Damaris’s address for her letters to avoid Lady Essex’s discovering the truth.

“If we do not find Dishforth tonight,” Harriet said, “then tomorrow we knock on Lady Taft’s door and interview her butler as to why her ladyship acts as Dishforth’s intermediary.”

“Or who her landlord might be,” Tabitha suggested.

“No!” Daphne exclaimed, for she held a secret hope for a much more romantic venue for their first meeting. And storming the portals of Lady Taft’s rented house did not fit into that scenario.

Of course, all of what Daphne knew about the man assumed that he was being completely honest with her. That his letters were not as fictional as his name.

Certainly she’d been honest with him.

Mostly so. Certainly not her name. For she had replied as Miss Spooner, the name of her first governess. It had seemed the perfect pseudonym at the time. Hadn’t her own Miss Spooner eloped one night with a dashing naval captain?

Still, it wasn’t only her name that wasn’t true. Daphne shifted uncomfortably, for she hadn’t been absolutely honest with Mr. Dishforth. She hadn’t mentioned her lack of finishing school. Or how she loathed London.

But some things were best not admitted in a letter.

And good heavens, if everyone was completely honest in courtship, no one would ever get married. Woolgathering as she was, Daphne hadn’t noticed that Lady Essex had returned.

“Miss Dale, you appear undone.” The old girl studied her with those piercing blue eyes of hers. “Positively flushed, I say. Miss Manx, my vinaigrette—”

“I am quite well,” Daphne rushed to reassure her.

“It is most likely the heat in this room,” Lady Essex declared. “A ball in July—I never! Do you suppose this Owle Park of Preston’s will be so stifling?”

“No, Lady Essex, not in the least,” Tabitha assured her. “Owle Park is most delightful. Large, airy rooms and a wonderful view of the river.”

“A river? That is promising, as long as it isn’t spoiled with all the heat,” she said. “Young ladies are not to their best advantage when they are damp with the heat. Ruins good silk.” She shot Daphne a significant glance, for earlier the lady had declared her red silk too hot—which had been Lady Essex’s polite way of saying “utterly improper”—and had suggested a more modest muslin for such a warm evening.

But Daphne had been determined. She was going to wear red, and when both Tabitha and Harriet had remarked how pretty and engaging Daphne appeared in her new gown, the old girl had relented.

For if there was one thing Lady Essex wanted for Harriet and Daphne, it was for them to show well. She was taking great delight in claiming full credit for Tabitha’s engagement to Preston, and she now had her sights set on a triple play, but only if she gained excellent matches for Daphne and Harriet.

“I hope you will be attentive to the right gentlemen, Daphne Dale. No more of this missish and particular behavior you’ve displayed of late,” Lady Essex said in no uncertain terms and probably loudly enough for half the ballroom to hear. “And bother your lack of dowry. Men tend to ignore those things when a lady is as fetching as you are. If I had but possessed your hair and fine eyes, I would have been a duchess.”

“Is that why you turned down the earl, Lady Essex?” Tabitha teased. “You were holding out for

duke?"

"Not all of us can be as lucky as you, Miss Timmons!" the lady declared. "A duchess, indeed! And Preston's bride, no less. The Seldons must be in alt over Preston finally getting married. And to think we all shall be there."

Daphne shuddered as she always did when she heard that name. There was nothing that set a Dale's teeth to rattling like that one single name.

Seldon.

How it was that the rest of English society didn't see them in the same light as every Dale did was beyond Daphne.

"Miss Dale, would you please find a way to smile over Miss Timmons's happiness," Lady Essex chided.

"Oh, just say it," Tabitha told her. "You wish I wasn't marrying a Seldon."

"I know I would never marry thusly," Daphne said diplomatically, because she had resigned herself to the notion that her dearest friend was wildly in love with Preston, and he with her.

If only . . . he wasn't a Seldon.

"Daphne," Lady Essex scolded, "that feud has dragged on for how long? A century?"

Nearly three, actually, but Daphne wasn't going to correct her.

"I would think the Dales and the Seldons could forgive and forget!" Lady Essex said. "It is all very tiresome. Besides, Tabitha is far better off marrying Preston than that odious Barkworth her uncle thought to force her to marry."

Tiresome feud, indeed! Daphne was only glad her mother wasn't here to hear such a thing. Moreover, so, that she wasn't here to see her only daughter attending a Seldon ball—against her mother's expressed wishes.

"Never fear, Lady Essex," Tabitha said, looping her arm into Daphne's and continuing their stroll around the room, "when I am married, Daphne will have no choice but to fall in love with the Seldons as well."

"How right you are," Lady Essex agreed. "Once she has attended the house party at Owle Park and seen your happiness in marriage, all this nonsense between the Seldons and the Dales will be forgotten. For by then, she will have found a husband as well."

Owle Park. Daphne glanced away, the very mention leaving her at odds. The Duke of Preston's country home. The Seldon family seat. A house as marked to the Dales as if it had been an annex to Sodom and Gomorrah.

"You are coming to the house party?" Tabitha pressed. What she really meant to ask was, *Are you coming to my wedding?*

Daphne stilled. Her parents, while delighted that Tabitha was making such an advantageous match, remained dead set against spending a fortnight in enemy territory.

In a Seldon house.

In such a place, her mother had said with a deep shudder.

Though they hadn't been so ill-mannered to say it thusly in Tabitha's hearing.

"I have been discussing the matter with my mother," Daphne told them. Discussing it was not quite the right way to describe the situation.

When Daphne had broached the subject, her mother had gone straight to her bed and spent two straight days encamped there, crying and wailing over the request, certain that taking her only daughter, her *unwed* daughter, to a Seldon house party was akin to consigning her to the nearest house of ill-repute.

Everyone knew the Seldons practiced the worst sort of debauchery, but out in the country? We away from the prying eyes of society, who knew what sort of depravity they would witness, subjected to . . .

We will all be ruined. Or worse, her mother had wailed and complained to her sympathetic husband.

What exactly “worse” implied, Daphne didn’t know. She only hoped that Tabitha wouldn’t so regret her marriage into such a notorious family and especially to its infamous duke. And his equally notorious relations—whom Daphne had managed to avoid meeting thus far.

“Of course she is coming to your wedding,” Lady Essex said, handing her fan to Miss Manx. “Your mother can see fit to allow you to attend the engagement ball, surely she will set aside her own prejudices and allow you to attend the duke’s house party. Why, half the *ton* is mad for an invitation and the other half is just plain mad over not getting one. Your mother is no fool, Daphne Dale.”

That might be true, Daphne wanted to tell Lady Essex, but her mother was a Dale through and through—both by marriage and birth. Her disdain of the Seldons was born not from a lifetime distrust but from generations of enmity.

“At least you are here tonight,” Tabitha said, smiling. “She didn’t forbid you to come to my engagement ball.”

Daphne pressed her lips together, for her mother had not exactly given her permission to attend.

Quite the opposite.

Certainly she had meant to keep her promise to her mother when she’d left Kempton and come to London with Tabitha that she would not spend a moment more than was necessary in the company of the Seldons.

Certainly tonight would suffice as “necessary,” with the likelihood of meeting Mr. Dishforth so close at hand.

Even if it meant enduring a dance with Preston’s uncle, Lord Henry Seldon.

Oh, it was a wretched notion, though.

“You’re thinking about Lord Henry, aren’t you?” Harriet said, giving her a nudge with her elbow.

“Please do not pull such a face when he comes to collect you,” Tabitha added.

“I wasn’t thinking of Lord Henry, nor am I pulling a face,” Daphne lied, forcing a smile onto her lips.

“You are and you were,” Harriet said. Sometimes there was no getting anything past her.

“Traitor,” Daphne whispered.

“Not my feud,” Harriet replied with a shrug.

Meanwhile, Tabitha stood there, arms crossed and slipper tapping impatiently.

“Oh, bother both of you!” Daphne said. “Yes, I promise I will appear the most gracious and contented lady in the room when I have to dance with *him*.”

“I don’t see what has you in such a state,” Harriet said. “From what Roxley says, Preston’s uncle is a most amiable fellow. A bit of a dullard, really.”

“*Tsk, tsk,*” Lady Essex clucked. “Whatever are you doing, Harriet, listening to that rapscaillie nephew of mine? His opinions hardly hold any credit. And Miss Timmons is correct, Miss Dale, you cannot go to the supper dance pulling such a face. Just dance with Lord Henry and be done with the matter.”

“How many times do I have to explain it?” Daphne huffed with a sigh of exasperation. “He’s Lord Seldon. If my family discovers I have danced with him, supped with him . . .”

She stopped herself right there.

Every time she thought of dancing with Lord Henry, she saw quite clearly every Dale Bible across England being opened and her name being vehemently scratched out.

And in some cases gouged out.

Great-Aunt Damaris would waste no time in ordering a new one in which would be inscribed reordered family lineage.

One that did not include Daphne.

“Daphne, I do not know what has come over you,” Tabitha scolded. “I thought you’d come to like Preston.”

“Oh, he seems to have come around,” she admitted, “but I think that has more to do with your influence, Tabitha, and nothing to do with his inherent Seldon nature.”

“Inherent Seldon nature?” Harriet’s nose wrinkled. “Listen to you. You sound like the worst sort of snob.”

Daphne took offense. “I am no snob, just well versed in the Seldon family history. Even Lady Essex will tell you that blood runs thick.”

Lady Essex pressed her lips together, her brows deeply furrowed, for indeed she did believe thusly but she could hardly admit such now. Instead, she made every appearance of searching the room for her previous quarry, Lady Jersey.

“Again, I have to ask, why must I dance with him?” Daphne grit her teeth and lips into a tight smile, if only to appear slightly amenable.

“It is Seldon tradition,” Tabitha repeated for about the fourth time, “that whoever is standing up with the bride dances at the engagement ball with whoever is standing up with the groom.”

Harriet chimed in quickly. “And you will do so because Tabitha is our dearest friend. And we will not have her happiness marred in any way whatsoever.” Her words were both a reminder and a bit of scold.

“You could dance with him,” Daphne pointed out. For wasn’t Harriet as much Tabitha’s friend as Daphne was?

“I told you, I already promised that dance to another,” Harriet said, folding her arms across her chest. “And it is only one dance.”

“It is not just one dance,” Daphne pointed out. There was also the supper arrangements. She had to dine with him. “You both know that my mother would not approve.”

“Your mother is in Kempton,” Harriet pointed out. “And we are here in London.”

“Gracious heavens, Harriet,” Lady Essex declared, squinting at a spot across the way. “There is Lady Jersey! And here I thought you’d made it up to keep me from pressing my vinaigrette upon Miss Dale.” She made a very pointed glance at the three of them, a warning to say that nothing, nothing, go past her, and then said, “Come now, Harriet, Miss Manx, we shall secure those vouchers for next Season—if they become necessary.” Again the sharp glance that spoke quite pointedly to the fact that she would prefer Harriet and Daphne to get on with the business of finding suitable *partis* and stop dragging their heels.

Tabitha sighed. “I am ever so glad to have found Preston. . . . Goodness, speaking of him, there is he being buttonholed by Lady Juniper. Probably over the seating arrangements. Again.”

Daphne glanced in that direction and found Tabitha’s soon-to-be groom indeed cornered by an elegantly clad lady in mauve—the aforementioned Lady Juniper. Preston’s aunt and Lord Henry’s sister.

Tabitha glanced back at Daphne, her desires clear.

“Yes, yes, go save him,” Daphne told her friend. “I will be safe and sound right here.”

“If you find him”—meaning Mr. Dishforth—“bring him to me immediately.” Tabitha wagged her finger in warning. “Don’t you dare fall in love at first sight and run away with him before I grant my approval.”

“Tabitha, I am far too sensible for such a thing. I promise, when I find my Dishforth, I will not run away with him.” She crossed her heart for good measure.

Satisfied, Tabitha hurried across the room to make her rescue while Daphne took a moment to study one and all filling the Seldon ballroom. She was probably the first ever Dale to cross into this unholy space.

So far, so good, she mused, considering she’d been here nearly an hour and had yet to be ruined. Or sold to an Eastern harem.

Oh, Tabitha could swear up and down that there was nothing out of the ordinary in the Duke of Preston’s residence. Yes, the Red Room was a bit ostentatious, but only what one would expect of a ducal enclave.

And certainly, Daphne had to concede, there were no odd remnants of the Hell Fire Club or some other league dedicated to debauchery laying about in open view.

Those damning bits of evidence, she suspected, were kept in the basement.

She made a cautionary note to herself: Do not go in the cellar.

Then again, considering she’d risked everything by coming here tonight, the cellar might be the least of her worries. Especially if her family found out what she’d done.

But in her defense, she’d come to the ball with the noblest of intentions. Because *he* was going to be here. Her Mr. Dishforth.

And after tonight, theirs would no longer be a love affair of merely letters.

Oh, she knew exactly what was going to happen. She was going to look up and their eyes would meet. He would smile at her. No, grin with delight that he’d discovered her.

In that so-very-magical moment they would know. Just know they had found their perfect partner.

Dishforth would be dressed elegantly, but sensibly. No grand waterfall or scads of lace, just a well-cut Weston coat, his sterling white cravat done in a simple, but precise, Mailcoach, and he’d be handsome. Perhaps even as handsome as Preston.

Oh, she’d concede that much about a Seldon. Preston was a good-looking devil. But all the men in his family were reputed to be too well put together by any measure.

Daphne sighed. Still, if Mr. Dishforth was even half as grand . . .

Then she glanced up, telling herself it was all naught but a ridiculous, fanciful dream.

And it was just that, a silly fancy, until she looked across the ballroom and it happened exactly as she thought it ought.

“**H**o, there,” the Earl of Roxley called out as Henry tried to slip unobtrusively into the ballroom. Henry usually arrived promptly at social gatherings, but tonight, Henry was late. And to Preston’s engagement ball, no less.

Henry was going to be furious with him.

Nor was the earl making his entrance any less discreet.

“Ah, hello, Roxley,” Henry said. He wasn’t overly fond of Preston’s gadfly friend, for he could never get a full measure of the man. Yet here he was—as if they had been boon companions since they were in short pants. Of course, with Preston about to be married, the earl was probably looking for a new comrade-in-arms, as it were, to join him in his capering about Society.

Henry shuddered at the thought of such foolishness and was about to make his excuses when he d
a double take at the earl.

A man about Town.

Good heavens, Roxley was just the man to help him, for the earl was a regular font of knowledge
when it came to the *ton*, especially as to the ladies.

More to the point, finding one.

So Henry brightened a bit. It was, after all, Roxley and Preston who had placed that demmed ad
the first place; now Roxley could help him finish the matter. Ironic and fitting.

“How nice to see you, old man,” Henry said, trying to smile.

“Of course,” the earl replied, slapping Henry on the back as if that was their usual form of greeting
“Have I missed anything?”

“Wouldn’t know,” Henry told him. “I just arrived.”

“You?” Roxley declared, taking a second long look at Henry. “Rather out of character, my good
man.”

Truer words. There was a lot about Henry that was out of character of late. Because of her. Mi
Spooner.

The earl continued. “Preston mentioned you’d been skulking about recently. Asked me to keep a
eye on you.”

“Me?” Henry shook his head. “I never skulk.”

“So I told Preston,” Roxley avowed. “But here you are, prowling about the edges of your own
ballroom. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were looking for someone.”

Oh, good God! Was it that obvious? Still, Henry tried to brazen it out. “Whyever would you say
such a thing?”

And then Roxley—who usually appeared half-seas over and made little to no sense—became a
too sharp-eyed, rather like that harridan aunt of his, Lady Essex. “Why because you’ve checked the
door three times in as many minutes, and you’ve surveyed the dance floor twice. Who is she?”

“No one,” Henry tried. “You must be—”

“My dear man, don’t try and flummox me. I make my living telling bouncers. Who is she?” Ar
then he stood there, poised and ready for Henry’s confession.

Henry pressed his lips together, for certainly he hadn’t told a living soul what he’d done—
answering that letter and engaging in a correspondence with some ridiculously named chit, Mi
Spooner. At least Henry hoped that wasn’t her real name.

Nor did he want to make a confession to the likes of Roxley. Yet something was different about th
earl tonight. Perhaps it was because he hadn’t arrived in a cloud of brandy, and the man’s eyes wer
sharp and clear.

“I . . . that is . . .” Henry began.

Roxley held up a hand to stave him off. “Will have to wait. There’s my aunt. In full sail with Lac
Jersey in her wake.” He shuddered. “I’m doomed if that pair catches me.” He edged into the alcoh
behind them, then opened the door to the gardens just wide enough to slip out. “Good luck with yo
search. I fear I must step out for the time being.” He went to leave but then turned around and adde
“A word of advice—whatever it is you were about to confide, don’t tell your sister.” He nodded acros
the way and then was gone.

Henry glanced in that direction and spied Hen and Preston engaged in what appeared to be a ter
conversation. Most likely a continuation of the debate he’d interrupted earlier this morning. Even as
played out once again in his thoughts, he still couldn’t believe what his family expected of him.

“Preston, the only solution is to see that he doesn’t meet her. Not right away.” Then Hen had glanced up and found Henry standing in the doorway and her mouth had snapped shut.

“Who doesn’t meet whom?” he’d asked.

Hen cringed, but to her credit, she recovered quickly as she shared a glance with Preston that said all too clearly, *Do not say another word.*

Why was it, when Hen was conspiring, she seemed to forget that they were twins, and, as such, that she knew all her tricks? Henry had no doubt exactly who was one of the parties that was to be kept separated.

Him.

But what lady Hen was trying to keep him from? Usually his sister was dragging all sorts of debutantes and misses and Lady Most-Excellent-Bred past him for his inspection.

Now there was a woman she didn’t want him to meet? She would have managed to pique his curiosity if not for his overriding passion to discover the identity of Miss Spooner. Still, it wouldn’t do to let Hen think she’d managed to gain the upper hand.

Not this time.

“Come now, Hen, are you saying that some breathtaking Incognito is going to be in our home tonight and you don’t want me to take up with her?” Henry winked broadly at Preston.

“Nothing of the sort,” Hen informed him.

Henry’s gaze narrowed as Preston and Hen exchanged a pair of guilty glances.

“Out with it,” he told them, folding his arms across his chest. “You know how I deplore surprises.”

“You tell him,” Hen ordered Preston. As the oldest (having arrived mere minutes earlier than Henry), she thought it her right to delegate the worst of whatever needed to be done.

“Me?” Preston shook his head, exercising his position as head of the family. “It would be better coming from you.”

Hen wasn’t so easily cowed, and had her argument at the ready, even as she made her literal escape by crossing the room to the sideboard. “It won’t be best any way around it. Besides, she is your responsibility. Certainly not mine.”

This was followed by a discerning little sniff, the one Hen made when she discovered herself straying into lowly waters. Having been born the daughter of a duke, his sister was not one to stoop down from her lofty perch of privilege willingly.

Henry turned back to Preston, brow cocked and waiting for a response.

Steeling his shoulders, Preston came out with it. “One of our guests tonight is a Dale—”

Henry barked out a laugh. A Dale! How utterly preposterous. And he continued to laugh until he realized neither his nephew or sister were joining him. “You’re jesting,” he’d said to Preston, giving him a slight punch in the arm.

He must be.

Preston sighed. “No.” There was nothing in his stony expression that might hint at a late belabored joke.

Then again, this wasn’t something a Seldon would find amusing.

“But she cannot—” Henry began.

“She is—”

“Here? Tonight? Are you certain she’s a—” Henry couldn’t bring himself to say it. Utter the wretched name.

Hen suffered no such lack of conscience. “A Dale. Yes, that is the point. We are to have a Dale in

our midst, and apparently we had best get used to it.” This was finished with a wrinkle of her nose and a pointed glance at Preston, which meant the blame lay squarely at his feet.

“What a pile of nonsense,” Henry told them. “Turn her away.” Never mind that he couldn’t believe she’d even dare set foot in this house.

She might be a Dale, but both Seldon and Dale knew better than to mix.

Yet Preston shocked Henry when he said in reply, “I fear it is not that easy. I am slightly indebted to Miss Dale—”

Henry stilled and then shook off such a notion. “Indebted? Now you are joking—”

“No, I’m not—” Preston added. Emphatically. Too much so.

“It is as Preston says,” Hen added. “A most unfortunate situation.” She turned to Preston. “I am glad Father isn’t here to see this day. Inviting a Dale to our house! Unthinkable.”

One word stood out in Henry’s mind. *Invited?*

“You don’t mean—” he began to stammer.

“Yes, I fear we do,” Hen replied with the air of one who’d stepped into something while exiting her barouche. “Preston insisted she be invited to the ball tonight and . . .” His sister looked to be attempting to swallow the words lodged in her throat. Instead, they came out in a rush. “And the house party.”

“Noooo!” Henry gasped, rounding on the duke. Head of the household be damned, this was beyond the pale. “Preston, you cannot—”

But apparently Preston could. And then the rest of the truth had come tumbling out. She was Tabitha’s dearest friend—and here Henry had thought the vicar’s daughter quite respectable. The worse yet, the news that this Dale chit was standing up with Tabitha at the wedding.

“Which means . . .” Preston began, slanting another guilty glance at Hen.

As if she might help him. Instead, Hen made a loud, indignant “*harrumph*” and washed her hands of the entire affair.

“I have to dance with her,” Henry had ground out. Oh, there were many things Henry was not, least in the eyes of his Seldon relations—a rake of the first order was one of them—but he was an expert on Seldon family history and tradition.

And even now, all these hours later, Henry knew he was bound by honor to do as he was asked.

That didn’t mean he had to like it.

Looking across the ballroom at Preston and Hen, Henry frowned. He had no choice but to dance with this Miss Dale. But to his benefit, he still had two hours in which to find his Miss Spooner, his recent words luring him into the crowd.

Do you ever look across a room and wonder if I am there, so close at hand, and yet unseen?

Henry paused and turned to search the faces of the sad little array of leftover wallflowers lining the ballroom walls, but none of them seemed to fit the image he’d fixed in his mind.

Miss Spooner, where the devil are you? he thought as he waded into the crush, her words swirling through his thoughts.

Do you think we will ever truly meet? Do we dare? Mr. Dishforth, I want ever so much to meet you, yet . . . I fear you might be disappointed in me. . . .

Yes, he understood that sentiment. For while their correspondence had been of a sensible nature—favorite books, taste in music, current politics—it had been easy to put off a face-to-face meeting. For all he knew he could be exchanging letters with one of Roxley’s maiden aunts . . . or Roxley himself given the earl’s perverse sense of humor.

Yet in the last sennight everything had taken a decidedly different turn. One that could hardly be deemed sensible.

I laid awake last night and wondered how we might meet.

He hadn’t meant those words as anything other than a passing comment, until she’d replied.

I too. In the wee hours before dawn, I found myself drawn to the window, parting the curtains and wondering which roof might be yours. Under which eaves you slept. Where I might find you . . .

The very vision of this intriguing minx searching him out in the last hours of darkness had left him with more than just a restless night.

He’d written her specifically about his attendance at this ball. That he wanted to see her wearing red (for she’d professed it her favorite color) and that he would find her.

Glancing over at Preston again, buttonholed as he was by Hen, he decided not to rescue his nephew after all. Instead he began his search for Miss Spooner.

If he found her before the supper dance, this wretched Miss Dale could go hang for all he cared. Tradition or no.

All he had to do was hope that Miss Spooner—whatever her real name—had been invited, though it seemed that every member of the *ton* still left in London was crammed into their ballroom.

But all too soon he realized his search might not be as simple as he’d once thought. For as it turned out, it seemed half the ladies in the *ton* had taken his suggestion “to wear red.”

Red muslin. Red silk. Even a red velvet. Red in every hue.

“Good God!” he muttered. Then again, how was he to have known red was the most popular color of the Season? That was what came of having a sister who was perpetually in widow’s weeds. A man had no sense of fashionable colors save black, gray, and her current choice of mauve.

He continued through the room, nodding in greeting to friends and acquaintances alike, rather amused that not a month ago most everyone in this room had turned their backs on the Seldon family over Preston’s antics.

Now the duke’s engagement to the very respectable Miss Timmons had erased years of misdeeds from the eyes of Society.

Henry shook his head. He’d never understand the fickle nature of . . .

His thought went unfinished, for in that moment, the crowd parted and his gaze fell on a young lady across the way—a lithesome vision he’d never seen or met, wearing red silk, a mane of pale blonde hair tumbling down to her bare shoulders in a tempting waterfall of curls.

Then this unknown vision turned, as if tugged by his very examination, and looked at him.

Her eyes widened, just a bit, and then she smiled. Ever so slightly, and he felt as if he’d been harpooned, struck down as it were, the haunting lines from one of Miss Spooner’s latest missives echoing through his stricken thoughts.

Mr. Dishforth, I am taken aback by your words, your unfettered desires. I know not what to say. But when we meet, I have no doubt I will find the words and the means to express my affection for you.

Henry tried to breathe, but apparently when one met their destiny, one stopped breathing. Good God! It had to be her. Miss Spooner.

He didn't know how he knew it, but he did. His elusive little minx, with her tart replies and winsome secrets, was here. Standing across the ballroom.

Practical to a fault, Henry didn't care how the Fates had done this, just that they had, and he wasn't going to let something as ethereal as chance or serendipity steal her away before he could.

Lord Henry, the most respectable and sensible Seldon who ever lived, suddenly found his innards rake and strode across the ballroom.

However, it was one thing to discover one could be rakish, and quite another to pull it off.

For when he came face-to-face with the lady, he hadn't a single notion of what to say.

What if she wasn't Miss Spooner? Demmed if he was going to make an ass of himself.

Still, what if she was?

There was only one way to find out.

So beyond all propriety, and all good manners, he simply bowed. And when he straightened, he said the only thing that came to mind.

“May I have this dance?”

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