

## Bunny & Biscuits

*This short story was written as a Valentine's Day present for my readers in the spring of 2012. It was originally meant as a bonus chapter, but, Hen and Miles being Hen and Miles, it decided it wanted to be a novella when it grew up. Unfortunately, there really wasn't time for it to grow into that novella (see Valentine's Day, above), but, one of these days, I hope to go back and polish it up, adding an Eloise and Colin frame. Stay tuned!*

*Many thanks go to Miss Eliza for providing the title. Where would Hen and Miles be without Bunny and biscuits?*

*One last thing: the action of this story takes place in February of 1804, right around the end of *The Temptation of the Night Jasmine*.*

Loring House  
February, 1804

"I do wish Penelope hadn't chosen the thirteenth," said Henrietta indistinctly.

In practice, it came out something like "Mrr mrr mrr mrr eenth." She was doing something to her eyes that appeared to require her mouth being half-open, which, Henrietta being Henrietta, didn't stop her from expressing her opinions.

"What was that again?" said Miles, more to watch her blink at him in the mirror than anything else.

Over the past eight months, he'd become something of an expert at interpreting garbled Hen-speak. He knew what she sounded like when she was putting on her lip rouge, what she sounded like while trying to pull a dress down over her head (or, preferably, up over her head) and, his very favorite, how she sounded while speaking around a mouthful of ginger biscuit.

Mmm, ginger biscuits.

Right now, though, the Henrietta reflected in the dressing table mirror was a far from happy Henrietta. She waved the stick of kohl she had been applying to the sides of her eyes. "I do wish Penelope weren't getting married on the thirteenth. It just seems like...."

"A bad idea?" provided Miles. He couldn't agree more. If Penelope weren't getting married this morning, they would still be in bed, under that pile of fluffy covers. They would also both be wearing considerably less in the way of clothing. Miles tugged at his cravat. "Is this crooked?"

"It's just fine," said Henrietta, without looking at him. "Stop tugging at it or Downey will be cross."

Miles stopped tugging. He didn't like to anger his valet. No one kept linen quite as fresh as Downey.

Downey had taken to Miles' marriage remarkably well. (Miles had heard that some valets didn't.) Miles suspected Downey was rather sweet on Henrietta's lady's maid—Nan? Annie? Mostly he knew her as the-person-who-barged-in-at-inconvenient-moments. Downey knew better; he had been trained in a bachelor household, after all, but Henrietta's maid had come straight from Uppington House and was used to the freedom of her mistress' chambers. They were still working on that.

On the whole, though, he was amazed at how little change their marriage had made in their lives—other than the fact that he saw a great deal more of Henrietta in the rather literal sense. Even the move to his parents' empty townhouse, Loring House, had been less disruptive than he would have imagined. He had never spent terribly much time at his bachelor lodgings; he had passed most of his time at the home of Henrietta's family, Uppington House. Within a few weeks of their marriage, Loring House had begun to take on an unmistakable resemblance to Uppington House, down to the yellow and white furnishings of the morning room. Miles suspected Henrietta of filching the furniture when her mother wasn't looking. Those slipper marks on the settee in the morning room looked suspiciously like the ones on the settee that used to be at Uppington House. Henrietta's romantic novels filled the shelves by the window and Bunny-the-Bunny, the stuffed animal he had given Henrietta when she was still a wee thing, presided over the bedroom from the chair by the fire.

It was all incredibly comfortable—Miles had all but grown up at Uppington House, after all—but something niggled at him. It wasn't a big niggle. It was just a little niggle, but there it was, all the same, niggle niggle niggling away, nagging at him late in the night when Henrietta was a warm lump in the covers beside him. Somehow, they had gone from being best friends to being best friends who just happened to be married. No one had been the least bit surprised (other than, perhaps, them). There had been no crying of the banns, no pounding of backs, no delighted exclamations, just a "Did you? Can't say I'm surprised. I say, did you hear about Exeter's new greys? Bang up to the mark!" Henrietta fussed over her friends, Miles went off to his club, and Lady Uppington indiscriminately cosseted and scolded them, just like always. They had been married for eight months now and it wasn't that there was anything wrong, precisely—other than Cook's staunch refusal to cede her recipe for ginger biscuits—but Miles knew something was missing.

Shouldn't being married feel just a little bit different?

It might, he thought, have been different if he had managed to do it properly, if he had courted Henrietta through a Season of balls and teas, if he had sued for her hand and married her in Saint George's, Hanover Square, instead of—well, instead of making rather a muck of it from start to finish. They had ended up in the right place, but they had done it all topsy turvy. Even his grand

declaration of love had come out in the middle of trying to tie up a French spy, which, Miles had to admit, wasn't the most romantic of moments, especially since the French spy kept interrupting, complaining, and, worst of all, critiquing.

Henrietta had been deuced sporting about it all, but Miles couldn't help but wonder if she minded. She said she didn't... but, sometimes, what Henrietta said and what Henrietta meant were somewhat different things.

He needed a Grand Romantic Plan.

Of course, the last time he'd come up with a Grand Romantic Plan, they'd ended up with Henrietta being chased by a French spy while Turnip Fitzhugh tried to cram himself under a convenient sofa. But this time would be different, Miles promised himself. A few of the chaps at the club had been nattering on about St. Valentine. Miles wasn't exactly sure who this St. Valentine chap was—he appeared to have come to a bad end, which was usually the way of things with saints—but according to the chaps at the club, there was a quaint tradition of declaring one's affections to one's beloved on the Feast of St. Valentine. It couldn't be more perfect.

Tonight, when they got back from Penelope's wedding, he'd tell Henrietta just how much he loved her. It would be perfect. There would be oysters and champagne.... Henrietta would be sitting *there*—Miles mentally moved his wife's chair a few feet to the left, in the optimal spot next to the fire and within easy carrying distance to the bed—and he could go down on one knee *there*, cunningly avoiding that creaky floorboard next to the bed, and then....

He'd been balked of his Grand Romantic Plan once; he wasn't going to let it happen again.

Henrietta was back to frowning at the mirror. Miles could have pointed out that the kohl next to her left eye was a bit smudgy, but he didn't think that was what was bothering her. Besides, maybe it was meant to be smudgy. Female fashion eluded him.

"It's just... why the thirteenth, of all days? It's almost as though she's tempting Fate." Henrietta moodily smudged the kohl on the other side of her eye.

Ah, so it was meant to be smudgy. Personally, Miles liked her eyes just the way they were, between her nose and her forehead, two of his favorite kissable spots, but he suspected that opinion wouldn't be entirely well received.

"Isn't tempting Fate what Penelope does?" The woman made a career of sneaking out onto balconies with everyone from Turnip Fitzhugh to the Prince of Wales. If that wasn't tempting Fate, Miles didn't know what was.

Henrietta frowned at her own reflection in the mirror. "But Freddy Staines! The man's a—"

"Reprobate and lecher?" provided Miles helpfully.

"That's a bit harsh."

"The man is a member of good-standing in the Naughty Hellfire Club." Miles stopped, thought, and grinned. "Make that a member in *bad* standing."

Sometimes, he amused himself so.

Henrietta set down the stick of kohl. "You're not helping."

Miles ambled over and squeezed her shoulders, dropping a kiss on the top of her head. "I'm sorry, old thing. But there's nothing you can do."

"I wish she were marrying Tommy Fluellen instead. Or Turnip Fitzhugh." Miles forbore to point out that Turnip was already very happily married. Henrietta was off and going. "Or anyone other than Freddy Staines."

"She did get caught on a balcony with him," Miles pointed out.

"It wasn't a balcony, it was a bedroom," argued Henrietta.

Miles raised his brows. Henrietta wasn't exactly helping her case there.

"Oh, all right." Henrietta let out a long breath of air between her pursed lips. "But it just doesn't seem fair that just for a few moments of indiscretion Penelope should be saddled for life with that—that—"

"You were saddled with me," Miles pointed out. They'd been caught in a garden rather than a bedroom or a balcony, but the result had been the same. Matrimony had followed rather rapidly upon the heels of discovery.

Henrietta stood on tiptoes to press a kiss to the side of his chin. "Yes, but that's different."

Miles' hands clasped her loosely around the waist. "How?"

"You're you," said Henrietta, as though that explained it all. A dimple appeared in her right cheek. "And you do an excellent job of keeping the bed warm."

"Anything else?" Miles asked, shaking back a floppy lock of hair from his eyes. He tried not to sound as though he were fishing.

Henrietta considered. "You're very useful for fetching things from high shelves."

In other words, he was a combination warming pan and footstool. Miles made a mental note never to buy Henrietta a hot water bottle or a step-ladder.

Henrietta twisted out of his grasp, tucking a lacy fichu into the neckline of her dress. "It's not just Penelope I'm worried about. Don't you think Charlotte seemed a bit subdued last night?"

Charlotte always seemed subdued to Miles, but, somehow, he didn't think that was the right answer. "Er—yes?"

He decided that he thoroughly disliked whoever it was who had invented the fichu. It made no sense at all as an article of clothing, it served no practical purpose, and it covered all of his favorite things.

Henrietta's teeth worried at her lower lip. "She says she's all right."

That was all right then. Now if only he could just find a way to get rid of that fichu. "Well, if she says she's all right..."

"It's that duke of hers," said Henrietta, tucking the fichu in more securely.

Blast. So much for accidentally knocking it off on their way into the carriage.

"She was the one who turned him down," pointed out Miles. And, really, shouldn't one have a little sympathy for the man scorned in that situation? He'd always thought the Duke of Dovedale was a rather decent chap, sensible, a good shot, not at all high in the instep. The man had asked for Charlotte's hand in front of the King and Queen-- how much more of a grand gesture could a woman ask?

Now that would have been an excellent Grand Romantic Plan. Why hadn't he thought of that at the time? They had been in the royal audience chamber, being thanked for helping the King out of a bit of a spot of bother. Blast. If only he'd had the sense to fling himself down on one knee, and say, "Majesty, I crave a boon—the hand of Lady Henrietta Selwick!"

Leaving aside the fact that they were already married.

"She only turned him down because she didn't think he really loved her," said Henrietta. "I worry about her."

"I know," said Miles, kissing the kissable spot behind Henrietta's right ear.

A blue enamel and seed pearl earring hit him in the nose. Henrietta's loyalty to her friends was one of her many admirable attributes—he just wished, sometimes, that she didn't find quite so much to worry about. Maybe he should have a word with the Duke of Dovedale about that whole Charlotte situation. With Penelope off in England and Charlotte reconciled to her duke....

"And then there's that blasted French spy." Henrietta adjusted her earring and jammed a jeweled comb down in her hair.

Miles was seized with a sudden sense of trepidation. He backed a step away, trying to get a good look at her face. "You're not going to try to track him down, are you? I thought we'd agreed..."

“No,” said Henrietta with regret. “It would be no use. He’s probably halfway to France by now. But if we could find out who he is....”

Miles’ blood ran cold. It might just have been the February wind whistling through the windowpanes, but he had a sudden, uneasy premonition. “Not again, Hen. Remember the stilettos?”

“How could I forget? But the Marquise de Montval is dead—we think,” she added, before Miles could say anything. They’d thought the Marquise de Montval was dead before. The woman had an uncanny way of popping back up. “Besides, I wasn’t going to do anything rash,” Henrietta added virtuously. “I was just going to discover his name and then report him to the proper authorities.”

“Mmmph,” said Miles. Whenever Henrietta looked like that—like butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth—it made him nervous. Very, very nervous. “Shouldn’t we just let sleeping spies lie?”

Every time he had a Grand Romantic Plan, French spies seemed to get in the way. As his mother in law was fond of saying, they were worse than moths. They got into everything.

Not this time, he promised himself. Not Valentine’s Day. This time, he was going to tell Henrietta he loved her, and he was going to do it right.

Then why did he suddenly feel a horrible sinking feeling?

Henrietta pressed a kiss to the corner of his lips. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to do anything foolish. Have you seen my wrap?”

\* \* \*

Dovedale House,  
Later That Day

Penelope’s wedding breakfast was held at the town residence of the Dowager Duchess of Dovedale.

The bridegroom wore boots by Hoby and a coat by Weston; the bride’s mother wore a dress of an alarming shade of puce, and a headpiece that looked suspiciously like a coronet. The bride’s father fell asleep halfway through the ceremony and snored through the vows.

The bride wore a ferocious smile that was worse than a scowl.

Henrietta’s heart ached for her friend. Penelope wasn’t a romantic like Charlotte; she had always publicly disclaimed any hopes of a love match, but Henrietta had always dismissed that as just talk. Like her role model, the Dowager Duchess of Dovedale, Penelope’s bark was worse than

her bite. She flirted with the outer edges of convention, delighting in shocking the staid matrons of the ton.

This time, though, Penelope had gone too far and the repercussions were far, far worse than anything any of them had imagined.

It wasn't just that Freddy Staines was a member of the Hellfire Club—although, given what Henrietta had heard of some of their orgies, that was bad enough. It was that he had made no secret of his reluctance at being forced into wedlock. It was an open secret that only the powerful persuasive powers of the Dowager Duchess of Dovedale had brought Freddy to the altar. It was one thing to dally with Penelope at a party, but he certainly hadn't intended to be shackled to her for life, and he'd made that opinion rather widely known.

Penelope didn't deal well with being mocked. Or pitied.

Right now, she was both, and Freddy Staines was the cause. Henrietta had half-expected the Dowager herself to stalk down the aisle behind Penelope, prepared to whap Freddy into compliance should he show any sign of bolting. But Freddy, well lubricated by the contents of a silver flask, played his part and the Dowager had stayed in her seat, looking mildly disappointed at the lack of scandal and bloodshed. The happy couple were to leave for India immediately following the ceremony. That, too, had been arranged by the Dowager Duchess of Dovedale.

It was just as well, thought Henrietta, that Penelope wouldn't be there for her own wedding reception. The sidelong looks and whispers might have driven Penelope to do something rash.

That is, something else rash.

Henrietta slipped into the room where her friend was changing into her traveling costume, preparing for her imminent exile. She couldn't help but feel responsible in some way. If she had been a better friend... if she had paid more attention... if she hadn't been quite so wrapped up in Miles....

It made it even worse that she was so happy with her Miles. Miles was Miles, through and through. Henrietta felt a warm glow at the thought. Miles would never join the Hellfire Club and his primary vice was the overconsumption of ginger biscuits. Even more important, he had never, for one moment, let anyone know that their marriage had been a forced one. He never reproached her for hastening the end of his bachelor existence. He would never have humiliated her as Freddy had Penelope.

Which, of course, made Henrietta feel even guiltier.

"I'm sorry," she said. Or, rather, croaked.

"I am, too," said Penelope, straightening her hat. "I ought never to have chosen this shade of orange. It clashes horribly with my hair."

“That’s not what I meant. I meant about this—all this.”

Penelope raised her chin. “Don’t be. I’d have to marry someone sooner or later—and at least Freddy is a handsome specimen.”

Henrietta couldn’t deny that. “Yes, he is, rather.”

Penelope shrugged. “I know he’s fool’s gold, shiny on the outside, worthless on the inside, but why take substance when one can have a bit of flash?”

Because substance kept one warm at night. Substance stroked one’s hair and brought hot water bottles when one’s back hurt. But Henrietta couldn’t say that; it would only make matters worse.

“India should be... interesting,” she said instead.

“Yes,” said Penelope indifferently. “Thousands of miles away from mother. Thank heavens for that.”

Henrietta couldn’t imagine it ending this way, all those years of confidences and pranks and late night whispers, not like this, hard-eyed and hurting. “You will come back?”

Penelope looked quickly away. “I suppose,” she said, but her voice wasn’t quite as strong as it had been before. She gave a strained little laugh. “One can’t imagine Freddy staying away too long.” Her lips twisted; she managed to get herself under enough control to say, “Be happy with your oaf.”

“Miles isn’t an oaf.” They had been through this same routine so many times, recited these same phrases. The very familiarity of made Henrietta’s eyes sting.

“I know. He’s a great big oaf.” Penelope squeezed Henrietta tight, but not before Henrietta caught a glimpse of the suspicious sheen in her eyes. Penelope’s voice was rough as she said, “Tell him if he doesn’t take care of you, I’ll send tigers back after him. Or at least the Dowager Duchess.”

Henrietta smiled through her own tears. She wished she could believe that Freddy would take care of Penelope, but since she knew he wouldn’t, she said instead, “Take care of yourself. Please.”

With one last squeeze, Penelope released her. “Don’t I always?”

Usually? Not. “I’ll miss you,” said Henrietta.

“Don’t go all sappy on me,” said Penelope, who was looking fairly sappy herself.



Penelope's mother appeared in the doorway. "Penelope?" Penelope's mother always managed to look as though she were smelling something nasty whenever she said her daughter's name. "Time to leave."

Henrietta squeezed her friend's hand. "Write to me," she said.

Penelope sketched a salute, and then she was gone.

It was all Henrietta could do not to run after her. India was just so far, so far from all the people who cared about Penelope and loved her. By the same token, it was also far from all the people merrily tearing her reputation to shreds. Maybe, Henrietta told herself, maybe Freddy would reform under the rigors of life in India. Maybe the long journey by boat would bring them closer together. Maybe....

Maybe Penelope would find a pet tiger. Or conquer a small principality.

Henrietta shook her head and went to go find Charlotte, who had been looking distinctly mopey all evening. Why did everything have to change? They had been so happy the three of them, giggling in the corners of ballrooms together, trying to dissuade Penelope from her more outrageous pranks, teasing Charlotte over her sentimentalism. And now Penelope was off to India, Charlotte had refused the hand of a duke, and she—her residence had changed, that was all. Marriage to Miles hadn't changed her.

Or had it?

"Why are you hiding here?" Henrietta found Charlotte in a corner of the ballroom, nursing a flat glass of champagne.

"I'm not hiding," said Charlotte, with a glance over her shoulder that implied quite the contrary. Henrietta knew exactly who she was looking for, the nominal owner of the house, the Duke of Dovedale, who, Henrietta had noticed, was looking nearly as mopey as Charlotte.

"Maybe if you just spoke to him...."

"I have the headache," said Charlotte tightly, and disappeared up the stairs, probably to hide in her room and read Fanny Burney's *Evelina* for the fifteen-hundredth time. It was what Charlotte did when she was unhappy.

At least, that was what the old Charlotte did. Henrietta wasn't entirely sure she knew this new one.

She looked around for her husband, but, according to her sources (Turnip), he had taken the Duke of Dovedale and a bottle of brandy and disappeared into the study. Didn't he realize that Charlotte was currently crying her eyes out because of that wretched man? But, no, they were probably happily talking about horseflesh, completely oblivious to Charlotte's distress.

Men, thought Henrietta bitterly, and set off in the direction of the ladies' retiring room, not because she particularly needed to retire, but because it was an enclosed space in which she could sulk in private.

Or maybe not. A quick look through the door revealed Lucy Ponsonby holding forth delightedly about Penelope's disgrace. "—in bed together!" she was saying delightedly. "Without their own clothes!"

"Rubbish," said Henrietta loudly, but no one paid the slightest bit of attention, the Ponsonby version being infinitely preferable to the truth, which might have been truer, but was distinctly less salacious.

It did nothing to improve her mood.

It might be February and frigid, but there were times when one needed to get away. Henrietta had spent more than her fair share of time at the Dovedale residence (the dowager duchess having happily ignored the existence of the duke for quite some time). Henrietta drew her wrap tighter around her as she let herself out the French doors into the garden. She was glad she'd worn velvet instead of muslin; she just wished she'd worn even more of it. She'd worn blue because Miles liked her in blue.

Hmph.

The sun was setting already, the early winter sunset, glowing orange over the summerhouse, setting the winter-scummed surface of the ornamental pond alight, glazing the frost-blasted statues with the illusion of flesh. In moments, the sun would drop below the columns of the summer house and it would be true dark. Penelope's wedding day would have come and gone and with it their old, happy camaraderie.

Even if Penelope came back from India, nothing would ever be quite the same again. Charlotte was talking of going up to Dovedale in Norfolk for the rest of the winter, possibly staying up there through the Season. Henrietta squinted into the glare of the sunset, feeling distinctly deflated. All her friends were leaving her. She had other friends, of course, but it would never be the same.

She wanted to bury her head in Miles' chest and whimper, as she had done when she was a small child and she'd accidentally dropped Bunny-the-Bunny in the pond in the Park.

If this was growing up, she wasn't entirely sure she liked it.

She put a slippared foot cautiously on the graveled path leading through the parterres. It had rained earlier in the day—good luck! they had all told Penelope—and the ground was wet and waterlogged, staining her satin slippers. She could feel the cold liquid seeping through her stockings.

As she paused, deciding whether or not to go on, she heard a voice from behind the summerhouse, a male voice, pitched low.

“I have no interest in your political designs”—it was Sir Francis Medmenham, head of the local chapter of the Hellfire Club. Henrietta had suspected him of being involved in the dealings that led to the kidnapping of the King, but, as a friend of the Prince of Wales, Medmenham had escaped scrutiny—“but I should like some assurance as to my... shipments.”

“Never fear, my friend.” Henrietta froze, one hand on the door. She knew that voice, too, that laughing, mocking, accented voice. “You shall have your pretty poppies. The Jasmine may have withered on the vine, but the Marigold will see to your needs.”

The Marigold.

“I hope this blossom shall be more reliable than the last,” said Sir Francis. “How do I contact your Marigold?”

“Through the usual channels,” said the Frenchman airily, the Frenchman who had told her to call him the Gardener, who had mocked her like—like an irritating older sibling as he had driven away from the site of the King’s kidnapping. “He will coordinate your shipments in India.”

“Where in India is he?” asked Sir Francis silkily. “I should like some assurances. My disciples grow restless without their accustomed brew.”

Back to the house for help? Or stay and listen? Henrietta stood where she was, perched on one foot. If she put the other down, the gravel might crackle. Her calf muscle was beginning to cramp. She felt a new sympathy for pigeons, who stood this way for extended periods of time.

“That, my dear sir, would be telling. All you need to know is that your shipments shall be forthcoming.”

Despite herself, Henrietta wobbled.

“What was that?” said Sir Francis, but the Frenchman was even faster.

“Company, I should think. Uninvited company.” There was the sound of hooves on gravel as the Gardener swung up onto the back of a large black gelding. “Lady Henrietta.”

Henrietta tried to muster words, but it was too much for her. “You—” she began. “Wait!”

He laughed. “I fear I have another engagement. Farewell, Lady Henrietta. Or should I say au revoir?”

As he wheeled his horse around, he winked at her. The cad had the gall to wink at her!

“Stop!” Henrietta cried, but it was too late, the train of her blue velvet gown tripped her up, the boggy ground sucked at her slippers, and Sir Francis Medmenham stepped neatly in front of her.

She could hear the fading sound of hoofbeats as her adversary galloped away. There was no point in pursuit, by the time she found Miles, he would be long gone. Just like last time. But she knew one thing; there was a Marigold on the loose in India. And there was one more thing she needed to know.

“Who was that?” demanded Henrietta of Sir Francis. Her breath made puffs of steam in the cold winter air.

“My dear Lady Henrietta, your”—Sir Francis’ gaze dipped deliberately down—“hands are as blue as your dress! Allow me to escort you inside before you take a chill.”

Henrietta glared at him. “Not until you tell me who he is. And how you contact him,” she added belatedly.

“I don’t,” said Sir Francis, in a way that made her want to slap him. “He contacts me.”

“It’s treason, you know,” said Henrietta shrilly.

Sir Francis gestured gracefully for her to precede him back into the house. “It’s nothing of the sort. It’s merely commerce.”

Henrietta wasn’t the daughter of a marquess for nothing. She drew herself up regally. “I imagine the War Office might take a different view of that.”

“Not,” said Sir Francis gently, “when so many enjoy the benefits of it.”

Henrietta swept past him in frustration. He was right, she knew. His Hellfire Club cast a wide net. Too many high ranking officials were involved. She might be able to force an investigation, but by the time she did, any evidence would long since have been hidden. Her hands were tied.

But not Penelope’s. She would be in India—with the Marigold. If they warned her before she sailed....

Henrietta caught Miles as he was wandering from one room to the next. “I was just looking for you. Ready to go home?” he said cheerfully.

Too cheerfully. Henrietta’s nerves were frazzled and her toes were cold.

“We need to get to the docks,” she said without preamble.

“The docks,” repeated Miles, looking pink-checked and more than a little befuddled. “The docks?”

It made Henrietta even crankier that he'd been inside, drinking brandy with the duke while she'd been standing in slush, being thwarted—again!—by that same, blasted Frenchman.

“The docks,” she said snippily. “There’s a spy, the Marigold—oh, I’ll tell you about it later. We have to let Penelope know! Before she sails. Come on!”

Miles remained annoyingly stationary. “You’ll never catch them now,” he said. “The boat was meant to have sailed”—he checked his watch—“five minutes ago.”

“Maybe it was late! We have to try. We can’t just let Penelope go off without knowing.”

“Why not? It’s not as though the spy will be after her,” Miles pointed out.

“I know, but—” Henrietta squirmed with frustration. “Maybe she can find him.” It sounded rather weak, put that way. She never did seem capable of thinking clearly when the Gardener was involved. He just made her so angry.

“I had something planned for us at home,” mumbled Miles.

“As important as this?”

It was the wrong thing to say. Miles crossed his arms over his chest, looking more upset than she’d seen him since she tossed his cricket bat in the lake when she was ten. “I’d like to think so. I jolly well had a surprise planned for you.”

“I didn’t intend to run into the spy—” Henrietta began.

Miles threw his hands in the air. “There’s always someone! Penelope, Charlotte—this spy! There’s always someone else.”

Henrietta blinked up at him. Somewhere, she had lost the plot. “I didn’t mean—”

“Never mind,” he said brusquely, because he was Miles, and, in the end, he always did what she wanted him to do. “You’re shivering. It’s cold. It might be dangerous. I’ll go.”

“You don’t need to—” Now that the initial wave of agitation had faded, Henrietta could see that he did rather have a point. If they were gone, they were gone. She could write Penelope a letter. And the truth was, there wasn’t really anything she could do about this spy; writing to Penelope was merely a way of making herself feel like she’d got the upper hand over that blasted Gardener.

“I’ll go,” said Miles brusquely. He leaned over and gave her a peck on the cheek. “Your mother can drop you off home.”

“Don’t—” It was too late. He was already out the door. “—go.”

Henrietta stood there in the hall of Dovedale House, staring at the closed door, a lump in her throat the size of a ginger biscuit. There's always someone else, he'd said. She hadn't meant to take Miles for granted. It was just—it was just that he was always there.

She'd never even asked him what he had planned.

Feeling like the worst sort of heel, she turned slowly back into the house to find her mother. Like Charlotte, she found she had the headache.

\* \* \*

Loring House  
Midnight

Miles missed the boat.

By the time he climbed stiffly down from the sedan chair, it was well past midnight. Usually, the sight of the torches burning on either side of his front door filled him with a warm and fuzzy feeling of contentment—it was rather a wonderful thing to have a home and a home with a Henrietta in it—but tonight, he was cold straight through, tired down to his bones, and feeling increasingly dejected. Even that blasted lock of hair that always got into his eyes had lost its bounce.

He'd made a muck of everything.

Miles trudged up the stairs to the front door, wishing he'd behaved—well, with more panache. Richard would never have stamped his foot and whined like a three year old. He would have swirled his cape and said, "Fear not!" and whisked off into the night to apprehend the spies and annul Penelope's marriage and probably leave a mocking note on someone's pillow while he was at it. While he had damp breeches from an unfortunate attempt to run after the boat. Note to self: keep an eye on the edge of the pier at all times. He was vaguely aware of smelling slightly of rotting fish.

Nothing said love quite like day old haddock.

"Sir!" His butler, Stwyth, opened the door with rather more force than necessary. His hair stood up in its usual points on the side of his bald pate. He caught a whiff of Miles' smell and his nose twitched slightly. "Sir."

"I know, Stwyth, I know," said Miles wearily. "Trust me, I—what's all this?"

The front hall was alight. Someone had placed candles on the treads of the stairs, long tapers, one after the other, creating a trail of light that led around the bend in the stair to the regions above.

"I couldn't possibly say, sir," said Stwyth, his twin peaks of hair quivering with excitement.

Huh. Miles had arranged his Valentine's Day feast with Downey what now seemed like years ago, before they had left for Penelope's wedding, but he had never said anything about candles. He had been too focused on the comestibles to consider the niceties of mood lighting. Perhaps Downey had decided to be creative? But that wasn't the least bit like Downey. The only place Downey exercised his artistic side was within the folds of Miles' cravat, where he gave full reign to the frustrated artist who lurked within, often to the detriment of Miles' chin.

There was something perched on the fourth stair up, something small and floppy. Miles took a step forward. It looked like a dog, but Miles knew better. He knew that it was, in fact....  
"Bunny?"

Miles had given the stuffed animal to Henrietta when she was still in swaddling clothes. Stuffed animal and mistress hadn't been parted since, except for the one regrettable incident when Lady Uppington had handed the admittedly grungy Bunny to the laundress. Bunny had returned a shocking shade of bright white. Henrietta was disconsolate. Bunny hadn't been washed since, but remained happily grubby and perpetually on a chair in their bedroom.

Miles felt a quiver of trepidation. Henrietta wouldn't abandon Bunny, would she? No matter how angry she was with him—Bunny was Bunny.

"I believe the animal bears a note, sir," said Stwyth, since Miles seemed incapable of movement.

"Er, yes! Right! Quite!" Rather gingerly, Miles extracted the note from the bunny's fuzzy grasp.

It said, *Follow the biscuits.*

It was only then that Miles noticed something hanging from the bannister. It was a biscuit. Miles freed it from its ribbon cradle and took a bite. Not just a biscuit. One of Cook's biscuits.

Miles could feel a grin starting to spread across his grimy face. "I guess I'd better follow the biscuits, hadn't I, Stwyth?"

"I believe that would be advisable, sir," said Stwyth, but Miles was already halfway up the stairs, bounding from biscuit to biscuit, snuffing out the candles as he went.

The trail ended in front of the bedroom door, where overlapping biscuits had been arranged in the shape of a heart. Miles scooped up the plate and flung open the bedroom door.

"Hen!" he began, and almost choked on a mouthful of biscuit.

Downey had followed his instructions to the letter. Tall candelabra burned on either side of the windows and a table had been set with all of Henrietta's favorite foods: silver bowls of cream whipped into soft peaks, dotted with red berries (Henrietta had very firm feelings about the proper ratio of berries to cream, with the cream very much in the ascendant), candied fruits sparkling with sugar, and champagne cooling in a silver bucket.

Most importantly, there was Henrietta, in the blue silk dressing gown he liked the most, the reddish tints in her hair gleaming in the candlelight, her legs curled up underneath her in the comfy chair that had been moved into the optimal position between the fire and the bed.

Everything was exactly as he'd imagined it—minus the oysters. And with rather more ginger biscuits.

Miles tried to say something, inhaled biscuit crumbs the wrong way, and began to choke.

“Miles?” Henrietta scrambled up from her chair, showing a rather nice expanse of leg, which he would have enjoyed if he'd had the breath to appreciate it, and began pounding him on the back. “Miles? Are you all right? And what IS that smell?”

Miles rested his hands on his knees, chest heaving and eyes watering. “Haddock,” he gasped.

“Bless you,” said Henrietta. “Good heavens. Did you go swimming?”

“Off the pier,” said Miles, straightening. He looked his wife in the eye. “I missed the boat, Hen.”

Henrietta wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him on the nose. “You are so good to me,” she said fervently.

Miles tried to look at his wife and succeeded in going cross-eyed. “Huh?” She seemed to have missed a crucial point. “Hen, I missed the boat.”

“What you mean,” said Henrietta, her blue silk skirt swishing fetchingly as she went to the table to fetch the champagne bottle, which dripped trails of melted ice all down the front of her silk dressing gown, “is that you acceded to my ridiculous request even though it was a silly idea in the first place. I shouldn't have asked you. And I should have listened when you tried to tell me about—about all this.” She wafted the dripping champagne bottle in the direction of the table and candles, nearly knocking over a burning taper. “I came home and found it all set up. I felt like—what IS the female equivalent of a cad?”

“I'm not sure there is one.” Miles felt rather as though he'd lost the script somewhere along the line. Wasn't he supposed to be apologizing and declaring his love and all that sort of thing?

Instead, Henrietta was wrestling with the champagne bottle, right next to a plate of biscuits and berries arranged in the shape of a heart with his name spelled out in hothouse raspberries.

“Well,” said his wife, “if there wasn't before, there is now and I'm it. Do you think *cad-ette* has a good ring to it? Or perhaps *caderina*.”

“Steady on there!” The champagne bottle was pointing right at the pane of the window. “Let me.”



Henrietta relinquished the bottle. “See?” said Henrietta emphatically. “This is exactly what I mean.”

“About what?” The cork popped neatly out of the bottle with a happy little fizz. Miles smelled champagne, ginger biscuit, and Henrietta’s floral soap, a distinctly heady combination. He had drowned and gone to Henrietta heaven.

On second thought, if he were in Heaven, his breeches wouldn’t be quite so itchy. He could still feel the sand squelching between his toes.

Henrietta held out her glass to him. “The champagne bottle—tonight—everything. You’re always there to make things right for me, even before I realize I need righting. You go off on fool’s errands to keep me from getting my feet cold. Who needs dragon’s heads when they have this?”

“Er, Hen?” Miles looked dubiously at the champagne bottle. It appeared to still be full. “Are you haven’t been knocking this back?”

“I’m not foxed,” said Henrietta. She accepted a brimming glass from him, licking the champagne off her hand when it sloshed over the side. “I’m just—well, I’m rather dizzy about you.”

“What?” That licking thing was a little distracting. “Dizzy?” Was that a good thing? And didn’t she mind that he smelled like dead fish?

Henrietta stepped closer, dead fish or no dead fish, and put a hand on his grimy lapel. “I just want you to know that you do matter. You matter more to me than anyone. What you said, about my always paying more attention to everyone else—”

“Never mind that.” Best not to revisit that, not when she was looking at him like that and her robe was clinging to her like that. He was fairly certain she wasn’t wearing anything under it. “Let’s just drink our champagne and get on with the I love you bit. If you would go and sit in the chair, over there....”

“No,” said Henrietta. That was his Henrietta. She’d always been good at standing her ground; it was the reason why he’d spent half his youth playing dolls instead of toy soldiers. Henrietta would just look at him and say “no” and there they’d be. “You were right. It’s true.” She put a hand on his arm, regardless of the lingering crustiness from his fall off the pier. “I have been taking you for granted.”

“No, you haven’t!” said Miles, indignant on her behalf.

Henrietta popped a strawberry in his mouth. “Yes, I have. I’ve been trying to pretend that everything is exactly the same as it was—and it’s not. We’re an us now. And that’s a good thing.” She took a deep breath and clasped her hands together. “Isn’t it.”

“Mm-hmm.” Miles swallowed the strawberry and grabbed for her hands. “That’s exactly what this is all about. I wanted to make a grand gesture, a proper grand gesture without spies or Turnip—”

“—or one of my friends popping up,” Henrietta provided.

Miles nodded. “I wanted to make up for not giving you any of the things that you ought to have had: a proper proposal, a proper wedding.”

“I liked our improper wedding!” said Henrietta. “Well, aside from the way Richard was scowling. I was afraid he was going to go after you with a fish knife.”

Miles decided it was time to turn the conversation away from fish. “And the worst of it is,” he said, “I never had the chance to tell you properly how I love you.”

Henrietta scrunched her nose at him. “But you do,” she said. “Every day. Every time you bring me my morning chocolate, every time you fetch my books from Hatchard’s so I don’t have to go out into the cold—every time you carry my parcels or go shopping with my mother.”

“But that’s nothing special,” he said, bewildered.

Henrietta smiled up at him. “You only think that because you’re you,” she said. She stood on her tiptoes to press her lips to his cheek. “You, Mr. Dorrington, have an extremely generous soul.”

“You’re so good to be good to,” said Miles, rather incoherently. “It make me happy to make you happy. When you’re happy you get this little glint—I can’t describe it precisely—yes, that one, just like that.”

Henrietta gave him one of her Henrietta looks, the slightly supercilious one. “A glint?”

“It’s like a glow, but more glint-y,” explained Miles. “Never mind. The point is that I think you’re rather wonderful, and if I could, I’d go back and do it all again, the right way around.”

Henrietta did that glint-y thing. “You mean you’d propose before we got married?” She shook her head. “That would be silly. I prefer us the way we are, harum scarum and topsy turvy.” She tilted her head to one side. “Or what was that that Turnip called us that time? Havey cavey.”

“We are not havey cavey,” said Miles sternly. “Even if we are rather topsy turvy.”

If they were going to topsy turvy....

Struck by a sudden idea, he thrust his champagne glass into her hand. Hang on,” he said, and bolted for the door.

Henrietta made a face at him, shrugged, and sipped philosophically from his glass.

Miles returned holding Bunny by the feet. “Oops,” he said, and turned Bunny right side up. “All right. This goes here”—he put Bunny down on a footstool—“and you go here”—he shepherded Henrietta into a chair—“and I go here.” He plopped down onto the floor at Henrietta’s feet.

Ooops, he'd landed right on the squeaky floorboard.

“Miles... what are you doing?”

Miles wafted Henrietta back into her chair. “Just stay there. Henrietta Anne Selwick, if we weren’t already married, would you marry me?”

Henrietta snorted champagne bubbles up her nose. “You brought my stuffed animal as a witness?”

Miles looked at her gravely. “You would never lie in front of Bunny.”

“Get up you, fool,” said Henrietta, but she was smiling as she said it. “Of course, I would marry you. I hid behind a bush for you! I made a complete cake of myself for you.”

“I take it that’s a yes?” Miles didn’t wait for her to answer; he swept her up off the chair with a happy whooshing noise.

Henrietta wrapped her arms around his neck. “We have Bunny and biscuits,” she said. “How could we possibly go wrong?”