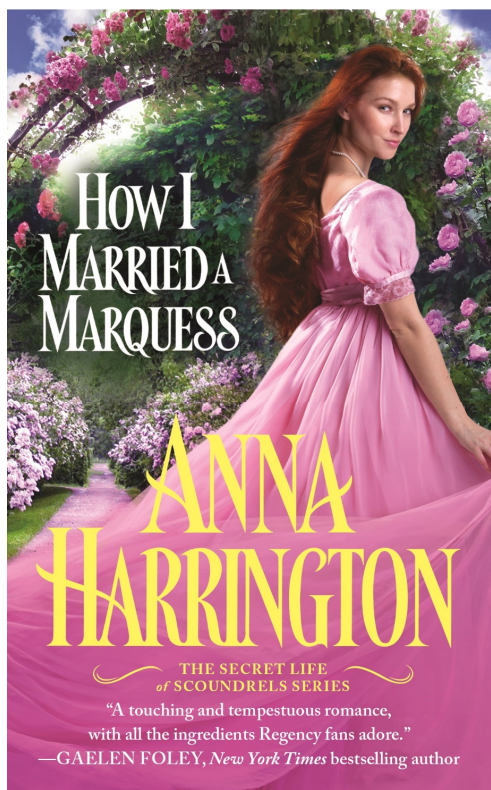


Deleted Scene:

HOW I MARRIED A MARQUESS



This is the only deleted scene from HOW I MARRIED A MARQUESS; this came out in a fairly early draft, as you can see from the name of the villain and his title, which were later changed. For once, the rough draft all fell into place, without major changes to plot. I was thrilled with the way the book ended and how all the events came together so well in the second to last chapter. All the loose ends were easily put into their places. Enjoy!

Prologue

Along the River Road

Islingham Village, Lincolnshire

September, 1817

The Earl and Countess of Bedford slumped heavily against the squabs as their carriage bumped down the rutted road along the river, splashing in and out of the large mud puddles. A thick layer of clouds blocked the light of the full moon and promised more rain—and even muddier spring roads on top of the ruts—and the carriage was left in the darkness of midnight. The inside lamp had been extinguished, partially so they could sleep, partially so they wouldn't have to look at each other, both of them having long ago given up on the sham that was their loveless marriage. Their stomachs were full from the lavish ten-course dinner hosted by Lord Simon Pennington, Marquess of Benchley, at Blackwood Hall, their heads light from several large glasses of wine and Madeira. A long snore ripped from the countess's nose.

Suddenly, the carriage lurched to a stop, toppling the couple onto the floor between the benches. Shouts and gunshots, the scuffling noises of fighting, the nervous stomping of horses—

“Dear God!” the earl cried out. “We’re being robbed!”

“My jewels!” The countess reached frantically for her neck, to remove the string of diamonds and push them down between her plump breasts, where the robbers would never dare check.

The carriage door jerked open, and the countess stifled a startled scream as the end of pistol flashed coldly in the dim glow of silver moonlight. A burlap sack smacked the earl across the face.

“Your money,” a gruff voice ordered. “Now!”

The countess shook, a combination of fear and fury, as she struggled to remove her rings from her plump fingers—

“Not you.” The gun swung to point directly at the earl’s chest. “Your money, my lord.”

Terrified, he pulled out the banknotes from his jacket and shoved them into the burlap sack, then he removed the gold rings on his fingers, the gold watch and chain from his waistcoat, and lastly the ruby and gold cravat pin at his throat.

The masked robber in the tri-cornered hat and black clothes snatched the sack from his hands. “Thank you for your donation.”

The door slammed shut.

The sound of boots scuffed across the dirt road, followed by the pounding of horse hooves fading into the distance...Then silence.

“Thank God,” the countess sighed with relief and rested her hand against her bosom, “they didn’t take my jewels.”

The now-penniless earl glared at her in the darkness. “Shut up, you stupid woman!”

Then he stepped down from the carriage to the muddy ground just as a cold rain began to fall and set about untying his driver and tigers, all three of whom lay bound and gagged at the side of the road. In the darkness, with the black river edging one side of the road and the thick woods on the other, no sign remained of the highwayman and his gang, nothing of their paths across the countryside, no clues as to where they could have gone. They had vanished into the foggy midnight shadows like ghosts, taking his gold and money with them.

Two miles down the road, a small rider on a black horse cut expertly into the woods and galloped through the thick trees toward a clearing near a pond, pausing only to drop the burlap sack into a hollow tree before spinning the horse on its hindquarters in so tight a circle that the beast reared onto the air before plunging off into the darkness.

At dawn, after the local constable and his men had searched along the road but found no information to the whereabouts of the gang of highwaymen who robbed the Earl of Bedford, two young boys in the blue morning fog slipped through the thick bushes along the edge of the pond to the hollow tree, reached inside and withdrew the sack, then ran gleefully back toward the village.