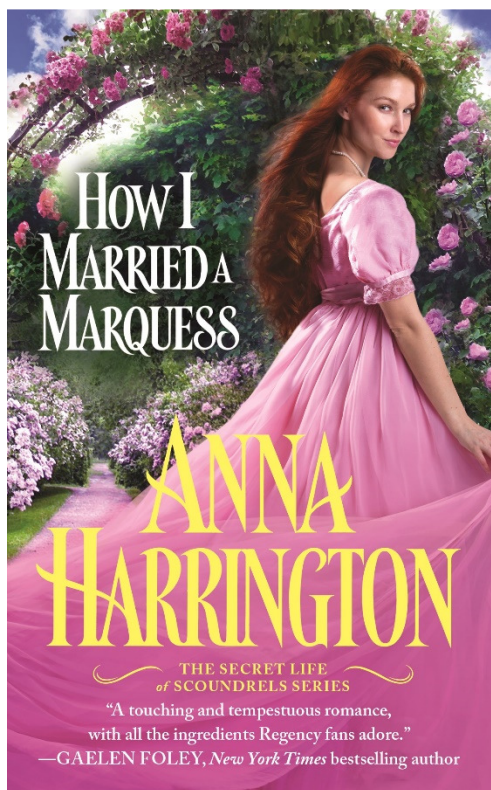


Bonus Scene:

HOW I MARRIED A MARQUESS



Although the reasons for Josie’s adoption by Richard and Elizabeth Carlisle are described in HOW I MARRIED A MARQUESS, we never get to see her actual adoption. So here it is. I hope you enjoy it and love the same spirit and determination in Josie as a little girl as I did when I wrote her.

***Islingham Village, Lincolnshire
June, 1804***

“Come on with you!” Mrs. Potter scowled. “They’re waiting.”

Stubbornly, Josie jutted her chin into the air and ignored the nasty old woman, frowning in concentration as she tied the frayed green ribbon in her hair. She hated Potter, with as much venom as it was possible for any ten-year-old to possess toward any adult, and knowing the

woman wanted her to hurry only made her go more slowly. Simply out of spite.

Potter cursed, a dirty, hard oath that made all the children in the attic dormitory of the village orphanage flinch, including Josie. But she wouldn’t—she absolutely refused—to hasten. Oh, it would cost her, of that she was certain, most likely no dinner again, or a beating, or even being locked into the coal bin in the basement again for the night. But Josie had been through many punishments in her short life, and there was little Potter could do to her that was worse.

“Just leave it, damn you!” Mrs. Potter grabbed her arm and jerked her down the narrow stairs, her hard grip making Josie wince.

She dragged the girl through the old house on High Street, stopping outside the closed door to the parlor at the front of the house where Potter kept her own lodgings and the children were forbidden to enter. Grabbing her by the scruff of her neck and shaking her hard, Potter jabbed a gnarled finger into her face.

“You’ll behave, understand me? And keep that smart mouth of yours shut,” she hissed. “If you don’t, I’ll beat you until—”

The threat was cut off as the parlor door flung open. A tall, dignified man in a brown coat and trousers frowned his bushy grey brows. “Mrs. Potter, is there a problem?”

“Oh, no!” A sickly-sweet smile pulled across the woman’s plump face, and she immediately patted Josie on the head, as if she were petting a dog. “I just—I apologize, Dr. Hampton, for the child’s appearance.”

Clearly, from the dubious expression darkening the physician’s face, he did not believe her. He held out his hand to Josie, who stared at him warily for a moment before deciding that this stranger and whatever he wanted with her was still better than being with Potter, then slipped her hand into his and allowed him to lead her into the parlor.

A pretty woman in a dark blue dress and matching pelisse, with hair like spun gold piled high on her head, sat in an old chair near the fire. When she saw Josie, a bright smile crossed her face, and she seemed to hold her breath as she reached up to clasp the hand resting reassuringly on her shoulder, which belonged to a tall, broad-shouldered man standing beside her.

“Hello,” she said softly, her voice lilting and musical.

Josie glanced at Potter, then up at the doctor who gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. “M’lady,” she answered quietly, saying nothing more. She’d had her ears boxed before for talking out of turn by other ladies who had seemed just as pleasant, just as polite and proper as this one. Best not to take any chances.

The woman’s eyes shined. “I am Elizabeth Carlisle, and this,” she glanced over her shoulder, “this is my husband, Richard. And what is your name, little one?”

“Josie, ma’am.”

“Josephine,” Mrs. Potter corrected from the doorway, “your ladyship.”

But Elizabeth Carlisle’s eyes never strayed from hers. “Josie...what a beautiful name.” The doctor gave her hand to Elizabeth, who took it in both of hers and gently drew her closer.

“I’m sorry about her appearance, ma’am,” Potter told her. “The girl ran off this morning, and I didn’t have time to put on her good dress or wash her face and—”

At a curt glance from the husband, the doctor crossed the room to Potter, putting himself between her and the couple.

Potter leaned to peek past his shoulder, her face twisting into a puzzled frown as she watched Elizabeth Carlisle fuss over the dirty brat. The doctor had come to the orphanage last week, to meet and observe the children. He’d favored this one, but she’d had no idea he was there on behalf of Lord and Lady Althorpe, that he had been sent to find them a girl...“They can’t be serious.”

“I assure you, they are.”

She snorted. “Whyever for?”

His expression darkened. “The Baron and Baroness Althorpe have three sons, but no daughters, and during her last time with child, there were complications. Her ladyship wanted to try for another child, a girl, but I strongly advised against it.” He glanced up at the Baroness, who was now gently touching the girl’s cheek. “At first, I thought they would prefer an infant, but I think the Baroness will be quite happy with this child.”

Mrs. Potter blinked in disbelief. “That urchin?”

“Perhaps, Mrs. Potter,” his eyes narrowed, “you should do as you advised the child and keep your silence.”

Her mouth slapped shut, her face flushing red.

Across the room, turning her attention away from Potter and the doctor, Josie listened warily to the woman’s soft voice, smelled the faint scent of lavender on her skin, and thought, quite simply, she was the most beautiful woman she’d ever seen. Elizabeth Carlisle continued to smile at her, continued to draw her closer, inch by inch, as she told Josie about her three sons and all the trouble the young boys caused around her house, how

they liked to ride their ponies, climb trees, play hide-and-seek inside the house on rainy days, and help Cook eat warm biscuits fresh from the oven. It sounded magical.

“But I do not have a little girl of my own.” The woman’s bright smile faded, and Josie thought she saw tears shining in her eyes. “And we do so want one, don’t we, Richard?”

The man knelt down beside Josie. “Very much. In fact,” he glanced sideways at his wife, as if searching her face for agreement, “I think we would like it if you would come live with us.”

Josie caught her breath. “Sir?”

“That is,” Elizabeth tucked a stray curl behind her ear, “if you want to.” She paused. “Would you like that?”

“Yes,” she whispered, unable to move, not even to nod, knowing that this seemingly wonderful opportunity could prove to be nothing more than an attempt by another couple to get a free servant girl. It had happened to her before.

But her agreement seemed exactly what the woman wanted to hear. An impossibly brilliant smile flashed across her pretty face, and she grabbed Josie to hug her tightly against her, so tightly Josie could barely breathe. She was certain she’d seen tears in the woman’s eyes, then, because she felt their warm wetness on her cheek.

The woman rose gracefully to her feet and led Josie by the hand from the room, as if the lady were afraid she would change her mind and run away. The husband and the doctor followed slowly after, talking in hushed tones between themselves.

A black carriage waited in the street, and a young man in a gold and blue uniform opened the door as they approached. A crowd of children gathered around, their eyes wide and mouths hanging open with awe as they saw Josie walking hand-in-hand with Lady Althorpe.

Josie stopped. “M’lady?” Then she corrected herself, “Elizabeth, I mean.”

The woman smiled down at her, obviously pleased that she had used her name. “Yes, dear?”

“Can I say goodbye to them?”

“Of course.” She bent down to look Josie solemnly in the eyes, as if making an unspoken promise. “But it isn’t goodbye. We’ll bring you to visit whenever you’d like.”

“Truly?” she squeaked.

Elizabeth Carlisle nodded. “Truly.”

Impulsively, Josie threw her arms around the woman’s neck, then raced away to the children standing nearby, going down the line of them, hugging each one in turn.

“I left Mary on the bed for you, Rose,” Josie whispered into the ear of the last girl, a child of just five. “She’s your doll now. Take good care of her.”

“I will,” she sniffed, but the tiny girl did not want to let go of her and continued to grasp her hands tightly. “You’ll never be back—I know it!”

“I will, and I will never forget you. I promise.” She released her, then turned to a group of boys standing to the side. “I’ll never forget any of you, no matter what.”

Then Richard scooped her into his arms and carried her to the carriage, settling her next to Elizabeth on the bench as the door closed and the coach rolled away toward the grand house on the other side of the river.