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Regency Romance

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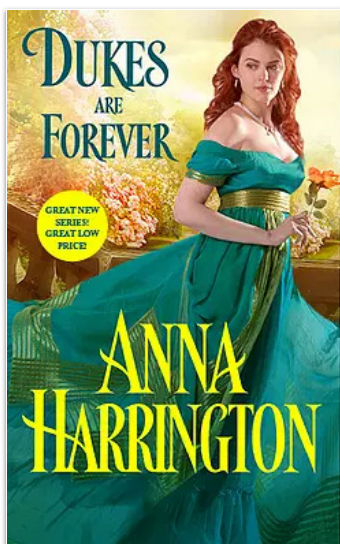
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Bonus Scene:

DUKES ARE FOREVER



This scene was originally envisioned as an epilogue to DUKES ARE FOREVER which linked this book to the second book in the series, ALONG CAME A ROGUE. Eventually, it was decided that the scene was too much of a cliffhanger and might upset readers, who would have had to wait three months to find out what happened next to Thomas. Although it wasn't included in any of the books, I love this little scene because of the interaction between Thomas and Edward and how much it demonstrates the brotherly bond between the two men.

April, 1816
Strathmore House, London

"You're a disgrace." Thomas's eyes narrowed at Edward over the rim of his brandy snifter as the two men sat in front of the fireplace in the study. "An absolute disgrace to the uniform and a traitor to your fellow man."

Edward puffed at his cigar and watched the smoke trail up toward the ceiling. "Because I dared to take a wife?"

"Because you love her." Thomas scowled distastefully. "It's simply not done. No one in English society actually loves his wife, for God's sake."

"I do," Edward answered with a casual shrug.

"Poor girl." The marquess clucked his tongue regretfully, shaking his head. "Doesn't know what she's gotten herself into."

Edward watched the flickering flames in the fireplace, remembering a certain fire he'd built in a lockkeeper's abandoned cottage one stormy night.

A year had passed since he carried a doll into Brambly House for the little girl he expected to find there and instead met the most stubborn, challenging, intelligent, beautiful, and alluring woman he'd ever met...the woman who changed his life. His little hellcat had already proved herself well as his wife and duchess, under Augusta's careful direction becoming one of the ton's most sought after ladies. Not that Kate cared. She'd still rather be in her laboratory crafting her medicines and rolling bandages than hosting teas and dinners. And at night, well...

He smiled devilishly. Poor girl, indeed.

"Someone should tell her there's still time to flee."

"Not anymore." Edward rolled his cigar thoughtfully between his fingertips. "She's with child."

Thomas slid him a sideways glance. "Is it yours?"

He popped the cigar between his teeth and grinned. "Dashed all hopes for an annulment, I daresay."

His friend's eyes shined as he lifted his glass toward Edward in a toast. "Congratulations, Colonel."

The warmth of pride filled Edward's chest. He was going to be a father. A father! He could hardly believe it himself.

"Aunt Augusta must be thrilled," Thomas added, taking a swallow of brandy.

"She's ecstatic." And much to Kate's chagrin, his aunt was already planning the nursery and interviewing nurses and nannies. But he couldn't blame her, because he was just as excited himself.

"She finally gets to be a grandmother."

Edward tossed the last inch of his cigar into the fire, then said quietly. "And you and Grey get to be uncles."

"Good God!" Thomas downed the rest of his brandy in a single, gasping swallow.

He looked solemnly at his former captain and sat forward in his chair, his elbows resting on his knees. "I'm counting on you and Grey to be good uncles to this child. Except for Augusta, you two are the only family we have now. And you, Thomas," he took a deep breath, "I need you to take care of Kate and the baby in case anything happens to me."

"Nothing is going to happen to you."

"If it does," Edward continued, knowing how fragile life was and that he'd never been friends with Fate, "you're a marquess now, you'll be a duke...They'll need your protection."

"They'll have it."

He held his friend's gaze, knowing he could count on Thomas. "Thank you."

The study door opened, and Kate Westover swept inside, a smile on her face for the two men as they rose to their feet to greet her. Thomas politely bowed his head but with a knowing grin, and Edward kissed her forehead, stirring a faint blush in her cheeks.

"I've been informed by Kingsley that dinner will be ready shortly," she told them, then reached for Thomas's hands. "Please stay—we'd love to have you join us."

"Thank you for the invitation, Duchess." The young marquess squeezed her hands and released them, exchanging a look with Edward over her head, one of clear communication that the colonel preferred to spend the night alone with his wife and wanted his former captain gone. "But perhaps another time."

"Soon?"

"Of course. I'll show myself out. Good evening, Colonel," he nodded at Edward, then kissed Kate's cheek, "And congratulations."

As Thomas left the study, he glanced over his shoulder and saw Edward pull a laughing Kate into his arms, placing his hand gently against her still-flat belly and leaning down to kiss her.

Smiling to himself, he collected his coat and hat from the footman and sauntered down the front steps, his chest light as happiness hummed through his veins. It was a beautiful evening, the late spring air fresh and soft, and the shadows just starting to lengthen along the cobblestone streets as the sun slipped beneath the western horizon, the gas lamps not yet lit.

A baby! Sweet Lord.

He couldn't help the silly grin on his face or the bounce in his step as he strolled down the Mayfair avenues toward his family's townhouse. He was going to be an uncle, yet the world carried on as usual, as if this momentous change hadn't occurred. Foolish world. Hadn't it realized how much all their lives had just changed?

Perhaps for once, he contemplated, he'd stay home instead of heading out for the evening, build a warm fire in his rooms, enjoy a book and a bottle of port, toast to Edward and Kate—

A man in a ragged coat stepped onto the footpath in front of him, raised a pistol, and pulled the trigger.

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