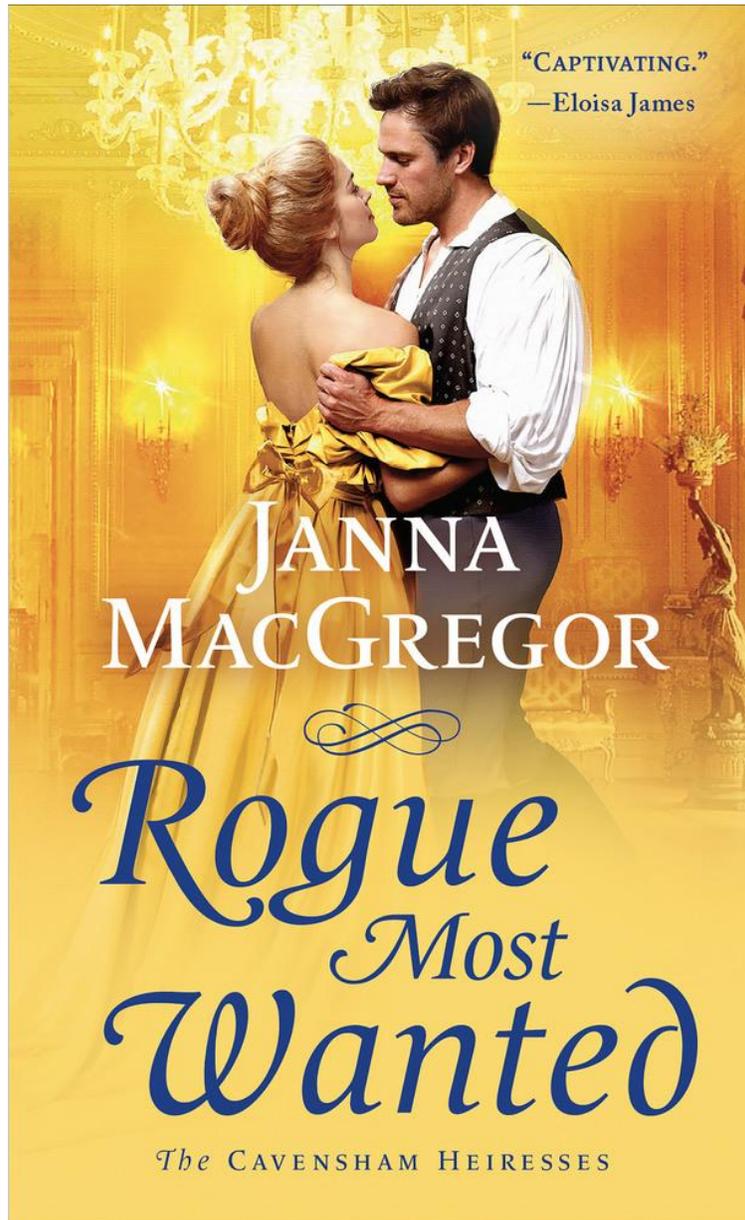


Here is an exclusive deleted scene from
Janna MacGregor's *Rogue Most Wanted!*



“Blast it,” Will said under his breath.

His black stallion, Chase, swiveled his ears in agreement.

In reward, Will patted the black horse on his withers. “At least, you don’t want anything from me except your daily oats.”

They continued on the path that led to the fields where Aunt Stella’s tenants had planted their spring crops. Will wanted to inspect their work to see if he could gauge how successful the yield would become mid and late summer. He’d also inspect what the home farm had planted. It was critical that Payne House store enough grain and produce for the upcoming winter, particularly if the yields were successful and prices stayed high. The tenants and Aunt Stella would profit greatly by selling their crops, and the home farm’s yield would see all of them through until next spring. Of course, a million things could happen in between now and the harvest, but it was his duty to plan for the worse.

A lovely copse of oak trees heavily laden with mistletoe shaded several blackberry bushes that had grown wild around the stone fence that separated Theodora’s estate from Aunt Stella’s property.

The alarm of bleating ewes was the only warning before a flurry of brown and turquoise jumped the stone wall in front of Chase. Startled, the great stallion reared and neighed his outrage at the disturbance, but Will kept his seat.

“Whoa, boy,” Will soothed. Chase twisted sideways almost in a spiral to escape. Will immediately settled the stallion by holding the reins tight, then coaxing the animal in a calming voice. He continued to rub the stallion’s crest and withers.

Theodora’s mount, a beautiful bay mare also reared, and Theodora expertly handled the turbulent reaction. When the mare made a move to bolt, Thea pulled one rein turning the horse

away from Chase. She leaned over the bay and crooned soft words while patting it. In response, her horse calmed much quicker than his.

He continued to soothe Chase but kept his gaze on Theodora and her mount. While she'd handled the horse with an expert precision the Prince Regent's horse guard would envy, Will didn't know her horse's temperament.

His watchful eye turned traitorous as he kept stealing glances at her person. She looked ravishing in a turquoise riding habit of broadcloth with red frogs down the front of her jacket and braided epaulettes on the shoulders. Stylish, she sported red gloves and matching half-boots. The short spencer featured a standup collar. A perfectly tied snow-white cravat completed the look.

If she were riding on Rotten Row this morning, she'd surely turn every gentleman's head with her ensemble.

"You have my sincerest apology, Lord William. I didn't see you there, or I wouldn't have taken the jump." Out of breath, her voice had deepened to a rich huskiness that caused his groin to tighten.

Her silken words drummed through his body like a call to arms. He imagined her urging her lover to join her in bed with that voice. What man could refuse such a siren's offer? He couldn't. The thought of all that red-blond hair spread across his own bed sent Will's blood rushing through his veins straight to his thickening cock. An image of her holding out her arms beckoning him to join her flashed through his mind.

He shook his head to tame his wild musings. Nothing good would come from such fantasies. Theodora, the Countess of Eanruig, was off limits. Today, tomorrow, and forever.

Why did this woman call to him with a vigor, a want, that he'd never experienced before? It had to be the fresh country air. There was no other explanation.

“I owe you an apology, too,” he said.

Thea’s look of contriteness melted into shock, and the sight amused him.

“Believe it or not, I’ve enough manners to acknowledge when it’s appropriate for me to make an apology.” By now, both horses had calmed, and Will drew Chase alongside the bay.

“You’re apologizing for last night’s behavior when you flew out of the maze. What about today at tea when you practically catapulted from the room?” she quipped with a smile.

Suddenly, her brow furrowed. “My teasing wasn’t a suitable way to accept your apology.”

“The things that you utter,” he laughed. Truly, she reminded him of an almost ripe strawberry, still tart but with an underlining sweetness that would soon blossom into perfection. “I shouldn’t have left you alone in the maze, and I was rather curt this afternoon. You have my sincerest apologies for my bad behavior. Now, that’s three times in one day. I’ve reached my limit. Don’t make me do it again.”

“Alright.” She nodded causing a riot of curls to flash in the sunlight.

“You look very fetching today. That color suits you.”

Her cheeks deepened into a lovely shade of pink. “Thank you. It’s old, but I’m partial to this habit. My grandfather had it specially designed for me in London. He gave it to me on my birthday seven years ago.”

A small hat sat at a jaunty angle tempting him. Strictly for show, it adorned her head, and he was the beneficiary of the beautiful sight. His fingers itched to grab one of those teasing mischievous curls. To make matters worse, only a foot separated the horses making her exotic eyes perfectly visible. Today, they displayed a perfect mixture of blue and green. It reminded him of the beautiful waters off the coast of southern Italy when he’d gone on his grand tour to escape the pain of his jilting.

Unaware of the affect she had on him, Theodora examined Chase with a practiced eye.

“Do you race?”

“Sometimes.” He leaned back in his saddle. “Why do you ask?”

“I wondered if you might have a go with me. I never have anyone to race with. I think my mare might benefit from a little competition. Sometimes, I think she’s lazy.” With a gentle touch, she wheeled the bay around in the direction he’d been headed.

“I don’t think your mare has much of a chance,” he said. “You see, there’s a reason he’s called Chase.”

“Why is that?” Thea blinked her eyes slowly.

Her wide-eyed innocence didn’t fool Will for a minute. His sister Emma had taught him that such a look meant he needed to be on guard. “Because all the other horses chase him.”

“What a perfect name, then.” She cast an admiring eye the horse’s way. “He’s a handsome beast.”

He decided then that they’d race. It’d give her an opportunity to admire his backside as well as Chase’s when they left Theodora and her horse in the dust. “I’ll race but only if we make a wager.” Will arched a brow. “We never race without some incentive.”

“We?”

“Chase and I.”

Her head dipped shyly. “What kind of a wager?”

“Anything you’d like,” he’d whispered. “If I win, I want another kiss.”

Damnation, where had that come from? Such a request amounted to pure foolishness.

With her head still bowed, Theodora studied her hands. “If I win, I want to ask you a question.”

“That’s all?”

She nodded.

He inhaled deeply. Taking advantage of her lack of sophistication and winning a kiss would teach her a valuable lesson. Stay away from men, particularly him. “Splendid. How far shall we race?”

Finally, she looked up, and the excitement in her eyes blazed. “To the old hawthorn tree on your left. Once we’re past this copse of trees, the path widens. You can’t miss it.”

“Prepare for a loss. I’m afraid your horse will not beat mine. This is your last chance to back out.” No one could ever say that he’d taken advantage of her. Chase stood at least three hands taller than her mare.

“On the count of three,” she chuckled. “One, two, *three*.”

Will clicked his tongue and nudged his horse with his knee. True to his name, Chase left Theodora and her bay behind. Halfway through the distance, Will made the mistake of looking over his shoulder. Not more than a length back, Theodora and the bay kept pace stride for stride. Will leaned forward urging Chase faster.

Three quarters of the distance, Will expected Theodora to be lagging behind. Instead, she and the bay had pulled forward until both horses were neck and neck. He chanced a glance and expected her to be holding on for dear life.

Instead, she laughed, then leaned low over the horse’s neck. She said something to it, but the words were lost in the pounding of hoofs. In response, the bay shot forward.

Will urged Chase to run faster, and the horse lengthened its stride, but to no avail. The bay had increased the distance between them by two lengths. The massive hawthorn stood majestically about one hundred yards ahead.

Try as he might, Will and Chase couldn't catch Theodora and her little bay who by now had increased the distance to three lengths.

They flew past the hawthorn, and Theodora clenched a fist in the air signaling her triumph. She slowed the bay's pace to allow it to cool down from the strenuous exercise, which allowed Will to catch up with her.

"Congratulations." Will pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow. "You've an excellent seat. Who taught you how to ride like that?"

"My grandfather. He hired the best riding instructors he could find in the area. Some girls learn to dance and embroider. I learned the art of racing and jumping." Her face glowed from the exertion of the race and the accompanying excitement over winning.

There was no other way to describe her except beautiful. It made losing all the more bitter as he desperately wanted that kiss he'd wagered.

"Wise man to recognize your talent at an early age." He couldn't help but smile. "It's a pleasure to watch you ride."

"You're very gracious." She dipped her head, then stole a peek. The sparkle in her eyes reflected a confidence, an excitement that made her even more attractive. He'd always admired such traits in a woman.

"As the victor, you won the right to ask me a question. However, before I allow you to collect, I want to ask you one. What's your mare's name?"

She shook her head and smiled at the same time. "You're not going to believe it."

"What?" He couldn't hide the laughter in his voice.

"Follow. Her name is Follow."

"That's an odd name for a horse," he answered.

“No odder than Chase.” She pulled Follow to a halt, then propped a hand on her hip. “She’s named Follow as all other horses follow her including your Chase. Which is entirely appropriate, as your stallion did nothing but chase after her the last half of the race.”

With such passion, she could charm the gold from the proverbial leprechaun. No doubt the sprite would even offer to retrieve it from the end of the rainbow for her.

Will drew up beside her. His attention diverted from her face by a rebellious curl, a causality of their race. Without thinking, he removed his gloves. It took little effort to reach over and caress the lock between his fingers. He caught her gaze. “It’s even softer than I had imagined.”

Her eyes widened, but she didn’t look away.

Gently, he brushed his fingers across her cheek lingering against the warm skin before he tucked the curl behind her ear. “What question do you want to ask me?”

“May I show you something first?” Her smile was bittersweet. “Years ago, my grandfather built it for me. I’d like to ask my question there.”