

### Excerpt from "The Rake's Revenge" by Gail Ranstrom

Grace lowered her voice in a whisper, "I am afraid for you, Afton. You have only a little more than two weeks. If you continue to pose as Madame Zoe after that, I fear that *we* might lose *you*."

"I cannot stop now, Aunt Grace. I've lost Mama and Papa, and Auntie Hen," Afton whispered back. Her heart caught in her throat as she thought of all that was at stake. "I cannot lose anyone else. I do not think I'd survive it."

She glanced to the dance floor where her younger sister, Dianthe, waltzed by with an eligible young baron. Her blonde hair shone in the candlelight and her pale blue gown was a perfect foil for her china blue eyes. By any standard, Dianthe was an uncommon beauty. If she married well, Afton could count that one obligation met. One less task to claim her attention. One step closer to her final goal of keeping her promise to her dying father to keep the family safe and secure – a task his own incompetence had prevented him from accomplishing.

She was touched by Grace's concern but unswayed in her determination. "If the murderer meant to kill me, he has had ten days to attempt it. Lady Annica's rumor about Madame Zoe losing her memory must have eased his mind."

Grace stiffened as she glanced at a point beyond Afton's right shoulder. From the expression on her face, her aunt was surprised and a little uncertain.

"Mrs. Forbush, thank you for inviting me this evening."

Something in the deep timbre and faint Scottish brogue of that voice sent a chill up Afton's spine. She turned to see the speaker bow over Grace's hand and lift it to his sensual lips. A shock of dark hair fell over his brow and light sparked in eyes the shade of moss. When he straightened, he was a full six

feet and more. His shoulders were broad, his features were finely chiseled and, despite his beauty, he was intensely masculine. Or was it the hint of frozen danger hovering about him like a ghostly presence that made her shiver?

"Lord Glenross! Heavens! I did not expect you to come in view of – that is – I'm delighted, but I did not hope to see you."

Lord Glenross? The man the entire ton had been gossiping about for the past two hours? The man who had just escaped after six months in an Algerian prison under sentence of death? Ah, now she knew the reason for his detachment. And her unease. She could not even imagine what might be done to a British officer in an Algerian prison.

Lord Glenross smiled – at least Afton thought it was a smile, but it could have been a grimace – his attention still fastened on Grace. "I would not have dreamed of missing it."

"You flatter me, Lord Glenross. I was not altogether certain you would welcome an invitation under the circumstances. That is . . . I thought--"

Afton could not take her eyes off the man. He turned to her as Grace continued her apology. His glance traveled from her eyes, paused in study of her mouth, then dropped further to linger a moment at her throat before dipping to the low décolletage of her pale pink gown. Her skin tingled in the wake of that heated gaze. When he returned his attention to her face, he gave her a devastating smile that made faint dimples appear in both cheeks, and Afton could not catch her breath. His appraisal, without the final smile, would have been insulting. She might have been flattered if there had not been something cynical in his study...as if there were really nothing personal in his assessment. As if he could appreciate, but never participate.

Lord Glenross returned his attention to Grace, as if remembering her suddenly. "Thank you, Mrs. Forbush, but I am quite all right," he said.

Grace gave him a doubtful smile. "I am glad to hear it. If there is anything I can do, my lord, you need only ask."

He paused long enough for Afton to realize he was measuring his reply-- *managing* their impression. That knowledge set her on her guard.

He lifted one shoulder in a negligent shrug. "I've had time to ponder the Fates, Mrs. Forbush, and wonder what forces set us on a path."

Fascinated by where he was headed with his conversation, Afton accepted a cup of rum punch from a passing footman's tray and fortified herself with a deep gulp while she awaited Lord Glenross's further explanation.

"Life is a great mystery, is it not? Any advantage one might gain would be of assistance, do you not agree?"

"Why, yes, I do," Grace said. "I have always believed that knowledge is a powerful thing."

"I knew you would think so, Mrs. Forbush, and that is why I have sought you out to ask how to contact a certain 'Madame Zoe.' Pray tell, how might I accomplish that?"

Surprise and shock made Afton choke, the punch halfway down her throat. Lord Glenross stepped forward, a concerned look on his face.

Grace intercepted him and thumped Afton on the back, glancing at her in silent desperation before answering. "Oh, Lord Glenross! How would I know such a thing?"

"You know everything worth knowing, Mrs. Forbush. And if you do not know, you know how to find out."

Afton finally caught her breath and Grace turned her attention back to Glenross. "Well, um, yes. I suppose I could make inquiries, but I must say that I am astonished, my lord. I would never have thought you to be the sort who would traffic with psychics."

"The collective ton says Madame Zoe is a phenomenon, Mrs. Forbush. Perhaps she will predict *my* future." His expression did not change but the corner of his right eye twitched faintly. "Or perhaps I shall predict hers," he added.

Afton tried to gather her wits. *Madame Zoe?* Men like Lord Glenross did not consult fortunetellers. He was playing some sort of deep game and, from what she'd seen of the man, no good could come from it. She glanced at Grace, wondering how she could possibly reply to such a request.

"That is very open-minded of you, my lord," Grace declared. "I shall have that information for you by Monday morning, latest. Shall I post the instructions to you at your hotel? Or shall I send 'round to your club?"

Afton contained her gasp of dismay even as Glenross smiled triumphantly. "Send to my hotel. I am staying at Pultney's in Piccadilly." That bit of business out of the way, he looked pointedly at Afton, and then back to Grace.

"Oh! I beg your pardon, my lord," she said. "May I present my niece, Miss Afton Lovejoy? Miss Lovejoy, please meet Robert McHugh, Lord Glenross."

"Lord Glenross," Afton managed to acknowledge. With some trepidation, she dropped a small curtsy and offered her hand. He accepted it and lifted it to his lips. The warmth of his hand spread through her, and when those sensual lips brushed lightly across her knuckles, his breath warmed her blood.

"Miss *Afton* Lovejoy?" he asked, turning back to Grace. "I could have sworn the invitation stated that you were honoring a Miss *Dianthe* Lovejoy."

Grace indicated Dianthe with a wave as she waltzed by with yet another proud looking partner. "Dianthe is Afton's sister."

Lord Glenross barely spared a glance for Dianthe before returning his attention to Afton. "Miss Lovejoy, I am charmed," he said. "Have you just now come to town?"

She wet her lips, gone dry with anxiety. "I've been in London six months, my lord. As Mrs. Forbush's companion."

Grace interceded once again. "Afton has shunned society since coming to town, my lord. She calls herself my companion, but she is my niece by marriage as well as a very dear friend."

"I am pleased that you have joined society tonight, Miss Lovejoy," he said. "I would be honored if you would consent to dance the next waltz with me."

Her heartbeat tripped. If she danced with him, would he be able to recognize her through her disguise when he met her as Madame Zoe? She could not risk such a thing. "I have promised the next waltz, my lord," she lied.

His smile did not falter, nor did his expression change, but she felt a subtle change in him. *He knew she was lying!*

"I see," he murmured. "Another time, Miss Lovejoy?" Without waiting for an answer, he bowed and departed in the direction of the game room.

Afton was appalled at the odd mixture of excitement and dread that filled her at the thought of seeing Lord Glenross again. She turned to Grace and lamented, "If there were only some way to refuse him!"

Grace looked doubtful. "If you wish, I shall tell him I could not discover how to contact Madame Zoe."

A complete waste of time. If Glenross did not have the referral from Grace, he would acquire it elsewhere. Slowly, painfully, Afton's heartbeat steadied. She shook her head. "Send Glenross my factor's address, and I shall instruct Mr. Evans to grant an appointment as soon as possible. As Shakespeare said, 'If it were done when 'tis done, then. . . .'"

". . . 'twere well it were done quickly.'" Grace finished the quote with a nod of agreement. "An excellent idea. Mr. Evans shall handle it all. He is the very personification of discretion."

Afton steadied her nerves and gave her aunt a small smile. "I shall simply tell Lord Glenross a happy little fortune and be done with him."