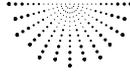


CHAPTER ONE



"WON'T YOU AT LEAST CONSIDER IT, FORREST? AS A FAVOUR TO ME?" The Countess of Dearborn cocked her head at her son in a manner intended to be winsome, but which made her enormous purple turban tip dangerously to one side.

"Don't tell me you would actually believe anything this Madame Fortunata might say, Mother," he replied with a snort, one golden brow sceptically arched. "I can assure you that I won't."

"Then you'll come?" Lady Dearborn was ecstatic. "I promise you won't regret it. Fortunata isn't Cora's real name, of course; I knew her when she was plain Mrs. Lawrence, back when she did readings only for a few friends, but now she is become ever so popular. Having one's fortune told is all the thing these days, you know."

"So is pink embroidery on one's waistcoat, I have heard, but you'll notice that my own singularly lacks it."

"Now, Forrest, don't tease," said the Countess, rising with a flutter of feathers and scarves to lay a tiny beringed hand on her son's sleeve. "You know how much this means to me."

He did. For as long as Forrest could remember, Lady Dearborn had relied heavily on superstition, folk tales and charms to order her daily life. As a child, he had been forced to eat gooseberries, which he

detested, every Whit Sunday as well as pancakes, which he liked rather better, on Shrove Tuesday. And he could still vividly recall, at a distance of some twenty years, his mother's hysteria over a maid's broken looking-glass, presaging ill luck for the entire household. The fact that her worst fears were never realized had no apparent effect on her blind faith in such omens.

"I will come, Mother. But I warn you—" his eyes narrowed—"do not expect me to do anything foolish, no matter how many offspring your Gypsy foretells for me. *If I marry, 'twill be to someone of my own choosing and in my own time.*"

"Certainly, Forrest, certainly!" agreed Lady Dearborn in shocked accents. "I would never presume to make such a decision for you."

The Earl of Dearborn smiled in spite of himself. "No, only to nudge me in the proper direction. Do you really want grandchildren so desperately as all that?"

"I'll not say another word on the subject," declared the Countess, her chin in the air. "Cora's predictions must speak for themselves." She rang for her abigail, a middle-aged woman as stolid and sensible as her mistress was flamboyant and eccentric. "My amethyst cloak, Marie, and the lilac-and-silver scarf."

Marie extracted the required items from a wardrobe overflowing with feathers, scarves and gauzes of every hue, with shades of purple and red predominating. A sleek Siamese cat batted at the scarf as it wafted past, but Marie, with deftness born of long practice, whisked it up out of reach of the playful sable paw.

Well wrapped against the early April chill, Lady Dearborn paused long enough to tuck a curled silver feather into her turban. Nodding at her reflection in the dressing-table mirror, she turned to her son and pronounced herself ready to leave.

"I trust Madame Fortunata will not be long-winded with her prognostications," observed the Earl as they descended to his waiting curricule. "I am expected for nuncheon at White's before one."



Following his mother's directions, Lord Dearborn was surprised when she told him to rein in his pair before a perfectly respectable-looking Town house of ample proportions on Brook Street.

"Your Madame Fortunata lives here?" he asked incredulously. "She must do exceedingly well gulling the ton out of their money."

"Cora is only Madame Fortunata on Tuesday and Thursday mornings," the Countess explained. "The rest of the time she is Mrs. Lawrence, as I said before, and quite well received. I daresay you have met her at some of the dos yourself."

"Indeed" was the Earl's only comment. Leaving his groom to walk the horses to prevent their becoming chilled, he escorted his mother up the broad front stairs where a butler, looking much like any other butler in London, admitted them to the house.

"Sylvia, my dear!" Rising to meet them as they entered a parlour that was in no way out of the ordinary was a short, matronly woman, dressed far more conservatively than the Countess. "You induced him to come, I see." Turning to the Earl, she said cryptically, "Your mother has warned me that you are a sceptic, my lord, so I thought it best that we meet first in here."

"I am charmed to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Lawrence—or is it Madame Fortunata today? It is Thursday, is it not?"

Their hostess gave a long, tinkling laugh. "A sceptic indeed, I see! It is only in my astrological sanctum that I become Madame Fortunata, my lord, while in any other part of the house I remain plain Cora Lawrence." She waved him to a chair, seating herself across from him. "Will you have a cup of tea, or would you prefer that we begin forthwith?" Her question was directed at the Earl, but she glanced at Lady Dearborn for guidance as she spoke.

"Forrest did say something about another engagement—" the Countess began.

"Yes, yes, let us get the mumbo jumbo over with," said the Earl quickly. "I've no doubt my mother has told you to predict eight or ten brats for me over the next dozen years. Not that I intend to comply." He glanced sidelong at the Countess, who feigned great interest in the

gilded moulding of the mantelpiece. "Where is this astrology room of yours?"

Mrs. Lawrence appeared more amused than offended at his manner. "Very well, my lord, I see we must waste as little of your precious time as possible. This way, if you please." Rising smoothly, she led the way out of the parlour and across the front hall to a door at the base of the curving staircase.

Watching Mrs. Lawrence walking ahead of them in her fashionable pearl-grey, high-necked morning gown, Forrest found it difficult to reconcile her unremarkable appearance with his mother's stories of her uncanny ability as a fortune-teller. Cora Lawrence looked like any of a dozen other Society matrons he had met at various respectable gatherings.

"Wait here a moment," she said before disappearing behind a plain, oak-panelled door. No more than a minute later, she called out from within, "You may enter now."

Without hesitation, the Earl turned the knob and pushed open the door, only to stand mesmerized on the threshold. The room, apparently windowless, was lit by a single candle on a small table at its centre. Cloth of midnight blue, spangled with silver stars, draped both the walls and the table, where their hostess was seated. She herself was startlingly transformed by a voluminous robe and turban of the same material. Spread out before her on the table was a large sheet of parchment, curling at the edges as though very old. Beside it was a globe of crystal, mounted on an ornate bronze stand.

"Go on," whispered the Countess from behind him.

Forrest blinked once, then proceeded into the room. "Am I to sit here, ma'am?" he asked blandly as his composure returned, gesturing at the only other chair.

Mrs. Lawrence—or Madame Fortunata now, he supposed—inclined her head regally, and he seated himself across from her. The parchment, he saw, was a chart of the constellations. He had read a fair amount of astronomy at Oxford, but had no idea what the various

notations around the stars meant. Something to do with his future, no doubt, he thought cynically.

As if in answer, Madame Fortunata pointed at a group of stars near the top edge of the chart. "This is Taurus, the sign under which you were born," she intoned in a voice markedly different from the one she had used in the parlour. "At the hour of your birth, Venus was in ascendancy and it is she whom we must consult to learn the identity of your soul mate."

"Soul mate?" he echoed incredulously.

"Sshh!" admonished Lady Dearborn from just inside the closed door.

The fortune-teller made no sign that she had heard either of them, but positioned the crystal globe over the parchment and gazed raptly into it. "I see her now. She is tall for a woman, and sculpted like the goddess herself. Hair of gold and eyes as blue as the sky."

Madame Fortunata now had Forrest's full attention. "Hair of gold, you say? Always did fancy blondes. Anything else?"

"Quiet and composed, graceful and demure. A vision of loveliness, soon to come to London for the first time. The stars can tell me no more."

"Her name, for instance?" asked Forrest. His scepticism, momentarily shaken, returned in full force. "No doubt there will be quite a few golden-haired, blue eyed debutantes this Season. How am I to know which one is my 'soul mate'?"

Madame Fortunata looked him full in the eyes. "You will know," she said.

"Come, Forrest," broke in the Countess. "Did you not say you were expected at White's? Be a dear and send your curricule back for me once you arrive. I wish to stay a bit longer and have my own horoscope read."

The Earl started, then turned, having briefly forgotten his mother's presence. "Certainly. I assume we may consider this matter closed?" At her innocent nod, he bowed to both ladies and took his leave.

"You did beautifully, Cora," said Lady Dearborn after the door had closed behind him. "I don't think he suspected a thing."

"I'm glad I was able to find that old crystal. I couldn't think of any other way to manufacture the description you suggested. Are you certain there will be a girl to fit it?" asked Mrs. Lawrence, removing her robe and turban. "I must admit you were right about the golden hair; it certainly made him prick up his ears."

"Dear Forrest has always preferred his, ah, ladies fair, though I doubt he knows that I know it," said the Countess with a chuckle. "And never fear, I've not known a Season yet without its share of blond debutantes, by nature or artifice. Trust me to discover which one has the best pedigree and pitch her at him, reminding him all the while of his destiny. Do the stars really predict him to marry this year?"

Mrs. Lawrence frowned at her chart, holding it closer to the candle. "Very possibly," she admitted. "The constellations predict a Season of surprises for your son, with an emphasis on romance."

"Well, another opera dancer would scarcely be a surprise, so I will assume that means marriage," decided Lady Dearborn with a bob of her turban. "The stars have never steered me wrong yet."



Between afternoons at Gentleman Jackson's or the War Office and evenings at cards or the theatre, Lord Dearborn quickly forgot his amusing interlude with Madame Fortunata. He might have shared it with his friends, as a jest that they would undoubtedly enjoy, had he not felt that in relating it he would be opening his mother to their ridicule, as well. Therefore, he did not mention it to anyone, and the matter soon slipped from his mind.

One evening nearly a month later, however, as the Season was just beginning to burst upon London, the incident was recalled vividly to his memory. He was escorting his mother (who had kept her promise in not referring again to his deplorable lack of wife and heirs) to a

musicale at Lady Brookhaven's when they encountered Mrs. Lawrence. Dressed as she was in a subdued, tasteful evening gown of cream silk, he could not at once remember where he had met the lady before.

"Cora! I am delighted to see you here!" exclaimed the Countess, rectifying the lapse in his memory.

"My lady," responded Mrs. Lawrence much more properly, though her smile was as warm as her friend's. "You are looking extremely well."

"Let us sit over here, out of the way, and have a nice cose," suggested Lady Dearborn, taking Mrs. Lawrence's arm. "You will excuse us, of course, Forrest."

The Earl nodded, bowing to both ladies before leaving them to their conversation. He walked thoughtfully towards the supper-room, where a lavish buffet was laid out. Seeing Mrs. Lawrence had vividly recalled her predictions to his mind, and he considered them again with a smile.

It was almost a shame, he thought, that her fortune-telling nonsense could not actually order the future. A woman such as she had described —tall, fair, quiet and demure —would be exactly what he might look for in a wife. He had always preferred blondes, something Mrs. Lawrence could not have known, as he was careful to keep his various *affaires* from his mother's ears. As he himself topped six feet, a tall woman would complement him well, he thought. Quiet — yes, he would infinitely prefer that to the mindless chatter most schoolroom misses subjected one to. And demure —a wife who would not be constantly hanging on his sleeve, making endless demands on his attention and purse-strings. Such a female might easily tempt him into parson's mousetrap, he mused.

Unconsciously, Forrest sighed with regret as he allowed the pleasant fantasy to disperse. At thirty, a prime catch since assuming his title at eighteen, he had endured more Seasons, more fluttering debutantes and more matchmaking mamas than he cared to remember. None had come even close to that ideal. Surely it was the sheerest

folly to think that just because some fortune-teller had said what she thought he wanted to hear, such a one would magically appear this Season.

Pausing at the door to the supper-room, he shook his head to clear it of such unaccustomed thoughts. It was high time he found another mistress, he decided. He had broken things off with Glorianna nearly a month ago, and had yet to find a replacement for her. Unfulfilled physical desires must surely be the reason for his wayward imagination.

He sighed again. The truth was, he was growing tired of such transient arrangements; he was lonely, in a way no mistress could remedy. *Soul mate*. Madame Fortunata's words came back to him. There was something strangely attractive in the idea of a woman, one perfect woman, intended solely for him. One who would fill the empty spaces in his life as he would fill those in hers.

Folly! he told himself firmly, putting the idea forcibly from his mind. Forrest gazed around the sumptuously furnished room, diverting his thoughts by inventing fictitious histories for those members of the gathering that he had not yet met. There, consuming lobster patties with relish, was a very young buck who doubtless considered himself a sporting gent, judging by his spotted Belcher neckcloth and the careless set of his coat. The Earl smiled to himself, imagining that scrawny figure stripped down at a boxing parlour, looking like a plucked chicken.

His glance travelled across various and sundry newcomers to the social scene, pausing occasionally on a particularly eccentric specimen. The family just entering the room did not fall into that category at first glance: father, sober and respectably clad; mother, a few years younger, handsome in an overstated way; two daughters, one small and dark, not in his style at all, whose dress was at least two years out of mode, and the other... Forrest's gaze sharpened abruptly. Tall, golden-haired and lovely, the other girl definitely merited further study.

Advancing carefully towards this vision, the Earl made closer

observations. The blonde stood perfectly still, her head at a regal angle. Leaning down, she whispered something to the dark girl, who seemed to have a great deal to say in reply. While she spoke, the lady who had captured his attention merely smiled, nodding once or twice. As the group moved into the room, he was struck by the grace of her stride.

His head in a whirl at this sudden materialization of his fanciful daydream, Forrest approached to seek an introduction to the woman who was clearly his Destiny.

