

CHAPTER 1



Lady Calliope Harley, The Dowager Countess of Knox

London

More than twenty years later

As the carriage made its way through the crowded streets of London, I hummed a happy tune and my heel bounced beneath my skirts. I have been a heel bouncer for as long as I can remember, though I tried to curtail my habit when Thomas was alive. He was a good man, but not exceptionally prone to whimsy and rarely appreciated any unladylike behavior, two of the primary characteristics of my personality.

Please do not misjudge. I am more hoyden than hussy.

Despite my high birth and outstanding upbringing, I simply could never completely conform myself to the strictures of society.

Well, in truth, it is not as though I was incapable, it is just all those rules were just no fun at all.

And what is life without a little fun in it?

As the carriage rolled closer to my destination—an appointment with Lady Ambrosia, the matchmaker who found the

perfect bride for my son Jimmy—the flutters of excitement built within my tummy and I fairly burst with the need to squeal in eager anticipation.

To be honest, my life had become rather dull. Much as I hated to admit it—I had become dull. It had been so gradual, I had not even noticed until one day while calling upon Lady Hortense Hamberly I realized we had spent a quarter of an hour discussing lamb chops.

Lamb chops?

Not only that, but I had been as engaged in the discussion as my hostess.

I shall agree a good meal is a joy, but if the most inspiring conversation of my week involved details on the preparation and consumption of mutton... well, it was time for me to make a change.

Yes, I had my beloved dogs, but their conversational skills were decidedly lacking and in fact, they were not even good listeners. Oh, Darcy pretended to listen, but he always looked a bit peeved by my silliness. Bingley wanted to be a good boy, but he simply could not stop chasing his tail. And Wickham... well, his leg humping had scared off more than a few of my regular lady callers.

And when I saw how happy my Jimmy and his Tempest were together, well, I decided it was not too late for me. Surely there was a nice gentleman out there who would like to have a wife who was — if I may be so bold — still not too old or too unattractive to be appreciated as a life companion.

A small flush warmed my chest and moved up my neck as I contemplated all of my wifely duties.

It had been a long time since I had enjoyed the company of a gentleman. Unlike many of my peers, I had not taken lovers either during my marriage or after the onset of widowhood. I hope you will not think me boastful, but I was not without opportunities. However, I might be flighty and easily

distracted, but I am not disloyal. Thomas cared deeply for me and I never had reason to believe he had strayed and I wished never to give him reason to wonder about my own fidelity.

Despite my loyalty, however, I could not help but wonder if there might be more to the marital bed than I had experienced with Thomas. Something within me yearned for something unknown, suspected there were tricks and treats about which only a select few had learned, but had no idea how to go about finding out without great risk to my reputation.

Now, however, I was free. My only child, Jimmy, was happily married and expecting his first child. From all my observations, joy abounded in their household. It warmed my heart, but also made clear to me I did not want to be the hovering, clinging widow who intruded on her child's life.

Thus, my trip to see Lady Ambrosia.

So lost in my thoughts was I, I failed to notice the carriage had stopped and when the footman opened the door the sudden burst of sunlight surprised me. "Oh, here we are."

"We are, your ladyship." The young man assisted me in alighting from the carriage. I enjoyed the feel of his strong forearm beneath my gloved hand.

Yes, I was in need of a man.

Glancing about, I noticed a bright red door and a sign declaring *Lady Ambrosia, Matchmaker to the Discerning*.

I set my sights on the door, righted my flower covered hat and stepped boldly toward the next chapter of my life.

The door swung open upon my approach and a statuesque woman stood in the doorway, a warm smile upon her lips. She dipped her head in acknowledgment and said, "I do so hope you are Lady Knox. I have been ruminating on your match and am eager to make the final determination for you. Please, come in."

She had already been thinking about my match? Did she know who would be my new husband? Was she gifted with

clairvoyance? What mystical delights awaited me? I hugged myself with giddy excitement and crossed the threshold.

There would be no discussions of lamb chops here.

Lady Ambrosia's home was tidy but cluttered. Yes, I know that is contradictory. There were piles of books and papers all about, but they were stacked neatly, and I had the firm belief, at any given moment, Lady Ambrosia could find exactly what she sought by going to the correct pile and locating the desired document or manuscript nearly instantly.

We wound our way through her overstuffed home single-file as that was all the width remaining from the mounds of treasures. I tried to keep up with her long strides and she chattered as we moved along. "I simply adore your hat," she said. "I do love flowers."

Instinctively, I reached up and touched the brim of the wide, bloom-adorned accessory atop my head. "Thank you," I said. "I understand you use flowers to make your matches, so I thought it might give you some inspiration."

Lady Ambrosia came to a sudden halt and I nearly ran into her, but managed to avoid a collision at the last minute. "Why, yes, it is inspiring," she said and plucked two blossoms with a hearty yank. I stole a peek in a mirror, relieved to see that there were still ample flowers covering the hat. It had cost a fair amount and Jimmy, despite his recent upturn in mood, still fretted over my spending and a replacement hat would not have been in my budget for several weeks to come.

Ah, but I was getting a new husband. A new man to manage my finances and provide for me. Surely a newlywed would not begrudge me a couple of hats and maybe a few sets of gloves?

Lady Ambrosia clutched the flowers in her hand and mumbled to herself as we continued our trek. As a person known for talking to herself, I took comfort in realizing Lady Ambrosia was a kindred spirit.

Lady Ambrosia moved quickly through her home and I

followed her as best I could. We traversed a route through the house and entered a solarium filled with warmth and blooms. The aroma wafted all around me and I felt myself begin to relax. I had not, until that time, realized I was tense, but in retrospect I knew I was about to make a life-changing decision, which rested upon the judgment of the woman seated across from me.

The tea items were brought out and Lady Ambrosia poured a cup for me and passed the cream and sugar. I took a sip of the delectable concoction and wondered what blend Lady Ambrosia used which was different from that available to we mere mortals, or mere countesses, as the case may be.

I was eager to learn my fate, but equally curious about the woman into whose hands I had entrusted my future. As I sipped my tea I considered my hostess. Lady Ambrosia was a woman of some height, her hair a large pile upon her head. The variety of shades and streaks of color mesmerized me: a smattering of gray, a bit of brown, and a twirl of golden hue all twined together and secured atop her head with a lovely comb in the shape of a butterfly. I was unclear about her age. The sprinkling of gray in her hair indicated she had lived some years and a slight thickening around her waist showed she was no longer in the youth of her life. However, the sparkle in her eye and the spring in her step led me to think regardless of what her exterior said, the interior Lady Ambrosia was little more than a girl, much like myself.

"I suppose you would like to know the identity of your soon-to-be husband?" Lady Ambrosia asked.

"Why, yes, I believe I would." My heart pounded and for a brief moment I wondered if I had made a mistake by seeking to find love at my age. But then Lady Ambrosia clasped my hand and warmth tingled throughout my body and my anxious thoughts evaporated.

She gave my hand a squeeze before releasing it. "Ah, it is not

so easy as that," she said with a laugh. Reaching beneath her seat, she retrieved a giant, leather bound book and set it upon the table, nearly engulfing the entire surface. Picking up my cup and saucer to make room, I glanced at the brittle brown pages filled with symbols which I assumed was some sort of code, or maybe just random doodles. It seemed anything was possible in this house.

Noticing my interest, Lady Ambrosia lifted the tome from the table and held it in her lap, like a fence between us. Returning my cup and saucer to the table, I stared at the worn cover of the book, as though somehow, I would be able to read its contents if I tried hard enough.

Meanwhile, Lady Ambrosia continued to flip pages back and forth while mumbling to herself. I managed to make out a couple of phrases, but mostly her words seemed like gibberish.

Patience is not my strong suit. I bounced my left heel up and down beneath my skirts so hard my chair began to wobble. Just when I was at the point of screaming at Lady Ambrosia in frustration, she lowered the book and smiled at me.

"There are still a few matters for me to investigate," she said, "but I believe I am on the right track to find just the right man for you." She winked. "I have a good feeling about this."

"Me too," I said, excitement building within. I leaned forward eagerly, awaiting Lady Ambrosia's edict.

"Please stand up," she said.

Puzzled, I complied.

"Good," she said. "Now, take three giant steps backward while clapping your hands."

"I beg your pardon?"

Lady Ambrosia set the book down and focused all of her attention on me. Opening her mouth wide, she repeated herself, this time enunciating each syllable precisely and using her eyes to convey some sort of expression in an exaggerated effort to convey her meaning. I hated to tell her I had perfectly

understood her request, I was simply flummoxed by being asked.

Nonetheless, I began to clap my hands together in front of me and then glanced over my shoulder to gauge the amount of space I had to complete the task before taking three giant steps to my rear.

"Outstanding," Lady Ambrosia exclaimed and opened her book to make notes.

Confused by her methods, I forced myself not to question her. I placed my trust in Lady Ambrosia, for better or worse.

"Next, I would very much like it if you could do a cartwheel for me." She opened her book again and looked up at me expectantly, pen poised at the ready to take notes on my next feat.

"A cartwheel? Why I have not turned a cartwheel in years."

"Oh, but I am confident you can still do it. Sometimes our youth gets buried by duty and expectations, but if you dust those things off, you might find it is easy to return to a time in the past."

I thought back to the last time I had done a cartwheel. I was probably about twelve years old and I had been wandering the woods talking to myself, as I had a tendency to do as an only child with a vivid imagination, when an overwhelming desire to turn a cartwheel had come over me. Months earlier, my mother, ever desirous of making me into a proper young lady, had forbidden me from such exhibitions. This edict came about when a particularly exuberant burst of tumbling came upon me just as the Duchess of Vermouth's carriage rolled into our drive and that exalted personage was greeted with an image of my naked bottom as I cartwheeled across the lawn.

My mother had told me a grand guest was expected and I thought my effervescent display was just the thing to show her how thrilled we were to have her at Thornthwaite Hall. I was, sadly, mistaken.

But, that episode had been months before and with no one

else in the woods but me and it being a glorious spring morning, I took a few steps to build up speed and flung myself wholeheartedly into the cartwheel to end all cartwheels.

And thereupon landed with a thud upon the hard ground, having caught my foot on a tree root in the process.

Suddenly, in recollecting that event there in Lady Ambrosia's solarium, a vivid image came to mind. The face of a young man. William St. Clair.

It would be a lie to say I had not thought of him in the years since we had parted ways on my eighteenth birthday. The ugly scene by the coaches had played out in my mind repeatedly. I had been so angry at him for treating me like a child, but in retrospect, I could see I had, in fact, acted like one.

But, that was in the past. Far in the past. I shook my head as if to clear the thought, removed the pins holding my hat in place, deposited the chapeau upon the seat I had vacated and proceeded to execute an impeccable cartwheel, if I do say so myself.

When I was upright again, Lady Ambrosia smiled and clapped her hands in appreciation. "Oh my! That was a corker!"

Blushing at her praise, I put my hat back on and resumed my seat, winded but pleased with myself.

Lady Ambrosia scribbled furiously in her mysterious book while I refreshed myself with a hearty sip of tea.

"Now," Lady Ambrosia said, closing the book again, "I am going to say some words and I would like you to say the first thing that comes to you. One word only. Understand?"

"I think so," I said. I had come this far, what was the point of questioning her methods now?

"Hot."

"Hot? Oh, I do not know what to say." I wrung my hands. This test was hard.

"Try to clear your mind. Take a deep breath. Erase every

thought in your head and we will try again." Lady Ambrosia patted my arm encouragingly and then said, "Blue."

"Sky," I said. "Oh no, that's not a good answer. Blue ribbon. That's my answer." I looked up at Lady Ambrosia expectantly. "Are you writing that in your book?"

With a heavy sigh, Lady Ambrosia took my hand and held my gaze. "There are no wrong answers. This is just a little game. Whatever word pops into your head, is the one you ought to say. Only one word. Can you do that?"

Another cartwheel would have been easier. How could I only say one word? I took a deep breath and nodded. "Yes, I am ready."

"Hibbety."

"Jibbety."

Lady Ambrosia smiled. I did it!

"Love," she said.

"Dogs," I said automatically and then realized what I had said. "No, no. I should say Jimmy, he's my son. And Tempest. That's who I love."

Lady Ambrosia jotted more notes in the book. I expected a reprimand at any moment.

"Let us try again," she said, and I focused very hard to make sure I followed the rules.

"Regret," she said.

"William St. Clair." I gasped and covered my mouth with my hands. What had I just said? My eyes went wide, and Lady Ambrosia gave me a knowing look.

"Hmmm. Interesting," she said, opening the big book and thumbing through a few pages with scratchings on them that looked like spider legs. She snapped the book closed and put it back beneath her chair.

I could barely pay attention to what was happening around me, so shocked was I by my mention of William's name. Of course, I assured myself, his name only came to mind because I

had remembered the time in the woods when I had hurt myself doing a cartwheel and he had picked me up and carried me home.

He always made me feel safe and protected. Which is what he was trying to do at my party... before it all went haywire.

I wondered what had happened to him in the years since I last saw him. After that ugly incident at my birthday party. Regret was right. I regretted so many things about what happened that night.

A wave of melancholy washed over me, and I pushed my seat back from the table and stood. "I-I have made a mistake," I said. "Thank you, but I believe I must leave now."

Lady Ambrosia looked at me and to my amazement, she did not seem surprised.

"You have a tendency to run away when life becomes difficult." She sipped her tea and glanced at me over the rim of her cup. "Is that how you wish to live the remainder of your life?"

I gaped at Lady Ambrosia, her face placid, her eyes gentle. How dare she speak so boldly to me? Did she not realize I was a countess? I puffed up my chest and prepared to set her to rights about my standing and her impertinence, but a moment of clarity wafted over me.

I had spent my entire life avoiding unpleasantness. Was that such a bad thing? Is it not called unpleasant for a reason? But, I was also an adult. A countess. Despite efforts to shield myself from the unpalatable portions of life, I had nonetheless experienced plenty of strife. The death of my husband and learning to navigate life without him had been more than a little daunting and heart rending. I had gone from my father's care to that of my husband and when he died, for the first time in my life, I was solely responsible for myself and also for my son. I had been poorly prepared for autonomy.

Thinking about William pinched painfully at my heart and

conscience. My feet itched to head for the door, yet I remained in place.

Leaning over, Lady Ambrosia patted the seat of the chair I had just vacated. "Please," she said, "sit down and tell me about William St. Clair."

Glancing from her kindly eyes to the exit route and back again, my decision was made. I resumed my seat, though I remained uncharacteristically quiet.

I had forgotten about the flowers which Lady Ambrosia had plucked from my hat until she brought them forward on the table again, her fingers stroking the blooms and stems while she hummed and mumbled to herself.

Watching her, I recalled Tempest's description of how Lady Ambrosia had used flowers to select my Jimmy as a husband for her. Certainly, they were an ideal match and so when Lady Ambrosia brought out the flowers which I assumed were to be part of her methodology in matching me with my new husband, my heart fluttered, and I hoped this meant she no longer desired to discuss William. My relief over that was replaced with anxiety at what my future might hold.

Glancing down at the flowers which were the subject of Lady Ambrosia's attention, there were clumps of two different varieties, one had long green leaves and tiny white lantern-like buds. The other included small blue blossoms with five petals and a delicate yellow center. I stole a peek at Lady Ambrosia's face and noted a smile turning up the corners of her mouth.

"Ah, yes," she finally said. "It all makes perfect sense now."

I was pleased to know at least one of us had a confident understanding of what was happening, as I most certainly did not. I bit my tongue and my heel wiggled beneath my skirts, but I forced myself to wait patiently for Lady Ambrosia to speak, difficult though it was for me to squelch the many questions dancing on my tongue.

Thankfully, Lady Ambrosia shared her thoughts before my

tenuous self-control snapped. "This flower," she said, holding up the blue one and gazing upon it fondly, "is called forget-me-not."

Curious, I cocked my head to the side and silently awaited her further explanation, which she kindly provided forthwith. "As the name seems to imply, this lovely little bud symbolizes remembrance, particularly of those for whom we care a great deal. Or cared for in the past," she said, studying my face for a reaction.

She was no doubt rewarded with a heated flush which I felt moving from my neck to forehead. My heart fluttered and warmth formed low in my belly.

Lady Ambrosia held the small bundle of blue blossoms out to me and I took it in hand, raising it to my nose and inhaling deeply, though I discerned a barely perceptible scent, despite the robust color of the petals. Curious, I looked to Lady Ambrosia. She smiled. "Ah, the forget-me-not is an odd little blossom. Its scent is strongest in the evening, and quite faint during the day. Trust me, by this evening it shall share a most pleasant fragrance with us all."

"May I keep this?"

"Of course, since it actually belongs to you and arrived here upon your hat." We shared a laugh over my forgetfulness and I found myself growing fond of Lady Ambrosia. She was most interesting company.

I tucked the blooms into my hair, finding a secure place for them above my ear and out of the way of my hat.

"And, what of this one?" I asked, pointing to the other cluster.

Lady Ambrosia held the flowers to her nose and inhaled deeply. "Lily of the valley," she said handing them to me for a whiff, though their scent was strong enough it was not necessary to draw them too near before the sweet aroma filled my senses.

"Lovely," I said.

"Yes, it is," Lady Ambrosia agreed. "The meanings for this flower include a return to happiness. It also signifies good fortune in love."

"Really?" Hope began to bloom in my heart. "I am most eager to learn the identity of my future husband."

"Patience, my dear. Patience."

"What more is there for me to do?" I asked. "Questions? Cartwheels? Flowers? What else do you expect?" A bit of pique began forming within me. Why did this process take so long? Was she stalling? Or was she a fraud?

"Please," Lady Ambrosia said, "tell me more about William St. Clair. It seems he still lays claim to your heart."

"No, there is no truth to such a statement. How dare you imply it? I was married to Lord Knox for many happy years and to suggest otherwise is not only incorrect but disrespectful to his memory as well."

"My apologies, my lady. Please forgive me for I meant no disrespect to you or your dearly departed husband." Lady Ambrosia took on a decidedly remorseful air and I immediately forgave her unintended transgression.

Somehow, it felt safe to confide in Lady Ambrosia, though I had only made her acquaintance thirty minutes earlier. I shared with her thoughts and feelings to which I dared not before give voice. I could never have allowed the words to pass my lips. To whom could I have entrusted the secrets of my heart, particularly when I was married to another?

In many ways, I believed myself foolish. These were the thoughts and emotions of a girl. A girl who knew nothing of the world or life. Now I was an adult, a mother, a widow. A countess, no less. And yet, my heart told me these feelings were very real.

For someone who had spent her entire life talking too much, saying the wrong things and blurting words in a most

unladylike manner, I had, somehow, managed to keep my feelings about William to myself. My grief and regret, longing and desire were too strong, and I knew if I dared to give even the tiniest bit of time or energy to them, they would overwhelm me. Consume my being. Possibly cause me to do something foolish which would alter the entire course of my life and undoubtedly, not for the better

But, with Lady Ambrosia, I felt no judgment, no pending criticism. And so, I opened the gate on the tumult of emotions surrounding the young man from my youth, William St. Clair.

The entire story came tumbling out. Once I began to speak, even I was shocked by the mass of words which had been waiting to be freed. The weight of guilt, sorrow and regret lifted from my shoulders.

Yes, he had behaved like a barbarian, but with time and distance I was able to see my own actions had been foolish as well. Going off alone with a young man at the mention of a gift, I had lost all sense. Reviewing the scene as William would have observed it, I could see his actions, though extreme, were intended for my benefit and well-being.

When all was completed, I glanced at Lady Ambrosia, holding my breath as I awaited her response to these words which I had never shared with another human being.

After a lengthy pause she said, "And what became of William? Have you never heard from him or about him in all these years?"

"He took a commission in the army. After the incident at my birthday party, I persuaded my mother that we needed to make a call upon his aunt on the pretext of checking on her health as she had been unable to attend the event at our home, though, in truth, I was desperate to speak to William. I could not have ventured there alone in order to see him, as you know. That would have been quite improper, even for me. His aunt informed us he had left for the army; his uncle having

hastily arranged a commission for him. Shortly thereafter, I accepted Lord Knox's offer of marriage and left the area.

"Every letter from my mother, particularly during the early years of my marriage, I scoured for news of William, but she said nothing, and I dared not ask. I pushed him from my mind, which became easier with the passage of time as well as the duties of motherhood and running a household as the Countess of Knox, my husband's father having passed on shortly after our marriage." I sighed and looked past Lady Ambrosia's shoulder as though I could recapture those years in some vision. "Several years ago, I learned his aunt and uncle had both passed away and a relative had inherited the title and estate. But of William himself, I have heard nothing for more than two decades."

I took a deep breath and forced myself to smile. "But, that was ancient history. A girlish crush, I am sure." Turning to Lady Ambrosia, I said, "Let us not speak of this any longer. It is time for me to leave the past where it belongs... in the past, and move on to my new love. I do hope you can make a love match for me. I simply hate the idea of not loving my husband. Though Lord Knox and I were not well acquainted at the time of our marriage, I did grow to love him and he me. Had I wanted to marry for the sake of having a husband, I suppose I could have done that by now without your kind assistance."

Lady Ambrosia laid her hand palm up on the table before me. "If you would be so kind, my lady, I should like to hold your hand for a moment. I may fall into a bit of a trance, but please do not be alarmed."

Somewhat taken aback, I paused. I had heard tales of seances and mediums and those who could communicate with the spirit world. Was Lady Ambrosia such a person? Was she a charlatan? A fraud?

Curiosity got the better of me and I laid my palm against hers. Immediately, a pulse of heat shot up the length of my arm.

Lady Ambrosia closed her eyes and began to mumble. Her head fell forward as though she had lost consciousness. Alarmed, I was unsure how to proceed. Should I wake her? Disengage my hand from hers and run from the house? Her grasp on my hand intensified and her mumbles increased in speed and volume until, as suddenly as it had begun, it ended. She looked up at me and smiled, released my hand and said, "I am having a dinner party tonight and would be most delighted if you could attend."

"Wh-what? Dinner? I thought you were going to find a spouse for me. What is happening? Oh dear, is there no man who will have me? Please, Lady Ambrosia, if no match is to be found, tell me now and let us have over with it and I shall go on my way, knowing the notion of finding love at my age is a bunch of silliness. Do not be alarmed, I have been silly my entire life, this sensation is quite familiar to me."

Though I had made the appointment with Lady Ambrosia on a whim, I had to acknowledge the deep disappointment which fell upon me as I realized no match for me existed. Once I had made the decision to engage Lady Ambrosia's services, a sense of excitement and possibility had me all a twitter and it now felt as though the rug had been pulled out from under me.

Gathering as much of my dignity as remained, I stood and gathered my things. "I thank you for the invitation, Lady Ambrosia, but I cannot impose on your hospitality any further. I am grateful for your time. You have been most kind." To my utter embarrassment, there was a catch in my voice as I spoke. One would never have guessed I had spent decades as the Countess of Knox.

Clearly, it was time for me to get back to my life as a middle-aged dowager countess preparing for her first grandchild. I made a mental note to stop off at the local yarn shop on the way home and collect some proper wool and needles to make a cap and booties for the little dear.

"My apologies," Lady Ambrosia said, "I did not explain myself. That sometimes happens, and I am quite sorry to have upset you. Your future husband will be at dinner here tonight."

I gasped. "Are you quite certain?" I clapped my hands in excitement. "Oh, I am so pleased. I was afraid there was no man who would have me, being old and widowed and sometimes silly. Thank you, Lady Ambrosia. Thank you ever so much. I shall return for dinner."

It was not until I was nearly home that I realized I had not asked for one single detail about my husband-to-be.