

Chapter One

I do not know how I became the goddess of love. Oh, I understand the “goddess” part. I am immortal, and I possess certain powers, and in ancient Greece, “deity” was the only language they had to describe us. We were lucky to be born in that world. A monotheistic culture has far different words for such a thing, as Denny—Dionysus—discovered when he over-imbibed in Inquisition-era Spain and started showing off his powers. Marius—Ares—had to ride to his big brother’s rescue, roping me into it because Athene decided a little pyre-burning might teach Denny to hold his liquor. Yes, Athene still goes by Athene, and dear Lord do not spell it Athena. She once snuck a chisel into the British Museum to fix a statue.

No, I understand why the appellation of goddess. It’s the “love” part I’ve never quite fathomed. Goddess of beauty, yes, and that is no show of ego. I know how I look, and if Fate had given me some say in the matter, I would have denied that particular gift. I suppose “love” arises from that. What else is a beautiful woman good for?

My powers have nothing to do with love. Or sex, though I am very fond of it, and rather good at it, as one might certainly hope to be after three thousand years of practice. No, I lack any powers of love or sex or fertility, and yet one can even find twenty-first-century sects that worship me in hopes of receiving those blessings.

I have no dominion there, and so after centuries of confusion, I did the only thing I could. I slammed down my banner and claimed the territory for myself. Aphrodite aka Venus aka Vanessa. Patron deity of lovers. Matchmaker extraordinaire.

And I am about to do what I do best.

Marius arrives to the soft blip of the security panel as he lets himself in. He doesn’t call for me.

Doesn't ask where I am. He strides straight through to my dressing room as if by homing beacon. We have been friends since we were children and lovers since we were adults, and even if we are currently "on a break"—as we have been too many times to count—he is first in my life, and I am in his. As he says, "Venus and Mars, planets with the entire earth between them sometimes, but still always within each other's sight."

He doesn't say hello. We are far past pleasantries. He walks in, and I don't turn from the mirror, but I do watch him enter through it. I will never be past *that*.

Marius looks in his forties. We all do. Our immortality took hold as we passed our youth and settled into early middle age, which is a very comfortable place to inhabit. He is handsome, of course. Athletic, of course. Confident and self-possessed. He is Ares, after all. God of War. But every statue leaves out the best of him. The easy-going charm and the kindness. Most of all, the kindness.

He walks up behind me as our eyes meet through the mirror. Reddish blond hair curls over his forehead. Beard stubble signifies he is taking the long weekend off work, as do the chinos, a golf-shirt and loafers.

"You're looking very corporate," I say.

"Don't worry. I have my Hawaiian shirt in the car." He catches my look and grins, showing perfect teeth. "Hawaiian shirt. Deck shorts. Sandals. With socks of course. Memorial Day appropriate attire."

"I *love* the corporate look," I say.

"I thought you might. And I see we're still trying to pick an outfit."

His gaze moves to the clothing hanging from every surface of the room.

"You do realize it's a small-town festival, right, Vess? Not a black-tie dinner."

“I would prefer black-tie. Then I would know exactly what to wear. This requires subtlety. Kennedy invited us as her guests, to celebrate the opening of her new shop, and I need to blend. *Blend.*”

“Good luck with that.”

I shoot him a glare.

He tilts his head. “Wait. Did you say Kennedy invited us? Pretty sure *you* invited us. In fact, I’m pretty sure the whole opening-gala weekend was your idea. You played fairy godmother, getting her new shop ready in time, everything moved from Boston to take advantage of the long-weekend crowds, and oh, why don’t we make a grand opening of it, invite Aiden for the weekend, yes, what a lovely idea that has absolutely nothing to do with matchmaking.” He looks at me. “Please, please tell me it has nothing to do with matchmaking.”

“It is the perfect weekend to open her shop. The start of the summer season in a tourist town. The timing was tight, so I helped make it happen.”

He motions sprinkling fairy dust.

“I am old,” I say. “Excruciatingly old, and entitled to my whims and notions. I had a notion to help Kennedy, in partial payment for all the help she gave us.”

“I noticed you dodged the matchmaking question.”

“Kennedy and Aiden make a *perfect* couple. They just need a nudge.”

He sighs and lowers himself into a chair. “They’ve only known each other for two weeks.”

“And at this rate, it’ll be two decades before either makes a move. I am accelerating the schedule. They’re mortal, after all. They don’t have the luxury of time. However, that is far from the only reason we’re going to Unstable. I *do* want to help with the grand opening. I also have other plans. Other work to do.”

His eyes narrow. "Other matchmaking?"

"Jonathan and Ani."

He groans.

"What?" I say. "You complain that I haven't given Kennedy and Aiden time. Jonathan and Ani have been friends since childhood. They've had time. Now they need help."

"Also Rian and Hope, I presume?" he says, naming Aiden's brother and Kennedy's younger sister.

I snatch up a dress from a chair. "Certainly not. They don't suit, and I have every intention of making sure that particular match *doesn't* happen. She's a child. He's the emotional equivalent of one."

"She's twenty. He's a twenty-four-year-old in need of some maturity, but I see promise there."

"Of course you do, because he's your hundred-times-great-grandson. If you want promise, you have Aiden. Rian needs a swift kick in the rear." I pull on the dress. "Thankfully, he is out of the country, so that is one fewer problem to worry about."

I slap on my accessories, turn and strike a pose. I'm wearing an unflattering brown sundress and equally unflattering glasses with my hair pinned up.

"Sexy librarian," Marius says. "I like it."

I scowl and switch to a pencil skirt and linen blazer, leaving the glasses and hair.

"Hot for teacher?" he says.

A hard glare, and I try outfit number three, a linen pantsuit.

"Mmm, speaking of corporate." He waggles his brows. "Can I be the misbehaving new hire, lady boss?"

I sigh and slump into the other chair. He rises, riffles through one of my closets and pulls out a simple but elegant sundress. Then he removes my glasses, sets them aside and unpins my hair before handing me the dress.

“Be yourself, Vess. No one expects anything else.” He pauses. “If you do want to change up anything, may I make a suggestion?”

“Please.”

“Don’t play matchmaker this weekend.”

“I am the goddess of love,” I say. “This is what I do. I have a plan. They are all very keen on mysteries, so I have one for them.”

He winces. “Please don’t tell me you’ve invented a fake mystery for them to solve.”

“Of course not. They aren’t children. I’m bringing them an actual local mystery . . . with a few extra clues.”

“Clues you planted?”

“Red herrings. Just a sprinkle.”

“Here’s a thought. Give them the mystery, minus the fake clues, and skip the matchmaking. They’re all adults. If they’re meant to be together, they’ll figure it out for themselves.”

He catches my expression and throws up his hands. “I tried. No one can say I didn’t try.”

I kiss his cheek. “You did. It was a lovely effort, and I appreciate it so much that I will let you be my plus-one at the weddings.”

He sighs, deeper, and returns to his chair.