

Chapter One

Lacy attacked me when I walked into the shop. “Let me see that ring again. Oh my God, it’s huge!” She held my hand, her grin wide. “Have you set a date yet?”

“New Year’s Day.” I felt like I was on a runaway train when Lacy squealed and started ranting about details that I hadn’t even considered.

“I know. But Jerry’s determined to get the knot tied before I change my mind.” I sank down on the stool we kept for customers near the cash register. “Wow. Do you realize we’ve never even lived together? At least not since we first met.” I leaned closer. “And that was hundreds of years ago.” I’d resisted that eternal commitment for over four hundred years.

So what had changed? Me. I was finally ready to admit that he was the one. Oh, let me say that again. THE ONE. After centuries of struggling against his domineering warrior nature and worrying that he’d never let me be independent, I’d finally realized we’d worked out a relationship I could live with. Actually, he’d changed too. Miracles do happen.

“Are you insane?” My mother suddenly appeared in the middle of the dress section. Yes, just materialized.

“Mother!” I glanced around, afraid some unsuspecting customer had fainted from shock.

“Give me some credit, Gloriana. None of your mortal customers saw me. Though I am sorely tempted to nip into the dressing room and tell the woman in there that she’ll never get her butt into that size ten.” My mother is a goddess from Olympus. She has a giant ego and considers mere mortals insignificant. I knew there was little chance she’d bother.

“You will not.” I grabbed her arm and dragged her toward the back of the store.

“Spandex can do wonders. If she wants to fit into a ten, I’m sure she’ll manage it.” I waved at Lacy to check. Zippers weren’t so forgiving.

“Oh, good. We’re going to your back room. We need to have a mother-daughter talk.” She was now the one doing the dragging, her fingers clamped on my arm. I gave Lacy a “save

me” look but my were-cat manager had already found a size twelve and was halfway to the dressing room. Lacy has a bossy mother too. She did give me a sympathetic finger wave.

When the door finally closed behind me, I jerked my arm free. “I hope you’re not here to disturb my wedding, Mother. You have to know I love Jerry. Why wouldn’t I eventually marry him?”

“He’s a vampire, Gloriana.” My mother shuddered. She sat in my only chair and crossed her legs. This season’s Prada pumps in black lizard. Gorgeous. She always had on the most exquisite clothes. She materialized them with goddess magic which I envied.

“Don’t say vampire like it’s a bad word. You know what I am, Mother. That makes Jerry and me perfect for each other.” I sat on my work table. “It took me a long time to realize it, but I’m ready to commit.”

“Commit to an asylum perhaps. We have those on Olympus, darling. They’re hell-holes. You should hear the screams. When a god or goddess goes off the deep end, the poor dears throw lightning bolts at anyone and everyone. It’s quite annoying.” My mother glanced at my concrete floor then kept her Chanel bag in her lap. “Obviously they must be locked away until they come to their senses. The screams are from the handmaidens who must care for them. The gods are stuck in tiny little cells, something like the coffins I’ve heard your council uses for punishment.” Another delicate shudder.

“You sound like you’ve been there yourself, Mother. I hope this isn’t a hint that mental illness runs in the family.” I saw that I’d struck a nerve. Mean, maybe, but I was tired of her attitude. She hated what I was so naturally that meant Jerry was worthless too. “Luckily I’ve never actually seen the coffins. They’re for vampires who break council law. I try to follow the rules here.”

“I never said I had to be locked up. But I’ve visited friends there. I know you’re angry with me, Gloriana, but please try to understand. It takes a lot to make a god go insane but I’ve

seen it happen. Because Zeus drove the person to madness.” She glared at me with eyes the same blue as mine. Hers shot sparks which was pretty and scary at the same time. “He can do that when he’s angry. I’m afraid that when he discovers I’ve lied to him because I kept you a secret all these years, he’ll let me have it.” She lowered her head and sniffed. “I’m not sure I can handle his worst when he throws it at me.”

“Then your best move is to disavow me, Mother. Write me off. Head back to Olympus as if I never existed.” I hopped down to kneel in front of her when tears filled her eyes. “Don’t get me wrong. It’s been wonderful finding out I have a family after all this time and I’d hate to lose you. I’ve been so... alone in the world. Except for Jerry.” I took a breath.

“Darling. We *are* family. You and me, even Zeus.” My mother dabbed at her eyes with a hanky she pulled from her purse. “What you feel for that vampire is gratitude. Even I am grateful to him. For saving you and keeping you alive for me.”

“He certainly didn’t do it for you, Mother.” I stood and looked down at her. “He loves me. For over four hundred years, he’s taken care of me and always been there for me. Now I’m finally strong enough to commit to him. Before . . .” I looked away from her. “Well, I was insecure. Afraid to use my powers. Not sure I even knew what they were.”

“And now?” Her hand was on my shoulder.

“Now I know who I am and what I’m capable of.” I turned to face her again and took her hand. “Thank you for that. So I’m confident that I can hold my own with Jerry, as an equal.”

“Well, at least you’re giving me credit for something.” She took a shuddery breath. “I blame Achelous for all of this vampire madness.” She frowned. “He will pay for tossing you away like yesterday’s trash.”

“Well, I hope so. But remember who left me with him in the first place. You lost the right to tell me what to do when you abandoned me in his orphanage, Mother. So accept my decision gracefully, please. I’m marrying Jerry and that’s that.” I put as much distance between us as the

small room allowed and waited to see what she'd do. Toss a lightning bolt? It was one of her favorite tricks. It wasn't smart to stay too close to any of the gods or goddess from Olympus when they were pissed.

“Well.” She stared at me, obviously thinking about her next move. “Am I invited to this event? Will there be bridal showers? A rehearsal dinner?” She pulled out a cell phone.

I could only gawk. I had no idea she even owned one. “Of course. Jer and I have many friends. In fact, Flo is hosting a shower for me tomorrow night.”

She punched something into her phone. “Surely you were going to have your mother there. What would your friends think if I didn't come? And I will bring an appropriate gift. Is there a theme?”

“I, uh, you know Flo, or maybe you don't. Anyway, she's having it at her house. It's lovely. I'll text you directions if you'll give me your number.” I heard my own phone, which I kept in my pants pocket, chime.

“There, you have it.” She smiled as if we were just the most ordinary bride and her adoring mother. “The theme, Gloriana. And are you registered anywhere?”

I swallowed, not sure this wasn't a ploy of some kind. “Seriously? You're going to come to Flo's shower and act like a happy mother of the bride? You won't cause a scene? Throw lightning bolts? Burn her beautiful house down?”

“Well, clearly you don't trust me.” Her hand trembled where it held her phone. “I am trying to understand you, Gloriana. You say you love and are grateful to this vampire. You wish to marry him. I want to have a relationship with you so I must not stand in the way of your happiness. Correct?” She moistened her lips with her tongue, as if she were nervous.

“Yes. Thank you, Mother.” I hugged her then stepped back again, still not sure this wasn't all for show. “Flo is doing an Arabian nights theme. She wants us to come dressed in harem clothes. She does love costumes. And my shop has plenty of that kind of garb. Leave it to

Flo to think of something that will stimulate my business.”

“Why, it sounds like fun. I knew Scheherazade. Such a clever girl. And she loved beautiful clothes. I may have something I can conjure that will be perfect.” She clapped her hands, suddenly all smiles.

“Flo promises some surprises. I’ll text you where I’m registered. Don’t know why, but Flo insisted Jer and I sign up for all the typical newlywed things.”

“You are setting up housekeeping, aren’t you? It is only proper.” She tapped her foot. “I have much to do. A mother of the bride dress. I never thought I’d need such a thing. What are your colors?”

“I’m wearing red, Flo is wearing whatever she wants. We haven’t--”

“Oh, dear. You clearly need a wedding planner. But I suppose it’s too late for that.” She looked me over. “Yes, red’s a good color for you. And lucky, I think. I will ask my astrologer about the date too. You did say New Year’s Day. Hmm.” Her brow wrinkled. “The shower is tomorrow? That doesn’t leave me much time. Text me when it starts. I wouldn’t want to be late.” She brushed my cheek with a light kiss. “I’d better go.”

“About Zeus.” Probably stupid to bring it up, but I knew she hadn’t forgotten about taking me to Olympus. “Seriously. He doesn’t need to know I even exist.”

“Nonsense. My father will see you and love you on sight. I know it. You are the very image of my mother. That will soften him to me and make him forget my little fabrications.” She managed a tremulous smile. “You mustn’t worry about that.”

“I think hiding a pregnancy with a mortal and the resulting child for more than a thousand years is more than a *little* fabrication.” I really, really didn’t want to go to Olympus. “And what about the fact that I’m a vampire? How is Zeus going to take that?”

My mother actually bit her fingernail, a sign she was highly disturbed. When she realized she had chipped her red polish, she frowned and blinked to fix it.

“Oh, he can never know that.” She sighed and pasted on a smile. “Trust me to spin this situation to our advantage when the time comes. Now I’m off to check my closet. Mother of the bride. I simply cannot wrap my head around it.” She dropped her cell into her bag and then disappeared.