

That's Amores



Linda
Andrews

LOVE LOTTERY



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by

Linda Andrews



ZUMAYA EMBRACES

AUSTIN TX

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Dedication

To my husband for everything that he does. To my parents, Peggy and Joe, my sisters Beth and Bobbi, and my critique partners Kim and Kerrie, without whom this book wouldn't have been possible.

CHAPTER I

Alessa Lombard lowered the crossbow into the display case; her students' voices echoed through the halls before fading away. For a moment, the songs of birds drifted indoors. Arriving with them was the pungent smell of wet cobblestones. Closing her eyes, she let the stillness fill her. She loved these moments when the spring semester brimmed with hope and possibility.

Behind her, soft-soled sandals snicked across the tiled floor. She stiffened. None of her students wore sandals to class, which could only mean someone from the council had come to harass her again. Her fingers tightened on the wooden stock before slipping to the lead-tipped bolt lying on the green velvet.

“You’re not wise to bring up my marital status when I’m surrounded by weapons.”

“I’d heard the *Consiglio Comunale* has been hounding you to put your name in the lottery this Valentine’s Day, but I didn’t believe it.” Lia Lombard Trancredo sighed.

Spinning, Alessa faced her adopted sister. Her shoulders relaxed. Not the council after all.

“You set a bad precedent by entering last year.”

Now, the city council had ordered *all* single women over twenty had to enter the love lottery. Suddenly, being single was a crime. Especially for a Lombard.

At thirty-one, she enjoyed her life as a spinster, and she planned to enjoy it a lot longer. A lifetime longer. She just needed to find a way around the council’s short-sighted ruling and keep her name out of that stupid lottery.

Alessa rolled her shoulders, breaking tension’s grip. Not that she’d even told her beloved sister about her plan.

“It turned out well.” Beaming, Lia patted her round belly, pressing against her green *stola* and matching *tunica*. Her very pregnant stomach smoothed the long front pleats of her dress. Peacock blue thread embroidered the neckline and hem, while matching gold butterfly *fibulae* clasped the emerald silk at her shoulders. With ringlets of brown hair cascading from the laurel wreath on her head, she was the epitome of fashion. First century ACE Roman fashion, that is. Perfect for a town locked in time to serve the deities of love, Cupid and Psyche.

Alessa plucked at her faded Cupid University T-shirt before smoothing the pink fabric over her faded blue jeans. Ah, well, she wasn’t dealing with the tourists invading their quiet *Tuscan* village. She was teaching her students how to shoot love arrows at lonely hearts.

And speaking of the ever-present gods...

The fresco on the wall behind Lia shimmered, and Psyche stepped onto the balcony of her palace on the hilltop. Her blue-and-gold butterfly wings beat softly as she set her elbow on the railing and rested her chin on her palm. A chill snaked down Alessa’s spine. The gods were up to something—usually something irritating to mortals.

She plucked at her shirt again. Given how Cupid and Psyche had been staring at her lately, maybe she shouldn’t have worn a shirt with a bull’s-eye on the back.

Lia cleared her throat and caressed her belly again.

“Don’t you think the lottery went well for me?”

Alessa jerked her attention from the goddess on the painted hill and focused on her sister.

“Yes, of course I do. You and Dante have loved each other since forever.”

That’s why their marriage worked. Well, that, and the gods had lent a hand by scooping the scrap of paper with Lia’s name on it out of the urn and plastering it against her future husband’s chest. Hard to miss those signs.

The love lottery was fine for everyone except her—her Lombard blood would taint any match made by the gods. She shut down the thought.

“You could have the same thing.” Lia smiled before carefully lowering herself onto a seat behind a student’s marble desk. The oak chair creaked as it adjusted to her weight. “Love. A husband. Children.”

“Don’t start.” Blinking back tears, Alessa pushed away from the crossbow case and paced the marble floor. She could never have those things. Not without paying a horrible price. “The entire village of Amores has marriage fever—my marriage, not anyone else’s.” She milked her fingers before stomping to the blackboard at the front of the rectangular room. “The Consiglio Comunale has even threatened my job here at the university.”

She slapped the eraser against the surface. A puff of chalk dust rose just as she inhaled; her eyes watered, and she coughed. Gods, she’d be so happy when the new computerized boards were installed.

“I thought the council only had authority over Amores and the surrounding farms, not the university,” Lia protested.

“*Sindaco Mezzerti* is of the opinion that unless he is expressly forbidden from doing so by the Cupid charter the mayor has authority.” The fathead! She chucked the eraser onto the metal ledge under the blackboard. It bounced off, and a small white plume marked its landing on the floor.

Lia snorted.

“That’s certainly a turnaround from last year.” Wooden chair legs scraped the marble tile. “He couldn’t stop quoting it chapter and verse when he was trying to banish me.”

Stooping, Alessa scooped up the eraser and placed it on the chalk-dusted ledge.

“I think he wants *me* banished.”

Never to return. Gone. Her heart thumped hollowly in her chest. If she let it happen, she'd be disappointing hundreds of generations of Lombards. Yet, she'd also be free of living in a village of happily married people. Stop being the beloved aunt but never a mother. Maybe she'd even find warm arms to hold her on a winter's night.

From the corner of her eye, she watched Psyche blowing bubbles from the frescoed balcony. The pink bubbles morphed into heart shapes bearing Alessa's face paired with one of the men from the village.

She shuddered. Hades, the gods *were* targeting her. At least in the village she could see them before they struck. In the outside world, she'd receive no such warning.

Then again, she might escape the Lombard family curse. Maybe leaving would be worth it. And she could have children. She did want *bambinos*. So much, at times, that she almost regretted her decision to stay single.

Almost.

“I doubt you'll be banished.” Lia slipped off her sandals and propped her swollen feet on the chair she'd turned. Leaning forward as far as her belly allowed, she rubbed the red welts cutting her pale skin. “The Lombards are the original signers of the charter. I think it's more likely the mayor wants you married and producing babies so the next generation of Lombards will be assured.”

If it was just a matter of producing babies, she could visit one of the sperm banks on the outside. With a turkey baster as a father, she wouldn't have to worry about the curse. Wouldn't *that* knot the city council's togas in unpleasant places?

But it wouldn't spare her children the Lombard curse. It had to end with her.

On the fresco, Psyche dropped her bottle of bubble soap. A red aura surrounded her lithe frame, and her butterfly wings snapped flat. Gods! She'd forgotten the goddess could hear her thoughts.

Just kidding.

Psyche's aura dimmed to pink.

Keeping her in sight, Alessa strode across the room to sit on the chair beside her sister.

"They don't need me for that. You're already well on your way."

Lia's sigh swirled through her bangs.

"I'm not a Lombard by blood."

The Consiglio Comunale did have a bloodline fetish. Still, Zephyrus, the west wind, had rescued Lia from the crash that killed her biological parents then carried her to Amores. Alessa's parents had planned to adopt the infant, but their fighting had delayed it again and again until they, too, had died.

She nudged Lia's shoulder.

"You're family in all the ways that matter."

"So Dante tells me." Lia rested her head on Alessa's shoulder. "Of course, he also says I've inherited your stubbornness."

Soft hair tickled Alessa's chin. Kissing her sister's head, she inhaled the strawberry scent of shampoo

"It's nice that he's still complimenting you after almost a year of marriage."

Not having Lombard blood had spared Lia the family curse.

"Alessa, can I ask you something without you getting angry?" Resting her hands on her belly, Lia picked at her glittery red nail polish.

"Why would I get angry?" Alessa watched Psyche fly off her balcony. The goddess flitted across the white plaster walls, ducking behind tapestries of famous hunters before leaping into the bust of herself by the blackboard. Her marble eyes blinked.

Alessa stared. Now what mischief was the goddess planning?

When Lia tilted her head to glance up at Alessa, her laurel wreath dropped over her creased forehead.

"That's not an answer."

Psyche's lips thinned before they pursed. Stone grated as the bust turned to face the blackboard. A moment later, the goddess emerged, delineated in smudged chalk. Butterfly wings

fluttered, dusting the floor. She smiled as her outline grew larger. Finally, her feet rested on the bottom of the board and her curly hair brushed the top.

In mystery novels, chalk outlines signaled dead bodies. Unfortunately, gods were immortal. Not that Alessa wanted an end to love. Love was a marvelous thing. But passionate love was better for other people.

“Sure, shoot.”

Psyche conjured a bow and arrow from the chalk dust.

Poor choice of words.

“Did you stay single because of me?”

What? Alessa blinked before focusing on her sister. *Gods, please tell me the council isn't using my sister to get to me.*

Lia brushed glittering crimson flakes off her belly.

“I mean, you raised me when you should have been out looking for your mate.”

“No!” Alessa's shout bounced back at her, and she winced.

Great, now nosey Diana Grimor will come to investigate.

The councilwoman already stopped by daily to inquire about Alessa's Valentine's Day plans.

Psyche smiled from the blackboard as red chalk hearts frothed around her.

A heart-shaped slide show of every eligible bachelor in Amores was a treat compared to a visit from Diana.

“I'm single because I've never met the right man.” *And, please, gods, I hope I never do.* “It has nothing to do with you. Don't let anyone tell you differently.”

Especially the Consiglio Comunale, image-conscious fools that they were.

Bracing her hands on the chair's arms, Lia hoisted herself into a more vertical position and twisted to face Alessa.

“When I was little, you were always dating the handsomest boys. They'd arrive with flowers and chocolates. Sometimes, they'd slip me one or two while Papa was interrogating them or Momma was fussing over you.

“Then, when Momma and Papa died, no one came over anymore. The flowers and candy just disappeared.”

Thank gods that was all her sister remembered. Not their parents’ constant fighting, Momma’s screeching accusations of infidelity, and Papa’s violent jealousy.

“You have nothing to do with my single state.”

But raising Lia *had* provided an excuse to stop pretending even to look for love. Too bad the fear she’d find it lay in her heart like Mount Etna, waiting for a chance to erupt and destroy her.

Alessa eyed Psyche, who studied her chalk fingernails.

“I didn’t think so, but...” Lia’s smile wobbled a second before sticking to her lips.

“But a thirty-one-year-old single woman in Amores is an abomination.”

Only widows and widowers were allowed to remain alone, the lucky ducks. To be unmarried in a town built on the notion of passionate love looked bad in the brochures. To be so and teach the Bow’s Arts at the very institute that spread that love throughout the world no doubt caused landslides on Mount Olympus.

“You’re certainly a rarity.” Lowering her feet to the floor, Lia peered around her belly and fished for her sandals.

“According to Sindaco Mezzerti, I’m singlehandedly destroying the mythos that is Amores. He claims that Cupid and Psyche have disappeared from the council’s chambers entirely.” Obviously, the mayor needed to visit the university more often. The two gods were here every day. Even their daughter, Voluptas, flew through the halls once a week.

Psyche clasped a hand over her mouth, but her crinkled eyes told the story of her mirth.

“Do you think the gods are behind this sudden pressure to have you married?”

“The gods are always up to something. But no, the council has been after me to enter the drawing since I was twenty-five.” Alessa bit the inside of her cheek before saying anything

the gods could construe as a challenge. “You actually gave me time to find someone.”

Not that she had looked, precisely.

She dropped to the floor and gently slid Lia’s sandals on her swollen feet then loosely tied the leather straps around her sister’s ankles. She leaned forward so a curtain of dark hair hid her face. Sometimes her sister saw too much.

“So, what are you going to do to avoid the spinster law?”

“I’ve got a plan.” One that would buy her time to think of a permanent solution.

A peek at the blackboard showed empty white smudges. The goddess had gone, and the tightness in Alessa’s chest eased. What the gods didn’t know couldn’t hurt her.

“The council actually gave me the idea.”

“Really?” Lia held out one hand and braced the other against the arm of the chair. “What is it?”

Standing, Alessa clasped her sister’s wrist. Soft, warm skin gave under her touch. At a nod from Lia, she took a deep breath and heaved. The strain burned up her back, but Lia made it up.

“You know that Signor Cerelia, the accounting professor, retired, right? Well, the university board has selected another gentleman to take his place for the rest of the year while they work through the hiring process.”

“How does that help?” Lia’s brow furrowed.

“This is the busiest time of the year.” Alessa felt the grin consume her face. It was truly a perfect plan. And given the council’s harassment, she had been afraid to share it. “You know that all the hotels and bed-and-breakfasts are full, so...” She paused savoring her victory—the rum in the tiramisu. “So, I offered the new professor a room in Lombard house. He’s going to stay with me.”

“I don’t understand.” Releasing her grip, Lia shook out the folds of her green stola.

“The Consiglio Comunale won’t dare mention their shame, also known as my single state, in front of an outsider.”

The gods would surely fall off Mount Olympus at the horror. For once, the council’s archaic manners would work against them. Alessa rubbed her hands together.

“But if he’s an outsider, how will he stay once Amores disappears after the end of the month?”

Normally, the village and every citizen in it were cloaked by magic after February, leaving outsiders with vague notions and fuzzy recollections about the place and its location. In order for the school board to give themselves time, they’d found a loophole in the rule. One that benefitted her as well.

Alessa did a quick survey of the walls. No Psyche. Something else was going her way.

“The new professor is from another magic town. One devoted to Christmas.” She bounced on her heels before striding to her desk. Really, it couldn’t be more perfect.

Love for one another, not passionate love, the lucky dog. He probably didn’t have pressure to marry, nor was he likely to know about curses—just good will and generosity. She raked her hair in a ponytail and bound it with a clip off her desk. Maybe *she* should ask for a transfer to the Christmas village. Of course, Santa and his elves weren’t likely to want someone with bows and arrows around their reindeer.

“Why is he coming *here*?” Lia rubbed her lower spine.

“Rumor has it he broke off an engagement.” Perhaps he’d been so badly burned he’d be an ally against the passionate-love brigade.

She grabbed up a handful of papers and tapped the edges against her desk until they were ordered. Humor effervesced through her. Not that she wanted anyone to be unhappy, but it would be nice to have someone else who didn’t think passion was the alpha and zeta of love.

Lia swayed before propping herself against the teacher’s desk.

“And the Consiglio Comunale let him come to Amores to teach?”

“I know.” Alessa choked on her chuckle. Good gods, what if the board had *really* hired him so he could find true love? Then...

Heat flooded her cheeks. *Then*, she hadn’t taken advantage of the board’s decision; she’d been tricked by them. The

notion chased itself around in her head until nausea roared at the back of her throat. Dropping the papers, she braced both hands on her desk to steady herself.

No, they wouldn't have done that. The scandal had rocked the school, and there'd been a few hastily called council meetings after the news broke. She set her hand on her chest and waited for her heart to resumé a more stately rhythm.

"And it isn't even his first broken engagement. Supposedly, there've been three others that ended badly."

Sighing, she scooped up the papers and stuffed them into her leather satchel. The students she taught did a good service for humanity. She just didn't want any part of it. Was that so wrong?

"Four broken engagements? Gods! Does he know Amores is the center of love?"

"He does." Alessa bit her lip while buckling her bag. His reasons for coming were the sole sticky spot in her plans. "He says he needs to come here and find his faith in love. Diana Grimor is looking forward to helping him." The cow!

She jerked her bag off the desk, felt the heavy tug on her arm. Widow Grimor liked the company of men, preferably naked men. Not that Alessa was a prude. She just wanted to make sure the new professor was around to provide a buffer between her and the matchmakers, not off being seduced by amorous widows.

"It's sad how the death of a mate turns some people's love into hedonism." Lia waddled around the desk to Alessa's side. "What if she takes him away for long weekends?"

"I can make myself scarce for a few days." She'd done it before, especially when their parents had fought.

"What do you know about him?"

"Just his name—Sloan Dugan—and that he'll be teaching basic business accounting. The classes are filling up, so make sure you tell Dante to enroll soon. I think that's the real reason Mr. Dugan was allowed in. Most of us are experts in helping others find love, but we have very little practical experience. The new professor is even teaching how to run an online business."

“Santa is everywhere on the net.” Lia scratched her stomach, while frowning at the fresco. “His Christmas Eve journey is even tracked by radar, and kids can email him lists instead of posting letters.”

“With the world’s population being what it is, I imagine computers require far less magic than the old-fashioned way.” Whatever that had been, but it probably involved elves. Lots of elves. Gods, what if Sloan Dugan had pointy ears and was three feet tall?

Alessa glanced at the painting. Psyche had returned to her mountaintop palace and once again blew heart-shaped bubbles from the balcony. Next to Alessa’s image was a pointy-eared, long-nosed elf straight from the Grimm brothers’ fairy tales.

Lia shuffled toward the door but stopped as the bubble elf exploded in a shower of pink droplets.

“How old is he? What does he look like? Does he have a mustache?”

Psyche blew another bubble.

“That doesn’t matter.” Alessa poked the fresco before the heart grew too big. “All that matters is, he’ll be sympathetic to my cause because he’s just left a bad relationship.”

Psyche sniffed, tossed her hair and flew along the wall toward the back of the room.

“So, you’re going to live with this guy you know next to nothing about, let alone what he looks like, for months, and be with him for hours at a time, right?”

“Si.” It was the perfect cover. Perfect. Provided the gods didn’t interfere.

As if on cue, the back corner cabinet squeaked opened. Three dummy torsos wobbled before tipping out and thudding to the floor. Psyche giggled from her poster taped inside the cabinet door.

“How is that different from the love lottery?”

Alessa set her satchel on the floor by the door and walked down the aisle to the back of the room.

“Because this is just one guy who will leave in four months, not thirty guys who have lived here all their lives and

have tried every line queuing up to draw a woman's name from an urn to marry them."

Ugh! It just didn't bear thinking about. Especially when old Signor Sienestra was groping about.

Stooping, she throttled one dummy's neck and worked it back into the cabinet. Psyche faded out of the poster.

Go pick on someone else for a change.

After stowing all three dummies, she slammed the cabinet and secured the latch.

"What if he's young, handsome and virile?"

Then four women wouldn't have let him get away. With or without magic, they would have worked that ring on his finger, even if they had to hire bouncers to hold him down. Love didn't just make people crazy; it made them do crazy things.

"Pregnancy has affected your brain."

"What if—"

"Excuse me."

A man's shadow hovered on the threshold. Lia stepped back. Gods, how many times had tourists interrupted today? Five? Six? Some had been downright rude when she reminded them that classes were in session. Alessa shook her head and rushed to her sister's side. Heavens only knew how outsiders treated pregnant women.

"Tours normally gather in the piazza, er, courtyard. Down the hall, first door on your right. You should find your guide there."

Hooking the strap of her satchel, she turned toward the door and stopped so fast the soles of her sneakers squeaked. Oh, my! Talk about young, handsome, and virile.

His broad shoulders practically brushed the jambs. Cobalt blue eyes peered at her from under a lock of deep red hair. When he thumped a black Stetson against his well-formed thigh, muscles rippled under his white dress shirt.

"Actually, I'm looking for Les." He shrugged, and that's when she noticed it—a duffle bag slung over his shoulder.

Her stomach cramped, and her heart tripped over a beat. Oh, gods, no! Behind her, she heard a tinkle of laughter and a flutter of wings.

The man pulled out a scrap of paper. The familiar red letters C and U of the university letterhead marked the top, but it was the neatly printed words that riveted her attention.

“Les Lombard. I’m supposed to room with him for the rest of the semester.”

“What!” She snatched the paper out of his hand. Awareness zipped up her arm before she shook out the note. Her printing. Her address. Her name—artfully torn to leave only *Les* on a tab.

Lia tossed her head, ringlets danced around her shoulders.

“Actually, *her* full name is *Alessa* Lombard, and I’m Lia Lombard Trancredo, her sister.” She thrust out her right hand. “And I’m very pleased to meet you...Mr. Dugan, isn’t it?”

Alessa’s fist consumed the paper. No wonder the gods had stuck around. They were waiting to see the results of their trick.

“Sloan Dugan.” He hesitated a moment before accepting Lia’s hand. “And the pleasure is all mine. Do you need help getting anywhere?”

“Thank you, but I’m meeting my husband in the piazza.” Lia grinned before clearing her throat. “I’ll leave you and my sister to get acquainted.”

Alessa bit back a cry. Traitor!

Sloan Dugan stepped into the hall and accompanied Lia down the corridor before opening the door and letting her pass outside.

And he has good manners, too! Leaning against the wall, she thumped her chest before flinging the paper into the rubbish bin. She was not going to be outsmarted by a bunch of meddling gods. She could handle this. It was no big deal.

A soft twang sounded just before a rubber-tipped arrow hit her square in the chest.

CHAPTER 2

Sloan inhaled the clean, damp air as the door closed. Throwing back his head, he closed his eyes. A woman. Les...Alessa Lombard—his roommate was a woman.

Her image swam in his mind's eye. And not just any woman. With her long chestnut hair, brown eyes, strong nose and full pink lips, she was a *beautiful* woman.

One who didn't have a wedding band on her finger.

She'd be the perfect candidate to fall in love with if she wasn't his new roomie. He knew how uncomfortable it was to stay with a woman when the romance soured. A groan vibrated up his throat, and he opened his eyes to scan the hallway. Nothing moved in the space between the plain white plaster walls. Good, no audience.

Maybe he could find another place to stay. He wasn't that particular—a bed-and-breakfast, a hotel, even a refrigerator-sized cardboard box would be enough so long as it kept out the rain. Anyplace else would do, because even if he didn't entertain romantic notions about Alessa Lombard, a female roommate might hinder his efforts to fall in love again.

And he needed to fall in love again, needed to banish all trace of Claire. His heart thudded heavily in his chest. He

tightened his grip on his shoulder strap until his hand trembled, and the brim of his Stetson crumpled in his other hand. Once he fell in love again, he'd forget Claire's lilac-scented shampoo, her citrusy soap and those scarlet wisps of fabric drying over the shower-curtain rod.

He forced air into his lungs, catching a whiff of orange blossoms. Claire's scent. Claire. Swallowing the lump lodged in his throat, he shook his head. *Get gone, woman!*

The mantra broke her grip on his thoughts, but she'd be back. She always came back. He slapped the brim of his hat against his thigh before rolling his tight shoulders.

He had to fall in love again, and there was no better place than here in Amores. The magical Italian city devoted solely to love. Romantic love. Passionate love. If he couldn't find love here...

Don't even think it!

Four failed engagements didn't mean anything; women always fell for his charm and wit. Anger crowded his thoughts. Claire had loved his potential and what it could do for *her*. Sloan clamped down on his thoughts again and forced his jaw to relax. He'd find another woman here, one who knew the true meaning of love.

And speaking of candidates, he had one waiting.

His cowboy boots tapped softly against the worn marble floor as he walked down the hall. The aroma of paper, chalk and books permeated the air. Did every school on the planet smell the same? The pressure in his chest eased. He'd liked teaching while he was earning his master's degree in mathematics. Of course, he'd liked the challenge of working for the hedge funds, too. *Don't go there.* He boxed up the thought.

That life was far, far away now.

He stopped short just over the threshold. Alessa leaned against the fresco on the wall. Her eyes were closed, and she clutched her chest. Red flashed between her fingers, and the shaft of an arrow quivered where it protruded from between her breasts.

"Christmas cookies!" In one motion, he dropped his hat, shrugged off his bag and ran to grab her shoulders. He care-

fully avoided the arrow's shaft while keeping her upright. What had they taught him in first-aid class? Don't panic! Too late. His heart drummed so loudly his eyes moved to the beat. "You've been shot!"

Under his hold, her shoulders shook. Her full lips began to tremble; then she grinned, revealing a designer smile.

Why was she laughing? Was she in shock?

Her eyes opened, exposing the humor swimming in their dark-chocolate depths.

"It's not a real arrow."

"Not a real arrow." He repeated her words, yet his brain refused to process them. Something else was pushing them out. Soft, warm flesh pressed against his palms. A woman's flesh. Tingles raced up his arms, ignited a fire in his gut and arrowed directly to his groin. Reindeer droppings! He'd never reacted this quickly to a woman. At least not one fully clothed. His thumbs settled in the dip of her collar bone. What was he supposed to be doing?

"Well, it is a real arrow. But it's not dangerous. See?" She pulled it away from her chest and flashed the blunt rubber tip at him. Laughter bubbled out of the slender column of her white throat.

What would it be like to lick her exposed skin? To kiss a path along her jaw until he sampled her lips. Sloan blinked. What had just happened? Sure, she was beautiful, but he'd acted like a felon who'd just been granted a conjugal visit after fifteen years in the pen.

"What in Charles Dickens is going on?"

She clamped her free hand over her mouth. Tears streamed from the corners of her eyes before she doubled over and unleashed the full measure of her mirth.

"Christmas cookies," she snickered. "Charles Dickens."

"You can blame my sister-in-law." Sloan crossed his arms over his chest. "She insisted on the no-swearing rule."

Which was all fine and dandy in Holly, where the rest of his family lived. But it was downright sissified in the real world. Especially when he was aroused and the object of his lust thought it was funny.

Alessa swallowed her last chuckle.

"It's cute."

"Cute." He winced. The female equivalent of *let's just be friends* and the verbal shafting of *I don't love you that way*. Guess he didn't have to worry about a romance leaving him homeless.

He bent to pick up his Stetson. Of course, he did love a challenge. What would it take to turn the glow of friendship to the fire of desire?

"But you may want to come up with something more Valentine's Day, like 'splintered arrows' or 'broken bows.' That way, folks will know you're a resident." Alessa Lombard stepped on the hat's brim, pinning it to the floor.

"I'll keep that in mind." Sloan reached for her trim, jean-encased calf. Should he lift her foot for her? His hand curled into a fist. Touching probably wasn't the best course of action. For all he knew, contact with the teacher of love archery was what had brought the tsunami of lust crashing down on him.

"Look, I'm sorry you were scared."

He raked his hand through his hair, felt the burn along his scalp as a few curls came free. And the day just kept getting better. First, he was a sissy, and now, he's a coward. He crouched by his hat, waiting for his chance to grab it. He'd had enough humiliation stuffing for a month of holidays.

"I wasn't scared. I was concerned." There was a difference. A big difference. "An appropriate response, given that you had an arrow sticking out of your chest."

"I am truly sorry that, for even one moment, you believed I had suffered an injury." Balancing on the balls of her feet, she dropped down next to him. Her warm hand closed over his, and her thumb stroked his fingers. She had nice hands, long, tapered fingers. He pictured them nimbly undoing the button of his jeans, slowly lowering the zipper and dipping—

No. No. No!

He yanked his hand free and overbalanced. His butt landed on the cold marble, and the impact rattled up his spine and out his head. Yeah, he was making real headway dispelling

that bad first impression. He rubbed his hand on his pant leg. The thoughts still lingered.

Why hadn't anyone warned him that Amores's citizens had an erotic potion infused in their skin?

Her brow furrowed. She looked at her hand then at him. Confusion clouded her brown eyes before she blinked it away.

"Psyche shot the practice arrow—not to harm me, you understand. More as a reminder that the gods have provenance over love."

Gods. Plural. He mentally shifted gears. The fact that more than one god might have meddled in his life probably explained his broken engagements.

He glanced around the room. Large windows filtered the afternoon sunshine into the class. Under them were glass cases filled with bows—some were more than six feet tall, like him, while others wouldn't even span the distance between his wrist and elbow. Gold-tipped spears with ebony poles stood in an urn in the corner by the blackboard. A case at the back of the room held bayonet-tipped rifles. With all these weapons, he understood how love could hurt so much.

"I guess this place puts the *amor* in *armory*." He smiled at her.

She frowned at him.

"The R is at the end of *amore*, not at the beginning."

Great, now he was a dunce, too. Maybe American humor didn't translate into Italian. He jerked. But he hadn't been speaking Italian.

"You're speaking English!"

"Ah, you forget. Love is a universal language." She winked at him before tossing her chestnut ponytail over her shoulder. "You'll be able to talk to and understand everyone, and vice versa, while you're in Amores."

"Good to know." Especially as he had to teach classes and had fudged a little on his resume. "I'm afraid my Italian is a bit rusty."

Pushing on her knees, she rose to her feet then offered him a hand up.

“Perhaps we could start over. My name is Alessa Lombard, professor of the Bow’s Arts here at Cupid University. On behalf of the board and the city council, welcome to Amores.”

Sloan stared at her hand, dangling mere inches from his nose. He shouldn’t take it. Any more doses of her skin, and he might actually act on those erotic thoughts. He slipped his palm against hers and braced himself for the sensual overload.

Except for a mild humming in his gut, his thoughts remained pure—if soot-stained snow was pure. Still, there weren’t any new naughty images bouncing around his head. Instead, his brain recorded the callus on her middle finger and the one on her thumb. Yet her hands were still soft, still feminine.

Perhaps he was building up an immunity to her passion potion.

“Sloan Dugan, recently of Holly, Arizona, and temporary accounting professor.” He tugged his hand free and wiped it on his pants before flattening his palm on the floor. No point taking any chances. His heated flesh cooled as he pushed to his feet, dragging his bag with him. The feel of her lingered.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Dugan.” She plucked his hat off the floor and brushed at the tread marks on the brim. “What have you been told about Amores?”

A pop quiz? Now? Well, he was in school. Unfortunately, he’d always developed a crush on his teachers. Perhaps a little distance would help. Clearing his throat, he retreated to the first row of desks and hoisted his bag onto the marble surface. What had she asked? Amores.

“Um, I know that it’s the physical manifestation of love on Earth.”

“Not just love—passionate love between sexual partners.” Red tinged her olive-toned skin, and she brushed harder at his hat.

His favorite hat. If she kept that up, she’d wear the felt clean away. Clean. Images of her in a bath, wearing nothing but water, soap bubbles, and his hands intruded. His legs twitched. No way was he moving closer to her, not for a hat, not for all the eggnog at Christmas. Maybe it wasn’t her touch. Maybe it was her breath. Hadn’t she just mentioned passion and sex?

“Mr. Dugan?”

“Um, Sloan. Call me...” *For a good time.* He scrubbed his hand down his face. *Focus, man.* “Sloan.” Thank Kris Kringle that thought had connected. Now, what had she been saying? “Right. Amores is everything Valentine’s Day.”

“It’s a little more than that.”

Setting his hat on the desk, she glanced up, looking first at him then at the fresco on the wall. Glancing right, he followed her line of sight. A woman with butterfly wings waved at him from the painting. Holy nutcrackers! He stumbled a few paces before getting his feet under him.

“She moved!” He pointed to the illustration of the woman, who was now blowing kisses at him. “The painting. It...It...”

He rubbed his eyes. Maybe this was a side effect of traveling here.

“Psyche and Cupid can inhabit any depiction of themselves.” Alessa blew a kiss back at the fresco. “It’s their way of making sure we’re spreading the love so the Earth doesn’t die.”

“Yeah. Okay.” He glanced over his shoulder. A tapestry on the wall fluttered before the threaded face winked at him. *Get a grip, Dugan.* Was this really so different from flying reindeer and animals talking at midnight on Christmas Eve? He shook out his hands. He’d have to remember to check the bathrooms before using the facilities. “I, uh, did read about them—Cupid and Psyche, I mean—before I came.”

“I’m not sure what it’s like in the Christmas village, but here, the myths change according to popular beliefs.”

“Holly.” Sloan turned back to face Alessa. “We’re one of many Christmas villages that act as way stations for Santa’s big night. And we have changing myths, too. Sometimes, we even have a sleigh propelled by a jet engine instead of reindeer.”

He didn’t know who it depressed more, him or his family’s herd.

“It is rather disconcerting when things change so drastically.” Sighing, she tugged the hem of her T-shirt over her hips. “You should know that the gods have acquired telepathy. Psyche, Cupid and their daughter Voluptas can read your thoughts and magnify those feelings.”

He spun on his heel and faced the tapestry. The gods were in his head? *They* must have caused the erotic thoughts. Was that a sign telling him to romance Alessa?

The fabric didn't twitch or raise an eyebrow. He squeezed his eyes shut. Maybe if he asked mentally he'd get an answer.

— *Do you want me to court Alessa?*

He opened one eye then the other. The fabric face hadn't changed.

"Are you sure they can hear our thoughts?"

"Not all of them, just the ones relating to passion and desire."

Fabric rustled behind him. Steel plated his ribs, and he labored for breath. She was coming closer; he could feel her body heat and the warm floral scent emanating from her skin. Sweat beaded his upper lip. Could falling in love again really be so easy?

After six months of charming Claire, entrancing her with his wit and enticing her with his success, he had finally gotten one date, then another. Then the Dugan Curse had kicked in and...

He rubbed his temples. Maybe love was only easy because he was here. In Amores. Maybe it wasn't love at all but lust. Love could just be a made-up construct pulled out of the collective human consciousness. He resisted the urge to tug on the tight fabric cradling his erection. The lust was real enough.

Alessa sat down on the desk next to him. The smiley faces on her tennis shoes took turns grinning up at him with each swing of her feet.

"While your rocket Santa sleigh probably comes from movies, the gods' telepathy derives from the erotic literature market. And it must be pretty big, because the gods are more powerful than they've been in centuries."

"Sugar cookies!" He plowed his hand through his hair. How was a man supposed to know if the thoughts were his or some gods' manipulation? He would *not* be someone's toy. Not again.

"If that's a euphemism for a shorter word beginning with an S and rhyming with *hit*, then I agree."

“How do you live here?” How could he stay? Every time he saw a picture of Cupid or Psyche, they could be planting come-hither thoughts about the butcher, the baker or the candlestick maker. That couldn’t lead him to real love, could it?

“Very carefully.” She nudged his shoulder. “I’m telling you this because they know about your broken engagements. You’re probably a challenge to them. And they can’t resist a challenge. Whichever god finds you a mate will have bragging rights for a decade.”

He straightened, breaking contact with her just as the Alessa in his thoughts traced his happy trail almost to the end.

“Uh.” The images faded. Either the gods were toying with him, or he was getting better control over his thoughts. Somehow, he suspected the former more than the later. “Is that why I was hired? Because of my broken engagements?”

He’d only disclosed it because he’d hoped to win the position. But if that information had put a target on his back, maybe he should have been more careful about what he’d wished for. He could live with another six months of whispers, innuendo and pity.

Sticking his hands in his pockets, he jingled the handful of euros.

But he *wanted* to fall in love.

Didn’t he?

Sure, he did. Yet, falling in love and being the prey in a game for a bunch of immortals were two completely different things.

“I’m sure that’s not the case.” Alessa moved her hands behind her back, but not before he saw her middle finger shift over her index one.

“Did you just cross your fingers?”

She blushed. How far down her body did the redness travel? What would it take to find out? Damn. He was doing it again. Or the gods were doing it to him. A headache pulsed at the base of his skull.

“Maybe.” Jumping off the desktop, she strode over to him. “I think your marital status may have swung the board’s vote

in your favor. But they wouldn't have hired you if your skills didn't fill a void at the university. No one here can teach accounting or e-commerce. Thanks to commercialization, our time exposed to outsiders expands every year. We need to learn to keep our village from drawing too much attention."

"That's something." Talk about a stripped bone thrown to a mongrel dog. But he'd take it. His pride had been AWOL since the Claire meltdown.

When Alessa was about two feet away, Sloan sidled to the right. Distance seemed to be the safest bet with her and her gods. Feigning interest in the spears, he moved, placing the desk between them.

"So, how did you get stuck with me?"

"I didn't get stuck with you. I volunteered."

She ran her fingers along the strap of the book bag resting on the teacher's desk. The hair on his arms stirred. She'd been staring at him the whole time, but now she looked away. Had his experience with Claire made him extra suspicious, or was she hiding something?

"Why? Are you interested in opening up a website?"

"No." Licking her lips, she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear before unbuckling her bag. The flap slapped the top as she opened and closed it. "You just broke up with your fiancée. I don't think you should be hounded into a relationship unless you're ready."

Now his hair stood at attention. Why would a woman who taught at Cupid University seem distrustful of love? He rubbed his arms. More than challenges, he loved mysteries.

And Alessa Lombard was a mystery in a gorgeous package.

He searched his thoughts. Yep, that was him thinking and not the gods putting ideas in his head.

"How would that work, exactly?"

The muscles of her neck worked as she swallowed. When she dragged in a deep breath, the letters on her shirt danced over her pert breasts.

"I'll tell my sister that I'm...interested...in you." Her fingers tightened on the strap until it folded in half. "Word would

get around, and some of the more rabid believers in love and desire would leave you alone.”

Irritation danced over his skin. Okay, he might not have six-pack abs or be as good-looking as his brothers, but there was no call to act like being attracted to him was the same as being offered a blindfold and a last cigarette.

The euros bit into his palm. What would she do if he took her up on her offer? Or, gods forbid, touched her? Wouldn't it be fun to find out how far she'd go to keep up the pretense? Would she hold his hand in public? Kiss him? Caress him?

His blood heated. No way! He pounded the notion out of his head. He'd just left one relationship built on lies. He didn't plan to start a fake one based on the same shaky foundation.

“That sounds like a plot of a chic-flick. A bad chick-flick.” Which said a lot, since none of his exes had dragged him to a good one in the last fifteen years. Dropping the coins, he crossed his arms across his chest. “I came to Amores to fall in love. And that's exactly what I plan to do.”

Color fled her cheeks, and her brown eyes blazed with fear.

“But you just broke up with someone. I thought you wanted to see what true love looked like, not find it for yourself!”

He set his jaw. “And just what is wrong with me that makes you think I'm not worthy of love?”

Her mouth opened then closed.

“You! Nothing is wrong with you. I—”

Knocking cut off her words. Sloan whirled around before retreating. A woman stood in the doorway. Sugar cookies! Was it the gods messing with his mind, or could he really see her nipples through the gauzy material of her gown?

Catching his eye, she ran her hand down her side, stopping on her thigh. Her bare thigh. The creamy expanse was exposed by the large slit in her dress.

He didn't need to be a god to read her thoughts.

“Ah, Alessa, I thought I heard you talking.” She licked her lips while her gaze skimmed down his chest and settled on his groin. “And who is this?”

Sloan's mouth went dry, and his muscles coiled. Talk about a miscalculation. He'd come here to find love, but in Amores,

love *stalked* people, shot them with arrows, then bagged and tagged 'em.

And he'd just become an eight-point buck during hunting season.



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Reviewers:

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