

THIS CUPID IS LOOKING FOR LOVE OF HER OWN



Signs of Cupidity

HEART HASSLE

Book

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SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
RAVEN KENNEDY

PENGUIN BOOKS

Signs of Cupidity

Raven Kennedy is a California girl born and raised, whose love for books pushed her into creating her own worlds. The Plated Prisoner Series, a dark fantasy romance, has already sold in over a dozen countries and is a #1 international bestseller with over 1 million copies sold to date. It was inspired by the myth of King Midas and a woman's journey with finding her own strength. Her debut series was a romcom fantasy about a cupid looking for love of her own. She has since gone on to write in a range of genres. Whether she makes you laugh or cry, or whether the series is about a cupid or a gold-touched woman living in King Midas's gilded castle, she hopes to create characters that readers can root for. The Plated Prisoner series is being adapted for series by Peter Guber's Mandalay Television.

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SIGNS OF CUPIDITY

HEART HASSLE BOOK ONE



RAVEN KENNEDY



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*To all the people who have been screwed over by cupids sticking
their arrows where they don't belong. May your book lovers be way
more satisfying.*

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CHAPTER 1



“Hey there, gorgeous. Did you sit on a pile of sugar? Because you have a sweet ass,” the guy says, leaning an elbow on the bar beside the girl wearing a skintight dress.

His eyes glide up and down her body like he’s ready to enter an eye-fucking contest. The woman turns around from her bar stool and flashes him a grin.

I roll my eyes and sigh at her. “Really? That’s going to work on you? That’s just sad,” I mumble. “Don’t fall for it, girl. He’s an asshole, trust me.”

I’m sitting right next to her, but she doesn’t hear me. Well, I’m not really *sitting* next to her. It’s more like I’m hovering over the empty barstool. Because I’m not *physically* here.

Although, I’m still here enough to be utterly annoyed when the woman gets to her feet and leads Mr. Terrible-Pick-Up-Line to the dance floor. They don’t really dance, if I’m being honest. They just sort of rub against each other and hop around. There’s a lot of ass holding, too. This one’s an ass man for sure. And yeah, okay, he looks like he’s an excellent ass handler, but that’s not the point. The point is, I was *just* here last night, and this same Mr. Terrible-Pick-Up-Line

was grinding on somebody else's ass, using equally awful pick up lines. It's just not right.

"Why does this always happen?" I ask aloud to the crowd. No one answers me. No one has answered me in decades. I guess it's not their fault, since they can't actually hear or see me, but that doesn't stop me from glaring at everyone.

"You guys should really be better than this," I say, focusing my lecture on the barman. "I mean as a species. Can't you evolve to be better at love? Because this is exhausting. And disheartening. And other words I can't even think of right now," I say.

The barman continues pouring drinks and ignores me. I wish I could have a drink. I put my hand in front of the glass as he slides it down the bar to someone else. It goes right through me like always.

I lift a hand to scratch the itch I feel on the back of my arm. It's just instinct to try to scratch. But of course, my hand goes right through my arm without touching it.

"Dammit!" I say through gritted teeth. "Five decades of this phantom itch!"

I try to slam my hand down on the bar in frustration, but it also passes right through. I can't even throw a satisfactory hissy fit. I'd love to really punch or kick something. Then eat and drink something. And then scratch this itch that has been plaguing me for so long. I must've died right when this damn itch cropped up on my arm, and then never got the chance to satisfy it.

"You have no idea how annoying this is," I whine to the person beside me as I continue trying to touch my arm. The man takes a drink and ignores me. "Lucky bastard," I say, eyeing him as he drains his glass.

I glance over my shoulder to look at my red wings. I wish I could touch these bad boys, too. My feathers look so soft, and the color is so vibrant, even in this dark bar. My wings are one of the perks of being what I am. Also the pink hair. I

like my pink hair. I have no idea what my face looks like or what color my eyes are, since I don't have a reflection. I'm kind of like a ghost like that. But I'm not a ghost, because they're a drag, and I'm actually pretty fun.

I guess it's not important what I look like, since no one can see me, anyway. But at least I like my silver dress. It kind of shimmers over my pale form, and if I could look in a mirror, I think it would probably look pretty damn good on me, too, hugging my curves as it does. It makes me feel better to be dressed nicely, even if no one can see me. At least I'm not wearing something embarrassing like dirty sweatpants and an oversized T-shirt. Or a Halloween costume. Or workout gear from the eighties. Or a stripper getup. On second thought, those might be pretty fun.

I wonder if ghosts think of things like this. I can't ask one, because they're terrible company. Not that I haven't tried. The thing about ghosts is that they're really confused. They don't really know where or who they are, so they just kind of sulk and float around in a daze. It's like they get afterlife dementia or something. They mope around, completely bewildered as they mumble to themselves. If you try to strike up a conversation with them, they trail off after only a few seconds and forget what you were talking about. Not great conversationalists.

Ghosts are clumsy, too. They're always running into things, sometimes with enough juice to actually move something in the physical plane. The wilder ones often fly around in a frenzy until they get sucked into the plumbing pipes or electrical sockets. Knocking pipes and flickering lights? Yep, just another confused ghost. So yeah, ghosts do me no good.

Besides the loneliness, it's also *boring* being invisible. I'm stuck in the Veil, where I can see the physical world, but I'm not really a part of it. I'm an invisible observer, because I am here for one purpose and one purpose only: to spread love and desire.

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Someone walks forward and sits down on my barstool, their body going right through my lap. “Rude,” I say with a huff.

I jump off the barstool and fly across the bar, floating right through people as I go. They don’t know the difference, so I don’t feel bad about invading their personal space at all.

I pick a spot against the wall and hover-lean against it as I watch the dance floor, utterly annoyed. These humans are so disappointing sometimes. Many times. Nearly all the times. Where’s the loyalty? Where’s the love? Where’s the romance? Or, to be more honest about where my bitterness really lies, where’s mine?

See, this is what I get. When I died, I was this innocent, naïve, hopelessly romantic girl. So when the angels asked me what job I wanted to take up in the afterlife, I chose to become a cupid.

Stupid fucking cupid.

I thought it was going to be awesome. What better job for a romantic than to help bloom other budding romances around the world and coax them into love? Who wouldn’t like to give a good Lust-Breath to some crazy kids looking for a nice tumble? Sign me up, right?

Well, it was nice for the first decade or two. But if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that this job has a lose-lose scenario for me. Lose Scenario Number One: I go to all this trouble of singling someone out, following him or her around and finding a compatible match. Then I help coax their relationship along. You know, some Flirt-Touches here, some Lust-Breaths there, and then bang: the Love Arrow. I think, job well done, right? Wrong. One of them ends up doing something stupid and ruins everything. Maybe not right away, but eventually. They get selfish. They get lazy. They get bored. They cheat. They lie. They fall out of love. So, lose.

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Then there’s Lose Scenario Number Two: I do all of that

and it succeeds. They fall in love and then stay in love. My small pushes along the way help solidify their connection. Sounds like a win, doesn't it? I thought so, too, for a long time. But guess what happens to a hopeless romantic cupid watching as these couples love and lust and live? That's right. Just call me Pining Cupid. Or Super Jealous Cupid. Or Bitter Cupid.

I failed to realize when I signed up for this job just how painful it would be to my own non-corporeal heart. My couples either fail miserably, breaking the love I worked so hard on, or they succeed, and I'm left alone with no hope for myself of ever getting love or getting laid.

Like I said. Stupid fucking cupid.

Mr. Terrible-Pick-Up-Line and his new girl are leaving out the back already. They barely made it through two songs. They certainly didn't need any of my Lust-Breaths to help them along. Not that I would give it to them anyway. I'm still pissed as hell that he was here again picking up someone new. It's just greedy.

I push off the wall and fly out the door to go outside. The sidewalk is busy with people waiting to go inside, but I ignore them and fly down the street. Bars, clubs, restaurants, parks, gyms, offices—I go everywhere.

I've been flying around this human realm for so long now, setting people up for love, getting them some great sex, encouraging romantic acts, fueling affection. It's the loneliest job imaginable.

I'm hurt about Mr. Terrible-Pick-Up-Line. Probably more than I should be, if I'm being honest. When I saw him last night with that other girl, I thought I was witnessing one of those rare love-at-first-sight kinds of scenarios. He slid in and made his moves, and I barely had to use my magic for any encouragement at all. I could feel the chemistry spark between them. I'd followed them back to his place just because their desire was that palpable. It drew me in.

It was sexy and exciting and yes, even romantic. Everything I crave. But it was all for show, apparently. All those lines he used, all those whispered promises groaned above her, and he hadn't even meant any of it. It pisses me off. If he wanted a one-night stand, he should've just been honest about it. I don't need to track the girl down to know he's blown her off. I should probably track her down anyway and try to help her move on, but I just can't do it. I don't have it in me.

See? I shouldn't be a cupid. This job has really run me down. There's not even a retirement plan. This job? It's for life. Or second life, anyway.

If I did the whole stress-aging thing, I'd have too many wrinkles to count. I'd look like one of those sheets that get tangled up in the dryer and when you finally unravel it, it has about a million creases in it. I'd have a head full of gray hair, too. But, now that I think about it, I could probably rock gray hair. Gray hair could be pretty awesome looking with my red wings. Maybe second place to my pink hair, anyway.

As I fly down the street, I point an accusatory finger in people's unaware faces. "No Lust for you," I tell one drunk guy before moving on to another. "No Love Arrows for you," I say to a girl. "And nothing for you, either," I add to someone else. "Nothing for any of you!" I yell at the sidewalk full of people. "You guys seriously disrespect the name of love." I cross my arms to stop myself from pointing at more faces and then nod to myself as they all walk humbly by. "That's right. Keep walking. This cupid is done pandering to your needs."

Because what about my needs, right? Right.

When I fly by a theater and hear music, I decide to go inside. The audience sits in high-backed chairs as they watch a couple singing on the stage. The lighting is low, the music soft. It's the perfect recipe for romance stew, and I'm the only one left without a spoon. Or a bowl. Or tangible hands.

I stop flying down the aisle when I spot a guy on an end seat. He's dressed nicely and is splitting his attention between the singers on stage and the woman beside him. He's handsome, and when he reaches over and places his hand gently on the woman's leg, I sigh. I don't remember what it feels like to be touched. I don't even remember what my old life was before I became this. Hell, I don't even remember my name.

Since becoming a cupid, all I have is my assigned number. It's marked on the inside of my right arm, right below the wrist. It looks like a silvery-white tattoo and shows the Roman numerals for one thousand and fifty: ML. I do, however, have a pretty sweet set of bow and arrows that reside in the quiver slung over my back. They hold my most powerful tool: Love Arrows. I can't deny the rush I get when I shoot someone with one of those bad boys. I have perfect aim, too. When I first started out, my aim was terrible. But I've had plenty of target practice since then, and probably thousands of misplaced romances because of it, but oh well.

The second my arrow hits someone, it bursts in a cloud of color before disappearing. It's all different colors—depending on the person. The arrow pushes the person's like right into love. Of course, just like my Lust-Breaths, there has to already be some sort of connection there. It's not like I can force love or desire. I just help it along. Think of me as the gardener. I don't make the seed, I just tend it to help it take root and sprout.

Inside the theater, I settle myself down on the floor beside his chair and listen to the singers as they croon to each other. It's a sappy love song, and my cupid-senses are tingling with the need to throw out some Flirt-Touches and Lust-Breaths until the room explodes into one giant orgy. Yes, I've done that before. Don't judge. They're fun to watch. There's nothing quite like passing the time in the middle of

an orgy. So many hands and tongues and other bits just sliding around like a carousel.

Besides, since my powers only work if there's already some desire and want there already, it's not really wrong. The ones that don't wish to partake usually get out of there real quick like. I don't interfere with free will. I just give them a push. But no, no pushing tonight. I'm mad at all of humankind with their stupid physical bodies and their stupid voices that can be heard.

Using my wings, I pick myself up and float out of the theater again into the night. My wings are really the only things I like about my job anymore. Well, besides the Love Arrows. Those things are downright fun to shoot. But I haven't used one in years. Why should I hand out love left and right when I can't get any for myself? I know, I know. I'm petty like that. But seriously, the angels should've given me a heads-up or thrown a Cupid Orientation or something before letting me take the job. I blame them for their oversight. I meander around the streets, blowing a few Lust-Breaths in people's faces as I go along, just because. I don't even wait to find people with a connection like I'm supposed to. Nope, I just fly by and blast people. I like watching them get all hot and bothered. Usually they find someplace to be very quickly, to either take care of business themselves or to find someone to do it with them. But sometimes, if I gave them an extra-strong dose, I get to see them make a complete ass of themselves as they sidle up and make a move on someone nearby. My favorite is when it's a stranger. Then I get to enjoy them getting told off or beaten up. Once, I Lusted this huge MMA-fighter-looking dude, and he practically jumped this poor accountant as he came strolling out of his office. I thought he was going to suffocate the poor guy. It was hilarious.

As I continue to fly, I spot a group of teenagers and zero in on the third wheel. He's a pimply-faced guy made of all

limbs, his elbows and knees jutting out like doorknobs. It's so clear that he's the pity friend, that my heart kind of hurts for him. There's a suave-looking bad boy with his arm slung over the girl who walks between them. He has a cigarette illegally perched in his too-young mouth to really round out his whole leather jacket, too-cool-for-school look. The girl looks up at him adoringly even as he blatantly checks out other girls' asses and blows cigarette smoke in her face. The third wheel looks on, hands in his pockets, unrequited love in his eyes as he watches her.

Why should the good guy lose out? So he's a little awkward looking. So what? I'm sure he'd treat the girl way better than this other joker. Plus, I'm sick of the cocky jackasses tonight. I'm already feeling frisky because of earlier, so just as the cocky jackass in question turns yet again to stare at another girl that walks by (and actually gives her a wink), I lose it. I hit him with a Love Arrow so quick that he stumbles right there on the sidewalk like he ran into a pole. The James Dean poseur immediately ditches the girl he's with and runs after the other one. His girl, or rather ex-girl now, screams his name (which is Brad, because of course he has a name like that), and then she bursts into tears when leather-jacket-Brad sticks his tongue down the other girl's throat. Whew. I always forget how fast teen love settles in. It's like normal love, except it's on hyper-drive. They can't help it. Their hormones overpower their brain cells.

Brad continues to feel up his newfound love while his poor forgotten ex watches from the sidelines, now clutching onto Mr. Lanky Third Wheel. He can barely contain his grin as he comforts her and leads her away. I swipe a nice Flirt-Touch across each of them as they walk by me. That should set things in motion nicely.

"Ha. Plot twist," I say, pleased with myself. "For all the friend-zoned nice guys out there!" I call out to their retreating backs. "You're welcome!"

I nod and decide that I'll just go around screwing up more predictable toxic pairings and give a leg up to third wheels everywhere. It'll be great fun to shake things up a bit. Almost like the year of '91 when I made an entire town fall in love with themselves. It didn't last long, and it sure as hell wasn't easy to do, but man, just watching the dates they took themselves on made it worth it. Entire restaurants full of singles, staring daggers at anyone that walked by, treating themselves to whatever they wanted. Vibrator sales went through the roof.

I chuckle darkly to myself, and just when I'm about to break up another trio of unbalanced proportions consisting of a nerdy girl looking longingly at the oblivious guy, the unbelievable happens: I feel the tug.

Uh-oh.

Before I can blink, I'm yanked out of the human realm and thrown into Cupidville. And there's only one reason I'd be yanked back there.

Yep. I'm in trouble.

CHAPTER 2



Okay, it's not actually called Cupidville. It's actually a higher part of existence in the Veil, where all the in-between entities go for direction or assignment or whatever the hell else. I've only been to the part that other cupids inhabit, and I'm only allowed to go when I'm summoned. Like right now. Summoning is actually just a nicer way of saying pulled away from your duties because your superiors are pissed off at you. Yeah. I've been here before. Shocker, right? It's kind of like getting called to the principal's office. Except scarier.

I'm yanked away from the human realm, and before I can mutter a string of curses from the stomach-roiling sensation of flying through space and time, my body is dumped into a seat in a brightly lit room full of other cupids. It's like a giant doctor's office, except instead of getting a checkup, we're all getting promotions, demotions, assignments, or...terminated. And termination for us means ceasing to exist. Gone. The End. Game Over. Snap of the fingers, just like that.

That part isn't on the brochure. No, really. There were brochures when I first signed up, complete with a happy pink font that made being a cupid sound like the best job in

existence. The devil is in the fine print. I really should've read it all before choosing this as my after-life occupation instead of getting caught up in the romance and a corny slogan: "Become a Cupid: Spread Love, Sex, and Desire!"

What? I was zero years old in the afterlife at the time. And it's not like I was the only one who fell for it, considering the other pink-haired, red-winged people around me. Of course, we're all still incorporeal, even here, so no change there. The only difference is that we can actually hear and talk to each other. And it's the only time I ever get to see other cupids. Surprise, surprise, there aren't that many of us. Considering how many realms we have to serve, it's very, very, very rare to see another cupid when you're working. So, yeah, as scary as it is to be sucked into Cupidville, it's also kind of awesome because I can see and talk to other cupids. It's like a high school reunion where you kind of recognize everyone but have no idea what the hell to talk about.

Inside the room, there's a huge reception area with some of the cupid superiors sitting behind glass, bustling around and looking extra busy. Every once in a while, a huge number displays on the wall with magic, lighting up to announce the next cupid in line to go forward. Right now, XLLL is on the screen. It won't go in numerical order. Just by some strange unknown system.

To my immediate right is a twenty-something male cupid. I think I'm around the same age. Without being able to see my reflection, I'm guessing I look somewhere between twenty and thirty. The only reason I think this is because the last time I was yanked here, this other cupid called me "hot and ripe as hell." I'm pretty sure he was terminated later, but the compliment was nice. I'm also pretty sure that twenty to thirty is a probable age range for "ripe." Unless I'm a cougar. And let's be honest, who doesn't want to be a cougar?

Anyway, the cupid guy sitting next to me is looking over at the wall where a huge poster hangs with the stupid cupid

slogan. I hear him muttering under his breath. "Fooking pile of steaming shite, that is."

I like him immediately. I lean over to get more into his personal space. "I know, right? They trick you into believing it's all fun and arrows and hearts, but in the real world, watching love and sex really starts to suck."

He looks over at me and nods. "Tell me about it. Had me for a fooking ride, they did," he says in the most entertaining accent I've ever heard. "The superior sold me like a bag of ice to a dry lake. Drank that shite right up."

"How'd they get you?" I ask. It's so nice being able to talk to someone. It's almost worth getting in trouble. It's been years and years since the last time I was yanked. I can't even remember how long ago it was. "For me, I was convinced it would be the most romantic job in all the realms. I was practically salivating for love when I signed up," I admit. "Couldn't wait to get started."

He raises a black brow. For some reason, our eyebrows aren't pink like our hair. I have no idea why. I also have no idea what color my eyebrows are, or my eyes. Cupid problems.

"Told me I'd be spreadin' all the sex I wanted, didn't they? Sold it like a fooking porno. Didn't realize not bein' able to join in would be its own sort of torture. I'm a virile guy, get it? I ain't cut out for this celibate shite. And the ghosts are seriously a drag. Fooking morose sons o' bitches."

I nod seriously. "I know, man. Believe me, I know."

He shakes his head, swearing under his breath about what a pain it is to be a cupid. But boy, this guy is pretty. Luscious lips, thick curly lashes, and cheekbones to die for. His pink hair sets his tan off rather nicely, too. I wish I had a tan. My skin is super pale. Like ghost pale.

We both look up as the next number flashes up on the wall. Another cupid, a little old lady, sees it and sighs. She floats toward the reception area looking perfectly guilty. I

wonder what trouble she was making to get yanked. She looks too sweet to be in trouble, like she should be somewhere baking cookies and knitting ugly socks that no one will wear.

“Once, I went on a Love-Strike in my city,” I say to my new cupid friend. “I didn’t give out any Love for a month straight. I was yanked here for it. As punishment, they tripled my Love quota for an entire decade,” I say, shaking my head at the memory. “A decade! By the time I was done, I was so sick of shooting arrows that I would’ve run myself straight through with one of them if I could.” I tried. Didn’t work. I’ve tried all my powers on myself. I’m sure every cupid here has. Our powers don’t work on ourselves.

He shudders at my story, because he knows how giving out a surplus of Love can get complicated quick. “They can shove their fooking Love quotas right up their hairy arses,” he says, making me laugh loudly. I get the stink eye from one of the superiors. Yeah, apparently they like the cupids to be quiet and demure.

“I got sent to the troll realm as punishment once.”

I swivel to look at him again and gasp. “No!”

He nods with a grimace on his pretty face. “Yup. I wasn’t givin’ anyone the Lust, you get it? I was on a strike of my own, if you catch my drift. If I couldn’t get any, no one else would, neither. When the superiors caught on, they sent me to the troll realm for an entire year. Those gobshites are the ugliest motherfookers I’ve ever eyed. I had to Lust ’em, and believe me, their idea of fooking ain’t pretty. Plus, they lay eggs after. And I don’t mean months later; I mean *right* after. Covered in sex juices and steaming.” It’s my turn to shudder. It makes my decade-long Love-Surplus seem tame in comparison.

“These cupid superiors are sadists.”

“What did you do to land you here this time?”

“Nothing!” I say defensively. “Well, barely anything,” I

amend. "I *almost* did something, maybe. I didn't even get a chance to really start, though. And *maybe* I haven't been giving Love out, either. But geez, they're so touchy these days."

"Yep. New management, I heard."

"Shit."

He nods. "You're tellin' me."

Before I can ask him what he did, I see my Roman numeral, ML, pop up on the screen. "Shit," I say again. "That's me."

"Good luck, cupid thousand fifty," he says with a nod.

I look down at his wrist where the letters DCCXX are. "You too, seven hundred twenty." I want to give him a fist bump, but since we don't have real bodies, it would turn awkward quickly. So instead, I just raise a fist in bitter cupid solidarity. "Keep it real."

"Aye. You fooking know it."

I float my way toward reception and stop in front of the glass where a superior cupid with a pinched face glowers at me. Her pink hair is in an updo that looks like a soft serve ice cream cone. "Cupid one thousand fifty?"

I nod and show her my arm. "Yep, that's me."

She looks at some papers and trails her finger down a column of writing. "Cupid one thousand fifty, report to room forty-three. Take door number one, go down the hall to the left. Follow the numbers. Thank you for your Loving service. Have a Cupidly good day."

She says everything with zero expression and in complete monotone, so naturally, a giggle bursts out of me unbidden. She glares daggers at me. "Sorry," I mock whisper, mimicking a motion to zip my mouth closed.

I quickly turn and find the door with the number one on it and go inside, heading down the hallway. Everything is white, and just like she said, there's door after door, all of them numbered. The doors are shaped like hearts, just in

case we forgot we were cupids or something. The propaganda around here just doesn't end.

Finally, I reach door number forty-three. I announce myself and hear someone call for me to enter. At least I think he does. He could've just cursed me out or read out an ingredient from the recipe for the perfect chocolate chip cookies. I wouldn't know either way. But now I really wish I had a tangible tongue so I could eat a chocolate chip cookie. Those things look delicious.

Inside is a small office, where a superior cupid sits behind a desk. He's middle-aged, and his wings are tucked in tightly against his back as he watches me enter. There are piles of papers all over the desk and an hourglass trickling sand down its center. The pieces of sand are shaped like hearts, because of course they are. The propaganda, remember? It's Cupidville.

"Please, sit."

I do, but it's not really sitting since my body is still ghost-like. I just manage to make it look like I'm hovering over the chair. He makes it look much easier, but then, since he's a superior, his body is more corporeal than mine, letting him actually touch the papers on his desk. I'm super jealous. I wonder if he can touch a chocolate chip cookie. Wait, can he eat a chocolate chip cookie?

"Cupid one thousand fifty," he says, interrupting my thoughts. He picks up a file folder with my number on it and starts flipping through it. "Human realm. In service for fifty-six years."

"That's me," I say brightly, plastering a huge smile on my face. Because he can't be too mad at me if I'm super-friendly, right?

He looks up at me and cocks a brow. Okay, so maybe I crossed over from super-friendly to semi-crazy with my too-wide smile. I quickly take it down a notch.

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"You've been disciplined five times in the past. This is your sixth visit," he says, looking up at me from the file.

"Which is pretty good, right? That's, like, only once a decade on average," I point out, still smiling.

"Is that amusing to you?"

I wipe the smile from my face. "No, nope. Definitely not, sir."

"Hmm. Well, despite your transgressions, you've been somewhat of a success in your duties," he says, surprising me. "Nothing remarkable, but you're a decent cupid."

I'm decent? I wonder who the real screw-ups are if he thinks I'm decent.

"Still, considering the number of purposeful transgressions you've been guilty of, we've decided to move you into another realm."

My eyes widen and I gasp. "Don't send me to the trolls!" I blurt out before I can stop myself. "I don't want to see their steaming sex eggs!"

He pauses his perusal of my file. "Who said anything about trolls?" he asks with exasperation.

I clear my throat and force myself to sit back down. *When did I jump out of the seat?* I am terrible at playing it cool. "Sorry. No one. I mean, I heard about them. The trolls, that is. Sometimes they're used as punishment, right? But you didn't say trolls. I hope you don't say trolls in the future. Because I don't want to go to the troll realm. You weren't going to say that, were you? I'd even take another Love-Surplus over the troll realm. Oh, gods, I'm giving you ideas, aren't I? I'm just going to shut up now."

I'm finally able to shut my yapping mouth. It's embarrassing how long it took.

The superior clears his throat. "Are you done?"

I nod like a madwoman, not trusting myself to open my mouth again in fear of more word vomit.

He eyes me for a moment longer, as if to make sure I

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really am going to keep my trap shut. After a moment, he puts my papers back inside my file and puts it down on the desk, folding his hands over it all official-like. I'm so nervous that I'm frozen in place.

Finally, he says, "You're being sent to the fae realm."

I blink at him several times. I open my mouth and then close it again. I blink some more. "I'm sorry, what?"

"The. Fae. Realm," he says slowly, like I'm an idiot. "You'll no longer be serving humans."

"The fae...but...I mean, isn't that a promotion? Like, lots of cupids ask to be transferred to the fae realm, right?" I ask, and my nervousness takes control of my mouth again. "I don't know why. Humans are just fine. Not that I'm saying I don't want to go to the fae realm. The fae realm is awesome. Really great. I've heard super things about the fae realm. Much better than the troll realm. I'd love to go to the fae realm. I just thought...I was getting disciplined? Or maybe terminated? Not that I want that! I don't want to go poof. Or at least, I heard there's a poof. Like we just disappear in a pink cloud and we cease to exist. Not that I'm asking for a termination demonstration. I'm not. You won't poof me, right? No, because you're sending me to the fae realm. Wow. The fae. Am I not in trouble?"

Gods. It's like I just can't help myself.

He looks like he's completely done with me. If there were a magic button on his desk that said, "Get Her Away From Me," he'd press it. We sit in awkward silence, staring at each other for several minutes until he composes himself enough to deign to speak to me again.

"Cupid one thousand fifty. You are hereby transferred to the fae realm. Don't screw up, or you may be in line for termination for your next disciplinary meeting. And yes, you'd go 'poof,'" he says, leaning forward slightly, making me lean back.

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If I had a heart, it would've just tripped and fallen down

in my chest. “Oh, you got it, sir. No trouble from me. You can bet your wings on it. I’ll be too busy spreading Love and Lust around to be getting into any trouble. I’ll get them sexing and loving in no time. I’m all over it, sir. You can count on me. No need for poofing.”

He just shakes his head at me and sighs. Then he *does* press a button, but this one says “Fae,” and just like that, I’m being yanked out of the cupid office and thrown into the fae realm.

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CHAPTER 3



Well, I'm certainly not on Earth anymore. That's my first thought the moment my incorporeal self pops into the fae realm. I'm actually hovering in midair, right smack in the sky. There are clouds above, around, and below me. The sun is straight up, but has more of a pink glow than the one on Earth. But the biggest difference? This place is made up of floating islands. Yep. Floating. Islands. Believe me, it looks stranger and more beautiful than it sounds. And there are *hundreds* of them. Some are barely a stone's throw away from another. Some are thousands of feet apart. Some are up, some are down, some are huge, some are tiny.

I soak in the sight. The fae realm. I never thought I'd find myself here. I'm pretty sure I was human in my former life, although that's just a guess. I just felt a general connection to humans. But being here fills me with a sort of awe. I can almost *feel* the magic that I know is ripe in the air.

The fae are the most magically powerful beings in all the realms, and their realm is also one of the largest. There's a reason lots of cupids want to land a gig here. Fae are supposedly freaky. Freakier than the freakiest of humans. There

aren't the same inhibitions with fae as there are in other realms. So it's fun for cupids to get in here and spread some desire, because the fae are down for pretty much anything. And, unlike most realms, there are a ton of different species in this realm, which breaks up the monotony of things.

I don't know why I was sent here, but I'm pretty freaking excited.

I decide to fly to the different islands and look around. There are so many; I just want to explore for a while. I head below to the lowest islands first and scour the skies. One island that I fly over is made purely of water. No land to speak of. It looks like a diamond, hovering there in the sky, and I'm pretty sure I see some merpeople splashing around.

I also see an island with a huge volcano that seems to be stuck in a never-ending eruption. Lava drips off the sides and into the sky, landing gods only knows where far below. A lot of the islands are made up of cities. Some have humble-looking huts, and some have sprawling mansions and town squares. I watch them all from high above, just getting my bearings.

I fly for a long time, not getting close to any island in particular, until I find a smallish one that's set apart from the heavily populated areas. In fact, it looks almost untouched and is heavily forested. I decide this is the one to take a closer look at, though I don't know why I'm drawn to it. Maybe it's because it's so green and serene looking, so different from the human city I came from. Or maybe it's because after getting yanked from the cupid meeting, I'm feeling about a million times lonelier than I was before.

That's what happens every time I get yanked. It's nice while I'm there (when I'm not getting disciplined) because I can actually talk to others. But it doesn't last nearly long enough, and then I'm put back out for however many years with no one but myself for company again. That short visit I