

In the game of love, what if Cupid is the loser?

Cupid in Blue



Back Cover Copy

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Aaron Bernhart—the new Cupid—finds previous experience in love is a prerequisite for the job. He's all ready with a golden bow and a quiver of magical red arrows. Sadly, what he's lacking is a girlfriend. On his first day at work he meets Catherine, and literally tumbles head over wings... from the sky, that is.

Catherine is a skeptic regarding all things romance, but finds herself turned on by Cupid's wings. The only thing holding her back from a happily ever after is herself.

Can Aaron convince the lovely loner to take a chance on romance with him, or will he be the only single Cupid in the history of the world?

Highlight

“But I don’t want to accept it! I want it to be gone.” When Landon didn’t offer a comment, Aaron slammed his fist down on the armrest of his chair. “Just because you’re a happily married man doesn’t mean the rest of us will be as lucky.” Aaron didn’t begrudge his brother the love of a lifetime. He only wished it had happened to him. He felt useless holed up in this house all the time, a shadow of who he was only two months prior because of the wings. Even though he had finally learned how to fold them beneath his skin, he wasn’t always sure that they’d stay there while he was out in public.

“Accept what you’ve been given, because miracles are a risky business at best. I’d say you’re stuck.” Landon rose to his feet in one smooth motion. “I’ll talk to you before we leave.”

“Sure, don’t try to help me or anything.” Aaron frowned when his brother ignored his sarcastic comment and vanished through the front door. “Me, as Cupid.” He leaned his head against the buttery soft leather, closed his eyes and sighed. No life, no girlfriend, no way out. “No problem.”

Cupid In Blue

by

Sandra Sookoo

Holiday Magic Series: Book Two of Six

Cupid In Blue

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Dedication

To the talented staff at Lyrical Press who worked on this project and believed enough to take a chance on the inhabitants of Crystals Falls. Thanks for coming along for the ride.

Chapter 1

“Damn it!”

Aaron Bernhart picked himself off the wet, muddy ground. With a furious glance at a passing flock of geese, he rubbed his shoulder then readjusted his wings. Six weeks ago, the pair of glorious white-feathered extensions had sprouted from his back, but he still hadn’t gotten used to how the appendages operated. It didn’t help matters when the local fowl plowed right through his flight path. When that happened, he usually plummeted to the earth with a tumble of outrage and a bruised tailbone.

“Well done, brother. Another couple of weeks and you’ll finally have the hang of it.” Landon, Aaron’s older sibling, strode around a holly thicket and into view.

“I’d like to see you live with this curse.” Aaron ineffectually brushed at a patch of mud on the left knee of his jeans. “It’s not as easy as you’d think.” He stared at his brother. They could have been twins and had played that card while growing up, but as they aged, their differences had grown more pronounced. Where Landon’s brown hair sported waves, Aaron’s own golden locks curled. Both were tall at six feet, and while Aaron considered himself laid-back, his brother was definitely more of a by-the-book type.

“I’m sure it isn’t.” Landon clapped Aaron on the shoulder. “It’s your destiny. You’ll figure it out.”

“Destiny, huh?” Aaron snorted. “You should know all about that.” With a grimace, he folded his wings behind him, wincing at the tenderness in his muscles.

“Why don’t you hide the wings under your skin like the rest of the winged people of the world? If you have difficulty doing so, I’m sure there are classes you can take at the Institute.”

“Because it’s too painful right now, and uncomfortable to lie on my back, but I do tuck them in when I absolutely must.” Aaron frowned. “Surely this is normal?” When Landon only lifted a dark brown eyebrow in response, he sighed. “And you’re sure this is really my destiny?” He hoped it was merely a fluke of the universe and that the wings would go away on their own.

“You know magic manifests itself in different ways for different people. I apparently can conjure rare objects from distant galaxies. You got wings, for whatever reason. Maybe you can perform other feats of wonder. Who knows?” Landon’s lips twitched in apparent amusement. “I’m almost sorry Jayne and I will be leaving for Glacier Falls in a few days. I’d love to see how this thing plays out.”

“I don’t need your pity.” Aaron shot Landon an irritated glance. “At least the task of being Santa Claus’s prodigy is yours. I don’t think I could handle the notoriety.” He flexed his right wrist and groaned. “That’s gonna be a bruise.”

“I’ve been asking around at the Institute. The appearance of your wings has been the subject of discussion in academic circles.”

“Is that right?” Aaron led the way back inside the rambling gray farmhouse, glad for the opportunity to slump into a sleek, brown leather recliner. “And what do the learned professors in the hallowed halls of the Institute of Magical Instruction attribute the phenomenon to?” In spite of his flippant, sarcastic tone, he desperately wanted answers. If the practitioners of magic at the Institute couldn’t figure out his puzzle, no one could. He didn’t want to go through the rest of his life without knowing why he had been “chosen.”

Landon cleared his throat. “They all believe you’ve been selected to be the next Cupid.”

“What?” Aaron’s mouth dropped open as he stared at his sibling in astonishment. “You can’t be serious! I don’t even have a handle on my own romantic attachments, especially now that I’ve sprouted wings.” He struggled to remove himself from the recliner, but the extra effort caused his back to ache. With a sigh, he sank back against the soft leather. “How is that possible, and will that be my job for the rest of my life?”

“How is anything possible in the world of magic?” Landon sat easily on the espresso leather sofa opposite Aaron’s chair. “Apparently the last Cupid never came back from a vacation to the Florida Keys. He took early retirement and now the position’s open.”

“But why me?” Aaron rolled his shoulders and resisted the urge to scratch the patch of skin between his wings with the remote control. “Why did the powers-that-be think that I’d be pleased with this arrangement?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, they don’t always ask our permission before they mess around in our lives.” Landon shot him a grin. “I’ll be Santa Claus within the next decade. It’s only fitting for you to step up to play Cupid for a while. You know, keep the magic in the family.”

“What if I don’t want to?” Aaron cringed at the whine that crept into his voice. It made him sound like he was back in third grade on the playground, where Landon used to taunt him to jump off the swings. “Ever since these feathered abominations appeared, I haven’t gone anywhere—not even to the diner, and that’s bad because I’m a terrible cook. I have to fend for myself.” He lowered his voice to a whisper, even though there was no one around to overhear. “Not to mention the other huge problem. I haven’t dated since we came to Crystal Falls. It’s been at least three months. Things are pretty bad on that front, if you know what I mean.”

“There is more to life than sex.” Landon’s eyes held no sympathy. “It’s best not to complain about your fate and accept it. Once you do that, you’ll be fine, and most likely, your special woman will be dumped into your lap.”

“But I don’t want to accept it! I want it to be gone.” When Landon didn’t offer a comment, Aaron slammed his fist down on the armrest of his chair. “Just because you’re a happily married man doesn’t mean the rest of us will be as lucky.” Aaron didn’t begrudge his brother the love of a lifetime. He only wished it had happened to him. He felt useless holed up in this house all the

time, a shadow of who he was only two months prior because of the wings. Even though he had finally learned how to fold them beneath his skin, he wasn't always sure that they'd stay there while he was out in public.

"Like I said, accept what you've been given, because miracles are a risky business at best. I'd say you're stuck." Landon rose to his feet in one smooth motion. "I need to help Jayne with her packing. I'll talk to you before we leave."

"Sure, don't try to help me or anything." Aaron frowned when his brother ignored his sarcastic comment and vanished through the front door. "Me, as Cupid." He leaned his head against the buttery soft leather, closed his eyes and sighed. No life, no girlfriend, no way out. "No problem."

* * * *

Catherine Alicot frowned as the sky spit a fine drizzle at her. It wasn't enough moisture to dampen her clothes or hair, but was enough to annoy her. She hated to be wet and it was Jenika's fault she was here. Stupid hick town. She needed to meet her friend at some kitschy bakery. For what? To have Jenika sign the quitclaim deed on their apartment in New York. Sure, she could have mailed the document. She did—twice, in fact. She had received no response to either registered letter. It was time to take matters into her own hands.

Rolling her eyes at the giant cookie-shaped sign that read "Just Cookies," Catherine gripped the cold metal handle, yanked the door open and entered. The fine tinkle of the jingle bells attached to the glass door drowned the word out as it swung closed behind her.

She spotted her former roommate behind a case containing pastries. "Jenika, we need to talk." Catherine's long legs ate up the length of the dining area with quick strides as she wove her way through the maze of two-seater round tables. Invisible clouds of vanilla and cherry enveloped her and made her mouth water. She had to resist the temptation. Empty calories were not a good thing.

"I've told you a hundred times to call me Jinx. I hate the name Jenika."

"Whatever." Catherine cocked an eyebrow at her ex-roommate. "Listen, just sign this deed then I can catch the next flight back to New York and be home by dinner." She glanced around the bakery and her lips curled with contempt. From the strands of red, sparkly heart tinsel strung around the ceiling to the cutout paper Cupids that adorned the windows, Just Cookies certainly appeared to usher in the holiday of love with high style. "I want to sell the apartment as soon as possible. I've got my eye on another piece of property, but I need to dump this one first." She resisted the urge to flick a pink glittery cherub that rested on the front counter. Love was overrated.

"Sorry, Catherine. I've been swamped here at the bakery, especially now. It seems everyone in town wants to order heart-shaped cookies."

"Mmm-hmm." She studied her friend. Jenika was petite, barely a couple inches taller than five feet, and curvy in all the right places. Wild, curly auburn hair ran riot about her shoulders, and Catherine had to admit the woman's best feature, by far, was her vivid green eyes. "I wouldn't eat too many of those cookies if I were you." Catherine frowned. "You're not exactly on the slim side."

“Gee, thanks. Bitch much? And you wonder why I took this job and moved from New York to Indiana.” Jenika dropped the half-eaten sugar cookie back onto a pink doily. “You’re gonna have to wait until I’m off the clock here. I want to make sure to read your paper before I sign it. You haven’t been entirely truthful with me in the past.”

A tiny thread of guilt twisted Catherine’s gut but she mentally brushed it aside. All those times when she’d coerced Jinx into going places, getting the tattoo or trying questionable foods didn’t have any bearing on the present situation. “It wasn’t personal, just business. The deed will just transfer your interest in the real estate to me so that I don’t have to track you down when the apartment sells.”

“At some point in your life, you’ll have to stop categorizing people as investments and business plans. You’re too blunt for your own good. I get tired of it sometimes—okay, a lot of times.”

Catherine most certainly was not going to stand around while her former roommate lectured her on the niceties of life. “Since I’ll be here for a couple of days, can I stay with you?”

“Not unless you brought a sleeping bag.” Jenika laughed. “I don’t have a place yet. I’m staying at Mrs. Wiggins’s boarding house on Oak Street. I think she’s got one more room for rent.”

“Things just get better and better.” Catherine’s cheeks warmed with the slow burn of irritation. “I’ll see you later.”

She slammed the bakery door on her way out. Why couldn’t Jenika just sign the stupid paper? Catherine stormed down the sidewalk, the heels of her black stiletto boots echoing sharply on the concrete. The drizzle had stopped, but the change in weather didn’t lift her mood. She’d gone two blocks before she skidded to a wobbly halt over a slab of slick pavement. Where the hell was the boarding house? The only thing she saw was an orderly row of older brick residential houses.

Catherine sighed. Obviously, she’d taken a wrong turn. She wasn’t in the heart of so-called downtown, that much was true. She turned a slow circle then frowned. There was no one out, most of the homes were silent, and some still sported unlit Christmas lights that swayed gently in the breeze. She shivered and berated herself for not dressing more appropriately for the February chill. The black skinny jeans and thin, cream-colored wool sweater weren’t enough to keep her warm.

The sun came out from behind a cloudbank, and Catherine sucked in her breath as a large winged shadow swooped across the grass then vanished behind a house. That was one huge bird! Curiosity had always been the weakness that tripped her up in life, and this moment proved to be no different. She figured she was already lost, so a side trip to investigate the bird with a pituitary problem wouldn’t make a difference. With determined strides, Catherine picked her way up the graveled driveway, careful not to scuff her boots.

The driveway ended in a wooden five-foot gate. Catherine tried the lock, which gave way under her fingers. She pushed the gate open and moved further into the backyard. Silhouetted against the weak sun was a man—with wings. The light gilded his golden curls, yet her eyes lingered on the pair of white, feathery wings that protruded from his back.

“I don’t believe it.” Catherine advanced another few steps onto the cement patio and made sure to avoid the patches of snow that dotted the small space. She looked past the wings to focus on the man himself. Grass-stained jeans hugged muscular thighs and a tight rear end while a red turtleneck hid his torso as he flapped about the yard. “Oh wow.” Catherine didn’t know if the words slipped out in response to his body or his wings. Even at this distance, she could see the definition of his stomach muscles as they strained under the fabric. Her heartbeat increased at the sight of him. She had an insane desire to run her fingers over those abs to see if they were as hard as they looked.

She shaded her eyes with a hand against the glare. “Hey, are you really flying or are you hooked up to some sort of wire?” She didn’t see any contraption to keep him suspended but that didn’t mean anything. Hollywood special effects teams had some awesome toys these days.

The angel or bird-man—or whatever he was—turned a startled gaze on her, gave a couple of ineffectual flaps of his wings and then fell to the ground with a heavy thump. “Damn!” He glared at her, his deep brown eyes ablaze with anger. “You broke my concentration.”

“It didn’t appear to me you had a good grasp on flying to begin with.” Catherine shrugged as he picked himself off the ground. “What’s with the Halloween costume?” She’d seen many things in her life—the world after dark in downtown Manhattan would blow anyone’s mind—but she had never seen a man with wings. “You do realize that’s months away, right?”

“Listen, lady, it’s not a costume.”

“Then you’re just a guy on the wrong side of genetics?” Her lips curved upward in a smile when the tips of his ears turned pink. “I don’t judge. I just came over to see what the commotion was.” A new thought occurred to her. “I need to find Mrs. Wiggins’s boarding house. Can you help me with that?” She stuck out a hand and pasted on what she liked to call her marketing smile. “I’m Catherine Alicot, by the way.”

The man stared at her for a moment before he shook her hand. “Aaron Bernhart.”

Catherine’s breath caught in her throat. Her fingers tingled from their brief contact, and she regretted the loss of warmth when he crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Glad to meet you.” Her heart raced and she licked her lips in sudden nervousness. “Have you escaped from an institution somewhere? Do you need some sort of mental help?”

“There’s nothing wrong with my mind. In case you haven’t noticed, I have wings. My brother thinks I’m the new freakin’ Cupid.” The anger of Aaron’s outburst faded as quickly as it came, as if he’d had this argument frequently. He sighed as his shoulders slumped in defeat.

“Complain much?”

“Annoy much?”

“Hey, I’m just looking for the boarding house, but I guess if I had wings and flew like a drunk goose, I’d complain too.” She lifted a brow, fighting a laugh.

“I’m sorry. You’ll find the boarding house four blocks in the other direction, past downtown. You’ve come too far.”

“Thanks.” Catherine hesitated, and then watched in fascination as he folded the wings behind his back. Her fingers itched to touch the feathers to see if they’d be as soft as down. “By the way, I wouldn’t consider you a freak. You just don’t know how to fly, and most likely you’ll never learn with that bad attitude.”

“Oh, thanks for the tip.” Aaron’s face twisted with anger once more. “I’ll take it under consideration.” Without another word, he stormed into the house.

Catherine frowned. Did she really just meet Cupid? Was there such a being? If that were truly the case, he wouldn’t make many matches with such a foul outlook. She shrugged. Maybe she needed to get her prescription for Prozac renewed...

Chapter 2

Aaron frowned as he watched the UPS truck rumble away from the house. What now? He closed the door then dumped the long brown cardboard box on the wood-and-glass coffee table. The return address indicated the package came from The Institute for Magical Instruction. Aaron swallowed the knot of anxiety that leaped into his throat. He had wings. How much worse could it get? He ripped the strip of clear packing tape from the box and carefully rooted through the white tissue paper. A small instruction booklet rested on top but he chucked it onto the coffee table, unread.

“Wow.” Aaron lifted out a quiver made of soft, supple tan leather. On its own, it would have been a fine gift. However, the next thing he pulled out was a bundle of ten arrows. “You’ve got to be kidding me.” Slim, about the width of a pipe cleaner, the arrows had wickedly sharp points and glowed with some sort of pulsing red liquid inside.

He couldn’t deny the evidence any longer. The wings, the quiver full of arrows and the label bearing the name of the Institute all added up to the undeniable fact was he, Aaron Bernhart, would now be known as Cupid.

Damn.

He set the first two items aside then bit off a curse as doubt coated his stomach. Maybe the Institute had the wrong guy. Maybe his wings were a fluke, something that a quick, discreet trip to a plastic surgeon could take care of, but when his fingers brushed over the remainder of the box’s contents, his heart sank. The last item was a bow, the string pulled taut between the tips of finely wrought golden metal cold to the touch, with carved scrollwork down the shaft. Aaron tried the tension of the line. He was sure an arrow would find its mark.

That settled it. The plastic surgeon was forgotten as he frowned at his new toy. Cupid with aching bones. Just perfect. He stretched, hoping to relieve his back, which hurt from the effort of keeping the wings under his skin. Unfurled, they banged into doorways and shelves, which made Landon grouse about the ensuing mess and pester him about returning to work. As much as he wanted to hide at home, Aaron knew at some point he’d have to get back out and mingle with everyone else. That thought depressed him. He didn’t want to share his anomaly with anyone. Seeing horror in someone’s eyes would undermine any confidence he’d managed to store since the wings made an appearance. An image of the woman from the day before flashed across his mind. Did she plan to stay in town?

With a shrug, he stuffed everything back into the box. He couldn’t worry about either issue at the moment. He had vendors to pay and checks to write, especially since he hadn’t been into the bakery in the daytime for a good month.

* * * *

“Mr. Bernhart!” Jenika wiped her hands on a frilly pink apron. “I can’t believe you’re really here!”

“Yeah, I decided not to work from home today.” Aaron rolled his eyes at his baker then continued past the bakery case, through the kitchen and into the tiny room he called his office. “Jenika! What sort of supplies will you need for the next two weeks?”

“Remember, call me Jinx.” When she stuck her red head around the doorframe, her green eyes were alight with mischief. “I’ll need the usual. Flour, sugar, butter and maybe a case of chocolate chips and one of baker’s chocolate.”

“Are you sure that’s enough?”

“Yes.” Jenika shrugged. “It’ll be Valentine’s Day soon, and every couple in love wants treats dipped in chocolate.”

He sighed as his baker popped back into the kitchen. Life hadn’t changed much since he’d been gone. Under Jenika’s leadership, Just Cookies had tripled its business. If he hadn’t been so consumed by his own magical problem, he’d investigate her roots. He suspected she wasn’t your average human.

Aaron had no sooner opened up an Excel spreadsheet then he heard raised voices in the bakery’s kitchen. He’d never get anything done at this rate. With a groan, he scrambled to his feet and strode to the door. “What the hell is going on out here?”

A thin layer of white flour covered the kitchen floor while his baker and another woman stood at opposite sides of the room. Muffins from the day-old basket flew from each corner as the females stood locked in a battle of wills.

“Jenika!” Aaron glared at the baker then transferred his gaze to the other woman. His heart slammed into his ribcage when he recognized his unexpected visitor from the day before. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Hello? How hard is it to call me Jinx?”

Both Aaron and Catherine ignored the outburst. “I assume you’re Jenika’s boss?” Catherine narrowed her angry indigo eyes. Her chest heaved with exertion.

“Yes, I’m her boss.” He stared at her and tried not to drool, wondering why he hadn’t paid much attention to her before. Apparently trying to stay upright in the sky took precedence over checking out a woman. He made up for lost time now. She was easily the most striking woman he’d seen in quite awhile. Straight jet-black hair hung to the middle of her back and swept from her high forehead. Nearly as tall as him, she wore the same black stiletto boots, but today she chose dark-wash jeans and a crimson V-neck sweater that gave him an enticing glimpse of deep cleavage. His groin stirred in response. “What difference does that make?”

“It means you have the authority to make her do what I ask.” She took a few steps in Jenika’s direction before Aaron laid a hand on her arm. “What are you doing?”

“Preventing a bigger mess.” Yes, in her heels, she was eye level with him. He liked it. He wrenched his gaze from her full rosy lips. “What’s the problem?”

Jenika frowned from the opposite side of the room as she rolled a banana nut muffin in her fingers. “Catherine wants me to sign a deed on our apartment in New York, but I want to read the document first. She doesn’t deal with procrastination well.”

“Just sign the stupid deed!” Catherine raked a hand through her hair and spent a few seconds untangling a few strands snagged in her bracelet. “It’s not that hard.”

“Maybe not for you, but I want to make sure you’re not taking anything but the apartment.”

“I’ve never stolen anything from you!” When Catherine attempted to lunge at the baker, Aaron wrapped his arms around her slim waist and pinned her arms to her sides. He stifled a sigh. The heavy scent of gardenias wafted from her hair to tickle his nose as she struggled to be free. “Enough, Catherine. I’ll have to remove you from the bakery if you persist with your threats.”

“Then tell her to sign the deed.” She went limp in his hold then twisted around to look at him over her shoulder. “She lives here now. I want to sell our apartment. I need her signature.”

“Jenika—er, I mean, Jinx, go out and tend to the customers. I’ll deal with Catherine.” He waited until the baker scampered into the dining area before he continued. “Why don’t you just count to ten before you say anything else?” He slowly released the woman in his arms. Desolation crashed over him at the loss of contact. “There is one thing you need to understand about your former roommate.”

Her eyes blazed dark blue fire. “What’s that?”

Waves of desire slammed into Aaron’s gut when her breasts strained against the thin fabric of her sweater at her deep breath. “You can’t make her do anything. She’ll do what you ask, but that’s just it—you have to ask. Trust me. I’ve learned at least that much since she’s been here.”

“That’s the trouble. I have asked her. She’s just goofing around to tick me off.” She chucked a piece of muffin into the trash bin then perched on a nearby stool. “I don’t like to wait.”

* * *

Catherine eyed the man before her with suspicion. Had she dreamed the wings yesterday? Like before, he wore his jeans to perfection—black denim today. She had just begun to appreciate how his broad upper body filled out his light blue fleece hoodie when his next question pulled her attention into another direction.

“How long do you plan to stay in town?”

Her gaze darted to his eyes: deep, molten chocolate pools. Catherine bit her bottom lip as her stomach fluttered with coils of unidentified emotion. “Not long. Just until Jenika signs the deed.” She stood in one fluid motion. “Why do you need to know, Fly Boy?”

“No reason.” He followed the nonchalant response with an even more casual shrug. “And knock it off with the talk about my wings. Most people don’t know about my...unusual status.”

“But I did see you with wings yesterday, right?” She hated to ask and look like a fool, but she really needed to know, if only to confirm she wasn’t crazy. Her normally rock-solid self-confidence wavered. “Because I thought—”

"You're not crazy." He bowed his head briefly before his eyes met hers again. "I'm the new Cupid, but I told you that already."

"I remember." Catherine's lips twitched in amusement. She watched as a faint blush stained his cheeks to creep down into his neckline. "Like the mythical matchmaker Cupid?" A few notes of laughter escaped despite her best efforts. "As in the half-naked guy that wears a diaper, Cupid?"

"Are you finished?" His mouth was set into a thin line of displeasure.

"Just a sec." She placed a hand over her mouth but still the laughter came. "So you'll fly through the air and shoot unsuspecting men and women with love arrows?" She wrapped her arms around her middle as her body shook with a fit of the giggles. She sobered when his face puckered with a scowl. "I'm done."

"I can only hope." He ran a hand through his golden curls, upsetting them into a tumbled mass. "And no, none of those scenarios apply to me. I haven't quite worked out the details of the job. It seems my magic in this area is still somewhat clouded."

"Magic? You can do magic?"

Aaron snorted. "You accept the fact I have wings, but you can't wrap your brain around the existence of magic?"

"I used to think magic was something out of a children's bedtime story." She ran her tongue over her suddenly dry lips and shrugged. "But I've seen some weird stuff. I suspect some things about Jenika. I think she's a—" She broke off the thought with a gasp. "But that's not my secret to tell." When his intense gaze didn't move from her face, she scrambled for something to fill the void. "So, Cupid, huh? You must have a fabulous love life to be given that job."

The blush that had almost faded into obscurity reappeared. "Ironically, I'm unattached at the moment."

Her laugh trilled through the kitchen like birdsong, surprising in its blatant, attention-grabbing quality. "Bummer. A single Cupid. You're right, it is very ironic." When he quirked a blond eyebrow at her in question, tiny stabs of excitement danced along her spine. She pushed them away, fumbling in her purse then withdrew a business-sized manila envelope "Okay, here is the deed I need Jenika to sign. Please ask her to look it over then sign in a couple of days. I'm still with Mrs. Wiggins since there's not a decent hotel in town."

"I'll make sure she gets it." Aaron accepted the envelope. "I've heard your landlady isn't a very gifted cook. If you get hungry, Peg's Place is open twenty-four hours."

"Are you asking me out, Bird Man?" She grinned when denial swept over his face. "Listen, I'll tell you what. If I happen to be at the diner the same time you are, I'll move to your table, all right?"

"Then how about we arrange to be there tomorrow evening around seven?"

Catherine liked that the slow, sexy smile that curved his lips. It promised unsolved mysteries and untold tales. "I could probably do that." She flipped the curtain of her hair over her shoulder, pleased when his eyes darkened.

“I’ll pick you up.” Before he turned into his doorway, he shot her a look so hot and full of promise she was surprised the paint didn’t curl off the wall, because it sure caused prickles up and down her spine.

Chapter 3

Target spotted at six o'clock.

With a downward push of his wings, Aaron hovered in the air above the First National Bank of Crystal Falls. Steady. Wait for it. He reached over his left shoulder and withdrew an arrow from the sling on his back. Ah, there she was—the woman he'd heard complaining about her love life at the bakery earlier in the afternoon. Aaron smiled to himself as he floated unseen under a bank of low hanging clouds. She'd be perfect for that guy he shot at the post office.

He fitted the arrow's feathered end to the bowstring, aimed and then pulled the string back to his right ear. Almost. One second more. Aaron let loose his first and second fingers. The arrow flew from the bow with a sharp *thwap* and the wind from its sudden flight lingered on his cheek, whisper soft. Satisfaction coated his stomach like molasses. He saw the woman flinch and turn to look at the back of her arm. Of course, she would find nothing. His arrows were cleverly designed to dissolve immediately upon impact. They only caused the recipient a brief sharp sting of pain equivalent to an insect bite. The target wouldn't remember the poke seconds later.

"Sweet!" Aaron grinned then slung his bow over his shoulder. Satisfaction snaked through his gut. This job didn't suck as much as he thought it would. The woman below looked over her shoulder. She pivoted sharply on her heel and set off in the direction of the post office. Aaron chuckled. Her match had left that building more than an hour ago, but Aaron figured she'd find him eventually. Well-matched pairs always found a way. It was his job to provide a bit of encouragement.

As he winged his way through the thin wisps of clouds, Aaron glanced at the large ornate clock on the City Hall building. Almost seven. He turned sharply to his right, toward Mrs. Wiggins's boarding house. Anticipation bubbled within him at the thought of seeing Catherine again. Her flippant, aloof, almost irreverent attitude toward love and magic intrigued him, and he wished to probe her mind further. Any woman who looked as stunning as she did deserved to be paired with someone who could love and appreciate her.

He let the laugh that had been building in his chest erupt as he slowly flapped his way through the maze of naked trees that bordered the streets of the small downtown area. Aaron mentally checked off a list of men he knew, intent on finding just the right candidate for Catherine. Yes, it seemed he would slide easily into his new role as Cupid. Matchmaking came like second nature to him.

The gray-shingled roof of the Victorian-style boarding house came into view. He wished now he had gotten her room number before she left yesterday. As it turned out, Aaron didn't need it. When he flew around the back of the house, he spotted Catherine. Dressed all in black, her slim, lithe body rested on the wrought-iron railing of a tiny balcony, which wasn't even wide enough for a chair. Aaron grinned. He would enjoy shocking the woman out of her shell of mockery.

Anticipation tightened his chest as he swooped down to hover just beyond her balcony window. "Good evening, Catherine. Ready for dinner?"

She emitted a small squeak of alarm and dropped the bonbon she was eating. "You cheated." Catherine untangled herself from the railing and clutched a box of chocolates to her chest. "You said you'd pick me up."

"I am." Before she could protest, Aaron plucked her from the balcony and held her against him as he descended to the ground. "I just didn't tell you how I'd be doing it." For long moments, his arms remained wrapped around her as he gazed into the deep blue pools of her eyes. He could easily stay there for hours. Desire slithered through his gut when she shivered against him.

The box of chocolates slipped to the ground unnoticed and she pulled out of his arms as he leaned in to kiss her. "Back off, Lover Boy."

Aaron stepped away, acutely aware she was the one who broke the embrace. "I'm sorry." By willpower alone, he kept the warmth in his neck from spreading to his face. "So, are you ready for dinner?"

Confusion clouded her eyes. "I'm not going anywhere unless you put those things away." She glanced pointedly at his wings. "But before you do, can I touch them?"

"Why?" Suddenly suspicious, he retreated another step. Curiosity blazed in her eyes as she closed the distance between them. "Why are you so interested in them? They're just wings."

"I've never seen anything like them before." Her eyes sparkled when she smiled. "Did you think I'd be afraid and run away? Maybe call one of the tabloids and sell your story for a couple thousand bucks?" She stretched out her right hand then stroked the feathers of his left wing.

Tremors rocked his body at her touch. Aaron had no idea his wings could bring such intense spikes of pleasure, but as Catherine drew her fingers over the soft, downy feathers, his knees buckled. Intense waves of need crashed into him with enough force to make him flinch. "Catherine..." His voice was rough with a passion he couldn't explain.

"You'd better be careful, Cupid. If a simple touch has you nearly doing cartwheels, I can't imagine what a kiss would make you do."

He met her gaze and almost pleaded with her to stop her torment, but he quelled the urge. He wanted to know what else would happen. "Catherine." Urgency flooded his voice. She swept her palm down the length of his wing. Aaron shivered and clutched at the hand she placed on his chest. He groaned as his arousal strained against the front of his jeans. Never had he felt this way, and all because a woman touched his wing. "Enough."

Catherine's laugh was throaty and smugly feminine, but she removed her hand. "I can honestly say I've never turned a guy on quite like this before."

"Damn." He felt the loss of contact immediately, as the extreme sensations subsided and his ragged breathing returned to normal. "You almost killed me." He stared at her with newfound respect and a healthy dose of shock.

"In order to be the authority on love and passion, wouldn't you need to experience it for yourself?" She shrugged then turned away. "I'm going to the diner. You're welcome to join me when you're able." At the last moment, she glanced over her shoulder. "I don't know how you men function with those things between your legs. Seems to me they spring to life at the most inopportune moments."

His jaw dropped. He stared after her for long moments as "that thing" calmed down enough so he could walk about town without embarrassing himself. Not for the first time did he wonder what exactly went on behind Catherine's confident façade.

Aaron folded his wings beneath his skin, cringing when joints snapped and the skin on his back stretched. He'd never get used to that sensation. He took a deep breath and let it hiss out between his teeth. Being Cupid was not the problem. Being Cupid with the hots for an unattainable woman definitely was.

* * * *

Catherine eyed the interior of Peg's Place with skepticism. A far cry from the trendy cafes and fine dining establishments she was used to, the diner was just that—a diner from any part of the country that served hometown comfort food. A sappy Michael Bolton love song wafted through the speakers. Red cardboard hearts hung from white curling ribbon and swayed each time the door opened. She perched on one of the white cushioned stools at the counter, scanning the vinyl menu as she tapped a French-manicured fingernail on the Formica.

"What can I get ya, darlin'?"

She narrowed her eyes, noting the woman's nametag read "Peg," which surprised her. She really didn't expect there was a real woman by the same moniker. "Do you have anything on the menu that's not fried or covered in gravy of some sort?" Catherine frowned at the frizzy redhead with the heavy coral lipstick. This was the second evening she intended to eat at the diner, and yesterday's salad had been a dismal disappointment. They didn't even know what romaine lettuce was.

"Well, now, you can always have the club sandwich." Peg planted a hand on her hip as she snapped her gum.

"Fine. I'll have that." Catherine sighed and jammed the menu into the wire rack nearby. Tomorrow, she would make Jenika sign the damn deed one way or another. She couldn't stand to be in this town another minute! She laid her head on her arms as she waited for her mediocre food. She heard the door open and Peg ask the newcomer if the usual would be okay.

"You could have at least waited for me."

She raised her head to shoot an amused glance at Aaron as he slipped onto the stool next to hers. "It looked like you needed your privacy." Two potato chips fell off the plate Peg deposited in front of her, and Catherine muttered her thanks to Peg then turned to him. "I mean, it appeared you had a rather big problem to deal with."

Annoyance flitted over Aaron's face. "I'm fine now, thanks for asking."

"I didn't ask." She peeked under the sesame Kaiser roll, contemplating her sandwich. "Does everything have to come topped with bacon?" She picked the offending smoked meat from the perfectly folded slices of turkey and dropped them on the side of her plate. She tried to ignore the mayonnaise that clung to the top bun.

"Listen, Catherine, about what happened back there..." His words trailed to a halt and he rubbed a hand over the blond stubble on his jaw.

Sudden stabs of desire pricked her gut. Her eyes followed every movement of his fingers. "It's none of my concern what you do with your body." She gave him a smile then quickly turned back to her sandwich, hoping the act of eating would distract her from his maleness. He smelled citrusy, like the orange groves in Florida, with a vague note of chocolate? Oh God. That was her biggest weakness.

"Funny." He nodded his thanks to Peg when she deposited his beverage on the table. He popped a straw into the ice-filled cup and sipped his soda. "What's the deal with your cavalier attitude toward love? Bad relationship? Husband with a cold shoulder? Distant father? Unrequited affection?" He snatched a piece of her discarded bacon and waited.

Catherine worried her bottom lip with her teeth as she willed her stomach to settle down. There was no reason she should be so discombobulated because of him. "No, nothing like that. My life is great, actually." She fiddled with a chip and nodded when he reached for one of them. "Well, it was until Jenika moved away. Now, it's just quiet." She frowned. "Really quiet, and a little lonely."

"Loneliness is one thing, but single people usually seek out relationship partners. So, what's your whole hang-up with romance?"

Peg returned and presented Aaron with a plate containing turkey Manhattan, swimming in pale gravy. Catherine shuddered. Gravy reminded her of a mud puddle. She risked a glance at her companion, studying him as Peg walked away. His blond curls were windblown and tiny downy feathers dotted the shoulders of his red sweater. She almost preferred him with his wings. They gave him an air of powerful authority, an acute masculine presence that couldn't be ignored. "I don't know. I've never really been in love and the prospect scares me. So I mock it." Catherine shrugged. "I've done pretty well without a man. Why should I invest my time in one now?" Her eyes followed the forkful of mashed potatoes as it passed his lips, those sensuous, kissable lips... Oh God.

“Because that’s why we exist. To love others. To find the one person to whom we belong. To feel completed by someone.” His smile reached his eyes. “I suppose that’s why I exist. To help people find their other half.”

“Whatever.” She pushed her picked-over meal away. “Who are you to preach to me about love? I mean, come on. A single Cupid?” She didn’t like how his intense brown-eyed gaze held hers. “Whoever heard of such a thing? You couldn’t possibly give advice about romance when you don’t know it yourself.”

“I’m working on it.” He wiped a bit of potato from his lips with a recyclable paper napkin.

“Well, you let me know if anything changes. Until then, my number one job is to get that deed signed and get out of here.” She fumbled in her purse then threw a twenty-dollar bill on the counter. “Tell her to keep the change. See ya around, Fly Boy.” Once out the door, she sucked in a few gulps of the cool air. There was no reason she should feel like burning to a crisp every time she saw the man. No reason at all.

Chapter 4

The aroma of strong black coffee teased Catherine's nose and tickled her senses. She sipped the dark brew and smiled when she tasted the bitterness on her tongue. Comfort settled into her bones as the liquid heated her throat. If nothing else, Just Cookies definitely served a great cup of java.

"Bad night?" Jenika slid a cookie on a plate down the counter toward Catherine.

"You could say that." She picked a bit of the pink frosting from the heart-shaped sugar cookie and let it dissolve on her tongue. She'd tossed and turned for several hours before she finally called defeat and ended up watching an hour of the Weather Channel. Thank goodness for artfully applied makeup that hid the dark blotches under her eyes. "I didn't get much sleep."

"That's because you're in denial."

"Of what?" Catherine scooped up another fingertip full of icing, content to lick the pink goo like a Popsicle. Sometimes extra calories were a good thing.

"Being smitten." Jenika filled a yellow plastic tray in the glass pastry case with fresh, round sugar cookies dipped halfway in dark chocolate.

"Smitten? I think you've been reading too many sappy romance novels." Catherine lifted a brow. "Or spending too much time in front of Lifetime."

"Then you're 'in like' with someone, but that sounds really dumb and not at all romantic. Now spill it. Who has caught your eye?"

"No one, okay?" Catherine shrugged. "I'm just tired of being in this town, that's all." Abandoning her now-naked cookie, she snagged another one from Jenika's tray. "I haven't talked to anyone beside you since I've been here." She hoped her friend believed the tiny lie.

"Oh, so then having dinner with Aaron Bernhart was just an illusion?"

Obviously, Jenika knew a thing or two about life. Catherine bit savagely into the new cookie and closed her eyes briefly as the bittersweet chocolate flirted with her taste buds. The richly sweet taste had the power to make her forget downy soft wings and golden curls...

"You know, I could try brewing you a love potion."

Catherine's eyes flew open in order to gape at the baker. "What?" She knew Jenika wasn't quite...normal, but she had no idea how far the woman could go. She dropped the cookie on the plate, her appetite for chocolate severely diminished. "When did you become a witch?"

"I'm not, but I did buy a copy of an old spell book at a rummage sale Mrs. Wiggins had a couple of weeks ago. I want to see if anything in there is real. I like the idea of magic. Wouldn't it be great to learn how to do it?" A smile lit her pixie-like face. "So, are you game?"

“Absolutely not! You’re not using me as a guinea pig.” Catherine slipped from the stool and cast a wistful glance at the chocolate-covered cookie. “I don’t suppose you’ll sign that deed this morning?”

“Still thinking about it.” Jenika removed Catherine’s plate and coffee cup to the tub that waited for dirty dishes under the counter. “What will you do with yourself today?”

“Beats me. What is there to do in Crystal Falls?” Catherine slipped her arms into a supple, black leather blazer. “And I didn’t bring too many changes of clothes with me since I didn’t expect to stay very long.” When Jenika didn’t pick up on the annoyed tone in her voice, she sighed. “Maybe I’ll do laundry.”

“You don’t need tons of clothes since you don’t have anyone to impress, right?”

“Right.” Catherine frowned as Jenika busied herself with a handful of backpack-toting children flooded into the bakery. She shivered from the gust of cold air, glad her schooldays were long behind her. Catherine hesitated a fraction of a second before opening her mouth to ask her ex-roommate a question regarding the love potion, but a smooth, cocky voice behind her shocked the thought from her head.

“Just the woman I wanted to see. Come on, we’ve got a full day ahead of us.”

She blinked as Aaron strode into the bakery to a chorus of jingling bells, a black knit stocking cap over his curls. A black-and-white Fair Isle sweater clung to his well-built chest. Catherine wrenched her eyes from his torso to focus on his eyes. “I didn’t realize we had an appointment.” Her pulse accelerated when he threw her a slow, sexy grin that seemed to wrap her in a warm cozy blanket. That smile was a definite challenge to her peace of mind.

“We don’t.” Aaron nodded to Jenika as he threaded his way through the group of school kids. “But I figured since you’re stuck here in Crystal Falls, you might as well see the town at its best.”

“If you wait until closing time, I’d be happy to go with you, Mr. Bernhart.” Jenika was oblivious to the tension between the two. “I haven’t gotten out much since I’ve been here.”

Catherine stifled a giggle as Aaron shot the baker a pointed glance. “It’s not necessary, Aaron. I’m sure the tour isn’t very exciting.” She nervously fiddled with the padded black handles of her barrel-style purse. “After all, what does Crystal Falls have besides the bakery, a diner and Mrs. Wiggins?”

Aaron’s brown eyes gleamed. “Magic.”

“Are you making fun of me because of what I told you about,” she jerked her head in the direction of Jinx, “you know who?”

Aaron’s grin didn’t lessen in intensity. “Absolutely not. I’m simply trying to get to know you better, you know, like normal ready-to-date people do.”

“Magic, huh?” Her shoulders slumped as a sigh escaped her. “This I have to see.” She met Aaron’s bright gaze. “I don’t want re-worked stories about Santa or the Easter Bunny. I want to experience something so bizarre, so mind-numbingly awesome, I’ll get chills and feel heat at the same time.” Chilly fingers of excitement shivered along her spine. She lifted her chin in challenge and kicked common sense in the rear. “I dare you to make magic sexy.”

* * * *

“Tell me again why we’re sitting up here? I hope it’s not to see how quickly my feet can freeze, because that happened ten minutes ago.” Catherine was not happy after Aaron flew up and deposited her in the tree.

“I guess the concept of patience being a virtue has escaped you.” Aaron let his fingertips play with the taut bowstring before lowering the weapon altogether in order to glance at his companion. “I am going to show you the subtle art of matchmaking.” He grinned when her face contorted with a sour expression. Beautiful and skeptical. It would be a challenge, but he could handle it. “Observe.”

He gestured down below to a man in a tan business suit, probably in his mid-twenties. “It’s this man’s lucky day because he’s about to meet the woman of his dreams.” He ignored Catherine’s sound of derision and scooted closer to her on the sturdy branch of an oak tree, which overlooked the post office. “Now, all I need to do is strike our unwitting friend with one of these.” He held up a special arrow and plunked the quiver into her lap.

“What is it?”

“What does it look like?” He liked the way the rosy blush stained her cheeks. “This,” he waved the thin object in front of her face, “just happens to be an authentic Cupid’s arrow, guaranteed to infect its target with amorous feelings.” Aaron fitted the slim arrow to the string, and then paused to admire the liquid interior of its shaft. He wondered what the substance inside was.

“So, are you going to shoot the guy or what?” Catherine shifted on the branch, clutching tightly to the quiver with one hand and the branch with the other as she teetered a bit. “I think I’m afraid of heights.”

He drew the arrow back to his ear, took aim and quickly released it. A brief wind stirred as the feathers caressed his cheek. The arrow struck the man square in the middle of his back. “Bulls eye.” Aaron couldn’t contain his laugh as the befuddled target squirmed, shrugged, then finally went on his way as if nothing happened. “There goes a very happy man.”

“How do you know he’s happy?” Catherine gripped Aaron’s arm as a stiff breeze swept through the naked treetop where they rested. “I mean, if someone just shot me with an arrow, I’d be the opposite of happy. I’d imagine it has to hurt.”

“It’s probably just a quick sting then the target feels nothing. I mean, if a Cupid’s arrow really did hurt, wouldn’t people start complaining on blogs or something?” He hoped she’d stop asking questions he had no answers for and made a mental note to read the damn manual that came with the bow and arrow. On the other hand, her curiosity intrigued him. Aaron hung his bow on

a nearby branch then turned slightly to study her. A frown marred the pink perfection of her lips as confusion warred with doubt in her sapphire blue eyes. He wondered what it would take to see those eyes sparkle with laughter.

“Come on, show me something I haven’t seen before. You shot some guy with an arrow. Big deal. Anyone could do that.”

“It was a magical arrow. That takes skill.”

“Whatever.” Her shrug caused the thin fabric of her sweater to pull tightly across her breasts. With an effort, he ignored the enticing display. He made a sound of exasperation in his throat, which turned to annoyance when his wings unfurled on his back. They seemed to be directly linked with his emotions—the more irritated or aroused he got, the better the likelihood his wings would make an appearance. “You’ve got to be the most frustrating woman I’ve ever met.”

“Sorry, guess I don’t fit your preconceived romantic mold.” She turned her attention to the quiver in her lap. “Maybe I’m not soft enough around the edges for all that mushy frou-frou love stuff.”

Aaron took one look at her trembling bottom lip and her slender fingers as they absently stroked one of his arrows. Even her French manicure was sexy. He stifled a groan. “Damn, Catherine, if you’d just let yourself believe in things you can’t see, you might learn something new. Heaven forbid that tough exterior of yours cracks.” He swallowed heavily and stared hard at the dull grayish-brown branches of the tree. She wanted something she’d never seen before. Fine. He’d give her a show she’d never forget. He hoped he had the small command of magic that Landon thought he did. Aaron never had cause to force the issue before.

He wasn’t disappointed.

The air before him shimmered and rolled with an invisible force. He concentrated harder. Surely, this couldn’t be the extent of his power. Aaron ignored the woman beside him, the hard, gnarled bark of the tree, the cold that seeped under his sweater to chill his skin. Then, he gave a triumphant bark of laughter, then grinned.

At the ends of the branches, where leaf buds would form in another two months, puffy red hearts appeared. They expanded in size until they were as big as apples, glittering in the weak February sunlight, suspended by golden stems. The outraged squawk of a bird shattered the silence as the winged animal crashed into one the hearts, which then shuddered and burst into a shower of red and golden sparks before it vanished. Aaron shooed the confused bird away in order to capture Catherine’s reaction. “Bet you’ve never seen that.” The pleasure he felt at his magical feat paled in comparison to her reaction. Desire threw a web around his consciousness.

Catherine gazed at the shiny newness, her lips parted in wonder. She poked tentatively at the nearest heart with a forefinger. “How did you do this?” She giggled when the heart popped like a child’s bubble into colorful sparkles. “It’s great. And it’s—”

“Magic.” Aaron’s breath caught in his chest when she smiled. He vowed to encourage her to do it more often.

“Magic.” She repeated the word with awe in her voice.

“It’s as unexplainable as love, but just as potent.” He brushed his fingers along the curve of her cheek. “Love gives us purpose and comfort, but magic lets us hope, believe in the impossible, trust in the unseen.” When the hearts nearest to them faded into showers of red glitter, Aaron leaned closer to her. “Magic is all around us. It waits to be recognized, but love is never recognized until we actually see it or, better yet, feel it.” Her excited breath warmed his lips. “I can show you what it feels like to be loved. I am Cupid, after all.” He waggled his eyebrows. God, did she have no idea how she affected him?

Her gaze held his for a long, heart-stopping moment, then, with a tiny sigh, Catherine pressed her lips to his. She pulled away with a giggle. “It feels kind of stupid to kiss you in this tree.”

“Then let’s move out of the tree.” Aaron’s heart thundered in his chest. He swept her from the branch and flew with her to the ground. The brief contact of their lips left him wanting more—much more. Once their feet were firmly anchored on the soggy still-dead grass, he cocked his head to the side, reluctant to release her from his arms. “Better?” He reminded himself to temper the urgency that threatened to clog his throat.

“Yes, but I think I broke one of your arrows.”

His passion faltered as he stepped back enough to take the quiver from her. He did a quick inspection. Seven arrows rested securely within the leather pouch. Aaron frowned. “Where’s the last arrow?” Apprehension swept the lust from his gut when she gave him a sheepish smile and held out her right hand, palm up. A tiny dot of crimson blood marred the creamy skin while the sweet scent of chocolate wafted around them. Aaron wondered anew at the mysterious liquid inside the arrows.

“I accidentally stabbed myself with it when you conjured the hearts. I got distracted and wasn’t paying much attention. I must have squeezed the quiver too hard.” Her tentative smile morphed into a sly, sexy smirk. “I hope that won’t be a problem.” A definite purr accompanied the statement. She lifted a perfectly arched brow.

Aaron’s heart sank. He watched the fragile crystalline shards of the arrow melt away. The sharp arrowhead embedded in her palm was the last to vanish. “Oh damn.”

Chapter 5

“Aaron, are you in here? You can’t hide from me forever.” Catherine tiptoed through the near-empty cafe section of Just Cookies, cringing when the bells on the door announced her presence with a cheery tune. “Come out, come out, wherever you are.” She giggled at the singsong quality of her voice.

Nearly an hour had passed since the Cupid’s arrow stabbed her palm. For reasons only known to him, Aaron had fled the area as if rabid hunting dogs nipped at his heels. He really could get up an impressive amount of speed with those wings. But Catherine wouldn’t be outfoxed by the winged wonder. She systematically checked out his typical haunts until she had finally tracked him to the bakery. Catherine stumbled into a chair and stifled a laugh as the piece of furniture scraped against the tiled floor. If she didn’t know better, she’d think she was drunk, but that was impossible. She didn’t remember having anything stronger than coffee that morning.

“Catherine? Are you okay? You look a little...weird.” Jenika’s anxious voice seemed to echo off the walls and bakery cases.

“I’m peachy, Jinx.” She blew an air kiss at her ex-roommate. “Now, tell me where that silly Aaron Bernhart is hiding.” Excitement bubbled in her stomach at the thought of seeing him again. She felt light and silly, almost as if... But no, that just wasn’t possible.

“You can’t go back there.” Jenika wedged herself between Catherine and the door to the kitchen, panic clouding her green eyes. “I mean it, Cat. Mr. Bernhart was very explicit when he told me—”

“Ah ha! He is here.” Catherine brushed past the petite Titan with a smile. “Don’t you worry. I’ll play nice.” She firmly closed the door on Jenika’s protests, snickering as she turned the lock. “Unless he asks otherwise.” A quick glance around the kitchen didn’t reveal the feathered hunk. “You can’t hide forever, Cupid.” Catherine laughed as Jenika’s frantic knocks rained on the door.

Three trays of freshly baked cookies rested on the wooden counter, ready to be decorated. Catherine paused in her pursuit of the feathered flyboy to sniff the air. Her stomach rumbled as the sweet perfume of vanilla, orange and chocolate teased her nose. Her determination to catch Aaron wavered and her mouth watered. Chocolate. Rich, sinful, luscious chocolate. Her eyes darted about the quiet kitchen to land on thick chocolate ganache that waited in a stainless steel bowl.

As if in a trance, Catherine moved toward the appliance. She licked her lips in anticipation of the smooth confection. What would it hurt if she just took a tiny taste? She moved a trembling finger toward the bowl then a muffled crash from the back office distracted her. “Aaron?” She shuffled to the open doorway. “Gotcha.” A grin stretched over her face when she spied the object of her desire near a closet door. “You can’t hide from me forever.”

“Stay away from me, Catherine.” Aaron darted across the cluttered office to put a battered metal desk between him and her. “Go back to the boarding house. You’ll only end up hurting yourself.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Fly Boy.” She steadily advanced into the room. Her heart beat so hard in her chest she thought it would surely escape to dance about the room. “I intend to finish what we started earlier.” Tingles of electricity teased her spine. “I’m not leaving until I kiss you.”

“What?” Aaron paused in his attempt to scramble away from her. “One kiss, then you’ll go straight to Mrs. Wiggins’s house?”

Catherine met his wary brown gaze then nodded. “I promise.” She tamped down the devilish giggle that threatened to escape. Aaron didn’t say how short the kiss had to be. She trailed a fingertip over the cool metal desktop. “Surely you won’t deny me one tiny, little kiss?” She made sure her pout was exaggerated, pleased when his eyes focused on her lips. “After all, you are Cupid, and romance is your job.”

Aaron remained silent as he stared at her.

“Think of it this way.” Catherine deliberately kept her voice low and conversational as she sashayed over to him. “It’s your responsibility to see that people get the ‘feel good’ emotions associated with love. Why don’t you show me the deep, dark, sexy side of romance?” She grinned when his Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat. “Convince me Cupid really knows what he’s pushing.”

A barely audible groan from Aaron was his only response, but he stood his ground.

Catherine interpreted his silence as an invitation. Sliding her hands up his chest, she wrapped them around his neck. “It must be hard to be in your position constantly watching other people get together, but nothing happens in your own life.” A red wave of lust swept through her body, prompting her for release.

“Enough, Catherine.” His voice shook with strain. “This has been quite a display.”

“And it’s about to get better.” She pressed her lips to the side of his neck as the citrus and male scent of him invaded her consciousness. “Be prepared, Mr. Bernhart. You’re in for a bumpy ride.” With very little effort, she pushed him into the leather rolling chair then straddled his lap.

* * * *

Heaven and Hell came together in a thunderstorm of desire and longing so intense Aaron thought he’d die, but if he went, he’d be a happy man. “Catherine, stop...” His words trailed off as she nibbled a path of searing kisses along his jaw. With each gentle press of her lips, Aaron’s control lessened until he could stand it no longer.

His hands slid along her trim hips to grasp her waist in an attempt to halt her amorous attentions, but when she entwined a hand in his hair, he knew he was lost. He brought his mouth to hers, intent to learn the secrets her lips had yet to reveal. Aaron ran the tip of his tongue along her bottom lip. When she moaned softly and pressed herself against him, Aaron nearly came out of his skin. “Catherine.”

Her eyes fluttered open. He could see the passion that clouded her deep blue eyes. "Now is not the time for talk." Her ragged breath warmed his lips, her own slick and glossy.

Aaron couldn't help but agree. He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her, urgency guiding his instinct. He manipulated her mouth until she parted her lips and met each stroke of his tongue. With every touch of her hands, with every tiny sound she made, Aaron's blood smoldered, burned, until he knew he'd combust into full flame.

His reaction to the supercharged woman on his lap was not enough to silence the doubts that flooded his mind. With a firm but gentle resolve, Aaron ended their kiss. "That's enough."

"But I'm not finished." She pushed her kiss-swollen lips into a pout, but he knew better than to fall for that ploy again.

"You are now." He grasped her waist and hoisted Catherine off his lap and onto the desk. Aaron inhaled several times before he could trust himself to look at her again. "Unless you want to end this afternoon on the cold, hard floor doing something you'll undoubtedly regret when you're sober, your little seduction attempt is over."

Catherine reached for him and frowned when he rolled the chair out of her range. "What do you mean, when I'm sober?"

"You're under the influence of a Cupid's arrow." He glanced at her rosy cheeks, disheveled hair and bright eyes then sighed heavily. There was nothing he'd rather do than crush her into his arms and kiss all reason from her. He refused to take advantage of her when she wasn't in her right mind. It was unfair to her and underhanded of him.

She shook her head. "No, I'm not." She gave him a goofy, lopsided grin. "I've never felt better in my life." She tapped her temple. "I know what I'm doing up here."

Depression chased the passion from his body as if he'd been doused in ice water. "I'm sure the arrow's effects will wear off eventually, but until they do, you need to go home." The practical half of his brain acknowledged her response to him had nothing to do with her own free will, but the hopeful half of his brain wished it weren't so. He slumped in his chair. "Go home."

"I live in New York, so how can I get there right now, silly?" Catherine hopped off the desk and closed the distance between them to stand between his sprawled legs. "You're cute when you sulk." She put both hands on his shoulders. She leaned into him to press her lips to his. "But I like you with wings better. They're very sexy on you."

Aaron swallowed hard but couldn't resist a quick peek down her blouse. Her perfectly formed breasts, encased in enticing black lace, seemed to cry out for his undivided attention. With a monumental amount of willpower, he squirmed away from her to stand awkwardly at the door. Already highly aroused, he grew frustrated when he saw Catherine openly stare at the front of his pants. His groin twitched in response. He was going to die of need or embarrassment, and he didn't care which as long as it put him out of his misery.

“Jenika!” When the baker didn’t respond to his call, he bit off a curse and strode awkwardly through the kitchen. “Jinx, where the hell are you?” Catherine followed him. He was desperate to remove the temptation she presented him. At the door, he angrily undid the lock to enter the bakery.

She rushed to him, her eyes wide while her red curls bobbed with each movement. “Is everything all right?” She looked down then raised her knowing gaze to his. “You look, um, happy to see somebody.”

With monumental effort, Aaron ignored Jinx’s comment. “Where were you?”

“Catherine locked the door and I couldn’t get in.” She glanced around him when Catherine slid beside him, a hand on his arm.

“No, everything is not all right.” Aaron detached Catherine’s fingers and stepped away. “Jinx, please take her home.” He glanced about the near-empty cafe area. Only a few customers remained. “As soon as these folks are done, I’m going to close the bakery early today. It doesn’t look like there’s much going on anyway.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere!” Catherine stamped her foot.

Aaron frowned then took Jenika aside. He lowered his voice so Catherine couldn’t overhear him. “She’s a bit sick and needs rest.” He looked over his shoulder at the temptress. Her wide eyes and the dilated pupils gave her affliction away. “Let her sleep it off, okay?”

Jenika nodded. “Is it permanent, whatever it is?” Fear shook her voice as she retrieved her purse from beneath the counter. “Is she on drugs? She’s been acting weird”

“No, don’t worry. She’ll be fine.” He ran a hand over his face. “Just make sure she stays put.” Aaron stood back and watched as Jenika looped her arm through Catherine’s and spoke to her in low tones. The bells at the door tinkled when the two women finally left. He breathed a sigh of relief.

He wished the sudden burst of affection Catherine had shown him wasn’t rooted in a falsehood. Icy fingers of despair clenched his stomach in a tight grip. Once the Cupid influence wore off, his beautiful, aloof Catherine would go back to mocking him at every turn. That thought plunged him into a black cloud of self-pity.

* * * *

Two days later saw Aaron ensconced in his leather recliner in front of the big screen TV, watching re-runs of *The Honeymooners*. Their antics held no appeal for him. He’d turned the program on for background noise. He rubbed his tired eyes. The one time he had ventured out late last evening, he ran into Catherine at the diner. One look at her smiling face and bright eyes when she noticed him told Aaron all he needed to know: the effects of the arrow still held her in its grip. When she approached him at the counter and laid a hand on his arm, he had mumbled an excuse and left. Immersing himself in life at home was better than working at a false relationship.

“Well, you’re a fine mess, aren’t you, brother?”

Aaron ignored Landon. What was the point of debating with his sibling when his brother would be gone soon? His listless gaze flickered over Landon's two black, soft-sided suitcases at the door then moved back to the TV screen. A sappy Hallmark card commercial caught his attention, but he just as quickly dismissed it. What was the point of love?

"How long do you plan on sulking?" Landon yanked the remote from Aaron's fingers then flipped off the TV. "You haven't shaved for days, let alone changed your clothes. Valentine's Day is tomorrow. It's your busiest time of the year but you'd rather rot in front of mindless programming." He tossed the remote on the coffee table where it rested atop an instruction manual.

"I don't care." Aaron shrugged and stared at the darkened screen.

"You ought to." Landon sat on the edge of the recliner next to Aaron's. "This is your job. Forget about what's-her-name and do what you've been told to do. If you don't, I'll have no choice but to report you to the people at the Institute."

"I guess familial loyalty holds no attraction for you." Aaron's bark of laughter was a bitter sound. "What do I know of love anyway? I can't manage to hold a woman's interest unless she's been hit with one of my arrows." He scratched at the stubble on his chin. He didn't care that he probably looked like a pirate.

"You're feeling low. You've been taken in by a female. Get over it."

"Easy for you to say." Aaron glared at his brother then closed the recliner, his feet on the floor. "You've got it all—a good job, an adoring wife, a future of happiness. So don't lecture me on what I should be doing."

"I had my fair share of doubts and disappointments, but you have to be stronger than your personal life. You've got a job to do and you can't get around it." Landon stood. "Deep down, you know this to be true. When you are entrusted with a magical appointment, you can't ignore it just because your life is in chaos." He clapped Aaron on the shoulder. "The universe doesn't work that way."

"Unfortunately, I know." Aaron raised his gaze and saw only compassion and understanding on his brother's face. "It's too bad we don't get a say when we're randomly chosen by the Institute to carry out magical endeavors."

"Would you have refused the calling if you had prior knowledge?"

Aaron thought over the satisfaction and pleasure of a well-aimed arrow shot and shook his head. "No. For whatever reason, my life before Cupid was a bit meaningless. But at least I had no trouble getting a date." This time, his laughter was genuine. He stood and stretched. What he really wanted to do was unfurl his wings and take a flight around town.

"Work on the magic. The rest will fall into place. Trust me."

"Thanks." The implication of the luggage in the entryway hit home. "You're leaving now, aren't you?" When Landon nodded, Aaron rubbed at his chin again. "I knew it was coming but didn't expect it to be so soon." Life without his brother around to tease him would certainly be different. "Good luck, and don't stay away too long."

He stood stiff for a few seconds when Landon clasped him in a gruff, manly hug. In a sudden burst of sibling rivalry, Aaron threw an arm around Landon's neck to capture him in a headlock. "I'll miss you, man." He ruffled his older brother's hair then released him, laughing when Landon cleared his throat and tried to put his chestnut waves to rights.

"Jayne and I will stay with Uncle Chris until we can find a house. Feel free to drop by anytime. I have a feeling I'll need the moral support."

Aaron's lips twitched. "You mean being around the elves and the toy factory all day, every day, won't always be charming?" He laughed outright at the pained expression on Landon's face. "Sorry. Come back to Crystal Falls for summer vacation."

"Will do." Landon moved toward the door then hefted the first suitcase. "Have you read the instructions?"

"Not exactly."

"First rule of being a paranormal. Trust but verify, brother. Your bow and arrow came with rules or a manual. Read it and figure it out."

"Geez, Mr. Know-it-all, don't worry. I will." Aaron frowned. When Landon remained silent, Aaron shrugged and grabbed the second suitcase. "Have a safe trip. Call if you need me for anything." He followed his brother down the sidewalk to the waiting Santa-red, four-door sedan. "A car? I thought you'd use the MED system."

"Jayne wants to drop by her mom's before we leave."

Aaron surrendered the suitcase he held and watched as they were both shoved into the crowded trunk. "Good luck trying to explain your situation to your mother-in-law." He closed the lid of the trunk as Landon threw himself behind the wheel. "Take care of yourself, and tell Jayne good-bye for me."

"I'll stay in touch." Landon buckled the seatbelt around him. "And listen, if you can't forget Catherine, then your only other option is to give her another chance. People have the capacity to surprise us, you know. I'm impressed at how you've dealt with the whole wing thing."

"Funny. What will I do without you bossing me around all the time?" Aaron smacked his brother good-naturedly through the open window of the car. "See ya around, brother."

"I expect a full report." The door slammed closed and the window glass rose. Aaron watched as his brother backed down the driveway and onto the road. He heaved a sigh and wondered how many more episodes of *The Honeymooners* he'd have to watch to make him forget the problems in his own life.

Chapter 6

Aaron woke up with a start and realized he had been snoring. And that only occurred when he was under stress, at least that's what Landon always told him. He struggled to roll over but couldn't because he wasn't in his bed. His body lay at awkward angles in the recliner as the TV blared an infomercial about some sort of weird half-blanket thing. He shook his head and stared bleary-eyed at the colorful images before reaching for the remote, which still rested on the coffee table—on top of the Cupid instruction manual, of all things.

He brought the recliner upright with a violent snap of the mechanism. The infomercial forgotten, he yanked the booklet from the table with shaking hands. *The Official Instruction Manual for the Newly Appointed Cupid*. Aaron snorted. If the bow, arrows and wings hadn't sealed his fate as Cupid, seeing "the facts" in print definitely did. He flipped through the black-and-white pages until one particular heading caught his eye: "Cupid Arrows." He smoothed the pages against his leg and settled in to read.

In your welcome box, we have given you ten arrows to start out with. We fully expect you to use the samples within a few days. Please contact The Institute of Magical Instruction for replacements.

Great. He was already behind schedule.

Inside each arrow is a unique blend of a highly concentrated red liqueur. It is comprised of one part magical dust, one part a mixture of male and female pheromones and one part chocolate essence. Chocolate has long been considered an aphrodisiac throughout the ages and gives the arrow's interior a pleasant smell upon impact.

Cold prickles of apprehension stabbed the base of his spine but he continued to read.

When you have selected your designated target, shoot him or her with an arrow. It is important to note that the arrow's liqueur will only affect the person for one hour after being struck. The magical substance within the arrow is intended to relax your target and loosen their inhibitions. Love can only bloom between two willing parties and relaxation is the key. Once first contact has been established, the body's own triggers and emotions will take over. Generally, a second arrow will not be needed.

Aaron's shot to his feet. The instruction manual slipped from his fingers. He had made the biggest mistake of his life. Had Catherine's seduction attempt been a direct result of the arrow or had the magical effects worn off before then? Icy dread crawled through his brain like a bad dream. He knew the answer. The time between the arrow's prick and her appearance at the bakery were spaced enough that there was no possible way she could have still been under the influence.

And what was more, her enthusiastic greeting in the diner had been real, honest emotion. He cursed himself as the dumbest man that had ever lived.

Just to be sure, he needed actual proof. He needed to see her again. He scratched his fingers through the out-of-control stubble on his cheek. First, he needed to clean up a bit. Cupid never sported a five o'clock shadow or stained and rumpled clothes. Aaron glanced at his watch. Almost ten. Would it be too late to visit the boarding house?

* * * *

"Are you sure you have to leave right now?" Jenika passed a white business-sized envelope to Catherine. "I signed your deed. Sorry for the delay. I just wanted to be very sure it was what I wanted to do."

"It's okay." Catherine slipped the offering into her purse. "My flight leaves Indianapolis for New York at eleven. It's the last flight of the evening. The cab's waiting outside, so I'll have plenty of time to find the gate and settle in." Her voice wobbled but she ignored the aberration. "I've got to go." She zipped her one and only suitcase then extended the handle. "Are you sure you won't come back to New York with me?" Her stomach churned to the point she thought she'd throw up. She had never been conflicted about anything before, let alone a man.

"I'm happy here." Jenika drifted over to stand by the bedroom door. "Are you sure you don't want to stick around here for awhile? You seem sad. What happened to your devil-may-care attitude?"

"I don't know." The compassion in her friend's voice triggered a few tears for Catherine, but she managed to wipe them away without much fanfare. She sniffed and rubbed her eyes. "There's no reason for me to stay here now. I just needed the deed." She would not remember the feel of soft downy wings or how she fit so perfectly into a pair of strong arms... She shoved her arms into her leather jacket. "Well, that's it."

"Look, I know you have a little 'thing' for Aaron. You're not as suave as you think at hiding your emotions." Jenika opened the door and followed Catherine into the hall and down the ancient wooden staircase. "But don't you owe it to yourself to see if there's anything between you guys?"

Catherine fiddled with the handle of the suitcase. "Trust me, there's nothing between us. I made a fool of myself a few days ago but that's all." She spied the yellow cab through the etched glass panel. She wrenched open the front door then turned to Jenika. "Well, give me a call sometime. Keep me posted on anything weird or new in your life." The heaviness in her chest increased when the taxi's horn blew a few staccato notes. "I've gotta go."

She stumbled down the front sidewalk, threw her suitcase into the seat beside her then slammed her door firmly shut. The sooner she left, the better.

* * * *

Breathless by the time he arrived at the boarding house, Aaron paused on the front walk to suck in lungfuls of air. Ever since he had gotten his wings, he hadn't taken his customary daily jogs. He needed to get back to his strict exercise routine. Cookies and women were giving him love handles. He caught himself mid-snicker. Cupid with love handles. How uber-attractive. He threw a glance around the darkened street. Far down at one of the two stoplights in town, a set of

brake lights vanished as a car sped off into the night. With one last deep breath, Aaron transferred his gaze to the house itself. Only a lamp in the foyer burned bright against the velvety darkness. Damn! He'd have to wake Mrs. Wiggins. He'd rather have a root canal. She had a tendency to be a little...persnickety when annoyed.

As he watched, movement behind the door caught his attention. Maybe his luck was about to change. Aaron ran up the sidewalk then rapped his knuckles on the glass panel of the door.

He gaped as the door opened to reveal his baker, clad in yellow flannel pajamas and slippers depicting the short, big-headed yellow bird from the popular old cartoon. "Jenika." His lips twitched but he managed to style a laugh. Somehow, the thought of the petite redhead being a fan of the show struck him as funny. "I need to talk to Catherine. Can you ask her to come down?"

"I can't." She shuffled her slipper-covered feet. "She's not here."

"Where is she?"

"My guess is stranded out among the cornfields."

He stared at her for a few seconds. "Jinx, it's late and I'm not in the mood for riddles. Why don't you just tell me what you mean?" As he raked his fingers through his hair, annoyance guided his actions.

She shrugged then stuck her hands in the pockets of her pajamas. "She left for the airport just a few minutes ago, but I had a weird vibe so I stuffed a bunch of gold coins in the taxi's gas tank. Any minute now it should stall out." She grinned. "The coins were strange too. I found a handful of them just lying on the floor of my bedroom. I don't know where they came from."

Aaron saw her green eyes dance with laughter, and not for the first time did he wonder about her heritage. That story would have to keep for another time. "Did you know I would come here tonight?"

"Not really. Just sensed I needed to delay the process. I didn't know why." She shivered. "Will you stop her from leaving?"

"I'm gonna try, but I can't promise anything. She's the most stubborn woman I've ever met." Aaron turned and jogged down the sidewalk to the quiet street. Time was of the essence. He didn't have time to mess with foot travel. He unfurled his wings then sighed with satisfaction as he flapped them a few times.

"I knew it!"

"Damn." Aaron glanced over his shoulder to see Jenika standing on the sidewalk, her mouth hanging slightly open. "I'll explain later. Until then, it's imperative to keep this knowledge a secret. Understand?" When she nodded mutely, he smiled. "Wish me luck."

With a *whoosh* and a downward push of his wings, Aaron lifted off the ground. The familiar pleasure filled his being as he flew higher through the darkened sky. Stars twinkled in the blackness, a nice backdrop for the pale light of the crescent moon. His eyes scanned the gray ribbon of road

below but there was no sign of the taxi. Onward he flew as he followed the curving gray ribbon of asphalt. Chilly wind stung his cheeks and rushed through his argyle sweater, but Aaron ignored the slight discomfort.

He was on a mission.

The red glow of taillights ahead captured his attention. Anticipation filled his gut. Would this be Catherine's stranded ride? With another downstroke of his wings, he propelled himself closer. Under the glow of the taillights, yellow paint was visible. The only person Aaron could see was a short man with a potbelly pacing by the front bumper of the car, a cellphone to his ear as his right hand gestured wildly.

Aaron circled the cab as his mind raced with possibilities. What would he say? How would she react? With a shroud of finality, he lowered himself to the ground. "Excuse me, sir? Can you tell me if you have a passenger inside?" The cabbie turned toward him just as Aaron tucked his wings beneath his skin.

"You stay away from me!" The cab driver waved his cellphone in front of him as if it were a talisman. "I've heard stories about this town and the weird stuff that goes on here. I don't want any part of it!"

Before Aaron could say another word, the bearded man plunged into a cornfield, weaving through the graveyard of short, dried leftover stalks. Another two steps brought Aaron near enough to the car he could see inside. His heart lurched when he spied Catherine, her head rested against the seat, her eyes closed.

Urgency compelled him to finish what he started. He rapped gently on the window then cringed when Catherine started. He hadn't meant to scare her. Catherine's eyes flew open to stare at him, disbelief clouding her gaze.

Slowly, the window inched its way down. Catherine stuck her head out as her fingers gripped the edge of the door. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, it was such a clear night, I decided to take a stroll." A grin lifted his lips—he couldn't contain it. She was here before him. He wanted to take her out of the cab and crush her to him, do something to cause her eyes to light with happiness. But he wanted to go slow. He didn't want to spook her. Instead, his gaze devoured every line, every nuance of her face. If he wasn't able to convince her to stay, he wanted to remember her in the endless years ahead.

"Aaron, it's late, I'm tired and I'm in danger of missing my flight home." She tapped a perfectly manicured fingernail against the door's metallic side.

"Look, I made a mistake and treated you unfairly. I can't help but wonder if you're leaving because of me or something else." His muscles tensed, for flight or action he couldn't discern, but the long moments before she spoke again nearly tore him apart.

“And because you acknowledged you were rude, you expect me to fall into your arms as if nothing ever happened?” She rolled her eyes. “Guess what? That’s so not gonna happen. I got what I needed. Now I intend to put this town behind me and shake the dust from my shoes as fast as I can.”

Aaron opened his mouth to protest then closed it just as quickly. “You’re right. It was stupid of me to think you’d stick around for a few more days. I thought you had feelings for me and that, with time, we could build a great relationship.” He was glad she opted to stay within the confines of the cab. If she were before him now, he would have no recourse but to try to convince her with kisses. But that would mean he’d influence her decision and he really wanted it to be her emotions, not his, that made her stay.

This time he wanted no misunderstandings. He wanted no errors.

He wanted her.

“Catherine, listen to me.” He laid a hand against the metal frame of the car and leaned down to the window. “I need to know the truth. When you kissed me at the bakery, was it of your own free will or did you feel compelled to do it?”

“What difference does it make? You pushed me away, sent me back to the boarding house. I felt stupid, especially since I took a chance.” She snatched her hands away when Aaron attempted to touch them. “Then you hid yourself away for two days. I can read the signs. You aren’t interested. I get it.”

His heart plunged at the pain that flitted across her face. “I’m sorry. I was confused. I thought you responded in that way because of the arrow.” He could smell her light, floral perfume, and the tiny tentacles of scent twisted his insides into a tormented knot of longing.

“The arrow had nothing to do with the bakery incident.” Her lips pulled downward in a frown and Aaron stifled a groan. Her mouth would be his downfall. “I wanted to kiss you, plain and simple, but what does it matter now?” She crossed her arms over her chest and stared at the seat in front of her.

“I can’t talk to you like this.” Aaron yanked on the door handle then wrenched the car door open. “Either scoot over or come out. We will settle this tonight.”

She blinked at him in surprise, but slid across the ratty fabric of the seat until her back bumped against her suitcase. “What is it you think will be settled?”

Aaron wrinkled his nose against the stale smell of the cab. He fought to contain his excitement when he saw her eyes light with interest. He pulled the car door shut, then as he turned to her, his knee brushed hers. Embers of need flared to life in his chest. He willed himself to be patient. “Life’s too short to dance around the truth. You’ve turned my world upside down. I listen for your voice and actually look forward to what you will say. I love it when you tease me. I never know what you’ll do next. But what I like most is your smile.”

“Really? What’s so special about it? It always looks a little bit lopsided to me.”

“That’s because you need to practice more.” Anxiety coursed through his veins like a waterfall. Her face was wan and pale, and for the first time since he’d known her, she had on absolutely no makeup. Because of that, he could plainly see the splash of freckles that covered her nose and cheeks in the dimness of the dome light before it switched off. “God, Catherine, you look amazing, and you have no idea.”

She made a sound of disbelief. “I have freckles, my smile’s crooked and I have gray hair underneath the dye. I’m hardly amazing.” Nervousness made her voice slightly higher than usual. “I’ll miss my flight.”

Aaron blew out the breath he hadn’t been aware he held. “There will be another tomorrow, I’m sure. That is, if you really want to leave.” He inched closer to her on the seat, pleased when she couldn’t move away due to the suitcase beside her. “I’m serious. Say you’ll stay, even if it’s for a few days.” He leaned in closer to her. “Don’t you think you owe it to yourself to find true happiness?”

“Jenika asked me the same thing.” She laid a hand on his chest.

He knew her resolve wavered, and he decided to press the issue. “I think what she means is, don’t cheat yourself. Take a chance on something. Stop living your life with a safety net. You’re tough as nails, yet you don’t like to take a chance.”

“But what if I mess up, or what if I fall?”

“What if you do? I’ll catch you.” He slipped a hand beneath the warm curtain of her hair to caress her neck. “I have wings, remember? There’s nowhere high enough that I couldn’t rescue you from if you should lose your footing.” Gently, he pulled Catherine to him until their lips almost touched. “Do you have anything else to add before—”

“Before what?” Her breath whispered over his skin.

He saw her answer in the sapphire depths of her eyes. “Before I do this.” He claimed her mouth in a kiss intended to be soft and slow, but Catherine apparently had other ideas. When she threw herself onto his lap, the back of his head slammed against the door, but he ignored the brief pain in order to pull her more firmly into an embrace. Her lips were eager and petal soft beneath his. The tiny flames of need that had been plaguing him since he met her erupted into huge bonfires of desire.

Pleased when her lips parted, he stroked her tongue with his in a time-honored mating dance. When she lightly bit his bottom lip, he nearly lost his carefully restrained control. “Catherine, stop for just a minute.” He was half lying, half sitting on the back seat, his head wedged uncomfortably against the window as Catherine attempted to straddle his lap.

“I don’t want to. I’m living life without a net.” A sexy smile touched her lips, echoed in her eyes. “You’re right. I want to find out if there is enough between us for a long-term relationship.”

He stilled her hands as they crept beneath his sweater. “I feel I must warn you that I want love, marriage, kids and the whole thing. My kiss-and-tell lifestyle is over.”

Catherine leaned down to kiss his nose. “If you think you can keep up with me, bring it on. I’m a bit high-maintenance, so chances are our relationship will be peppered with issues.”

“Who said romance was a straight and narrow kind of thing?” The front of his jeans strained tightly around his arousal, and he could feel the pressure on his back. His wings would pop out soon, which could present a huge problem in the small confines of the dirty cab, but he ran his palms up her sides anyway. The urge to peel off her red V-neck sweater and acquaint his mouth with her breasts was so strong, he nearly dumped her from his lap and onto the seat, fully prepared to claim her in the cab. He drew in a shuddering breath and cautioned himself to wait. “Love is best served spicy.”

Aaron fumbled for the door handle, exceedingly glad when it opened so he could scramble out in an awkward tumble of arm and legs. “Ack.” As soon as he gained his footing, he allowed his wings to unfurl in glorious freedom. Aaron sighed with relief, and then he watched Catherine exit the cab. Her cheeks flushed, her lips kiss-swollen and a mischievous glint in her eye, she teetered slightly in her black stiletto boots as she advanced upon him.

He swallowed—hard. He was in big trouble.

“Cat, if you continue to look at me in that way, I can’t be held responsible for my actions.” Desire took a back seat to a much stronger emotion—love. It couldn’t be possible. Not in such a short amount of time. He frowned, but another glance at the woman before him confirmed his dire straights. He was Cupid, after all. He shouldn’t be surprised. “I’d rather not have our first sexual encounter in the cornfield.”

Her throaty laugh floated easily through the stillness of the night. “I agree, but I do have one request for when that moment happens.” She stepped into the waiting circle of his arms to draw a finger through the feathers of his left wing.

“What’s that?” Tremors shook his body at the next sweep of her hand.

Her grin was simple and teasing. “Will you keep your wings out? I kinda have a thing for them.” She ended her statement by nipping a line of kisses along his jaw.

“You’re weird.” He marveled at his good fortune to hold such a woman, let alone love her.

“Hey, you’re the one with the wings, Fly Boy, so who’s the weird one in this relationship?” She followed her teasing with a playful smack to his shoulder. “Why don’t you fly us back to town?”

Aaron gave her an open-mouthed kiss. “As you wish.” He scooped her up in his arms and held her close. “But, there is one thing. I’m concerned about Jenika. There’s something strange going on with her.”

Catherine snickered and wrapped her arms around his neck. “You have no idea.”

About [Sandra Sookoo](#)

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During writing *Cupid in Blue*, I discovered a couple of things about myself. One, I love writing about mythical beings, and two, I love putting said mythical beings into weird and wacky situations that, while pretend, could definitely happen. I mean, how ironically funny is it that Cupid could be a total failure with his own love life?

Anyway, I hope I've allowed you to suspend your disbelief long enough to come play in my magical world and get to know the characters in Crystal Falls a little bit better. And I hope you'll visit again soon!

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