

CUPID'S MATCH



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To Jamie, for his endless support, and for listening to me talk nonstop about cupids over the past four years.

To my mom, dad, and sister for always cheering me on.

And to my readers on Wattpad. We did it!



PART I
THE CUPIDS MATCHMAKING SERVICE



Dear Lila,

*I am contacting you on behalf of the Cupids
Matchmaking Service.*

*You will not have heard of us but we are an organiza-
tion that works behind the scenes of society, identifying
each person's perfect match.*

*Usually, we do not contact our clients. We prefer to
work in secrecy—setting up ideal environments for our
matches to have a chance encounter.*

*Recently, however, we ran your details through our
system and . . . well . . . in your case. . . .*

We think you'd better come in.

Please respond at your earliest convenience.

*Yours Urgently,
The Cupids Matchmaking Service*

I

The Cupids Matchmaking Service is written in elegant calligraphy above the glass shop front. A sign reading “Not Taking New Clients at This Time” is taped to the door.

“That place never takes anyone new on,” a girl remarks to her friend as they pass by with shopping bags.

I frown as I look up at the towering building, shielding my eyes from the sun with the stack of letters in my hand. *I can't believe I'm actually here.*

When I couldn't find information online, I'd assumed the dating agency would be small. I didn't expect a skyscraper with gilt window frames and cherubs carved into the white stone walls. I feel out of place. I can't imagine anyone in battered Converse, skinny jeans, and a leather jacket has passed through its doors before.

But then, it's not like I wanted to spend the last day of summer break on the bus to Los Angeles. And, if anyone in this huge building had bothered to answer the phone, I wouldn't have had to.

I push open the glass door. A bell tinkles as I step inside.

Shiny white tiles cover the floor and several stylish neon-colored armchairs surround a large coffee table boasting a range of fanned-out fashion magazines. On the opposite side of the room stands a high, stone reception desk where a blond in a crisp white suit chatters into a headset. Above her, hanging by wires from the ceiling, is a long, golden arrow.

Something glinting on the wall catches my eye. It's a plaque that says *Making Matches for 3,000 Years*.

Shaking my head incredulously, I march over and dump the stack of letters onto the desk. The blond looks up, startled. A name badge reading *Crystal* is pinned to the pocket of her white suit jacket.

"Can I call you back?" she says into her headset. "Something's just come up."

Her blue eyes look me up and down. Suddenly, I am aware of how I must look; she is immaculate, not a hair out of place, and here I am, having spent an hour and a half on the ripe-smelling bus from Forever Falls. I catch sight of my dark, tangled hair in the reflective surface of a glass door. I could be her polar opposite.

"I'm sorry," she chimes, "we're not taking on any new clients at this time."

She fiddles with her headset and I realize she is about to continue her conversation. A wave of irritation washes over me.

"I'm not here to become a client, I'm here to tell you to *stop bugging me*."

She looks back at me, confused. "Excuse me?"

I gesture toward the five letters scattered across the reception desk.

"All summer you've been spamming me with letters, text messages, emails," I say. "I am *not* interested in your services. I don't

know how you have my personal details, but you need to remove me from your mailing lists. I *have* a boyfriend already, thanks very much.”

I turn on my heel and march toward the exit.

“Wait.”

Her voice is lower, more assertive than before. Urgent, even.

I spin back around.

“You say we have been trying to contact you?”

I nod slowly.

She frowns. “Well, that is most . . . irregular.” With a manicured hand she picks up one of the letters I’ve dumped unceremoniously on her desk. “We don’t contact our clients, ever. It’s against our—”

“Privacy laws?” I shrug. “Whatever. Just don’t contact me again. Okay?”

I’m about to turn and leave again when she stands up abruptly.

“No!” she says, her voice higher pitched now. “Please!” As if suddenly realizing the weirdness of her behavior, she sits back down with a robotic smile. “Just let me run your name through the computer, find out what has occurred here. Then we can remove you from our database. Yes?”

I sigh. “Fine.”

Relief washes over her face as I walk back to the imposing reception desk.

“Name?”

“Lila Black.”

Her long nails click on the keyboard as she enters my name. She waits a few moments. Then she frowns and hurriedly types something else. As she stares at the screen, all the blood drains from her face. A mask of surprise replaces her faux smile. There’s another emotion there too.

Fear?

“Miss Black, we have a *big* problem. You have been matched with”—she stops and bites her lip—“I think . . . I think one of our agents is best suited to fill you in on the situation. Please take a seat. *I will send someone out right away.*”

“I really—”

The receptionist raises one hand, signaling me to be quiet, while pressing a white button on the intercom beside her. A few moments later a muffled male voice sounds through the small speaker.

“What is it, Crystal?” He sounds disgruntled.

“Cal,” she chimes, “I need you to come through to reception right away.”

“You know the line, Crystal,” he snaps. “We’re not taking on any new clients at this time.”

She coughs, a little embarrassed, then quickly slips off her headset and picks up the receiver. “It’s not that,” she whispers. “Look, you just really need to come out here.”

There’s more muttering on the other end before Crystal places the phone back down. The robotic smile reappears.

“One of our agents will be with you momentarily.”

I’m about to argue that I don’t want to see an agent, I just want them to stop contacting me, when the frosted-glass door beside reception swings open to reveal a young man I can only presume is Cal.

He is as beautiful as Crystal, with well-groomed blond hair and sharp silver eyes. He wears a crisp white suit even though he looks like he could be around my age, seventeen. He’s definitely attractive, if you like that sort of thing; he’s a bit too clean cut for my taste.

His eyes sweep over Crystal, irritated, before settling on me. “I’m sorry,” he says, his voice laced with disdain, “we’re not taking on any new clients at this time.”

“Yes, I get the picture,” I say through gritted teeth, “but I’m not here to become a client. I’m here to tell you to stop contacting me.”

“You *do* need to see this, Cal,” Crystal says.

He exhales sharply through his nose then makes his way over to the desk, leaning over Crystal to read whatever is on the screen. His eyes darken. Shock flickers across his angular features. Then he regains his cold composure.

“So, you’re the girl,” he says. “Of all the girls in the world, *you’re* his Match. I must admit, you’re not what I expected. Now, please come with me. We have something very important to discuss. Your very life could be at—”

Crystal coughs and gives him a warning look.

He sighs. “Please come with me, Miss Black. I’ll explain everything.” He spins back around and heads through the glass door.

For a moment I consider just walking out, despite Crystal’s encouraging nod. But my best friend, Charlie, isn’t back from her journalism camp yet, and James, my boyfriend, has a shift at the diner all day. So it’s either this or sit at home with no promises that the Cupids Matchmaking Service will stop contacting me.

Plus, I hate to admit it, but I am kind of curious about who exactly they think I’ve been “matched” with.

“Fine,” I say. “But for the record, this is seriously weird.”

I walk to the door, swing it open, and step inside.

2

Beyond the door is an immensely hectic, open-plan office.

It's predominantly white—like the reception area—but with black classical columns that reach up to the high ceiling and a left wall that has been turned into a collage of faces, names, and places linked together with pieces of pink string. Through an arched door in the far wall, I can just make out a weathered stone statue of a woman draped in a toga in the room beyond.

People in white suits rush around babbling into headsets. I can't help but notice that everyone who works here is stunningly attractive, as though they made being good looking a job requirement.

Cal strides through them, looking over his shoulder only once as I follow him between the rows of computers, maneuvering around people who don't seem to care whether we knock shoulders. *It looks more like a stock-trading floor than a dating service.*

As we walk forward, I notice a number of wall monitors looping through a stream of different images. "Top Ten Undesirables"

suddenly flashes across one of the screens, followed by a mug shot of a guy with penetrating eyes. But before I can focus properly on the rest, the image fades into darkness.

Cal opens the door to a glass-walled office and gestures that I go inside. "Take a seat, Miss Black," he says, his tone of voice still cold.

I glare at him as I sit down in a quaint red armchair.

He closes the door, grabs a black envelope from a filing cabinet against the wall, then takes a seat behind the desk. He sighs heavily, making him seem older than on first impression. In fact, his whole demeanor makes him seem more grown up; there's a cool confidence in the way he maintains eye contact, and I don't think I've ever seen a teenager sit so upright in a chair before.

"You're not what I was expecting," he says while opening the envelope.

"Yes, you said. Now are you going to tell me what I'm doing here?"

Cal slides a piece of paper out of the black packet and scans it. "We recently ran your details through our system," he says, "and you were matched with someone we did not expect to see matched with anyone."

I shake my head. "Why would you run my details through your system? Why do you even *have* my details?"

Cal smiles coolly. "We have *everyone's* details, but that is not the issue here."

"Well, can you tell me what the issue *is*?"

His eyes flash an icy silver. "It's a difficult situation. I risk breaking our . . . our laws by telling you what I'm about to tell you."

"Have a lot of dating-club laws, do you?"

Cal ignores me and takes a deep breath. "We are . . . cupids," he says, running a hand through his perfect blond hair. "We match people. We have done so for many centuries. But we do not dabble with love ourselves. It is too dangerous. Many years ago, one of our own went off the rails. Dabbled with human affairs, human hearts. Obsessed over human women and made them obsess over him. He became very dangerous. His power grew, his ideology became extreme. And we banished him from our organization. Forever."

I stare at him. "Is this some kind of joke?"

Cal shakes his head slowly. "Unfortunately not, Miss Black."

I sit a little straighter in the armchair, my gaze sliding to the busy open-plan space outside Cal's office as I calculate how long it would take me to get back to the exit.

"Okay, *Cal*, that's great." I keep my voice as even as possible and force my lips into what I hope is a reassuring smile. Charlie's going to love this when I tell her. She'll probably want to put it in her blog: "Dating Service Thinks It's Run by Cupids!"

From the way Cal's brow furrows, my acting may not be as good as I thought.

"So, what has this got to do with me?" I ask, continuing to play along.

Cal stares at me, then takes another deep breath. "Recently, for the first time in cupid history, he was matched with someone." He shakes his head. "He shouldn't even be in the system. He *definitely* shouldn't have a match. It's dangerous. And if he finds out . . ." Cal pauses but doesn't remove his gaze from my face. "Miss Black, he will do anything to get what he wants. He is the original. The most powerful of us all. He is Cupid himself. And he has been matched . . . with you."

Neither of us speaks for a moment. Then I laugh—I can't help myself. Cal merely stares at me, his cold eyes unreadable.

"You're telling me that my match is Cupid?" I say. "Cupid?! As in the little guy with wings and a bow and arrow?"

For a moment I wonder if I've been brought onto a reality TV show. I risk another glance at the busy office, half expecting a camera crew, but all I see is a stream of white suits and another glimpse of the stone statue beyond the archway.

Cal slowly slides the piece of paper he's been holding across the desk. "No," he says. "*This* is Cupid."

I take the glossy sheet. It's a black-and-white head shot of a guy with ruffled hair and eyes that seem to pierce my own, even from the page. Although he could be the same age as Cal, there is something more mature about his features; his jawline is squarer and his shoulders broader. His lips are curled into a mischievous smirk and he has a cute chin dimple that softens his ruggedness with boyish charm.

There is no denying he is good looking—the page could have been ripped from a menswear magazine—but there's also something familiar about him.

"You're telling me *this* is Cupid?"

I return my gaze to Cal, who looks disappointed.

"Your pupils dilated," he says, staring at my face in unnerving fashion. "You find him attractive."

"That's a pretty weird thing to say."

A flicker of confusion crosses his face, as though usually people love it when he tells them about their dilated pupils. I throw the photograph back onto the desk and look him directly in the eye.

"I have a boyfriend. I've already told you that."

I wonder momentarily what James would think about me coming here in the first place. I didn't tell him. He's been so busy working over summer that we've not had time to hang out much lately.

Cal looks exasperated. "Yes, but your boyfriend is not your match. His match is . . ."—he stops himself—". . . someone else," he finishes, ignoring my dirty look. "*You* have been matched with *Cupid*."

I look back at the head shot. Then suddenly it clicks where I've seen "Cupid's" face before. "This is the picture I saw on the screen out there. One of the Top Ten Undesirables." *Whatever that means.*

Cal nods darkly. "The number one undesirable."

I blink. Then I bring back my weird smile.

"Riiight, okay. Well, thank you, Cal. This has been very . . . informative." Hands on the chair's red armrests, I slowly lift myself out of the seat. "Now, I'm just gonna . . . you know . . . go."

"Please sit down, Lila Black," says Cal. "And stop smiling like that. It's quite unnerving."

"*I'm* unnerving *you*? Seriously, what is this? Are you trying to con me out of money or something?"

Cal exhales and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"You don't believe me. You don't believe anything I'm saying."

"Of course I don't!"

He stares at me. "But you *need* to. You are in danger. He *will* come after you."

Suddenly he reaches out to his computer monitor and switches it on with a long slender finger. He has musician's hands, I observe, then shake the random thought off as he hurriedly types something on his keyboard. And after a few moments of silence, a look of satisfaction creeps onto his face.

“I have something to show you, something that will make you believe in cupids.”

He grabs a scrap of paper and scribbles down a sequence of numbers. Then he abruptly stands, triumph glinting in his cool eyes.

“Follow me, Miss Black. You’re going to want to see this.”