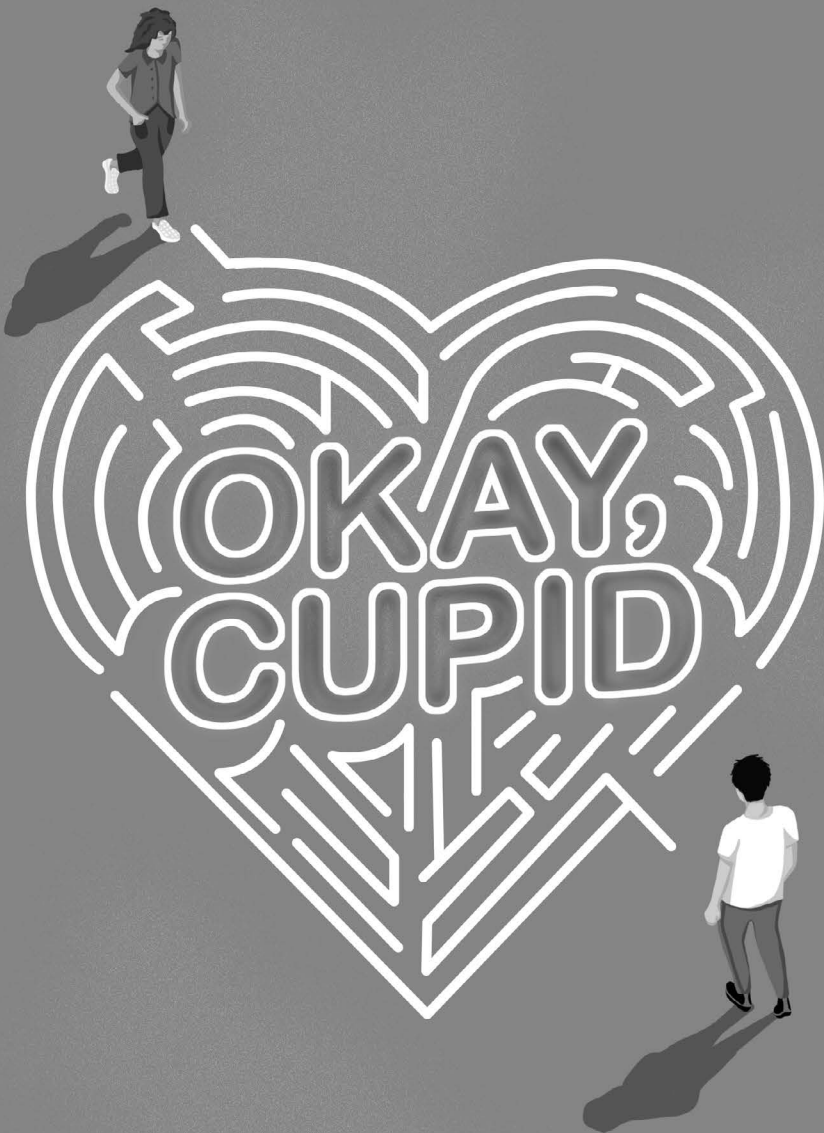




OKAY, CUPID

MASON DEAVER

author of *I WISH YOU ALL THE BEST*



OKAY, CUPID

**MASON
DEAVER**

PUSH

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**THIS BOOK IS FOR HƯƠNG,
WHO IS STILL HERE.**

CHAPTER ONE

I've never understood why humans have to make it so difficult to fall in love.

A meet-cute, a little flirting, some hand-holding and dates, maybe a scary movie that causes some “accidental” physical contact. Then a walk home that ends with kisses stolen on the front steps as they say good night.

Or rivals in college, vying for that coveted position as . . . well, I haven't been to college, or really even high school, so I don't know what smart college students fight over, but maybe they want to be the professor's assistant or something? Maybe a couple broke up, one of them getting cold feet before they realize they *do* love the other person, and they were just afraid to give love a shot.

My favorites are childhood best friends—extra points if they grew up next to each other—whose stolen looks and unrealized feelings build to this crescendo of big emotions boiling over, realizing that the person that they wanted was right there beside them all along, and they just never saw it. But luckily, it wasn't too late.

Love is so magical.

Except humans are . . . well, complicated, to say the least. Always getting in their own way, letting their anxieties and fears distract them, never being bold enough to make that move.

Then again, I guess if humans knew everything about falling in love, I wouldn't have a job.

In my experience, few people actually want to run halfway across a city during rush hour or buy a ticket for a flight they'll never make just to catch the person they love moments before they board a plane to the other side of the country.

That's our responsibility, though. To push the humans toward something more, to urge them forward and break down the boundaries, to fight for their own love.

That's what we're here for.

That's what *I'm* here for.

Because I'm a Cupid. And a perfectly fine one too.

Today, being a perfectly fine Cupid means sneaking into the back of a local café. I grab a blue apron from the alcove near the exit and wipe the name Gary off its name tag, writing my own in its place in big white letters.

A quick little wave of my hand, and suddenly everyone who is either in this café or walks in will think I belong here, that I've worked here for months. And that way, no one will think I'm just some random kid who stumbled into the back of the café without permission. I can't afford to miss the couple that I'm here to help.

Richard's voice echoes in my ears. I can imagine the expression on his face once I've done my job, that look of pride that's mostly hidden by the beard, but I can still tell when he's making it. It's the look that tells me he doesn't believe he wasted sixteen years of his and Leah's lives training me to be a Cupid, that I am actually worth his time and energy, and that he hasn't screwed up by giving me a second chance. I have to ignore the voice in the back of my head that's telling me I'm the one who's going

to screw up. Again. Even though I've done this dozens of times before, and I've only ever fucked up once. And okay, maybe it was a *huge* fuckup, the worst fuckup I ever could've made. But if the nerves get to me now, I can kiss this all goodbye.

Ugh, kiss.

I nod to one of the guys washing the dishes, doing my best to make it seem like I belong here. Because my magic is only half the performance.

The rest is all me.

Fixing the cap to my head, squashing down my hair so it'll fit, I walk through the door to the front of the shop, which is right where I need to be.

I'm the background character, the cardboard cutout tree, unnoticed. Invisible.

"Hey, Jude!" Another coworker steals a sip of water from a transparent plastic cup hidden under the counter. "Hope you're ready for the rush."

"Right, yeah," I tell her, because my mouth is about a mile behind my brain in terms of functioning right now. There's a lot to take in, from all the coffee dispensers and flavor options to the menu to the line that's stretching toward the door.

At least I know the disguise is working.

"Okay, Jude, we're busy today, no messing around!" My brand-new manager, Ray, stomps right up to me without giving me a second to breathe. He looks like the kind of guy who might keel over at any moment, his poor heart giving out. I step in behind him, double-checking the crowd so I know for a fact I haven't missed who I'm here for. "I need you on register. *Now.*"

Register, directly in front of all the customers.

There's no chance I'll miss Claire and Henry as they come through the front doors for their morning orders.

There was a time I loved being in the middle of the action, getting to be the center of attention. I'd go up to adults when I was younger and use my cuteness to my advantage. Richard and Leah always told me I was meant to be a Cupid, that it was evident from a young age. Leah loves telling the story of the time I pretended I was lost in a park and got these two best friends stuck in a perpetual will-they-won't-they situation to finally admit their feelings for each other while they helped me find her.

I'm still pretty proud of that one.

That was a long time ago, though, and this is my first time out in the field in months. I'm wondering if Leah was right when she said it's too soon after . . . everything that happened.

It's not like you can lose your touch, I remind myself. This is what you were born to do. You're good at being a Cupid.

I take a breath and pull out my customer-service voice. A little rusty, but it's still there.

One thing Cupid training can't prepare you for, though?

How to work a register.

My first customer of the day just wants a tall black coffee, and that's easy enough—there's even a button just for that, though he says something about dark roast and I have no idea what that means. The guy behind him wants a white mocha with three shots of caramel. I barely know what a mocha is, let alone a white mocha, and it takes me several seconds to find where the shot buttons are hidden. He gets irritated with me, snatching the receipt out of my hand when I give it to him, but I try to brush him off.

I'm here for one thing, and one thing only.

Next is a customer who wants a fully customized drink with chocolate drizzle, medium ice, extra whipped cream, cinnamon, and nutmeg, with ten pumps of hazelnut and three pumps of mocha powder, and no actual coffee in sight.

"It is eight in the morning," I whisper to myself as I manage to charge the customer for only about half the order.

I keep looking up toward the door when I hear the bell ring as customers walk in, adding to the line that's already forming in front of me.

If all my info was correct, Claire and Henry should be here any moment now.

There are many things our magic can't do for us, many things that leave us to our own devices. Like researching the people we're meant to help.

Richard was nice enough to send me an email with the need-to-know details: Claire and Henry are coworkers, their cubicles on opposite sides of the office, both of them pretty addicted to their work and trapped in the office during and after work hours, so they haven't had much time for love lives. But there's something between the two of them, something the universe has deemed worth my attention.

Stolen peeks when the other isn't looking, awkward break-room conversations, second-guessing the wording of emails, but not a word exchanged between them.

You'd think there were scarier things in the world than a conversation.

But I can also sympathize.

I decided to take things out of the office in the hope of having a more chill environment. Thankfully, it was easy to

determine that they both come to the same café every morning, after I faked being a delivery person and noticed the cups on their desks as I delivered flowers to Henry.

Another sneaky little move to inspire a little jealousy, taking a bouquet of flowers in and asking Claire if she knew where Henry's desk was. She'd pointed me right to him, and I could hear the hesitation in her voice, the curiosity over who just might've sent him flowers.

Being a Cupid means being a little conniving.

After a few too-early mornings of camping out in the café, I had everything ready to go. It was that first day, though, that I snatched my ace in the hole, the finest little detail that would pull them together:

They both order the same thing.

Iced chai, shot of espresso, oat milk.

Once I had that, the rest of the pieces clicked into place. I'd take their orders, make just one of them, and avoid calling out their names. That way, they'd go for the drink at the same time, their hands meeting, fireworks going off as they finally, finally noticed each other outside passing glances in the hallway or in meetings . . .

"Jude! What are you doing just standing there?" Manager Ray glares at me, his brows furrowed together.

I'm stuck there, staring at the screen, wondering how I make sure the coffee order is made to the incredibly specific temperature the customer has requested. "Yes, sir. Sorry, I just . . . don't remember the steps to the order."

He rolls his eyes and takes the cup away from me. "Just take the next one and hand the cups off to me."

I shake off the sinking feeling as best I can and get back to

the register. I'm not here to make coffee; I'm here to help Henry and Claire. I only have to survive until they get here, and then I can abandon this post, go back home, tell Richard about my success, and prove to Leah that it was the right move to let me take an assignment.

"Go grab the cold brew from the fridge. We need to refill the dispenser," Ray tells me as he prepares another drink I don't know the recipe for.

"Sure, yeah." I peer over the display case of baked goods that blocks my view of the front door, cursing my five-foot-five stature. I'm not too eager to step away from the register, but Claire and Henry haven't made their pre-work appearances yet.

"Jude, what are you doing? Stop standing around. Come on, you're not new at this!"

I catch the awkward glances of some of the customers, unsure what to do when a manager shouts at an employee.

"Right!" I rush to the fridge, looking for the large vats of black coffee that I can only assume are the cold brew I'm supposed to find. I pour quickly, managing to spill only a few splashes on Gary's apron and my shoes before it's ready to go. By that time, the line at the cash register is stretching toward the door once again, and I'm shoving croissants and bagels into the oven and accidentally burning a few when my attention gets pulled elsewhere.

My heart goes out to baristas everywhere.

Between the heat of the ovens, the smell of coffee that I'm sure I'll never scrub away, and the old people yelling at me because there's too much caramel or not enough sugar or they're sure that I gave them decaf instead of regular, it's almost enough to get me to walk out of here.

The bell rings again, and when my eyes shoot toward the door, I see Henry walking in, holding the door for Claire as she comes in behind him. There's this moment of cute but awkward hesitation, and for a second, I think that my job here might be done without me having to do a thing. It's rare, but it happens sometimes. But Claire's on her phone, Henry forgotten, and he's content to watch her from afar.

So there's still work to be done.

I make a rush for the register, making sure I'll be the one who takes their orders.

"Good morning, what can I get started for you?"

Henry's a pretty handsome guy in that classic sense, looking strong in a button-down that might tear if he flexes the right way. His glasses complete the Clark Kent of it all.

"Large dirty iced chai, please. With an extra shot. Oat milk too, please." It's cute that he repeats his "please."

"Coming right up." I tap the screen on the register.

Claire comes next. She seems a little frazzled this morning, a wilder look in her eyes as she wraps up whatever memo she had to write.

"Hi, how are you?" I ask her, but she doesn't hear me at first. Or she does and her mind is racing too fast to register what I've said.

"Sorry?"

"How are you?" I repeat.

"Oh." She laughs awkwardly. "I'm just . . . my boss, he's . . . you know."

I steal a look at Ray, who is currently passive-aggressively chewing out another barista for the amount of "cookie

crumble” being used in our new drink. “Yeah, I know,” I say. I take her familiar order and get right to work.

Now’s the moment, my time to shine.

The two of them stand at the end of the counter, waiting to pick up their orders. Claire is staring at Henry, watching as he does a crossword on his phone. I can tell Claire finds this endearing; I’ve caught her smiling, and she even offered an answer once, which Henry thankfully thought was charming instead of intrusive. These kinds of things can always go either way.

“Jude, register,” Ray tells me while I’m making Henry’s drink. “Abby’s taking over the drinks.”

“But I—” I have to make sure only one of the drinks makes it to the end of the counter. I have to make sure they both reach for it so their hands will meet and sparks will fly! I have a plan; I don’t have time to adapt.

“Jude, did I stutter?”

“No.” I duck my head to hide my shame. I nearly trip over myself as I make my way back to the register and try to keep an eye out for Claire’s and Henry’s drinks.

It’s not like I have to be in front of them for the magic to work, and I didn’t write their names on the cups, so it should be okay. Yes. Direct intervention isn’t always needed; sometimes it’s enough for us to line up all the details where they need to be, and they can be carried through on their own.

But part of me wanted to see it happen, to watch it all come together.

I tap the register to wake the screen up. “Good morning, what can I get—”

And I freeze.

Staring at me from the other side of the counter is the cutest boy I've ever seen in my entire life. His deep brown eyes gaze into mine, accompanied by a wide smile that still seems so small, and a dotting of freckles against soft brown skin. His hair is mostly covered by a beanie, but the ends that escape are curly and untamed.

It's a face I know well, unfortunately.

Because I've kissed that face.

I can't even fathom what the chances of this reunion are. There are literally hundreds of thousands of people in this city, more arriving and leaving every single day. And there are hundreds, if not thousands, of coffee shops.

And Leo Dawson just had to walk into mine.

A million different feelings try to drown me all at once. But only one thought comes to the forefront.

Why?

Just . . . *why?*

"Hi there." He smiles again, and I notice that gap between his two front teeth that first made my heart rumble. He hasn't changed much since last summer, when I went over to Oakland every single weekday as a counselor for this day camp because two of my fellow counselors had crushes on one another.

I hadn't meant for it to happen, but Leo . . . the way he smiled at me, the way he looked at me with those warm brown eyes, the way he tapped his fingers on his knees when he was nervous, the thick sound of his quiet voice, the way that he loved helping the kids out, lifting them into the air or racing them around on his shoulders . . .

It made me fall.

All of it.

I made the mistake of letting a human get close, letting things get personal. I let the situation go somewhere it never should have gone. I thought it would be okay. I thought being so far away from the city, from Leah and Richard and Cal and everyone else, would make things okay. I sat next to him, I texted him, I held his hand, I whispered sweet things in his ear, and I let him do the same to me. I knew that it wasn't allowed, that it could never go anywhere. Humans are too messy, too emotional, too unpredictable. We're meant to help them as much as we can, and then leave them to their own devices.

But I liked him.

A lot.

And I thought . . .

I don't really know what I thought, actually. Even now, I don't know what to think. The expression on his face is plain; there's no magic in his eyes, no familiarity. When I kissed him, when I let that happen, my powers poisoned him like a venom. I watched as each and every memory he had of me vanished from his mind, erased second by second until there was nothing of me left in him.

It was awkward, to say the least. He stared at me, and he asked with a heartbreaking curiosity in his voice, "Who are you?" My hands still cupped his cheeks. I could only stare at him, dumbfounded, scared, wondering what I'd done to get that reaction out of him.

It's one thing to know what will happen when you break a rule, and quite another to experience the punishment.

"It's me," I tried. "It's Jude?"

"Sorry, uh . . . Jude . . . were we making out?"

For a moment, I hoped it was some cruel joke, that he was just messing with me. But in the weeks that I'd known him, I'd learned that there wasn't a cruel bone in Leo's body.

What the Cupids had warned was true: He'd forgotten all about me. In the span of minutes, the time we'd spent together was gone, and there was no getting it back.

I arrived at my apartment with tears in my eyes, feeling like the only way to feel better was to crawl through my skin and do whatever I had to in order to stop feeling things. That pain lingered with me for a while, and now, seeing him again, I'm realizing that it never really went away.

I just got better at burying it.

"Did you catch that?" he asks, the drawl of his voice luring me in all over again.

"Oh, um . . . I'm sorry." I hesitate, turning to the register. "Can you repeat your order?"

He peers at the menu, rocking on his heels as he tucks his hands into the pockets of his hoodie. "Iced Americano. Venti, please. I need the caffeine."

"Lots of studying?" I ask without meaning to. The quick math in my head tells me that he's a senior now. I wonder if he's still planning to go into childhood development. He was so passionate about working with kids, about volunteering at camps and hospitals. "I mean, were you up late? Studying or, like . . . something?"

I shouldn't be having a conversation with him. He's the reason I'm on probation. Which makes him the easiest possible way to get into more trouble.

He's still smiling, though. "You could say that."

“I, uh . . .” My words are lost the moment they leave my lips.
“Sorry.”

“You’re good. I can imagine your brain gets pretty fried dealing with these people.”

“Yeah, it’s been a rough one,” I tell him.

“Well, if there’s anything I could do to make your afternoon more relaxing, I’d be happy to help.”

No.

Nope, no. I can’t do this. I’m going to combust, right here, right now, in front of this entire café. That will be my lasting legacy. I need to end this; I need to get away from him. Because my heart can’t take this. Half a year ago, I felt like I knew this boy better than I knew myself. We shared music and touches and truths—well, all truths but the big one. Right now, looking at him hurts. And part of me can’t help but wonder if he recognizes me at all. Am I a phantom to him? Does he even remember those precious awkward seconds after our kiss, after I lost him? My hair was shorter, and I didn’t wear makeup because of the heat. But . . . am I still in there? Deep down?

“Sorry, I’m too much of a flirt,” he says. “My moms say it’ll get me in trouble one day.”

“No, it’s fine. I, uh . . .” My mouth has gone dry. “I’m sorry, what was it that you ordered?”

He laughs, that soft sound that became music to my ears. “Iced Americano, remember?”

“Yes! Right!”

God, I should never work in customer service.

Ever again.

I grab the cup and my marker, putting the order into the computer.

“What’s your name?” I have to ask so I don’t raise suspicion.

“Leo.”

“Like the constellation.” It just slips out. Just like it did the first time he told me his name.

“More like the astrological sign. My moms set me up to be self-centered.”

“Yeah . . .” The computer flashes, prompting me to finish the transaction. “Oh, do you need a receipt?”

“Only if it has your number on it.”

I understand that he doesn’t know what he’s doing, that every word he says to me is torture. None of it was his fault, not an ounce of it. He didn’t know; he didn’t realize what would happen, that we couldn’t love each other.

“I, uh . . . uh . . . um . . .” I stammer for a bit. Every word I’ve ever known has suddenly left my brain.

“You okay?” he asks me, his voice slow. I can’t tell if it’s his actual accent or if I just can’t process anything right now.

“Jude! Get it moving!” Ray shouts from the entrance to the back kitchen.

“Sorry,” I spurt out to Leo, writing his name on the cup and finishing the transaction, printing out the receipt and handing it to him in record time before I have to step away from the register, grabbing the cup I’ve prepared. “I can’t do this.”

He looks at me in confusion for a moment before I walk away from him. Ray calls out my name, but I don’t turn. I just pull the hat off my curls and untie the apron, everything forgotten. Claire, Henry, Ray, Leo. I can’t do this. I’m not prepared.

Whatever is going on, I can’t deal with it.

“Jude, get the cash register!” Ray shouts over the rush one last time. I feel bad leaving my coworkers here to deal with the slammed line alone.

But I have to leave.

I walk back through the kitchen where my coworkers are racing around. I’m not fit to be a barista anyway. I remember I’m still holding Leo’s cup and I drop it like it’s burning me. I untie the apron, leaving everything behind for Gary and his shift tomorrow. When I close my eyes, I can still remember the confusion on Leo’s face that night, the way his brows knitted together, the blacks of his eyes blown out.

And here I am, six months later, doing the exact same thing I did that night.

Leaving.

Abandoning my post, leaving a job undone. Leah’s going to be so pissed at me, and I can imagine the disappointment on Richard’s face so easily.

I just . . . I can’t.

I stand behind the café, and with a series of gestures, everyone who dared enter that café in the last hour has forgotten about me. It’s not necessarily a full erasure of the mind—what good would that do any of us, if we erased the minds of the humans we’d just gotten to fall in love? Instead, the spell works on their memories of me, casting me as a shadow, filling in the spaces where I might’ve been present.

Even Leo.

For the second time.

I don’t like doing this. I don’t like worming my way into the minds of other people and taking something that isn’t mine. But it’s necessary. Part of the job.

I'm back at the starting line all over again. If I'm lucky, my probation will only be extended, extra weeks of training and conditioning.

Because of the same boy.

All for a boy.

A weakness that we're expected to exploit in humans but suppress in ourselves. Because we're above that. At least, we're meant to be.

I walk down to the bus stop, reaching into my pockets to pull out my headphones, pulling up Spotify and pressing play on the first Sufjan Stevens song that comes up on the front page because why not amplify the emotional torture?

The bus arrives a second later, and I stare at the open doors, wondering if I should actually get on and go home, or find another bus to carry me farther south until I reach Los Angeles or something.

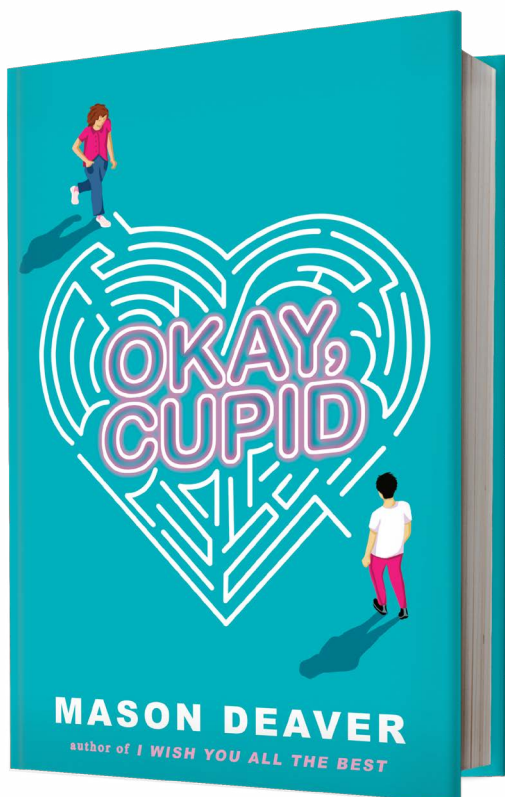
But no. This is my life, and I have to deal with what I've done.

I've failed again.

Just like last time.

All over some boy.

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