

the
love
pug

j.j. howard

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The Amazing Cupid

January 1: Cupid has special powers!

As soon as I'd written the words, I frowned. A big blot of ink had leaked from my pen and marred the very first page of my brand-new journal. I could almost hear my friend Theo's voice in my head, teasing me for using an ink pen. But I loved old-fashioned things, even if they took a bit more time. *And sometimes made more of a mess*, I thought as I dabbed at the ink with a tissue.

My adorable pug, Cupid, let out a bark from where he sat on my bedroom floor. I'd been writing at my desk, but I turned around to pull my dog up into my lap. I stroked his soft ears,

admiring his tan fur and sweet, wrinkly black muzzle.

“*Do* you have special powers?” I asked Cupid, gazing into his wide dark eyes. He let out a snuffling sound as if to say, *Why, yes, I do, Emma.*

I nodded. It might have been the only explanation for what had happened earlier that day.

My best friend, Hallie, and I had been walking with Cupid down the street to visit my former babysitter, Annie Taylor. Annie is in high school, and she’d offered to help Hallie prepare for the middle school cheer squad auditions.

It was cold and sunny, which is my favorite weather, but Hallie had not been so happy.

“It’s freezing,” Hallie groaned, nestling herself deeper inside her puffy coat. “Shouldn’t we be hibernating on New Year’s Day?”

“Okay, gloomy-pants,” I told her. “Why can’t you be more like Cupid? See how much he’s enjoying this awesome weather?”

We both looked down at Cupid, who was walking along between us with a definite spring in his step.

“Yeah, well, I think his coat’s warmer than mine,” Hallie

said, and I couldn't argue with that. Cupid *was* wearing his warmest outfit—a deep red down jacket trimmed with faux rabbit fur that I'd dressed him in that morning.

“How come you're so grumpy today?” I asked Hallie. Even though I was usually the more cheerful one of the two of us, Hallie didn't usually seem *this* blue.

She sighed. “I guess I'm just not sure about this whole cheer-squad-tryout thing. I mean, I still don't even know if I *want* to be on the team.”

“Come on, Hallie, you're going to be great!” I told her confidently. “And with Annie's help, you'll be a lock at the tryouts. She's the team captain at the high school.”

“I know, Ems. You've only told me nine thousand times. But that's not what I was saying . . .”

Just then, Cupid began barking excitedly, which was unusual for him. He's more of a laid-back sniffer than a barker, unless he's agitated or very happy.

I looked up to see a moving van parked in front of the house next door to Annie's. She must have been getting new neighbors. I realized that Cupid was barking at the teenage boy who

had just pulled a chair out from the back of the truck.

Cupid tugged on his leash, which he also *never* did. I yelped in surprise as the leash slipped out of my gloved hand. Then Cupid shot straight toward the boy.

“Cupid!” I yelled, racing after him.

The boy put down the chair and scooped up Cupid. My pug immediately started giving the boy a series of sloppy licks right on his face. I turned to Hallie in surprise. That was three strange things Cupid had just done, right in a row. Even though he’s very affectionate, he doesn’t normally “kiss” strangers. He mainly reserves his face licks for me or my neighbor Theo.

Annie, no doubt hearing the commotion, opened her front door and stepped outside. As soon as he saw her, Cupid started to squirm in the boy’s arms. The boy let him go, saying to me, “I’m sorry—I was afraid he was going to jump down.”

“It’s okay,” I called, and changed direction, since Cupid was now running straight for Annie. When she saw him on the loose, she started running too, and soon we were all standing in a circle, with Annie holding my very naughty dog, and getting some Cupid face kisses of her own.

Annie giggled. “Emma, your dog is out of control.”

“Not usually,” I told her, shaking my head, still confused about his odd behavior.

“Hi,” the boy said. “I’m Mateo. We’re just moving in.” He pointed to the house next door to Annie’s.

Annie looked up at him (she had to look *up* because he—Mateo—was very tall . . . and very cute) and I swear, the look on her face made it seem like she’d just been struck by lightning.

“I’m Annie,” she told Mateo, her voice sounding a little breathless.

The way she was looking at Mateo—and the way he was looking back at her—made me wonder . . . did they *like* each other? I glanced at Hallie, and her smile told me she was wondering the same thing.

I knew Annie didn’t have a boyfriend. In a classic move, head cheerleader Annie had dated the quarterback of the high school’s football team for two years, but since the breakup with Nate, she had been single.

I looked at my little pug in Annie’s arms, and I could almost swear he . . . winked at me. Or maybe he was just blinking. But

Cupid *had* been the one to bring Annie and Mateo together.

Wait a minute. Was he living up to his name?

I stepped forward to take my pug from Annie so she could focus on getting to know Mateo. Though clearly someone needed to actually start the conversation, because they were both just staring at each other.

“Welcome to Highbury, Mateo,” I said brightly. “I’m Emma, and this is my best friend, Hallie. Where did you move from?”

Mateo shook his head, like he was remembering where he was, and turned to look at me. “We just moved from Baltimore,” he said.

“Wow,” Hallie said. “Highbury’s going to be a huge change for you, then.”

Highbury, Pennsylvania, is a very small town—but that’s part of why I love it so much. *Technically* I was born in another town (there’s no hospital right in Highbury), but besides that, I’ve lived here all my life. I’ve gone to school with almost all the same kids since kindergarten, and I know every part of the town as well as I know my own name. And I love that you

don't even really need a car in Highbury—you can walk basically everywhere.

“Highbury is the most wonderful place in the world,” I jumped in to tell Mateo.

An idea started forming in my mind. I glanced from Annie back to Mateo. “In fact, to fully appreciate it, you should have a local show you around. Annie, maybe you could help?”

“Oh,” Annie said, blushing. “Sure. Are you starting at the high school tomorrow?” she asked Mateo, who nodded.

“I'm a senior,” he said. “Still haven't forgiven my parents for moving in the middle of the year.”

“Oh no!” Annie said, her eyes going round. “I'm sorry. But Emma's right—Highbury really is a great place, and I'll introduce you to everyone at school. I'm a senior too,” she added. “You'll have so many friends before you know it, I promise!”

Cupid gave a short bark of agreement, and we all laughed.

A loud voice came from the driveway next door. “Were you just gonna dip out of the rest of this unloading nightmare or what?” The boy hollering at Mateo was clearly his younger brother. He looked just like him, only shorter.

Mateo frowned at the other boy. “I was meeting some of our neighbors, Stain.”

I frowned. *His name was Stain?*

The boy wandered over to us. “Hi,” he said. “I’m Frankie Castillo. I see you’ve met my lazy big brother already.”

I almost laughed at myself for not realizing right away that *stain* had been a big-brother insult.

“I’m Emma,” I said, “and this is Hallie, and Annie. Oh, and Cupid. Welcome to Highbury!”

I think Frankie rolled his eyes a little as he said, “Thanks.”

“What grade are you in?” I asked him.

“Seventh,” he said. “I know I look old for my age.”

Mateo groaned out loud. “We know you *sound* stupid for your age,” he said to Frankie, then turned to the rest of us. “I apologize for the human stain otherwise known as my brother.”

Mateo had been so nice and polite . . . until his little brother came along. At that moment, I was pretty glad to be an only child, or at least *not* to be anybody’s younger sister.

“We’re in seventh too,” Hallie told Frankie, and he shrugged. I bristled. He didn’t seem very nice.