

# *The Cupid Effect*

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sphere

S P H E R E

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*For  
my twelve little samurai  
(you know who you are)*



## *the luvvie bit . . .*

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# *prologue*

## Good Intentions

1. Thou shalt sort out thy cardiovascular system
2. Thou shalt NOT get involved in other people's lives
3. Even if they're really, really nice thou shalt remember Commandment 2
4. Thou shalt think before thy speaks
5. Thou shalt think again before thy speaks
6. Thou shalt watch less *Angel*
7. Thou shalt remember that Angel is a 250-year-old vampire who dated Buffy The Vampire Slayer, not the man you're going to be with for ever and ever.

Simple. No? Easy. No? And I've broken two of them within, ooh, four hours.



# chapter one

## Heart's Desire

I blame Oprah.

This is all her fault.

I mean, if it wasn't for her, I'd be waking up to 'just' another weekend, right about now. The usual: Saturday morning telly, wander round Bromley shopping centre, battle for food in the Savacentre.

Instead, I'm stood at Leeds train station with my worldly goods at my feet.

I've *really* done it this time, haven't I? I've done some stupid things in my life, most of them either involving sex or money or shoes, but this time I've truly surpassed myself. And it's all down to Oprah Winfrey.

Oh, it started innocently enough. I woke up one morning and I couldn't *get*.

I couldn't get up, get showered, get dressed, get to the station, get on a train, get to work. I couldn't get, so I pulled a sickie and I saw *Oprah*. My life went pear-shaped right after that.

Up to that point, any doubts I had about my life were formless. Just floating around at the back of my consciousness. After my sickie, though, these doubts and insecurities had a voice. An American talk show host's voice.

First, I was taping Oprah's show. *Every day*. Next, terms like 'heart's desire' and 'you can't change what you don't acknowledge' were never far from my lips. Then came the books. I became the Noah of self-help manuals. I was hoarding them two by two as though, instead of a flood, there was a predicted self-help drought coming and yea, verily, it was almost upon us. A few moments after that – or maybe it was months – I was headed for Leeds clutching a one-way ticket. Because that's where my heart's desire was. Supposedly. Two hundred miles away from everything I knew and loved.

I glanced down at my suitcase and holdall.

*WHAT THE HELL HAVE I DONE?*

I've given up everything to go back to college, that's what.

Two hundred miles away, in London, I had a life. I had my own flat. Two televisions, a sofa, a wardrobe, bookcases, video shelves, a bed made from reclaimed antique wood. Not some cheapo self-assembly job. It was actually made for me from antique wood. How many people could say that? Not many, that's how many.

And, down south, I had friends. Hoards of them. I couldn't go down the end of my street without tripping over them. Up here, I had my best mate Jessica and . . . and . . .

The breath caught in my chest, my heart started flinging itself against my rib cage. *Oh God. I'm insane. I'm actually insane.* (That revelation was on a par with finding out I was never going to marry Arnold Schwarzenegger. Except I'd cried quite a lot then.)

This was what everyone said. My family, my friends, my colleagues. They'd all reminded me how I'd struggled to pay off my student debts and buy a flat and decorate it and become respected in my career. 'And you're giving it all up to go back to living out of one room? Why exactly?'

'Because Oprah told me to,' would've been the short answer.

I explained, though, that I was leaving because life is too long, not too short. What if I get to ninety with my memory intact? Wouldn't I be *more* pissed off if I got to that ripe old age and realised I'd not had the courage to follow my true heart's desire and do what I really wanted with my life instead of carrying on with the day to day because it was easier not to rock the boat? Life's too long not to do it; not to be true to myself. Most people understood when I spelt it out like that. Either that, or they lost interest halfway through and agreed with me to shut me up.

*But why didn't anyone stop me?* If I really thought someone was going to do what I'd done on the strength of an American chat show and a few self-help tomes, I'd have gone in for a spot of kidnapping and self-help deprogramming. But that's just me, obviously.

*Anyway, it's too late now, isn't it, Ceri D'Altroy? You're here now, they're expecting you on Monday, and someone else is living in your flat. Might as well get on with it. Start dealing with the now. (Dealing with the now? Dealing with the now?! I was even thinking like an Oprah guest. The pre-Oprah me would've said, 'Right Ceri, move your bloomin' arse.')*

I hoisted my holdall onto my shoulder, gripped my suitcase handle with renewed purpose and vigour then headed for the taxi rank outside.

As I staggered towards the station exit, I kept my line of sight firmly lowered, with my head down, my chin-length black hair hiding my face. I often walked like this, as though I had the weight of the world, as well as half my flat, on my shoulders. I wasn't a miserable old cow, I'd actually trained myself to not look up. To not look anyone in the face or initiate eye contact. The last thing I needed at this stage of the game, when I was already fragile, was to make eye contact with a stranger. Catch someone's eye and you soon found yourself signing up for a

credit card, giving some freak a fake phone number or hearing about some old dear's gall bladder operation. At least, that's what happened to me. Regularly. More regularly than should've been statistically possible. Most people didn't get on a bus and get off fifteen minutes later knowing the entire life story of the woman next to them. I did. There were whole bus routes where I knew most of the passengers by their ailments, not their names.

This was my talent; my gift. Unintentionally eliciting personal info from perfect strangers. I never did have the brass front to tell these people to get lost or even ignore them. The best I could do was not make eye contact in the first place. And I'd found it perfectly feasible to go about ninety-two per cent of my daily business without looking anyone in the eye.

I wrestled my slipping holdall back onto my left shoulder, ignoring how my rucksack lacerated that soft, fleshy bit between my neck and shoulders. *I can do this. I can do this*, I repeated in my head.

I hadn't got past the entrance of Menzies when a body stepped into my path. Shite. This happened sometimes. The 'no eye contact' thing didn't work. People approached me anyway. But, I could still get out of this if I kept my head down and moved on.

'Sorry,' I mumbled, and stepped to my left without looking up.

The body stepped with me.

I stepped to the right, the body stepped to the right.

Left, the body went left. We danced on – right and left, left and right – like this for a few more seconds, then I attempted a double-bluff, left step, but actually went to the right.

But my escape plan was foiled by a fiendish body block. This person had me bang to rights. And I was going to be signing up to be a Jehovah's Witness in, ooh, three minutes.

With a silent sigh, I looked up.

I wasn't greeted by a magazine promising to save my soul (but let me die if I needed a blood transfusion), instead, a cardboard sign with:

*Kerry Dalbo*

was thrust in my face.

My eyes shot to above the sign. Jess grinned back at me so wide I could hardly see her face.

'Welcome home sweetie,' Jess cried and threw her arms around my neck. As she did so, our combined weight tipped back onto my overstuffed rucksack and before either of us could do anything, we both went tumbling to the ground.