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Opening Extract from...

Off the Page

Written by
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DELILAH

I've been waiting my whole life for Oliver, so you'd think another fifteen minutes wouldn't matter. But it's fifteen minutes that Oliver is alone on a bus, unmonitored, for the first time, with the most ruthless, malicious, soul-sucking creatures on earth: high school students.

Going to high school is a little like being told you have to get up each morning and run headlong at sixty miles an hour into the same brick wall. Every day, you're forced to watch Darwin's principle of survival of the fittest play out: evolutionary advantages, like perfect white teeth and gravity-defying boobs, or a football team jacket keep you from falling prey to the demons that grow to three times their size when they feed on the fear of a hapless freshman and bully him to a pulp. After years of public school, I've gotten pretty good at being invisible. That way, you're less likely to become a target.

But Oliver knows none of this. He has *always* been the center

of attention. He's even more undeveloped socially than the boy who enrolled last year after nine years of being homeschooled in a yurt. Which is why I'm actually breaking a sweat, imagining everything Oliver could be doing wrong.

At this point, he's probably ten minutes into a story about the first dragon he ever encountered—and while he might think it's a great icebreaker, the rest of the bus will either peg him as the new druggie in town, who puts 'shrooms in his breakfast omelet, or as one of those kids who run around speaking Elvish, wearing homemade cloaks, with foam swords tucked into their belts. Either way, that kind of first impression is one that sticks for the rest of your life.

Believe me, I know.

I've spent my entire school career as *that* girl. The one who wrote *VD Rocks!* on all her second-grade valentines and who literally walked into a wall once while reading a book. The one who recently reaffirmed her subterranean spot on the social-status totem pole by accidentally punching out the most popular girl in school during swim practice.

Oliver and I make a *fabulous* couple.

Speaking of which . . . I kind of still can't believe we *are* one. It's one thing to have a boyfriend, but to have someone who looks like he just stepped out of a romantic comedy—well, it doesn't happen to people like me. Girls spend their lives dreaming of that perfect guy but always wind up settling when they realize he doesn't exist. I found mine—but he was trapped inside a fairy tale. Since that's the only world he's ever lived in, acclimating to this one has been a bit of a challenge. How he

came to be real—and mine—is a long story . . . but it's been the biggest adventure of my life.

So far, anyway.

"Delilah!" I hear, and I turn around to see my best friend, Jules, barreling toward me. We hug like magnets. We haven't seen each other all summer—she was exiled to her aunt's house in the Midwest, and I was totally preoccupied with Oliver's arrival. Her Mohawk has grown out into an Egyptian bob, which she's dyed midnight blue, and she's wearing her usual thick black eyeliner, combat boots, and a T-shirt with the name of her favorite band du jour: Khaleesi and the Dragons. "So where is he?" she asks, looking around.

"Not here yet," I tell her. "What if he called the bus his trusty steed again?"

Jules laughs. "Delilah, you've been practicing with him the whole summer. I think he can handle a fifteen-minute bus ride without you." Suddenly she grimaces. "Oh crap, don't tell me you guys are going to be Gorilla-glued together, like BrAngelo," Jules says, jerking her head toward Brianna and Angelo, the school's power couple, who seem to have an uncanny ability to be making out on my locker at the exact moment I need to get inside. "I think it's great that you have a hot new boyfriend, but you better not ditch me."

"Are you kidding?" I say. "I'm going to need your help. Being around Oliver is like when you're babysitting a toddler and you realize the entire house is a potential danger zone."

"Perfect timing," murmurs Jules as Oliver's bus pulls up to the front of the school.

You know how there are some moments in your life when time just slows down? When you remember every minute detail: how the wind feels against your face, how the freshly cut grass smells, how snippets of conversation become a dull background buzz, and how in that instant, there's only the beat of your heart and the breath that you draw and the person whose eyes lock with yours?

Oliver is the last one to step off the bus. His black hair is ruffled by the breeze. He's wearing the white shirt and jeans I picked out for him, and an unzipped hoodie. A leather satchel is strung across his chest, and his green eyes search the crowd.

When he sees me, a huge smile breaks across his face.

He walks toward me as if there aren't three hundred people staring at him—the new kid—as if it doesn't matter in the least that the popular girls are tossing their hair and batting their lashes like they're at a photo shoot, or that the jocks are all sizing him up as competition. He walks as if the only thing he can see is me.

Oliver wraps his arms around me and swings me in a circle, like I weigh nothing at all. He sets me down, then gently holds my face in his hands, looking at me as if he has found treasure. "Hello," he says, and he kisses me.

I can feel everyone's eyes on me, their mouths gaping.

Not gonna lie: I could get used to this.

* * *

I met Oliver inside a book. Last year, I got obsessed with a kids' fairy tale that I found in the stacks of the school library—in

particular, with the prince who was illustrated throughout the pages. Now, lots of readers crush on fictional characters, but mine turned out to be not so fictional. Oliver wanted out of his book, where every day was the same, and into a life that didn't have such a rigid plotline.

We had a bunch of failed attempts—including one involving a magic easel that reproduced him in the real world but flat as a pancake, and a brief period of time where I got sucked into the book and found myself swimming with mermaids and fending off a deranged princess who fancied herself in love with Oliver. Our last-ditch attempt to get him written out of the story included a covert trip to Cape Cod to find the author of the book, Jessamyn Jacobs, who had written the story for her son, Edgar, after his dad died. As it turned out, Edgar was a dead ringer for Oliver, and just the replacement we needed in the book for Oliver. For the past three months, Edgar's been living in the fairy tale, and Oliver's been living on Cape Cod, impersonating him—American accent, teenage moods, twenty-first-century clothing, and all. After weeks of persuasion, Oliver finally convinced Jessamyn to move here, to New Hampshire, so he could be with me.

Oliver and I walk down the hall, where girls bunch together, jockeying into position to take a Snapchat selfie; bros try to jam a shipping container's worth of sports gear into a locker the size of a carry-on suitcase; cheerleaders gaze at themselves in their locker mirrors, putting on lip gloss in slow motion, as if they're starring in their own Sephora commercial. Suddenly two nerds zoom down the hallway, clutching stacks of books to their chests, careening off bystanders like human pinballs.

Oliver nearly gets mowed down in the process. "Is there a fire?" he asks.

"No, we only have fifteen minutes till class starts. To a nerd, that means you're already a half hour late." I glance down the hallway. "They run *everywhere. All the time.*"

I can feel everyone's eyes on my back as Oliver and I pass. As we move through the crowds, I purposely bump into him every so often. I do this so I can make sure he's really here. You have to understand—I'm just not a lucky person. I never win a raffle; every penny I come across is tails-up; my last fortune cookie said *Good luck with that.* This is literally a dream come true.

Suddenly I realize that Oliver is doing the queen's wave as we head down the science wing. I grab his hand and pull it down. "These are not your subjects," I whisper, but when he threads his fingers through mine, I completely forget to be frustrated.

Before I realize what he's doing, he's pulling me around a corner, into the narrow hallway that leads to the photography lab. In a delicate choreography, he spins me so that my back is against the wall and his hands are bracketing me. His hair is falling across his eyes as he leans forward, lifts my chin, and kisses me.

"What was that for?" I ask, dizzy.

He grins. "Just because I can."

I can't help smiling back. Three months ago, I never imagined that I could even reach out and touch Oliver's hand, much less sneak away during school for a secret kiss.

The terrible thing about falling in love is that real life always gets in the way. I sigh, taking his hand. "As much as I'd like to stay here, we have to get you to class."

"So," Oliver says. "What's my first task?"

"Well," I reply, taking the printed schedule out of his hand. EDGAR JACOBS, it reads, startling me. It's hard for me to remember that Oliver is masquerading as someone else; how difficult must it be for *him*? "Your first *class* is chemistry."

"Alchemy?"

"Um, not quite. More like potions."

Oliver looks impressed. "Wow. Everyone here hopes to be a wizard?"

"Only the ones with a death wish," I murmur. I stop in front of a bank of lockers, matching the number to the one on his schedule. "This is yours."

He tugs on the lock, frowning at the numerical puzzle of the combination. Then suddenly he brightens and, out of nowhere, pulls out a dagger and hacks it against the metal.

"Oh my *God*!" I shout, grabbing the knife and stuffing it into my backpack before anyone else can see. "Do you want to get arrested?"

"I'm really not that tired," Oliver says.

I sigh. "No knives. *Ever.* Understand?"

His eyes flicker with remorse. "There's just so much here that's . . . different," he says.

"I know," I empathize. "That's why you've got me." I take off the numeric lock, using the code on the back of Oliver's schedule, and replace it with a padlock whose combination is five letters. "Watch," I say, using my thumb to roll the wheels until they spell *E-D-A-H-E.* "Everyone deserves a happy ending."

"I think I can remember that." He grins and backs me against the lockers. "You know what else I remember?"

His eyes are as green as a summer field, and as easy to get lost in.

"I remember the first time I saw you," Oliver says. "You were wearing that shirt."

When he looks at me like that, I can't even remember my name, much less what I'm wearing today. "I was?"

"And I remember the first time I did this," he adds, and he leans in and kisses me.

Suddenly I hear a voice over my shoulder. "Um," a boy says. "You guys are kind of draped across my locker?"

Oh God. I've become BrAngelo.

Immediately I shove Oliver away and tuck my hair behind my ears. "Sorry," I mutter. "Won't happen again." I clear my throat. "I'm Delilah, by the way."

The kid jerks the metal door open and looks at me. "Chris," he says.

Oliver extends his hand. "I'm Oli—"

"Edgar," I interrupt. "His name is Edgar."

"Yes. Right," Oliver says. "That is my name."

"I feel like I haven't seen you before," I say to Chris.

"I'm new. Just moved here from Detroit."

"I just moved here too," Oliver replies.

"Oh yeah? Where from?"

"The kingdom of—"

"Cape Cod," I blurt out.

Chris snorts. "She doesn't let you talk much, man. Where are you guys headed?"

"Edgar's got chemistry with Mr. Zhang," I say.

"Cool, me too. I'll see you there?" Chris shuts his locker and, with a wave, walks down the hall.

Oliver watches him. "How come *he's* allowed to wave?"

I roll my eyes. It's 8:15 a.m. and I'm already exhausted. "I'll explain later," I say.

I have enough time to drop Oliver off at his chemistry classroom before I have to head to French. As we turn the corner, Jules slips up behind us and links her arm through mine. "Guess who broke up," she says.

Oliver smiles. "This must be the famous Jules."

"Reports of my awesomeness are usually underrated," Jules answers. She gives Oliver a once-over and then nods and turns to me. "Well done."

"I'm kind of in a rush—I'm trying to get him to Zhang's room before the bell rings," I explain.

"Trust me, you want to hear this. . . . Allie McAndrews and Ryan Douglas?"

Oliver looks at me, questioning.

"Prom queen and king," I explain quickly.

He looks impressed. "Royalty."

"They *think* they are," Jules agrees. "Anyway, they broke up. Apparently being faithful comes as easily to Ryan as Shakespeare."

Having been in Ryan's English class last year, I know that's saying a lot.

"Speak of the devil," says Jules.

As if we're watching a soap opera, Allie turns the corner, flanked by her posse. From the opposite direction, simultaneously,

Ryan swaggers down the hall. We bystanders freeze, holding our breath, waiting for the inevitable train wreck.

"Oh, look! What a rare sighting," Allie says loudly. "A man-slut in the wild!" Her girls giggle in response.

Ryan looks her up and down. "Did you eat *all* your feelings, Allie?"

At that, Allie propels herself at him, claws out. Just in time, a kid steps between them—James, the president of the LGBT Alliance, who has his own bow tie business and runs conflict-resolution training for student mentors. "Walk it off, girlfriend," James says to Ryan, who shoves him into the wall.

"Back off, fairy," Ryan growls.

Before I realize what's happening, Oliver is no longer standing next to me. He's heading straight for Ryan.

"Oh crap," Jules says. "You had to date a hero?"

But Oliver rushes past Ryan, moving toward James, who's now sprawled on the ground. He extends a hand and helps James up. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, thanks," James replies, brushing himself off.

This is good, this is really good. Oliver has created the best reputation possible. Everyone is looking at him as if he is a champion.

Including Allie McAndrews.

Oliver puts a hand on James's shoulder. "Fairies here are *much* bigger than I expected," he says, delighted.

For a moment, time stops. Something flickers across James's face—disappointment. Resignation. Pain.

What happens next is so fast I can barely see it: James pulls

back his arm and socks Oliver hard so that he falls backward, knocked out cold.

Oh yeah. This is gonna be a *great* year.

I fly to Oliver's side, crouching down. By now the crowd has scattered, afraid of repercussions. I help him sit up; he winces as he leans against the wall.

"Let me guess," Oliver mutters. "*Fairy* means something different here?"

But I can't answer, because when I look at him I see it: the trickle of black from his nose, the stains on his white shirt.

"Oliver," I whisper. "You're *inking*."