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Opening extract from

Starcrossed

Written by

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STARCROSSED

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STARCROSSED

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MACMILLAN



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For my beloved husband



CHAPTER ONE

‘But if you bought me a car now, it would be yours when I go away to school in two years. Still practically new,’ Helen said optimistically. Unfortunately, her father was no sucker.

‘Lennie, just because the state of Massachusetts thinks it’s OK for sixteen-year-olds to drive . . .’ Jerry began.

‘Almost seventeen,’ Helen reminded.

‘Doesn’t mean that I have to agree with it.’ He was winning, but Helen hadn’t lost yet.

‘You know, the Pig only has another year or two left in her,’ Helen said, referring to the ancient Jeep Wrangler her father drove, which she suspected might have been parked outside the castle where the Magna Carta was signed. ‘And think of all the gas money we could save if we got a hybrid, or even went full electric. Wave of the future, Dad.’

‘Uh-huh,’ was all he’d say.

Now she’d lost.

Helen Hamilton groaned softly to herself and looked out over the railing of the ferry that was bringing her back

to Nantucket. She contemplated another year of riding her bike to school in November and, when the snow got too deep, scrounging for rides or, worst of all, taking the bus. She shivered in anticipated agony and tried not to think about it. Some of the Labor Day tourists were staring at her, not unusual, so Helen tried to turn her face away as subtly as she could. When Helen looked in a mirror, all she saw were the basics – two eyes, a nose and a mouth – but strangers from off island tended to stare, which was really annoying.

Luckily for Helen, most of the tourists on the ferry that afternoon were there for the view, not her portrait. They were so determined to cram in a little scenic beauty before the end of summer that they felt obliged to *ooh* and *aah* at every marvel of the Atlantic Ocean, though it was all lost on Helen. As far as she was concerned, growing up on a tiny island was nothing but a pain, and she couldn't wait to go to college off island, off Massachusetts, and off the entire eastern seaboard if she could manage it.

It wasn't that Helen hated her home life. In fact, she and her father got along perfectly. Her mom had ditched them both when Helen was a baby, but Jerry had learned early on how to give his daughter just the right amount of attention. He didn't hover, yet he was always there for her when she needed him. Buried under a thin layer of resentment about the current car situation, she knew she could never ask for a better dad.

'Hey, Lennie! How's the rash?' yelled a familiar voice.

Coming towards her was Claire, Helen's best friend since birth. She tipped unsteady tourists out of her path with artfully placed pushes.

The sea-goofy day trippers swerved away from Claire like she was a linebacker and not a tiny elf of a girl perched delicately on platform sandals. She glided easily through the stumbling riot she had created and slid next to Helen by the railing.

'Giggles! I see you got some back-to-school shopping done too,' Jerry said as he gave Claire a one-armed hug around her parcels.

Claire Aoki, aka Giggles, was a bad-ass. Anyone who took a look at her five-foot-two frame and delicate Asian features and failed to recognize her inherent scrappiness ran the risk of suffering horribly at the hands of a grossly underestimated opponent. The nickname 'Giggles' was her personal albatross. She'd had it since she was a baby. In her friends' and family's defence it was impossible to resist calling her Giggles. Claire had, hands down, the best laugh in the universe. Never forced or shrill, it was the kind of laugh that could make anyone within earshot smile.

'Fo-sho, sire of my BFF,' Claire replied. She hugged Jerry back with genuine affection, ignoring his use of the dreaded nickname. 'Might I have a word with your progeny? Sorry to be so rude, but it's top-secret, high-clearance stuff. I'd tell you . . .' she began.

'But then you'd have to kill me,' Jerry finished sagely.

He shuffled obligingly off to the concession stand to buy himself a sugary soda while his daughter, the chief of the food police, wasn't looking.

'Whatcha got in the bag, Dad?' Claire asked. She grabbed Helen's loot and started rifling through. 'Jeans, cardigan, T-shirt, under- whoa! You go underwear shopping with your dad? Ew!'

'It's not like I have any choice!' Helen complained as she snatched her bag away. 'I needed new bras! Anyway, my dad hides at the bookstore while I try everything on. But, trust me, even knowing he's down the street while I shop for underwear is excruciating,' she said, a smile on her reddening face.

'It can't be all that painful. It's not like you ever try to buy anything sexy. Jeez, Lennie, do you think you could dress more like my grandma?' Claire held up a pair of white cotton briefs. Helen snatched the granny pants and shoved them to the bottom of the bag while Claire stretched out her magnificent laugh.

'I know, I'm such a big geek it's gone viral,' Helen replied, Claire's teasing instantly forgiven, as usual. 'Aren't you afraid you'll catch a fatal case of loser from me?'

'Nope. I'm so awesome I'm immune. Anyway, geeks are the best. You're all so deliciously corruptible. And I love the way you blush whenever I talk about under-pants.'

Claire was forced to adjust her stance as a couple of picture-takers barged in close to them. Working with the

momentum of the deck, Claire nudged the tourists out of the way with one of her ninja balance moves. They stumbled aside, laughing about the 'choppy water', clueless that Claire had even touched them. Helen fiddled with the heart necklace she always wore and took the opportunity to slouch down against the railing to better meet her friend's small stature.

Unfortunately for achingly shy Helen, she was an eye-grabbing five feet nine inches tall, and still growing. She'd prayed to Jesus, the Buddha, Muhammad and Vishnu to make it stop, but she still felt the hot splinters in her limbs and the seizing muscles of another growth spurt at night. She promised herself that at least if she topped six feet she'd be tall enough to scale the safety railing and throw herself off the top of the lighthouse in Siasconset.

Salespeople were always telling her how lucky she was, but not even they could find her trousers that fitted. Helen had resigned herself to the fact that in order to buy affordable jeans that were long enough she had to go a few sizes too big, but if she didn't want them to fall off her hips, she had to put up with a mild breeze flapping around her ankles. Helen was pretty sure that the 'wicked jealous' salesgirls didn't walk around with chilly ankles. Or with their butt cracks showing.

'Stand up straight,' Claire snapped automatically when she saw Helen slouching, and Helen obeyed. Claire had a thing about good posture, something to do with

her super-proper Japanese mother and even more proper kimono-wearing grandmother.

‘OK! On to the main topic,’ Claire announced. ‘You know that huge kazillion-dollar compound that the New England Patriots guy used to own?’

‘The one in ‘Sconset? Sure. What about it?’ Helen asked, picturing the house’s private beach and feeling relieved that her dad didn’t make enough money at his store to buy a house any closer to the water.

When Helen was a child, she had very nearly drowned, and ever since had secretly believed that the Atlantic Ocean was trying to kill her. She’d always kept that bit of paranoia to herself . . . though she still was a terrible swimmer. To be fair, she could tread water for a few minutes at a time, but she was rotten at it. Eventually, she sank like a rock no matter how saline the ocean was supposed to be and no matter how hard she paddled.

‘It finally sold to a big family,’ Claire said. ‘Or two families. I’m not sure how it works, but I guess there are two fathers, and they’re brothers. They both have kids – so the kids are cousins?’ Claire wrinkled her brow. ‘Whatever. The point is that whoever moved in has a bunch of kids. And they’re all about the same age. There are, like, *two boys* that are going to be in our grade.’

‘And let me guess,’ Helen said, deadpan. ‘You did a tarot reading and saw that both of the boys are going to fall madly in love with you and then they’ll tragically fight to the death.’

Claire kicked Helen in the shin. 'No, dummy. There's one for each of us.'

Helen rubbed her leg, pretending it hurt. Even if Claire had kicked Helen with all her might, she still wouldn't be strong enough to leave a bruise.

'One for each of us? That's uncharacteristically low drama of you,' Helen teased. 'It's too straightforward. I don't buy it. But how about this? We'll each fall in love with the same boy, or the wrong boy – whichever one doesn't love us back – and then you and I will fight *each other* to the death.'

'Whatever are you babbling on about?' Claire asked sweetly as she inspected her nails, feigning incomprehension.

'God, Claire, you're so predictable,' Helen said, laughing. 'Every year you dust off those cards you bought in Salem that time on the field trip and you always predict that something amazing is going to happen. But every year the only thing that amazes me is that you haven't slipped into a boredom coma by winter break.'

'Why do you fight it?' Claire protested. 'You know eventually something spectacular is going to happen to us. You and I are way too fabulous to be *ordinary*.'

Helen shrugged. 'I am perfectly happy with ordinary. In fact, I think I'd be devastated if you actually predicted right for a change.'

Claire tilted her head to one side and stared at her.

Helen untucked her hair from behind her ears to curtain off her face. She hated to be watched.

‘I know you would. I just don’t think ordinary’s ever going to work out for you,’ Claire said thoughtfully.

Helen changed the subject. They chatted about their class schedules, running track and whether or not they should cut a fringe. Helen wanted something new, but Claire was dead set against Helen touching her long blonde hair with scissors. Then they realized that they had wandered too close to what they called the ‘pervert zone’ of the ferry, and had to hastily backtrack.

They both hated that part of the ferry, but Helen was particularly sensitive about it; it reminded her of this creepy guy that had followed her around one summer, until the day he just disappeared off the ferry. Instead of feeling relieved when she realized he wasn’t coming back, Helen felt like she had done something wrong. She had never brought it up with Claire, but there had been a bright flash and a horrible smell of burned hair. Then the guy was just *gone*. It still made her queasy to think about it, but Helen played along, as if it was all a big joke. She forced a laugh and let Claire drag her to another part of the ferry.

Jerry joined them as they pulled into the dock and disembarked. Claire waved goodbye and promised to try to visit Helen at work the next day, though since it was the last day of summer, the outlook was doubtful.

Helen worked a few days a week for her father, who

co-owned the island's general store. Apart from a morning paper and fresh cup of coffee, the News Store also sold saltwater taffy, penny candy, caramels and toffee in real crystal jars, and ropes of liquorice whips sold by the yard. There were always fresh-cut flowers and handmade greeting cards, gag gifts and magic tricks, seasonal knick-knacks for the tourists, and refrigerator essentials like milk and eggs for the locals.

About six years ago the News Store had expanded its horizons and added Kate's Cakes on to the back, and since then business had exploded. Kate Rogers was, quite simply, a genius with baked goods. She could take anything and make it into a pie, cake, popover, cookie or muffin. Even universally loathed vegetables like Brussels sprouts and broccoli succumbed to Kate's wiles and became big hits as croissant fillers.

Still in her early thirties, Kate was creative and intelligent. When she'd partnered up with Jerry, she revamped the back of the News Store and turned it into a haven for the island's artists and writers, somehow managing to do it without turning up the snob factor. Kate was careful to make sure that anyone who loved baked goods and real coffee – from suits to poets, working-class townies to corporate raiders – would feel comfortable sitting down at her counter and reading a newspaper. She had a way of making everyone feel welcome. Helen adored her.

When Helen got to work the next day, Kate was trying to stock a delivery of flour and sugar. It was pathetic.

‘Lennie! Thank God you’re early. Do you think you could help me . . . ?’ Kate gestured towards the forty-pound sacks.

‘I got it. No, don’t tug the corner like that – you’ll hurt your back,’ Helen warned, rushing to stop Kate’s ineffectual pulling. ‘Why didn’t Luis do this for you? Wasn’t he working this morning?’ Helen asked, referring to one of the other workers on the schedule.

‘The delivery came after Luis left. I tried to stall until you got here, but a customer nearly tripped and I had to at least pretend I was going to move the blasted thing,’ Kate said.

‘I’ll take care of the flour if you fix me a snack,’ Helen said cajolingly as she stooped to pick up the sack.

‘Deal,’ Kate replied gratefully, and hustled off with a smile. Helen waited until Kate’s back was turned, lifted the sack of flour easily on to her shoulder, and sauntered towards the workstation, where she opened the sack and poured some flour into the smaller plastic container Kate used in the kitchen. While Helen neatly stacked the rest of the delivery in the storeroom, Kate poured her a bubbly pink lemonade, the kind that Helen loved, from France, one of the many foreign places she was dying to visit.

‘It’s not that you’re so freakishly strong for someone so thin that bothers me. What really pisses me off,’ Kate said as she sliced some cherries and cheese for Helen to

snack on, 'is that you never get winded. Not even in *this* heat.'

'I get winded,' Helen lied.

'You sigh. Big difference.'

'I've just got bigger lungs than you.'

'But since you're taller, you'd need *more* oxygen, wouldn't you?'

They clinked glasses and sipped their lemonade, calling it even. Kate was a bit shorter and plumper than Helen, but that didn't make her either short or fat. Helen always thought of the word *zaftig* when she saw Kate, which she had a notion meant 'sexy curvy'. She never used it, though, in case Kate took it the wrong way.

'Is the book club on tonight?' Helen asked.

'Uh-huh. But I doubt anyone will want to talk about Kundera,' Kate said with a smirk, jingling the ice cubes in her glass.

'Why? Hot gossip?'

'Smokin' hot. This crazy-big family just moved to the island.'

'The place in 'Sconset?' Helen asked. At Kate's nod, she rolled her eyes.

'Oh-ho! Too good to dish with the rest of us?' Kate teased, flicking the condensed water from the side of her glass in Helen's direction.

Helen play-shrieked, and then had to leave Kate for a moment to ring up for a few customers. As soon as she

finished the transactions, she came back and continued the conversation.

‘No. I just don’t think it’s that strange for a big family to buy a big property. Especially if they’re going to live in it year-round. It makes more sense than some old wealthy couple buying a summer home that’s so huge they get lost on the way to the mailbox.’

‘True,’ Kate conceded. ‘But I really thought you’d be more interested in the Delos family. You’ll be graduating with a few of them.’

Helen stood there as *Delos* ran around her head. The name meant nothing to her. How could it? But some echoey part of her brain kept repeating ‘Delos’ over and over.

‘Lennie? Where’d you go?’ Kate asked. She was interrupted by the first members of the book club coming early, wound-up and already in the throes of wild speculation.

Kate’s prediction was right. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was no match for the arrival of new year-rounders, especially since the rumour-mill had revealed that they were moving here from Spain. Apparently, they were Boston natives who had moved to Europe three years ago in order to be closer to their extended family, but now, suddenly, they’d decided to move back. It was the ‘suddenly’ part that everyone spent the most time discussing. The school secretary had hinted to a few of the book-club members that the kids had been enrolled so far

past the normal date that the parents had practically had to bribe their way in, and all sorts of special agreements had to be made to ship their furniture over in time for their arrival. It seemed like the Delos family had left Spain in a hurry, and the book club agreed that there must have been some kind of falling-out with their cousins.

The one thing Helen could confidently gather from all the chatter was that the Delos family was rather unconventional. There were two fathers who were brothers, their younger sister, one mother (one of the fathers was a widower), and five kids, all living together on the property. The entire family was supposed to be unbelievably smart and beautiful and wealthy. Helen rolled her eyes when she heard the parts of the gossip that elevated the Delos family to mythic proportions. In fact, she could barely stand it.

Helen tried to stay behind the register and ignore the excited whispering, but it was impossible. Every time she heard one of the members of the Delos family mentioned by name, it drew her attention as if it had been shouted, irritating her. She left the register and went over to the magazine rack, straightening the shelves just to give her hands something to do.

As she wiped down the shelves and stocked the candy jars, she mentally ticked the kids off in her head. *Hector is a year older than Jason and Ariadne, who are twins. Lucas and Cassandra are brother and sister, cousins to the other three.*

She changed the water for the flowers and rang up

for a few customers. Hector wouldn't be there the first day of school because he was still in Spain with his Aunt Pandora, though no one in town knew why.

Helen pulled on a pair of shoulder-length rubber gloves, a long apron and dug through the garbage for stray recycling items. *Lucas, Jason and Ariadne are all going to be in my grade. So I'm surrounded. Cassandra is the youngest. She's a freshman, and only fourteen.*

She went to the back kitchen and put a load in the industrial dishwasher. She mopped the floors and started counting the money. *Lucas is such a stupid name. It's all wrong. It sticks out like a sore thumb.*

'Lennie?'

'What! Dad! Can't you see I'm counting?' Helen said, slamming her hands down on the counter so hard she made a stack of quarters jump. Jerry held up his hands in a placating gesture.

'It's the first day of school tomorrow,' he reminded her in his most reasonable voice.

'I know,' she responded blankly, still unaccountably irritable but trying not to take it out on her father.

'It's almost eleven, honey,' he said. Kate came out from the back to check on the noise.

'You're still here? I'm really sorry, Jerry,' she said, looking perplexed. 'Helen, I told you to lock the front and go home at nine.'

They both stared at Helen, who had arranged every bill and every coin in neat stacks.

'I got sidetracked,' Helen said lamely.

After sharing a worried glance with Jerry, Kate took over counting the change and sent them home. Still in a daze, Helen gave Kate a kiss goodbye and tried to figure out how she had missed out on the last three hours of her life.

Jerry put Helen's bike on the back of the Pig and started the engine without a word. He glanced over at her a few times as they drove home, but he didn't say anything until they parked in the driveway.

'Did you eat?' he asked softly, raising his eyebrows.

'I don't . . . yes?' Helen had no idea what or when she'd last eaten. She vaguely remembered Kate cutting her some cherries.

'Are you nervous about the first day of school? Junior year's a big one.'

'I guess I must be,' she said absent-mindedly.

Jerry glanced over at her and bit his lower lip. He exhaled before speaking. 'I've been thinking maybe you should talk to Dr Cunningham about those phobia pills. You know, the kind for people who have a hard time in crowds? Agoraphobia! That's what it's called,' he burst out, remembering. 'Do you think that could help you?'

Helen smiled and ran the charm of her necklace along its chain. 'I don't think so, Dad. I'm not afraid of strangers – I'm just shy.'

She knew she was lying. It wasn't *just* that she was shy.

Any time she extended herself and attracted attention, even accidentally, her stomach hurt so badly it felt almost like the stomach flu or menstrual cramps – really *bad* menstrual cramps – but she'd sooner set her hair on fire than tell her father that.

'And you're OK with that? I know you'd never ask, but do you want help? Because I think this is holding you back . . .' Jerry said, starting in on one of their oldest fights.

Helen cut him off at the pass. 'I'm fine! Really. I don't want to talk to Dr Cunningham; I don't want drugs. I just want to go inside and eat,' she said in a rush. She got out of the Jeep.

Her father watched her with a small smile as she plucked her heavy, old-fashioned bike off the rack on the back of the Jeep and placed it on the ground. She rang the bell on her handlebar jauntily and gave her dad a grin.

'See, I'm just peachy,' she said.

'If you knew how hard what you just did would be for an average girl your age, you'd get what I'm saying. You aren't average, Helen. You try to come off that way, but you're not. You're like *her*,' he said, his voice drifting off.

For the thousandth time Helen cursed the mother she didn't remember for breaking her father's sweet heart. How could anyone leave such a good guy without so much as a goodbye? Without so much as a photo to remember her by?

‘You win! I’m not average – I’m special, just like everyone else,’ Helen teased, anxious to cheer him up. She nudged him with her hip as she walked past, wheeling her bike into the garage. ‘Now, what is there to eat? I’m starving, and it’s your week to be kitchen slave.’