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Opening extract from

Soul Song

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To Isabel, who knew Iris's name

1

How can you miss someone you've never met?

'Nate,' I think. 'His name is Nate, short for Nathaniel.'

I keep thinking it, over and over. I will hold on to Nate's name – the fact of him – any way I can.

Right now, it's all I have.

Dr Price sits behind a desk and watches me with keen blue eyes. "Iris, do you know why you're here?" he asks.

"Because there's been a mistake, that's why," I say. I try to sound bored – pissed off. I try not to show how scared I am.

Dr Price lifts a grey eyebrow. "But when the police officer brought you here last night, you got very upset, remember?" he asks. "You shouted, 'I trusted you!' at her. What did you mean by that?"

I shrug. Oh God, I can't believe I told that woman everything. I hate myself for being so stupid. I should have known how it would end up.

A silence falls.

Dr Price looks down at some papers. "Officer Yang says that you told her you believe some rather … unusual things."

"I was just kidding," I say. "I didn't mean any of it!" I have a green and silver stone in my hand. I grip it hard.

Dr Price keeps on as if I hadn't spoken. "She says you told her that you've been to the past," he says. "1922, it says here. And you met a boy there who you think is your soul mate. Now the two of you are in this time – our time – together, but things aren't easy for you. Is that correct?"

Every word is correct.

"Of course it's not," I snap. "I'd have to be crazy to believe something like that."

But given where I am, I guess that is kind of the point.

Dr Price leans back and gazes at me. He clicks a pen a few times. "Officer Yang said you were very upset," he says. "Almost in tears."

I think fast. "I – I want to be an actress," I say. "I was just practising a scene."

I can tell he doesn't believe me. The chair squeaks as he sits up. "Where are your parents?" he asks.

"I don't have any."

He makes a note. "Your carers, then?"

I don't answer. If I say Texas, they'll find out I'm a runaway, for all I'm two thousand miles away in Los Angeles. There can't be *that* many runaways named Iris from Texas. And then Gary, the creep from the group home, will know where I am.

Why, why did I give that police officer my real first name?

'Nate, short for Nathaniel,' I repeat to myself. Where *is* Nate? Is he OK? I stroke my fingers over the smooth surface of the stone. It doesn't make me feel any better.

Dr Price's gaze drops down. "That's a pretty stone," he says.

I stiffen as he looks back at his notes. "You told Officer Yang that you believe it has magical powers," he says. "As long as its two halves are joined, you and this boy from the past can be in the same time together. Is that true?"

I try to look as if it doesn't matter. "It's true that I told her that," I say. "I can't believe she fell for it. Of course the stone doesn't have magical powers. There's no such thing."

Dr Price holds out his hand. "May I?"

I want to say no, but that would seem too strange. So, after a second, I give him the stone.

"Unusual," he says, as he studies it. "I've never seen anything quite like it." He watches me as he tosses it once on his palm. Its green and silver surface shimmers. "You don't believe there's anything special about it?" he asks.

I can't take my eyes off the stone. I feel cold, and I wipe my hands on my jeans. If anything happens to it ...

"It's just a pretty stone, that's all," I say. My voice is faint.

Dr Price draws his hand back. "So if I were to throw it out the window ..."

"No!" I leap forward, but his fingers have closed over the stone. "Please, don't break it!" I cry. "You could ruin everything!"

A clock ticks. I shake as I sit and stare at the stone. Dr Price hands it back to me. He looks like he feels sorry for me.

"I wasn't going to harm it, Iris," he says. "But I think it's a good idea for you to stay here with us for a while. We have drugs that can help with these fantasies of yours."

Terror fills me. "I don't need help!"

He ignores me. "These fantasies have been taking over your life, haven't they?" he says. "We can help with that. But *you* have to help, too." He leans forward. "You have to work with us, Iris. We can't get you better on our own. Will you do that?"

My head pounds. 'No!' I want to shout. 'You have to let me out of here!'

Then I see the bars on the window. They're painted white to blend in with the walls, but they're still bars. I'm trapped. No one is going to believe me – no one. For now, I have to play along, until I can figure out a way to escape this place and get back to Nate.

If he still wants to have anything to do with me.

Pain stabs my heart as I think about how he must be feeling. It's all my fault.

I realise that Dr Price is waiting for an answer. I clear my throat and try to sound sincere.

"I'll help," I say.



They leave me alone for the next few hours.

The ward is depressing. Ugly. The walls are painted apple green and the sofas and chairs are brown. It's full of kids around my age. They have empty stares, or they sit and talk to themselves. They scare me, but I manage not to show it. Maybe mental illness is catching. Maybe I *will* go crazy if I don't get out of here soon.

The bedroom they give me has two single beds. The girl in the other bed is called Mel and she makes me nervous – the way she gazes into space. Sometimes she laughs out loud, as if she's watching a funny film inside her head.

I don't spend much time in the bedroom. Instead, I wander around the ward as the TV drones on in the background. I try to look as if I'm just bored and restless.

What I'm really doing is watching the front desk. There's always a nurse sitting there. The door to the ward is right beside her. A guard stands next to it. I remember from last night that there's another door beyond that one. Both doors are kept locked.

As I stare at the guard, I wonder if he keeps the keys in his pocket. Any time he looks over at me, I glance away. In the end, I give up and go back into the common area.

There is a game show on TV. There is lots of screaming and laughing coming from the screen. Here in the ward, there are just blank faces.

No one pays attention to me. I sit in the corner of a sofa and stare at the TV. The windows in here have bars on them, too.

I clench my fists. 'Nate, I'm sorry,' I think. He must be so worried about me by now, for all he was so angry before. Angrier than I've ever seen him. The thought makes me feel sick.

'Everything will be all right,' I tell him in my mind. 'I'll be back with you soon. We'll work it out.' I hope that's true. Oh God, why didn't I keep my promise to him? Why did I keep trying to find out about his family?

I lick my lips as I think about what else I found out. There's something I didn't tell Officer Yang. I'm not sure I've admitted it even to myself.

No one is watching me, so I take a postcard out of the back pocket of my jeans. I stare down at it. No, it wasn't just my imagination. My grandmother's handwriting looks fainter than it did before.

Soon it will be as if she never even existed. And when that happens … what will it mean for me? My mother was her daughter. I can't have been born if she wasn't.

'This can't be happening,' I think as I grip the postcard. I have *got* to get back to Nate. But even if I manage to escape … how can we fix this?

"I know why you're here," a voice hisses. I start in surprise. My room-mate Mel is sitting beside me. She's small and dark-haired, with a sharp chin like a cat.

I try not to show how nervous I am. I shove the postcard back in my pocket. "You do?" I say.

She nods. "The voices in my head tell me things," she says. "You're going to die soon, aren't you?"