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Opening extract from

Soulmates

Written by

Holly Bourne

Published by

Usborne Publishing Ltd

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Prologue

"Soulmates" wasn't something I had ever believed in. It was a Hollywood word – a notion created to sell romantic literature and movie rights.

Love, as I saw it, was a worldwide obsession born out of desperate fantasy. People could call it love, romance, finding their soulmate, and all that other nonsense. But in my mind? It was just hormones, biology, chemistry – dressed up in some happily-ever-after, self-created delusion born out of a fear of being alone.

Of course, you're always a cynic before you fall in love yourself…

The problem is, Hollywood, Stephenie Meyer, Mills and Boon – they got it right. Soulmates *do* exist.

But what they fail to understand is that finding them isn't always a good thing.

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It started just like any other day, with the sun rising.

I suppose whenever anything extraordinary happens to anyone, they've always started that day with the humdrum of waking up in bed. Whether it's a near-death experience or meeting the person you want to spend the rest of your life with – it all starts with the sun rising, alarm clocks ringing and getting out from under the covers. So dull. So ordinary.

The day my life changed was no different.

I lay in my single bed, under my duvet, looking at the beam of light sneaking between my curtains and casting itself upon my legs. And as I did, I practised my breathing exercises. I kept my hands on the base of my stomach, focusing on how it expanded and contracted with each breath. I repeated this for ten minutes.

It was Saturday and I had nothing to get up for. I drew the curtains back, letting the rest of the light invade every corner of my room. I then pulled myself onto the window sill, curled my legs under me and looked outside.

My name is Poppy Lawson, and I don't like where I live. Though it's overtly clichéd to be seventeen and hate where you live, it's the truth. In fact, there is nothing about my life that isn't typical. I live in a small town, a perfect commuting distance from London. Every morning at 6.30 a.m. the men leave, trickling in a line towards the train station, all wearing suits. The wives remain at home, getting their children ready for private school and shovelling down bowls of organic muesli, before climbing into their four-by-fours for the school run. It's a town where everyone has a front garden, a place where everyone knows you and you know everyone, and extra-curricular activities are thrust down teenagers' throats as if the success of the family depends solely on how good the children are at lacrosse. It's all a giant cliché and I hate it. But I figure that's pretty damn predictable too.

My contemplations were interrupted by my mobile phone ringing. I looked at the screen and smiled. It was Lizzie.

"It's early, you cow. I could still be asleep you know," I said.

"Shut up. It's past ten thirty, and I have news."

"Well, spill then." I uncurled my legs and stretched them out on the window sill.

"It's about tonight. It's going to be amazing."

Lizzie had a way of making everything a drama. Her ambition was to be a journalist and she spent most of her time practising. She traded titbits of gossip between

friendship groups, "sexed-up" even the dreariest house party the morning after and, of course, she had an encyclopaedic knowledge of everyone's business. I had learned she was physically incapable of keeping a secret, but loved her anyway. She made this place – our lives – seem dramatic. She brought colour to the monochrome.

I sighed. "Lizzie, it's another Band Night, what can possibly happen?" I replied. "Oh no, don't tell me. One of our friends' going-nowhere bands has actually signed a record deal?" I squealed to ring home my sarcasm. "I don't believe it. It's a miracle!"

She laughed. "No, of course not." Then she paused, pre-empting my reaction. "But there *is* a new band playing tonight and they're supposed to be incredible. They're called Growing Pains. I've heard the lead guitarist is gorgeous, and apparently a record label *is* interested in them."

I sighed again.

"Seriously."

"Lizzie, we've been going to Band Night for how long? Two years? We know how many boys in bands who *apparently* have record labels interested in them? And pray tell me, how many of them have actually ever made it? I bet you ten million pounds that they all grow up, go to uni and do Business Studies, spend a gap year pretending they're not going to get a job in Daddy's company and then take one on a starting salary of £32,000." I re-curled my feet under myself and took a quick breath. "AND then when they're middle-aged they'll entertain their posh friends at dinner

parties with stories of their 'troubled' youth being a 'rock star'."

It was Lizzie's turn to sigh. "Christ, you're miserable."

I shrugged over the phone. "Just speaking the truth."

"Okay. Well forget the band-bashing, Miss I'm-So-Much-Better-Than-Everyone, and let me at least tell you about the fit guitarist."

I laughed. "That I will allow."

We spoke for a few more minutes and when I hung up I felt happier. Okay, it wasn't going to be the social highlight of my life, but at least Band Night was something to do on a Saturday night that didn't involve ordering pizza, watching a trashy film, and wallowing in my own uncoolness. With a sudden burst of energy I flung my legs off the window sill and went down for breakfast.

Mum was making tea as I entered the kitchen. She stood in her dressing gown, frowning at the cupboard doors. She'd been trying to talk Dad into refitting the kitchen for about two years, but he refused to "waste money on something as boring as cupboard doors".

"Morning," she said, tearing her eyes away. "Fancy a cuppa?"

I opened a cupboard and pulled out a box of cereal. "Please."

As I poured out muesli, she brought a mug over and ruffled my hair.

"Mum!"

"Sorry, love."

She sat next to me, warming her hands on her tea while I started eating.

"So what's the big plan for today then?"

I swallowed. "Just going to Band Night. Some new band is playing, supposed to be good. Apparently they have a fit guitarist."

Mum perked up. "Ooo, really? That's exciting. Wow, a fit man in Middletown. It must be a miracle."

"I know." I rolled my eyes. "But stranger things have happened."

Mum laughed. My constant disregard for every potential suitor was something she teased me about. She ribbed me that no one would ever be good enough, but I swore I wasn't picky. It was just that all seventeen-year-old boys were disgusting. And the few that weren't had over-inflated egos from the constant attention. My theory was that boys stopped being gross aged nineteen, and as I wasn't pretty enough to attract an older guy, I was quite happy to wait for two years until every boy my age didn't nauseate me.

Mum, however, didn't agree with my thinking and worried about me. In fact, worrying about me was her favourite pastime.

As if on cue, her face turned serious over the steam of her tea.

"So, how did your appointment with Dr. Ashley go the other day?" she asked quietly.

Oh God, so it was going to be one of *those* mornings.

"It was fine," I replied non-committally and carried on eating.

"Just fine?" What was it with parents and *that* phrase? "What did you talk about?"

"You know, the usual."

She nodded. "Okay."

I focused on chewing muesli, waiting for her to start up again.

It took less than thirty seconds.

"So what is the usual?"

I swallowed.

"Jesus, Mum, I don't know. I whinged about my coursework, he made me practise that stupid breathing thing again, we talked about how to cope when…you know…it happens."

She looked concerned and I held my breath, waiting for her to say it.

"So he still doesn't know what causes it?" Her eyes filled with tears. Bloody hell. How many times can you have the same conversation?

"Mum." I spoke slowly and carefully. "This isn't your fault. You didn't screw up my child-raising or drop me on my head as a baby. You brought up Louise exactly the same and this didn't happen to her. It's bad luck. That's all. You've got to believe me."

She looked up at me like a child. "Really?" she whispered. "Dr. Ashley didn't say it was anyone's fault?"

"Of course he didn't. Because it's not. It's just my biology, my hormones. Whatever. No doubt it's something I'll outgrow and we'll look back and laugh at it. Okay?"

She looked relieved. For now. No doubt I would have this conversation again at some point the next week. And the next. And the next.

"Okay." She grabbed both of our empty cups and took them to the sink.

"You can borrow my handbag for tonight if you want," she said, smiling.

"Can I? Brilliant. Thanks, Mum."

Then she walked out of the kitchen.

Here's the thing. Much as I try to fight it, I'm the biggest cliché around. I've got "mental health" problems. I know. Original, right? I detest myself for my lack of creativity, but unfortunately it's out of my control. It's like, because I'm middle class, my mind isn't preoccupied with worrying about money and stuff, so it's busying itself with this instead.

About two years ago, I was in school, just listening to my Geography teacher banging away about fair trade coffee, when it became quite obvious I was about to die. The walls closed in on me. Everything went black, and I couldn't breathe.

Blind panic rushed through my body like an adrenalin shot as I realized that these were my last moments. I

remember thinking, as my body frantically fought for air, how dreadfully awful it was that I was going to die in Geography. And I had never swum with dolphins, or seen the Grand Canyon, or ridden a motorbike, or done any of the things you're supposed to do before dying. I wouldn't see my parents again. Or Louise. It would wreck their lives if I died.

And then I realized I was going to die without ever having a boyfriend. Though the world was hazy, all I could think about was love. And how I'd never had it. How I would never understand what it felt like to fall asleep knowing another person was thinking of you. I would never have someone touch the small of my back as they steered me through a crowd. I would never know every contour of someone's face off-by-heart, and yet not be bored with it. And, as I sank to the grey, chewing-gum stained carpet, all I could think was how sad that was.

Of course, I woke up. Surrounded by concerned faces, my palms bleeding from digging my fingernails into them. I got to go home for the day. And all my romantic revelations were forgotten. I put them down to concussion or whatever, and I got a lot of attention for about a week until everyone forgot about it.

My life continued without consequence until it happened again.

I was shopping for tampons with my mum – probably the most embarrassing items you could be carrying in a public near-death experience. Like the first time, the walls

squashed me in and I felt I was being suffocated by nothing. That was all I could remember. I came round screaming on the cold marble floor, while dozens of terrified shoppers stared at me. My mum was clutching my hand desperately, her eyes wide with fear.

There were doctor's appointments after doctor's appointments. My mum argued with our GP so, of course, we "went private". After hundreds of blood tests, two more "incidents", and dozens of referrals, I was taken to a large white house and forced to talk to some smiling man with perfectly straight but yellowing teeth. He eventually gave me a term for the incidents. Panic attacks. Very common, apparently. Stresses of modern life and all that.

And so began my weekly appointments with Dr. Ashley. Or the Shrink, or Head Doctor, or whatever you'd like to call him. And for two years I've been forced to endure the guilt in my mum's face every morning. Searching for an answer, a reason, and only finding her innocent self to blame.

I ran my cereal bowl under the tap, washing off all the leftover muesli so it wouldn't stick like cement to the sides. Then I waited for the evening, where hopefully, something original would happen in this stupid, stupid town.

I spent the day busying myself with being a girl. I ran a huge bubble bath with some of Mum's posh stuff and shaved my legs. I then tried on about six million different outfits. After much speculation, I decided on my dark denim miniskirt

and the faded Smiths T-shirt I'd begged Dad to buy me from a vintage store. After applying lashings of mascara, eyeliner and lip gloss, I checked my phone and realized I was meeting everyone in five minutes. I took one last look in the mirror – not bad. Not brilliant either. My brown eyes stared back at me, covered slightly by some of my mousey hair, which I had tried and failed to backcomb into a rock-y look. I slipped my feet into my battered ballerina pumps, grabbed my jacket and ran out the door.

It was still light as I half-ran, half-walked to meet my friends. The sun was low in the sky, casting everything with a golden light. I momentarily revelled in how pretty everything looked, before reminding myself that I hated it here. My friends were waiting for me at the corner – Elizabeth, Ruth, and Amanda.

"You're late!" Lizzie said. "I swear I spend half my life waiting for you." She looked nice. New jeans and a black top. She'd twisted her hair into some complicated-looking knot and was wearing loads of eyeliner.

I jogged the last couple of steps to meet them. "Sorry," I panted. "Wardrobe crisis."

"Yeah yeah. If we've missed the fit guitarist, I'll give you a real crisis to worry about."

At the words "fit guitarist", Ruth's eyes lit up. I gave her a quick hug to say hello.

"Have you seen this mysterious fitty?" she asked.

Ruth was always interested in a conquest. Once she set her sights on someone, she was pretty much unstoppable.

She also had a DD chest to bounce off any competition. I was always relieved I didn't fancy anyone, as I wouldn't stand much chance with Ruth around.

"I only just heard about him. But I saw a pig fly past my window this morning, so I'm quite sure a hot man has moved to town."

"Poppy," she said. "It makes me so sad to hear you speak like this. There are so many hot men around. If only you opened your eyes to the countless possibilities."

"There are hot *boys*," I corrected. "I don't think we know any hot men."

"Oh, they're men by the time I'm finished with them." And she winked.

I linked arms with Amanda, who hadn't spoken yet. Bless her. She'd spent so long hanging around Ruth, she'd learned not to bother trying.

"How are things going with Johnno?"

Johnno was Amanda's sort-of boyfriend. She'd surpassed herself by finding someone even shyer than she was. They spent most of their time apologizing to each other or awkwardly holding hands like children put together for a wedding photograph.

She blushed deeply. "Things with Johnno are going fine," she stammered slightly. "We managed to kiss yesterday without bumping noses."

I couldn't help laughing. "Well, baby steps, eh?"

Lizzie linked her arms through mine and Ruth's so we were all in a line.

"Right, ladies," she said. "I have a feeling tonight is going to be incredible."

"Yeah right," I muttered.

"Shut it. Seriously, I feel a burning in my loins that something is going to happen tonight."

"You can get a cream for that. You know, for the burning?"

Ruth's eyes brightened in recognition. "Oh yes, she's right. I can recommend you one. Clears it up straight away."

"Silence," Lizzie said and we dissolved into laughter. "Things are going to happen tonight. I can just feel it." She paused. "It's my *news sense*."

We all rolled our eyes.

"Let's just get this over with," I said.

And we started walking towards the club.