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Opening extract from

Soul Mates

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To my husband, who makes me believe in soul mates

1

How can you miss someone you've never met?

I always know him by his eyes.

Sometimes we're on the deck of a ship together, in old-fashioned clothes. Or we stand in the shadow of the Pyramids. Or we watch a tropical sunset. It doesn't matter. I may not know his name, but his eyes are always the same – a deep, gentle brown. And the look in them as he turns to me is ... something I've never seen before.

Not in real life, anyway.

Tonight I dreamed about him again.

This time we're hiking in the snow. We both have on heavy coats, and he has his arm around me, to shield me from the cold.

"Don't worry," he says. He has to raise his voice over the wind. "We'll be all right."

It's so cold, and I know we're lost. But I'm not scared. Because we're together, and that means we can do anything.

"I'm not worried," I say. I stop and rest my hands on either side of his face. I kiss him. His lips are warm, even in the cold.

He grins through the snowflakes. "You could be a *little* worried," he says. "We're not home yet."

He's so beautiful. Maybe that's a funny word to use for a boy who's almost a man, but it's true. And as I look into his dark eyes I have a thousand memories.

It has always been him.

I start to touch his mouth with my finger. Then I gasp as an icy shiver runs down my spine. I glance around us, terrified of what I might see. But there are only snow-covered trees.

He takes my hand and we start to walk again, faster than before. "We'll be all right," he repeats.

His jaw looks hard now, and I know that he feels it, too. There's something out there. Something evil – jealous.

Something that will stop at nothing to tear us apart.

"Carlton, New Mexico!"

I wake up with a gasp. My pulse is pounding. I'm on a Greyhound bus, with my face pressed up against a window. A fat lady snores in the seat next to me.

It was only a dream. For a second I want to cry. OK, part of it was scary, but I'd still give anything to be back in it again. The boy's face has already begun to fade from my mind – just like always. All I have left are his voice and eyes.

I swallow hard. His love for me was so clear in both.

Love. Something in me hardens, and I glare out the window at the dusty town. Yeah, right. As if love like that could ever be real anyway. Why do I keep dreaming about this stupid boy? He's been haunting me for years.

Along with that sense of something evil. I go cold as I remember. Then I shake my head, irritated. 'Get a grip, Iris,' I think.

As the bus pulls into the station I grab my backpack and climb over the sleeping fat lady. This is where I get off. It's as far as I could afford. I still have a long way to go, but I'm a few hundred miles closer now.

I'm the only one who gets off. The driver looks at me as I step out into the warm night air. "Got someone meeting you?" he asks.

"Sure, my aunt." The lie comes with ease. I've had a lot of chance to practise, these last few days. The bus driver nods – he's bored already. The doors slide shut and the bus pulls away into the night.

I go over to the vending machines. I don't have much money – only what I've managed to save. I check the change slot and find a quarter. Thank God. I add a few more coins and buy a Snickers bar.

As I eat, I stare at the highway. The cars are bright streaks of light heading west. Same as me.

I know where I'm going, and that almost makes me feel as if I belong somewhere. I haven't felt that way since Gran died and I got put into care. But I've been sure of where I need to go for a long time. I've never been there, but it feels like ... well, like there's a magnet, and it's pulling me there.

OK, I guess that's pretty crazy. But at least it's somewhere to go – as good a place as any. Because I am *not* going back into care. Ever. I think about that sleaze at the group home and shudder.

Not that anyone's going to come looking for me. Another 16-year-old runaway – who cares?

I swing my backpack over one shoulder and head towards the highway. It's summer and the wind is warm, even at night. It stirs at my long, dark hair. My feet kick up small clouds of dust with every step.

When I reach the side of the highway, I stop and stick out my thumb.

"We're just coming into Los Angeles," a woman's cheery voice says.

I open my eyes, still heavy with sleep. When I realise what I was dreaming, I wince. 'God, not *him* again,' I think. 'What exactly is wrong with me?'

The woman at the wheel of the car is middle-aged and chubby. "Sorry to wake you up," she says. "I thought you'd want to see the skyline." She takes a slurp of coffee.

"That's OK," I say. I've been lucky. I know it's stupid to hitchhike, but most people who picked me up were worried about me. One old lady scolded me all the way across Arizona, telling me how dangerous it is to hitch rides.

I sit up and stare at the long, smoggy skyline in wonder. I've actually done it. I've made it to Los Angeles – two thousand miles from Texas.

"Where in the city are you heading?" the woman asks. Then she grins. "Let me guess. You want to be an actress."

"No, I'm visiting my grandparents," I say. "They've got a place near Hollywood and Vine."

It's the only Los Angeles address I know. It's the same one everyone knows. But as I say it I stare up at the hills north of the city. And my pulse skips a beat as it hits me – that's where I'm going.

After the woman drops me off, I get a city bus. Then I walk for a long time. By late afternoon I'm on a road high above Los Angeles. I can see the entire city, and the big HOLLYWOOD sign a few hills over.

I'm not sure what to do. For so long, I've felt like I *have* to come to L. A. But why? I don't feel drawn to anything at all now. I have no idea why I'm up in these hills.

I walk on down the road. The sun is hot, my backpack heavy.

'I need to figure out what I'm going to do,' I think as I trudge along. 'I'll have to try and get a job somewhere.'

Coming up here was such a waste of time. I should be heading the other way, back down into the city. But for some reason I keep going, even though I'm getting more annoyed at myself with every step.

I'm just about to turn back when I come to an old iron gate. I stop and stare. It's tall, with

spikes on top, and it's hanging off its hinges. On the other side of the gate is a long dirt track. There are weeds everywhere. And orange trees – I can smell them.

I hold onto the gate as I look in. There's a house at the end of the track. Big, like something a Hollywood star would have. It looks old and abandoned. I glance behind me. There's no one around.

'This is such a bad idea,' I tell myself. 'The place is probably full of druggies.'

But for some reason I really want to see the house up close. I hesitate – and then squeeze through a gap in the gate.

The only sounds are my footsteps and the wind in the trees. When I reach the house it's even older than I thought. Worn steps lead to the front door, and half the windows are boarded up.

I wipe the palms of my hands on my jeans. All of a sudden I feel excited – nervous. But why? It's only an old house.

I want to go inside so much that it scares me a little. There's an old-fashioned well nearby, and I go over, rest my hands on the cool stone and look down. From far away, my face stares back at me.

There's a bucket on a chain. When I try it, the pulley still works, but the wooden bucket has rotted away. Big surprise.

Come in.

I jump and stare at the house, my eyes wide. It's like it *spoke* to me. No, this is way too freaky! I snatch up my backpack and start to leave – but then I pause and look back. My pulse skips another beat.

I have to see what's inside.

I can't stop myself. I head towards the house and walk up the creaky steps.