

A SOUL'S KISS by Debra Chapoton

Chapter One

“Jessica Mitchell,” my drama teacher, Mrs. Clark, calls out my name. “Your group is first.”

We walk up the stage steps. Kayla first, then me, then Michael. I get goose bumps just knowing he’s right behind me.

I signed up for drama class because I saw the play last year and Michael blew me away. It’s not unusual for a junior, like me, to add drama to her schedule. I’m pretty sure Kayla had the same goal in mind when she switched into the class the second week of school: Michael Hoffman. How else could we get into a class with a senior?

We get into position on the stage.

I hold the knife steady, steady, directly over Kayla’s heart. Her eyes do not flutter open. I stay poised, waiting for the exact moment when I will raise my arm higher, release my breath with a scream, and plunge the weapon downward with jealous rage.

Or resentful hate.

Or odious envy.

I haven’t really got hold of my circle of emotion yet. What I really want to do is giggle. I stare at her closed eyes, waiting for a signal. She looks like my archrival Hannah. They share the same long blonde hair. Pretty like her, too.

Michael will step between us at any moment now and save her.

“Jessica,” Michael whispers my name. I raise my arm. Jerk it. I feel a tingle in my shoulder like a tendon snapped and I half turn without meaning to.

Her eyes open. She doesn’t scream and neither do I, though one of us should. She sneers instead, rolls her eyes toward Michael and whispers the classic *save me*.

I slam the knife down, my fist stopping a quarter inch from her chest. In the same instant Michael leaps from behind me and punches at my hand. He knocks the knife’s handle. It easily flips away and thumps on the floor with no resounding metallic clatter. Of course not. The rubber stage prop is as phony as we are. Our sixty second impromptu warm-up exercise receives the hesitant applause of the other twenty-seven kids watching. Three guys take the stage as we return to our seats.

Today we had to limit our dialogue to three words or less per person and concentrate on blending actions. *Like a dance*, Mrs. Clark had said. Michael, Kayla, and I step down and trail toward the empty fifth row as the next group gets into position. *Like a dance*, I think, and I sidestep my way past Kayla so I can sit next to Michael. He is so hot.

Now that I’m sitting so close to him I get more nervous, if that’s possible. I want to say something, anything, but the words are stuck somewhere near my pounding heart.

My best friend, Rashanda, would have something smart to say. Her constant advice rolls around in my head: just be yourself.

“So, Michael,” I whisper as the second group on stage begins, “what are your biggest fears?” I’ve practiced questions like this in front of the bathroom mirror. Now I feel like a fool for actually asking him such a lame question so I flip my hair back with my hand and angle my body toward him, crossing my right leg over my left. Why do I bother trying to act cool? I’m hopeless at this acting stuff, and I am über-scared that people won’t like me.

“Uh,” he says. He keeps his eyes forward, frowns a bit, and then turns toward me. For a second, we are the only two people in the auditorium. He keeps his voice to something less than a whisper. I read his lips. “I’d have to say robbers, the dark, and balloons on the floor.”

I stifle my laughter. Kayla nudges me.

“What’s so funny?” she asks. Her voice is a little too loud. I shake my head, keep my lips glued shut, and focus on the three kids that are acting like animals on the stage. Mrs. Clark’s piercing glance in our direction misses me and settles on Kayla. Kayla slumps back.

I dig my hand in my pocket for a breath mint, but only find lint. Drama is the last period of the day and the most important class to have fresh breath. Because, well, because I could get picked to do a romantic scene. And Michael Hoffman, man of my dreams, might have to do a scene with me, like today, and like two other times this semester, and I might get to sit next to him in the auditorium. Like today. So breath mints are a must.

I can’t believe I’ve run out of mints. I put my hand up to my face and give a little fake cough, trying to catch a whiff. Not bad, I guess. I join the others in clapping faint approval for the finished skit on stage.

Now’s my chance to respond and not be heard by Mrs. Clark. “Balloons on the floor?” I lean toward Michael, match his last two hand claps. “You’re going to have to explain that one to me.”

“I’ll tell you later,” he breathes.

Michael curls up one delicious corner of his mouth then breaks into a full grin. I memorize the moment as his deep blue eyes hold mine for a fraction of eternity. I didn’t know that a guy’s eyes could sparkle so. If I swallow now, will he notice the lump in my throat? When his eyes flicker to the stage I take advantage of two whole seconds to admire the way his sun-bleached hair falls across his forehead. He gives a tiny toss of his head like a rock star. I’ve seen him do that a hundred times, but maybe my ogling spurred the unconscious gesture.

My heart thumps. *Later*. What could that mean? Right after school? Alone in the auditorium? With Michael Hoffman?

As if to mock me the entire class howls at something silly that the third group on stage is doing. Michael catches it, and Kayla, too, so I laugh along with them. Three senior boys, friends of Michael’s who are nice and cool and popular even though they aren’t in the party crowd or jocks, troop off the stage. They file into our row from the other aisle and Michael stands to high five them. I wish I knew what had been so funny.

As the next several groups do their skits we sit quietly. It takes half the hour to get through everybody, and then Mrs. Clark marches us back to the drama room and passes out some scripts.

Later. Later. Isn’t it time for the last bell to ring? I really want to get to the *later* part of today and talk to Michael.

Finally the bell rings. I fish under my desk for my Spanish book, the only class I have any homework in tonight, and take my time getting to my feet. If I time it just right I can exit with Michael and—

“Jessica.” Mrs. Clark motions me over as I pass her desk. “I want you to practice the part of the girl looking for her soul mate. You don’t have to memorize anything.” She laughs like a troll and adds, “Yet.” I can sense Michael passing behind me. He’ll be out the door in two more seconds. “But go over it enough times to get a sense of the timing and rhythm.”

“All right,” I say. She hasn’t given anyone else an assignment like this. She must think I need all the extra help I can get. Right. I fold the script in half and then fold it again and stuff the bulky square into my back pocket.

There are three slowpokes between me and the door. Michael is through it and heading for his locker. Of course I know exactly where his locker is located—I pass it several times a day.

I push past the slowpokes and enter the hallway. This is the third time I’ve left drama class after Michael. That means I’ll have to see him meet up with his girlfriend, Hannah.

Yup, there she is. She catches up to him at the corner, gives him a peck on the cheek—what I wouldn’t give to be in her shoes—but then she says something and waves him off. He continues down to his locker, but she keeps going straight.

Dilemma. Do I go to my locker? I’ve got my Spanish homework and the drama script. I didn’t wear a coat today. I can go down the senior hallway to the parking lot before heading to the pool. I can stop and ask Michael about his funny fear of balloons.

Or do I follow Hannah and see what she’s up to? Seems like a no-brainer, except that Hannah starts waving at Keith Mullins as soon as Michael turns away. If she’s two-timing Michael, well, that would be nothing but good news for me.

I turn down the senior hallway. Doors slam, lockers clang, locks jangle. Guys yell, jerks cuss, girls laugh. I’m pretty much ignored since I’m a lowly junior. I plaster a semi-smile on my face, ready if Michael bangs his locker shut and sees me. This is a practiced smile, one that doesn’t make my chin crinkle, but lifts my cheeks to create a higher cheekbone effect. I’m just average looking so I have to do the most with what I have.

I slow my pace.

And don’t see the elbow. Just feel it. Hard. Around my eye socket.

I’m flat on my back. Lights out.

“Sorry,” some moron says.

“Hey, are you all right?” I recognize that voice. Michael helps me up. The moron gets my book and hands it back to me.

“Yeah,” I say, “I’m . . . I’m fine.”

“Hey, I didn’t see her,” the moron says to Michael.

“What happened?” Hannah is right beside me. I stare at her shoes. Keith lags behind.

Michael explains to them in vivid detail. Has everyone slowed their pace to stare at me? Maybe I really did get knocked out. I’m not sure. My tail bone hurts and my wrists tingle from being pulled to my feet. My eye socket throbs and so does the back of my skull.

“We should take her home,” Hannah says to Michael. Then to me, “Did you drive or take the bus?” I guess I don’t answer fast enough because she keeps talking. “We’ll take you home. You shouldn’t drive. You seem all disoriented.”

More like embarrassed. Mortified. Humiliated. Totally self-conscious.

They huddle me out the back door and down the steps. Hannah has my free arm and guides me between two rows of cars until we reach a new Ford Focus. Midnight blue. Michael, or maybe it’s Keith, takes my Spanish book as Hannah helps me into the back seat, and then he hands it back and I stare at the book’s cover, still too embarrassed to lift my eyes. And dizzy.

“Where does she live?” I hear Hannah ask as she closes my door. The three of them stand outside and I’m shocked to hear Keith recite my exact address and give directions. How strange is that? Why would he know where I live?

Two of them skirt around the car and then all three of the doors open and they slide into their spots like a dance. *Like a dance?* Music blares from the radio, but I don't recognize the song and now I can't remember who was sitting next to me or who was driving.

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Suddenly I wake to swirling walls. I focus on the ceiling and wait until the dizziness passes. I'm not in my room; this is my sister's room. She's studying abroad this year so sometimes I use her room.

I turn my head and stare at the red numbers on the clock radio. I try to remember if it's Saturday or a school day. If this isn't Saturday then I'm seriously late. I sit up on an elbow and listen for the usual house sounds: dad in the shower or mom emptying the dishwasher or the kitchen TV spouting the Early Show.

Nothing.

I chuck back the comforter and realize I'm still wearing my jeans and blouse from yesterday. That's a tremendous time saver and it isn't as if anybody will remember what Jessica Mitchell wore the day before. Fashionista I am not. Now if only my hair isn't too bad.

The bathroom mirror reflects my oval face which is maybe a little paler than usual. Sleepy green eyes, unfashionably thin lips, and messy hair. I don't waste more than ten minutes on trying to look better. Hardly a bruise around my eye. No swelling.

I don't have time for breakfast and from the looks of the kitchen neither did my parents. No toast crumbs on the counter, no cereal bowl in the sink. I don't even smell coffee.

Something seems off, but I don't have time to figure it out.

Toothpaste, mouthwash, find some breath mints, grab my homework—did I have homework?—and I'm outta here.

But my car isn't in the garage. My mom's car, I mean. Dad drops her at work when I need to use her car to stay after school for practice. Like yesterday. For some reason my head is all fuzzy for a moment before I realize that I missed practice. My car is still at school! I step out the garage door, lock it, and glance up the street. Three kids are standing at the bus stop. I start walking toward them trying to remember why I left my car, skipped practice, and somehow got home. I stop in the middle of the road as a throbbing around my eye brings back the memory. I was in Keith Mullins' car. A wave of embarrassment washes over me as I remember.

I start walking toward the bus stop again. Little groans escape between my teeth as I think of Hannah, Keith, and most of all Michael, taking pity on poor little me. The ride out of the school parking lot is hazy, though. I imagine that it was Hannah who sat in the backseat with me, but that doesn't seem right if it was Michael's car. I can't picture the car. In fact, I can't remember arriving home or anything else about last night.

The rumble of the approaching school bus cuts off my reflection. The bus's gears shift down as I shift up into a jog. I've been on the bus when the driver has pulled away leaving behind a kid who was racing to catch it. I don't want to be that kid today. If I have to ride my bike three miles to school I'll miss first hour for sure. I ramp it up another notch as the stupid yellow monstrosity huffs to a stop and swings open its door. Three neighborhood kids I rarely speak to take their sweet time, thank you, thank you, and trudge up the steps. I make it and I'm not even out of breath. The driver closes the door practically on my heels and I fall into my usual seat as the bus lurches forward, spewing diesel fumes.

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I'm in first hour English, last row, last seat, before the tardy bell rings. The bus ride smudges in my memory under a growing headache.

The seat next to me is vacant. Rashanda's seat. Rashanda is the token black kid in our English class and my very best friend. I can get away with teasing her about it because we've been best friends since first grade. Her dad is white and her mom is half African American so technically Rashanda is a quadroon, a word we learned last year when we had to read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for extra credit. Sometimes I call her a silly quadroon whenever she does something peculiar, which is pretty often. She has some persistent health issues so she's at the hospital a lot. I worry about her all the time, but she tells me not to. Everything will work out, she says. She trusts God, she says, and so should I. I still worry.

There's a weird feeling about today. Like the stars aren't lining up right.

Mrs. Brown's student teacher is waiting for the bell to ring so she can click *enter* on the computer and finalize the attendance. She stares at Rashanda's empty seat and then at my desk, but not exactly at me. She looks oddly sad, but maybe that's because she started teaching the class this week and it's not going too well. Junior English is a far cry from Junior Honors English. I was in the Honors section last year with all my friends, but I couldn't fit it in my schedule this semester.

There is the usual pre-bell ruckus going on with half the kids not even in their seats. A bunch of girls are knotted into a whispering frenzy near the front of the classroom. Their heads turn one by one to look back here. At me? Maybe they're staring at my black eye. I guess I didn't use enough cover-up. They whisper some more and then file down Tyler Dolan's row.

A couple of the kids that sit around Tyler are making a fuss over him, reaching a hand out to tap his arm, nodding their heads in unison. The girls join in the conversation. Tyler's freckled face holds a deeper blush than usual, almost as red as his hair. I like Tyler; he's one of those guys I've known all my life, but usually take for granted. He held a door open for me last week. Last year, before I got my driver's license, I missed the bus and he walked me all the way home.

He looks so uncomfortable with the attention he's getting. There is something seriously wrong. With all the noise in the large room I can only make out a couple of phrases. Expressions of sympathy.

Mrs. Brown gathers her things like she's going to leave the student teacher to fend for herself today. I hope she doesn't go too far away. Some of these jerks wouldn't think twice about harassing Ms. Gardner to tears. Suddenly I feel overwhelmed by those possible tears, like I'm somehow connected spiritually to a whole range of emotions present in the room.

The tardy bell rings and Mrs. Brown stands up. That's all it takes for some of the kids to find their seats; others have to be herded, hushed, and hovered over. When Mrs. Brown is satisfied that everyone's attention is focused she turns the reins over to Ms. Gardner and leaves with a final scowl at two boys in the front.

Sometimes the bell also is a signal for me and Rashanda to go into the storage room at the back of the classroom. Since our seats flank the storage room door, we're responsible for passing out the classroom set of grammar books that we use once or twice a week. It only takes a few seconds to grab a couple armloads of the tattered manuals and distribute them to our fellow classmates. Groans and grimaces follow. Hardly anyone likes to learn about fragments and participles and gerunds.

"Today we're going to cover the use of apostrophes," Ms. Gardner says. I figure that's my cue and I stand up. Without Rashanda I'm on my own. "Tyler, would you mind getting the books from the storage room?"

Well, that's nice. I'll have some help and maybe I can find out what's up with him.

The classroom erupts into the customary whining and moaning as I slip into the dusty storage room. The long center table is covered with stacks of materials for the debate team instead of the grammar books. The shelves are crammed with thirty copies each of various novels, plays, and classics.

Tyler shuffles in and looks at the table and then the shelves.

"I don't know where they are," I say. "They're usually on the table."

He gives a little hoarse grunt like he's trying to clear his throat, but doesn't say anything. He scans the bottom shelf. I do the same on the other side of the cramped room. If we take too long I don't want to think of the teasing we'll get when we come out, you know, like: *What were you two doing in there? How long does it take to make a baby? Zip up, Dolan* and worse, gross stuff either whispered or, because there's a student teacher, yelled.

"Ah, here they are," Tyler breathes out the words like he's talking to himself.

"I'll help," I say, but he's already piling the whole set against his chest. He rises from a squatting position and two books slip to the floor just as another kid, Jason Phillips, frames the doorway.

Jason catches about a dozen more of the paperbacks as they flop out of Tyler's grasp.

"Got 'em," Jason says. He waits while Tyler retrieves the ones from the floor. I stand there like an idiot, my eye throbbing again and a sudden thirst sticking my lips together.

"I can help, too," I say. My mouth is so dry that the words must sound like crackers on sandpaper. "It's my job anyway."

They rudely ignore me and Jason says to Tyler, "Sorry about your stepbrother. I hope he makes it."

Tyler nods with his whole book-laden body; his freckles melt into another blush. I wish I knew what the problem was. I didn't even know he had a stepbrother. What could have happened that's making everyone be so sympathetic? Did he get killed in the military or something? I try to ask these questions, but my breath skips past my vocal cords and no sounds come out.

I watch them leave. How stupid am I going to look coming out of a small dark room empty handed? I'm half tempted to stay in the storage room until Ms. Gardner starts talking and all eyes will be looking forward. I reach into my pocket for a breath mint, pop it into my mouth, and relieve the parched taste. I almost collide with Tyler as he comes back in to toss the extra copies on the table.

"Oops," I say as I jump out of his way. I smile and crush myself against the shelf with my hands flung out at my sides like I'm avoiding a steamroller. I have a sudden impulse to be funny, to say something to cheer Tyler up, but he doesn't even look my way. I don't blame him; I haven't been as friendly to him in the past as I should have been.

He touches the top book and mumbles my name, a signal, I suppose, that he hasn't left a book on my desk. I still cannot speak. I pick up the book and follow him out, the corners of my mouth drooping to match his shoulders.

Class is a bore yet speeds by in a flash. When Jason and Tyler get up to collect the books at the end of the hour I stay glued to my seat. I can't seem to make myself move. Oh well, I'll let the boys do it. I push the grammar book to the edge of my desk and watch Tyler frown as he stares at it. His lips form an o, but no sound comes out. His face reddens and he avoids my eyes, as if I'm not even here.

When the bell rings, a couple kids linger to talk to Tyler so I join the tight group and listen.

"So what happened, exactly?" one girl says. "I heard it was a really bad car accident."

“Yeah.” Tyler keeps his head down.

“I didn’t even know Keith was your stepbrother,” another kid says.

“Me neither,” I chime in, finally able to speak though my words sound distant, my voice hollow. I wonder which Keith they mean. I can think of three in our grade.

Tyler looks my way, then up at the ceiling like he’s blinking back tears. He answers the kid, “Yeah, my mom and his dad got married when we were six and seven. I mostly just see him on weekends, but, you know, after ten years it’s like we’re brothers.”

I reach my hand out to give him one of those consoling pats on the shoulder, but a girl swings her book bag up and around and bangs it against my chest. I feel more than a little embarrassed as I dance back a step. She doesn’t even say *excuse me* or anything. Instead she asks, “Is Keith in as bad a shape as the girl in our class?” She swings her head in the direction where Rashanda and I sit and my heart skips. I think she means Rashanda, but then she says, “Jessica, right? Jessica Mitchell?”

That can’t be right. She must have Rashanda confused with me. I try to correct her, but again I am breathless and can’t form the words.

I watch Tyler’s face scrunch into a red knot like he’s going to correct her, but then he shakes his head no and says, “Concussion, I guess. He should recover completely. But he broke his leg.”

A concussion and a broken leg sound pretty serious to me, and yet it isn’t as bad as “the girl” in our class? I turn and stare at Rashanda’s seat. Kids from the next class period are wandering in and someone sits down in her seat. I bolt from the room and pat my pockets for my phone. It isn’t on me.

I see Carrie, a girl in my social studies class, and call out, my lungs finally working, “Hey, Carrie, can I borrow your phone a sec?” She totally ignores me and walks around the corner.

Then I see Kayla. She’s headed for Tyler who is being mobbed by a bunch of kids near the drinking fountain. She won’t ignore me, I’m sure. I come up behind her as another girl asks her if she knew that Keith Mullins was Tyler’s brother.

I stop short. Huh? Keith *Mullins*? The senior who is friends with Michael Hoffman? The guy I was in a car with yesterday? I could have been in that accident!

And then somebody else swings a book bag at my chest. On purpose.

It’s like they can’t see me.

I land on my back, the breath knocked out of me. I need a doctor with a set of those shock paddles.

I feel like a flipped turtle flailing away to right itself, and nobody is coming to my aid. Not even chivalrous Tyler. Kayla is steps away and as soon as I get some air in my lungs I gasp a plea. “Kayla, hey.”

“She can’t hear you,” someone says, kneeling down next to me. The voice is familiar. I can’t decide if I’ll be elated or deflated if it’s gorgeous Michael Hoffman coming to my assistance again. A hand takes mine and pulls me up. The bell rings and everyone scatters to class, a few of them, no doubt, facing detention for reaching the limit on tardies.

“Thanks,” I say, brushing off my butt. I have that funny feeling like I’ve forgotten something. Where are my books? Did I remember to bring back the drama script? I pat my back pocket, uncertain. I need to go to my locker before next hour, but now it’s too late.

“You’re welcome. How do you feel?”

“Okay,” I say and finally look at the angular face of tall, dark, and handsome Keith Mullins. Keith Mullins! “Hey.”

“Hey yourself.”

Keith’s eyes flicker back and forth from my right eye to my left eye. One of his eyes is more dilated than the other. He has a bump on his forehead that his hair partially hides. We spend an uncomfortable moment evaluating one another, alone in the hallway.

I remember something and say, “I heard you broke your leg.”

“I did. It’s in a cast, slung up on some kind of contraption.”

“What?” The tender tissue around my eye protests the scrunching I’m giving my forehead. “Huh? What are you doing here? Weren’t you in a car accident?”

Tyler steps out of room 236 and crosses in front of us to head to the boys’ bathroom.

“Tyler, look, it’s Keith.” He completely ignores me.

“He can’t hear you,” Keith repeats, almost like a chorus. “Or see you. Us, I mean.”

“Tyler!” He doesn’t even look back as the door swings shut. I stare hard at Keith. “What do you mean he can’t hear us or see us?”

“Do you remember the accident, Jessica?” he asks.

What accident? My head hurts so much for a moment that I think I’m going to puke.

Tyler comes out of the restroom and walks by us again, closer this time. I hear him say my name like a prayer, “Jessica.”

“What, Tyler?” I answer.

Keith snorts. “He’s got such a crush on you,” he says. “I sure hope you don’t die.”

“Gee, thanks, that’s nice.” When I turn back Keith is gone, the flap of the boys’ bathroom door my only clue. Tyler has vanished into his classroom, too, and I’m left wobbling in the middle of the hallway.

Maybe I should go puke. I pull open the door to the girls’ washroom and walk in. I stop inches before passing the full length mirror on the side wall. What did Keith mean? Why can’t anyone see or hear me? I thought people were being mean or ignoring me today, starting with the bus driver. But if they can’t see me . . . I step forward and look at my reflection. Head to toe, there I am. I can see myself: yesterday’s clothes, yesterday’s black eye, crappy hair, five pounds to lose, a couple of pre-menstrual blemishes, no shoes. Huh? I close my eyes. It feels like I have shoes on. I open my eyes. Bare feet. Yuck, bare feet in a public bathroom. Have I been barefoot all day? Maybe I’m dreaming.

The door opens and two girls file in. They walk between me and the mirror. The first girl, flaunting a style mix of Goth and Grunge, is already pulling a cigarette out of her purse. She ignores her own reflection as she passes, but I do not. I stare at the girl that trails her, dressed in sweet pink, soft bouncing curls framing a softer, yet identical, face. No reflection. I grip the edge of the sink behind me and hold my breath.

The pretty girl turns her attention toward me and looks me in the eyes, only the second person to do that today. She reaches forward and taps the Goth girl’s head several times, but all the smoker does is bend down and check under each bathroom stall. Satisfied that she’s alone, she leans against the far wall and blows smoke at the ceiling. Except for one reflected and one un-reflected spirit, me and pretty girl, no one can see her.

“Who are you?” I take a chance that one of them will hear me.

“Nobody,” pretty girl replies. “I’m just a nobody.”

“And Goth girl?” I tilt my head toward the cloud of smoke.

“She’s me. She’s the new me. Amy. Amy Harper. Used to get good grades. Used to babysit little kids and help mom around the house and . . . be happy. We’re kind of disconnected now.”

I stare at this girl, this spirit-Amy. No way. I can’t be listening to somebody’s soul talking. I must be hallucinating.

“Amy. Hi, I’m Jessica Mitchell.” I forget about my shoeless feet and cross over to the smoking girl. “Hi!” I get no reaction. Nothing. The real flesh and blood Amy Harper can’t hear me. She unknowingly blows more smoke at my face and I choke and cough.

I continue to choke and cough until Amy finishes her cigarette and leaves the restroom, her hazy soul a quick step behind, no wave to me or any indication that we’d spoken.

I’m alone for a moment and then Keith is here, leaning against the first stall.

“Sorry about disappearing,” he says.

“What are you doing here? This is the girls’ restroom.” I speak fast and cough again.

“Now you see me, now you don’t.” Keith laughs. “This is sort of fun, you know. Appearing, reappearing, floating above their heads.”

The coughing fit returns and I can hardly manage the spasms that shake my body. Maybe somewhere there’s a me who’s coughing up blood.

“You’ll be all right,” Keith says. “Just relax and go with the flow. They’re taking care of you.”

“Huh?”

“Come on, I’ll show you.” He takes my hand and leads me past the mirror where I can see how ragged I look and how pale Keith’s reflection appears. I’m vaguely relieved that we both have reflections.

I can’t make heads or tails of his explanation as he leads me out of the school and to a mangled blue Ford. He opens the passenger door for me and I get in. Somehow he manages to open the driver’s door and squeeze himself behind the steering wheel. The dashboard is collapsed, the radio is hanging forward, and the windshield is a web of cracks. He peels out of the lot with all the recklessness of rage and immortality combined.

“If I disappear on you again, don’t worry. Disappearing is a good thing . . . for me, anyway. It means I’m back in my body.” He chuckles while I ponder that one. Too strange. He pulls into a space in the emergency parking lot at the hospital, and says, “Follow me, Jess.”

“Jessica,” I correct him. I hate *Jessie* or *Jess* and I thought everyone knew that. How could he know my address but not know that?

Whoa. Slow down. I’m getting angry over nothing.

But I can’t control this apprehension. I keep on his right side after we maneuver the revolving doors, pass the nurses’ station, and enter the ER. I don’t want to see bed pans, puke buckets, or blood vials. I don’t want to hear screams.

But I hear them.

And crying. And short, dry sobs.

And then Keith is no longer on my left.

I stand in front of one of those curtains that curve around a hospital bed, hiding the sight but not the sound of a sick or injured patient. I hear a groan. Anxious parental voices cry out Keith’s name, hopeful and soothing, yet guarded. I duck under the curtain and stand at the foot of Keith’s bed. At least I think it’s Keith. It looks like his hair. His face is bandaged and the parts I can see are swollen. His mom and dad are holding his hands and cooing his name. This must be

Keith. The clothing he was wearing is in a clear plastic bag under his mom's chair. Bloody. His leg is held aloft by some contraption.

"Cool, huh?" he says. He stands next to me again, pointing at himself, or rather his body in the bed. "I've been in and out of consciousness for hours, popping back home or to school. Even went to church once."

I want to ask where Michael is, if he's dying, too, because it certainly looks like Keith doesn't have much time left in this world. Instead I say, "Hey, you're barefoot, too." He smiles and I ask the question that is burning hottest in my head: "How come you knew my address?" As soon as it's out of my mouth I know it's not the question I should be asking.

His laugh is sweet, such a contrast to the weeping of his mother. His father, or it must be his stepfather, keeps up a steady stream of soft words in his mom's ear.

"Tyler's been talking about you for years. Had me drive him by your house. But he's shy, you know. He's just gonna keep his feelings to himself and never even ask you to—"

"Ask me to what?" But Keith is gone again. The edge of the privacy curtain trembles. I stare at the bandaged head of the real Keith, listen to his mom's whimpering, watch the blips and lines on the monitor he's hooked up to. The heartbeat is steady now, but an irregular pattern is rolling off the screen and I know what that means—he has reappeared somewhere else.

This is no dream. Maybe I have some special ability now that lets me see and hear spirits or souls or ghosts even.

Or maybe I'm dead.

The echo of screams from the car accident fade in and out. My head and chest hurt now, the nausea is back. I'm not going to wait for Keith to reappear. I need to search around right now. I have the sickest feeling that I'm going to find Michael in one of these hospital beds.

Or myself.

Then my breath escapes in a rush as I remember that I wanted to check on Rashanda. It was Rashanda that I was so concerned about before. Something happened to *her*. I'm sure of it.

I duck under the curtain and scan the room. There are twenty numbered cubicles, most empty of patients, their curtains opened, all facing the long nurses' station.

I run to the counter and read the dry erase board that charts patients, doctors, nurses, medications, and procedures. I suck in too much sterile smelling air as soon as I read the name next to bed four. My name.

Bed four.

Back past Keith's curtain.

Seven. Six. Five. The curtain to bed four waves open as a nurse whooshes out with a metal tray filled with vials and bandages and silver instruments. I catch a glimpse of the patient and three visitors.

My parents. And Rashanda. And me, in the bed.

End of Sample

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Praise for *A Soul's Kiss*

"Sensational, satisfying and surreal. A thrilling tale, beautifully imagined and carefully crafted. A must read 'coming of age' novel. I hope to see more of Chapoton in the future."

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"A Soul's Kiss is a compelling story of a group of teenagers struggling to find their place in the world. It's a fresh reminder that what we think we want isn't always what we need and that sometimes what we need was right in front of us all along."
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