

GROWING UP WON'T KILL YOU...



D.J. McCUNE
**DEATH
& Co.**

THE
MORTAL
KNIFE

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HOT
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For Ellen, our bright light, with love



Prologue



everywhere he looked, the dead were waiting.

Luc Mortson sighed and stared around the Hinterland, allowing himself one moment to stop and breathe, before he resumed his work. Anything longer than that was a luxury he couldn't afford when hundreds of souls stood beside him in the Hinterland, staring at their own bodies and trying to understand that their physical lives were over.

Why did these jobs always seem to happen at night? Luc stifled a yawn and watched his father Nathaniel working, dressed in his usual suit and camel-hair coat. A landslide had engulfed an Italian village overnight, killing hundreds as they slept. The Mortsons had been at home in London, tucked up in bed when their death senses flared. There was no choice but to get up, get dressed and get out of the door. After all, they were Lumen – the guardians of the souls of the dead.

Nathaniel had his hand on the shoulder of a middle-aged man, his mouth close to the man's ear, chanting the directions the soul needed for his journey onto the Unknown Roads. Luc

could see the soul's face relaxing and knew that any second the man would step through his Light and say goodbye to the physical world. Sure enough, a moment later the man moved forward and disappeared, leaving only his crushed body behind.

Luc winced at the sight of the bodies, fidgeting with the keystone round his neck. Most humans couldn't see the Hinterland until they were dead – which was just as well really. It would only freak them out. The Hinterland was another realm, a borderland between physical life and the next life. It lay on top of the physical world like a clear film covering a map, allowing souls a one-way view of the world they were leaving behind. Most souls were happy enough to go, once they realised their souls had plenty of life in them yet.

Nathanial came over and gave him a brief smile. 'We're getting there. Most of the fast-response Lumen are here now. You can rest when we're finished. Go and help Aron.'

Luc nodded and searched for his older brother. When a big disaster like this struck, specialist Lumen had to get there fast and give directions to the souls before they wandered into their Lights, confused and frightened. None of them had expected to die tonight; none of them were prepared mentally. If they went through their Lights without directions it was easy to get lost on the other side. Fast-response Lumen came from every part of the globe to prevent this.

As Nathanial moved away, Luc called after him. 'Where's Adam?'

Nathanial's jaw tightened. 'He's over there sitting down. He's . . . indisposed.'

Luc's eyes roamed through the crowd until they locked on a

small figure huddling by what used to be a house. His younger brother was bent double, retching. 'Oh right. Nothing new there then.' He grinned. What was it with Adam? He was a Mortson like the rest of them. He had the same blood and the same keystone but somehow the Mortson talent had missed his younger brother out. Adam was fifteen but he was still at *school* – and what self-respecting Luman stayed at school after the age of eleven?

'Get back to work, Luc.' Nathaniel sounded sharper than usual.

Luc frowned as his father walked away. He turned his attention back to Adam, watching him wipe his mouth on his hoodie sleeve and edge towards another soul. His brother was in disgrace. Adam had done something major a few days earlier – a solo job. Guiding a soul into his Light all alone, without supervision from a full, Marked Luman.

Luc couldn't understand it. What was Adam trying to prove? He hated coming on jobs at the best of times – so why would he go and do one on his own? Breaking Luman law was a big deal. It was the kind of thing that could bring your physical life to a fast end.

Luc shrugged. It wasn't his problem. Adam was a moron at times but he was all right. He searched for a soul and found a girl about his own age. Dying at seventeen didn't seem fair but Luc pushed away the unexpected pang of sadness he felt. Lumen didn't decide who lived and died – they just dealt with the fallout.

He moved towards the girl with his biggest smile. He was good at being a Luman. He was even better with the ladies.

Chapter 1



he holidays were over. All over London, thousands of alarm clocks were ringing, beeping and blaring into life while owners muttered, cursed and battered them into silence, creeping deeper beneath the covers for a few more minutes in bed.

Not Adam Mortson. He'd been up for hours, pacing round his bedroom, watching the digital numbers on his clock flicker and change, heartbeat by heartbeat. Now he grinned at his reflection in his bedroom mirror, uniform immaculate, shoes gleaming, hair . . . under control. Half-term was over. He was finally going back to school. *Brilliant!*

He skipped downstairs and into the kitchen. No one else was there and he hummed under his breath while he waited for the toaster to pop. It would be nice to eat without having an angry audience. Meals had been a bit tense for the last week.

It hadn't been a typical half-term holiday, even by his standards. In fact, on the first day of the holidays he had thwarted a suicide bomber and saved lots of innocent bystanders. He'd followed that up by doing an underage soul guiding, sending

the bomber's soul into the afterlife before he had come of age and without a Marked Luman present. He'd known he was going to be in trouble. What he *hadn't* realised was just *how* angry his father was going to be.

Was it really only a week ago? He'd been with Melissa before he got home. As soon as he opened the front door a not-so-welcoming committee was waiting for him. Nathaniel and Elise were standing, arms folded, faces grim. Auntie Jo was there too, just behind, and for once she wasn't smiling. There was no sign of his older brothers, Aron and Luc, or his younger sister Chloe – but he was pretty sure they were lurking nearby, ears flapping like radar dishes.

The toaster popped and Adam's cheeks burned at the memory of the conversation that had ensued. He'd been grounded of course, just as he'd known he would be – but the direst threat of all had been made; that he wouldn't be going back to school. Only Auntie Jo's arguments had saved him, although she'd seemed reluctant, as if wondering whether she was doing the right thing.

Auntie Jo had always been Adam's ally in the fight to stay at school – something no one else in the family could understand. The Mortsons were Lumen, guardians of the souls of the dead. They didn't need to go to school. Most Lumen – like his brothers and his sister – had left at the end of primary school, having learned to read and write. Besides, they got plenty of lessons at home, taught by their mother Elise and a reluctant Auntie Jo. The boys learned all about guiding souls, while Chloe was taught how to be a perfect wife and hostess.

The Mortsons were expert Lumen, specialising in helping the most tricky souls, those who had died suddenly or unexpectedly.

In fact, Adam's father, Nathaniel Mortson, was High Luman of Britain, overseeing all the souls and Lumen in his Kingdom. Aron and Luc were both showing signs of the Mortson talent – and everyone expected Adam to show the same promise.

The problem was that Adam was pretty much the worst Luman in history. Every time he swooped – stepped into the Hinterland and travelled to a newly dead soul – his nose would start bleeding madly. He never knew what to say to the souls other than, 'Erm . . . sorry, you're dead.' And worst of all his stomach had a habit of getting upset in the Hinterland. No soul wanted their last sight on earth to be a fifteen-year-old throwing up on his trainers.

Adam knew he wasn't meant to be a Luman. He wanted to be a doctor. Unfortunately this was the maddest thing anyone in his family had ever heard. During their teen years Lumen children were normally 'home-schooled' – not that the authorities knew what kind of 'education' they were getting. Adam had fought tooth and nail to stay at Bonehill Charitable School and hang out with his friends and Melissa – but he knew his parents were starting to have second thoughts. They'd put up with it so far but their patience was running out . . .

Adam sighed and smeared marmalade on his toast. He had just lifted the first slice to his mouth when the back door opened and Nathaniel and Luc walked in, obviously back from an early morning call-out. Adam froze. Nathaniel stared at his uniform, gave him a stiff nod, then stalked out of the kitchen, leaving Luc and Adam alone.

'All right, leper?' Luc said cheerfully, snagging one of the pieces of toast. 'I keep meaning to get you a bell so you can

ring it and shout “*Unclean, unclean!*”. At least we’ll know when you’re in a room – no nasty surprises for anyone.’

Adam scowled. *I did the right thing*, he told himself for the millionth time. *The people I saved were innocent. They didn’t deserve to die! And the bomber didn’t deserve my help onto the Unknown Roads.* He was in trouble for the bit his family knew about – the underage guiding. If they knew the rest he would be dead right now. Literally.

Luc pulled out a chair, interrupting Adam’s thoughts. ‘You know, you should be welcoming me with open arms. I’m pretty much the only one in the house who doesn’t hate you.’

‘Sam and Morty still like me,’ Adam muttered.

Luc sniggered. ‘Yeah. They’re *dogs*, Adam. I was thinking more about the human occupants.’ He swiped another slice of toast, ignoring Adam’s curses. ‘So . . . back to school. You’ll get to see your girlfriend again!’

‘She’s not my girlfriend,’ Adam said. *Yet.* His heart sang a happy song, remembering how it felt to finally kiss Melissa Morgan. She’d liked it too! Well, OK, she’d given him a six out of ten but he reckoned with a bit of practice . . . He threw more bread in the toaster, humming to himself.

‘Ahhh, Adam’s in lurrrrve,’ Luc trilled. ‘You enjoy it, seriously. It’s only a matter of time before you get caught and then you’ll be more in the doghouse than the actual dogs.’

Adam glared. In a world of arranged marriages, having a girlfriend was just one more forbidden thing for a Luman. Lumen tended to get betrothed at an early age (to other Lumen of course) and married young – not that Luc ever had any problems with ignoring the rules and impressing the opposite

sex. 'Why would I get caught? It's not like *you* never go out with people. *You* never get caught.'

Luc snorted. 'Yeah, but I'm me and you're you. It's like comparing something really clever with something . . . really not clever. Plus I don't go all goggle-eyed over girls. I'm like James Bond. In, complete the mission and get out while the going's good. You're more like Romeo – and that story didn't end well.'

Adam applied a vicious smear of peanut butter to his toast and grabbed his schoolbag. 'I don't care what you think. Everything is going to be fine.'

He could still hear Luc's laughter ringing in his ears as he stalked out of the back door.

Adam's anger faded as he sat on the bus to school. There was no point getting mad at Luc – or indeed any of his family. None of them could understand why he wanted to go to school, even Auntie Jo. Why would they? They didn't *want* to be normal. In fact, the very idea of being normal left Luc cold! Luc *liked* being a Luman. He liked not going to school and swooping and guiding souls – but then he didn't throw up or get nosebleeds every time he did it. Aron, Adam's eldest brother, was planning to follow in their father's footsteps and become the next High Luman. Chloe wasn't allowed to be a Luman but she would be expected to marry into an old Luman family and have lots of sons, just as their mother Elise had. Only Auntie Jo had broken with tradition in not marrying and living with her brother Nathaniel.

It was hard for Adam to explain why he was so awful at being a Luman. He knew Nathaniel thought he would grow out of

it and get better but Adam wasn't so sure. He wasn't scared of death or the souls or the Hinterland – most of the souls were quite happy to step into their Lights once they knew their life in the physical world had ended. He just couldn't shake the feeling that his own life should be about more than death.

It didn't help that Adam had an extra talent – one he was careful to hide from his family. In the Luman world someone like him was called a Seer. All Lumen had a death sense, a sense that told them when a soul had died and whether it was a predicted death or unexpected. The Mortsons specialised in sudden deaths, when souls could get frightened and lost unless they were guided into their Lights quickly. But a Seer had an extra sense – what Adam thought of as his doom sense. He could sometimes feel when a soul was about to die, *before* it had actually happened – which gave him the chance to do something about it.

This meant breaking Luman law – and cheating the Fates out of souls. So far Adam had intervened in death scenes three times, most recently depriving the suicide bomber of his intended victims. So far no one suspected that *he* was involved – but if he got caught he would be put on trial by the Luman authorities and face the death penalty himself.

Adam slumped back in his chair. He was pretty sure most people his age weren't having to worry about being executed just for trying to help people. In fact, when he listened to his friends whingeing about their homework or not getting a new computer game he felt like telling them to get a grip. If that was the biggest thing they had to fret over they were doing well!

The bell on the bus pinged, jolting Adam out of his thoughts. A girl was walking past him, ready to get off. She was wearing the uniform of a nearby school and had twisted a pink-flowered bandana through her long, blonde hair. The bus hit a bump and she stumbled, almost falling into Adam's lap. 'Sorry,' she muttered without looking up, clutching on to her mobile phone and putting her headphones on.

Adam watched her step off the bus. Something about the way she walked reminded him of Melissa. He sighed. Who was he trying to kid? *Everything* reminded him of Melissa at the minute. Auntie Jo had given him a strawberry bonbon a few nights earlier and he'd fallen into a reverie, thinking how much it tasted like Melissa's lip balm. He hadn't even heard Chloe talking to him and, in the face of some crude suggestions about what he might be thinking about, had ended up pretending he was choking and subjecting himself to some 'helpful' thumps on the back from Aron. He scowled at the memory. Aron was massive and Adam's spine still felt tender.

The bus had just pulled away when, without warning, Adam's stomach clenched in agony. It was as if someone had punched him and stabbed him at the same time. He folded in two, resting his head on the seat bar, trying not to cry out. This *could not* be happening! His doom sense had been lying quiet for a week since the suicide bomb. He'd spent a whole week off mooching about in his room, bar one disastrous call-out in Italy – and now on his first day back at school his internal siren was howling in warning. He knew the signs. Someone was about to die.

The pain in his stomach was making his eyes water. He scrabbled blindly in his schoolbag for his water bottle and

managed a mouthful. The shock of the cold cut through the nausea and he eased upright cautiously. He felt like banging his head off the window with frustration. Why *now*? Why did he have to get a doom warning when he couldn't *do* anything?

He tried to block the premonition. He'd spent his whole life doing it – in fact, it had become second nature. He'd actually had to *try* to tune into his doom sense when he had decided to intervene and save some of the sudden deaths. The thing was there were only two occasions when the premonitions forced their way through as powerfully as this. Either lots of people were about to die – or one person who was very nearby.

He sat up straighter and tried to peer surreptitiously round the bus. Everybody *looked* pretty healthy. No one else from his school was on board but there were a few people his age wearing a variety of uniforms. The rest of the bus was full of people on their way to work, most of them in suits and no older than his parents. There *was* one older lady sitting a few seats ahead on the other side of the bus. She was coughing in sharp, phlegmy sounding barks. Adam watched her through narrowed eyes – but just as he'd decided she was the victim, the lady whipped out a packet of throat sweets and a large handkerchief and blew her nose like a bugle. He frowned, not sure whether to be relieved or disappointed. She just had a cold. And anyway, how was he going to do anything to save her on a bus full of people?

The bus paused at a zebra crossing. Adam watched the orange lights blinking and let his eyes drift past, to a side street on the left, off the main road. It was just an ordinary street, like a dozen others the bus had passed – but the stabbing pain

returned with a vengeance. Adam gagged a little and turned it into a cough. He wanted to curl up in a ball on the floor and whimper but he forced himself to stare through watery eyes at the road. Hawthorn Avenue. It was a nice name but something terrible was going to happen there.

The bus moved on and as they drew level with the street Adam *willed* his doom sense to give him something more, *anything* at all. For a moment nothing happened. Then, just as they were about to pass, the light outside flickered and changed and Adam saw it, just for a split second – the white van mounting the kerb, too late, trying to avoid something – trying in vain because the girl landed hard on the tarmac, mobile phone smashing, the force tearing her blonde hair free from the pink bandana.

Adam sprang to his feet, grabbed his bag and leapt into the aisle all in one movement, almost landing on the woman in the seat opposite. He ignored her protests and ran to the front of the bus. 'I need to get off.'

The driver didn't even turn his head. 'Can't let you off till the next stop.'

Adam tried not to shout. 'I need to get off *now*!'

'Can't let you off till the next stop.' The driver might as well have been a robot for all the emotion he showed. He sounded utterly world-weary, like a man incapable of being surprised; a man who'd heard every story in the history of the world and who already knew the punchline to every joke ever told.

Adam glared at him. 'I need to get off the bus. Seriously. I have to get off!' The passengers in the front few seats were lowering

their newspapers and staring at him with dull irritation. His audience gave Adam an idea. He raised his voice. 'I'm going to be sick. I have some sort of bug I think. You know that winter vomiting thing?' He gave an Oscar-worthy retch and groan. It wasn't as hard as he thought it would be; the adrenalin had his stomach rolling and flipping.

The driver flinched as far back in his seat as physically possible, his deadpan expression replaced with one of complete disgust. He slammed the brake on and the door popped open. Adam was off and running before the bus had even come to a standstill.

There was no time to think about what he was going to do. Adam ran like the hounds of hell were chasing him. He could hear his heart thudding in his ears and his feet pounding on the pavement. His schoolbag was slowing him down, so he threw it over a hedge into someone's garden and kept going. He turned a corner and saw the zebra crossing in the distance. A figure was visible further up the road, moving towards him. He pelted on.

The crossing was getting closer. Adam was gasping for breath now. He hadn't run this far in ages. He had a vague sense that he probably needed to get a bit fitter if he was going to keep doing this whole saving people thing. That was the bit they never told you in comics or films – being a hero wasn't easy. Unless you'd come from another planet or been bitten by a radioactive bug you were probably going to need to hit the gym every so often.

He was close enough to see the girl now. He could also see how she was going to die. Her head was bent over her phone

and she wasn't looking ahead. Worse, in the distance Adam could see a line of cars and behind them the white van. The girl was reaching the corner of Hawthorn Avenue and turning into the street. Adam tried to wave but she was too absorbed in her playlist. He gave a wheezing groan and forced his legs to go to his version of warp speed.

He tried calling her but she had her headphones on. He realised, with an awful, sickening churn, that he wasn't going to reach her in time. She couldn't see him and couldn't hear him. She was walking in a dream and the white van was almost at the end of the street.

Adam veered round the corner, just as the white van reached the other corner. The girl was almost at the kerb, ready to step into the road, lost in a daze, and the van was accelerating, the driver chatting and laughing on his mobile, and everything was too slow and too fast and there was no time to think so Adam ran straight across the road and threw himself at the girl.

And, like a real superhero, for just a second it felt like he was flying.

Chapter 2



myriad of sensations blurred together in quick succession for Adam. Wind whistled past his ears, closely followed by the long, shocking blare of a horn. His hands closed on slim shoulders in a woollen blazer and he saw the blonde-haired girl's mouth fall open in shock. A startled squeak emerged from her mouth and her breath blew hot on his cheek. There was a brief moment of imbalance as Adam and the girl tussled together, almost falling under the wheels of the van, until the momentum took them backwards onto the pavement and into a painful tangle of limbs.

Adam fell on his left arm and shoulder but managed to absorb the blonde girl's weight. She landed in a cat-like half-crouch, staggering forward, almost falling over Adam. He found himself lying on his back staring up into her face just an arm's length from his own.

She was totally unharmed. She was also hopping mad. She ripped her headphones off, swore at Adam and pulled free of his grip. 'Get off me!' She staggered to her feet and backed away from him.

Adam held his hands up in the air, wincing at the bolt of pain that shot up his left side. 'It's OK! I'm not trying to hurt you!'

The girl snorted and called him something very rude. '*You hurt me?* Don't come near me, creep! I do ju-jitsu!'

There was a thud of metal as the door of the white van slammed closed. The driver, a burly middle-aged man, marched over and glared down at Adam. 'What the hell are you doing, you little twerp? Are you trying to get yourself killed?' He glanced from Adam's prone form to the blonde-haired girl, noticing her angry expression. 'What's wrong, love? Did he attack you?' He pointed a stubby and vehement finger in Adam's face. 'Did you try to attack her?'

Adam blinked up at them, temporarily speechless. He hadn't expected a round of applause – after all, the van driver didn't *know* he'd almost killed the girl. Still, he hadn't expected the pair of them to join forces and beat him to a pulp either! He tried to sit up, wincing. 'Look, I wasn't attacking anybody.' He wasn't sure what was hurting him more – the bad landing or the injustice of the whole sorry situation!

The van driver gave him a disgusted look. 'They should lock people like you up.' The girl was standing beside the van man with her arms folded, shaking her head.

The unfairness of it all was threatening to make Adam blurt out something outrageous – like the truth. He swallowed hard and took a deep breath. It made his ribs hurt. 'Look, I'm really sorry. I was only messing around. I thought you were someone else.'

'Yeah, right,' the girl said with a scowl. 'Just stay away from me.' She turned and crossed the road unharmed, heading off

down Hawthorn Avenue, presumably in the direction of her school.

The van driver glared at Adam. 'Just you stay down there and count to one hundred before you walk anywhere near that young lady.' He climbed back in the van and drove off slowly, as if to make the point he was keeping an eye on things.

Adam let the white van recede from view and struggled painfully to his feet. He had risked his own life to save someone else's. He didn't expect a medal. He didn't even expect thanks. He just didn't want to be called a creep for doing something good. He tried to summon up a warm glow, knowing he had saved a life but all he could feel was the warm glow of the massive bruise growing down his left arm. Sometimes doing the right thing sucked.

He scowled and limped off to reclaim his schoolbag.

No matter what else had happened, Adam always felt a lightening in his spirits as he walked up the long, stony driveway to Bonehill Charitable School. He could tell that not all of his classmates felt the same sense of good fortune as he watched them drag their feet towards the main building.

Bonehill was an old school, founded by an eccentric philanthropist more than a century ago and maintained by a trust. Places were awarded by lottery, which meant that the catchment covered a huge area and attracted students from all backgrounds. It was seen as a good school by people in the know, not that Adam's family had any clue what a 'good school' was. These things weren't important in the Luman world because no self-respecting Luman would be seen dead at school at Adam's age.

Adam didn't care. This was where he felt happiest, most at ease in his own skin. He had his friends, he was studying subjects he enjoyed and now he had Melissa as well. His heart hopped about a little thinking of her. How should he play things? She was in his form class and would be in registration. Kissing her had definitely been a step in the right direction! He didn't think he could actually call her his girlfriend just yet but if he didn't mess things up he might be able to soon enough.

Of course every silver lining had a cloud and the cloud was lurking by the front door into the main building. Mr Bulber, aka The Bulb, was standing at the top of the steps surveying his domain. A former professional wrestler turned teacher, The Bulb had somehow managed to finagle his way into the position of head teacher. His son Michael Bulber took full advantage of his father's position by terrorising the school at his leisure, earning himself the nickname 'the Beast'.

Adam scowled just thinking about his nemesis. The Beast had always been a menacing presence in school but a couple of run-ins with him outside of school had shown him that Michael Bulber had a dark side few people knew about. Typically Adam had managed to fall for the one girl the Beast held a torch for. The fact that Melissa had only been out with him a few times and couldn't stand him didn't deter the Beast in any way from pursuing her – or treating Adam as a love rival.

The Bulb shared in his son's dislike for Adam, although for different reasons – namely that Adam was clever. The Bulb didn't like clever boys. He liked boys who thought school was all about enjoying manly activities like wrestling. He especially detested geeks or anyone who liked science, computers, manga

or Orc and Elf role-playing games – which placed Adam and his friends squarely at the top of his hit list.

Still, they had recently put their skills to good use. After The Bulb had cancelled a planned school trip to Japan, they had created a fake Japanese sensei who promised to teach The Bulb secret ninja wrestling moves, as long as he performed a few challenges first. They had put The Bulb in some mortifying situations – and managed to get the Japan trip reinstated in the process.

‘Morning, sir,’ Adam muttered as he slid past. It was hard not to smirk.

‘You’re late, Mortson!’ The Bulb turned his cold stare on Adam, looking him up and down. ‘And what’s wrong with your blazer? Get yourself brushed down and get to class!’ Adam scarpered towards his form room, happy to have escaped detention.

At the door, he paused, suddenly feeling nervous at the thought of seeing Melissa. There were still a few fellow stragglers in the corridor, so a full-on preen was out of the question but he *did* dust off his mucky blazer, squash his sandy hair under control and sling his bag on his unbruised shoulder in a more nonchalant manner.

He was as ready as he was ever going to be. He rolled his shoulders back, took a deep breath and strode into the classroom.

Two lessons later, Adam was slinking towards the library in a state of deep depression, all his good feelings long since evaporated. Why had he been so keen to get back here? Was he mad?

He wasn't sure what he'd expected but it hadn't been Melissa greeting him with nothing more than a cool nod. He had stared at her beseechingly across his form room while his form tutor, Mr Fenton, ranted incoherently about incomplete homework leading inexorably to failed exams, unemployment and the lunatic asylum. Melissa studiously ignored Adam throughout, chewing her lip and doodling on the back of her pencil case. He could feel his heart cracking and warm goo running down the inside of his chest towards his stomach. His internal choir was wailing gospel style, *Why, oh why, Melissa, why?* He could still taste the memory of her strawberry lip balm.

At breaktime he slouched through the library doors and mooched towards his usual table. His friends were in their usual spots, doing their usual things: Archie was sketching a scantily clad manga chick; Spike was on his laptop (no doubt hacking into the Pentagon or similar); and Dan was hovering between the two, devouring a pile of nuts and being irritating.

It was Dan who noticed him first. He grinned up through a horrible mouthful of crushed Brazil nuts. 'All right Adam? How's it going?'

Somehow Adam managed to avoid rending his own clothes and beating his chest in anguish. 'Yeah, all right.' He wasn't all right. How could they not see? How could they not see the jagged splinters of his heart bursting out through his skin?

Archie turned his sketchpad round for Adam to admire. 'Here she is. My ninja babe. This is the woman of my dreams. And now that we're going to Japan I'm actually going to get to meet her.' He leered at his picture and tucked it carefully away in his bag.

‘Of course we might not have to go to Japan to see a ninja,’ Dan muttered. He waggled his eyebrows and nodded at Adam meaningfully.

Adam stared at him, confused. Whatever the meaning was it was lost on him. ‘Did you have a good holiday?’

Archie groaned. ‘Don’t ask him that. Seriously. You don’t want to know.’

Dan gave him a withering look, then turned to Adam with the kind of expression normally reserved for orphans in black and white films. ‘I wouldn’t say it was good but it was certainly . . . eventful.’

‘Don’t say I didn’t warn you,’ Archie muttered.

‘What happened?’

Dan drew in a long, shuddering breath. ‘Nothing much. Except I pretty much nearly died.’

Adam blinked. Whatever he’d been expecting Dan to say it hadn’t been that. ‘Oh, right. Well, you know, glad you’re still here.’


Dan seemed disappointed at his reaction. ‘Yeah, I am! But only just!’ He gave a knowing nod at Adam. ‘Another thirty seconds and it would have been a whole different story!’

Archie sighed and closed his sketchpad. ‘Just tell him what happened and get it over with.’

Dan scowled. ‘You should be more sympathetic! I’m having an existential crisis. My mum said I’m having to come to terms with my own mortality. I have to go to counselling and act stuff out with dolls.’

Archie gave a dirty snigger. ‘Yeah I’ll bet you do, perv.’

Adam eyed Dan curiously. ‘Your mum’s some kind of



therapist, isn't she?' At Dan's nod he shuddered. It would be bad enough to have your mum psychoanalysing you all the time, but Dan's dad was a dentist. His nickname was the Dark Lord, not least because of his unhealthy interest in spy cameras. Dentist and psychotherapist. It was like the worst parental job combination in history – agony on every level.

'Just tell him what happened.' Spike spoke for the first time since Adam had sat down. He didn't even look up, frowning in concentration as he stared at his laptop screen.

'I'll tell you all right!' Dan said. 'I went to Trafalgar Square for the Septic Kisses concert the day that bomber blew himself up – and I got a photo of him just before it happened!'