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Opening extract from **Death & Co.**

Written by
D.J. McCune

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Chapter 1



It had to be a disaster. Nothing else would have raised the whole household, dogs barking, his brothers bellowing, Auntie Jo squawking downstairs.

Adam Mortson groaned and rolled over. 'Keep it down, will you? Some of us have school in the morning.' When the door opened he tried to play dead – but then nobody here was going to be fooled.

'Adam. Get dressed.'

He squinted up at his mother's shadowy outline. 'Why?'

'Because you are needed.' Elise's voice was husky, which somehow made her light French accent more distinct. She cleared her throat. 'Your father will need your help tonight.'

He wanted to pull the pillow back over his head and pretend this wasn't happening – but she wouldn't be waking him if it wasn't major. 'What happened?'

'An earthquake.' She sounded calm but her fingers clutched at the front of her dressing gown. 'A city in South America. It will be a busy night.'

He closed his eyes, trying to swallow his anger and guilt. 'I have a test tomorrow. For science.'

‘Adam.’ There was a world of reproach in that word.

He groaned and threw the cover aside. ‘All right, ALL RIGHT! Don’t worry about me, whatever you do. I’ll just fail another test and fall asleep in class *again* and do yet *another* detention but apart from that . . .’ He groped about for the lamp switch and the room came alive with light.

His mother turned and walked to the door, then paused, resting her slim fingers on the frame. Her voice was very quiet and very cutting. ‘Sometimes I am ashamed of you.’ The latch snicked into place behind her.

Adam stared at where she had been standing just a second before. ‘Sometimes I’m ashamed of you too,’ he whispered.

Downstairs Morty and Sam were barking like hellhounds, chasing each other along the gloomy hall. The front door was ajar, cold air wafting in from the garden, making Adam shiver. The dogs came over and nipped at his elbows but he pushed them away, not feeling friendly.

Staring at his reflection in the hall mirror, he was confronted by a savage-looking figure – bloodshot blue eyes and tousled sandy hair standing on end. He looked, quite appropriately, like someone dragged kicking and screaming from his bed. Adam thought about Chloe, his younger sister, dozing upstairs. *She* didn’t have to go on call-outs. Lucky her.

Ducking into the kitchen, he found Auntie Jo sitting at the scarred table, drinking whisky and surfing the Internet on her purple laptop. As usual her generous curves were swathed in a voluminous kaftan, and her short black hair

stood askew. Her dark hair was the only thing she had in common with Adam's father; otherwise they looked completely unlike.

She glanced at him. 'Hasn't hit the web yet. Fresh in. Good chance you'll be one of the first ones there.' She sounded almost gleeful.

He shrugged, throwing two slices of bread into the toaster. 'Yeah, well, hope it's not as bad as everybody thinks. I wouldn't mind a couple more hours of kip before I go to school.'

Auntie Jo snorted into her whisky. 'I thought you would be growing out of all that by now.'

Adam watched the toaster and tried to ignore her but she wasn't to be deterred. 'I know you like pretending to be *normal* but you know you're going to have to leave school soon. I've argued for you for as long as I can but your father is losing patience. He won't let you stay there much longer, no matter what I say.' Her voice turned wheedling as the bread hopped out of the toaster and onto Adam's plate. 'Butter me a slice, will you?'

Adam gritted his teeth and smeared butter on as if it had attacked him in a past life. He slid the plate across the table to Auntie Jo and crunched his slice as he walked back into the hall. His older brothers were already there, arguing over how to divide up the souls when they got there. As usual their argument had spilled over into something a little more physical. Aron, his eldest brother, had Luc in a headlock. 'Listen, moron, I am older than you and I get the bigger zone. That is the way it's going to be.' His face was flushed beneath his blond hair.

Luc's shock of dark hair could just be seen through Aron's meaty arm. He was slight but wiry and he was wriggling like an eel. 'I can guide three times as fast as you.' He escaped the headlock with a *pop* and grinned at Aron. 'You can't do anywhere bigger than a school playground! I can guide a whole *town* in the time it takes you to do a *supermarket*!'

'Boys.' His father's voice could have frozen lava. Adam felt a powerful urge to shrink back into the kitchen and hide under the table. Maybe Auntie Jo wouldn't rat him out if he bribed her with the rest of his toast . . . 'Adam, stop lurking. Get over here.'

He was cornered. He dragged his feet forward until he was standing beside his brothers. Aron shot him a disgusted look. 'What's *he* coming for?'

His father ignored him. He was pulling on a camel-hair coat over his charcoal suit, smoothing his dark hair in the mirror. Nathaniel Mortson was a tall, thin man with surprisingly broad shoulders and a very straight spine. He wore a suit to every job, whether it was in a crack den or a war zone. He said it reassured people that they were in safe hands. Adam glanced down at his jeans and trainers with a surge of resentment. He'd much rather be wearing his pyjamas . . .

He felt Luc's elbow in his ribs and jumped. 'Huh? What?' Luc rolled his eyes and looked away. Adam blinked straight into his father's even gaze. 'Sorry. What was that?'

Nathaniel sucked air in between his teeth, his only sign of irritation. 'I *said*, do you remember the sequence? You haven't been on a job with us for a while. Can you remember everything?'

‘Yes, Father,’ he muttered, fidgeting. He could have said a lot more but he didn’t trust himself. He had too many bad memories of chanting the long roads, over and over again. He was sure at that age most kids had still been learning how to spell their own names.

‘Have you all got your keystones? Good. We’re ready then.’ Nathaniel paused and fixed Aron and Luc in his pale stare until Aron’s cheeks flushed afresh. ‘I expect you to behave with dignity, not squabble like rats over bread. We are Lumen. The people there are relying on us. Remember what we’re there to do.’

‘Yes, Father,’ all three of them chorused. Adam swallowed hard. He hated this bit.

Arriving, he had the usual sensation of having been turned inside out, dipped in ice water and squeezed through a very narrow pipe. ‘Swooping’ was the traditional name for what they’d just done – stepping through an invisible doorway from the physical world into a very different world – the Hinterland. They had just travelled thousands of miles in mere seconds. Swooping was fast – but frankly the name made the whole process sound much nicer than it really was. ‘Only way to travel,’ he muttered and swallowed, tasting blood at the back of his throat. He dabbed at his nose and pulled away red-stained fingers. At least his ears weren’t dripping blood this time. Even so, he wasn’t exactly going to be a reassuring sight – more like a scruffy, bleeding teenage ghoul.

Apparently his father felt the same. Muttering, he produced a pristine white handkerchief and flung it in Adam’s direction. Adam pressed it gratefully to his nose,

trying to stem the flow of blood. He felt stupid. Most Lumen got the hang of swooping fairly quickly. Everyone found it tricky at first but Aron and Luc had picked it up in no time. Not Adam though.

He knew it was all about perception. He remembered sitting in Nathaniel's study while his father patiently explained the whole thing over and over again. 'Everything is energy, Adam. Your body, the world we see around us – it's all just energy. We just *see* it as physical. So now you have to shift your focus and experience a new world, a new way of seeing. It's already there, right where we're standing. The Hinterland exists on top of the physical world – it's just a different form of energy. Look at this picture. When you first look you see an old woman with a crooked nose. But look again – see her? A beautiful young woman with a fur hat. Both of them are there at the same time, just like our world and the Hinterland. And when you learn to see both worlds you'll be able to use your keystone and move between them with ease.'

Adam shook his head, snapping back to the present. In the physical world the air was thick with smoke. It had been the middle of the night at home but here it was early evening. What should have been a beautiful sunset was turning the scene before them a ghastly red. They stood in silence, getting their bearings among the shattered buildings and bodies, watching survivors staggering through the remains of their homes. One woman stumbled past, wearing an apron and one shoe, still clutching a wooden spoon. Of course *she* couldn't see *them*. For Adam the effect was like looking through a one-way mirror.

His father had made it sound so easy, stepping between two levels of reality. The Hinterland, the place of souls, lay like a pale shadow on top of the physical world, like a clear film placed over a map. It was freaky seeing both worlds at the same time. His eyes could see the physical world but they could also see the Hinterland. It was like being sandwiched between two panes of glass, watching the normal world pass by him – and through him – unaware that he was even there.

He felt pleasantly detached from the chaos in the physical world. Swooping always blocked his ears, like swimming underwater. He could hear his pulse thumping and the rush of his own blood. He swallowed hard until his hearing returned – then wished he hadn't as sound burst back in, piercing the thin veil between the physical world and the Hinterland. Car alarms shrieked in tandem with women, men roared and wept, alternately praying to and cursing a variety of gods and saints. An infant cried out, long and shrill, then fell silent.

Nathanial recovered first, a lifetime of experience kicking in. He took a deep breath. 'Work swiftly and compassionately.' He nodded at Adam. 'I know you'll make me proud.'

He walked away. Luc and Aron grinned at each other, eager to get started. Adam stood still, feeling the ground shifting beneath his feet and a terrible coldness creeping into his muscles in spite of the thick coat. The sounds from the physical world faded and others emerged as his family began to work. Why did *he* always get so confused when he swooped, while his brothers were able to just get on

with the job? He stumbled after his father, trying to steel himself for what he had to do.

The woman was kneeling beside her own body, rocking back and forth, sobbing. She was young and pretty, or at least her soul was. Her body must have been beautiful before the concrete had crushed her left side, leaving her face eerily unmarked. She kept reaching out to touch one smooth, unblemished cheek. Adam watched her trying to lie down on her own body, as if she could somehow merge herself back into the broken flesh. It always seemed cruel that the souls could see their own corpses but somehow it helped them to understand that their physical life was over.

When Nathaniel appeared beside her the woman started, pulling away from him – until he smiled. His smile was glorious – white-toothed and warm, a smile so uniquely reassuring that Adam watched the young woman melt into it. It was a smile like a lifeboat in a rough sea. When Nathaniel took her hand she allowed him to pull her to her feet, graceful and docile.

‘Hello, Eva.’ His voice was low and kind. ‘There’s no need to be afraid.’

‘How . . . Do I know you?’ Her dark eyes crinkled as she looked up at him.

‘I’m a friend, Eva, sent to help you.’

‘Are you an angel?’ When he didn’t answer, her eyes widened and so did her smile. ‘*Madre de Dios!* Thanks be to God!’ Her lips trembled a little and the smile faded. ‘I am dead?’

Nathaniel rested a hand on her shoulder. ‘You have a

new life now and a new road to follow. Look! There is a Light ahead of you – your Light! Do you see it?’

Eva followed the direction of his eyes and her mouth dropped open, eyes round with wonder. ‘I see it! *Dios*, it is beautiful!’

‘This is your road, Eva, your very own road. It’s going to lead you somewhere special and I’m going to help you begin your journey.’ Nathaniel’s voice was changing, sending little ripples down Adam’s spine. How many Sunday afternoons had he spent throughout his childhood, his own voice becoming a song, reciting under Auntie Jo’s stern gaze? He watched Nathaniel lean towards the woman and begin chanting in her ear, his voice a low hum. Adam turned away, unable to bear the sight of her starting that long walk onto the Unknown Roads.

He felt numb. He wanted to go home to bed and pull the duvet over his head. He looked around the chaos, at the bodies and their souls beside them. Some of the souls were frightened while others were looking around curiously. He watched Aron help the soul of an old man who blinked at him like a startled tortoise; and he watched Luc bend down and hug the wailing soul of a little girl, her face crumpled with anguish.

Nerves were making him nauseous. He gritted his teeth and jogged forward. People milled all around him in two different worlds but none of the living saw him – only the dead. His eyes darted from soul to soul, desperate to find someone who looked calm. With relief he saw a middle-aged man watching him with a mildly perturbed expression. He glanced away from Adam as if embarrassed, staring at

the remains of his own leg protruding from beneath a slab of concrete.

Adam took a deep breath and tried to paste a reassuring smile on his face. His cheek muscles didn't seem to be working very well. 'Erm . . . Hello. Are you OK?' He looked at the man's raised eyebrows and resisted the urge to slap his own forehead. 'No, of course you're not. That was stupid. Sorry.'

The man stared at him, concern crossing his pleasant features. 'Are you well, my friend? I do not know your face. You are here on vacation?'

Adam grimaced. 'Erm, no, not really. More of a flying visit, if you know what I mean.' He gave a nervous laugh, then cleared his throat. What the hell was he *doing*? What had this poor guy done to deserve an imbecile like *him* as a guide into the next world? Adam tried to make his expression neutral. 'Look, the thing is . . . There's been a bit of an accident. Well, an earthquake really. And you see . . . Well, you're dead. I'm very sorry.'

He squinted at the man, expecting anything from violence to hysterics. Instead the man nodded sagely, looking down at his own body or what could be seen of it beneath the concrete. 'I was thinking this did not look so good for me. I was going to have some bad headache, you know what I mean?' He gave a sudden cackle of laughter and slapped Adam's shoulder.

Adam stared at him half suspiciously and forced a ghastly smile. 'I have to say you're taking this well.'

The man glanced over his shoulder and beckoned him closer. 'Let me be honest with you, *amigo*. When I was

younger, I . . . was not such a nice guy. So when I saw my body lying there I looked around, expecting all the devils in hell to be coming for me. And instead there *you* are! *Much* better than anything I expected – no pitchfork, you know?’ His teeth gleamed and he gave Adam a conspiratorial look. ‘So maybe we can keep away from *el Diablo*, eh?’

Adam felt little prickles rise on the back of his neck. ‘Well, that sounds great.’ He tried to sound casual – nonchalant even. ‘You know, I think I can help you. Maybe I can send you on a journey somewhere really nice.’

The man shrugged. ‘Why not? There is nothing for me here now. My house is gone, my dog is gone, my mistress is gone – even my wife is gone. I have nothing. Where are you sending me?’

‘I don’t really know,’ Adam confessed. ‘But you should be able to see it. Just ahead of you there is a Light. There’s a road on the other side and it’s going to take you somewhere very special.’ He could hear his own voice changing, taking on that magical sing-song quality. ‘Can you see it?’

The man swore softly. ‘*Si!* There, I see it!’

‘That’s great. No, wait a minute, don’t go yet! There are some things I need to tell you first.’ The man’s eyes narrowed. Adam hurried to reassure him. ‘Nothing bad – I just need to give you a few directions.’ He took a deep breath and stepped in closer to the soul, placing a hand on his shoulder and his mouth close to the man’s ear. He started to chant, slowly at first, worried that he would forget a step in the sequence and send the man wandering blindly along the Unknown Roads. Without directions he could wander for a hundred years on the other side. But as the

words tumbled from his mouth Adam's confidence grew and he picked up the pace, almost singing. He could feel the man relaxing, his shoulder loosening beneath Adam's hand, jaw slackening, staring at his Light with a mixture of confusion and longing.

It was done. Adam lifted his hand away from the man's shoulder and took a step back. He could see the soul had forgotten about him already, was already walking forward. There was a brief flare of light and the man was gone.

He breathed in slowly and tried to enjoy the moment. After all, he had done a good thing. He had sent a soul on to the next stage, without fear, onto the Unknown Roads. Mission accomplished. One down . . . He looked around and felt his spirits sink. Lots to go. Some of them were staring at him, faces half pleading and half afraid. One of them reached out towards him, her mouth moving. She might have been praying.

He was going to help her, he really was. Unfortunately, without warning, his stomach lurched and her soul was treated to the sight of Adam vomiting on his own shoes.

Back home several hours later Adam crept up the stairs in his bare feet, his trainers and socks festering in the garden. Other 'fast response' Lumen had arrived from every part of the globe – borders didn't matter when there was a big disaster and lots of sudden deaths. Nobody had said a word to him as he sat weakly beside a rubble pile – but they didn't have to. The weight of his failure felt heavier than the house.

Once upon a time his family had found the nosebleeds

and projectile vomiting fascinating, like a strange illness or a really ugly insect. Most Lumen found the shift from physical world to Hinterland confusing – but in a good way. Their bodies forgot to feel hungry or thirsty. It helped Lumen do their work without discomfort. Adam got confused too – but not in a helpful way. *His* body reacted angrily and lashed out, protesting against the strangeness of it all. And even if he wasn't technically physical in the Hinterland, his body still *thought* it was. The consequences were all too real – and vomit-spattered – when he returned to the normal world . . .

He eased his bedroom door shut and leaned against it with his eyes closed, wishing he could wipe his humiliation away. It was still dark outside. With any luck he could get another hour of sleep before he had to get up and get ready for school.

Clutching the keystone beneath his top helped his mind to quiet down. It was a small, carved, charcoal stone dangling from a fine titanium chain – lightweight but very strong. The smooth, oval edges of the keystone fitted neatly into his palm and a brief flare of energy buzzed up his arm. His own keystone vibrated slightly with the energy of the family Keystones kept in the vault beneath the house. These acted as something between a homing beacon and an energy source, helping Lumen to swoop to a death scene and then find their way home.

The family Keystones were bigger than the personal keystones – some of them were the size of a gold bar and far more valuable. No one really knew where the Keystones came from originally. Luman mythology said that they had

come from a power beyond the Unknown Roads, to protect Lumen from disease and help them do their work.

Over the centuries, certain Luman families acquired more and more Keystones and when a Luman died he could take a family Keystone through his Light to 'recharge', before returning it to the Lumen who had guided him, waiting patiently in the Hinterland. A recharged Keystone helped the owners to feel deaths sooner and swoop faster. They were also worth huge amounts of money. The older Luman families like the Mortsons had even sold off Keystones in the past and used the money to invest for future generations. The profits nestled safely in Swiss bank accounts.

Of course nowadays it wasn't the done thing to sell a Keystone – only to chip off a fragment to make personal keystones for women, children and animals. No one knew exactly how many Keystones existed but those not owned by families were carefully guarded by the Curators, the Luman authorities.

After a few minutes holding his keystone, Adam felt tolerably calm. He inched across the dark floor, tripping over his school bag and cursing. The bed felt cold. Closing his eyes, he fought to keep his mind blank and empty. There would be plenty of time to feel crap in the morning. For now, all he had to do was relax and drift off into sleep . . .

His alarm blared into life, a radio jingle making him jump. The excited reporter was shrieking about some breaking news – a devastating earthquake in a minor Mexican city, hundreds feared dead. Adam slammed his hand on the clock radio, stunning it into silence, and stared through the darkness at the ceiling. 'I hate my life,' he muttered.