

SOULMATES AND OTHER WAYS TO DIE



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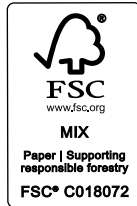
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For Callum

*For putting up with all my imaginary friends
and helping me to make them a reality*

Also by Melissa Welliver

My Love Life and the Apocalypse

*Zoe*

It's kind of funny how quickly you get used to the bodies. The man was laid out in the middle of the road outside our house. He wasn't there last night when I put the bins out so he must have dropped dead on his way to work. Train station was at the bottom of the hill, made sense. Of all the ways there are to go nowadays, this seemed like one of the dullest.

'Hey, Bari, when was the last Dearly Departed report in our area?'

My screen lit up with the computer-generated face of a Bernese mountain dog. You could pick any avatar for Bari, but I always wanted a dog. Besides, a digital dog doesn't poop, doesn't need feeding, and won't slow me down when the inevitable end of the world arrives.

‘The last report within an eight-kilometre radius was eight hours and fifty-three minutes ago, Mistress Zoe,’ Bari replied. His lips didn’t move when he spoke – because of course, that would be ridiculous – but he did tilt his head knowingly from side to side as my speakers played his voice.

And the mistress thing – I know, I know. But I couldn’t resist being the master to my very own electronic pooch.

‘So the man outside my window probably hasn’t been reported yet,’ I sighed. I really hated going outside unnecessarily, even on a sunny summer day like today.

‘Accessing front door camera for analysis,’ Bari said. His avatar turned around on the screen like he was doing a trick at Crufts. ‘Accessed. Judging from the lack of flies around the body, I would advise filling out a DD report, Mistress Zoe.’

‘Yeah, I know you’re right. OK, in your bed, Bari.’

At the sound of my instruction, Bari ran to the side of the screen and disappeared through a digital doggy door.

I pulled out my phone and opened the Dearly Departed app, the red DD symbol appearing in my recently used folder as soon as I unlocked the thing.

Thank you for logging on to DearlyDeparted.gov.

Are you registering a KinTwin or a Departed?

I smirked every time I was asked the question. Knowing who my KinTwin was would sure be helpful, but the

day I register them on this chuffing app is the day I sack off survival training. Basically, it isn't happening.

Thank you for selecting: DEPARTED. Have you checked the subject's pulse? Please [click here](#) to see a video tutorial if you are unsure.

I hesitated over the *yes* button and looked back out the window. Poor man couldn't have looked more dead. It was 5.30 a.m. and I saw him there when I got up at five for cardio training. That said, it wasn't unheard of. Sometimes your KinTwin falls into a coma or gets a really bad head injury and you could just be knocked out right where you're walking.

I had to go check.

Safety first, though. I grabbed a face mask out of the box in my bedside drawer and secured it with the nose clip I kept in my cargo pants pocket. I'm assuming the poor man died through his KinTwin because there isn't any obvious sign of trauma, but still.

I headed downstairs and saw Mam through the open door of the kitchen as I walked past.

'Morning love. You finished with cardio already?' She didn't look up from her tablet. I assumed she was meticulously copying in exactly how much dried pasta we had left and then converting that into calories and numbers of meals on her spreadsheet.

We kept track partly because the end of times didn't tend to tell you when it was starting, so always good to be prepared, but also because we were always penny-pinching. When the government grants tax breaks to anyone who lives with their KinTwin, they don't massively care about single mothers who haven't met theirs yet.

'All good. There's a possible DD out front, so I'm just going to check for a pulse before I report.'

'Mask on?' she asked, still not looking up from her tablet.

'Mam, please. It's like you don't know me at all.' I rolled my eyes and headed for the front door.

I undid the three master locks and stepped out into our front garden. The body was still there, right at the top of our drive, like he had taken one look at our weeds and the rusted old bicycle and the overgrown hedge and keeled over on the spot. Which, you know, Mrs Jones next door would totally say is what happened. But who has time for gardening while living through the world's slowest apocalypse?

I headed to the top of the drive and bent down next to the body. The street was quiet still, but it was sunny and warm, typical for June. The house opposite had been empty since the couple living there DD'd, same as the houses either side of it and one of the ones next door to mine and Mam's. Funny how a housing crisis can be

solved with something as simple as a mass thinning out of the population.

The man was wearing a grey suit, matching grey tie, and to be honest, matching grey expression – his eyes were closed but he looked tired and weather-beaten, with deep wrinkles on his forehead. There was a slow purple bruise growing just above his left eye – he could have hit his head when he fell, but the shape of the bruise suggested he was alive when he hit the ground. Definitely not KinTwin behaviour. I had a book on cadaver bruising in the house, but it was a bit far to go and leave the poor man if he really was dead. Besides, if Mrs Jones found a body this close to the rusted bicycle, she'd probably report us to the landlord again.

I tilted his head gently to expose the carotid artery and pressed two fingers firmly against it. His skin was still warm, but so was the sun. If he was dead, he'd start to smell soon, and the last thing we needed was that bloody urban fox sniffing around on bin day.

Was that a pulse? I closed my eyes and tried to focus on the possible sound of a heartbeat. *Hmmm. Maybe?* It's possible that a heartbeat can slow if put into a medicated state, like under anaesthetic. Maybe his KinTwin was having an operation? But no, that made no sense. He wouldn't have been granted permission to go to work if that was the case.

I leant in closer, trying to see if I could feel his breath on my cheek.

‘Mmphelp.’ A small, muffled noise came from the man’s lips. He was alive. Was he trying to breathe?

‘Help!’

Nope, not trying to breathe. More trying to take out my eardrums, clearly.

I fell backwards and the guy sat up, fully conscious and definitely not dead.

‘Help!’ he screamed this time, looking around, eyes wild. He was loud enough that birds flew off the roofs and curtains twitched across the street.

It took a second for him to notice me sitting next to him. ‘Hey, calm down. I just – I thought you were dead.’ I scrambled to my feet and dusted down my clothes before adjusting my mask – still intact but slightly dislodged by the whole ordeal.

‘Sorry. Oh my god, I’m so sorry,’ he said.

He sat forward and tried to catch his breath while I deleted the report from my Dearly Departed app. My hands were shaking and I took a moment to count my breaths in and out. Stress-related conditions were one of the top causes of death. By keeping my emotions in check, I kept a killer at bay.

‘I was about to report you. Thought you had DD’d,’ I said, sliding my phone back into my cargo pocket.

‘Holy . . . Yeah, to be honest, I thought I was departed there too. I was walking to work, and then I got this horrible headache . . .’ His eyes widened as he came to the same conclusion I had.

‘You married?’ I asked.

He nodded. ‘My wife is at home. She’s pregnant.’

‘Well, she’s not dead. Yet, anyway. Best go check on her, then.’

He blinked at me. I wasn’t sure if it was because of his head injury, or because of how I’d just told him that his wife’s life could be in danger. Either way, I get that confused blinking look a lot.

The man got to his feet and off he went, running back up the hill away from the station. I wondered what had happened to his wife. Maybe she fell and hit her head. Hard to say. At least he knew she was still alive. Some people weren’t so lucky.

I headed back inside to get ready for school.

Getting ready to go to school for most people means running a brush through their hair and deciding how short they could roll up their skirt. For me and Mam, it’s more of a lifestyle choice to choose to go outside at all.

‘Shall we take stock of the Bug-Out Bag?’ Mam said.

She came out of the kitchen and tapped her tablet with a stubby fingernail. Some of the girls at school got their nails done – I couldn’t get past the hygiene issues to do it

myself. A recent study had found MRSA under the nails of half of all hospital patients and workers. So I kept mine short like Mam – not as pretty but a lot more practical. Besides, nail bars are breeding grounds for flesh-eating bacteria. I'd rather get Dearly Departed than that.

'Can't, sorry. Have to get to school,' I said.

'All right. It can wait – just be careful,' Mam said, like careful wasn't my default setting. She checked the monitors in the hall, the ones that showed our outdoor camera set-up. Once she was happy there were no immediate threats, she let me out. If she had her own way, I'd still be homeschooled. I had to gently point out that Mam wasn't exactly well versed in maths and sciences and if I wanted to do well in those, I needed a proper schoolteacher.

I elbow-bumped Mam goodbye and set off. The familiar weight on my shoulders of my Bug-Out Bag, clipped to the side of my school bag, was strangely comforting. Even without Mam's audit I knew I would find my spare battery pack, monkey solar charger, three bars of compacted protein meals, a torch and one pack of iodine pills. That would be enough to get me home in case of an emergency, although what really qualified as an emergency any more was a matter of opinion.

I joined the masses of other people now filtering down the hill to start their day. No one really spoke to anyone else, but that was the norm. You didn't want to

start a conversation with someone who could drop dead any moment, and besides, you'd only be responsible for registering them if you got too close. The DD app was supposed to make the whole process easier, but really it just made people more angry about the whole situation.

It was a nice enough town to grow up in before all this, was Lufian Bridge. Big enough to have a couple of decent primary schools and a high school, which is why Mam and Dad bought a house here, but also small enough that there wasn't much to worry about when pottering about town. Plus it was just outside Manchester, only thirty minutes on the train – when it was running. Or hadn't crashed. Or both.

At the end of the road the first rows of shops began – well, if you could still call them shops. Most were closed, shut ages ago by dead owners or dead customers or both. The shutters were pulled down and covered in grim graffiti.

I popped my earbuds in. Bari would have transferred to my phone once he detected I had left the house via GPS. 'Bari, listen for ambient noise within ten metres, OK?'

'Affirmative, Mistress Zoe. I will alert you of any immediate threats. Would you like to resume your podcast, *Ten ways you'll die in the first wave of the Apocalypse?*'

'No, ta very much,' I replied. I usually listened to a podcast on the way to school. Sometimes when I was on a

run too, but with the morning's distraction I didn't have time for cardio this morning. I could have squeezed a run in maybe, but that was a worse idea than just skipping it. Running without warming up first or wearing the correct clothing could lead to risk of heart attack, stroke, injury or sudden death syndrome. Better that I slow my pace before school and catch up on what's happening in the world.

Ouch. A dull pain, faint enough that I could almost ignore it, shot up my leg. I had been getting them on and off for a few years, since the KinTwin mutation was discovered, so I knew it was nothing seriously wrong with me. At least I was old enough to understand the pain when it started – the KinTwin mutation was present from birth. There were some poor babies experiencing toothache from their toddler KinTwins, or even extra scraped knees when their KinTwin fell off the slide in the playground. I felt bad for those who were born after the KinTwin mutation hit the world – they were bonded to another human being from birth. They never had sole control over their own lives. I'd had six mutation-free years to myself – six years where my life was my own.

What was more alarming than the pain itself was that my KinTwin – and as much as I wanted to pretend otherwise, I had one – was really one to throw themselves about. I could assume it was a boy, as KinTwins were – according to studies – romantically destined to be, and I was pretty

sure I was straight. That said, I hadn't so much as kissed anyone before so I guess I could still be surprised. Any pain he, she or they felt, I could feel around 10 per cent of, and I seemed to have a small twinge or ache every other day.

Which did not bode well for his safety, aka my own safety. I sighed. What if my KinTwin lived somewhere dangerous, like a war-torn country? There were cases of KinTwins who didn't even speak the same language, so it was possible. Not every KinTwin lived in the same country, but some reports did say they were drawn to each other.

'Bari, can you run off today's headlines, please?'

'Of course, Mistress Zoe. Reading headlines for United Kingdom for today, 24 June 2045. Most popular news headlines as dictated by internet traffic.' Bari still spoke with the same posh accent I had downloaded for him. I knew if I got out my phone he would be right there on the screen, tilting his head and twitching his nose, but I knew better than to use my phone now I was on the main road. Over a hundred deaths last year were linked to pedestrians distracted by their phones on major roads.

And if you add in their KinTwin deaths, really that's over two hundred deaths.

'Most popular headline: GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE RAISES CONCERNS OVER SPIRALLING DEATH RATE AS

SHARES IN DEARLY DEPARTED APP SKYROCKET.’

‘Tell me something I don’t know,’ I muttered.

‘Affirmative, Mistress Zoe,’ said Bari, taking me literally, as per usual. Not that I minded, really. Someone who took me literally saved a lot of time over the nuances of typical human interaction. And seeing as we’re probably looking down the barrel of an incredibly slow apocalypse anyway, I might as well get used to digital company.

‘Next most popular headline: MY KINTWIN IS SERVING A LIFE SENTENCE FOR MURDER. AM I THE ASSHOLE FOR NOT WANTING TO MEET HIM?’ Bari read.

‘That’s way too dark. Next, please, Bari,’ I said. I had a recurring nightmare that I found out my KinTwin was some awful human being who should be in prison. Imagine being forced to connect with an actual murderer. See, this was the dark side of KinTwinning that barely anyone seemed to talk about. Life, just like love, wasn’t all sunshine and rainbows. I’d rather have no KinTwin at all than a bad one.

‘Next most popular headline: DIVORCE RATES AT ALL-TIME LOW AS GOVERNMENT GRANTS FOR KINTWINS MAKE MARRIAGE MORE PROFITABLE THAN EVER.’

‘Ugh, nope. Next, please, Bari,’ I said. It was true, marriage success rates were insanely high for married couples in KinTwin partnerships. Nobody talked about when it went wrong, though, like when your dad dies

and your mam doesn't, revealing the worst-case scenario: they aren't KinTwins. What does that even make me? A pity baby? I felt a nudge from my watch as my heart rate rose, and took a deep breath. No point feeling sorry for myself.

'Next most popular headline: TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF KINTWIN MUTATION DISCOVERY BEGS THE QUESTION: CELEBRATE OR DESPAIR?'

'So I see the tabloid press is as chuffing cheerful as ever. And that's coming from me,' I said, a small smile playing around my lips. I did try to smile as much as I could, because I read once that smiling releases endorphins that help battle stress hormones. Besides, contrary to what most people thought of me, I wasn't miserable. I was just content in quiet emotion.

'Alert. Incoming threat detected. Alert.' Bari interrupted the next headline with the stark message.

I pulled out my earbuds and froze on the pavement.

It was obvious, now that I didn't have my noise-cancelling headphones in, what the issue was. Because the plane was incredibly noisy and, at that low altitude, pretty hard to miss. In the distance, a light aircraft with two fiery propellers was wobbling across the sky, headed straight towards where I stood. It moved impossibly fast, leaving a trail of black smoke in its wake.

Two women waiting at the bus stop screamed, and that

caused something of a stampede. People dashed into the road and pushed past each other on the pavement. Cars driving towards the direction of the plane U-turned, horns blaring as they tried to clear the road.

All this panicking happened in the space of a few seconds. But the number one rule of survival? Panic is deadly.

‘Bari, estimate how far away that plane is,’ I said, pointing my phone’s camera at the fast-approaching aircraft.

‘One-point-two kilometres away and closing,’ Bari responded instantly.

‘It’s coming down fast. I don’t think it will hit us,’ I said, tucking into the alcove of a newsagents as people ran past screaming. A man ran out into the street and a motorbike swerved, narrowly avoiding hitting him.

Today, as per usual, stupidity will probably kill more people than anything else.

‘I think we sit tight, stay out of the road, and wait for the plane to—’

I didn’t finish my sentence, and I’m not really sure who I was speaking to anyway. Bari didn’t have emotion, didn’t care about his – or my own – mortality. I was cut off by the noise of an explosion so loud people fell over in the street in front of me, and all I had time to do was cover my ears. The plane had come down.

I wish I could say this was my first plane crash, but it wasn't necessarily uncommon with Dearly Departed Syndrome around. Sure, the authorities tried to regulate pilots as much as possible, make sure their KinTwin was registered and safely detained during flight; that the autopilot was on. But still, accidents happened, and while the government could control commercial flights that way, it wouldn't cover everything. Small planes just had a single pilot, no autopilot either. Heart attacks, brain aneurysms. Bad luck stuff. That was the danger we all faced every day. We couldn't stop living just because, oh I don't know, sometimes the odd plane came down.

And that was my attempt at sarcasm. Is it working? I read once that sarcastic humour can help de-escalate feelings of woe or panic. My ears were ringing, but there wasn't pain so hopefully the damage wasn't permanent. Plus, the screams all around me were drowning out my tinnitus. It was a huge explosion for a small plane – maybe the fuel tanks were full and it had only just set off.

I peeped around the doorframe of the newsagents and saw the orange glow of a fire raging in the distance. Surely no one directly in the landing zone survived.

Which meant dozens of KinTwins just went down, too.

'Alert. Incoming threat detected. Alert,' Bari barked at me from my phone.

‘Bari, I saw the plane. We’re good. We just need to wait for people to calm down before we keep walking,’ I said. It crossed my mind that Mam would have heard the boom, but that wouldn’t make her leave the house. She hadn’t texted me either, but she’s connected to my smartwatch, which in turn detects my heart rate. She knew I was alive, that’s why she hadn’t texted me. True maternal love at its finest.

‘Alert. Alert. Alert.’ Bari was still whining, so I turned away from the glow in the distance and assessed what he could be talking about.

I heard the screech of the tyres before I saw the bus.

The last thing I remember seeing was the bus swing around the corner, plough through a dozen people still in the road, and head straight towards the newsagent. It was electric, like most cars were, and therefore silent, so I never heard it coming until that screech. The bus closed the gap between us fast, so fast that I could see the slumped-over figure of the driver, newly deceased.

It was like my brain worked faster than everything around me was happening. I could see a gap to run out into, but I knew I wouldn’t make it in time. It might even make the impact worse if I was smeared across the store front. The door might at least afford me some cushioning.

Don’t. Panic.

I did the only thing I could do. I braced for impact.