

IS THERE LOVE AFTER DEATH?



FERRYMAN

CLAIRE MCFALL

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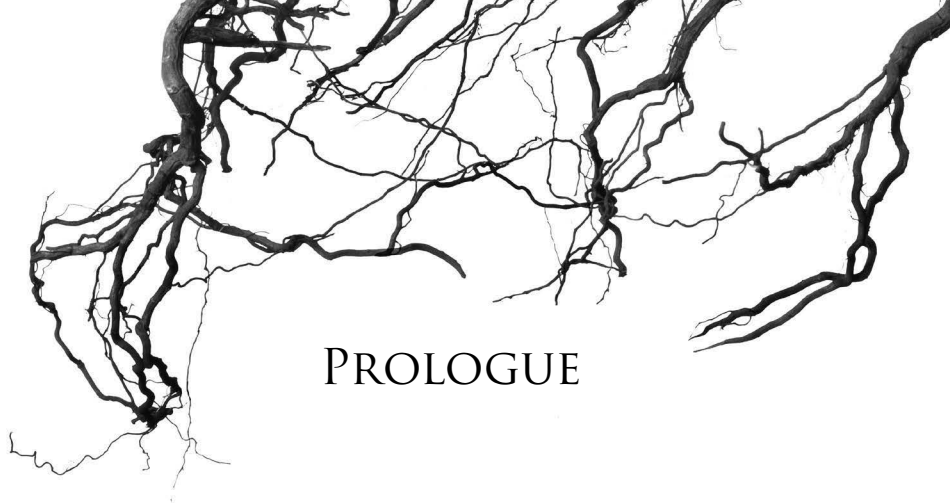
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If you're from the 'Gow and you're reading this – hello, and I miss you. Be good (and don't forget to tuck your chairs in!). Thank you for teaching me how to take others into the world of make-believe.

And finally, thanks to Dylan and Tristan for appearing in my head and insisting that I write them down.

Claire McFall



PROLOGUE

He sat on the hillside and waited.

Another day, another job. Before him, rusting tracks disappeared into the depths of the tunnel mouth. In the grey gloom of the cloudy day, the light barely penetrated beyond the stone arch of the opening. His eyes never left the entrance. He was expectant, but jaded.

There was no thrill of excitement or flicker of interest.

He had long since ceased to be curious. Now the only thing that mattered was completing the task. His cold, clinical eyes were lifeless.

The wind stirred, blowing frigid air around him, but he didn't feel the chill. He was focused, watchful.

Any moment now.



ONE

The first heavy drops of rain announced themselves, tapping out a disjointed rhythm on the tin roof over the train platform. Dylan sighed and plunged her face down deeper into her thick winter jacket, trying to warm her freezing nose. She could feel her feet going numb, and she stamped her boots on the cracked concrete to get her circulation going. She glared at the slick, black train tracks littered with crisp packets, rusting Irn Bru cans and bits of broken umbrella. The train was fifteen minutes late and she had arrived ten minutes early in her eagerness. There was nothing to do but stand, stare and feel her body heat slowly seeping away.

As the rain began to fall more steadily, the stranger beside her tried in vain to read his free newspaper, absorbed in a story about a gruesome murder spree in the West End. The roof provided feeble cover, and droplets fell thickly onto the paper, exploding and expanding the ink in a blotchy mess. Grumbling audibly, he folded it up and stuffed it under his arm. The man glanced around, searching for a new distraction, and Dylan immediately looked away. She didn't want to have to make polite conversation.

It had not been a good day. For some reason, her alarm had failed to go off, and really it had all been downhill from there.



“Up! Get up! You’re going to be late. Were you on your phone again last night? If you can’t organise yourself, you’ll find me taking a much more active role in your social life, and you won’t like it!”

Her mother’s voice rang out, barging in on a dream involving a handsome stranger. Its screech had the ability to cut through glass, so Dylan’s subconscious offered little challenge. Her mother continued to complain as she marched back down the long corridor of their tenement flat, but Dylan had already tuned out. She was trying to remember the dream, to hold on to some of the details for later. Walking slowly... a hand, warm around hers... the scent of foliage and damp earthiness heady in the air. Dylan smiled, feeling warmth bubble in her chest, but the chill of the morning dissolved the image before she could lock his face into her mind. Sighing, she forced her eyes open and stretched, luxuriating in the cosy warmth of her thick duvet, then squinted left towards her alarm clock.

Oh God.

She was going to be so late. Scrambling around her room, she tried to pull together enough clean clothes to create a full school uniform. A brush through her brown, shoulder-length hair created the usual frizzy mess. Bad hair life. Dylan didn’t even glance at her reflection as she hid the frizz in an inconspicuous bun. How other girls managed to create artfully styled, perfect hairdos was a mystery to her. Even when she made an effort to blow-dry and straighten, two seconds outside was enough to return her unruly hair to its natural state.

Having no shower was out of the question, but today she had to make do with a quick twirl under water that was always scalding hot, irrespective of knobs turned or buttons pushed. She scraped a rough towel against her skin and yanked on the black skirt, white shirt and green tie that made up her uniform. In her haste,

she caught a jaggy nail on her last pair of tights and ripped a huge ladder in them. Grinding her teeth, she lobbed them in the bin and clattered, barelegged, down the hall to the kitchen.

A glimpse in the fridge revealed nothing that could be eaten on the run. There was no time to dash into a café. She would just have to be hungry. At least she had enough money left on her school dinner card for a decent meal. It was Friday, that usually meant fish and chips – although of course there would be no salt, vinegar or even ketchup. Not in our health-mad school, Dylan thought, rolling her eyes.

“Have you packed?”

Dylan turned to see her mother, Joan, standing in the kitchen doorway. She was already dressed in her uniform for the gruelling twelve-hour shift at the hospital.

“No. I’ll do it after school. The train isn’t till half five – there’s loads of time.” Interfering as usual, Dylan thought. Sometimes it seemed like her mum just couldn’t help herself.

Joan’s eyebrows rose in disapproval, deepening the wrinkles that ran across her forehead despite the expensive lotions and potions she applied each night.

“You are so disorganised,” Joan began. “You should have had it done last night instead of chatting with your friends...”

“All right!” Dylan snapped. “I’ll manage.”

Joan looked as if she had many more things to say, but instead she simply shook her head and turned away. It was easy to guess the reason for her mother’s bad mood. She highly disapproved of Dylan’s weekend trip to see her father, the man Joan had once promised to have and to hold until death – or in this case life – did them part.

Anticipating that Joan had not given up on the matter, Dylan threw her shoes and jacket on, grabbed her bag and stomped down

the hall, trying to ignore the grumbling that was already coming from her stomach. She paused at the door to yell a compulsory goodbye – met with silence – before traipsing out into the rain.

By the time she had walked for fifteen minutes, her cheap winter jacket had given up the fight against the drizzle and she could feel the wet leaking into her shirt.

A sudden, hideous thought made her stop in her tracks, despite the downpour. White shirt. Rain. Wet shirt. She remembered rooting through her underwear drawer for a clean bra and coming up with only one – dark blue.

She hissed a word between her clenched teeth that would have gotten her grounded if her mother had been in the vicinity. There was no time to run home. In fact, despite rushing, she was still going to be late.

Terrific.

Head down, she splashed along the high street, past the charity shops, boarded-up failed dreams, cafés with cheap furniture and extortionate cakes, and the obligatory betting shop or two. There was no point trying to avoid the puddles, her feet were already soaked through; they were now the least of her worries. For a moment she considered crossing the road and hiding in the park until Joan left for work, but she knew herself better than that. She just didn't have the nerve. Muttering a stream of complaints interspersed with obscenities, she turned off the high street and through the gates of Kaithshall Academy.

Three floors of uniform boxes in various stages of disrepair, Dylan was sure the school had been designed to curb enthusiasm, creativity and, most importantly, spirit. Registration was in Miss Parson's room on the top floor – another tired-looking cube that the teacher had tried to brighten with posters and wall displays. Strangely, her efforts only made the space more depressing –

especially now, filled with thirty clones chattering inconsequential rubbish as if it were life-altering drama.

Dylan's tardy entrance earned her a pointed look. As soon as she sat down, the teacher's high-pitched whine shot over the classroom din. "Dylan. Jacket."

Amazing how pupils have to be polite to teachers, but it doesn't work in reverse, Dylan thought.

"I'm cold. It's freezing outside." And in here, she thought, but didn't add.

"I don't care. Jacket."

Dylan considered resisting, but knew it would be futile. Besides, any further complaints would draw attention to her, something she tried to avoid as a rule. Sighing, she battled with the cheap zip and shrugged the jacket off. A glance down confirmed her fears. The sodden blouse was transparent, and under it her dark-blue bra seemed to glare like a beacon. She hunched down in her chair and wondered how long she could hope to remain invisible.

The answer was about forty-five seconds.

It began with the girls, of course. Snickers erupted somewhere to her left.

"What? What is it?" The harsh, snide voice of David 'Dove' MacMillan cut across the titters.

Dylan looked resolutely at the front board, but in her mind's eye she constructed a crystal-clear image of Cheryl and her cronies smiling gleefully as they pointed manicured nails in her direction. Dove was so dense it would take him another few seconds to realise they were even pointing at her, and he would never work out the joke without a sledgehammer-sized clue. Cheryl would provide that service, mouthing, "Check out the bra," or perhaps a suitably obscene hand gesture. Sign language was more on the level of the moronic boys in this class.

“Ha!” Again, another mental image of the spittle and Irn Bru that would be soaring onto the desk now he had finally cottoned on. “Haw, Dylan, I can see your boobs!”

Dylan cringed and slunk a little further down in the chair as titters elevated to open hilarity. Even the teacher was laughing. Cow.

Ever since Katie had left, no one at this school even gave the impression of being on the same planet as Dylan, never mind the same species. They were sheep, all of them. The boys wore tracksuits, listened to hip-hop and spent their evenings down at the skatepark. Not skating, just vandalising things and drinking any booze they'd managed to get their hands on. The girls were worse. Five layers of make-up turning them orange, and catty, screeching voices picked up from American teen dramas. The twelve cans of hairspray that their 'look' required seemed to have turned their brains to mush, because they couldn't have a conversation unless it involved tanning, atrocious pop music or – most disturbing of all – which of the tracksuited Casanovas was the most appealing. Of course there were other outsiders, but they tended to be loners too, just trying to get by and avoid being targeted by the mob.

Katie had been her one companion. They'd known each other since primary school and spent their time quietly mocking their fellow classmates and plotting a way out of the place. Last year all that had changed. Katie's parents had decided that, as they despised each other, the time had come to split. They'd hated each other as long as Dylan had known Katie, so she couldn't understand why it had to happen now. But Katie had been forced to choose between living with her alcoholic father in Glasgow, or moving away with her obsessive mother. Dylan hadn't envied her the choice. Caught between a rock and a hard place,

she'd chosen to go with her mother, to a tiny village in Lanarkshire called Lesmahagow. It might as well have been on the other side of the world. Since she'd gone, life had been a lot harder, and a lot lonelier. Dylan missed her friend. Katie wouldn't have laughed at the see-through shirt for a start.

Although the shirt had dried out by halfway through first period, the damage was done. Everywhere she went, boys from her year – and some she didn't even know – followed her and laughed, making sarcastic comments and attempting to ping her bra strap (just to check it was still there). By lunchtime, Dylan had had enough. She was sick of boys making fun of her, sick of girls with snide looks, and sick of teachers who pretended to be deaf and blind. When the bell went at the end of fourth period, she passed by the canteen, ignoring the scent of fish and chips and the pangs from her stomach, and went out of the school gates with the crowd heading to the chip shop or the bakery. When she came to the end of the line of shops, she just kept on walking.

Her heart beat double-time as she reached streets that the pupils never ventured into at lunchtime – unless, of course, they were planning to do exactly what she was doing. She'd never skipped school before, had never even considered it really. She was the shy, serious pupil. Quiet, diligent, but not particularly clever. All of her successes had to be earned through hard work, which was easy when you had no friends. But today she was becoming a rebel. When period five registration was taken, there would be an 'A' for absent beside her name. Even if they phoned the hospital, there would be nothing Joan could do about it. By the time her shift finished, her daughter would be halfway to Aberdeen. Dylan put the unease she felt out of her mind. Today she had more important things to think about.

At home, the first thing she did was yank off the school shirt

that had caused all today's embarrassment. She dumped it in the washing basket, and stood in front of her wardrobe examining her clothes. What was an appropriate thing to wear when meeting your dad for the first time? It had to make the right initial impression. Nothing revealing that would make her look slutty; nothing with cartoon characters to make her look childish. Something pretty and grown up. She looked. She pulled clothes aside to see what was hidden at the back. Finally she was forced to admit that she did not own anything fitting that description. She grabbed a faded blue t-shirt with the name of her favourite band emblazoned across the front, and topped this with a grey, hooded zip jumper. She kicked off her school skirt and replaced it with comfortable jeans and whacked on some old Nike trainers. She scrutinised herself in the full-length mirror in Joan's room. It would have to do.

Next she grabbed an old bag from the hall cupboard and dumped it on her bed. She shoved in another pair of jeans and a couple of t-shirts, some underwear, and then her black school shoes and a green skirt, just in case he wanted to take her out to dinner or something. Her phone and wallet she stuffed into the front pocket along with some toiletries.

Then she grabbed one last, important item from the bed. Egbert, her teddy. He was greying with age and fairly battered, with one eye missing and a slight tear along the back seam leaking stuffing. He'd never win a beauty contest, but he'd been with her since she was a baby and having him nearby made her feel safe and comforted. She wanted to take him, but her dad might think she was a child. She hugged the teddy to her chest, undecided. Then put him on the bed and looked at him. He seemed to stare back, unwanted and abandoned. Instantly feeling guilty, Dylan grabbed him and placed him gently on top of her clothes.

She zipped up the bag, then unzipped it and chucked him back out. This time he fell face down and couldn't gaze forlornly at her with his one accusing eye. She zipped up the bag again and walked determinedly out of the room.

Exactly twenty seconds later, she dashed back in and grabbed him.

"Sorry, Egbert," she whispered, kissing him quickly before stuffing him into the bag as she ran out of the door.

If she hurried she might be able to catch the earlier train and surprise her dad. This thought carried her down the stairs and along the damp street. There was a café on the way to the train station; maybe she could nip in and grab a burger to sustain her till dinner. Dylan picked up the pace, mouth already watering in anticipation, then as she passed the high metal gates of the park, something stopped her dead. She stared through the bars at the *mêlée* of greenery, not quite sure what she was looking at.

Déjà vu.

She squinted, trying to work out what had triggered the feeling. A glimpse of tousled blond peeked out beneath the branches of a wide oak. For a second, Dylan had a flash of that same halo of hair, wrapped round a face, featureless but for eyes of shocking cobalt blue. The dream.

She sucked in a breath, her pulse suddenly pounding, but a cackle of boyish laughter shattered the illusion. The head turned to reveal a smirking mouth pouting out a stream of smoke, cigarette dangling from his lips. Dove MacMillan, with his pals. Dylan wrinkled her nose in disgust and stepped back before he could see her.

Shaking her head to chase the last tendrils of the dream away, she crossed the road, eyes fixed on the hand-painted sign above the greasy-spoon café.