

IS THERE LOVE BEYOND THE AFTERLIFE?



TRESPASSERS

A FERRYMAN NOVEL

CLAIRE MCFALL

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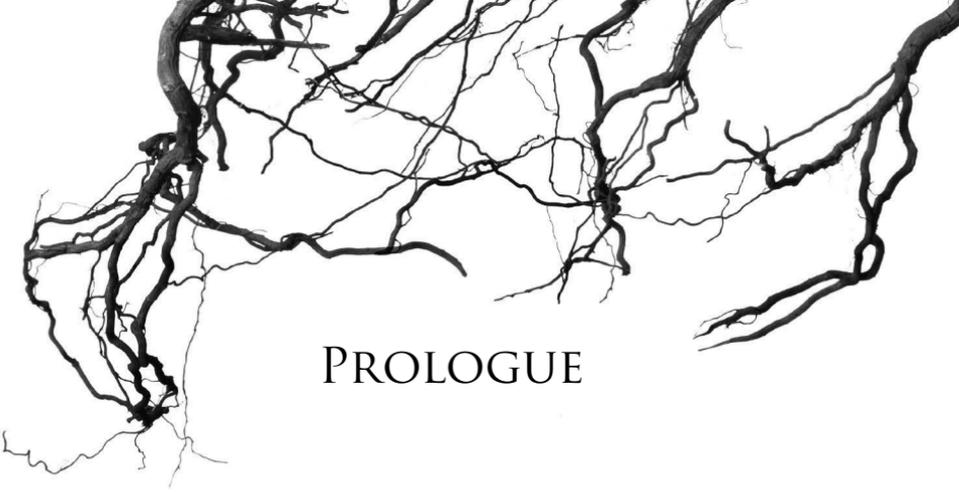
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KELPIEDGE

To Cate and John. Finally.



PROLOGUE

He just... he just vanished.

Susanna sat on the damp grass on the side of the hill and contemplated the tunnel mouth where the ferryman who called himself Tristan had disappeared. She'd no right to be there, she knew, lingering, holding off her next soul – but she'd seen him going the wrong way.

Towards the world of the living – him and his soul. And vanishing.

There was only one possible explanation, but that was the thing: it was impossible. She'd sat here for a long time – though time was all relative in the wasteland – and hadn't been able to come up with any other answer except the one that sent equal bolts of fear and excitement coursing through her veins.

Somehow, Tristan had found a door to the world of the living.

Somehow, he'd gone through it.

He was a ferryman just like her, and he'd left his post. The pull of Susanna's next soul, her next job, scraped painfully against her every nerve ending, but she couldn't make herself move from the spot. She couldn't stop seeing Tristan's broad shoulders, his mop of sandy hair, being swallowed up by the darkness as he walked right out of the wasteland.



ONE

Dylan floated in a warm haze. Eyes closed, she lay flat on her back, thick cushioning underneath her and soft covers tucked up almost to her chin. She was comfortable, she was cosy and she wanted to stay that way.

Unfortunately, there were several voices nearby intruding on her peace and one of them, at least, wasn't going to be ignored for long.

"Who, exactly, are you, young man?" Joan's words were frosted with ice. Dylan knew that tone, knew it intimately. She'd been on the receiving end of it more times than she could count. What she'd never noticed before, though, was the undertone of anxiety and fear that sharpened its edge.

"I'm with Dylan."

At the second voice, Dylan's eyes snapped open. She couldn't help it. She'd crossed the wasteland for that rich timbre, faced beings more deadly and terrifying than anything she could have imagined in the world of the living. There was nothing she wouldn't do...

Although there was one thing she *couldn't* do. With her neck trapped by an unyielding plastic collar, she wasn't able to twist and see Tristan, check with her own eyes that he was really there. She tried, though, letting the hard material dig into her collarbone and rolling her eyes so far upwards that her temples throbbed. But he remained frustratingly just out of sight.

“Are you indeed?” A pause heavy with suspicion that made Dylan wince. “Funny how I’ve never heard of you. Doctor, why have you allowed this young man access to my daughter?” Rising volume, rising anger. “She’s lying unconscious. He could have done *anything!*”

Dylan had heard enough. Mortified, she tried to yell, but all that came out was a croaky, “Mum!”

Unable to see anything except an ugly white strip light above her head and the circular curtain rail that typically surrounded a hospital bed, she had to wait a couple of seconds for Joan’s face to rush into her field of vision.

“Dylan! Are you all right?”

Joan looked like she’d aged a hundred years. Her eyes were bloodshot and the bags beneath them were streaked with mascara. The tight bun she always kept her hair in was bedraggled, wisps hanging limply round her face. She was wearing her nurse’s uniform under a baggy cardigan, and it struck Dylan suddenly that she’d been wearing that when they’d said goodbye – no, when they’d fought instead of saying goodbye – just that morning.

And yet it had been days ago for Dylan. Days of struggling through the wasteland. Without warning, Dylan’s eyes filled with tears that spilled hot and fast across her cheeks, disappearing into her hair.

“Mum!” she repeated. Her face scrunched up against the stinging in her eyes, her nose and her throat.

“It’s all right, sweetheart. I’m here.” Fingers curled around her left hand and even though Joan’s grip was icy, Dylan felt comforted.

Dylan sniffed and tried to lift her right hand to wipe her cheeks dry, but a tug followed by a sharp pain brought her up short. She flinched, drew in a startled breath and tried to raise her head,

but along with the neck brace someone had run a strap across her shoulders. She couldn't lift herself more than an inch – and even that *hurt*.

“Just hold still, baby,” Joan crooned. “You're in the hospital. You've had a bad accident and you need to stay very still.” She squeezed Dylan's right hand very gently. “You've got a drip in your other hand. It's best if you just...” a choked breath “...if you just stay as still as you can, all right?”

No, it wasn't all right, Dylan thought. She felt helpless lying there flat on her back. And she *couldn't see Tristan*.

“That's right, Dylan, just stay flat for now,” another voice cut in smoothly. A doctor, stethoscope dangling round his neck, leaned into Dylan's vision on the opposite side of the bed to Joan. He looked as tired as she did, but he smiled. “We need to examine the extent of your injuries before we start letting you move about. You may have a spinal injury, so we have to be very careful.”

Sudden panic, as a memory from the train flooded Dylan's mind.

“My legs?” she whispered.

She remembered the agony of lying buried under the debris from the crash, the feeling of fire that had ripped through her legs with every breath, every shift of her weight. Now there was... nothing. A sea of numbness. She tried to wiggle her toes, but it was impossible to tell if they were moving.

“They're still there.” The doctor held up both hands in a calming gesture, that same smile fixed on his face. Dylan wondered if he looked like that even when he was giving really bad news. Suddenly it wasn't comforting any more.

He dropped one hand down, resting it on the covers. Dylan couldn't tell if he was touching her or not; if he was, she couldn't feel it.

“I don’t... I can’t...”

“Relax, Dylan.” An impossible order to follow. “There’s no reason for alarm. You’re on a high dose of painkiller and we had to heavily bandage you because you have some deep lacerations. That’s why you don’t have much feeling, all right?”

Dylan stared at the doctor for a moment, weighing the truth of his words, then allowed herself to breathe.

“I’ll come back in a few minutes when you’re taken for X-rays,” the doctor added. He smiled and backed out of their curtained section.

“Mum.” Dylan swallowed and then coughed a bit. Her throat felt like sandpaper.

“Here.” Joan thrust a plastic cup in her direction, the straw just an inch from her lips. Greedily Dylan sucked down the water, although Joan took it away before she was anywhere near satisfied. “That’s enough for now.”

“Mum,” she repeated, a little more strongly. She tried once more, unsuccessfully, to raise her head. “Where’s Tristan?”

Joan’s lips thinned. She turned her head away slightly, as if she was turning her nose up at some unpleasant smell, and panic coiled heavy and cold in Dylan’s chest.

“I thought I heard—” Dylan struggled against the confines of the bed, did her best to lever against the restraints holding her down, “Where—”

“I’m here.” Better than just his voice, Tristan’s face slid into view on the other side of the bed, as far as possible from Joan – which was a good choice because she was glowering at him with unconcealed suspicion and anger.

Tristan. Relief and joy flowed through Dylan like a river. He was here. He’d made it.

They both had.

Tristan made to reach for Dylan's hand, the one with the drip thrust uncomfortably into her vein, but a sharp noise from Joan stopped him short. Needing his touch, Dylan ignored the discomfort that tugged repulsively every time she shifted her hand, and covered the remaining distance, wrapping her fingers around his.

He squeezed tight and it hurt, but Dylan smiled at him.

"You're here," she whispered.

Then it slammed into her – the memory of saying those exact same words, lying flat on a gurney as two paramedics carried her from the wreckage of the train. The feeling of seeing him there, in the world, alive and solid and real, after thinking that she'd lost him. After thinking that she'd let go of his hand and left him behind. Fresh tears fell down her face.

"You see! You see!" Joan reached across and tried to slap Tristan's hand away, but the waist-high railings and the width of the bed prevented her. "You're upsetting her! Let her go!"

"No! Mum," Dylan tightened her grip on Tristan and used her free hand to bat Joan's arm away. "Stop it."

"Clearly you've bewitched her," Joan spat. "And now here you are, confusing her when she's vulnerable and doesn't know which way is up!"

"Mum!"

Joan totally ignored Dylan, her focus fixed on Tristan.

"I want you to leave," she said firmly. Then she shifted her gaze to beyond the curtain. "Doctor? I want him out. He isn't family, he has no right to be here."

"Mrs McKenzie," the doctor began, leaning in through the curtain, but Joan ranted right over the top of him.

"No. I know the rules. I've worked here for eight years. I don't know who let that young man in, but—"

"Don't go." Dylan was only concentrating on Tristan. He, too,

was ignoring her mum, his hand still folded tightly around hers, his piercing blue gaze fixed on her face like he was trying to memorise her features. “Don’t leave me.”

He squeezed a hairsbreadth tighter, causing a jolt of pain to streak across the top of Dylan’s hand, and shook his head imperceptibly.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he promised.

Joan was still raving at the doctor, but with Tristan gazing down at her, Dylan tuned her mum out completely.

“I still can’t believe you’re here,” she told him.

“Where else would I be?” He gave her a crooked smile, a puzzled line forming between his eyes.

“You know what I mean.” Each time Dylan blinked, she expected Tristan to disappear, to be pulled back into the wasteland, called back to his never-ending duty. It didn’t seem real that he could’ve broken his bond of servitude so easily.

“We’re meant to be together,” Tristan told her, sliding even closer. “Wherever you are, that’s where I’ll be.”

“Good.” Dylan smiled at him, hoping against hope that it would somehow be as easy as he said. She looked over to where Joan stood, hands on hips, face screwed up in anger.

“Mum.”

No response from Joan.

“Mum!”

Still no reaction.

“Joan!”

That did it.

Joan turned on her, ready for battle as usual. “Dylan—”

“I want Tristan to stay.” Dylan wasn’t as stupid as the doctor – she had no intention of letting Joan get started on her. “If he can’t be here, then I don’t want you to be, either.”

Joan reared back as if she'd slapped her. "I am your mother, Dylan."

"I don't care." Not the truth: Joan's hurt expression brought a hard lump to Dylan's throat, but she pushed on regardless. "I want Tristan."

"Well." For once Joan seemed to be lost for words. She blinked furiously, and Dylan was horrified to realise she was near tears. She'd never seen her mum cry, not ever. Seeing it now made snakes writhe in her belly. She fought hard not to back down.

At that moment two orderlies trundled in, oblivious to the tense scene.

"One for the X-ray department?"

There was a moment's pause before the doctor seemed to come to himself.

"That's right," he said, now looking thankful for the timely reprieve. "Dylan here." He waved unnecessarily in Dylan's direction.

The orderlies shuffled round, unlocked her hospital bed's brakes and wheeled her out, drip pole and all.

It was both a worry and a relief to leave Tristan and Joan behind. What might Joan say without Dylan there to act as a buffer? Would she have Tristan thrown out of the hospital? Arrested? One of the orderlies noticed her worried glance and attempted to reassure her.

"Not going far, love, the X-ray department is just round the corner here."

It wasn't enough to calm her. The further she went from him, the more sick and sore she felt. What if he wasn't there when she got back?

No. He wouldn't leave her. He'd promised.



The X-ray technician was brusque and efficient, and the radiographer didn't even speak to her. Dylan didn't mind; she was focussing all her energy on not throwing up. The pain in her legs was excruciating – she couldn't wait to get some more painkillers when she was back on the ward.

Bizarrely, the trip back through the corridors actually helped, and both her legs and her stomach felt better when the orderlies parked her bed in place.

Joan was there, pacing like a tiger, and, much to Dylan's relief, Tristan was too. He was slumped in a metal chair, looking strangely pale. Joan must have given him hell in her absence. Dylan's eyes met his and he held them with an intensity that revealed his concern.

At least Joan hadn't managed to drive him away.

"Are you all right? Did the doctor say anything?" Joan was straight over to the side of the bed, crowding in on Dylan before Tristan could get up from his chair.

"I didn't speak to a doctor," Dylan answered. "It was the radiographer, but he didn't tell me anything."

"Of course." Joan shook her head at her own stupidity. This was her hospital, Dylan thought. She must know how things were run. "Maybe I'll..." She craned her neck, her eyes fixed beyond the door of the room, and Dylan could tell she was thinking about going to find the doctor, harassing him until he put Dylan at the top of his list. But then Joan's eyes drifted back to Tristan. "We'll just wait, shall we? Won't be long."

Dylan tried to keep the disappointment from her face. She wanted to know what was wrong with her legs, but mostly she wanted Joan out of the room for a few minutes so that she could speak to Tristan. Privately. It still didn't feel real to see him here, in a hospital ward, rather than striding confidently through the meadows and mountains of the wasteland.

Nobody said much as they waited. Joan fussed over Dylan's water, plumped her pillows and tried to detangle her hair until Dylan snapped at her to leave her be. It felt like a lifetime but the doctor finally made an appearance. It was the same one from earlier, looking haggard and harassed.

"Do you have the results, Dr Hammond?" Joan got straight to the point.

He grimaced before smoothing his face back into a professional, reassuring mask. "Well, I've spoken to the radiographer and it's as we thought," he said. "The right leg's broken."

"Is it a clean break?" Joan asked.

There was an ugly pause. Dylan felt a curl of dread in her stomach – that obviously meant no.

"There are multiple breaks, Nurse McKenzie. We're going to have to pin it and insert a brace while it heals."

"An operation," Joan whispered, the blood seeping out of her cheeks.

"Mum?" Dylan whimpered, panic forming at Joan's reaction.

"It's all right." Joan was back at Dylan's bedside in a heartbeat, a smile on her face, though it was strained. "It's only a small one."

"A very routine procedure, Dylan," the doctor continued. "You'll be fine. Although there are further complications..."

"Doctor?" Joan prodded.

"There's also a very fine fracture in your left leg, Dylan. It's not significant enough to need a cast, but you're going to have to keep your weight off it while it heals too."

"Both legs! I'll be an invalid." Dylan shuddered.

"It'll be fine," Joan squeezed her shoulder in reassurance. "I'll be there to help you."

"Tristan," Dylan said. At the edge of her vision she saw him

stand, but her focus stayed on Joan. “Tristan will help me too. He can stay with us.”

“No!” Joan’s response was a bark.

The doctor cleared his throat, clearly keen to extract himself from this discussion. “I’ll pop back in a wee while, once I know when we can slot you in for the operation.” He slid out as Joan rounded her attention back on Dylan.

“I’m not having *him* in our house. He’s—” Dylan narrowed her eyes as Joan visibly collected herself. “We don’t need him,” she finished with deliberate calm.

Tristan approached the bed, but stood on the opposite side from Joan. “I would like to help,” he said evenly. His calm tone and relaxed posture were belied by his white-knuckled grip on the bed railings. Dylan reached out and tugged one hand free, folding her fingers around his.

“No,” Joan repeated. “The two of us will be just fine. I’ll take some time off work and—”

“Dylan’s recovery is going to take weeks, Mrs McKenzie,” Tristan interjected quietly. “Likely months.”

A tense moment passed as Joan clenched her teeth and Dylan fought to keep the victorious expression from her face. There was no way Joan would be able to take that much time off. Even if the hospital allowed the absence, she knew they couldn’t afford to lose Joan’s wages.

“Plus, Mum, we live on the second floor of a tenement flat. You’re not exactly strong enough to carry me up and down two flights of stairs!” Dylan squeezed Tristan’s hand, sensing the inevitable.

After several long, angry seconds of silence, Joan turned to Tristan and spat her words out: “You sleep on the couch. Understand?”