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Opening extract from **Ferryman**

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To Clare, for being the first, and to Chris, for letting me
disappear inside my head.

Chapter 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 morosely 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 continue reading 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 running into 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 did not want to have to make polite conversation.

It had not been a good day. For reasons best known to itself, her alarm had failed to sound, and really it had all been downhill from there.

“Up! Get up! You’re going to be late. Were you on that computer 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 a later daydream. 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. Dylan didn’t even glance at her reflection as she reached for the bobble that would hide her bad hair life 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 the water that was scalding hot, irrespective of which knobs were twirled 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, bare legged, down the hall to the kitchen.

Setting off without breakfast was also highly undesirable, but a glimpse in the fridge – and a desperately optimistic peek into the larder – revealed nothing that could be eaten on the run. If she’d been earlier she could have dashed into a café on the way to school and grabbed a bacon roll, but there was no time for that now. 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 she 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 that she laboriously applied each night.

"You are so disorganised," Joan began. "You should have had this done last night instead of messing around on MSN..."

"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. Dylan listened to her footsteps echo down the hall. 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 pledged her life to – 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 quickly threw her shoes on, grabbed her school bag and stomped down the hall, trying to ignore the grumbling that was already coming from her stomach. It was going to be a long morning. She paused at the door to yell a compulsory goodbye, one that was met with silence, before traipsing out into the rain.

By the time she had walked the fifteen minutes to school, the cheap winter jacket she wore 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 searching for a clean bra and coming up with only one – a navy one.

A word that would certainly get her grounded if her mother had been in the vicinity escaped from between her clenched teeth. A quick glance at her watch told her that there was no time to run home. In fact, despite rushing, she was still going to be late.

Terrific.

Head down into the rain, she stomped 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 longer any point in 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, the school, Dylan was sure, 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 room 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. Another voice that could cut through glass. "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 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 revealed about forty-five seconds later. 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 perfectly 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, there was no one at this school who even gave the impression of being on the same planet as Dylan, never mind being part of 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 watching re-runs of American teen dramas on E4. 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 that had all 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 it had. 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. She 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 the immature boys making fun of her, sick of the stuck-up girls with their snide looks, and sick of the stupid 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 pangs from her stomach as the scent of fish and chips wafted through the double doors, and went out of the school gates with the rest of the crowd heading out to the chip shop or the bakery. When she reached 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 in to 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 in any of your classes, or the whole school. 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 Joan at the

hospital, there would be nothing she could do about it. By the time her shift finished, Dylan would be halfway to Aberdeen. She put the unease she felt out of her mind. Today she had more important things to think about.

When she reached her own street, she became a little more cautious, but she met no one. Trudging up the stairs to the second floor, she pulled out her keys. They jangled loudly in the stairwell, making her catch her breath. The last thing she needed was Mrs Bailey from across the hall sticking her nose out. She'd want to know what Dylan was up to, or worse: she'd want her to come in, have a chat. Catch up. Dylan listened intently, but there was no shuffle of aged footsteps, so she quickly opened up the double lock – Joan was paranoid about burglars – and sneaked inside.

The first thing she did was to yank off the school shirt that had caused all of today's embarrassment. She dumped it in the washing basket in the bathroom and wandered into her room and over to the wardrobe. She stood there examining her clothes closely. 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 left, then right. She pulled some of her clothes aside and leaned in to see what was hidden at the back. Finally she was forced to admit that she did not own anything fitting that description. In the end, 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. Old Nike trainers completed the look.

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, MP3 player 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, out of which the stuffing was making a desperate bid to escape. He'd never win a beauty contest, but he'd been with her since she was a baby and having him near her made her feel safe and comforted.

She wanted to take him, but if her dad saw Egbert he'd think she was a baby. She hugged him to her chest, undecided. Then she put him on the bed. She drew back her hand and looked at him. He seemed to stare back, looking unwanted and abandoned. Instantly feeling guilty, Dylan grabbed him and placed him gently on top of her clothes. She zipped up the bag, then half 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. Egbert lay discarded on the middle of the bed. Exactly twenty seconds later, she dashed back in and grabbed him.

"Sorry, Egbert," she whispered, kissing him quickly before

stuffing him unceremoniously into the bag as she ran back 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 street. There was a café en route to the train station; maybe she could nip in, grab a burger to sustain her till dinner. Dylan picked up the pace, mouth already watering in anticipation, but as she passed the high metal gates of the park, something stopped her dead. She stared through the bars at the melee 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 peaked 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. As she watched, the head turned to reveal a smirking mouth pouting out a stream of smoke, cigarette dangling from his lips. MacMillan, dogging it 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.

Chapter Two

It's outrageous. Scandalous." The stranger had clearly decided that, as reading was out, he would concentrate on the next best thing: complaining. Dylan glanced at him dubiously. She did not really want to get into a discussion with this tweed-covered, middle-aged man and end up being drawn into awkward conversation all the way to Aberdeen. She shrugged, a gesture almost lost under her heavy parka.

He carried on, unfazed by her lack of enthusiasm. "I mean, the prices they're charging, you'd think they could be on time. But oh no. Outrageous. I've been waiting here for twenty minutes, and you know when it comes in there won't be a seat to be had. Terrible service."

Dylan looked around. Though a cross-section of society loitered under the various points of shelter, the platform was not so crowded that she could just melt away and disappear.

The tweed man turned to look at her. "Don't you think?"

Forced into a direct response, Dylan tried to be as non-committal as possible. "Mmmm."

He seemed to take this as an invitation to continue the diatribe. "Better when it was National Rail. Knew where you were with them. Good, honest men working the trains then. It's all gone downhill now. Run by a bunch of charlatans. Outrageous."

Where *is* the train, Dylan thought, desperate to be relieved of this social charade. And there it was, rolling in like a knight in rusting armour. One glimmer of hope in a day full of embarrassment and torment.

She reached down for the rucksack at her feet. It was faded and showing signs of wear and tear, like most things she owned. As she took both handles in her hand and heaved the heavy bag off the ground and over her shoulder, a faint ripping sound made her grimace. It would be in keeping with the pattern of today for the seam to tear open and a phantom wind to gust up and whisk her underwear across the station. Mercifully it held, and Dylan shuffled forward with the rest of the weary passengers towards the train as it coasted slowly to a standstill. It stopped with a hiss of hydraulics, leaving her equidistant between two sets of doors. She quickly eyed the direction in which the tweed stranger was headed and dashed, as fast as she could under her burden, towards the other door.

Once in the carriage she glanced left and right, trying to identify the crazies – drunks, weirdos, people who wanted to tell you their life stories (which often involved odd alien abductions) and philosophise with you on the meaning of life and other theories. These people seemed inexplicably drawn to

her when she took public transport, and she was anxious to avoid them today when she had so many other things on her mind. Her surveillance picked out the free seats and it did not take long to work out why these remained open in the packed train. A mother with her screaming baby, its red face puckered up and angry, sat at one end with a pram and several bags filled with everything a baby could possibly need scattered in disarray around them. On the other side of the aisle, a few seats down, there was a double-seater opposite a pair of drunken teenagers in blue Rangers' tops. They were drinking from a bottle of what looked suspiciously like Buckfast hidden inexpertly in a paper bag, and singing loudly and very out of tune.

The only other option was in the middle of the carriage, squashed in beside a large woman with an array of shopping bags, which she had arranged on the seat beside and across from her in a manner that made it blatantly clear that she did not welcome company. However, glaring or not, she was the most appealing option.

"Excuse me," Dylan muttered, shuffling over to her.

The woman sighed loudly, her displeasure obvious, but she moved the bags nonetheless and Dylan, after shrugging out of her jacket and hauling it and her bag up onto the overhead shelf, settled herself down. A quick root around in her bag on the platform, as she waited her turn to enter the train, had produced her MP3 player and some headphones. Sticking them roughly in her ears, she closed her eyes and turned the volume up high, letting the heavy drumbeats of her favourite indie rock band drown out the world around her. She imagined the bag lady glaring at her and her awful music, and the image made her smile.

Too quiet for Dylan to hear, the train groaned and strained, picking up speed as it raced on towards Aberdeen.

Keeping her eyes closed, she thought about the coming weekend. Nerves and excitement fought for control of the butterflies in her stomach as she contemplated stepping off the train and searching out the man who was all but a stranger to her. It had taken months of persuasion and wheedling for Joan to relinquish the phone number of one James Miller, her father. Dylan remembered how her hand had shaken as she'd dialled, hung up, dialled again, and then hung up. What if he didn't want to talk to her? What if he had his own family now? What if, worst of all, he turned out to be a huge disappointment? A drunk or a criminal? Her mother had been unable to give her any more details. They didn't talk, ever. He'd left when she'd asked and never bothered either of them again, also like she'd asked. Dylan had been five years old at the time, and in the decade that had passed his face had become less than a memory.

After two days of inner turmoil, Dylan had called in the middle of the day, finding a quiet spot in the school playground that wasn't already claimed by the smokers, amorous couples or gangs. Her hope was that he'd be at work and no one would answer. It worked. After six heart-stopping rings, the answer machine beeped and she suddenly realised that she hadn't thought about what she was going to say. Panicking, she left a hesitant, rambling message.

"Hi, this is for James Miller. It's Dylan. Your daughter." What else to say? "I, um... I got your number from Mum. I mean, Joan. I thought, maybe, we could meet up, maybe. And talk. If you want to." Breathe. "This is my number..."

As soon as she'd hung up, she'd cringed. What an idiot! She couldn't believe that she hadn't planned a message. She'd sounded like a bumbling moron. Well, there was nothing to do now but wait. And she had waited. All afternoon she felt sick to her stomach. Biology and English passed in a blur. At home she'd numbly watched *Ready, Steady, Cook* and the news, not even changing channel when the stupid soaps came on. What if he didn't call? Would he have listened to the message yet? What if he never got the message? Dylan had imagined a female hand lifting the receiver and listening, then slowly pressing a painted red fingernail on the delete button. The image had made her look over at the cordless phone beside her and chew her bottom lip, indecisively. Too scared to phone again, she'd had no choice but to cross her fingers and stay within easy reach of her mobile.

It took two days, but he did call. At four o'clock, just as she was sloshing home through yet another rainy day of school with wet socks and increasingly wet shoulders, her phone vibrated in her pocket and began chirping out the piano chords of the *Once Upon a Time* theme tune. This was it. Her heart seemed to stop beating as she yanked the phone out of her pocket. A quick glance at the caller ID confirmed it: although it wasn't a number she recognised, it was the Aberdeen area code. Sliding her thumb up the glass screen, she pressed it to her ear.

"Hello?" Her voice sounded rough and strangled. She tried to clear her throat quietly.

"Dylan? Dylan, this is James. Miller. I mean, your dad."

Silence. Say something Dylan, she thought. Say something, Dad. The silence hung between them, but in the stress of the moment it sounded like screaming.

"Listen." His voice broke through it, melted it away. "I'm so glad you called. I've wanted to get in touch with you for so long. We've got a lot to catch up on."

Dylan closed her eyes and smiled. She took a deep breath and started to speak.

It had been so easy after that. Talking to him felt very comfortable, like she'd known him for ever. They'd talked until Dylan's mobile ran out of charge. He wanted to know everything about her, her school, hobbies, who she hung out with, what movies were her favourites and what books she liked to read. Boys – though there wasn't much to say there, not from the selection on offer at Kaithshall. In return, he told her about his life in Aberdeen, where he lived with Anna, his dog. No wife, no kids. No complications. And he wanted her to visit.

That had been exactly one week ago. For seven days Dylan had been wrestling with her nerves and excitement about meeting him, and trying not to fight with Joan, who made no secret of the fact that she disapproved of Dylan trying to connect with her father. She'd no one to talk to about it except snatched MSN conversations with Katie whenever her friend's crazy mother gave her five minutes alone. They'd managed to sneak one such chat last night. Katie's mother had done a late-night shopping run – she hated to go when there would be lots of people around – and Katie had managed to convince her that she needed to go to bed early for school. Dylan had received her text and two minutes later they'd been connected.

Oh my God I thought she was never going to leave!

Thank heavens for 24hr supermarkets!

I know! How are things? New school still suck?
New school, same morons. These ones are just country morons. So glad that this time next year we'll be starting college, I can't wait to get out of here! Howz things at glorious Kaithshall?

Sucks. Got some news though!

Ooh, do tell!

I called my dad.

Dylan had hit the send button and waited. Her heart had been racing ridiculously. She'd wanted Katie to say something nice; wanted someone to tell her that she was doing the right thing. There'd been a pause that seemed to last for ever before the little box had popped up: *Katie's writing*.

So... how did that go?

A cautious response. Her friend hadn't wanted to stick her foot in it.

Actually, great! He wants to meet me! He sounded really nice on the phone. Don't know why Joan hates him so much.

Who knows? Parents are weird. Look at mine, total nutters! So is he coming down to see you then?

Nope, I'm going there. Tomorrow.

What?! That was fast! You scared?

No, I'm dead excited. What is there to be scared about?

The reply had come through instantly.

Liar. You're crapping it!

Dylan had laughed out loud, then clamped her hand over her mouth. Joan would go mental if she knew she was on the computer this late. Typical Katie, she always saw straight through her pretence.

Okay, maybe a bit. Trying not to think about it too much... kind of worried I might chicken out if I actually think about what I'm doing!

It'll be cool. You need to meet him anyway. And if your mum really does hate him then keeping them in separate cities might be a good idea! How you getting there? Train?

Yeah, he's bought me a ticket. He says he wants to make up for fifteen years of lost time.

Dylan held the train ticket in her hand right now. She was supposed to text her dad to let him know she was on her way. She'd been impressed that he could text; Joan couldn't even make a call on her mobile. When she'd broken down once she'd had to ask a stranger to show her how to contact the RAC.

Digging into her pocket, which was difficult being surrounded by the glaring woman's bags, Dylan pulled out her phone. She opened up a new text and began to type.

**Dad, on train. Not running too late at the mo.
 Can't wait to meet you ☺ Dylan.**

Just as she hit the send button, the window beside her went black. Fabulous, she thought, a tunnel. The mobile – an expensive Christmas gift that Joan had paid for through several extra shifts at work – scrolled one word across the screen: *Sending*. It rolled through three times before the little phone emitted a double beep: *Message failed*.

“Dammit,” Dylan muttered. Irrationally she tried holding the phone up above her head, knowing that it was useless. They were still in the tunnel; no signal was going to get through that much rock. She was poised like that, arm in the air like a mini Statue of Liberty, when it happened. Light vanished, sound exploded, and the world ended.