



**BLOOD WILL
BE BORN**

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PROLOGUE

Bog land, Co. Monaghan, Republic of Ireland
1976

Nothing's as heavy as a dead body.

Better to keep them alive, make them walk, easier over ground like this. Fryer kept his eyes down, careful on each step. The path they were on was barely that: a thin snake of semi-swamped moss and turf, broken up by the odd grey rock or half-dead tree. On either side the bog: black and boundary-less in the dead of night. The wind was in voice, it howled across the land, sending salt spray into his face.

Romantic bloody Ireland: people had killed for this, many more had died.

Mooney's light faltered, and then faded, fast. He had been leading the way, the boy between them, Fryer's gun pointed at his back. Fryer stopped, Mooney must have changed direction. Within a minute, a man could be lost. It was the whole point of this place: things came to disappear.

Fryer squinted into the rain. No sign of him. Hovering to his left, for a moment, was the ghost of a light, and

then it was gone, obscured by the mist. The spray surged towards him, blanketing even the ground, leaving him without bearings. Fryer staggered drunkenly. He held out both arms like a tightrope walker and slid his finger off the trigger, hissing a prayer of expletives under his breath. He could smell the oily looking water pooled at his feet, mineral, decomposed. No way was he going in that.

Fryer's eyes widened; no longer seeing the bog water. His shoulders hunched and he turned, finger back on the trigger.

'Mooney!' he yelled, dropping down on his right knee, gun pointed.

The hairs on the back of his neck raised in an angry heckle, he felt them shiver and crawl; something had been behind him. Close enough to touch him. And now, something was watching him. He stared, unblinking into the blackness, training the shooter between ten and two.

'Mooney!' he screamed, but the wind sucked his words away.

His mind raced, recounting the journey that had taken them to this point. They had not been tailed. Fryer was certain of it. Mooney said the Brits were sending in the SAS, men who would lie in wait for weeks on end, then *bang bang*. Fryer told Mooney he was scared of fuck all, and that was true. But now, Fryer was scared.

He waited, every sense on edge, but heard only the wind. He watched the path. That's where it was. And he could feel it watching him. Fryer stole a glance in the direction of Mooney's light. He could see it again, but it was very faint, a hazy yellow glow. If he stopped here any longer, he might not find them. He might end up waist deep in the dark water.

With IT.

He slowly raised himself up, gun still trained on the path, and took a few tentative steps forward. He peered intently, but there was only blackness and the spray on his face. He slowly lowered the gun. Nothing. It was time to go. Fryer turned, and walked, one eye on the dissipating halo of Mooney's lamp. He would not run, no need, and if he ran he could twist an ankle, break a leg.

And then it will catch you, because it is still there, you know it. You can feel it on you, watching.

And then Mooney would have to drag him back to the cottage, and Mooney couldn't drive, there'd be no way to get back to Belfast.

Squelch, sink, suck – next foot, and repeat. Wetter here, less of a path. Fryer panted hard. He checked, but Mooney's light was no closer, so he set off again, faster, until he was running, or what passed for it, arms swinging at his side, the gun gripped in the wet claw of his hand, eyes on the light, to catch Mooney, get this dirty job done.

A hand, bony and preternaturally strong, hooked round his left foot, and held it under the cold water. Fryer yelped and fell forward, the bog rushed up, his brain manically ordering his numb body to kick, roll and shoot.

Freezing, earthy ditchwater stung his eyes, filling his ears, his nose and mouth, drowning him in blackness. His left ankle exploded with agony, something holding and turning. It was going to twist off his foot, pull his leg from its socket. Fryer screamed into the mud, his finger pumping the pistol's trigger. Instead, he felt the cold squelch of mossy water in his right fist. He had lost the gun. He pushed himself up and turned, choking out bog water and gasping,

crying. Fryer started to tug his leg by the calf, his left ankle exploding with agony as he yanked. Fryer looked down, panting, but no longer sobbing.

His foot was caught on a twisted old root; he could see its shiny blackness where it broke the lip of the water like a mummified forehead. Not the bogeyman after all, he thought. Fryer shuffled on his arse, getting closer to it, then turned himself round and dislodged his foot, shoe coming off in the process. He submerged his hand into the black pool, retrieved it. Grimacing, he squeezed his foot in, leaving the laces undone. He turned, and groped about frantically on his hands and knees in the muddy water for the gun, finding nothing but sediment. Finally, he stood up, panting, spitting away the flat, iodine taste of the water. Time to catch himself on here. He'd lost his cool, and now he'd lost a piece. He was going to balls up this operation if he was not careful.

'Find Mooney, do the job,' he said into the rain.

He cupped his hands to his mouth, ready to bellow Mooney's name, though it would have done little good. Then he looked right. Maybe a hundred feet away, he could see it: Mooney's light, moving ever so slightly, the size of an old penny. Must have tracked too far to his left, overshot them, but he had made up the ground. If anything, he was a bit ahead of them now. Fryer started to move towards the light, trying to keep the weight off his left ankle, but not able to. He gritted his teeth, and welcomed the pain. It was keeping him alert; it was bigger than the wind, a distraction from the foundering cold that wanted him to stop. Fryer plodded on, his gaze fixed on the glow, not looking down. And not looking back.

His feet found a firmer path, the light cleaner, closer. About ten yards further on, there was Mooney, the boy still in tow. Fryer called him. Mooney stopped, turned round and looked him up and down as he approached. He took a fist full of the boy's soaking T-shirt and shoved him down, hard. Ahead was only bog; this was the end of the road.

'State of you, you're soaked,' Mooney said.

'Fell,' said Fryer, looking over his shoulder into the dark. 'Foot caught. On a root.'

'Gun?' asked Mooney.

Fryer shook his head, not meeting Mooney's eyes. The boy was sitting on a flat stone, rocking back and forth, whimpering like a wounded cub.

'Never mind, use mine,' said Mooney.

The boy squinted up at Fryer, taking him in. He raised both his hands, tightly bound by a piece of nylon rope, and pointed a finger at him.

'Ha ha you fell, you fell. You're all wet,' he said. His face had broken into a stupid smile and then he started to laugh, snot swinging off his nose in a white rope, he was in fits.

Fryer limped over, fast as he could, his gun hand balling into a fist. If not for him, he would not be here, his ankle up like a bap and a missing gun to explain back in Belfast. Fryer got to him, launched a punch and decked him in the mouth, feeling his lips squash and split, the bony barrier of his teeth crunch and give way, loosening under Fryer's knuckles. His hand was ringing. The boy was screeching, his bound hands muffling the sound as he pressed them against his mouth. He started shaking, and crying loudly, strings of saliva and blood pouring from his mouth. Mooney had his gun out, pointed at the boy's head.

‘Shut you the fuck up!’ he said.

The boy stared at the gun, eyes wide, whining, but not crying. Mooney lowered the gun.

‘Mammy, I want my mammy,’ he said, the tears back on.

Mooney raised the piece and cracked him once on the top of the head with the base of the grip. Hit him hard. The boy slumped off the rock, his tongue lolling out of his mouth, lips swelling. Out cold, but probably still alive. Mooney turned to Fryer, a look of genuine apology.

‘I should have gagged him, Fryer. He was quiet, you know, since last night,’ he said.

Fryer sighed, nodded. Mooney understood. Worse than carrying their dead weight was listening to them plead and cry for their lives. Got on your nerves. An informer would say anything to save his skin. He will go to England, and never return. He will never say a word; never, ever talk. It was sort of funny when you thought about it. Talking was usually their problem. It explained why Fryer and Mooney usually dumped their bodies in a public place. The message was as important as the punishment: touts will be found and shot. This was different. This boy was never going to be found. He was to be disappeared. He would not be claimed. That was their orders. Mooney was holding the gun out to him by the barrel. Fryer took it.

‘I did the last one,’ he said. He checked Mooney’s Colt, found six in the chamber and then cocked it. Mooney stepped away from where the boy lay.

‘Where will we bury the—’

Three shots from Fryer in quick succession, the crack of the gun silencing Mooney’s question, the boy’s body jerking as though electrified with each shot, and then he

was absolutely still. Three holes in the side of his head, darker even than his wet hair, each indented and each still smoking. More smoke and cordite hung in the air momentarily, then was cleaned away by the breeze.

‘We’ll weigh him down in the water,’ said Fryer.

‘You take his feet,’ he said, setting the gun next to the lamp.

Mooney nodded and grabbed the boy’s ankles. Fryer grunted, hoisting the boy up by the nylon rope. As they raised him off the ground, a portion of skull flapped open, grey mash and blood within. Fryer raised his eyes to Mooney and nodded. Mooney’s face was pale going on green, but he did what Fryer wanted and turned so they were side on to the where the path ended and the bog water began.

‘One, two,’ counted Fryer, swinging the body with Mooney, and then they both let go, throwing it into the water on three. It hit with a small splash then started to sink, face down.

‘Help me,’ said Fryer, returning to where the boy had been sitting. He squatted over the flat rock. He dug his fingers under it, feeling his nails fill and compact with the soft, black earth, until he felt a turn in the stone. Mooney was doing the same on the other side.

‘Got it?’ said Fryer.

‘Yes,’ nodded Mooney.

‘On three again,’ said Fryer and again they counted, this time heaving and lifting the stone from its resting place and carefully bringing it up. Fryer’s ankle felt like it was made of rusty shards of metal and nerves, but he kept moving, he wanted this over. They walked the boulder into the black water, up to their knees, and then reached the place where the boy’s body had hit.

‘Go,’ gasped Fryer.

They pushed the weight of the boulder away from them and it splashed into the water, sinking, on top of the body. Now it would never rise. It was over. They sloshed back to the path. Fryer stopped and took the weight off his ankle. Mooney picked up the gun, and kept walking, moving quickly.

‘Where are you going?’ asked Fryer.

‘Piss,’ said Mooney, not looking back.

Fryer felt inside his pocket and took out a busted pack of filter tips. They were drenched, like him. He squeezed the paper packet in his hand and watched as water dripped between his fingers. He pocketed the smokes. He had already left a gun out there somewhere, best to leave nothing else. From a fair bit off he heard the sound of retching and vomiting: Mooney. Fryer lifted up the lamp and started to move in that direction. His ankle blasted mercilessly each time he put weight on it. More sounds of retching. Fryer froze, every cell in his body alive and alert. It was back, watching him, but not from the path like before. It was in the bog, it was behind him.

‘Nothing there,’ said Fryer, to himself, and started to walk.

He heard something over the wind: a slow splash and slop of bog water being disturbed close behind him. Then he smelt it. It was wild, feral as fox piss but also of the bog, wet and cloying as a bag of spoilt potatoes. He ran, swinging the paraffin lamp, crazy shadows lunging at him from the path. The splinters of pain from his ankle were just distant echoes. It was coming for him. It was real but not human and if he turned round he would be able to see it, but that might just take his mind, aye, before it killed him it would do just that.

His left ankle buckled beneath him and Fryer was falling, for the second time that night, this time letting go a small scream as the path surged up to meet him. He hit the ground hard, and heard the paraffin lamp crack. The fuel ignited with a whoosh and Fryer's face was hit with light and heat. The spilt oil started to burn brightly on the path, just inches from Fryer's face. Fryer rolled over and scrabbled away on his back, panting and pushing at the earth with his feet. His eyes were wide, searching for it, but the flash of light hung in his vision, blinding him. It was close, he knew it, its smell was coming at him in waves, fierce as shit, stagnant as a drain.

'No!' he screamed, and waved his right arm in front of him.

There was something spraying out of him, cascading through the air. He lowered his arm and saw a shard of glass from the lamp had embedded in his wrist, the blood still pumping out, hot and black. His vision was clearer. He looked up, waiting for the thing to be looming over him, but it was Mooney looming over him, Mooney who was calling his name, cursing, and stripping off to his white vest. He tore it apart and tied it tight above Fryer's elbow, Fryer groaned, tried to complain, but nothing came out. The blood stopped pumping, and as it did, the first wave of pain hit Fryer, dull and everlasting.

Mooney dragged him up, put Fryer's good arm round his neck and tugged the back of Fryer's strides, keeping him on his feet. Fryer's legs gave up, and then steadied. Mooney was speaking to him. Could he walk, as far as the cottage? Fryer nodded, and they started moving. Fryer could smell the boke on his breath, but that was OK, it was better than

the other smell. Fryer stopped. He looked back. The oil was sputtering out now, but still burning. He could not see the 'thing', but it was there. And it was watching, from the darkness. Its name came to him, as the last flames died.

'It's the Moley,' said Fryer, gritting his teeth on the words, but too late, he had spoken. He had given it a name, and a life.

It knew what he had done and had followed him. If not for the blood, it would have taken him.