

Bleed a River Deep

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PROLOGUE

Monday 9 October

The last time I saw Leon Bradley with a gun in his hand, he was standing in our garden at home. Only five years old and a little under three feet tall, he had a cowboy hat tipped back on his head, his hair, strands of fine spun gold, hanging in his eyes. My younger brother, Tom, who was playing the Indian, had taken refuge in our shed, sharpening his plastic knife in preparation for a scalping.

Leon had pointed the gun at me, one eye shut, the tip of his tongue poking out through his lips in concentration while he lined me up in his sights. He kept shaking his fringe from his open eye. 'Hands up, Tonto,' he said.

I raised my hands in surrender as I edged my way down the driveway and out onto the street. My friend – Leon's older brother Fearghal – waited for me in his Ford Fiesta, revving the engine.

'Bang, bang,' I heard Leon shout, just as I slammed the car door. As we sped off, I saw Leon in the rear-view mirror, mimicking a gun's recoil with the plastic Smith & Wesson he clenched in his tiny fist.

This was different though. Leon must have been in his late twenties now. His hair had darkened or was dyed brown, and hung in unwashed straggles down his neck. Yet his face was again contorted in pantomime concentration as he held the gun

steady. Again he had one eye open, his mouth a thin pale line. I followed his gaze, followed the aim of his weapon, to where US Senator Cathal Hagan stood, his face frozen in terror.

I pushed through the crowd towards him, my hand raised, a shout of warning caught in my throat. Then I heard the shot and glimpsed the muzzle flash, even as two American Secret Service agents, too late to compensate for the inadequacy of An Garda, grappled Bradley to the ground. The gun, knocked loose from Bradley's grip, fell onto the floor where it lay glinting in the autumn sunlight that streamed through the windows.

CHAPTER ONE

Friday 29 September

'They've uncovered a body out at the new mine.'

It took me a few seconds to realise the speaker was addressing me. I looked up from my desk to where Superintendent Harry Patterson loomed over me.

'Excuse me?'

'They've dug up a body out at the mine,' he said irritably. 'We're going out there. It's a dead body,' he explained, turning to leave as he did so.

'They generally are, if they've had to dig them up,' I muttered to his retreating back.

'And keep the smart arse comments to yourself,' he snapped. 'Get a move on.'

The leaves had only begun to turn, despite the lateness of the year. Some green still showed from the massive oaks behind our home when I left that morning; the cherry trees though were predominately golden, the leaves beginning to twist and sag. The air was still ripe and warm, the tannic scent of autumn starting to sharpen.

The fact that Patterson himself was attending was indication enough of the priority this find was being given. It wasn't so much what was found, but more *where* it was found: Orcas, a new gold mine opened two years previous near Barnes Gap, be-

tween Ballybofey and Donegal town, built on the promise of untold wealth to be shared with the whole community at some undefined point in the future. The body, Patterson explained in the car, had been found by some of the workers as they dug a new section of the mine. Patterson had been summoned by the owner himself, John Weston.

Weston was a second generation Irish American, whose family had moved back to 'the old country', following his father's death. Bill Weston, John's father, had been a Senator in the US, as well as being extremely wealthy. John had inherited every cent and had developed a number of business projects in Ireland, supported by friends of his father. The Orcas goldmine was the biggest and, it appeared, the most successful.

Twenty minutes later, Patterson turned the car up a narrow side road, and Orcas hove into view: sixteen acres of Donegal bog land which now housed Ireland's largest gold mine. Preliminary tests conducted in the 1990s had shown the presence of several high quality veins which ran through the rock under this land. One vein apparently stretched right across the sixteen acres and along the bed of the River Finn.

'I wonder where . . .' Patterson began, then stopped. There was no need to ask for directions. A convoy of Garda cars was already parked further up the road, alongside several 4x4s marked with Orcas livery. Half the force in Donegal must have been called out here, I thought. A good day to commit a crime anywhere else in the county.

The car made it almost to the site before getting stuck in a mud filled puddle. We walked the rest of the way, our feet slipping on the wet path. Ahead of us a group of Guards had gathered, most still in their shirt sleeves. Some of them must have clocked Patterson, for they began to make themselves look busy. Some of the others just moved to the side of the road to let him past.

‘This is a right balls-up,’ he spat. ‘Weston’s just turned a record profit. Word was he was going to make a bigger investment. This could be enough to scare the fucker off.’

As we drew level with the pit, the two men standing in it dropped their spades and scrabbled up the bank of clay they had shifted. The soil was almost black and scented the morning air with the smell of mould. It took me a second or two to pick out the body from the surrounding soil, for the only parts visible at this stage were the head and part of the upper arm.

But Patterson had no need to worry about Weston getting scared off. If there was a murder involved here, it had happened a few thousand years earlier by the look if it.

The corpse was curled in on itself. The underlying muscle was outlined by skin the texture of old leather. The face had been flattened, presumably by the weight of earth pressing on top of it. The eyes were open, though the sockets long emptied. The mouth likewise was fixed ajar, the teeth, slightly gapped and blunted, were still lodged in the jawbone. There was certainly no sense of serenity in death: the face was twisted as if in agony.

One arm protruded slightly from the dirt, the finger nails still attached to the talon-like hand.

‘Jesus, what is it?’ Patterson asked. ‘Should we call the State Pathologist or the archaeologist?’

A few of the men standing around grunted good humouredly.

‘Still, at least he didn’t die on our watch, eh boys?’ he continued.

‘Do we need an ME to declare it dead?’ someone called. More laughter.

‘Best get forensics up anyway,’ Patterson concluded. ‘Just to keep it all official and that.’ Then he nodded to me: ‘We’re to see Weston.’

As we travelled towards the main building, I looked out across the mine. When it first opened, it had been the subject of some controversy from environmental lobby groups, and I had had my own reservations about it, based on the little I had read in the papers. In reality, the mine itself was not at all what I had expected and much smaller than I’d imagined, though the scarring it had already inflicted on the landscape was significant.

Two large warehouses squatted side by side, their low corrugated roofs painted blood red. Despite the size, only a few workmen were visible, and I counted a half dozen cars parked in the staff area. One, a black Lexus with personalised number plates spattered with mud, revealed that Weston was already here.

We were directed to the only brick building in the compound, a white stucco three storey block. A workman was at the front door, fastening a bronze plaque to the wall with an electric screwdriver. It caught the sun as he shifted it into position. He nodded as we passed, then snuffled into the back of his wrist and continued with his work.

Weston's receptionist was waiting for us when we entered the building. The floor was covered with thick carpet on which the image of a gold Torc was repeated in a series of diagonal patterns. To one side of the reception desk stood a mahogany display cabinet, its contents lit by tiny halogen spot lights. The shelves of the cabinet glittered with gold jewellery. I wandered over and scanned the contents and their price tags while Patterson ingratiated himself with the twenty-year-old receptionist behind the desk. The smallest item in the cabinet – a pair of gold studs – was priced at €350.

John Weston strode down the stairs towards us, his hand already outstretched, his smile fixed, business like, friendly, predatory. He smelt of expensive aftershave. His shirt cuffs sat just far enough past his jacket sleeve to reveal both the quality of the cloth and the gold cuff links, fashioned again in the Torc shape of his company's emblem. His skin was tanned, his hair neatly trimmed: he looked younger than his fifty years, despite the slight peppering of grey at his sideburns.

'Gentlemen,' he began, his accent discernible in the way he slurred the word, the 't' almost silent. 'Thanks for coming. Let's grab a coffee.'

Clasping Patterson's hand in both of his, he shook it, then repeated the gesture with me.

'John Weston,' he said, smiling expansively.

'Ben Devlin,' I replied.

'Ben,' he repeated, with a nod of his head, as if to demonstrate that he was committing my name to memory. Then he placed his hand on my elbow and guided me towards the stairs, physically directing me. I resisted the movement and he stopped.

'Just admiring your collection, here,' I said. 'My wife would kill for something like that.'

'Beautiful, aren't they?' he agreed, still smiling. His teeth were perfect and straight, and unnaturally white. I was vaguely aware that I was trying hard to find reasons not to like the man, despite the fact he had been nothing but gracious since our arrival.

'Jackie,' he said to the girl who had welcomed us. 'Have you those packs?'

With a timid smile, Jackie produced two thick folders from beneath the desk where she sat. Both were bound in a leather cover emblazoned with the Orcas emblem. No expense spared.

'And choose something pretty for Ben's wife, would you?' he added, winking at me conspiratorially, then directing me towards the stairs again before I had a chance to decline the offer.

Weston's office itself was the size of the entire ground floor of the Garda station in Lifford where I was based. He occupied a corner room on the top floor of the building so that, from his

desk, he could survey his empire both to left and right. As we entered his office he flicked a switch and the blinds on the windows automatically pulled back, revealing both the expanse of his gold mine and to the other side, the majesty of the Donegal landscape into which he had quite literally carved his niche.

‘Beautiful country,’ he observed. ‘Absolutely stunning.’

I began to suspect that Weston spoke only in superlatives. I also noticed he was being careful to compliment the landscape, and not the additions he had made to it.

I looked down over the forest to our left, through which I could catch a glimpse of the Carrowcreel, a tributary snaking its way towards the River Finn. The light glittered on its surface, as if on shards of broken mirror.

‘Almost a pity to industrialise it,’ I said, earning a warning glance from Patterson who had continued his ingratiation since our arrival, echoing Weston’s observations on the weather as we had climbed the two flights of stairs to his office.

‘Almost,’ Weston agreed with a smile. ‘This is my country too, Inspector. I’m not going to damage it. Part of our licence is our guarantee that we will leave this area as we found it. Every clod that has been dug up will be replaced. It will be as if we were never here.’

‘And when will that be?’ I asked.

‘When it’s no longer profitable to remain, I suppose,’ he said, his palms held open in front of him in a gesture of honesty. ‘I am a business man, after all.’ He waited a beat, then continued, ‘though of course this was all bog land before we arrived.’

And to bog land, it must return, despite the fact that the bogs themselves were artificially created by some Iron Age entrepreneur.'

I nodded slightly, having taken his point.

'Which leads me nicely on to our friend out there. I'm no forensics specialist, but I'm guessing he or she didn't die in this century. Is that right?'

'It would appear so,' Patterson said, eager to assert his role in the conversation. 'It shouldn't cause too much disruption to your works, Mr Weston.'

Weston nodded his head. 'An amazing country,' he stated, then pointed a finger at us. 'I forgot that coffee, didn't I?' he said, still good humoured. He pressed the intercom button on his phone and instructed Jackie to bring us coffee and some biscuits, which she did with startling speed.

Once we had settled into our drinks, Weston explained why he had summoned us.

'The packs you've been given details the history of the Orcas mine— including our financial reports for the past tax year. You'll notice that last year we enjoyed record profits. As a result of this, we have a special visitor coming both to formally open the site and, I suppose, to officially acknowledge the Irish-American finances which have made this all possible.'

'Who's the visitor?' Patterson asked.

'An old friend of my father's,' Weston said. 'Senator Cathal Hagan.'

We both nodded. Hagan was well known, even in Ireland. He'd been an outspoken Irish-American senator, who had established links with 'Heal Ireland', ostensibly an Irish aid charity, but which in fact, funded republican causes in the North.

'Obviously, anything we can do to help, sir,' Patterson offered.

Weston nodded soberly. 'Thank you, Harry. We'll have to work together on this. The Senator will bring some security with him, and I know a number of the other divisions will be involved in his trip, but we'll be dependent on yourself and Ben to ensure there's no trouble while he's here. Obviously this information is between the three of us for now, gentlemen.'

I didn't need to ask why there would be trouble. Hagan had called on those senators who expressed reservations over the invasion of Iraq a few years back to be strung up for failing America in its hour of need. Post 9/11 he was an outspoken critic of terrorism, in all its forms, apparently forgetting that the charity he had spearheaded in the 80s had paid for most of the Republican movement's weaponry in Ireland. His arrival could attract the growing anti-War lobby which had already organised more than one demonstration in Ireland over the past few years.

'Do you expect trouble?' Patterson asked, then seemed to gauge the stupidity of the question by our expressions, for he immediately added, 'Beyond the usual, I mean.'

'Senator Hagan has his detractors, both at home and abroad, as I'm sure you're aware, Harry. In addition, the environmental lobby seem determined to vilify us at every turn, despite the fact

that, before a sod was cut here, we invested millions on an environmental impact study, to whose recommendation we have adhered in every point.'

'How much security will he be bringing with him?' I asked.

'One or two personal security men, I suspect,' Weston answered. 'He is retired now, Ben, so he isn't afforded quite the level of protection he once was.'

'So, we'll be responsible for the bulk of it,' Patterson said. It was a statement rather than a question, but Weston nodded.

'When's the visit?'

Weston grimaced, then, leaning forward in his seat, consulted a document on the desk before him, although he clearly knew the date by heart: 'Monday, 9th October.'

Following coffee and preliminary security discussions, Patterson and I were escorted back downstairs. Weston gestured to the welcome packs we had been given.

'Everything you could ever want to know about our company is in those packs, gentlemen.'

As we shook hands to leave, the receptionist from earlier approached nervously, holding a blue box. She passed it to Weston who opened it and inspected the contents.

'Beautiful choice, Jackie,' he said, nodding with admiration. Clearly relieved to have completed this latest task to Weston's satisfaction, Jackie smiled and scurried off again. I was a little taken aback when Weston handed me the box. 'I hope your wife likes it, Ben,' he said.

I opened the box, a little confused and feeling my face flush with embarrassment. Inside it sat a thick gold necklace, which I was sure I had seen in the display cabinet earlier with a price tag in excess of €3000 Euro.

I held the box out towards Weston again. 'Thank you, sir, but I can't accept this. It's . . . it's far too much.'

He stood his ground, however, his hands clasped in military fashion behind his back, his smile fixed. 'No, I insist, Ben. '

I could think of nothing to say, and so, in the end, simply thanked him for his generosity, though as we left the building to return to Patterson's car, I could not help feeling that, in some way, I had accepted more than just a gift for my wife.

'Bloody hell, Devlin,' Patterson said as we pulled out onto the main road. 'That thing costs a fucking fortune.'

'I didn't ask him for it,' I said defensively.

'You may as well have done,' he retorted, and I suspected that part of his reaction was jealousy that he had not been similarly gifted. 'You can't fuck up this visit now,' he added, without looking at me.

'Me?'

'You. I'm putting you in charge of it,' he said. Then, nodding towards the box I held in my hand, he added, 'You've already been paid for it, after all.'

We had only travelled a mile or so when a security van accompanied by a convoy of Garda and Army vehicles approached us

on the other side of the road, travelling towards Lifford to stock the banks in preparation for wages day. As it passed, a camper van with number plates so muddied they were impossible to read, overtook it, then cut across the lane in front of us and trundled up a dirt track just off the main road. Patterson slammed on the brakes though there was no real prospect of our colliding with it.

‘Fucking hippies!’ he shouted, flicking one finger in the general direction of the van, whose rear bumper we could see disappearing up the lane way.

While we were sitting there, a second camper, which had remained behind the security cortège, indicated and pulled across the road in front of us, also heading up the lane.

‘Where the fuck is everyone going?’ Patterson asked incredulously.

‘Maybe we should find out,’ I suggested, if only so we wouldn’t have to sit in the middle of the road for any longer.

He grunted, then turned the car onto the laneway and followed the trail of dust raised by the van in front, up the path and into the pine forest I had seen from Weston’s office. The car shuddered along the dirt track, the air cooling as we drove beneath the canopy of the trees. The lower trunk and boughs were completely bare; the forest floor thick with browned pine needles and lumps of cones, the air sharp with the scent of sap when I wound down the window. Above the drone of the car, I could hear the rushing of the Carrowcreel.

Around the next bend, we pulled to a stop behind the two camper vans, which had parked alongside several other cars. The occupants of each were unloading tents and camping equipment from their respective vehicles. My initial thought was that it was perhaps a group of travellers or crusties, setting up camp illegally. However, as I looked closer, it became apparent that the people around us were of no single age- or social-group. The second car from the front was being emptied by a middle aged couple. The camper van did indeed contain crusties, clad in woolly jumpers, with dreadlocked hair, tight jeans and loose boots. There were also single men and women and families, even a local barman I recognised, Patsy McCann, was removing camping gear from the boot of his car.

We got out of the squad car. Patterson immediately made a beeline for the camper van, already fitting his cap on his cannonball head. I wandered over to Patsy McCann, taking the opportunity to light up as I did.

‘What’s up, Patsy?’ I said, holding out the box to offer him a cigarette too.

‘Here ahead of the rush, Ben,’ he said over his shoulder to me, not stopping his unpacking. ‘No thanks,’ he added, nodding at the proffered cigarettes.

‘What rush?’

‘The bleedin’ gold rush, man,’ he said, cocking an eyebrow at my ignorance.

I laughed, assuming it was in some way connected with the record profits Orcas had just announced. I was wrong.

Patsy turned long enough to hand me the local newspaper, then turned again and, having emptied the boot, strained to pull, from the back seat of his car, a rucksack, tied to which was an old kitchen sieve. I opened the paper. The story could not have been more obvious. Under the headline *Prepare for the Rush* was a picture of a middle-aged man holding up a nugget of gold the size of a penny, as if in offering.

His name was Ted Coyle. He had been camped out in this woodland for three weeks now, without anyone knowing. He had come here, he said, because of the gold mine, believing he was fated to strike it rich. Coyle sounded like a lunatic. Whether he was or not, according to the news report, he would soon be a rich lunatic. The nugget in his hand might just make his fortune, the report claimed. He had found it, he said, while panning the Car-rowcreel.