

Goodbye Baby Blue

Goodbye Baby Blue is the first of Frank Ryan's acclaimed thriller trilogy, which also includes *Sweet Summer* and *Tiger Tiger*, all featuring Sandy Woodings. With his perceptive eye for background and character, Ryan has created a thriller masterpiece.

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Frank Ryan

Goodbye Baby Blue

Also by Frank Ryan

Between Clouds and the Sea

The Doomsday Genie

Sweet Summer

Tiger Tiger

The Snowmelt River

The Tower of Bones

The Sword of Feimhin

The Return of the Arinn

Frank Ryan

Goodbye Baby Blue



A SWIFT BOOK

**First published in Great Britain by New English
Library
Republished by Swift Publishers 1999**

135798642

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British
Library
ISBN 1-874082-77-4

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Swift Publishers

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my agent, Bill Hamilton, and to my original editors, Nick Sayers and Vanessa Daubney, for their help in the writing of this novel. Special thanks to my brother, Tony, for his encouragement – also to my friend Craig Dent for the courtesy of his time and technical advice.

For my son, John

1

The leaves fall in a pattern, all off one branch together, so that there are whole branches black and bare with others in the same tree with plenty still left on them. He notices these things as he smells them and he senses the touch of the leaves on his skin. Even to their dry crackling death under his feet as he walks on them, he senses them and he sees them in his mind's eye, the fresh fall on the path behind him, he is aware of them blown into an agitation by his passage. *And in the vine were three branches: and it was as though it budded, and her blossoms shot forth* – . How certainly he feels things like that today, how alive are all his senses. He could be overpowered by the aniseed smell of crushed ferns as he watches from his hiding place in the thick bushes. He can see the children playing and there is a hard quality of touch to his eyes as there is the quality of patience.

Emotion has made his face peculiarly blank and the staring quality of his expression is heightened by the very light colour of his eyes, which are a uniform ash grey. He stands so still and silently it is as if he were immune to the simple human comforts, to the need for blinking and to the cold – for it is certainly the coldest autumn afternoon so far, proven by the dense puffs of steam that blow at excited intervals from the mouths of the children.

“Here! Look at this – I found this. This’ll burn right well.”

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“Hey! Let’s have a look. Hey, Bobby – come and look what Chris’s found!”

Their voices have a lucid musical quality, almost as pure as the note of the male blackbird which has flown up out of the leaves and shrieks a warning.

There are three of them, all boys. They are collecting twigs and odds and ends of wood from amongst the withered nettles and big rusty seed-spikes of docks, putting them down carefully in a pile for their bonfire. Everything about this activity fascinates him: their little dashes here and there, their intimations of adult complexity, the hierarchy, already clear, amongst them. Yet it is only one of them who is really the focus for his eyes. This is the one who is obviously their leader, the tallest of them, with dark wavy hair and brown eyes. The others keep on calling out his name. All the time they want to please him. When he moves they follow him, eddying round him, asking his opinions on things and vying for his attention. He is a little king amongst them and in regal fashion he watches what they do and he is spare with his replies. How calm the world is seen in those big brown eyes.

Bobby! Bobby!

The memory comes without warning: the knowledge that she too is here, that her face hangs in the air, with death in her eyes and her blood has become a thick oil, gushing from the fork of her thighs into the dust.

For a moment the memory is unbearable. For a moment the pain of that memory blots out the world. He has to shake the vision from his head, he is aware only of the need to tear himself clear of the image of her welling blood. He can hide himself no longer. Suddenly there is the bright flash of phosphorescent light. How surprised they all look, as he walks out from where he was hiding, as he smiles and walks amongst them, holding three burning sparklers in his right hand. They are all afraid of him but he calms them quickly with the softness and the calmness in his soothing words.

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“Here! The’s not fritt’ned on’t, eh?” He crouches to come level with the smallest of them, who is wearing a blue parka with the hood partly covering his neck, blond hair and a gap in his top teeth.

The boy’s hand trembles slightly as he accepts the burning sparkler.

Still frightened: he stands up tall above them, his eyes close in a prolonged blink and when he opens them again, he is staring up at the gnarled branches of the autumn trees.

The second of them has a plump face, cheek-heavy, with a sensuous surly mouth and a flattened nose. Their eyes meet but he accepts the sparkler.

“Here!” he says calmly, “here you are – last one for Bobby.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Why doesn’t the’ want it?”

The tall man’s teeth show white against his heavy blue stubble: he is smiling: the grey pearls of eyes are glittering. A face that seems younger now, in spite of the unshaven cheeks and chin and in spite of the dialect. He laughs and seems to enjoy the steam of his own breath, bathing his face, warm and moist, as he cups both hands in front of his lips and he blows heartily to warm them.

“Thee mates are not fritt’ned on a couple o’sparklers.”

“I’m not afraid neither.”

Superior even in the way he is dressed: a grey bomber jacket, with black patches over the shoulders and elbows, blue and white mittens in the colour of the Wednesday football team, jeans with horizontal zips over the knees.

“Oh, sparklers aren’t good enough for thee, are they not? I suppose the’d expect rockets?”

“Hey, Mister – have you got any more fireworks? Hey, he’s got more fireworks. Hey, Mister – what kind of fireworks have you got? Go on, show us then if you’ve got some better ones.” The younger two boys are excited,

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shouting, but he keeps his smiling grey eyes on those suspicious brown eyes.

“Aye. Happen I have some more. But I were goin’ t’save them for bonfire night proper.”

“I’d just love to see a rocket. I’d love to put the light to it myself.”

“Only the’rt not big enough, art – !” He laughs and ruffles the blond wisp of hair that has fallen over the apple-downy cheeks poking out of the hood. “The’rt nobbut a snip on a dog’s tail, that’s what the’s up to.”

“Bobby’s big enough.”

“Aye. He’s big enough. But I don’t reckon he’s of a mind to.”

“Oh, go on, Bobby. Go on. I dare you.”

Still the smile shows through the dark mouth and those eyes are shining. Underneath his feet he feels the crush of beechnut cases while the ground, strewn with tansies and dandelions, is a celebration.

“All right.”

He nods calmly: for he was always certain. “Now then – thee two guard t’fuyer whilst me and Bobby comes back with the rockets. Okay?” He raises his eyebrows humorously at the middle boy, whose sulkiness has never left him. He can still see the pair of them as he takes Bobby in the direction of the embankment, wide eyes in faces pale with the cold, and the little one’s left hand clenching and unclenching.

2

Standing close to the large uncurtained window, Sandy Woodings gazed through his own reflection into a garden that was illuminated as bright as day by a powerful arc light. The light was brilliant because the woman who owned both the garden and the apartment in which he was standing, had a morbid fear of burglars; an understandable fear given the wealth of antiques that decorated every room, even the bathroom. But Sandy Woodings wasn't very interested in antiques. He was interested in the little things. Like a first tooth, or the loss of that first tooth. Or that first concentration in four small faces, the sandcastles on the beach at Croyde Bay, the drawings which followed the colouring books.

When he lit a cigarette, the lighter solidified his reflection. A tall man, dark curly hair, medium blue eyes. Athletic, more than fit for his age, but not young looking. He was aged thirty-nine but he knew that he looked two or three years older.

Josie, on the contrary, looked younger than her thirty-six years. Maybe it was the individual woman in her – feminism appeared to have completely passed her by – or maybe it was because she had a good sense of humour and things didn't worry her for long. He liked that about her, he liked her irrepressible sense of humour, almost as much as he felt curiously a part of this twilight world of the widowed and the divorced. Not love, no – neither pretended that. In that

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sense they were honest with each other. Just a good evening out and afterwards . . . Yes, he was looking forward to the afterwards. But the telephone call spoiled all that.

He took it in the bedroom, although he was well aware of the main extension, hidden in a Japanese lacquered cabinet in the lounge. “Chief Inspector Woodings,” he announced quietly into the receiver, and as he waited for the connection he watched Josie’s antics in the mirror, how she had fallen back onto the black satin counterpane, the carmine sheet lipping it at one angle like a tongue, one hand splayed backwards against the pillow, and the other hand, finger wagging an admonition in his direction.

Listening to the desk sergeant’s voice without taking his eyes off her, he watched her form kisses with the half made-up mouth, the dog’s-tongue expressiveness of her face, the dyed blonde hair, the widely spaced pale blue eyes.

“A young lad has gone missing,” he spoke calmly, his eyes still on the reflection of her face.

“How do you mean, missing?”

“Kidnapped. I’m sorry, Josie.”

He turned to look at her, at the wilful posturing against the counterpane, the sort of woman’s body that was popular in the sixties. Josie would have been a teenager in the sixties.

“I can see why Julie left you.”

Their eyes met but he said nothing.

“I shall go out without you. I’m going to dress up and I’m going to go out without you.”

“Suit yourself.” He had stood up and was distracted momentarily by the Watteau vignettes that decorated her ivory-coloured wardrobes.

“Go on then – not even a kiss. Not even a teensy weensy one – you pig!”

He came back over and sat on the edge of the bed and he allowed her pale blue eyes to search his face. “I’ll be in touch. Give you a tinkle.”

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“You don’t care.” She kissed him miserably, but with wet lips and long enough for the kiss to linger. She left her scent about him like a talisman and the weight of her breasts seemed to have impressed itself onto the memory of his left arm.

A detective sergeant called Tom Williams opened the car door for him and then led him across the wet tarmac road until they stood facing a long and dark slope, illuminated by floodlights. Behind them, with noses directed like bloodhounds against the grey brick terrace of houses, were a dozen squad cars with blue lights asynchronously flashing.

“Have we got an accurate time for when it happened, Tom?”

“Four fifteen – give or take a couple of minutes.”

He looked at his watch: already 7.36. His eyes performed a low wide sweep of the site of abduction, which, to judge from the position of the lights, was about two thirds the way down the slope, close to where it terminated in a wooded coppice, parallel to a busy main road.

“It’s some playground, Tom.”

“How do you mean?” asked Tom.

“Were you never a kid yourself?”

“Never,” said Tom, sniffing.

Something about this scene had an immediate and powerful impact on Sandy Woodings – something about it, even in the dark, as they now made their way past wild grasses, docks, what was left of the nettles and the big flat pancakes of butterbur – it was one of those islands of wild nature found in the waste areas of any large city, a wilderness fighting a festering war against humanity’s rubbish.

“What’s the lad’s name?”

“Stephens, Robert. Eight years old – closer to nine. Taken from the company of his two small pals when

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they were making a bonfire down here, close to the trees.”

Thoughtfully, Sandy led Tom in negotiating some old prams, pieces of garden fencing and some other rubbish, walking with hand-held torches across a fissured lake of old pink mortar, until they came to a part of the slope where it met the road and bloomed, completing the transformation back into primeval forest.

“Four fifteen – so it all happened in daylight?”

“Look up there, in the direction of the houses, and you can see the row where he lived. Four hundred yards away.”

Sandy Woodings took time to look, he picked out the house from the degree of police activity about it.

“Four hundred yards,” Sandy mused still, then suddenly they came on the spot where a sergeant was working under spotlights, knocking hooked pins into the ground and watched in open-mouthed admiration by two boys, the older and plumper of whom was wearing a police officer’s helmet. Tom introduced himself to their two witnesses, then extricated his handkerchief and blew his nose with a trumpeting, staccato relish.

Children make good objective witnesses. The two young boys gave Sandy Woodings a very clear description of the man who had taken their friend Bobby. A tall man, unshaven, with funny eyes. They weren’t altogether clear what they meant by funny eyes but Sandy Woodings thought it unusual. Standing over the spot above a sheer embankment leading down to a main road – the spot where their kidnapper’s feet had left ski marks from his heels on sliding down to where he must have parked some kind of vehicle – Sandy thought again about the strangeness the children had remarked in those eyes. But they had not recognised him, the man was a perfect stranger to them. And yet . . .

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Sandy Woodings felt himself invaded by a sense of strangeness. A menacing bewilderment that caused the hackles to rise slowly on the back of his neck.

Disturbed by that same sense of foreboding, he climbed the hill, leaving Sergeant Tom Williams to liaise with the Scene-of-Crime constable, while Sandy entered the terraced house where Inspector Jock Andrews had already taken down the statements from the Stephens family. Quickly reading through these, he sat in the living room of their home, keeping a curious awareness of the dark-haired woman who was the boy's mother.

Mrs Stephens must have been interrupted in preparing the tea – her fingers were red and shrivelled, as if recently in water, and there were traces of flour across the belly of her open-necked red dress, decorated with small green leaves.

Either they found her son alive and well or Mrs Stephens would never recover. There would never again be a normal day. Sandy Woodings chose his words, his tone of voice, with care.

“We need your help, Mrs Stephens.”

She nodded. She blinked her eyes wide several times, then appeared to withdraw somewhere deeper, her neck fallen forwards, ahead of the line of her shoulders.

“This man – ” he hesitated, because he thought she needed time to take it in, “you've heard his description – does anything about him seem familiar?”

She shook her head. She was sitting at the far end of a red dralon settee, close enough to the window for the intermittent flashes of blue light from the cars to illuminate her face. Her attractive brown eyes did not look back at him, but stared in a distracted way at the floral hard-wear carpet under her feet.

“Think again, if you can, Mrs Stephens. A man perhaps hanging about the street? Somebody watching the house? Maybe something Bobby said to you – perhaps he was approached by this man recently?”

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It was an enormous effort for her to speak, her voice husky, tremulous. “You’ll find him, won’t you, Mr Woodings?”

“We’ll try very hard, Mrs Stephens.”

“You won’t find him, will you? You’re just saying you’ll find him but you won’t find him. You read about it in the paper, children going missing . . .”

He passed her the photograph Jock had chosen for circulation. “Please look at it, Mrs Stephens.” It was a picture of a slim boy with dark hair like that of his mother. In the photograph he was leaning against the trunk of an oak tree, his hands in his pockets and his head inclined slightly downwards. He was wearing black jeans with white stitching down the sides. She lifted her eyes to the photograph as the blue lights stopped flashing.

“He wasn’t wearing these.”

“What was he wearing then?”

“Grey – his grey jacket, with black over the shoulders. And blue jeans.”

“Do you have any photographs of him wearing the same clothes as today?”

“No. The bomber jacket and jeans were new. He’s – Bobby is – quite fashion conscious for his age.”

“What were on his feet, Mrs Stephens?”

“Trainers.” She allowed the photograph to fall loosely in her hand. “Black and white trainers. Size threes. They were a present from his grandmother.”

A policeman brought in two mugs of coffee. Mrs Stephens made no response so one of the mugs was put on top of the sideboard, in case she changed her mind. Sandy Woodings accepted the other, gazing at the photograph again. Out of what depths had this character emerged? He inhaled deeply, added, “I’ve got four of my own, Mrs Stephens. My son is only a year older.”

Suddenly something erupted inside her. All the time she had been living a few feet in front of her eyes, now she

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discovered her real self an infinite distance behind them. She screamed.

Her husband brushed aside the comforting hand of Jock Andrews, to throw his arms about her.

“For Christ’s sake, why aren’t you out there searching? Nothing but damned fool questions. Questions and more bloody questions.”

“I have more than sixty men down the slope already, Mr Stephens. Before the hour is out, I hope to double that figure. Every road is blocked. We’ll make it our business to search every street and every house in every street. I want you to believe me, we’re searching.”

“But you’ve found nothing, have you?”

“Think, Mr Stephens. You’re angry but it isn’t helping, is it?”

“We can’t take any more of it, no more of these useless questions.”

“Why – why, in heaven’s name, did Bobby go with this man? He seems to have gone willingly. That’s what the two boys told us. This man, a perfect stranger, approached him and Bobby just went along with him without a struggle.”

A shortish thickset man, his greying black hair back from his temples and a large circular bald patch on the crown of his head: Mr Stephens’ face was a livid red and he was sweating heavily. “You said you had kids yourself, I heard you.”

“Yes, I said that, Mr Stephens.”

“Then you damn well know, don’t you?”

“What do I know, Mr Stephens?”

“You know they don’t do as they’re told.”

Sandy Woodings stood up abruptly, studied Mr Stephens a moment, then put his hand reassuringly on Mrs Stephens’ shoulder. “Allow Inspector Andrews here to call in your doctor. He’ll give you something. Try to keep calm – get a little rest.”

*

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At 10.00 p.m. Sandy stood once more at the scene of crime, a habit of his since he had first taken charge as an inspector. They had failed to find either the boy or his abductor.

It had happened here – *here*.

This crime had erupted from some human depths, not incomprehensible, something understandable if you could never sympathise. In that understanding must lie the clue, the explanation. Sandy thought about that: he stood alone for many minutes thinking hard.

He detested what he was thinking because he was thinking sex offender and this aroused an instinctive revulsion in him. He thought about it, and was revolted or changed his mind and instead was baffled, all night; and by dawn he still wasn't certain. In this job nothing was ever quite that certain.

Sandy Woodings had consumed several cups of coffee in those uncertain hours and he had climbed to his feet on many an occasion, to stretch his legs, or step out of doors and bruise his lungs with the ice-cold night air, or to smoke a cigarette outside, where cigarettes always tasted ten times better.

But there were peculiarities, weren't there?

And peculiarities, he nodded, bringing a freshly lit cigarette to his lips and inhaling, were interesting. He saw the pair of them now, in his restless mental eye, the two boys, fidgety and tired. He listened again to their precise answers to his questions, registered the posture, the tilt of their faces – the tone of bewilderment in their voices.

Here you are . . . last one for Bobby . . .

Bewilderment. But did it mean anything in two children? Maybe. Maybe it did. And that was the first inkling of the unusual. But then something even more striking was the degree of intelligence – planning even – about the kidnapping. Now he considered the nature of that plan, while continuing to smoke his cigarette, until his thoughts were interrupted by the radio sergeant, who drew him back into

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the incident Portakabin and where, with cigarette stubbed out in a saucer, he listened to Inspector Andrews' voice over the radio set:

"Do you want me to just collect the files together and bring them out to you?"

"No – I'll come in," he took a sidelong glance out of the aluminium-framed window, to witness the smoky wash of dawn illuminate the distant trees, even as yet another mug of strong and burningly hot coffee was deposited on the Formica-topped table next to his elbow. "We should get together on this, Jock. Let's meet up for lunch."

Andrews hesitated, then agreed.

Through the window of the Portakabin, he saw a uniformed chief inspector arrive, Charlie Earnshaw, who had a team of trained searchers with him and a man in a buff-coloured overcoat who was a forensic technician down from North Yorkshire.

"Another thing, Jock – I've been giving it some thought. We'll concentrate on boys. Put boys missing in a separate file – collect all missing children, but put boys separately – have you got that?"

Earnshaw saw him through the window and waved. Sandy Woodings waved back with the hand that was holding the receiver. The radio was a temporary link-up while they were waiting for a proper telephone to be installed. He made a signal to Earnshaw because he wanted him to wait, but the uniformed officer didn't see it. Jock said, "I've got you then – separate out boys – shall we say under the age of fourteen. Boys reported missing in the last couple of years?"

"That sounds about right."

Even before the moment of real daylight, Earnshaw's team set about it. They had unloaded metal detectors and were now making their way down the slope.

"Can I ask you, Chief, if we can get together on this a little earlier than lunchtime?"

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“If you like – say ten or so.” It was a good idea; he knew the reason Jock was worrying. But he felt impatient. “Listen – with regard to headquarters – let’s just hold what we’ve got until the actual meeting. Keep out of people’s way – got it – until we can sift through the files.”

As he replaced the receiver, he saw a new van arrive with the sniffer dogs. He left the comforts of the Portakabin to catch up with Earnshaw and then he insisted on dragging him away from his treasure trove of tin cans, pull tabs and milk bottle tops, to talk.

“That’s fifteen hours missing now, Charlie,” he said, blowing between his cupped hands and wincing with the cutting edge of the cold.

“If you ask me the poor little devil’s done for,” said Charlie phlegmatically.

Sandy Woodings scratched at the unshaven side of his neck without a change of facial expression. Charlie had a long face, which he needed to accommodate a very flat and lengthy nose. Now Woodings looked Charlie directly in his overmoist half-mocking hazel eyes, the purse of the underdeveloped upper lip under the strong black moustache.

“We don’t know he’s dead, unless you’ve found something?”

“No,” said Charlie, “we’ve found nothing.”

“But?”

“I just don’t fancy the odds, that’s all.”

Charlie was a man who liked a flutter more than he should. That was part of the reason Georgy Barker didn’t like him. But Georgy didn’t like a lot of people – detectives didn’t make good friends, not with each other. Suspicion had been developed to too high a degree, like an overworked muscle.

“Five to one on,” Charlie gave him his considered opinion on the odds calmly, and without the slightest intention of disrespect.

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But Sandy Woodings was already hurrying with an athletic springy step up the slope to where he had caught sight of Sergeant Tom Williams. And even before they were within speaking distance, Sandy knew that they hadn't been able to spot any definite vehicle.

Tom said, "I've got reports varying from a Ford Granada, orange, green or blue, a Sierra with stripes, a motor-bike with side car and one extra-large furniture removals van."

"Parked on the road at the bottom?"

"Either parked on the road or nearby or seen prowling about the streets at the right time. And there will be many more, by the sounds of it."

"Perfect!"

Dawn had brought out a gaggle of reporters, who were held at the top road by some uniformed men on duty, and the photographers were giving the constables the run around, trying to get close enough to take better pictures of the policemen searching. While they watched, they were joined by the scientist from the forensic science laboratory, who had realised the unlikelihood of finding anything useful but felt obliged to wait until the searches were completed.

At the time of the telephone conversation he had felt something hard to describe – a kind of debilitating surge of excitement. Now he was thankful for that because it primed something deep inside him, something to do with that same conversation with those two boys. *Bewilderment!* He didn't know why he was so suddenly overwhelmed by it, except that there was something more to it than was obvious, a recognition that was a stirring of painful memory, something deeper still.

They had a clear twenty minutes before the rain started. Then, trudging the way back with Tom to the Portakabins with their familiar navy and white cross-hatching, he cleared aside the reporters with a firm courtesy, while refusing to talk to them.

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“I could have told you they’d find nothing,” said Tom, sitting comfortable, adding whisky to his own mug from a pocket flask.

Watching through the window, the dog-handlers caught Sandy’s attention, putting the fur-soaked shapes back into their van. He could tell they were mad, because he would have been mad in their place, finding himself called out this morning after a hundred pairs of boots, knees and clawing hands had ploughed up the ground.

He called him Bobby!

“Get Jock for me in records, will you, Tom,” he must have squeezed his own tension into his voice, because Tom looked at him and he laughed back at Tom.

Inside the Portakabin, there was a deafening increase in the patter of rain as he waited on the telephone. “Bloody hell, Jock! I asked you to call me.”

“I would have done to,” said Jock cautiously, “but there were reasons.”

“I asked you to call me back straightaway, that was what I asked.”

“Well there was nothing to tell you anyway. I found absolutely nothing. No similarity with any previous kidnapping.”

“You didn’t look hard enough.”

“I looked pretty hard, I can tell you.” Jock was a mouth breather, which you only noticed when he was on the other end of the telephone. “It’s a one off, Chief. That’s what I think – and if you ask me, it’s something a bit peculiar.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I feel it in my big toe, the same way you do,” said Jock, while Sandy watched, through his window, a headquarters car pulling into the place vacated by the dog-handlers’ van. There was a monstrous contortion as a balloon-like figure fought to clamber out.

“Tell me why peculiar, Jock. Make it snappy.”

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There was a pause, the mouth breathing again. “The two kids seemed to trust him.”

“Go on – ”

“I thought they somehow believed in him.” Jock coughed with embarrassment. Sandy saw him with that perfectly clean handkerchief, the nervous mascot, a clean one, pressed into four every day.

“That’s all?”

Sandy watched the big man take the felt hat which was passed to him from the passenger window of the car, then his eyes made a long sideways sweep, taking in the slope, the glance in the direction of the incident centre. He appeared to swirl, on remarkably dexterous feet, a dancer’s lithe movement, called something into the yawning car window, another graceful swirl towards the party still searching with their metal detectors; a matt of wire-wool hair, with the remains of its original red showing for all the world like an early rust, that large squarish head elevated turtle-like over the slow-moving carapace of a body.

“I think there was something odd about the character’s voice.”

“What about his voice?”

“I don’t know.”

Sandy Woodings nodded: he had felt something very similar. He considered what he and Jock agreed on: that the two boys had trusted the man and there was something odd about his voice. Sandy noticed the second figure, the figure of a woman, which had made an appearance, now dawdling about the top of the slope. Even as he registered that great square untidy head nodding up and down, the long, tree-trunks of arms windmilling one way, the hands pirouetting to make some point, and perhaps a ninety degree clockwise turn of the whole upper trunk in Sandy’s direction, he observed how the woman stood absolutely still and stared hard for a moment in his direction.

“You’re worrying me, Jock.”

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“I know I am.”

The big man was starting to walk the last few yards in the direction of the incident centre, limping slightly – you had to know about the arthritis in his hip joint.

“I want you to talk to Mrs Stephens again, Jock.”

“Thanks a lot.”

His heart suffered a delicate somersault

He was in the act of putting the phone down quickly.

“Talk to her and let me know, Jock.”

The big man was in the same room with him; he had to bend his neck, incline his body sideways, to squeeze through the small door. Now he just stood inside the doorway, statuesque, with his Michelin-rubber-man smile, waiting for Sandy to replace the telephone. Sandy remained seated.

“Woodings – you’re a caution.”

“You’re up early, Georgy.”

Sandy had already guessed the reason for Jock’s failure to telephone, a reason now emphasised as he heard that beefy fist slap twice into the palm of the other hand like a sound like a flat shovel smacking wet sand.

Superintendent George Barker had got to Jock and indulged in one of his little games, which might have taken Sandy by surprise if he hadn’t phoned Jock on the suspicion. Yet the presence of Georgy at this early stage was something he hadn’t bargained on. It wasn’t that he didn’t get on with his boss – of any detective he had ever met, Georgy had the most profound understanding of warped human nature – but Georgy and he had such different ways of going about things. And he had taken Georgy’s active service position after the big man had been bounced upstairs on account of the effects of age and eighteen stones weight on his hip joints.

Georgy put his felt hat down in the centre of the table immediately opposite Sandy Woodings.

“Now come on, Sandy, for the sake of these aching bones,

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tell me what we've got. I'm waiting to hear it. What have we got on this character, eh?"

Broad daylight: it wasn't even an exaggeration. Sandy found it easier to focus on the hat than on that corned beef face. If Georgy played it dramatic, then you had to be careful not to underestimate the intensity of his feelings on the matter.

"We haven't much, I'm afraid. If I am to be honest about it, we have sweet nothing." He hesitated, his eyes lifting from the hat to gaze calmly into those of Georgy Barker. "All I have is instinct and one slight puzzle."

"What slight puzzle?" Georgy had the ability to focus on three things at once: Tom – who had managed to conceal himself out of the firing line, now adding another tot of whisky to his coffee – the sergeant in charge of provisions, who appeared without apparent prompting, with a full pint-sized mug of cocoa, and Sandy's eyes. All the time he had never stopped searching for something in the depths of Sandy Woodings' eyes.

"He knew the lad's name. He called him Bobby."

Margaret Stephens was standing on the grass verge by the side of the top road, overlooking the slope where policemen were still conducting their searches. She had got this far but her legs would not carry her further. Yet there was a desperate need in her to go further, to go down there and just to look, and the need contracted in her, a torturing spasm that would have driven her except for the weakness that debilitated her legs above and below the knees.

All night long people had tried to console her, to press alcohol on her, and sleeping pills, and empty words, affection, well-meaning but totally misplaced rationalisations.

There was no rational explanation for her presence here at the top of this familiar slope, for the difference in her that had taken place in the short space of twenty-four hours.

Frank Ryan

First she simply could not believe it, and that had been the most difficult thing, simply believing it, and then there was the coming to terms with the fact that the explanation would not be reasonable or rational.