

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

FRANK RYAN

GOODBYE
BABY BLUE



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CHAPTER ONE

The leaves fall in a pattern, all off one branch together, so that there are whole branches black and bare with the 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."

"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 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 of 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 opinion 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.

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.

"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, shouting, but he keeps his smiling grey eyes always 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.