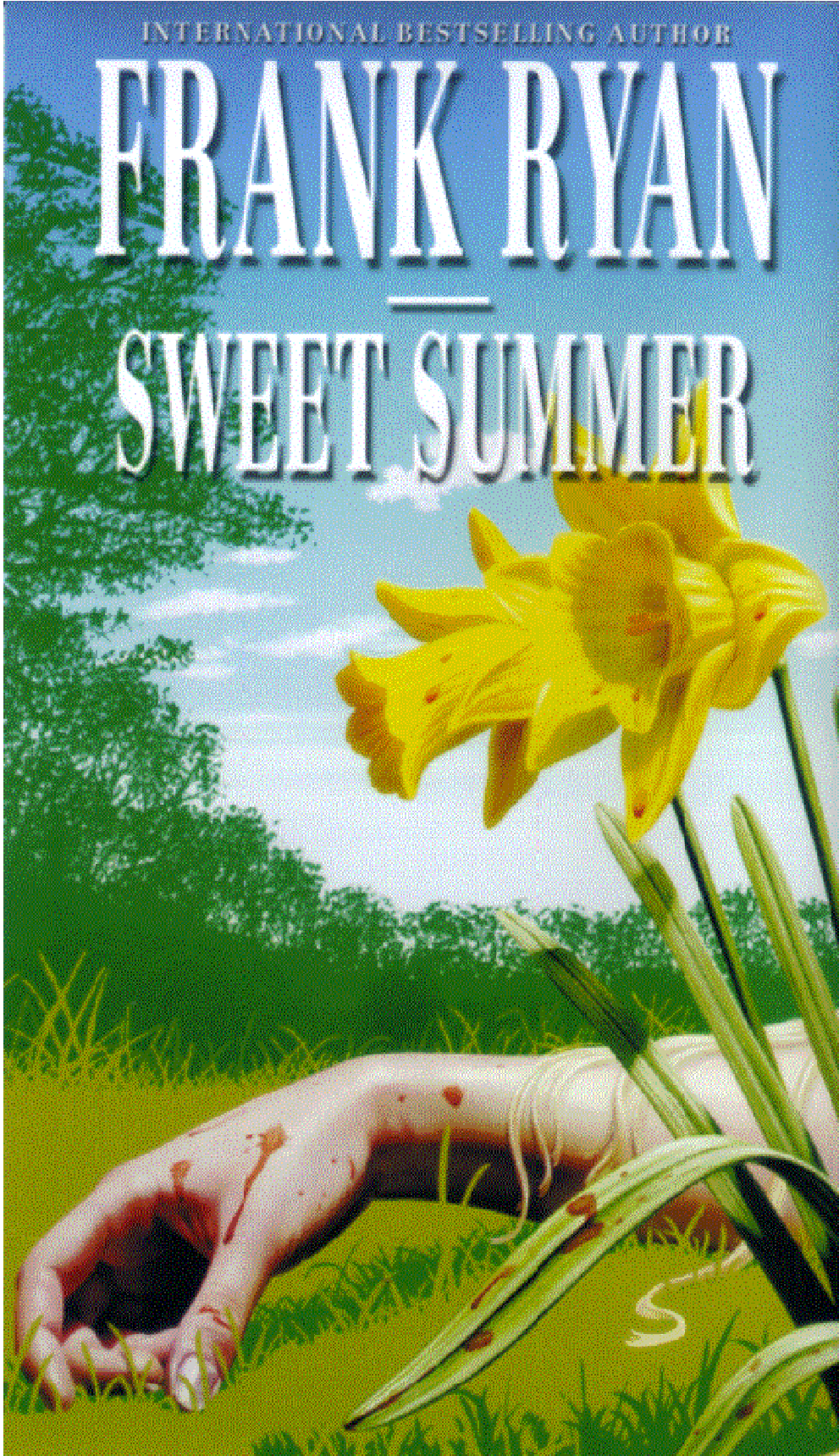


INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

FRANK RYAN

SWEET SUMMER



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CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS, HE THOUGHT, the sound of the sea which had woken him so early. That, together with the unfamiliar surroundings, and dawn, at 5.50 a.m., breaking through the small aluminium-framed window of his rented caravan. All the same, Detective Chief Inspector Sandy Woodings enjoyed the simple pleasure of the holiday feeling, the peace of the attractive little North Devon resort of Croyde Bay. Three hundred and forty miles to the north, in the South Yorkshire village of Dossage, Emily Pendle was similarly awake, in the reassuringly familiar surroundings of her own bedroom, enjoying that same peaceful moment. Although they lived no more than twenty miles apart, the detective and the sixty-year-old woman had never met. There had never been any reason for their meeting – before this morning.

Mrs Pendle was the first on her feet, crossing the floor of her bedroom and throwing open the curtains on to the cottage garden, on the same level as her bedroom window. This she did with a flourish, admiring the beautiful morning, the sky a milky white at horizon level, merging into a Prussian blue above. Without bothering to wash, or to change the underwear in which she had slept, she threw over her head a sleeveless black top – something she had knitted herself in a chunky careless kind of weave – then pulled up a pair of black corduroy trousers, before proceeding to coat her fingernails and toenails with a fresh layer of a lurid purple. Into the holes in her ears she pinned two chunky and pendulous ear-rings in the shape of horse-shoes, while over either wrist she slipped in apparent random order at least half a dozen heavy gold bracelets, from which hung dozens of lucky charms, figurines of animals and signs of the zodiac. Her bracelets tinkled merrily as she smoothed her eyebrows with a saliva-tipped finger; then with toilet complete, she walked barefooted out of the bedroom on to a wide landing of broad bare floorboards, varnished over Edwardian brown paint, and opened a second door of the landing, calling out:

"Here, Harry Tom! Who's a good old boy then! Who's a good old fellow-me-lad, then!"

In the centre of the second bedroom, rousing himself with a self-indulgent bleary look, was an enormous pig with a large black patch over his back. Harry Tom made little grunts of delight as she raked his coarse hair with her newly painted fingernails. It was about this time that Sandy Woodings padded out through the thirty-foot awning in which his four children lay sleeping, zipped up a hole in the tent after him, and then, wearing a navy and red tracksuit and trainers, set off on the first morning run of his family holiday.

Taking his time at first, he picked his way through a field sparsely dotted with brightly coloured caravans and tents, and emerged on to the empty road that separated the caravan site from the beach. He walked across the road, looked to his right where the way led to the pleasant cliff-top walk of Baggy Point, but then decided to make directly towards the beach. Walking down a concrete approach, he began running slowly through the deep soft sand, then, once beyond the dry outer fringe of the beach and on a firmer surface, he picked up pace.

Today was Tuesday, May 8th: four days previously he had granted his wife Julie a divorce, so that she could marry the husband of her erstwhile best friend, Mary. The holiday was in part to get away from all this. But now, alone with the morning, he couldn't stop thinking about it. The divorce was all her doing. He had never wanted it. Now he realised that there was nothing at all he could do about it, nothing he could do that would simply erase his feelings.

Mrs Pendle had also started out on her morning journey. With the pig in front of her and wearing the same clothes she had put on after getting out of bed, she followed the pig's ambling pace down a main road, keeping to the white line on the crown of the road, now and then banging on a pot lid she held in one hand with a wooden ladle she wielded with the other.

"Tup!" she said crisply, when his curiosity wavered. "Come on now! Tup, Harry Tom!"

The unusual couple passed an old converted farmhouse and turned right. The sun had risen a few degrees above the horizon and the beauty of the morning had increased commensurately. She tugged Harry Tom past hedges exuberant with forsythia and cherry blossom, nothing of which was lost to her curious brown eyes. Past banks of daffodils – she could smell each individual clump of honeysuckle – but most especially for Mrs Pendle the embryonic pink genitalia of the sycamores. The sycamores, regarded by the villagers as the native weed, were closer to her in their unplanted naturalness, their wildness.

Four hundred yards from the corner she came to a small modern brick-built house which she evidently disapproved of, for she banged even harder on the pot lid than before. It was equally evident that whoever lived there shared the antipathy because the front bedroom window came down with a clatter. Soon she followed Harry Tom, who now needed no prompting, into another right turn, through an open gate, into a council recreation area. The pig's feet moved a little faster now, as he came within sight and smell of the woods.

To their left was a slope planted with a young hazel and birch. As they manoeuvred themselves over a small stile, Harry Tom gave a squeal of delight. His nose darted left and right in rapid succession, and his excitement was suddenly so great that she made no effort to direct or to control him any longer.

Panting and sweating, his trainers wet with surf, Sandy Woodings was staring out to sea. The sound was strange, like that of human breathing and not made any the less so because so many people before him had used the comparison. The analogies with the human heart seemed so obvious. Like it, the sea could conceal whatever lay at its core, so that its emotions and reactions remained a mystery. You could not trust the sea. And Sandy Woodings would find difficulty in trusting any other woman.

He began to walk slowly, following the tide, listening to the rhythm of it, while Mrs Pendle followed a clay path deeper into the wood, her keen ears and sharp brown eyes easily finding the wake of the pig. And then she saw him and horror started to rise her, twisting into a ball in her throat.

"Oh, Lord! Oh Lord, Harry Tom. Get back out of it. Get back out of it. Back! Back!"

In his simple confusion, the pig might have been shaking his head at her, as she battered him about the snout in an effort to dislodge his grasp of a blood-stained human hand.

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At 8.17 a.m., a very tall heavily built man with grizzled iron hair showing just a trace of its original red, stood unmoving in the morning sunlight and watched an olive-green Peugeot slow for the uniformed policeman at the entrance to the recreation area and then pull in with a graceful sweep to park immediately in front of him. Detective Superintendent Georgy Barker opened the driver's door with a minor flourish and greeted the tiny dapper figure inside with a lopsided smile.

"Good morning, doctor. Glad we managed to get you personally on this one." "Good morning, George!" Doctor Atkins, chief forensic pathologist to the city's police force, was the only person who did not call him "Georgy". The doctor lifted his case from the passenger seat as he emerged, then placed it studiously on the seat of a rough-hewn picnic bench before extricating a square handkerchief in which was neatly tucked a nasal insufflator. Into each nostril, with a dainty movement, he squeezed two puffs, folded the whole away again as neatly as it had emerged; into the side pocket of his dark-blue pinstripe, and then allowed the detective to lead him in the direction of the woods.

"How much do we know about it already?" the doctor enquired in a cultured and polite voice, as they crushed tiny blue forget-me-nots in the sloping lawn of grass. Their steps were curiously disharmonious, the smaller man having to make various corrections to his stride to keep up with the giant's limp – Georgy Barker suffered, among many other ailments, from osteoarthritis of his right hip.

"Murder. There's no doubt about it. A young woman, possibly no more than a girl. Nice long fair hair. Not possible to go for identity yet because she's lying face down. Multiple wounds. Blood everywhere."

Uniformed policemen searched on all fours among leafless oaks and tall fragrant pines. The pair arrived within minutes under a twenty-foot holly tree and were filmed in motion by a photographer with a video camera. The superintendent stood and watched, his face dappled with sunlight, as, within the strict privacy of the screened-off enclosure, the doctor opened his case and began his methodical task.

The cameraman captured the doctor, framed against the deep evergreen of the holly, as he pulled on his surgical gloves in that curiously practised fashion, continuing the film as the small dapper figure stood at the foot of the body, dictating in short crisp sentences into a hand Dictaphone. He described the scene, the time, the ambient temperature, the climatic conditions that had prevailed in the preceding twenty-four hours. The young woman's body lay more half turned than truly face down, with her legs extended, her left arm concealed beneath her and her right arm flexed and held aloft above her head. The superintendent had not exaggerated about her hair – it was fair, long and attractive, now matted with dust, and, above the right ear, clotted with blood. A ribbon about an inch wide surrounded her forehead. The colour of the ribbon vaguely matched that of her mauve sweater. She wore a tightly fitting white cotton skirt, no stockings, one white sandal still on her right foot and the other bare, pathetic in its innocent nakedness. There were signs of a considerable struggle, with, as the detective had intimated, a great deal of blood.

"I shall have to disturb her."

"Carry on – we've taken more than enough pictures."

Having taken a "core" temperature, the doctor lifted the back of the sweater to display a bra-less back that was dotted and lacerated with puncture wounds.

"Cause of death – multiple stab wounds." Chief Superintendent Barker's voice was a little tight as he spoke for the first time in many minutes.

"It would appear so," said Doctor Atkins evenly.

Between them they turned the body over, and in doing so demonstrated for the camera a fully developed rigor mortis. The flesh resembled nothing solid, quite inhuman, more like a plaster window model. It was immediately obvious, even without disturbing her clothes, that the main frenzy of attack had taken place from the front. Avoiding the face and extending from the neck downwards was a mass of stab wounds, following a vague but sinister trail. They encompassed the pointed girlish mounds of breasts and extended in a wide fan out onto the abdomen, to the most severely and extensively insulted focus on the lower trunk just above the pubic bone. Yet it was her face, now exposed, which caused the two men to take a simultaneous step backwards, in a mute and quite involuntary expression of pity. Her face was indeed young, perhaps that of a teenager, and to an unexpected degree pretty – more than pretty, it was an extraordinarily beautiful young woman's face.