

Picture this:

The villa sits high and secluded on the southernmost slope of Calella de Palafrugell on the Spanish Costa Brava. Its white stucco walls and sun-bleached tiles are set hard against a backdrop of cypress and pine, and from the poolside patio you can look down across the confusion of rooftops and narrow winding streets of the hibernating resort to the shimmering turquoise of the bay beyond: there the three sparsely populated beaches, the bobbing boats and the gently lapping waves; there the knot of weathered fishermen repairing their nets in the shade of the beachfront arches.

And this:

Edinburgh, the Big Chill. Mid-December Gorgie. Gloomy wind-whipped streets cowering beneath turbulent skies and lashing rain. Tenements huddled together, close on sooted wynds, broken cobbles glistening a bloodless orange in the streetlight wash. Not just the polished gloss of the city the tourist saw, but the real city where punters battled along dark, littered streets, crunching broken glass as they scrunched against the elements, past boarded shop-windows and lean, scavenging dogs. Where cold, hollow eyes reflect cold, hollow lives, and anger offers the only semblance of any

emotional warmth. Where winter is a long and soulless night of far too many days.

Where would you live, say you had the choice?

Say someone called you up and said, 'Hey, Billy, how would you like a holiday? A long-term stay in an exclusive villa on the Costa Brava, all expenses paid?'

And all you had to do was kill someone. What you liked doing best anyway.

What would you do?

What would any poor man do?

It wasn't as though it was easy out here. Fuck no. Life was hard. Decisions had to be made. Like should he go to the toilet or just piss in the pool? Hard indeed. The only advantage was Sunday mornings you could sit out here in the shade on the patio with a *San Miguel* in one hand and a coming-down head in the other. Watch the girl turn lazily in the pool and try to remember exactly how she got there.

Foxy-looking chick, too. Wearing one of those black string bikinis that reveal more than they suggest. Her skin was pale, her face and shoulders freckled and her hair a tangle of long blonde curls. But spread like seaweed now, as she lay face down in the swimming-pool with the axe still lodged deep between her shoulder-blades. A sight for sore eyes.

And Billy's eyes were sore. Studying them in the mirror this morning they had looked like raw, suppurating wounds; as though someone had poked through the sockets and given his brain a stir. Which was exactly how it felt now. Addled. And not just a little

confused as he tried to piece together the events of the night before.

She was an art student. Sandra something. English. She'd hitched her way down through France and had arrived in Spain at the same time as the heat-wave. Had decided to take a little sun before heading on down to Barcelona. Which was how she ended up dead in Billy's private swimming-pool.

Well, not quite. There were still a few blanks to fill in, foggy places in his mind where memory feared to tread. Perhaps another San Miguel would help.

William P. McCulloch dragged his weary bones off the recliner, padded naked across the patio to the cool marbled floor of the kitchen; the effort almost draining him. He took two bottles from the refrigerator, opened one and gulped. Then almost bit off its neck as the portable phone shrilled on its wall-attachment.

He glared at it, willing it to explode. For eighteen months now it had only ever rung on the first Sunday of every month.

Until now.

And still it rang. on and on. Shredding his nerves as he stood with his dick in the ice-box trying to decide—answer it or smash it to a million tiny pieces?

Decisions, decisions.

And today of all days, all strung out the way he was and trying hard to understand how there were bloodstains all across the wall in the hall. Look at him, all wound up, taut as a fucking bowstring. And all because the phone was ringing when it shouldn't - the second Sunday in December.

As he reached for it the ringing stopped.

Typical.

He took it from the wall and carried it outside with his beer.

Pure dynamite. The benefits of a common market. Even the lowest European common denominator was proving better than anything ever Made In Britain. For instance. The acid here, they brought down straight from Amsterdam on the overnight express, Paris to Barcelona. Leave your passport with the guard, sleep right through, step off bleary-eyed in Gerona saying, 'Customs? What customs?'

And strong stuff, too. What had Alfonso called it? *Estrella Roja*, red star. Billy had his own name for it. Life Saving Drug. And a thousand tabs was going to cost you maybe only a fiftieth of the profit you made. You had the same outlook on life as Alfonso, a hundredth.

But worth it.

Look at Billy.

One tab and twelve hours later he was still jumpy as a cat in a threshing machine. Or maybe it was the heat, he thought. Affecting his head. Christmas just around the corner and here he was cooking like a haggis in the middle of a heat-wave. He opened the second *San Miguel* on his teeth and carried it across to the low balustrade overlooking the bay.

One thing about Sandra, she knew how to float. She'd been doing it now for hours. Turning softly like a starfish in the centre of the pool, the shaft of the axe like a listing mast in the centre of her back. Around the lips of the wound the blood had dried, crusty and dark, accentuating the paleness of her skin. She looked unreal, Billy thought, almost waxlike against the pink-stained water.

A breath of warm sluggish wind pushed at his hair, the smell of olive-oil and garlic wafting up from one of the villas further down the headland. Soon it would be time for chill-out, what the Spanish liked to call *siesta*. He removed his shades and mopped his face, thinking suddenly of the claustrophobic, hop-laden air of his native Gorgie. So far away, yet somehow brought close by the sound of the telephone. Not just garlic, but a sense of change in the ether.

He noticed for the first time the wound just above the elbow of her right arm. Four inches long, it had the gape of a screaming mouth, the bone within winking like a pearl in the sun.

So at least she had struggled, he thought. In the hall outside the kitchen, where the bloodstains climbed the wall . . . A forehead, then. With her running towards the patio in her near-nothing bikini. Screaming?

Yeah, they always screamed in the films.

The telephone shrilled again. This time he didn't jump a foot in the air, he merely let it ring.

There were more bloodstains, he noticed, on the patio near the lip of the pool. Had he caught up with her there? Or here on the far side, by the low balustrade? Try as he might, he couldn't remember: too many fragments of his memory reflecting only glimpses, like the shards of a broken mirror. He would have to take more care in future, much more care.

He pressed the 'speak' button on the phone.

'Diga,' he said, snapping it out, the bored exec tired of being disturbed.

'He's surfaced.'

An old man's voice, as dry and dusty as the track that led up to the villa through the stunted shrubs and cut-back pine. Coming

across clear and loud, as though calling from Can Pau's down on the beachfront instead of the frozen climes of Scotland's capital.

'Who's surfaced?'

'Who do you think?'

Billy didn't need to think—he knew. What he didn't know was how come the chick was still wearing her bikini. He could only imagine that she'd put it on again after, just before he chased her from the bedroom out on to the patio. He hoped so, anyway. Either that or he needed his head examined.

He could hear the impatient rattle of the old man's breath in his ear. 'Costello?' he said. Making it a question.

'I want him finished, Billy, taken care of.' Jack Rankine was a man whose obsessive breath of life was a succession of limitless wants. 'I want you on the next plane out.'

'*Manana*, Jackie-boy.' Billy smiled to himself, imagining the snarl on the old man's lips. 'I've a few loose ends need tying up. Well, one in particular.'

'Tomorrow, then. I'll have Dodds meet you at the airport.'

'When did Costello get out?' Billy asked.

'Nine, ten days ago. I've had Dodds on his tail from the moment he walked out through the gates.'

'He been busy?'

'First week he just sat in his flat picking his nose. Went out twice, once to visit his parole officer, once to buy food.'

'And now?'

'Now he's working for Jay Johnstone,' the old man sighed.

Billy laughed. 'I bet that makes you happy.'

'I want you back here, Billy. Fast.'

'Costello—what's he doing for Johnstone? Pimping?'

'Working as a bouncer in a wine-bar.'

'How the mighty have fallen.' Billy swigged from the bottle, smeared the sweat from his stinging eyes. A man could evaporate in this heat, if he wasn't too careful; just fade away in a cloud of steam. He said, 'What about the deeds, Jackie-boy? You had them drawn up yet?'

'They're here on my desk. All they need is signed.'

Where the dusty track climbed through the shrubs to approach the villa, there was a wooden plaque on the whitewashed wall to the left of the wrought-iron gates. Villa Rancor. That would be first to go. Then do something about the decor inside. Shoot down the flying ducks on the wall, paper over the bloodstains. Then think of a new name.

Rankine said, 'You still there?'

Billy said he was.

'Aye, well, don't forget your snowshoes.' The old man cackled and hung up.

Billy returned his attention to the girl. Sandra. Her of the freckles and peeliewally skin. Maybe they hadn't made it to the bedroom after all. Had done it on the floor in front of the spitting log-fire. Him taking her from behind, both hands on her saddle as she moaned, 'More, Billy, more,' ramming herself on to him, then shuddering as she came again and again and again.

Yeah, he could imagine it like that—easily.

He just couldn't remember doing it.