

A Simple Act of Violence

R. J. Ellory

Published by Orion

Extract

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Prologue

She stands in the kitchen, and for a moment she holds her breath.

A little after five in the afternoon. Already dark outside, and though she can remember standing in the same spot a thousand times before – ahead of her the sink, to her right the counter-top, to her left the doorway to the hall – there is something different.

Extraordinarily so.

Air is the same, but seems harder to breathe. Light above her the same, but somehow harsh and invasive. Even her skin, something never noticed, appears to feel tighter. Her scalp itches as she starts to sweat, she feels the pressure of her clothes, the weight of her arms, the tension created by the rings on her fingers and the watch on her wrist; feels her underwear, her shoes, her necklace, her blouse.

This is it, she thinks.

My name is Catherine. I am forty-nine years old, and this is it.

Fuck.

Moves to the right. Reaches out her hand and touches the cool surface of the sink-edge. She grips it and, using it as leverage, turns slowly towards the door.

She wonders whether he's inside the house already.

She wonders if she should stand still and wait, or if she should move.

She wonders what he expects her to do.

It is quite some time before she makes a decision, and when she makes that decision she goes with it.

Walks right across the kitchen and into the front room of the house – businesslike, straightforward; takes a DVD from the bookcase against the wall and, with the remote in her hand, she opens the player, puts the disc inside, closes the player, pushes buttons, and waits for sound . . . and then the picture comes and she hesitates.

Music.

She ups the volume.

Music by Dimitri Tiomkin.

It's A Wonderful Life.

Remembers the first time she saw this movie. Remembers every time she's seen this movie. Whole sections by heart, word-for-word. Verbatim. Like she was cramming for a test. Remembers the people she was with, what they said, the ones that cried and the ones that didn't. Remembers things like that at a time like this. Figured that she'd remember the important things.

Hell, maybe these *are* the important things.

Heart is big in her chest. Heart the size of a clenched fist? Apparently not. Not in her case. Heart the size of two fists together, or the size of a football. The size of—

What? she thinks.

The size of what exactly?

Looks at the TV screen. Hears the sound of the tolling bell, and then the playful strings-section melody. The sign that reads YOU ARE NOW IN BEDFORD FALLS. A picture postcard street, snow falling . . .

Catherine Sheridan starts to feel the emotion then. It isn't fear, because she's long since passed the point of being afraid. It's nothing immediately definable – something like loss, perhaps something like nostalgia; something like anger and resentment, or bitterness that it had to end this way.

'I owe everything to George Bailey,' the voice from the TV says. 'Help him dear Father. Joseph, Jesus and Mary . . . help my friend Mr Bailey . . .'

A woman's voice: 'Help my son George tonight.'

The camera pans away, up into the sky, away from the house and into space.

It's everything and nothing all at once. Catherine Sheridan sees the whole of her life collapsed like a concertina, and then drawn out again until every fraction and fragment can be clearly identified.

She closes her eyes, opens them again, sees children sledding on shovels, the scene where George saves Harry from the icy water. And that's how George got the virus in his ear, and that's how he lost his hearing . . .

It is then that Catherine hears something. She thinks to turn, but doesn't dare. A sudden rush of something in the base of her gut. *Wants* to turn now. Wants so desperately to turn around and look him square in the face, but knows that if she does this she will break down, she will scream and cry and plead for this to happen some other way, and

it's too late now, too late to go back . . . too late after everything that's happened, everything that they've done, everything they've learned and what it all meant . . .

And Catherine thinking: *What the fuck were we thinking? Who the fuck did we think we were? Who the fuck gave us the right to do what we did?*

Thinks: *We gave ourselves the right. We gave ourselves a right that should only have been granted by God. And where the fuck was He? Where the fuck was God when those people were dying, huh?*

And now I have to die.

Die like this.

Die right now in my own house.

What goes around comes around.

That's what Robey would have said: 'What goes around comes around, Catherine.'

And she would have smiled, and said: 'You were always such a fucking Buddhist. The job you do, the things you've seen, and you think you can quote me some sort of self-serving, zero-responsibility platitude. Fuck you, John Robey . . . you ever listen to yourself?'

And he would have said: 'No . . . no, I never listen to myself, Catherine. I don't dare.'

And she would have known *exactly* what he meant.

After a while you don't dare face what you did. You just close your eyes and grit your teeth and clench your fists and make believe everything will come out right.

That's what you do.

Until a moment like now.

Standing in your own front room, Jimmy Stewart on the TV, and you know *he* is behind you. You know he is right behind you. You have some kind of an idea of what he's going to do 'cause you've read it in the newspapers . . .

Catherine looks at the TV.

George is at the bank.

'Avast there, captain . . . where ya headin'?'

'Gotta see Poppa, Uncle Billy.'

'Some other time, George.'

'It's important.'

'There's a squall in there, it's shapin' up into a storm.'

And Catherine senses *him* behind her, right there behind her . . . could reach her hand behind her back and touch him. Can imagine what's going on inside his heart, his head, the rush of emotion that will

be almost overwhelming. Or maybe not. *Maybe he's tougher than me. Much tougher than I believed.* But then she hears the slight hitch in his throat as he inhales. Hears that slight hitch and knows – just *knows* – that he feels this thing as much as she does.

Closes her eyes.

'It's a good face,' the voice from the TV says. 'I like it. I like George Bailey. Tell me . . . did he ever tell anyone about the pills?'

'Not a soul.'

'Did he ever marry the girl? Did he ever go exploring?'

'Well . . . wait and see . . .'

Catherine Sheridan closes her eyes and grits her teeth and clenches her fists, and wonders if she needs to fight back. If it would make sense to try and fight back. If anything will ever make sense again.

God I hope we're right, she thinks. *I hope that everything–*

Feels his hand on her shoulder. She's rigid now, every muscle, every nerve and sinew, every atom of her being is tensed up and taut.

Sorts of leans back toward him as she feels his hands close around the back of her neck. Feels the strength in his grip as it tightens, and knows that it is taking every ounce of his will and self-discipline to do this thing. Knows that this will hurt him more – much, much more – than it will hurt her.

Catherine tries to turn slightly, and even as she does so she knows she is only contributing to the swiftness with which this thing will be done. Perhaps that's *why* she turns. Feels the pressure of his fingertips, feels the pressure change as he moves to the right, as he maintains his grip on her throat, as he changes pace, builds pressure, eases back, uses his forearm to tilt her head to the left . . . and her eyes sting as tears fill her lower lids, but she's not even crying. This is some kind of involuntary reaction, and the tension rises in her chest as her lungs begin to resist the absence of oxygen . . . and she starts to feel dizzy, and when her eyelids flutter she can see deep rushes of unidentifiable colors . . .

Sound erupts from the middle of her chest. A red-raw thundering fuck of a sound. Rushes up through the middle of her chest and stops dead at the base of her throat.

Oh my God, she's thinking. *Oh my God . . . Oh my God . . . Oh my God . . .*

Feels the full weight of her own body as it starts to drop, feels the way he struggles to hold her upright, and though she knows it will soon be over there is something inside her – something genetic,

something basic, an instinct threaded through and around her being – that still fights for life even though she knows it’s no goddamned use now . . .

Now her eyes feel full of blood, they see nothing but red. Great smashing swathes of burgundy and rose and scarlet and crimson and claret . . .

Oh my God . . .

Feels the weight of her head as it lolls forward.

Knows that even if he stopped right now, even if he released his grip and let her go, even if paramedics arrived and bound her to a stretcher and pushed a mask over her face and told her to *Breathe goddammit woman, breathe!* . . . even if that oxygen was pure and untainted, and they raced the ambulance to Columbia Hospital or the University Medical Center . . . even if they did these things there would be no way she would survive . . .

In her last moment she strains to open her eyes, and there she sees George Bailey’s face light up at the dance, sees Mary look back at him, and it’s one of those moments, one of those stop-dead-in-your-tracks, love-at-first-sight moments that only ever happen to the best of people, and only ever happen once. And if you don’t go with that moment, if you don’t go with that rush of spontaneous magic that fills your heart, your mind, fills every little bit of everything you are . . . if you don’t just go with it you’ll remember it for the rest of your life as the one thing you should have done, the only thing you *really* should have done, the thing that might have made your whole life different, might have made it worthwhile, made it really mean something more than what you ended up with . . .

And Jimmy Stewart says: ‘Well, hello.’

Catherine Sheridan can’t fight any more. Doesn’t want to. Her spirit is broken. Everything that was something now counts for nothing at all. Lets it go. Feels herself slide to the floor, and feels him release her, and thinks: *I’m not the one who has to go on living with the knowledge of what we did . . .*

Thank God for small mercies.

By the time he started doing things to Catherine Sheridan she was long since dead.

One

Washington D.C. was not the center of the world, though a significant percentage of Washingtonians would've had you believe it.

Detective Robert Miller was not one of them.

Capital of the continental United States, the seat of federal government, a history stretching back hundreds of years, and yet despite such depth of history, despite the art and architecture, the tree-lined streets, the galleries, the museums, despite one of the most efficient metro systems of any American city, Washington still possessed its shadows, its sharp corners, its blunt edges. People were still murdered there each and every day.

November 11th was cold and unwelcoming, a day of mourning and remembrance for many reasons. Darkness dropped like a stone at five, the temperature below zero by six, and the streetlights running parallel lines as far as the eye could see seemed little more than invitations to follow them and leave. Detective Robert Miller had very recently thought of leaving, of taking another job in another city, and he had his own specific and personal reasons for considering such an option. The reasons were numerous – and they were bad – and he'd spent many weeks trying to forget them. At that moment, however, he stood in the back lot of the Sheridan house on Columbia Street NW. The cherry-blue bars of parked squad cars were reflected in the windows, the hubbub and commotion of too many people with too many agendas – attendant uniforms, forensics, crime scene photographers, neighbors with kids and dogs and questions that would never be answered, the hissing and static of handhelds and squad-car radios . . . The end of the street was a carnival of noise and confusion, and through all this Miller felt nothing but the change of pace he'd known would come. It quickened his pulse. He could feel his heart in his chest and the nerves in the base of his stomach. Three months' suspension – the first month at home, the second and third months behind a desk – and now he was here. No more than a week of active duty and the world had already found him. He had

walked from the daylight, directly toward the shadowed underbelly of Washington, and he had been welcomed like long-lost family. And to show its appreciation for his return it had left a beaten corpse in an upper bedroom overlooking Columbia Street North West.

Miller had already been inside, had seen what he wanted to see, a great deal he didn't. The victim's furniture, the pictures on the walls, all a reminder of a life that once was. And now that life had gone, extinguished in a heartbeat. He had left by the back kitchen door, wanted a breath of air, a change of tempo. Forensics were in there, businesslike and unemotional, and Miller needed a little distance. It was so bitterly cold, and though he wore an overcoat and a scarf, though he buried his hands in his pockets, he felt a sense of something altogether more chilling than the weather. He stood silently in the featureless back-lot and watched the madness unfold around him. He listened to the seemingly nonchalant voices of men who were somehow inured to such things. He had believed himself unreachable, but he had been reached, reached with ease, and it frightened him.

Robert Miller – a man of unremarkable appearance, perhaps no different from many other men – waited for his partner, Detective Albert Roth. Miller had worked with Roth for the better part of two years. They couldn't have been less alike, but Al Roth was nevertheless an anchor, a fastidiously professional man, abiding by protocol and regulation, thinking for both of them when required.

Miller had persisted in Homicide, but recent events had overwhelmed and buried whatever sense of purpose he'd originally felt. The things he'd learned seemed to possess as much use as dry sticks and fresh air. He'd made tentative enquiries to Vice and Narcotics, even to Administration, but remained undecided. August had been a bad month, September worse, and even now – still reeling from all that had taken place, feeling as if he'd somehow survived an ugly car crash – he did not truly understand what had happened. He and Roth did not speak of the past three months, it was something sensed, and though Miller felt it would perhaps have been better to speak he never started the conversation.

That evening Miller had been at the Second Precinct when the report came in. Al Roth had been called out to Columbia NW from his home, and when he arrived he and Miller stood in silence in the dead woman's garden. Just for a few moments, a sign of respect perhaps.

They went in through the rear kitchen door. Men crowded the

downstairs hallway; there were people on the stairs, and the hubbub of voices and the intermittent flash of cameras was backed by the sound of orchestral music. They stood without speaking for a time, and then Roth asked ‘What the hell is that?’

Miller nodded toward the front room. ‘DVD playing . . . *It’s A Wonderful Life* of all things.’

‘Very fitting,’ Roth replied. ‘She upstairs?’

‘Yes, bedroom to the right.’

‘What did you say her name was?’

‘Sheridan,’ Miller replied. ‘Catherine Sheridan.’

‘I’m going up there.’

‘Mind the pizza,’ Miller said.

Roth frowned. ‘Pizza?’

‘Delivery guy dropped it on the hallway carpet. Came over here to bring an order and found the front door unlocked. Says he heard the TV in the front—’

‘What? And he came in the house?’

‘Says they have strict policy not to leave without payment. God knows what he was thinking, Al. He thought he heard someone upstairs, figured that they couldn’t hear him because of the TV so he went up there. He found her in the bedroom just as she is now.’ Miller seemed to look right through Roth as he was speaking, then he got it together, his thoughts and words coinciding. ‘There’s forensic people all over the place. They’re gonna kick us out in a moment, but you go on up there and take a look.’

Roth paused for a moment. ‘You okay?’ he asked.

Miller could feel the substance and darkness of his own thoughts. He saw it in his reflection, the lines around his eyes, the shadows beneath. ‘I’m okay,’ he said, but there was something indefinite and subdued in his voice.

‘You ready for this?’

‘As I’ll ever be,’ Miller said, his tone one of philosophical resignation.

Roth stepped past Miller, walked across the front hallway and started up the stairs. Miller followed him, the two of them edging their way along the corridor to the dead woman’s bedroom. A huddle of three or four men were gathered around the doorway. One of them – a face Miller recognized from some other moment, some other dark quarter of their collective past – nodded in acknowledgement. They knew who Miller was. They knew what had happened to him, the

way his life had been opened up for the newspapers and shared with the world. They all wanted to ask the same question, but they never did.

As Miller entered the room the other officers seemed to step back and fade from his line of sight. He slowed up for a moment.

There was nothing like dead people.

Nothing in the world.

People alive and people dead were not even close. Even now, despite the number of bodies he'd seen, there was always that moment when Miller believed the victim's eyes would open, that there would be a sudden intake of breath, perhaps a grimace of pain, a faint smile, something that said, 'Here I am . . . back again . . . sorry, I was elsewhere for a moment.'

There was a first time, of course. But there was something about the first time that had stayed with Miller for every other time. It stopped his heart – just for a second, less than a second – and said, 'Here's what people are capable of doing to people. Here's another example of the way life can smash someone to pieces.'

Now, the first thing was the irregularity of her position. Catherine Sheridan was on her knees, arms stretched out to her sides, head on the mattress, but turned so her cheek touched the sheet beneath her. A second sheet had been carelessly draped around her waist and obscured much of her legs. She seemed to be looking back along the length of her body towards the door. It was a sexual position, but there was no longer anything sexual about her.

The second thing was the expression on her face. He could not describe it. He knelt on the floor and looked right back at her, right up close, saw his own features reflected in the glassy stillness of her eyes. It was almost impossible to describe the feeling her expression had given him. Acceptance. Resignation. Acquiescence perhaps? It contrasted with the vicious lividity of the bruising that covered her shoulders and arms. From the neck down, what little he could see of her waist and thighs, it appeared she had been beaten mercilessly, relentlessly, in a manner so unforgiving it would have been impossible to survive. Already the blood had laked, the swelling had become accentuated as fluids thickened and clotted. The pain must have gone on and on and on, and then suddenly – a welcome silence after some interminable noise – it had ended.

Miller had wanted to reach out and touch her, to close her eyes, to

whisper something reassuring, to tell her the horror had ended, peace had come . . . but he could not.

It had taken some while for the blood to stop thundering through his veins, for his heart to stop skipping beats. With each new victim, the old ones came too. Like ghosts. Each of them perhaps desiring some greater understanding of what had happened.

Catherine Sheridan had been dead for two or three hours. Assistant coroner later confirmed that she'd died between four forty-five and six, afternoon of Saturday, November 11th. Pizza had been ordered at five-forty. Delivery guy arrived at five after six, found her body within a matter of minutes. Miller had been called from the Second just after six-thirty, had arrived at six fifty-four. Roth had joined him ten minutes later, and by the time they both stood looking at Catherine Sheridan's awkward pose from the upper hallway of her house it was close to seven-fifteen. She looked cold, but the skin had not yet turned completely.

'Same as the others,' Roth said. 'Pretty much the same anyway. Smell that?'

Miller nodded. 'Lavender.'

'And the tag?'

Miller walked alongside the edge of the mattress and looked down at Catherine Sheridan. He pointed to her neck, the thin ribbon upon which was tied a standard manila-colored luggage tag. The tag was blank, almost as if a Jane Doe had been delivered to the morgue, nameless, without identity, unimportant perhaps. 'Ribbon is white this time,' he said as Roth appeared on the other side of the bed.

From where he stood Miller could see Catherine Sheridan's face very clearly. She had been an attractive woman, slightly-built, petite almost, with brunette shoulder-length hair and an olive complexion. Her throat was bruised and the same bruises were present on her shoulders, her upper arms, her torso, her thighs, some of them so brutal that the skin had been broken. Her face, however, was unmarked.

'See her face,' Miller said.

Roth came around the foot of the bed, stood beside Miller, said nothing for a while and then slowly shook his head.

'Four,' Miller said.

'Four,' Roth echoed.

A voice from behind them. 'You from Homicide?' Miller and Roth turned in unison. One of the CSAs stood there, field kit in his hand,

latex gloves, behind him a man with a camera. 'I'm sorry, but I need you guys out of here now.'

Miller looked once more at the almost placid expression on Catherine Sheridan's face, then made his way carefully out of the room, Roth behind him, neither of them saying anything until they were once again downstairs.

Miller stopped in the doorway of the front room. The credits were rolling on *It's A Wonderful Life*.

'So?' Roth asked.

Miller shrugged.

'You think—'

'I'm not thinking anything,' Miller interjected. 'I'm not thinking anything until I know exactly what happened to her.'

'What have we got?'

Miller took out his notepad, scanned the few lines he'd scribbled when he'd arrived. 'No sign of forced entry to the property. Seems he came in through the front door because the back door was still locked when I got here. I had forensics take pictures before we unlocked it. No sign of a struggle, nothing broken, nothing obviously out of place.'

'Percentage of attacks committed by someone known to the victim is what? Forty, fifty percent?'

'More I think,' Miller replied. 'Pizza delivery guy found her. Large pizza, custom order. Suggests that it was ordered for two. If the guy who did this was already here then it suggests it was someone she knew.'

'And then she may not have known him at all. Maybe she just liked pizza.'

'There's also the known identity,' Miller replied, referring to the many cases of entry made to houses by people dressed as police officers, gas and telephone engineers, other such things. The familiarity of the uniform made people drop their guard. The perp entered uninhibited, the crime was committed, and even if the individual was seen it was ordinarily little more than the uniform that was remembered. 'If there was no break-in, no struggle, no apparent resistance, then we're more than likely dealing with someone she knew, or someone she felt she could trust.'

'You want to start around the neighborhood now?' Roth asked.

Miller glanced at his watch. He felt weary, like emotional bruising.

‘The papers get word of this there’s gonna be shit flying every which way.’

Roth smiled knowingly. ‘As if you hadn’t had enough of your name in the papers.’

Miller’s expression told Roth that such a comment wasn’t appreciated.

They walked away from the back of Catherine Sheridan’s house, came up along the hedgerow that divided her plot from the neighbor’s and stood for a while on the sidewalk.

‘You wouldn’t think it, would you?’ Miller said. ‘If you didn’t know that someone was dead in this house . . .’

‘Most of the world is oblivious to the rest of the world,’ Roth said.

Miller smiled. ‘What the hell is that? Yiddish philosophy?’

Roth didn’t reply. He nodded toward the house on the right. ‘Let’s take that one first.’

There was no response at either of the adjacent properties. The house facing the Sheridan lot was dark and silent.

Over the street and two down they found someone at home – an elderly man, white hair protruding in clumps from above his ears, a thin face, eyes set too far back behind heavy spectacles.

Miller introduced himself, showed his ID.

‘You’re wanting to know what I saw, right?’ the old man said. He instinctively looked toward the Sheridan house, the light-bars flashing in reflection on the lenses of his horn-rims, the firework display of activity that was so instantly recognizable as bad news. ‘It was about four, maybe four-thirty.’

Miller frowned. ‘What was?’

‘When she came home . . . about four-thirty.’

‘How are you sure?’ Miller asked.

‘Had on the TV. Was watching a gameshow. Pretty girls, you know? Watch it most every day. Comes on at four, runs for half an hour.’

‘So if you were watching TV how do you know that Ms Sheridan came home?’

It was cold, bitterly so, there on the old man’s doorstep. Roth’s hands were gloved but still he massaged them together as if he was choking something small. He gritted his teeth, glanced at the road like he was waiting for something else to happen.

‘How do I know? Come inside a minute.’

Miller glanced at Roth. Roth nodded. They stepped inside. Place was neat but could have done with a clean.

The old man waved them into the front, showed them his chair, the TV, how it was positioned.

'If I'm here I can see the house.' He pointed. Miller leaned down to sitting height. Through the window he could see Catherine Sheridan's front door.

'You knew her?'

'Some.'

'How well?'

'Hell, I don't know. How well does anyone know anyone these days? Ain't like how it used to be. We were polite. Said hi every once in a while. She never came for dinner if that's what you mean.'

'And you saw her go inside the house?'

The old man nodded.

'And then?'

'Some kid with thick glasses won three thousand bucks and darn near pissed himself.'

Miller frowned.

'On the game show.'

'Right . . . on the game show.'

'And you didn't see anything else?'

'What else was there to see?'

'Someone approaching the house?'

'The guy that killed her?'

'Anyone . . . anyone at all.'

'I didn't see anyone.'

Miller handed him a card. 'You remember anything else you give me a call, okay?'

'Sure.'

Miller turned, looked at Roth. Roth shook his head; he had no further questions.

The old man inhaled slowly, exhaled once more. 'Hard to believe,' he said quietly.

'What is?'

'That he went and killed my neighbor. I mean, what the hell did she do to deserve that?'

Miller shrugged. 'God knows. What did any of them do?'

Roth and Miller moved on. They spoke with neighbors in three

houses further down but came back none the wiser. No-one had seen a thing. No-one remembered anything.

‘Like I said,’ Roth repeated, ‘most of the world is oblivious.’

They returned to the Sheridan place to check on the forensics unit. Miller stayed downstairs, surveyed the scene before him, tried to imprint every detail on his mind for later reference. He thought of the movie that had been playing. It was something to watch with family at Christmas, not something to watch as you died.

Roth came down and waited with him as forensics went through Catherine Sheridan’s kitchen, her bathroom, through drawers and cupboards, fingertip-searching her belongings, perhaps believing that they would find something to help explain what had taken place. They knew they were just looking for a single clue, a hint, a suggestion, a lead . . . the *one thing* that would let them catch this creature by the tail and haul it to the curb.

It would come. Sure as Christmas. But not when they expected, nor how, nor why.

Before Miller left he asked after the lead CSA, waited while one of the analysts brought him from upstairs.

‘You’re the chief on this?’ the CSA asked.

‘First one here, that’s all,’ Miller replied.

‘Greg Reid,’ the CSA said. ‘Would shake hands but . . .’ He held up his latex-gloved hands, smears and spots of blood visible on them.

‘I’ll leave my card on the table here,’ Miller said. ‘Just wanted you to know who I am, my number if you needed me.’

‘Have to give us the time we need,’ Reid said. ‘A day or two . . . I got a whole house to process. You speak to whoever you have to speak to and then come back, okay?’

Miller nodded. ‘Anything immediate shows up, call me?’

‘Do have something,’ Reid said. He nodded toward the telephone table near the front door. ‘Bag there has her passport and a library card in it. She went to the library today, looks like she returned some books. The passport is the only picture I can find of her right now. You’ll need a picture for your walkabout. Maybe have one of your people clean it up, make her look like a human being.’

‘Appreciated,’ Miller said. ‘Let me know if there’s anything else.’

Reid smiled sardonically. ‘What? Like we find the guy left his name and address?’

Miller didn’t respond. He was tired. A CSA’s relationship ended

with the crime scene; Homicide would live with this until it was done.

Roth and Miller left by the rear door, paused once again in the lot and looked at the back of the house. Lights burned. Shadows up against the windows from the men working inside. Miller stood there until he felt the cold getting to him, Roth beside him, neither of them speaking until Miller told Roth to take the car.

‘You’re sure?’ Roth asked.

‘I’m going to walk. I could use the exercise.’

Roth looked at Miller askance. ‘You feel like everyone you meet wants to ask you questions, don’t you?’

Miller shrugged.

‘You heard from Marie?’

‘Not a word.’

‘She didn’t come get her things from your place?’

‘I think she’s gone away for a while.’ Miller shook his head. ‘Fuck, who am I kidding? I think she’s gone for good.’

‘Amanda didn’t like her,’ Roth said. ‘She said that she wasn’t down-to-earth enough for you.’

‘Tell Amanda that I appreciate her concern, but it was simply a fuck-up. We all know that.’

‘You figured out what you’re gonna do yet?’

Miller appeared momentarily irritated. ‘Go home, would you?’

Roth glanced back at the Sheridan house. ‘This is the last thing you want, right?’

Miller looked down at the sidewalk, didn’t answer the question.

Roth smiled understandingly. ‘I’ll go home now,’ he said, and started away towards the car.

Miller stayed for ten or fifteen minutes, his attention focused on the lights in the Sheridan house, and then he buried his hands in his pockets and started walking. It was close to ten by the time he reached his apartment over Harriet’s Delicatessen on Church Street. Harriet, ancient and wise, would be out back, drinking warm milk with her husband Zalman, talking about things only they could remember. Miller took the rear stairwell up to his apartment instead of his usual route through the deli itself. Such moments as this, wonderful people though they were, Harriet and Zalman Shamir would keep him up for an hour, insisting he eat chicken liver sandwiches and honey cake. Most other nights yes, but tonight? No, not tonight. Tonight belonged to Catherine Sheridan, to finding the reason for her death.

Miller let himself in, kicked off his shoes, spent an hour outlining his initial observations on a yellow legal pad. He watched TV for a little while before fatigue started to take him.

Eleven, perhaps later, Harriet and Zalman locked up and went home. Harriet called him goodnight from the stairs, and Miller called goodnight in return.

He did not sleep. He lay awake with his eyes closed and thought of Catherine Sheridan. Who she was. Why she had died. Who had killed her. He thought of these things and he longed for morning, for morning would bring daylight, and daylight would give distance between himself and his ghosts.