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City of Lies

Written by R. J. Ellory

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City of Lies

R. J. ELLORY



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A hundred times have I thought New York is a catastrophe, and fifty times: It is a beautiful catastrophe.

Le Corbusier

Always you must play yourself. But it will be an infinite variety.

Constantin Stanislavski – *An Actor Prepares*

ONE

Old man crawled out of the doorway on his hands and knees. Crawled out like a dog.

Sound from his mouth almost inhuman, face all twisted, like someone had taken hold of his hair and screwed his features a few inches backwards.

Blood on his hands, on the sidewalk. Blood on his knees. Made it to the kerb and then collapsed forward.

Smell in the air like snow, cool and crisp.

Later, people would be asked what they remembered most clearly, and all of them – one for one and without exception – would speak about the blood.

Snow didn't come. Not that night. Would come a few days later perhaps, maybe in time for Christmas.

Had it come there would have been blood in that snow, spooling around the old man as he lay there, twitching and mouthing while cabs flew by and people went from one part of their lives to yet another; while New York made it safely out of one long day and hoped the next would be somehow better.

Such is the way of the world some would say, grateful for the fact that it had not been them, had not in fact been anyone they knew – and that, if nothing else, was some small saving grace.

People were stabbed and shot, strangled, burned, drowned and hung; people were killed in automobile accidents, in freak twists of nature; people walked from their houses every day believing that it would be a day no different from any other. But it was.

The old man lay on the sidewalk until someone called the police. An ambulance came; police helped the medics put the old man on a stretcher and lift him in back of the vehicle.

'He try to stop the guy with the gun,' a Korean man told the officer after the ambulance had peeled away, cherry-bar flashing,

lights ablaze. It was a Sunday evening; the traffic was as quiet as it would get.

'Who the hell are you?' the officer said.

'I own liquor store.'

'Liquor store? What liquor store?'

'Liquor store down there.' The man pointed. 'Some guy robbing the store . . . some guy with a gun, and the old man went for him—'

'The old man tried to stop a guy robbing your store?' the officer asked.

'He did . . . guy was trying to rob the store. He had gun. He was pointing gun at my wife, and then old man come down the aisle and went for the guy. Guy got real scared and shot the old man. Don't think he mean to shoot anyone, but old man scared him and the guy lost it.'

'And where did the guy go?'

'Took off down the street.'

The officer looked down the street as if such a thing would serve a purpose. 'He went that way?'

The man nodded. 'Yes, that way.'

'You better come with me then . . . you better come to the precinct and make a statement. You could look at some pictures and see if you recognize him.'

'Who?'

'The one with the gun . . . the one who tried to rob you.'

'Oh,' the store owner said. 'I thought you mean old man.'

The officer shook his head. Sometimes he wondered about people, how they managed to make it through each day.

The owner's wife came down from the liquor store later, maybe half an hour or so. She carried a bucket, hot soapy water inside, in her hand a mop. She cleaned down the sidewalk, sluiced the blood into the gutter, and she too thought *such is the way of the world*, perhaps those words exactly, perhaps something close. She was Korean. She had a short name, more consonants than vowels, which folks kept mispronouncing, so she called herself Kim. Kim was easy to remember, easier to say. She had come to America with every intention of being nothing but herself. Eleven years on and she was called Kim and standing on the sidewalk washing blood into the street from some old

man who came to buy his wine each Sunday, an old man who'd tried to help them.

And then it was kind of forgotten, because in and of itself such an event was of no great moment.

This was New York after all. Used to be Sinatra's town. Now it belonged to *Sex and the City* and Woody Allen. Shit like this went down each and every day, each and every way. People wrote about this place – people like Roth and Auster, Selby and Styron. This was the center of the world, a microcosm that represented all that was senseless and beautiful about the world.

A place where someone could get shot for no reason; where a woman called Kim could wash blood into the gutter with no greater ceremony than if it were spilled diesel wine; where the reasons to live – love and money, perhaps the hope of something better – were indiscernible from the reasons to die. Blessed and brave, impassioned, afflicted, forever believing in fortune, a million lives crossing a million lives more, and all of them interwoven until the seams that lay between them could no longer be defined.

Sunday evening, mid-December; they rushed the old man to St Vincent's and, despite knowing nothing of his life, not even his name, they all – the liquor store owner, his wife, the police officer, the medics in the Blue Cross ambulance . . . all of them hoped and prayed and willed that he would live.

Such was human nature; such was the way of the world.

An hour later, maybe less. Middle-aged man – greying hair, white shirt, woven silk tie, features made of character and muscular tension – stands in front of a desk. Replaces the phone in its cradle. Looks away towards the window of the room, a window that overlooks the street from where the sound of traffic, making its way from wherever to someplace else, is like staggered breathing.

Middle-aged man turns and looks across the desk at a younger woman – dark hair, beautiful yes, no doubt about it, but a ghost within her features that speaks of some internal disquiet.

'They shot Edward,' the man says. His voice is matter-of-fact and businesslike, almost as if such news has been expected.

Sharp intake of breath. 'Who? Who shot him? Is he okay?' The woman, name of Cathy Hollander, starts to rise from her chair.

The man raises his hand and she pauses. 'We don't know anything,' he says. 'Maybe something direct, maybe simple bad luck. Go get Charlie Beck and Joe Koenig. I have to make some calls. I have to get someone here—'

'Someone?' the woman asks.

'I have to get his son from Miami—'

She frowns, shakes her head. 'His son? What the fuck are you talking about? Edward has a son?'

The man, goes by the name of Walt Freiberg, nods his head slowly and closes his eyes. 'Yes,' he says, his voice almost a whisper, 'he has a son.'

'I didn't know—' Cathy starts.

Freiberg lifts the receiver and dials a number. 'You didn't know he had a son? I wouldn't feel left out sweetheart . . . neither did the rest of the world.'

The phone connects at the other end of the line.

Walt Freiberg smiles. 'Evelyn? It's Walter . . . long time, no see. Calling because I need you to do something for me.'

TWO

So this – amongst so many other things – was the real deal, the hard-bitten truth: when he was drunk he believed in God.

But these days John Harper didn't drink so often, and thus his moments of faith were few and far between. Harper was one of the very fortunate who'd experienced the moment of special revelation: sleep off the drunk and the debt was still owed; the girlfriend still pregnant; the wife knew you'd walked out on her for a twenty-two-year-old Thai girl with universal joints for hips. The fan was still spinning, the crap still airborne six ways to Christmas. Life turns a corner, and all of a sudden your soundtrack plays in a minor key.

And so John Harper stopped drinking, and therefore stopped believing in God.

But before that: raw-faced and noisy; thundering migraines surrendering to nothing but a combination of Jack Daniels and Darvon Complex; fits of anger, more often than not directed towards himself; a frustrated man; a man of words bound within the limits of a stunted imagination. Ate too little – corn-dogs and cinnamon cake and sometimes a cheeseburger from Wendy's or Sambo's; late-night shuffles through the kitchen searching out Ring-Dings and handfuls of dry Froot Loops, making inhuman sounds, hands shaking, wondering when the muse would come back.

Because John Harper wrote a book one time; called it *Depth of Fingerprints*; sold it for twelve thousand dollars up-front to a smalltime publishing house in Miami. Optioned for film; film was never made. Helluva story, even posted a squib in the *Herald Tribune* which told him he had a future if he kept his narrative dry and his prose succinct. That had been eight years before. Started a dozen things since; finished nothing.

Lived in Miami now. Had headed south from New York in the

hope of inspiration and wound up staying, and like someone once said: Miami was a noise, a perpetual thundering noise trapped against the coast of Florida between Biscayne Bay and Hialeah; beneath it Coral Gables, above it Fort Lauderdale; everywhere the smell of the Everglades – rank, swollen and fetid in summer, cracked and featureless and unforgiving in winter.

Miami was a promise and an automatic betrayal; a catastrophe by the sea; perched there upon a finger of land that pointed accusingly at something that was altogether not to blame. And never had been. And never would be.

Miami was a punctuation mark of dirt on a peninsula of misfortune; an appendage.

But home is where the heart is.

John Harper's heart was taken in Miami, and to date – as far as he knew – it had never been returned.

Pushed his pen nevertheless; wrote inches for the *Herald*, and sometimes those inches were pressed out once more for the *Key West Citizen*, *The Keynoter*, *Island Life* and *The Navigator*. John Harper wrote human interest squibs about poisonwood and pigeon plum and strangler fig and gumbo limbo in Lignumvitae Key State Botanical; about shark sightings and shark tournaments; about the homes of Tennessee Williams and Papa Hemingway on Key West; about all manner of minutiae that swallowed the attention for a heartbeat and was just as soon forgotten.

Greyhound Bus made eight stops between Miami and Key West. Down through Islamorada, Key Largo, Marathon and Grassy Key; two routes – one from the Florida Turnpike which wound up in Homestead, the other along 1-95 which became US 1 at the southern end of Miami. Both roads hit the Overseas Highway. Both roads he had travelled. And there was something about the islands – all thirty-one punctuations of limestone and the eight hundred uninhabited islands that surrounded them – that forever gripped his imagination. Here, on this awkward peninsula of hope, he believed himself a million miles from the disappointment of New York. South and east was the Atlantic, west was the Gulf of Mexico; forty-two bridges, dozens of causeways; New England and Caribbean architecture – gingerbread verandas, widow's walks, wrought-iron balconies, population of twenty-five thousand, a million tourists a year.

John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park with its starfish and lobsters, its sponges and sea cucumbers, its stingrays, barracuda, crabs and angel fish. And then there was Key Largo Dry Rocks, the Bronze Christ of the Deep Statue, shoals of blackfin tuna, the waves of frigate birds overhead that would tell you when the fish were running. And the smell, the once-in-a-lifetime smell of salt, seaweed, fish and marsh, mangrove swamps and rocks; the memory of pirates and Ponce de Leon, the Dry Tortugas, the footprints of turtles, the reefs, the clear water, the citrus, the coconut.

All these things a hundred and fifty miles from where he sat in his small backroom office in the *Miami Herald* complex.

John Harper: journalist, one-time novelist, one-time New Yorker; thirty-six years old, muddy-blond hair, good jawline, clear grey eyes. Single now, single and without options; small address book, maybe a dozen girls in all, but each one – right to the last – had been ousted from the Harper camp by the necessity to do something more with their lives than wait for the bitter and sardonic humor to lighten up. Last got laid a handful of weeks before. Sweet girl, olive complexion, emerald eyes. Called him 'Johnnie' which irritated him, but not for long. Lasted a couple of months; she found someone else – boat captain called Gil Gibson running tourist trips out of Bayside around HMS *Bounty*. She took another little piece of that heart, the one that belonged to Miami, and she stole it away silently, walking on eggshells, for she knew John Harper was a man of too many words, and some of those words could be hurled with a raised voice and clenched fists. He let her go; she would have gone anyway; told her it was better for both of them if she walked out into life and found what she really wanted. To her, to himself, he had lied, but he had lied like a professional.

And Harper believed, *had* to believe, that one day the muse would come home, and then he would find his dry narrative and his succinct prose, and he would pen a prizewinner that would give him enough money to leave Miami and head south along Overseas until he reached the end. And he'd walk out to the beach come nightfall and know that Hemingway and Williams, John Hersey, James Merrill, Tom McGuane and Phil Caputo . . . know that all of them had once stood right where he would be standing, and they too had looked out towards the Keys of Fish

Hawk, Sugarloaf, Halfmoon and Little Truman. He would stand in the footprints of giants, and there – at the southernmost point of the continental United States – John Michael Harper, he of the dry and bitter humor, he of the lost loves and lonely nights, he of clenched fists and silent typewriter, of burgeoning promise and unfulfilled potential, would know that he had come home.

Home, perhaps, is not where the heart is, but where – at last – you found it.

But that was all so much of so many different things. That sort of thing was dreams and wishes and other stuff related.

Reality was less complex.

Simple job. Showed up Monday morning.

'John?'

Standing in the doorway was Harry. Harry made most doorways look too small. Harry – a.k.a. Harry Ivens, Assistant Editor-In-Chief, *Miami Herald* – smiled like he'd just got the joke, a joke pretty much everyone else had gotten three-quarters of an hour before.

'Harry . . . good morning,' John Harper replied.

Harry nodded. 'Shark tournament, Blackwater Sound into Florida Bay, all the way out and round Sandy, come home south-west into Marathon . . . you know the routine, you love it, you know you do . . . get your shit together.' Harry smiled again.

'Today?'

'Today.'

'Thought it was next Monday.'

Harry tilted his head to one side as if considering the significance of Harper's comment. He looked at Harper again. 'It's December, John, same trip every year, same time. We'll soon have Christmas, if you didn't know. Get a diary, write this stuff down. Hell, get a computer, a laptop maybe . . . you could be better organized. We're not asking you to cover Watergate. Time for coffee now, little more than that, and you better be away or the boats will be sailing without you aboard. Camera, remember? Pictures are good . . . get some pictures and we can put your piece in all the Keys papers three times over.' Harry nodded. 'I've got to go now, but I envy you. Sun and fun and fish, right?'

'Right, Harry.'

Harper watched him leave the room and head through the maze of partitions to his office in the far corner, then he turned

his chair until his back was to the door. He made-believe he was looking out through a window. Behind him, there on the wall, he'd hung a calendar, a calendar with pictures of Molasses Reef, Mallory Pier, Fort Zachary Taylor and the gulls at Higgs Beach. Made-believe he was looking out through a window at these things and, sometimes when he did this, he would close his eyes and imagine the tradewind breeze through his hair, would find the smell, would hear the shrill echoes of birds and the sound of the surf against the shore.

Minutes would dissolve away silently, and then someone would say, 'Where the fuck is Harper?' and Harper would turn and wait for the someone to come through the door, and hear them say, 'John, I need four and a half inches split three ways. Pages six, nine, eleven. Any old crap will do. Need it within the hour, okay?'

And John Harper would nod and smile, and spend twenty-five minutes writing four and a half inches of any old crap, and they would use it like mortar between the bricks, fill in the gaps between one real story and the next, and even as he was doing it he would smell the tradewind breeze, would hear the gulls, feel a sense of warmth on the back of his neck.

And that – fundamentally – was what he did. Rented a comfortable, simple apartment on N.W. Twelfth between Gibson Park and the North-South Expressway, not so far from his workplace; couple of bars he frequented, not because he needed to drink but because he liked the sound of real people with real enough lives, and bars were where he would find them when evening came and Miami slowed down; five days a week in a small office writing fill-ins and bylines, more than not without credit, and the only reason he got the job in the first place was because of *Depth of Fingerprints*, which – all in all – wasn't so much a bad book as a good start that never went anyplace.

John Harper was a man without a purpose, and he knew – above all else – that a man without a purpose was destined for unhappiness whichever way he walked.

What he *told* himself he wanted was the tradewind and the blackfin tuna, the pigeon plum and the poisonwood, the eight hundred punctuations of limestone and the smell that haunted the spaces in between. The truth was perhaps different. What he

wanted was something to drive him forward, much the way he'd been driven to write *Depth of Fingerprints*.

But that December Monday morning – late December, but still so warm you felt punch-drunk before reaching the car – he left his office and the complex and headed home. Mid-morning he was packed and prepped for a two-day jaunt out of Blackwater Sound; a flotilla of boats captained by seasoned and veteran drunks, men with faces like storm-hammered rocks, hands like dried-up leather gloves, their passengers business types – from Miami and Hialeah, Coral Gables and Kendall; men who split their time between the office, the Key Biscayne Golf Course, the mistress, and three times a year this wild two-day fishing jag after barracuda and shark, staggering close to blind near the edge of the deck, loaded to the gunnels with cold beer and warm sun. This was as real as life got for guys like this, and John Harper was there to see it all, to tell the tales, to take the pictures, to write another byline or fill-in that would grace the pages of *The Key West Citizen* or *Island Life*.

Took him an hour to get down there, all the way to Key Largo, and already he sensed, perhaps with something preternatural and intuitive, that these couple of days ahead would see a storm out of the Gulf of Mexico. He parked his car, a Pontiac 6.6 that had seen so many better days, off of the highway between Newport and Rock Harbor, and then he hitched a ride back towards the mouth of the Sound with one of the many pickups that were headed that way.

All jeans and tee-shirts, lumberjack checks with the sleeves torn off, unshaven since Friday morning in preparation for this; belts with hunting knives in hand-tooled leather sheaths, strong boots with sealed soles, weatherproofs and all-in-ones packed in holdalls; men shouting, laughing, already drinking, not even discreet despite the hour of the day, and thumping shoulders and real-life honest-to-God man-hugs, and *Shit, you old fuck . . . you look like you gained forty fucking pounds since a year ago! And You hear about Marv? Hell, if his missus didn't catch him bangin' some Filipino chick. Took him for half his fucking company, poor son-of-a-bitch.*

And amidst this vast throng of noisy humanity – amidst these real people, their lives put on hold for forty-eight hours –

John Harper stood, watching the jetties bear up beneath the strain, and down along the wharf there were twenty-five or thirty boats hitched and waiting to carry them out, a thousand bucks a man, with fiberglass rods and high-tensile lines, and carbon-steel hooks and hats bedecked with flies that were hand-wound and hand-tied and a work of art in themselves, and all of this on a Monday morning while regular folk were filling out requisition dockets for insurance claims, or ferrying kids to band practice or hairdressers or football or drama class.

There were some regulars down there, faces he had seen before, and every once in a while he would nod and smile or grip someone's hand, and look at their face, and think *You were here last time around, and for the life of me I cannot remember your name,* and get a look back that meant exactly the same thing, but they were all too polite to say so, and it didn't matter a goddamn anyway because they would more than likely lose one another in this vast mêlée, and wouldn't see one another again until next time they did this thing.

Harper walked down the wharf until he found the Press vessel, the *Mary McGregor,* her name freshly painted on the stern.

He smiled to himself, and wondered what in hell's name he was doing there. Hadn't it been a year ago that he'd told himself he would never do this trip again? The story was always the same; the pictures would be syndicated on the web for anyone who wanted to use them; it would be the same faces, the same tales, the same fisherman's lies.

Harper reached the stern of the boat and, with his kitbag over his shoulder, hauled himself up and over the railing. He stood there for a moment and then turned and looked out towards the sea. Turquoise and cerulean, the sky clear, giving a view all the way west to Joe Bay, the smell of salt clearing the nostrils, the warmth of the sun overhead.

Back and behind Harper was Key Largo. Down along Overseas Highway and the first mile marker would appear – MM126, one hundred and twenty-six miles north of Key West – and a little way beyond that you would cross the Jewfish Creek bridge. Once upon a time it was called Rock Harbor, but Bogart and Bacall changed all that in 1948. Here was the Caribbean Club, a coquina rock facade and a tin roof, old movie posters on the walls and the redolent haunt of rum and bourbon, as if the very

structure of the place was imbued with it. Often times Harper would drive down there Sundays just to eat at Mrs Mac's Kitchen, and then head out to the Wild Bird Center, across wooden walkways that meandered through mangrove wetlands crowded with saffron plum trees, pine bromeliads and prickly pear cacti. One time he'd gone out to the reefs: White Banks Dry Rocks and Carysfort, the French Reef and Molasses, and then Conch where the sunken wrecks of the *Capitana*, the *El Infante* and the *San Jose* lay sleeping. He'd never been back, not because he couldn't dive, not because he didn't want to see them again, but because he knew that the more he went the more dissatisfied he would become with the life he had chosen. The same way he'd felt when he'd left New York so many years before.

And it was then that the call came. The defining moment perhaps. His cellphone jangling awkwardly, and Harper thinking, *This is some other unwanted aspect of an unwanted life.*

He looked at the number on the face of the phone – the *Herald*, and for a moment he was tempted not to take the call. Protocol and the threat of unemployment censored his thoughts. He pressed the green button.

'Hi.'

John . . . it's Carol at the desk. Harry asked me to call you. You out with the boats?

'Yes . . . just got here, why?'

He asked me to tell you to come back.

'Come back . . . what have I got to come back for?'

There's been a call for you.

'A call? What call?'

Your aunt called the paper . . . said there was something urgent, something to do with your family.

Harper frowned. 'Carol, believe me, the woman is crazy, absolutely fucking crazy . . . don't worry about it. Just get someone to tell her I'm out, won't be back for a while, okay?'

John . . . don't give me a hard time. Harry told me to get you back here, whatever you said. Just come back, alright?

'Is he there?'

Harry? Of course he's here.

'Put him on the phone, Carol.'

A moment's pause.

John?

'Jesus Harry . . . what the hell is going on over there?'

People after you, John . . . had two calls from your aunt in New York, and then a further three calls from some girl called Nancy Young.

'What?'

Just get your ass back here, John . . . I'm sending someone down to cover the trip, okay? Whatever's going on with your family seems like a big deal and I can't have your friends and relatives calling the paper and upsetting people. Come back and sort this shit out, will you?

'Right, Harry . . . right, sure thing.'

Puzzled as hell, John Harper finished the call.

It cost him fifty bucks to get someone to drive him back to where he'd parked his car. Annoyed, irritated, wanting to be out there on the deck of a boat making his way towards the limestone punctuations. Life had a habit of interrupting pretty much everything these days.

By the time he reached the *Herald* it was gone eleven. Walked in just as Carol rose from behind her desk. She pointed towards Ivens' office.

Harper frowned, shook his head, couldn't believe that such a fuss was being made about a call from one crazy relative, a relative he hadn't spoken to for as long as he could remember.

'So what the fuck is going on here?' was the question with which he was greeted. Harry Ivens – big man that he was – came out from behind his wide desk.

'Going on?' Harper asked. 'I haven't a clue, Harry . . . you said my aunt had called, and Nancy Young.'

'Who the hell is Nancy Young?' Ivens asked.

'Girl I used to date.'

'So what the hell was she doing calling David?'

Harper frowned. 'David? David Leonhardt?'

Harry nodded, pointing to one of the cubicles ten yards or so from his office. Harper could see the back of Leonhardt's head.

'David!' Ivens hollered.

Leonhardt turned, rose from his chair, and even as he reached the office door his phone started ringing again. Leonhardt glanced at it and looked at Harper.

'It's Nancy,' he said, and then he paused awkwardly.

Harper's eyes widened.

Leonhardt shrugged. He handed his phone to Harper.

Harper held it up and peered at the name that flashed on the screen. *NANCY . . . NANCY . . . NANCY . . .*

He was confused. He hit the button, and then passed the phone back to Leonhardt.

'Nancy?' Leonhardt paused, silent, looked embarrassed. He nodded his head, looked at John Harper, and then said, 'You . . . she wants to speak to you . . . says she's called you but couldn't get a signal.'

John took the phone, held it to his ear.

John?

'Nancy . . . what is it?'

Hadn't spoken to her for the better part of a year. Bitter and acrimonious relationship breakdown. Hurling vases down the stairs, old 45s, a couple of signed and framed pictures he'd had for years. Had to clean up the hallway below, sweeping shards of glass from along the baseboard. Sour taste in his mouth. Harsh words echoing in his head even as he heard her voice.

John . . . I've been trying to get hold of you . . . your aunt called me earlier, an hour ago, I don't remember . . .

She sounded worried, fretting, anxious, uptight. Sounded like a woman on the edge of an episode.

She didn't have your cellphone number . . . not that it would've done any good . . . your phone's off—

'I've changed my number.'

Right . . . anyway, I couldn't reach you—

'You called David's phone,' Harper interrupted.

He looked up at David Leonhardt who glanced away like he wasn't listening, like he didn't hear the last thing said. Tension in the air. Awkwardness.

Yes.

John shook his head. 'You called David's phone . . . David Leonhardt . . . from the paper?'

Yes, I called David's phone . . . I called him because I thought he might know where you were. You guys have done a lot of work together . . .

'But how do you have his number, Nancy?'

John looked at Leonhardt again, Frowned like he was trying to see if it worked as a useful expression. 'David?' he asked, and for a moment it wasn't clear whether he was speaking directly to his

colleague, or if he was talking on the cell. 'I don't understand . . . how does Nancy have your phone number?'

Leonhardt shrugged, mouth turned down at the edges, trying to appear nonchalant.

John?

Back on the phone.

John . . . shut up for a goddamned minute will you? I've been calling you because your aunt didn't know how to get hold of you . . . she needs to speak to you.

There was silence for a moment, a tight pocket of silence, like Nancy was going to say something else and then she cut it short, pulled in the reins, didn't know what words to use.

'What?' Harper asked. 'What is it?'

I don't know, John . . . it doesn't make sense.

'Whaddya mean, it doesn't make sense? *What* doesn't make sense, Nancy?' His tone one of irritation. He could hear it, clear as a bell at daybreak, and he knew this was some overspill from way back when; something tied up tight inside, tied up with whipcord, something vindictive and vengeful towards the girl who seemed to have effortlessly broken his heart.

Don't get nasty, John . . . I'm just calling you because your aunt couldn't get hold of you so she called me. I'm here at work, John, still at work, and she called me here and I've been trying to find you. I did meet her, John, remember? She must have remembered where I worked.

'So what's so important, Nancy? What's so important that she needs to call my ex-girlfriend?' Emphasized *ex*, like he wanted to say something to get back at her.

Like I said, it doesn't make any sense to me—

Nancy paused, and then, *She said it was about your family John. She said she needed to speak to you about your family.*

'She what?'

John, will you stop asking me questions I can't answer. You have any idea how stupid you sound?

A heartbeat of hesitation, then, 'I'll call her, okay?'

Okay . . . that's all I wanted. Now let me speak to David.

Harper opened his mouth to say something else. He felt awkward, disjointed; his thoughts present, half-formed, but seemingly disconnected from speech.

He held out the phone. Leonhardt took it, turned and walked back to his desk, speaking as he went.

'So what the fuck is going on?' Harry Ivens asked.

Harper looked blank. 'My aunt—'

'You need to call her, right?'

'Yes . . . call her . . . yes . . .'

Harry took a step forward. 'So go call her, John. Go call the woman and find out what's going on.'

'Yes,' Harper said. 'I'll call her.'

Harper backed up and started towards his office at the far end of the corridor. He glanced left at Leonhardt. Leonhardt had his back to him but sensed that he was being watched. He shifted his chair a few inches forward in an effort to disappear. Harper would have said something, would have asked him how the hell Nancy Young had his cellphone number. He didn't. Kept on walking. Stepped into his office and sat down at the desk. Picked up the phone. Dialled a number he remembered by heart.

She answered the call within three rings. 'John,' she said, and Harper knew from her tone that something serious had happened.