

FAULT LINES

Nancy Kress

"Fault Lines" was purchased by Gardner Dozois, and appeared in the August 1995 issue of Asimov's, with illustration by Steve Cavallo. It was one of a long sequence of elegant and incisive stories by Kress that have appeared in Asimov's under four different editors over the last eighteen years, since her first Asimov's sale to Gardner Dozois in 1979- stories that have made her one of the most popular of all the magazine's writers. Born in Buffalo, New York, Nancy Kress now lives in Silver Springs, Maryland, with her husband, SF author Charles Sheffield. Her books include the novels The Prince Of Morning Bells, The Golden Grove, The White Pipes, An Alien Light, and Braided Rose, the collection Trinity And Other Stories. She won both the Hugo and the Nebula Award in 1992 for her novel 'Beggars in Spain,' an Asimov's story; the novel version, Beggars in Spain, appeared the following year, and was followed by a sequel, Beggars and Choosers. Her most recent books include a new collection, The Aliens of Earth and a new novel, Oaths & Miracles. She has also won a Nebula Award for her story "Out Of All Them Bright Stars."

Here she offers us a compelling and fascinating story in which a retired New York cop must solve a series of brutal murders while at the same time unraveling an intricate and deadly biological mystery ...

"If the truth shall kill them, let them die." -Immanuel Kant

The first day of school, we had assault-with-intent in Ms. Kelly's room. I was in my room next door, 136, laying down the law to 7C math. The usual first-day bullshit: turn in home-work every day, take your assigned seat as soon as you walk in, don't bring a weapon, no abusive attitude into my class-room or you'll wish you'd never been born. The kids would ignore the first, do the others-for me anyway. Apparently not for Jenny Kelly.

"Mr. Shaunessy! Mr. Shaunessy! Come quick, they throw-ing chairs next door! The new teacher crying!" A pretty, tiny girl I recognized from last year: Lateesha Jefferson. Her round face glowed with excitement and satisfaction. A riot! Already! On the very first day!

I looked over my class slowly, penetratingly, letting my gaze linger on each upturned face. I took my time about it. Most kids dropped their eyes. Next door, something heavy hit the wall. I lowered my voice, so everybody had to strain to hear me.

"Nobody move while I'm gone. You all got that?"

Some heads nodded. Some kids stared back, uncertain but cool. A few boys smirked and brought my unsmiling gaze to their faces until they stopped. Shouts filtered through the wall.

"Okay, Lateesha, tell Ms. Kelly I'm coming." She took off like a shot, grinning, Paul Revere in purple leggings and silver shoes.

I limped to the door and turned for a last look. My students all sat quietly, watching me. I saw Pedro Valesquez and Steven Cheung surreptitiously scanning my jacket for the bulge of a service revolver that of course wasn't there. My reputation had become so inflated it rivaled the NYC budget. In the hall Lateesha screamed in a voice that could have deafened rock stars. "Mr. Shaunessy coming! You ho's better stop!"

In 134, two eighth-grade girls grappled in the middle of the floor. For a wonder, neither seemed to be armed, not even with keys. One girl's nose streamed blood. The other's blouse was torn. Both screamed incoherently, nonstop, like stuck sirens. Kids raced around the room. A chair had apparently been hurled at the chalkboard, or at somebody once standing in front of the chalkboard; chair and board had cracked. Jenny Kelly yelled and waved her arms. Lateesha was wrong; Ms. Kelly wasn't crying. But neither was she helping things a hell of a lot. A few kids on the perimeter of the chaos saw me and fell silent, curious to see what came next.

And then I saw Jeff Connors, leaning against the window wall, arms folded across his chest, and his expression as he watched the fighting girls told me everything I needed to know.

I took a huge breath, letting it fill my lungs. I bellowed at top volume, and with no facial expression whatsoever, "Freeze! Now!"

And everybody did.

The kids who didn't know me looked instantly for the gun and the back-up. The kids who did know me grinned, stifled it, and nodded slightly. The two girls stopped pounding each other to twist toward the noise-my bellow had shivered the hanging fluorescents-which was time enough for me to limp across the floor, grab the girl on top, and haul her to her feet. She twisted to swing on me, thought better of it, and stood there, panting.

The girl on the floor whooped, leaped up, and tensed to slug the girl I held. But then she stopped. She didn't know me, but the scene had alerted her: nobody yelling anymore, the other wildcat quiet in my grip, nobody racing around the room. She glanced around, puzzled.

Jeff still leaned against the wall.

They expected me to say something. I said nothing, just stood there, impassive. Seconds dragged by. Fifteen, thirty, forty-five. To adults, that's a long time. To kids, it's forever. The adrenaline ebbs away.

A girl in the back row sat down at her desk.

Another followed.

Pretty soon they were all sitting down, quiet, not exactly intimidated but interested. This was different, and different was cool. Only the two girls were left, and Jeff Connors leaning on the window, and a small Chinese kid whose chair was probably the one hurled at the chalkboard. I saw that the crack ran right through words printed neatly in green marker: Ms. **Kgjly** Engjjgn 8E

After a minute, the Chinese kid without a chair sat on his desk.

Still I said nothing. Another minute dragged past. The kids were uneasy now. Lateesha helpfully, "Them girls supposed to go to the nurse, Mr. Shaunessy. Each one by they own self."

I kept my grip on the girl with the torn blouse. The other girl, her nose gushing blood, suddenly started to cry. She jammed her fist against her mouth and ran out of the room.

I looked at each face, one at a time.

Eventually I released my grip on the second girl and nod-ded at Lateesha. "You go with to the nurse."

Lateesha jumped up eagerly, a girl with a mission, the only one I'd spoken to. "You come on, honey," she said, and led away the second girl, clucking at her under her breath.

Now they were all eager for the limelight. Rosaria said quickly, "They fighting over Je Mr. Shaunessy."

"No they ain't," said a big, muscled boy in the second row. He was scowling. "They fighting cause Jonelle, she dissed Lisa."

"No, they-"

Everybody had a version. They all jumped in, intellectuals with theories, arguing with other until they saw I wasn't saying anything, wasn't trying to sort through it, wasn't going to participate. One by one, they fell silent again, curious.

Finally Jeff himself spoke. He looked at me with his ab-solutely open, earnest, guileless expression and said, 'It was them suicides, Mr. Shaunessy.'

The rest of the class looked slightly confused, but willing to go along with this. They knew Jeff. But now Ms. Kelly, excluded for five full minutes from her own classroom, jumped in. She was angry. "*What* suicides? What are you talking about, uh ..."

Jeff didn't deign to supply his name. She was supposed to know it. He spoke directly to "Them old people. The ones who killed theirselves in that hospital this morning. And last week. In the newspaper."

I didn't react. Just waited.

"You know, Mr. Shaunessy," Jeff went on, in that same open, confiding tone. 'Them old people shooting and hanging and pushing theirselves out of windows. At their age. In their sixties and seventies and eighties.'" He shook his head re-gretfully.

The other kids were nodding now, although I'd bet my pension none of them ever read anything in any newspaper.

"It just ain't no example to us," Jeff said regretfully. "If even the people who are getting three good meals a day and got people waiting on them and don't have to work or struggle more with the man-if *they* give up, how we supposed to think there's anything in this here life for us?"

He leaned back against the window and grinned at me: triumphant, regretful, pleading, inheritor of a world he hadn't made. His classmates glanced at each other sideways, glanced at me, and stopped grinning.

"A tragedy, that's what it is," Jeff said, shaking his head. "A tragedy. All them old people deciding a whole life just don't make it worth it to stick to the rules. How *we* supposed to be to behave?"

"You have to get control of Jeff Connors," I told Jenny Kelly at lunch in the faculty room. This was an exposed-pipes, flaking-plaster oasis in the basement of Benjamin Franklin Junior High. Teachers sat jammed together on folding metal chairs around brown formica tables, drinking coffee and eating out of paper bags. Ms. Kelly had plopped down next to me and practically demanded advice. "That's actually not as hard as it might look. Jeff's a hustler, a con operator, and the others follow him. But he's not uncontrollable."

"Easy for you to say," she retorted, surprising me. "They look at you and see the macho ex-cop who weighs what? Two-thirty? Who took out three criminals before you got shot, and has strong juice at Juvenile Hall. They look at me and see a five-foot-three, one-hundred-twenty-pound nobody they can all push around. Including Jeff."

"So don't let him," I said, wondering how she'd heard all the stories about me so fast. She'd only moved into the district four days ago.

She took a healthy bite of her cheese sandwich. Although she'd spent the first half of the lunch period in the ladies' room, I didn't see any tear marks. Maybe she fixed her makeup to cover tear stains. Margie used to do that. Up close Jenny Kelly looked older than I'd thought at first: twenty-eight, maybe thirty. Her looks weren't going to make it any easier to control a roomful of thirteen-year-old boys. She pushed her short blond hair off her face and looked directly at me.

"Do you really carry a gun?"

"Of course not. Board of Education regs forbid any weapons by anybody on school property. You know that."

"The kids think you carry."

I shrugged.

"And you don't tell them otherwise."

I shrugged again.

"Okay, I can't do that either," she said. "But I'm not going to fail at this, Gene. I'm just nervous. You're a big success here, everybody says so. So tell me what I *can* do to keep enough control of my classes that I have a remote chance of actually teaching anybody anything."

I studied her, and revised my first opinion, which was that she'd be gone by the end of

September. No tear stains, not fresh out of college, able to keep eating under stress. The verbal determination I discounted; I'd heard a lot of verbal determination from rookies when I was in the Force, and most of it melted away three months out of Police Academy. Even sooner in the City School District.

"You need to do two things," I said. "First, recognize that these kids can't do without connection to other human beings. Not for five minutes, not for one minute. They're starved for it. And to most of them, 'connection' means arguing, fighting, struggling, even abuse. It's what they're used to, and it's what they'll naturally create, because it feels better to them than existing alone in a social vacuum for even a minute. To compete with that, to get them to disengage from each other long enough to listen to you, you have to give them an equally strong connection to *you*. It doesn't have to be intimidation, or some bullshit fantasy about going up against the law. You can find your own way. But unless you're a strong presence- very strong, very distinctive-of one kind or another, they're going to ignore you and go back to connecting with each other."

"Connection," she said, thinking about it. "What about connecting to the material? English literature has some pretty exciting stuff in it, you know."

"I'll take your word for it. But no books are exciting to most of these kids. Not initially. They can only connect to the material through a person. They're that starved."

She took another bite of sandwich. "And the second thing?"

"I already told you. Get control of Jeff Connors. Immediately."

"Who is he? And what was all that bullshit about old people killing themselves?"

I said, "Didn't you see it on the news?"

"Of course I did. The police are investigating, aren't they? But what did it have to do with my classroom?"

"Nothing. It was a diversionary tactic. A cover-up."

"Of what?"

"Could be a lot of things. Jeff will use whatever he hears to confuse and mislead, and he hears everything. He's bright, unmotivated, a natural leader, and-unbelievably-not a gang member. You saw him-no big gold, no beeper. His police record is clean. So far, anyway."

Jenny said, "You worked with him a little last year."

"No, I didn't work with him. I controlled him in class, was all." She'd been asking about me.

"So if *you* didn't really connect with him, how do I?"

"I can't tell you that," I said, and we ate in silence for a few minutes. It didn't feel strained. She looked thoughtful, turning over what I'd told her. I wondered suddenly whether she'd had a good cop. Her ears were small, I noticed, and pink, with tiny gold earrings in the shape of little shells.

She caught me looking, and smiled, and glanced at my left hand.

So whoever she'd asked about me hadn't told her every-thing. I gulped my last bite of sandwich, nodded, and went back to my room before 7H came thundering up the stairs, the day almost over, one more crazy period where Mr. Shau-nessy actually expected them to pay attention to some weird math instead of their natural, intense, contentious absorption in each other.

Two more elderly people committed suicide, at the Angels of Mercy Nursing Home on Amsterdam Avenue.

I caught it on the news, while correcting 7H's first-day quiz to find out how much math I remembered from last year. They didn't remember squat. My shattered knee was propped up on the hassock beside the bones and burial tray of a Hun-gry Man Extra-Crispy Fried Chicken.

"... identified as Giacomo della Francesca, seventy-eight, and Lydia Smith, eighty. They occupied rooms on the same floor, according to nursing home staff, and both had been in fairly good spirits. Mrs. Smith, a widow, threw herself from the roof of the eight-story building. Della Francesca, who was found dead in his room, had apparently stabbed him-self. The suicides follow very closely on similar deaths this morning at the Beth Israel Retirement Home on West End Avenue. However, Captain Michael Doyle, NYPD, warned against premature speculation about-

I shifted my knee. This Captain Doyle must be getting ner-vous; this was the third pair of self-inflicted fatalities in nurs-ing homes within ten days. Old people weren't usually susceptible to copy-cat suicides. Pretty soon the *Daily News* or the *Post* would decide that there was actually some nut running around Manhattan knocking off the elderly. Or that there was a medical conspiracy backed by Middle East ter-rorists and extraterrestrials. Whatever the tabloids chose, the NYPD would end up taking the blame.

Suddenly I knew, out of nowhere, that Margie was worse.

I get these flashes like that, out of nowhere, and I hate it. I never used to. I used to know things the way normal people know things, by seeing them or reading them or hearing them or reasoning them through. Ways that made sense. Now, for the last year, I get these flashes of knowing things some other way, thoughts just turning up in my mind, and the intuitions are mostly right. Mostly right, and nearly always bad.

This wasn't one of my nights to go to the hospital. But I flicked off the TV, limped to the trash to throw away my dinner tray, and picked up the cane I use when my leg has been under too much physical stress. The phone rang. I paused to listen to the answering machine, just

case it was Libby calling from Cornell to tell me about her first week of classes.

"Gene, this is Vince Romano." Pause. "Bucky." Pause. "I know it's been a long time."

I sat down slowly on the hassock.

"Listen, I was sorry to hear about Margie. I was going to ... you were ... it wasn't...." Despite myself, I had to grin. People didn't change. Bucky Romano never could locate a complete verb.

He finished floundering. "... to say how sorry I am. But that's not why I'm calling." Long pause. "I need to talk to you. It's important. Very important." Pause. "It's not about Father Healey again, or any of that old... something else entirely." Pause. "Very important, Gene. I can't... it isn't ... you won't..." Pause. Then his voice changed, became stronger. "I can't do this alone, Gene."

Bucky had never been able to do anything alone. Not when we were six, not when we were eleven, not when we were seventeen, not when he was twenty-three and it wasn't any longer me but Father Healey who decided what he did. Not when he was twenty-seven and it was again deciding for him, more unhappy about that than I'd ever been about any-thing in my life until Margie's accident.

Bucky recited his phone number, but he didn't hang up. I could hear him breathing. Suddenly I could almost see him, somewhere out there, sitting with the receiver pressed so close to his mouth that it would look like he was trying to swallow it. Hoping against hope I might pick up the phone after all. Worrying the depths of his skinny frantic soul for what words he could say to make me do this.

"Gene ... it's about... I shouldn't say this, but after all you're a ... were a ... it's about those elderly deaths." Pause. "I work at Kelvin Pharmaceutical now." And then the click.

What the hell could anybody make of any of that?

I limped to the elevator and caught a cab to St. Clare's Hospital.

Margie *was* worse, although the only way I could tell was that there was one more tube hooked to her than there'd been last night. She lay in bed in the same position she'd lain in for eighteen months and seven days: curled head to knees, splinter-thin arms bent at the elbows. She weighed ninety-nine pounds. Gastrostomy and catheter tubes ran into her, and now an IV drip on a pole as well. Her beautiful brown hair, worn away a bit at the back of her head from constant contact with the pillow, was dull. Its sheen, like her life, had faded deep inside its brittle shafts, unrecoverable.

"Hello, Margie. I'm back."

I eased myself into the chair, leg straight out in front of me.

"Libby hasn't called yet. First week of classes, schedule to straighten out, old friends to

see-you know how it is." Mar-gie always had. I could see her and Libby shopping the week before Libby's freshman year, laughing over the Gap bags, quarreling over the price of something I'd buy either of them now, no matter what it cost. Anything.

"It's pretty cool out for September, sweetheart. But the leaves haven't changed yet. I walk across the Park just yesterday-all still green. Composing myself for today. Which wasn't too bad. It's going to be a good school year, I think."

Have a great year! Margie always said to me on the first day of school, as if the whole year would be compressed in that first six hours and twenty minutes. For three years she'd said it, the three years since I'd been retired from the Force and limped into a career as a junior-high teacher. I remembered her standing at the door, half-dressed for her secretarial job at Time-Warner, her silk blouse stretched across those generous breasts, the slip showing underneath. *Have a great day! Have a great five minutes!*

"Last-period 7H looks like a zoo, Margie. But when doesn't last period look like a zoo? They're revved up like Ferraris by then. But both algebra classes look good, and there's a girl in 7A whose transcript is incredible. I mean, we're talking future Westinghouse Talent winner here."

Talk to her, the doctor had said. *We don't know what coma patients can and cannot do.* That had been a year and a half ago. Nobody ever said it to me now. But I couldn't stop.

"There's a new sacrificial lamb in the room next to mine, eighth-grade English. She had a cat fight in there today. But I don't know, she might have more grit than she looks. And guess who called. Bucky Romano. After all this time. Thirteen years. He wants me to give him a job. I'm not sure yet."

Her teeth gapped and stuck out. The anti-seizure medication in her gastrostomy bag made the gum tissue grow too much. It displaced her teeth.

"I finally bought curtains for the kitchen. Like Libby nagged me to. Although they'll probably have to wait until she comes home at Thanksgiving to get hung. Yellow. You'd like them."

Margie had never seen this kitchen. I could see her in the dining room of the house I'd grown up on a chair hanging drapes, rubbing at a dirty spot on the window....

"Gene?"

"Hi, Susan." The shift nurse looked as tired as I'd ever seen her. "What's this new tube for, Margie?"

"Antibiotics. She was having a little trouble breathing, and an X-ray showed a slight pneumonia. It'll clear right up on medication. Gene, you have a phone call."

Something clutched in my chest. *Libby*. Ever since that '93 Lincoln had torn through a li

on Lexington while Margie crossed with a bag of groceries, any phone call in an unexpected place does that to me. I limped to the nurses' station.

"Gene? This is Vince. Romano. Bucky."

"Bucky."

"I'm sorry to bother you at... I was so sorry to hear about Margie, I left a message on your machine but maybe you haven't been home to ... listen, I need to see you, Gene. It's important. Please."

"It's late, Bucky. I have to teach tomorrow. I teach now, at-"

"*Please*. You'll know why when I see you. I have to see you."

I closed my eyes. "Look, I'm pretty tired. Maybe another time."

"*Please*, Gene. Just for a few minutes. I can be at your place in fifteen minutes!"

Bucky had never minded begging. I remembered that, now. Suddenly I didn't want him to see where I lived, how I lived, without Margie. What I really wanted was to tell him "no."

But I couldn't. I never had, not our whole lives, and I couldn't now-why not? I didn't know.

"All right, Bucky. A few minutes. I'll meet you in the lobby here at St. Clare's."

"Fifteen minutes. God, thanks, Gene. Thanks so much, I really appreciate it, I need to-"

"*Okay*."

"See you soon."

He didn't mind begging, and he made people help him. Even Father Healey had found out about that. Coming in to Bucky's life, and going out.

The lobby of St. Clare's never changed. Same scuffed green floor, slashed gray vinyl couches mended with wide tape, information-desk attendant who looked like he could have been a bouncer at Madison Square Garden. Maybe he had. Tired people yelled and whispered in Spanish, Greek, Korean, Chinese. Statues of the Madonna and St. Clare and the crucified Christ beamed a serenity as alien here as money.

Bucky and I grew up in next-door apartments in a neighborhood like this one, a few blocks from Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows. That's how we denned our location: "two doors down from the crying Broad." We made our First Communion together, and our Confirmation, and Bucky was best man when I married Marge. But by that time he'd entered the seminary, and his irreverence about Our Lady had disappeared, along with all other traces of humor, humility, or humanity. Or so I thought then. Maybe I wasn't wrong. Even though he always made straight A's in class, Bucky-as-priest-in-training was the same as Bucky-as-shortstop or Bucky-as-third-clarineteer or Bucky-as-altar-boy: intense, committed, short-sightedly wrong.

He'd catch a high pop and drop it. He'd know "Claire de Lune" perfectly, and be half a behind. Teeth sticking out, skinny face furrowed in concentration, he'd bend over the altar and become so enraptured by whatever he saw there that he'd forget to make the response. The boys would nudge each other and grin, and later howl at him in the parking lot.

But his decision to leave the priesthood wasn't a howler. It wasn't even a real decision. He'd vacillated for months, growing thinner and more stuttery, and finally he'd taken a bottle of vodka and a half pint of vodka. Father Healey and I found him, and had his stomach pumped, and Father Healey tried to talk him back into the seminary and the saving grace of God. From his hospital bed Bucky had called me, stuttering in his panic, to come get him and take him home. He was terrified. Not of the hospital or of Father Healey.

And I had, coming straight from duty, secure in my shield and gun and Margie's love and my beautiful young daughter and my contempt for the weakling who needed a lapsed-Catholic cop to help him face an old priest in a worn-out religion. God, I'd been smug.

"Gene?" Bucky said. "Gene Shaunessy?"

I looked up at the faded lobby of St. Clare's.

"Hello, Bucky."

"God, you look ... I can't... you haven't changed a bit!"

Then he started to cry.

I got him to a Greek place around the corner on Ninth. The dinner trade was mostly over and we sat at a table in the shadows, next to a dirty side window with a view of a brick alley. Bucky with his back to the door. Not that he cared if anybody saw him crying. I cared. I ordered two beers.

"Okay, what is it?"

He blew his nose and nodded gratefully. "Same old Gene. You always just... never any..."

"Bucky. What the fuck is wrong?"

He said, unexpectedly, "You hate this."

Over his shoulder, I eyed the door. Starting eighteen months ago, I'd had enough tears and drama to last me the rest of my life, although I wasn't going to tell Bucky that. If he didn't get over with....

"I work at Kelvin Pharmaceuticals," Bucky said, suddenly calmer. "'After I left the seminary, after Father Healey ... you remember..."

"Go on," I said, more harshly than I'd intended. Father Healey and I had screamed at each other outside Bucky's door at St. Vincent's, while Bucky's stomach was being pumped. I'd s...

things I didn't want to remember.

"I went back to school. Took a B.S. in chemistry. Then a Ph.D. You and I, about that time of... I wanted to call you after you were shot but... I could have tried harder to find you earlier I know ... anyway. I went to work for Kelvin, in the research department. Liked it. I met Tommy. We live together."

He'd never said. But, then, he'd never had to. And there hadn't been very much saying anyway, not back then, and certainly not at Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows.

"I liked the work at Kelvin. Like it. Liked it." He took a deep breath. "I worked on Camineur. You take it, don't you, Gene?"

I almost jumped out of my skin. "How'd you know that?"

He grinned. "Not by any medical record hacking. Calm down, it isn't... people can't tell, just guessed, from the profile."

He meant *my* profile. Camineur is something called a neu-rotransmitter uptake-regulator. Unlike Prozac and the other antidepressants that were its ancestors, it fiddles not just with serotonin levels but also with norepinephrine and dopamine and a half dozen other brain chemicals. It was prescribed for me after Marge's accident. Non-addictive, no bad side effects, no dulling of the mind. Without it, I couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't concentrate. Couldn't stop wanting to kill some-body every time I walked into St. Clare's.

I had found myself in a gun shop on Avenue D, trigger-testing a nine-millimeter, which was so light in my hand it floated. When I looked at the thoughts in my head, I went to see Marge's doctor.

Bucky said, quietly for once, "'Camineur was designed to prevent violent ideation in people with strong but normally controlled violent impulses, whose control has broken down under severe life stress. It's often prescribed for cops. Also military careerists and doctors. Types with compensated par-anoia restrained by strong moral strictures. Nobody told you that the Camineur generation of mood inhibitors was that specific?"

If they did, I hadn't been listening. I hadn't been listening to much in those months. But I heard Bucky now. His hesitations disappeared when he talked about his work.

"It's a good drug, Gene. You don't have to feel... there isn't anything shameful about taking it. It just restores the brain chemistry to whatever it was before the trauma."

I scowled, and gestured for two more beers.

"All right. I didn't mean to... There's been several generations of neural Pharmaceuticals since then. And that's why I'm talking to you."

I sipped my second beer, and watched Bucky drain his.

"Three years ago we ... there was a breakthrough in neu-ropharm research, really startling stuff, I won't go into the ... we started a whole new line of development. I was on the team. On the team."

I waited. Sudden raindrops, large and sparse, struck the dirty window.

"Since Camineur, we've narrowed down the effects of neu-ropharms spectacularly. I don't know how much you know about this, but the big neurological discovery in the last five years is that repeated intense emotion doesn't just alter the synaptic pathways in the brain. It actually changes your brain structure from the cellular level up. With any intense experience, new structures start to be built, and if the experience is repeated, they get reinforced. The physical changes can make you, say, more open to risk-taking, or calmer in the face of stress. Or the physical structures that get built can make it hard or even impossible to function normally, if you're trying with all your will. In other words, your life literally makes you crazy."

He smiled. I said nothing.

"What we've learned is how to affect only those pathways created by depression, only those created by fear, only those created by narcissistic rage ... we don't touch your memories. They're there. You can see them, in your mind, like bill-boards. But now you drive past them, not through them. In an emotional sense."

Bucky peered at me. I said, not gently, "So what pills do *you* take to drive past your memories?"

He laughed. "I don't." I stayed impassive but he said hastily anyway, "Not that people do are ... it isn't a sign of weakness to take neuropharms, Gene. Or a sign of strength not to. Just... it isn't... I was waiting, was all. I was wait-ing."

"For what? Your prince to come?" I was still angry.

He said simply, "Yes."

Slowly I lowered my beer. But Bucky returned to his back-ground intelligence.

"This drug my team is working on now ... the next step was to go beyond just closing down negative pathways. Take, as just one example, serotonin. Some researcher said... there's one theory that serotonin, especially, is like cops. Having enough of it in your cerebral chemistry keeps riots and looting and assault in the brain from getting out of control. But just holding down crime doesn't, all by itself, create prosperity or happiness. Or joy. For that, you need a new class of neuropharms that create positive pathways. Or at least strengthen those that are already there."

"Cocaine," I said. "Speed. Gin and tonic."

"No, no. Not a rush of power. Not a temporary high. Not temporary at all, and not isolating. The neural pathways that make people feel... the ones that let you ..." He leaned

to-ward me, elbows on the table. "Weren't there moments, Gene, when you felt so close to Margie it was like you crawled inside her skin for a minute? Like you *were* Margie?"

I looked at the window. Raindrops slid slowly down the dirty glass, streaking it dirtier. In the alley, a homeless prowled the garbage cans. "What's this got to do with the elderly suicides? If you have a point to make, make it."

"They weren't suicides. They were murders."

"Murders? Some psycho knocking off old people? What makes you think so?"

"Not some psycho. And I don't think so. I *know*."

"How?"

"All eight elderlies were taking J-24. That's the Kelvin code name for the neuropharm that ends situational isolation. It was a clinical trial."

I studied Bucky, whose eyes burned with Bucky light: in-tense, pleading, determined, in-tense. And something else, some-thing that hadn't been there in the old days. "Bucky, that makes no sense. The NYPD isn't perfect, God knows, but they can tell the difference between suicide and murder. And anyway, the suicide rate rises naturally among old people, they get depressed and stopped. He had to already know this."

"That's just it!" Bucky cried, and an old Greek couple at a table halfway across the room turned to stare at him. He lowered his voice. "The elderly in the clinical trial *weren't* depressed. They were very carefully screened for it. No psychological, chemical, or social markers for depression. These were the... when you see old people in travel ads, doing things full of life and health, playing tennis and dancing by candlelight... the team psychologists looked for our clinical subjects very carefully. *None* of them was depressed!"

"So maybe your pill made them depressed. Enough to kill themselves."

"No! No! J-24 couldn't... there wasn't any ... it didn't make them depressed. I saw it." He hesitated. "And besides ..."

"Besides what?"

He looked out at the alley. A waiter pushed a trolley of dirty dishes past our table. When Bucky spoke again, his voice sounded odd.

"I gave five intense years to J-24 and the research that led to it, Gene. Days, evenings, weekends-eighty hours a week in the lab. Every minute until I met Tommy, and maybe too much time even after that. I know everything that the Kelvin team leaders know, everything that could be known about that drug's projected interaction with existing neurotransmitters. J-24 was my life."

As the Church had once been. Bucky couldn't do anything by halves. I wondered just what

his position on "the team" had actually been.

He said, "We designed J-24 to combat the isolation that even normal, healthy people feel with age. You get old. Your friends die. Your mate dies. Your children live in another state with lives of their own. All the connections you built up over decades are gone, and in healthy people, those connections created very thick, specific, strong neural structures. Any new friends you make in a nursing home or retirement community-there just aren't the years left to duplicate the strength of those neural pathways. Even when outgoing, un-depressed, risk-taking elderly try."

I didn't say anything.

"J-24 was specific to the neurochemistry of connection. You took it in the presence of someone else, and it opened the two of you up to each other, made it possible to genuinely *genuinely*, at the permanent chemical level-imprint on each other."

"You created an *aphrodisiac for geezers*?"

"No," he said, irritated. "Sex had nothing to do with it. Those impulses originate in the limbic system. This was... emotional bonding. Of the most intense, long-term type. Don't tell me all you ever felt for Margie was sex!"

After a minute he said, "I'm sorry."

"Finish your story."

"It *is* finished. We gave the drug to four sets of volunteers, all people who had long-term terminal diseases but weren't depressed, people who were willing to take risks in order to enhance the quality of their own perceptions in the time left. I was there observing when they took it. They bonded like baby ducks imprinting on the first moving objects they see. No, not like that. More like ... like ..." He looked over my shoulder, at the wall, and his eyes filled with water. I glanced around to make sure nobody noticed.

"Giacomo della Francesca and Lydia Smith took J-24 together almost a month ago. They were transformed by this incredible joy in each other. In knowing each other. Not each other's memories, but each other's ... souls. They talked, and held hands, and you could just feel that they were completely open to each other, without all the psychological defenses we use to keep ourselves walled off. They knew each other. They almost *were* each other."

I was embarrassed by the look on his face. "But they didn't know each other like that, Bucky. It was just an illusion."

"No. It wasn't. Look, what happens when you connect with someone, share something intense with them?"

I didn't want to have this conversation. But Bucky didn't really need me to answer; he rolled on all by himself, un-stoppable.

"What happens when you connect is that you exhibit greater risk taking, with fewer inhibitions. You exhibit greater empathy, greater attention, greater receptivity to what is being said, greater pleasure. And *all* of those responses are neuro-chemical, which in turn create, reinforce, or diminish physical structures in the brain. J-24 just reverses the process. Instead of the experience causing the neurochemical response, J-24 supplies the physical changes that create the experience. And that's not all. The drug boosts the *rate* of structural change, so that every touch, every word exchanged, every emotional response, reinforces neural pathways or two hundred times as much as a normal life encounter."

I wasn't sure how much of this I believed. "And so you say you gave it to four old couples ... does it only work on men and women?"

A strange look passed swiftly over his face: secretive, almost pained. I remembered Tommy. "That's all who have tried it so far. Can you ... have you ever thought about what it would be like to be really merged, to know him» to be him-think of it, Gene! I could-"

"I don't want to hear about that," I said harshly. Libby would hate that answer. My liberal, tolerant daughter. But I'd been a cop. Lingering homophobia went with the territory, even if I wasn't exactly proud of it. Whatever Bucky's fantasies were about him and Tommy, I didn't want to know.

Bucky didn't look offended. "All right. But just imagine- an end to the terrible isolation we live in our whole tiny lives...." He looked at the raindrops sliding down the window.

"And you think somebody murdered those elderly for that? Who? Why?"

"I don't know."

"Bucky. Think. This doesn't make any sense. A drug company creates a... what did you call it? A neuropharm. They get it into clinical trials, under FDA supervision-"

"No," Bucky said.

I stared at him.

"It would have taken years. Maybe decades. It's too radical a departure. So Kelvin-"

"You knew there was no approval."

"Yes. But I thought... I never thought..." He looked at me, and suddenly I had another one of those unlogical flashes, and I saw there was more wrong here even than Bucky was telling me. He believed that he'd participated, in whatever small way, in creating a drug that led some people to murder eight old people. Never mind if it was true-Bucky believed it. He believed this company was covering its collective ass by calling the deaths depressive suicides, when they could not have been suicides. And yet Bucky sat in front of me without chewing his nails to his knuckles, or pulling out his hair, or hating himself. Bucky, to whom guilt was the staff of life.

I'd seen him try to kill himself over leaving the Church. I'd watched him go through ago

of guilt over ignoring answering-machine messages from Father Healey. Hell, I'd watched him shake and cry because at ten years old we'd stolen three apples from a market on Columbus Avenue. Yet there he sat, disturbed but coherent. For Bucky, even serene. Believing he'd contributed to murder.

I said, "What neuropharms do you take, Bucky?"

"I told you. None."

"None at all?"

"No." His brown eyes were completely honest. "Gene, I want you to find out how these clinical subjects really died. You have access to NYPD records-"

"Not anymore."

"But you *know* people. And cases get buried there all the time, you used to tell me that yourself, with enough money you can buy yourself an investigation unless somebody high up in the city is really out to get you. Kelvin Pharmaceuticals doesn't have those kinds of enemies. They're not the Mob. They're just..."

"Committing murder to cover up an illegal drug trial? I don't buy it, Bucky."

"Then find out what *really* happened."

I shot back, "What do *you* think happened?"

"I don't know! But I do know this drug is a good thing! Don't you understand, it holds out the possibility of a perfect, totally open connection with the person you love most in the world.... Find out what happened, Gene. It wasn't suicide. J-24 doesn't cause depression. I *know* it. And for this drug to be denied people would be ... it would be a sin."

He said it so simply, so naturally, that I was thrown all over again. This wasn't Bucky, I had known him. Or maybe it was. He was still driven by sin and love.

I stood and put money on the table. "I don't want to get involved in this, Bucky. I really don't. But-one thing more-"

"Yeah?"

"Camineur. Can it... does it account for..." Jesus, I sounded like him. "I get these flashes of intuition about things I've been thinking about. Sometimes it's stuff I didn't know."

He nodded. "You knew the stuff before. You just didn't know you knew. Camineur strengthens intuitive right-brain pathways. As an effect of releasing the stranglehold of violent thoughts. You're more distanced from compulsive thoughts of destruction, but also more likely to make connections among various non-violent perceptions. You're just more intuitive, Gene."

now that you're less driven."

And I'm less Gene, my unwelcome intuition said. I gazed down at Bucky, sitting there with his skinny fingers splayed on the table, an unBucky-like serenity weirdly mixed with his manner and his belief that he worked for a corporation that had murdered eight people. What the hell was *he*?

"I don't want to get involved in this," I repeated.

"But you will," Bucky said, and in his words I heard utter, unshakable faith.

Jenny Kelly said, 'I set up a conference with Jeff Connors and he never showed.' It was Friday afternoon. She had deep circles around her eyes. Raccoon eyes, we called them. They were the badge of teachers who were new, dedicated, or crazy. Who sat up until 1:00 a.m. in a frenzy of lesson planning and paper correcting, and then arrived at school at 6:30 A.M. to supervise track or meet with students or correct more papers.

"Set up another conference," I suggested. "Sometimes by the third or fourth missed appointment, guilt drives them to show up."

She nodded. "Okay. Meanwhile, Jeff has my class all worked up over something called Neighborhood Safety Information Network, where they're supposed to inform on their friends' drug activity, or something. It's some-how connected to getting their Social Service checks. It's got the kids all in an uproar ... I sent seventeen kids to the principal in three days."

"You might want to ease up on that, Jenny. It gives everybody-kids and administration the idea that you can't control your own classroom."

"I can't," she said, so promptly and honestly that I had to smile. "But I *will*."

"Well, good luck."

"Listen, Gene, I'm picking the brains of everybody I can get to talk to me about this. Want to go have a cup of coffee someplace?"

"Sorry."

"Okay." She didn't look rebuffed, which was a relief. To-day her earrings matched the color of her sweater. A soft blue, with lace at the neck. "Maybe another time."

"Maybe." It was easier than an outright no.

Crossing the parking lot to my car, I saw Jeff Connors. He slapped me a high-five. "Ms. Kelly's looking for you, Jeff."

"She is? Oh, yeah. Well, I can't today. Busy."

"So I hear. There isn't any such thing as the Neighborhood Safety Information Network, is there?"

He eyed me carefully. "Sure there is, Mr. S."

"Really? Well, I'm going to be at Midtown South station house this afternoon. I'll ask about it."

"It's, like, kinda new. They maybe don't know nothing about it yet."

"Ah. Well, I'll ask anyway. See you around, Jeff."

"Hang loose."

He watched my car all the way down the block, until I turned the corner.

The arrest room at Midtown South was full of cops filling out forms: fingerprint cards, On-line Booking System Arrest Worksheets, complaint reports, property invoices, requests for laboratory examinations of evidence, Arrest Documentation Checklists. The cops, most of whom had changed out of uni-form, scribbled and muttered and sharpened pencils. In the holding pen alleged criminals cursed and slept and muttered and sang. It looked like fourth-period study hall in the junior-high cafeteria.

I said, "Lieutenant Fermato?"

A scribbling cop in a Looney Tunes sweatshirt waved me toward an office without even looking up.

"Oh my God. Gene Shaunessy. Risen from the fuckin' dead."

"Hello, Johnny."

"Come *in*. God, you look like a politician. Teaching must be the soft life."

"Better to put on a few pounds than look like a starved rat."

We stood there clasping hands, looking at each other, not saying the things that didn't need saying anyway, even if we'd had the words, which we didn't. Johnny and I had been partners for seven years. We'd gone together through foot pursuits and high-speed chases and lost fights and violent domestics and bungled traps by Internal Affairs and robberies-in-progress and grueling boredom of the street. Johnny's divorce. My retirement. Johnny had gone into Narcotics a year before I took the hit that shattered my knee. If he'd been my partner, it might not have happened. He'd made lieutenant only a few months ago. I hadn't seen him in a year and a half.

Suddenly I knew-or the Camineur knew-why I'd come to Midtown South to help Bucky after all. I'd already lost too many pieces of my life. Not the life I had now-the life I'd had once. My real one.

"Gene-about Marge ..."

I held up my hand. "Don't. I'm here about something else. Professional."

His voice changed. "You in trouble?"

"No. A friend is." Johnny didn't know Bucky; they'd been separate pieces of my old life I couldn't picture them in the same room together for more than five minutes. "It's about the suicides at the Angels of Mercy Nursing Home. Giacomo della Francesca and Lydia Smith."

Johnny nodded. "What about it?"

"I'd like to see a copy of the initial crime-scene report."

Johnny looked at me steadily. But all he said was, "Not my jurisdiction, Gene."

I looked back. If Johnny didn't want to get me the report, he wouldn't. But either way, he *could*. Johnny'd been the best undercover cop in Manhattan, mostly because he was so good at putting together his net of criminal informers, inside favors, noncriminal spies, and unseen procedures. I didn't believe he'd dismantled any of it just because he'd come in off the street. Not Johnny.

"Is it important?"

I said, "It's important."

"All right," he said, and that was all that had to be said. I asked him instead about the Neighborhood Safety Information Network.

"We heard about that one," Johnny said. "Pure lies, but somebody's using it to stir up a lot of anti-cop crap as a set-up for something or other. We're watching it."

"Watches run down," I said, because it was an old joke between us, and Johnny laughed. Then we talked about old times, and Libby, and his two boys, and when I left, the same cops were filling out the same forms and the same perps were still sleeping or cursing or singing, nobody looking at each other in the whole damn place.

By the next week, the elderly suicides had disappeared from the papers, which had moved on to another batch of mayhem and alleged brutality in the three-oh. Jenny Kelly had two more fights in her classroom. One I heard through the wall and broke up myself. The other Lateesha told me about in the parking lot. "That boy, Mr. Shaunessy, that Richie Tang, he call Ms. Kelly an ugly bitch! He say she be sorry for messing with *him*!"

"And then what?" I said, reluctantly.

Lateesha smiled. "Ms. Kelly, she yell back that Richie might act like a lost cause but he ain't lost to *her*, and she be damned if anybody gonna talk to her that way. But Richie just say and walk out. Ms. Kelly, she be gone by Thanks-giving."

"Not necessarily," I said. "Sometimes people surprise you."

"Not me, they don't."

"Maybe even you, Lateesha."

Jenny Kelly's eyes wore permanent rings: sleeplessness, anger, smudged mascara. In the faculty room she sat hunched over her coffee, scribbling furiously with red pen on student compositions. I found myself choosing a different table.

"Hi, Gene," Bucky's voice said on my answering machine. "Please call if you ... I wondered whether you found out any ... give me a call. Please. I have a different phone number, I'll give it to you." Pause. "I've moved."

I didn't call him back. Something in the "I've moved" hinted at more pain, more complications, another chapter in Bucky's messy internal drama. I decided to call him only if I heard something from Johnny Fermato.

Who phoned me the following Tuesday, eight days after my visit to Midtown South. "G. John Fermato."

"Hey, Johnny."

"I'm calling to follow through on our conversation last week. I'm afraid the information requested is unavailable."

I stood in my minuscule kitchen, listening to the traffic three stories below, listening to Johnny's cold formality. "Unavailable?"

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"You mean the file has disappeared? Been replaced by a later version? Somebody's sitting on it?"

"I'm sorry, the information you requested isn't available."

"Right," I said, without expression.

"Catch you soon."

"Bye, Lieutenant."

After he hung up I stood there holding the receiver, surprised at how much it hurt. It was full five minutes before the anger came. And then it was distant, muffled. Filtered through the Camineur, so that it wouldn't get out of hand.

Safe.

Jeff Connors showed up at school after a three-day absence, wearing a beeper, and a necklace of thick gold links.

"Jeff, he big now," Lateesha told me, and turned away, lips pursed like the disapproving mother she would someday be.

I was patrolling the hall before the first bell when Jenny Kelly strode past me and stopped at the door to the boys' room, which wasn't really a door but a turning that hid the urinals and stalls from obvious view. The door itself had been removed after the fifth wastebasket fire two days. Jeff came around the corner, saw Ms. Kelly, and stopped. I could see he was thinking about retreating again, but her voice didn't let him. "I want to see you, Jeff. In my free period." Her voice said he would be there.

"Okay," Jeff said, with no hustle, and slouched off, beeper riding on his hip.

I said to her, "He knows when your free period is."

She looked at me coolly. "Yes."

"So you've gotten him to talk to you."

"A little." Still cool. "His mother disappeared for three days. She uses. She's back now. Jeff doesn't trust her to take care of his little brother. Did you even know he had a little brother, Gene?"

I shook my head.

"Why not?" She looked like Lateesha. Disapproving mother. The raccoon eyes were etched deeper. "This boy is in trouble, and he's one we don't have to lose. We can still save him. I could have, last year. He admires you. But you never gave him the time of day, beyond making sure he wasn't any trouble to *you*."

"I don't think you have the right to judge whether-"

"Don't I? Maybe not. I'm sorry. But don't you see, Jeff only wanted from you-"

"That's the bell. Good luck today, Ms. Kelly." She stared at me, then gave me a little laugh. "Right. And where were *you* when the glaciers melted? Never mind." She walked into her classroom, which diminished in noise only a fraction of a decibel.

Her earrings were little silver hoops, and her silky blouse was red.

After school I drove to the Angels of Mercy Nursing Home and pretended I was interested in finding a place for my aging mother. A woman named Karen Gennaro showed me a dining hall, bedrooms, activity rooms, a little garden deep in marigolds and asters, nursing facilities. Old people peacefully played cards, watched TV, sat by sunshiny windows. There was no word that eighty-year-old Lydia Smith had thrown her-self from the roof, or that her J-24-bonded boyfriend Giacomo della Francesca had stabbed himself to death.

"I'd like to walk around a little by myself now," I told Ms. Gennaro. "Just sort of get the feel of the place. My mother is ... particular." She hesitated. "We don't usually allow-"

"Mom didn't like Green Meadows because too many corridors were painted pale blue. She hates pale blue. She rejected Saint Anne's because the other women didn't care enough

about their hairdos and so the atmosphere wasn't self-respecting. She wouldn't visit Havenview because there was no piano in the dining room. This is the tenth place I've re-reported on."

She laughed. "No wonder you sound so weary. All right, just check out with me before leave."

I inspected the day room again, chatting idly with a man watching the weather channel. Then I wandered to the sixth floor, where Lydia Smith and Giacomo della Francesca had lived. I chatted with an elderly man in a wheelchair, and a sixteen-year-old Catholic Youth volunteer and a Mrs. Locur-zio, who had the room on the other side of Lydia Smith's. Nothing.

A janitor came by mopping floors, a heavy young man with watery blue eyes and a sweet, puzzled face like a bearded child.

"Excuse me-have you worked here long?"

"Four years." He leaned on his mop, friendly and shy.

"Then you must come to know the patients pretty well."

"Pretty well." He smiled. "They're nice to me."

I listened to his careful, spaced speech, a little thick on each initial consonant. "'Are all of them nice to you?"

"Some are mean. Because they're sick and they hurt."

"Mrs. Smith was always nice to you."

"Oh, yes. A nice lady. She talked to me every day." His doughy face became more puzzled. "She died."

"Yes. She was unhappy with her life."

He frowned. "Mrs. Smith was unhappy? But she... no. She was happy." He looked at me with an appeal. "She was *al-ways* happy. Aren't you her friend?"

"Yes," I said. "I just made a mistake about her being unhappy."

"She was *always* happy. With Mr. Frank. They laughed and laughed and read books."

"Mr. della Francesca."

"He said I could call him Mr. Frank."

I said, "What's your name?"

"Pete," he said, as if I should know it.

"Oh, you're Pete! Yes, Mrs. Smith spoke to me about you. Just before she died. She said you were nice, too."

He beamed. "She was my friend."

"You were sad when she died, Pete."

"I was sad when she died."

I said, "What exactly happened?"

His face changed. He picked up the mop, thrust it into the rolling bucket. "Nothing."

"Nothing? But Mrs. Smith is dead."

"I gotta go now." He started to roll the bucket across the half-mopped floor, but I placed a firm hand on his arm. There's a cop intuition that has nothing to do with neuro-pharms.

I said, "Some bad people killed Mrs. Smith."

He looked at me, and something shifted behind his pale blue gaze.

"They didn't tell you that, I know. They said Mrs. Smith killed herself. But you know she was very happy and didn't do that, don't you? What did you see, Pete?"

He was scared now. Once, a long time ago, I hated myself for doing this to people like Pete. Then I got so I didn't think about it. It didn't bother me now, either.

"Mrs. Gennaro killed Mrs. Smith," I said.

Shock wiped out fear. "No, she didn't! She's a nice lady!"

"I say Mrs. Gennaro and the doctor killed Mrs. Smith."

"You're crazy! You're an asshole! Take it back!"

"Mrs. Gennaro and the doctor-"

"Mrs. Smith and Mr. Frank was all alone together when they went up to that roof!"

I said swiftly, "How do you know?"

But he was panicked now, genuinely terrified. Not of me- of what he'd said. He opened his mouth to scream. I said,

"Don't worry, Pete. I'm a cop. I work with the cops you talked to before. They just sent me to double check your story. I work with the same cops you told before."

"With Officer Camp?"

"That's right," I said. "With Officer Camp."

"Oh." He still looked scared. "I told them already! I told them I unlocked the roof door Mrs. Smith and Mr. Frank like they asked me to!"

"Pete-"

"I gotta go!"

"Go ahead, Pete. You did good."

He scurried off. I left the building before he could find Karen Gennaro.

A call to an old friend at Records turned up an Officer Joseph Camphausen at Midtown South, a Ralph Campogiani in the Queens Robbery Squad, a Bruce Campinella at the two-f and a detective second grade Joyce Campolieto in In-telligence. I guessed Campinella, but didn't matter which one Pete had talked to, or that I wouldn't get another chance inside Ang of Mercy. I headed for West End Avenue.

The sun was setting. Manhattan was filled with river light. I drove up the West Side Highway with the window down, and remembered how much Margie had liked to do that, in the winter. *Real air, Gene. Chilled like good beer.*

Nobody at the Beth Israel Retirement Home would talk to me about the two old people died there, Samuel Fetterolf and Rose Kaplan. Nor would they let me wander around loose after my carefully guided tour. I went to the Chinese restau-rant across the street and waited.

From every street-side window in Beth Israel I'd seen them head in here: well-dressed and women visiting their par-ents and aunts and grandmothers after work. They'd stay an hour and then they'd be too hungry to go home and cook, or maybe too demoralized to go home without a drink, a steady stream of overscheduled people dutifully keeping up connec-tions with their old. I chose a table in the bar section, ordered, and ate slowly. It took a huge pl moo goo gai pan and three club sodas before I heard it.

"How can you *say* that? She's not senile, Brad! She knows whether her friends are suicidal or not!"

"I didn't say she-"

"Yes, you did! You said we can't trust her perceptions! She's only old, not stupid!" Fier thrust of chopsticks into her sweet and sour. She was about thirty, slim and tanned, her dark hair cut short. Preppy shirt and sweater. He wasn't holding up as well, the paunch and bald spot well underway, the beleaguered husband look not yet turned resentful.

"Joanne, I only said-"

"You said we should just discount what Grams said and leave her there, *even though* s so scared. You always dis-count what she says!"

"I don't. I just-"

"Like about that thing at Passover. What Grams wanted was completely reasonable, and you just-"

"Excuse me," I said, before they drifted any more. The thing at Passover wouldn't do me any good. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't help but overhear. I have a grandmother in Beth Israel, and I'm a little worried about her, otherwise I wouldn't interrupt, it's just that... my grandmother is scared to stay there, too."

They inspected me unsmilingly, saying nothing.

"I don't know what to do," I said desperately. "She's never been like this."

"I'm sorry," Brad said stiffly, "we can't help."

'Oh, I understand. Strangers. I just thought... you said something about your grandmother being frightened... I'm sorry." I got up to leave, projecting embarrassment.

"Wait a minute," Joanne said. "What did you say your name was?"

"Aaron Sanderson."

"Joanne, I don't think-"

"Brad, if he has the same problem as-Mr. Sanderson, what is your grandmother afraid of? Is she usually nervous?"

"No, that's just it," I said, moving closer to their table. Brad frowned at me. "She's never nervous or jittery, and never depressed. She's fantastic, actually. But ever since those two residents died..."

"Well, that's just *it*," Joanne said. Brad sighed and shifted his weight. "Grams was friends with Mrs. Kaplan, and she told me that Mrs. Kaplan would never in a million years commit suicide. She just *wouldn't*."

"Same thing my grandmother said. But I'm sure there couldn't be actual danger in Beth Israel," I said. Dismiss what the witness said and wait for the contradiction.

"Why not?" Joanne said. "They could be testing some new medication ... in fact, Grams said Mrs. Kaplan had volunteered for some clinical trial. She had cancer."

Brad said, 'And so naturally she was depressed. Or maybe depression was a side effect of the drug. You read about that shit all the time. The drug company will be faced with a huge lawsuit, they'll settle, they'll stop giving the pills, and every-body's grandmother is safe. That's simple."

"No, smartie." Joanne glared at him. "It's not that simple. Grams said she spent the afternoon with Mrs. Kaplan a week or so *after* she started the drug. Mrs. Kaplan was anything but depressed. She was really up, and she'd fallen in love with Mr. Fetterolf who was also

the trial, and his daughter-in-law Dottie was telling me-

"Joanne, let's go," Brad said. "I don't really feel like arguing here."

I said, "My grandmother knew Mr. Fetterolf slightly. And she's worried about his suicide."

"So am I," Joanne said. "I keep telling and telling Brad-

"Joanne, I'm going. You do what the hell you want."

"You can't just-all right, all right! Everything has to be your way!" She flounced up, threw me an apologetic look, and followed her husband out.

There were four Fetterolfs in the Manhattan phone directory. Two were single initials which meant they were probably women living alone. I chose Herman Fetterolf on West Eighty-sixth.

The apartment building was nice, with a carpeted lobby and deep comfortable sofas. I went to the doorman, "Please tell Mrs. Dottie Fetterolf that there's a private investigator to talk to her about her father-in-law's death. My name is Joe Carter. Ask her if she'll come down to the lobby to talk to me."

He gave me a startled look and conveyed the message. When Mrs. Fetterolf came down, I could see she was ready to be furious at somebody, anybody. Long skirt swishing, long vest flapping, she steamed across the lobby. "You the private investigator? Who are you working for?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, Mrs. Fetterolf. But it's someone who, like you, has lost an elderly relative to suicide."

"Suicide! Ha! It wasn't any suicide! It was murder!"

"Murder?"

"They killed him! And no one will admit it!"

"What makes you think so?"

"Think? *Think?* I don't have to think, I *know!* One week he's fine, he's friends with this Kaplan, they play Scrabble, they read books together, he's happy as a clam. Maybe even a little something gets going between them, who am I to say, more power to them. And then one night the same night- the *same* night-he hangs himself and she walks in front of a bus! Coincidence, don't think so! ... Besides, there would be a note."

"I beg your-

"My father-in-law would have left a note. He was thoughtful that way. You know what I'm saying? He wrote everybody in the whole family all the time, nobody could even keep up with reading it all. He would have left a note for sure."

"Did he-"

"He was lonely after his wife died. Sarah. A saint. They met fifty-six years ago-"

In the end, she gave me her father-in-law's entire history. Also Rose Kaplan's. I wrote down.

When I called Johnny Fermato, I was told by a wary desk sergeant that Lieutenant Fermato would get back to me.

In my dreams.

"Somebody's being screwed over, Margie," I said. "And it's probably costing somebody else pay-off money."

She lay there in the fetal position, her hands like claws. The IV was gone, but she was connected by tubes to the humidified air supply, the catheter bag, the feeding pump. The pumps made soft noises: *ronk, ronk*. I laid my briefcase on the bottom of her bed, which Susan would probably object to.

"It wasn't depression," I said to Margie. "Delia Francesca and Mrs. Smith went up to the roof together. Alone together. Samuel Fetterolf and Rose Kaplan were in love." J-24 chem-ically induced love.

The bag in Margie's IV slowly emptied. The catheter bag slowly filled. Her ears were hidden under the dry, brittle, life-less hair.

"Johnny Fermato knows something. Maybe only that the word's been passed down to keep the case closed. I did get the coroners' reports. They say 'self-inflicted fatal wounds.' All evidence reports."

Somewhere in the hospital corridors, a woman screamed. Then stopped.

"Margie," I heard myself saying, "I don't want to come here anymore."

The next second, I was up and limping around the room. I put my forehead against the wall and ground it in. How could I say that to her? Margie, the only woman I'd ever loved, the person in the world I was closest to.... On our wedding night, which was also her nineteenth birthday, she'd told me she felt like she could die from happiness. And I'd known what she meant.

And on that other night eight years later, when Bucky had done his pills-and-vodka routine, Margie had been with me when the phone rang. *Gene.. . Gene... I did it....*

Did what? Jesus, Bucky, it's after midnight-

But I don't... Father Healey...

Bucky, I gotta start my shift at eight tomorrow morning. Goodnight.

Gene, who's calling at this hour?

... say... good-bye....

Of all the inconsiderate ... the phone woke Libby!

Tell Father Healey I never would have made... good priests don't doubt like... I can't touch God anymore....

And then I'd known. I was out of the apartment in fifteen seconds. Shoes, pants, gun. In a pajama top I drove to the seminary, leaned on the bell. Bucky wasn't there, but Father Healey was. I searched the rooms, the chapel, the little meditation garden, all the while traffic noise drowning out the thumping in my chest. Father Healey shouting questions at me. I wouldn't see him in my car. Get away from me you bastard you killed him, you and your insistence on pushing God on a mind never tightly wrapped in the first place... Bucky wasn't at his mother's house. Now I had two people screaming at me.

I found him at Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows. Where I should have looked first. He'd broken a stained glass window, just smashed it with a board, no subtlety. He was in front of the altar, breathing shallow, already unconscious. EMS seemed to take forever to get there. The on-duty cops were faster; the stained-glass was alarm-wired.

But when it was over, Bucky's stomach pumped, sleeping it off at St. Vincent's, I had crawled back in bed next to Margie. Libby asleep in her little bedroom. I'd put my arms around my wife, and I'd vowed that after Bucky got out of the hospital, I'd never see him and his mother's stupid dramas of faith again.

"I didn't mean that," I said to Margie, inert in her tracheal collar. "Sweetheart, I didn't mean to leave you. Of course I want to be here. I'll be here as long as you're breathing!"

She didn't move. IV bag emptying, catheter bag filling.

Susan came in, her nurse's uniform rumpled. "Hi, Gene."

"Hello, Susan."

"We're about the same tonight."

I could see that. And then the Camineur kicked in and I could see something else, in one of those unbidden flashes of knowledge that Bucky called heightened connective cognition. Bucky hadn't phoned me because he didn't really want to know what had happened to those people. He already had enough belief to satisfy himself. He just wanted J-24 cleared publicly and he wanted me to start the stink that would do it. He was handing the responsibility for the deaths of Kaplan and Samuel Fetterolf and Lydia Smith and Giacomo della Francesca to me. Just the way he'd handed me the responsibility for his break with Father Healey the night of his attempted suicide. I'd been used.

"Fuck that!"

Susan turned, startled, from changing Margie's catheter bag. "I beg your pardon?"

Margie, of course, said nothing.

I limped out of the hospital room, ignoring the look on Susan's face. I was angrier than I had been in eighteen months. Anger pushed against the inside of my chest and shot like bullets through my veins.

Until the Camineur did its thing.

A dozen boys crowded the basketball hoop after school, even though it was drizzling. I limped toward my car. Just as I reached it, a red Mercedes pulled up beside me and Jeff Con-nors got out from the passenger side.

He wore a blue bandana on his head, and it bulged on the left side above the ear. Heavy bandaging underneath; some-body had worked on him. He also wore a necklace of heavy gold links, a beeper, and jacket of supple brown leather. He didn't even try to keep the leather off the rain.

His eyes met mine, and something flickered behind them. The Mercedes drove off. Jeff started toward the kids at the hoops, who'd all stopped playing to watch the car. There was the usual high-fiving and competitive dissing, but I heard its guarded quality, and I saw something was about to go down.

Nothing to do with me. I unlocked my car door.

Jenny Kelly came hurrying across the court, through the drizzle. Her eyes flashed. "Jeff! Jeff!"

She didn't even know enough not to confront him in front of his customers. He stared at her, impassive, no sign of his usual likable hustle. To him, she might as well have been a cop.

"Jeff, could I see you for a minute?"

Not a facial twitch. But something moved behind his eyes.

"Please? It's about your little brother."

She was giving him an out: family emergency. He didn't take it.

"I'm busy."

Ms. Kelly nodded. "Okay. Tomorrow, then?"

"I'm busy."

"Then I'll catch you later." She'd learned not to argue. But I saw her face after she turned away from the boys sniggering behind her. She wasn't giving up, either. Not on Jeff.

Me, she never glanced at.

I got into my car and drove off, knowing better than Jenny Kelly what was happening on the basketball court behind me, not even trying to interfere. If it didn't happen on school property it would happen off it. What was the difference, really? You couldn't stop it. No matter what idealistic fools like Jenny Kelly thought.

Her earrings were little pearls, and her shirt, damp from the rain, clung to her body.

The whole next week, I left the phone off the hook. I dropped Libby a note saying to write me instead of calling because NYNEX was having trouble with the line into my building. I didn't go to the hospital. I taught my math classes, corrected papers in my own classroom, and left right after eighth period. I only glimpsed Jenny Kelly once, at a bus stop a few blocks from the school building. She was holding the hand of a small black kid, three or four, dressed in a Knicks sweatshirt. They were waiting for a bus. I drove on by.

But you can't really escape.

I spotted the guy when I came out of the metroteller late Friday afternoon. I'd noticed him earlier, when I dropped off a suit at the drycleaner's. This wasn't the kind of thing I dealt with anymore-but it happens. Somebody you collared eight years ago gets out and decides to get even. Or somebody spots you by accident and suddenly remembers some old score on behalf of his cousin, or your partner, or some damn thing you yourself don't even recall. It happens.

I couldn't move fast, not with my knee. I strolled into Mulcahy's, which has a long aisle running between the bar and the tables, with another door to the alley that's usually left open if the weather's any good. The men's and ladies' rooms are off an alcove just before the alley, along with a pay phone and cigarette machine. I nodded at Brian Mulcahy behind the bar, limped through, and went into the ladies'. It was empty. I kept the door cracked. My tail checked the alley, then strode toward the men's room. When his back was to the ladies' and I had my hand on the heavy door, I grabbed him.

He wasn't as tall or heavy as I was-average build, brown hair, nondescript looks. He twisted in my grasp, and I felt the bulge of the gun under his jacket. "Stop it, Shaunessy! NYPD!"

I let him go. He fished out his shield, looking at me hard. Then he said, "Not here. This is an informant hangout- didn't you *know*? Meet me at 248 West Seventieth, apartment 8. Christ, why don't you fix your goddamn *phone*?" Then he was gone.

I had a beer at the bar while I thought it over. Then I went home. When the buzzer rang an hour and a half later, I didn't answer. Whoever stood downstairs buzzed for ten minutes straight before giving up.

That night I dreamed someone was trying to kill Margie, stalking her through the Times Square sleaze and firing tiny chemically poisoned darts. I couldn't be sure, dreams being what they are, but I think the stalker was me.

The Saturday mail came around three-thirty. It brought a flat manilla package, no return

address, no note. It was a copy of the crime-scene report on the deaths of Lydia Smith and Gia-corno della Francesca.

Seven years as partners doesn't just wash away. No matter what the official line has to

There were three eight-by-ten color crime scene photos: an empty rooftop; Mrs. Smith's body smashed on the pavement below; della Francesca's body lying on the floor beside a neatly made bed. His face was in partial shadow but his skinny spotted hands were clear, both clutching the hilt of the knife buried in his chest. There wasn't much blood. That doesn't happen until somebody pulls the knife out.

The written reports didn't say anything that wasn't in the photos.

I resealed the package and locked it in my file cabinet. Johnny had come through; Bucky had screwed me. The deaths were suicides, just like Kelvin Pharmaceuticals said, just like the Department said. Bucky's superconnective pill was the downer to end all downers, and he knew it, and he was hoping against hope it wasn't so.

Because he and Tommy had taken it together.

I've moved, Bucky had said in his one message since he told me about J-24. I'd assumed that meant that he'd changed apartments, or lovers, or lives, as he'd once changed from fanatic seminarian to fanatic chemist. But that's not what he meant. He meant he'd made his move via J-24, because he wanted the effect for himself and Tommy, and he refused to believe the risk applied to him. Just like all the dumb crack users I spent sixteen years arresting.

I dialed his number. After four rings, the answering machine picked up. I hung up, walked from the living room to the bedroom, pounded my fists on the wall a couple times, walked back and dialed again. When the machine picked up I said, 'Bucky. This is Gene. Call me *now*. I mean it-I have to know you're all right.'

I hesitated ... he hadn't contacted me in weeks. What could I use as leverage?

"If you don't call me tonight, Saturday, by nine, I'll..." What? Not go look for him. Not again, not like thirteen years ago, rushing out in pants and pajama top, Margie calling after *Gene! Gene! For God's sake...*

I couldn't do it again.

"If you don't phone by nine o'clock, I'll call the feds with what I've found about J-24, without checking it out with you first. So *call me*, Bucky."

Usually on Saturday afternoon I went to the hospital to see Margie. Not today. I sat at my kitchen table with algebra tests from 7B spread over the tiny surface, and it took me an hour to get through three papers. I kept staring at the undecorated wall, seeing Bucky there. Seeing the photos of Lydia Smith and Giacomo della Francesca. Seeing that night thirteen years ago when Bucky had his stomach pumped. Then I'd wrench myself back to the test papers and correct

another problem. *If train A leaves point X traveling at a steady fifty miles per hour at six A.M....*

If a bullet leaves a gun traveling at 1500 feet per second, it can tear off a human head. Nobody realizes that but people who have seen it. Soldiers. Doctors. Cops.

After a while, I realized I was staring at the wall again, and picked up another paper. *I equals 2Y...* Some of the names on the papers I didn't even recognize. Who was James Dill? Was he the tall quiet kid in the last row, or the short one in shoes held together with tape, who fell asleep most mornings? They were just names.

On the wall, I saw Jenny Kelly holding the hand of Jeff Connors's little brother.

At seven-thirty I shoved the papers into my briefcase and grabbed my jacket. Before I tried Bucky's number once more. No answer. I turned off the living room light and limped along the hall to the door. Before I opened it, my foot struck something. Without even thinking about it, I flattened against the wall and reached behind me for the foyer light.

It was only another package. A padded mailer, nine by twelve, the cheap kind that leak oily black stuffing all over you if you open it wrong. The stuffing was already coming out a little tear in one corner. There were no stamps, no address; it had been shoved under the door. Whoever had left it had gotten into the building-not hard to do on a Saturday, with people coming and going, just wait until someone else has unlocked the door and smile at them as they go in, any set of keys visible in your hand. In the upper left corner of the envelope was an NYPD evidence sticker.

I picked up the package just as the phone rang.

"Bucky! Where are-"

"Gene, this is Jenny Kelly. Listen, I need your help. Please! I just got a call from Jeff Connors, he didn't know who else to call... the police have got him barricaded in a drug house, they're yelling at him to come out and he's got Darryl with him, that's his little brother, and he's terrified-Jeff is-that they'll knock down the door and go in shooting... God, Gene, please go only four blocks from you, that's why I called, and you know how these things work... please."

She had to pause for breath. I said tonelessly, "What's the address?"

She told me. I slammed the receiver down in the midst of her thank-you's. If she'd been in the room with me, I think I could have hit her.

I limped the four blocks north, forcing my damaged knee, and three blocks were gone before I realized I still had the padded envelope in my hand. I folded it in half and shoved it in my jacket pocket.

The address wasn't hard to find. Two cars blocked the street, lights whirling, and I could hear more sirens in the distance. The scene was all fucked up. A woman of twenty-one or

twenty-two was screaming hysterically and jumping up and down: "He's got my baby! He's got a gun up there! He's going to kill my son!" while a uniform who looked about nineteen was trying ineptly to calm her down. Her clothes were torn and bloody. She smacked the rookie across the arm and his partner moved in to restrain her, while another cop with a bullhorn shouted up at the building. Neighbors poured out onto the street. The one uniform left was trying to do crowd control, funneling them away from the building, and nobody was going. He looked no older than the guy holding the woman, as if he'd had about six hours total time on the street.

I had my dummy shield. We'd all had our shields duplicated, one thirty-second of an inch smaller than the real shield, so we could leave the real one home and not risk a fine and all the paperwork if it got lost. When I retired, I turned in my shield but kept the dummy. I flashed back now at the rookie struggling with the hysterical girl. That might cost me a lot of trouble later, but I'd worry about that when the time came.

The street thinking comes back so fast.

"This doesn't look right," I shouted at the rookie over the shrieking woman. She was still flailing in his hold, screaming, "He's got my baby! He's got a gun! For Chrissake, get my baby before he kills him!" The guy with the bullhorn stopped shouting and came over to us.

"Who are you?"

"He's from Hostage and Barricade," the rookie gasped, although I hadn't said so. I didn't contradict him. He was trying so hard to be gentle with the screaming woman that she was twisting like a dervish while he struggled to cuff her.

"Look," I said, "she's not the mother of that child up there. He's the perp's little brother, she sure the hell doesn't look old enough to be the older kid's mother!"

"How do you-" the uniform began, but the girl let out a shriek that could have leveled buildings, jerked one hand free and clawed at my face.

I ducked fast enough that she missed my eyes, but her nails tore a long jagged line down my cheek. The rookie stopped being gentle and cuffed her so hard she staggered. The sleeve of his sweater rode up when he jerked her arms behind her back, and I saw the needle tracks.

Shit, shit, shit.

Two back-up cars screamed up. An older cop in plain clothes got out, and I slipped my dummy shield back in my pocket.

"Listen, officer, I *know* that kid up there, the one with the baby. I'm his teacher. He's in eighth grade. His name is Jeff Connors, the child with him is his little brother Darryl, and the woman is *not* their mother. Something's going down here, but it's not what she says."

He looked at me hard. "How'd you get that wound?"

"She clawed him," the rookie said. "He's from-"

"He phoned me," I said urgently, holding him with my eyes. "He's scared stiff. He'll come out with no problems if you let him, and leave Darryl there."

"You're his teacher? That why he called you? You got ID?"

I showed him my United Federation of Teachers card, driver's license, Benjamin Franklin Junior High pass. The uni-forms had all been pressed into crowd control by a sergeant who looked like he knew what he was doing.

"Where'd he get the gun? He belong to a gang?"

I said, "I don't know. But he might."

"How do you know there's nobody else up there with him?"

"He didn't say so on the phone. But I don't know for sure."

"What's the phone number up there?"

"I don't know. He didn't give it to me."

"Is he on anything?"

"I don't know. I would guess no."

He stood there, weighing it a moment. Then he picked up the bullhorn, motioned to his men to get into position. His voice was suddenly calm, even gentle. "Connors! Look, we know you're with your little brother, and we don't want either of you to get hurt. Leave Darryl there and come down by yourself. Leave the gun and just come on down. You do that and everything'll be fine."

"He's going to kill my-" the woman shrieked, before someone shoved her into a car and slammed the door.

"Come on, Jeff, we can do this nice and easy, no problems for anybody."

I put my hand to my cheek. It came away bloody.

The negotiator's voice grew even calmer, even more reasonable.

"I know Darryl's probably scared, but he doesn't have to be, just come on down and we'll get him home where he belongs. Then you and I can talk about what's best for your little brother____"

Jeff came out. He slipped out of the building, hands on his head, going, "Don't shoot me please don't shoot me, don't shoot me," and he wasn't the hustler of the eighth grade who knew all the moves, wasn't the dealer in big gold on the basketball court. He was a terrified thirteen-year-old in a dirty blue bandana, who'd been set up.

Cops in body armor rushed forward and grabbed him. More cops started into the building. A taxi pulled up and Jenny Kelly jumped out, dressed in a low-cut black satin blouse and black velvet skirt.

"Jeff! Are you all right?"

Jeff looked at her, and I think if they'd been alone, he might have started to cry. "Darryl's here alone...."

"They'll bring Darryl down safe," I said.

"I'll take Darryl to your aunt's again," Jenny promised. A man climbed out of the taxi behind her and paid the driver.

He was scowling. The rookie glanced down the front of Jenny's blouse.

Jeff was cuffed and put into a car. Jenny turned to me. "Oh, your face, you're hurt! Where will they take Jeff, Gene? Will you go, too? Please?"

"I'll have to. I told them it was me that Jeff phoned."

She smiled. I'd never seen her smile like that before, at least not at me. I kept my eyes raised to her face, and my own face blank. "Who set him up, Jenny?"

"Set him up?"

"That woman was yelling she's Darryl's mother and Jeff was going to kill her baby. Somebody wanted the cops to go storming in there and start shooting. If Jeff got killed, the NYPD would be used as executioners. If he didn't, he'd still be so scared they'll own him. What is it, Jenny? The same one who circulated that inflammatory crap about a Neighborhood Safety Information Network?"

She frowned. "I don't know. But Jeff has been ... there were some connections that..." She trailed off, frowned again. Her date came up to us, still scowling. "Gene, this is Paul Snyder. Paul, Gene Shaunessy.... Paul, I'm sorry, I have to go with Gene to wherever they're taking him. I'm the one he really called. And I said I'd take Darryl to his aunt."

"Jenny, for Chrissake ... we have tickets for the Met!"

She just looked at him, and I saw that Paul Snyder wasn't going to be seeing any more of Jenny Kelly's cleavage.

"I'll drive you to the precinct, Jenny," I said. "Only I have to be the first one interviewed. I have to be as quick as I can because there's something else urgent tonight...." Bucky. Dear God.

Jenny said quickly, "Your wife? Is she worse?"

"She'll never be worse. Or better," I said before I knew I was going to say anything, and I immediately regretted it.

"Gene..." Jenny began, but I didn't let her finish. She was standing too close to me. I could smell her perfume. A fold of her black velvet skirt blew against my leg.

I said harshly, "You won't last at school another six months if you take it all this hard. You'll burn out. You'll leave."

Her gaze didn't waver. "Oh no, I won't. And don't talk to me in that tone of voice."

"Six months," I said, and turned away. A cop came out of the building carrying a wailing Darryl. And the lieutenant came over to me, wanting to know whatever it was I thought I knew about Jeff Connors's connections.

It was midnight before I got home. After the precinct house there'd been a clinic, with the claw marks on my face disinfected and a tetanus shot and a blood test and photographs for assault charges. After that, I looked for Bucky.

He wasn't at his apartment, or at his mother's apartment. The weekend security guard at Kelvin Pharmaceuticals said he'd been on duty since four p.m. and Dr. Romano hadn't signed out to his lab. That was the entire list of places I knew to look. Bucky's current life was unknown to me. I didn't even know Tommy's last name.

I dragged myself through my apartment, pulling off my jacket. The light on the answering machine blinked.

My mind-or the Camineur-made some connections. Even before I pressed the MESSAGING button, I think I knew.

"Gene, this is Tom Fletcher. You don't know me ... we've never met...." A deeper voice than I'd expected but ragged, spiky. "I got your message on Vince Romano's machine. About J-24. Vince..." The voice caught, went on. "Vince is in the hospital. I'm calling from there. St. Clare's, it's on Ninth at Fifty-first. Third floor. Just before he ... said to tell you..."

I couldn't make out the words in the rest of the message.

I sat there in the dark for a few minutes. Then I pulled my jacket back on and caught a cab to St. Clare's. I didn't think I could drive.

The desk attendant waved me through. He thought I was just visiting Margie, even at that hour. It had happened before. But not lately.

Bucky lay on the bed, a sheet pulled up to his chin but not yet over his face. His eyes were open. Suddenly I didn't want to know what the sheet was covering-how he'd done it, what he'd chosen, how long it had taken. All the dreary algebra of death. *If train A leaves the station at a steady fifty miles per hour....* There were no marks on Bucky's face. He was smiling.

And then I saw he was still breathing. Bucky, the ever inept, had failed a second time.

Tommy stood in a corner, as if he couldn't get it together enough to sit down. Tall and handsome, he had dark well-cut hair and the kind of fresh complexion that comes with youth and exercise. He looked about fifteen years younger than Bucky. When had they taken the J together? Lydia Smith and Giacomo della Francesca had killed themselves within hours of each other. So had Rose Kaplan and Samuel Fetter-olf. How much did Tommy know?

He held out his hand. His voice was husky. "You're Gene."

"I'm Gene."

"Tom Fletcher. Vince and I are-"

"I know," I said, and stared down at Bucky's smiling face, and wondered how I was going to tell this boy that he, too, was about to try to kill himself for chemically induced love.

I flashed on Bucky and me sitting beside the rainstreaked alley window of the Greek diner. *What are you waiting for, Bucky, your prince to come?*

Yes. And, Have you ever thought what it would be like to be really merged-to know how to be him?

"Tom," I said. "There's something we have to discuss."

"Discuss?" His voice had grown even huskier.

"About Bucky. Vince. You and Vince."

"What?"

I looked down at Bucky's smiling face.

"Not here. Come with me to the waiting room."

It was deserted at that hour, a forlorn alcove of scratched furniture, discarded magazines, too-harsh fluorescent lights. We sat facing each other on red plastic chairs.

I said abruptly, "Do you know what J-24 is?"

His eyes grew wary. "Yes."

"What is it?" I couldn't find the right tone. I was grilling him as if he were under arrest. I were still a cop.

"It's a drug that Vince's company was working on. To make people bond to each other, merge together in perfect union." His voice was bitter.

"What else did he tell you?"

"Not much. What should he have told me?"

You never see enough, not even in the streets, to really prepare you. Each time you see genuine cruelty, it's like the first time. Damn you, Bucky. Damn you to hell for emotional gr

I said, "He didn't tell you that the clinical subjects who took J-24 ... the people who bo ... he didn't tell you they were all elderly?"

"No," Tom said.

"The same elderly who have been committing suicide all over the city? The ones in the papers?"

"Oh, my God."

He got up and walked the length of the waiting room, maybe four good steps. Then back His handsome face was gray as ash. "They killed themselves after taking J-24? Be-cause o J-24?"

I nodded. Tom didn't move. A long minute passed, and then he said softly, "My poor Vince."

"Poor *Vince*? How the hell can you... don't you get it, Tommy boy? You're next! You to the bonding drag with poor suffering Vince, and your three weeks or whatever of joy are up and you're dead, kid! The chemicals will do their thing in your brain, super withdrawal, and you'll kill yourself just like Bucky! Only you'll probably be better at it and ac-tually succee

He stared at me. And then he said, "Vince didn't try to kill himself."

I couldn't speak.

"He didn't attempt suicide. Is that what you thought? No, he's in a catatonic state. And / never took J-24 with him."

"Then who ..."

"God," Tom said, and the full force of bitterness was back. ' 'He took it with God. At so church, Our Lady of Ever-lasting Something. Alone in front of the altar, fasting and praying told me when he moved out."

When he moved out. Because it wasn't Tommy that Bucky really wanted, it was God. It always been God, for thir-teen solid years. *Tell Father Healey I can't touch God any-mor . Have you ever thought what it would be like to be really merged, to know him to be him No. To know Him. To be Him. What are you waiting for, your Prince?*

Yes.

Tom said, "After he took the damned drug, he lost all interest in me. In everything. He didn't go to work, just sat in the corner smiling and laughing and crying. He was like ... high something, but not really. I don't know what he was. It wasn't like anything I ever saw befo

Nor anybody else. Merged with God. *They knew each*

other, they almost were each other. Think, Gene! To have an end to the terrible isolation in which we live our whole tiny lives....

"I got so *angry* with him," Tom said, "and it did no good at all. I just didn't count anymore. So I told him to get out, and he did, and then I spent three days looking for him but I couldn't find him anywhere, and I was frantic. Finally he called me, this afternoon. He was crying. I again it was like I wasn't even really there, not me, Tom. He sure the hell wasn't crying over *me*."

Tom walked to the one small window, which was barred. Back turned to me, he spoke over his shoulder. Carefully, trying to get it word-perfect.

"Vince said I should call you. He said, 'Tell Gene-it wears off. And then the grief and loss and anger ... *especially* the anger that it's over. But I can beat it. It's different for me. They couldn't.' Then he hung up. Not a word to me."

I said, "I'm sorry."

He turned. "Yeah, well, that was Vince, wasn't it? *He* always came first with himself."

No, I could have said. God came first. And that's how Bucky beat the J-24 withdrawal. Human bonds, whether forged by living or chemicals got torn down as much as built up. But you don't have to live in a three-room apartment with God, fight about money with God, listen to God snore and fart and say things so stupid you can't believe they're coming out of the mouth of your beloved, watch God be selfish or petty or cruel. God was *bigger* than all that, at least in Bucky's mind, was so big that He filled everything. And this time when God retreated from him, when the J-24 wore off and Bucky could feel the bonding slipping away, Bucky slipped along after it. Deeper into his own mind, where all love exists anyway.

"The doctor said he might never come out of the catatonia," Tom said. He was starting to get angry now, the anger of self-preservation. "Or he might. Either way, I don't think I'll be waiting around for him. He's treated me too badly."

Not a long-term kind of guy, Tommy. I said, "But you never took J-24 yourself."

"No," Tom said. "I'm not *stupid*. I think I'll go home now. Thanks for coming, Gene. Good to meet you."

"You, too," I said, knowing neither of us meant it.

'Oh, and Vince said one more thing. He said to tell you it was, too, murder. Does that make sense?"

"Yes," I said. But not, I hoped, to him.

After Tom left, I sat in the waiting room and pulled from my jacket the second package.

NYPD evidence sticker had torn when I'd jammed the padded mailer in my pocket.

It was the original crime scene report for Lydia Smith and Giacomo della Francesca, the one Johnny Fermato must have known about when he sent me the phony one. This report was signed Bruce Campinella. I didn't know him, but I could probably pick him out of a line-up from the brief tussle in Mulcahy's: average height, brown hair, undistinguished looks, furious underneath. Your basic competent honest cop, still outraged at what the system had for sale. And for sale at a probably not very high price. Not in New York.

There were only two photos this time. One I'd already seen: Mrs. Smith's smashed body on the pavement below the nursing home roof. The other was new. Delia Francesca's body lying on the roof, not in his room, before the cover-up team moved him and took the second set of pictures. The old man lay face up, the knife still in his chest. It was a good photo; the facial expression was very clear. The pain was there, of course, but you could see the fury, too. The incredible rage. *And then the grief and loss and anger. .. especially the anger that it's over.*

Had della Francesca pushed Lydia Smith first, after that shattering quarrel that came from losing their special, un-earthly union, and then killed himself? Or had she found the strength in her disappointment and outrage to drive the knife in, and then she jumped? Ordinarily, the loss of love doesn't mean hate. Just how unbearable was it to have had a true, perfect, unhuman connection to human isolation-and then *lose* it? How much rage did that primordial loss release?

Or maybe Bucky was wrong, and it had been suicide after all. Not the anger uppermost, but the grief. Maybe the rage on della Francesca's dead face wasn't at his lost perfect love, but at his own emptiness once it was gone. He'd felt something so wonderful, so sublime, that everything *else* afterward fell unbearably short, and life itself wasn't worth the effort. No matter what he did, he'd never ever have its like again.

I thought of Samuel Fetterolf before he took J-24, writing everyone in his family all the time, trying to stay connected. Of Pete, straining every cell of his damaged brain to protect his memories of the old people who'd been kind to him. Of Jeff Connors, hanging onto Darryl while he moved into the world of red Mercedes and big deals. Of Jenny Kelly, sacrificing dates and her sleep and her private life in her frantic effort to connect to the students, who undoubtedly thought of as "her kids." Of Bucky.

The elevator to the fifth floor was out of order. I took the stairs. The shift nurse barely nodded at me. It wasn't Susan. In Margie's room the lights had been dimmed and she lay in gloom like a curved dry husk, covered with a light sheet. I pulled the chair closer to her bed and stared at her.

And for maybe the first time since her accident, I remembered.

Roll the window down, Gene.

It's fifteen degrees out there, Margie!

It's real air. Chilled like good beer. It smells like a god-damn factory in this car.

Don't start again. I'm warning you.

Are you so afraid the job won't kill you that you want the cigarettes to do it?

Stop trying to control me.

Maybe you should do better at controlling yourself.

The night I'd found Bucky at Our Lady of Perpetual Sor-rows, I'd been in control. It was Bucky who hadn't. I'd crawled back in bed and put my arms around Margie and vowed never to see Bucky and his messy stupid dramas of faith ever again. Margie hadn't been asleep. She'd been cry-ing. I'd had enough hysteria for one night; I didn't want to hear it. I wouldn't even let her speak. I stalked out of the bedroom and spent the night on the sofa. It was three days before I'd even talk to her so we could work it out and make it good between us again.

Have a great year! she'd said my first September at Ben-jamin Franklin. But it hadn't been a great year. I was trying to learn how to be a teacher, and trying to forget how to be a cop, and I didn't have much time left over for her. We'd fought about that, and then I'd stayed away from home more and more to get away from the fighting, and by the time I returned *she* was staying away from home a lot. Over time it got better again, but I don't know where she was going. One night she crossed Lexington with a bag of groceries in front of that '93 Lincoln. I don't know who the groceries were for. She never bought porterhouse and champagne for *me*.

Maybe we would have worked that out, too. Somehow.

"Weren't there moments, Gene, Bucky had said, when you felt so close to Margie it was like you crawled inside her skin for a minute? Like you were Margie? No. I was never that close to Margie. We were close, but not that close. What we'd had was good, but not that good. No perfect merging of souls.

Which was the reason I could survive its loss.

I stood up slowly, favoring my knee. On the way out of the room, I took the plastic bottle of Camineur out of my pocket and tossed it in the waste basket. Then I left, without looking back.

Outside, on Ninth Avenue, a patrol car suddenly switched on its lights and took off. So many kids who should have been at home swaggered past, heading downtown. I looked for a payphone. By now, Jenny Kelly would be done delivering Darryl to his aunt, and Jeff Connors would be going to need better than the usual overworked public defender. I knew a guy at Legal Aid, a hotshot, who still owed me a long-overdue favor.

I found the phone, and the connection went through.