

## Endorsements

*Shadow of Light* is a heady mix of metaphysics and astrophysics, theology and quantum science, end-of-the-world apocalypse and madcap comic romance, all served up in a great bouillabaisse that is part thriller, part science fiction, part mystery, but mostly good old-fashioned story telling. Mr. Power is aptly named: he casts a potent spell from the first page, and doesn't break it until well past the last one.

—MARK BUCHANAN, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *YOUR GOD IF TOO SAFE*, *SPIRITUAL RHYTHM* AND MANY OTHERS.

After reading Rodney Christian Power's book, I recognised that he is not only a master story teller, but a gifted craftsman who intuitively knows how to entertain and hold the reader's attention from beginning to end. What a great read from an imaginative, talented writer. *Shadow of Light* will make a great movie.

—SARAH NICHOLS, HOLLYWOOD SCREEN WRITER AND AUTHOR OF *ONE STEP AT A TIME*

*Shadow of Light* is a terrific story, one I will read again just for the joy of it.

—GORDON PINSENT, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR, ACTOR AND PLAYWRIGHT

The work of an emerging master who is sure to be soon hailed by all readers, *Shadow of Light* is rich with insight, challenge and texture. A rewarding read, no matter your literary tastes.

—ROBERT MACDONALD, AUTHOR AND PUBLISHER

I wish to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of Kenneth Tapping, Ph.D., Astrophysics, M.Sc., Space Physics, B.Sc., Mathematics and Physics, astronomer at the Dominion Radio Astrophysical Observatory in British Columbia. Dr. Tapping was kind enough to review the manuscript and provide me with details on how the universe is unfolding. However . . . this being a work of fiction, there are places where I chose to wander off into the great unknown. So if you happen to come across something not quite kosher, please do not hold Ken responsible. To misquote Rudyard Kipling: Science is science and miracles are miracles, and ne'er the twain shall meet.

My thanks also to Queenie Huling, Director of Public Affairs for Kings Country Hospital in Brooklyn, for taking time to show me around this magnificent building.

Shadow of Light is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

*Shadow of Light*

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

This book is dedicated to the memory of our daughter Jo-Ann, who didn't want to leave early, but had to go anyway.

*As if you could kill time without injuring eternity.*

Henry David Thoreau

MONDAY

## 0725 HRS

The reason Brooks Hennessey found himself in church that morning was because he'd missed Sunday Mass. If he had missed Mass because he was sick or traveling or something like that, he would not have bothered. But the third commandment was sacred to him. The sixth commandment, the reason for his absence, he had learned to accommodate ages ago.

Brooks had spent the entire weekend with his new mistress, Annie. Annie was twenty-two, Brooks forty-four, but the age difference presented no problem, at least not in this early stage of their relationship. A passionate lover, the big man had no license to display his talents at home, which left him little choice but to seek consolation elsewhere. As for Rachael, she didn't seem to care one way or another what Brooks did. They still maintained a cordial relationship but hadn't shared the same bedroom for eight years.

So come Monday, Brooks was up at six sharp to make certain he caught early Mass before work. Brooks did not aspire to being a *good* Christian—his lifestyle prohibited such a lofty goal—but being brought up in an Irish Catholic family had superimposed a certain structure on his life. Going to church was part of it. Although, true enough, as a result of his affairs he could not receive Holy Communion, and it was this self-imposed separation from God that weighed so heavily upon him.

He raised his head to take another quick peek at the Gang of Five, as they were known in his younger years: five great frescos laid out in a semicircle behind the magnificent marble alcove that housed the crucified Christ. All the main players were there: Moses, David, Jesus, John the Baptist, and Paul. For some reason this morning Brooks felt as if those cold painted eyes were bearing down on him. He had the distinct impression that John the Baptist in particular was annoyed about something.

When the church door creaked open halfway through Mass to allow old Mrs. Kelly to enter, Brooks had no way of knowing his nefarious lifestyle was about to suffer a fatal blow. He could hear the labored breathing as she made her way up the long church aisle, her cane tapping away on the tiled floor. Brooks was kneeling on the outside of the tenth row, immediately right of the center aisle.

The old lady struggled by him, heading for her usual spot in the front pew. Brooks knew her well enough, had spoken to her a few times at the church socials, the bake sales. He recalled her keen sense of humor. “Don’t forget, Brooksie,” she’d once said to him, “God gave us laughter to keep us sane.” But the old gal had a sharp tongue in her head and could tell you off at the drop of a hat if need be. Only a few weeks ago Brooks had listened to her lay into some kid for wearing his baseball cap in church.



Then, suddenly, she was down. Flat out, just like that.

The basilica of St. Andrew's was less than one-tenth filled, and Kathleen Kelly quickly became the center of attention. Brooks reached her first. As he was helping the old lady to her feet, he was shocked to discover that she had just taken a good beating: glasses askew, bright blood dripping from her nose, her upper lip torn open, one puffed eye bruised and closed.

“Good Lord! We'd better get you over to a doctor right away.”

Mrs. Kelly righted her glasses and fixed her one good eye on Brooks Hennessey as she pushed his hands away. Her would-be benefactor could smell the blood mixed in with the sharp tang of mothballs wafting up from the green velour dress she wore. Up close like that her body odor easily overpowered the lingering echoes of yesterday's burned incense.

The old lady wiped the blood away with the back of her left hand, took a good grip on her cane, then continued on toward the front of the church. Brooks had no choice but to follow awkwardly behind, a kind of overgrown guardian angel, his two huge hands hovering beside the frail shoulders ready to catch her if she went down again.

To his surprise, Mrs. Kelly lumbered past the front pew and began to make her way up the altar steps. Part way through the Consecration, Father Harry Flynn paused with the chalice in midair to take a quick look at the strange entourage climbing his steps.

Father Harry was seventy-four, eight years younger than Kathleen Kelly. He just cleared the five-three mark, and his ample girth brought to mind nobody more than Friar Tuck of Sherwood Forest fame, or at least the way the movies portrayed him. Beneath his shining dome was a round, cherubic face easily given to mirth. Being pastor at St.

Andrew's Parish, located bang smack in the middle of lower west side Brooklyn, gave him, if not the ultimate pragmatic outlook on life, then one close to it. Many of his parishioners believed if the devil himself popped up beside him, Harry Flynn wouldn't bat an eye.

Nevertheless, he could read danger in the one cold blue eye now bearing down on him. He frowned and gave a short jerk of his head, a clear signal to Brooks to get this battered creature off his altar.

The big Irishman took a firm hold of her shoulders and whispered, "Come on now, let's go have a seat and I'll take a look at you."

But Kathleen Kelly had not come to church that particular morning to attend Mass. She had an entirely different purpose in mind. "You take your frigging meat-hooks off me, Brooks Hennessey. I got something to say, and neither you nor his Royal Highness here—" she cast a mean, squinty look in the priest's direction "—is going to stop me."

Mrs. Kelly might be a diminutive little thing, just parchment stretched over a few old bones, but she owned a voice as shrill as a banshee. Harry Flynn took a deep breath. He had not yet spoken the words that would change the wine into the blood of Christ. He lowered the chalice to the altar.

Everyone in church was intent on the unfolding drama.

Reaching under his vestments to switch off his microphone, Father Harry glided around the altar to put an end to this nonsense. Two red-soutaned altar boys hastened to back out of his way.

In a whispered but firm voice he said, “Now see here, Kathleen, you get yourself off of my altar this instant and let Brooks run you over to Lutheran.”

Harry Flynn’s face froze when the old lady slapped her cane down on the altar, hard. Before he or Brooks could move a muscle, she swept it across the marble surface in one swift motion, scattering the filled chalice and the ciborium with its sacred hosts across the sanctuary. Blood-red wine sloshed over the tiles while the communion wafers drifted down through the air like tiny wingless angels.

Turning to face the assembly, Mrs. Kelly shouted, “It’s all a big farce—that’s what it is! Where is Jesus Christ? Do you see him? No, because he’s not here, that’s why!”

The startled priest clamped his hand over her mouth while Brooks pinned down the old lady's arms. False teeth or not, they bit Father Harry’s finger clean through to the bone. He uttered something unrelated to the service and jerked his hand away.

“Four times in four months—the cowardly little friggers! Take my purse, shove me around, beat me up—and me a poor old widow! I come up here and pray. I ask for help. Just get them to leave me alone, I ask. I’m an old woman. I never carry more than twenty bucks. This morning I only had five. So they beat me bad. I called out to Jesus Christ . . . ”

She paused then, as if the strain had become too much. Brooks saw the tears falling away from her one good eye. There was no question of removing her now. Brooks knew it, and Father Harry knew it. He looked at Brooks and shook his head.

“I didn’t want a whole lot out of life, just to be left alone. But they won’t leave me alone, because I’m old and weak. If God was real, like we been told, He would never allow such going’s on. He would never—”

Her mouth sprang open and a loud gasp fell out. She dropped the offending cane and made a grab for the nearest corner of the altar. Brooks still had his arm around her shoulders, but he was too slow to prevent her collapse to the floor. The two men knelt beside her and watched as the frail bones began to shake violently. Brooks raised her head with one hand while Father Harry picked up one of the hosts and placed it on her tongue, but she spit it out.

At that moment Brooks became aware of a tearing sound, a sudden wild rush of air, a pressure on his lungs. He thought this unnatural, but quickly forgot about it when he noticed one startling blue eye staring up at him with such vehemence that it made him cringe.

“You’re a fool, Brooks Hennessey,” she managed to croak. “Get away from all this while you can. Don’t waste your life like I did. It’s all a big lie . . . ”

He could see that she was fading fast.

“And Jesus Christ—” she twisted her bleeding lips into a sneer “—*is the biggest lie of all!*”

Kathleen Kelly’s final condemnation echoed across the church’s hushed interior and seemed to hang in the air. Eileen Cantwell, a nurse over at St. Paul’s, appeared beside them. She pushed the men aside and placed her finger on the old woman’s carotid artery. Unable to find a pulse, she pressed her ear against the woman’s chest.

Nothing!

Pale, she looked up into the priest's eyes. "May the saints preserve her, Father. She's gone, she is. Just like that, the poor darling."

Father Harry whispered, "Are you certain, Eileen? She had a lot of fight in her only a moment ago. Can't you do something to . . ." But his voice died away with Mrs. Cantwell's stern look and vigorous shaking of her head.

The whole episode had taken but a few minutes, which caused Brooks to wonder if Kathleen Kelly hadn't just been struck down from on High.

Father Harry rose to his feet, switched on his throat mike, then turned toward his anxious congregation. "Dear friends in Christ, it is a sad and terrible event we just witnessed here this morning. This poor woman, overwrought as she was, mocked the power of Almighty God and has now paid the price. I want all of you to come up and gather around the altar so we can say a prayer for the soul of Kathleen Kelly. I fear at this moment she is in desperate need of our help."

0740 HRS

There had always been some concern about Sarius. He was an independent spirit, and independent spirits provided ample reason for concern. Belonging to the lowest of all angelic orders, the Ophanim to be precise, he was headstrong and mischievous to the point of driving his fellow angels to distraction. His recent requests to become a human guardian were rejected as a matter of policy.

As angels are wont to do from time to time, Sarius had merely been seeking a process that would lend purpose to his existence; but alas, no member of the Ophanim or even of the three levels above them, had ever been accorded such high privilege. The Chief Guardian, Saraqael, along with other notables of the realm, held a firm belief that the lower orders were entirely unsuitable. They were all too prone to creating mischief, which is why their movements throughout the universe were closely monitored by the big boss, Metatron, who on numerous occasions had found reason to voice his concern to the

Master. But God usually allowed His firstborn to do what they wanted, within reason. Both Saraqael and Metatron were of the opinion that God derived a certain degree of enjoyment from their unbridled activities, not unlike a doting father with a house full of exuberant children.

Of late, due to the close of another earth millennium, curiosity had prompted Sarius to once again tune in on the human experiment. The last time he had visited earth was to watch Moses lead the Israelites out of Egypt. This time around, the angel had been observing for some fifty years, a mere pinprick of eternity. Although he regularly covered the entire globe, Sarius tended to spend much of his time in America, where on occasion he was known to succumb to the urge to intervene in the activities of human affairs where he was not allowed. Direct interference by the Guardians was considered a normal part of their mandate, but not for other angels, at least not without permission.

New York City, Brooklyn in particular, intrigued this particular visitor because he found it to be a true microcosm of all the earth's peoples. More races and colors and religions were squeezed together in Brooklyn than in any other place on the planet.

So it was that Sarius, hovering beside Brooks Hennessey's right shoulder at the very moment of Kathleen Kelly's unfortunate demise, made the abrupt and completely unauthorized decision to take over her body.

Brooks held Mrs. Kelly's tiny head tenderly in the palm of one hand, his eyes closed, while members of the congregation shuffled into place at the foot of the altar, all craning their necks to get a better look at the poor dear.

*"Blessed Mother of God!"* exclaimed Mrs. Cantwell.

Brooks opened his eyes to find that Mrs. Kelly's good eye had also popped open, and a broad smile, more like a smirk, was planted across her face. Amazed, he withdrew his hand from behind her head.

Father Harry had already begun the prayer, but stopped, looked down, then took a step back when Mrs. Kelly suddenly sat up without the use of her hands, just sprang forward as if an unseen force had pushed her.

The cause of all the furor finally stood up and stared at the wine-soaked altar, at the tiny communion wafers scattered around the floor. She touched her puffed-up eye as a mystified look crept over her battered face.

After a moment or two she turned and smiled shyly at her would-be mourners. "It's a terrible thing I've done for sure, but my poor old head was rattled from the beating I'd just taken."

She took up her little blue walking cane, patted Mrs. Cantwell's hand affectionately, then departed the altar without visible effort.

The crowd parted in astonished silence to let her through, but she'd taken only a few steps when she turned around and called out in an authoritative voice, "You, Brooks Hennessey, you'd better come along with me." In a dry tone she added, "Perhaps you might pick up something useful for that foolish thing you publish."

Brooks was owner and editor of the weekly neighborhood paper, the *Village Review*, mostly advertising with local gossip added for color. He hesitated, but Father Harry whispered in his ear, "I don't care if you have to carry her, but get her over to Lutheran Medical Center for an examination. It's obvious that beating she took has addled her brains."



Brooks was six-six, two hundred and seventy pounds, a gentle giant. Mrs. Kelly was four-eleven, eighty-three pounds. One could scour the entire borough, from Bay Ridge to Spring Creek, from Greenpoint to Coney Island, and never find a more mismatched couple.

Outside, high up on the church steps, the newly-overhauled Kathleen Sarius Kelly, in full possession of the old woman's retained consciousness, including her arthritis, decided right off to shed those memories associated with pain. The angel had successfully mapped out human physiology when he first took an interest in them, and simply by taking in a few gulps of polluted Brooklyn air, successfully replaced most of the atoms in Mrs. Kelly's bloodstream. Next he forcibly expunged those cellular memories he did not wish to retain, allowing their defective molecules to float free in the environment, perhaps to settle in on some other unsuspecting and perhaps undeserving person.

Sarius was fully aware that he had far exceeded the limits of non-interference, and puzzled though he was by this sudden uncontrollable urge to become directly involved in human affairs, he did not see any reason why he should hobble around in pain as Kathleen Kelly had done. As an afterthought he removed her twisted glasses and tossed them in a nearby refuse container. The angel would not be needing them.

It was mid-October, the weather clear and still warm, but the big old elms on either side of the church steps were already sprouting clusters of gold and a few smatterings of red. The visitor saw, with new eyes, that the buildings across the road were a clutch of four-story brownstones, although their actual colors were cream and brick and tan, with the lower level a series of little shops: a flower shop, a grocery store, hair stylist,

an animal clinic, and Mario's Unisex, which gave Sarius reason to pause, not being fully acquainted with the term *unisex*. Myriad odors assaulted the angel's reclaimed nose, the most pleasing by far coming from an Italian bakery in the next block.

Brooks was puzzled. If he didn't know better, he would have sworn old Mrs. Kelly was viewing the area for the first time. As he waited, he considered that even though the new millennium was well underway, a whole lot of people, in New York, in America, everywhere in the world, were still fidgety about the notion that God was going to pull the plug. Certainly, with the current economic woes and the usual worldwide rumblings of war, natural disasters, and famine, a fair swath of quirky religious groups were quick to jump on the Mayan calendar bandwagon and beat their drums, but he suspected most folks were fed-up with hearing this drivel day after day.

As they made their way down the granite steps, Mrs. Kelly glanced up at her huge companion. "Annie," she said, forming her swiftly-healing bruised face into a wry smile.

Brooks took a sudden coughing fit, covering up his shock as best he could. "How's that, Mrs. Kelly?"

She banged her cane against his ankle. "Now don't go being foolish with me, Brooks Hennessey. I know for a fact that you misbehaved yourself eleven times in the space of forty hours. There's a whole lot of randy teenagers around who can't keep up that pace. Little wonder that young woman has gone crazy over you."

Inwardly Brooks cried out, *I don't believe this!* He and Annie had driven thirty miles north to a nondescript little motel on the outskirts of White Plains. How could Mrs. Kelly possibly know about their weekend?

Monday morning commercial traffic along Fifth Avenue was brisk. An '88 Dodge pickup truck full of pumpkins eased by them, its rusted cab crammed with dirty-faced children twisting their necks in all directions. Angry drivers screamed obscenities as they pulled out around the truck. Seven little Chinese girls holding hands scurried across the street in the smoky wake of a city bus, their identical bright blue costumes making them appear like giant beads of lapis.

“Yes,” Mrs. Kelly said reflectively, “too bad it’s all over with. Give her a call, why don’t you; break the news as gently as you can.” She tucked her little rouged cheeks into a sudden grin as if her suggestion was the funniest thing she’d heard in ages, then glanced up at Brooks, clicking her false teeth a few times before adding, “Tell her you found a more experienced woman. That ought to do it.”

Brooks knew Father Harry was right. Old Mrs. Kelly was definitely screwy in the head. As they crossed Fifth Avenue with the light, he realized they were heading south, away from Lutheran. “Listen here, my love, I was just ordered to get you over to the hospital for a check. Why, at your age you never know what the damage might be. Then you should have a talk with the police, give them descriptions of the dirty devils who beat you up.”

They were at that moment passing beneath a faded red awning that advertised Spanish-American cuisine, and still heading south. Next to the restaurant was the narrow entrance to a private residence with a big gray garbage container parked beside the door.

A warm childhood memory came charging into the angel's consciousness.

Mrs. Kelly stopped, rolled up the sleeve of her dress. “Tell you what, Brooksie, how about you and me twist wrists.” Smiling, she added, “That’s how me old dad used to

settle his affairs. If you win, off we go to the hospital. I win, then it's on we go as I command. That fair enough?"

At this point Brooks was only humoring the victim. *If this is what it takes to get her out of my hair*, he thought, *it's a small price to pay*.

Mrs. Kelly rested her elbow on the lid, the meatless arm with its spindly wrist ready for action. The big man knew he'd have to be real careful or he might hurt her, but setting his paw up against her tiny hand was a sight good for a laugh any day, and he could not resist a quiet chuckle.

"You ready now?" Brooks asked his miniature opponent.

"Indeed I am, and don't go getting too surprised if I happen to beat you, okay?"

Three black kids, preteens, paused to catch the action. They said nothing, just stared at the odd couple. The bigger kid was toting a ghetto blaster that spewed forth rap music so loud it made the walls of a nearby building vibrate. The kids soon realized they were watching some kind of playacting. Why, or for whose benefit, they didn't know.

Bang! The big man's knuckles slammed hard against the steel lid.

"I warned you. Want to go again?"

Brooks, his knuckles raw and bleeding, gritted his teeth, crushed her hand in his, and pulled. Mrs. Kelly held his hand steady, turned her head toward the boys and said, "Mr. Allmand is real tired of you children hassling him. You stay away from him now, or I'll come after you and whale the daylight out of the three of you. That's a promise."

Then she drove Brooks's hand so hard into the steel lid that he thought all his bones were broken. "*Jesus Christ!*" he cried out in pain.

“Not allowed, Brooks! Definitely not allowed. You use the Man’s name once more, I’ll scour your mouth with bleach.”

Brooks had tears in his eyes. The three kids shrugged. They knew a sham when they saw one. Moving off, the one with the noisemaker called out, “Screw you, Granny.”

Granny studied the kid for a few seconds, then reached out with her cane and jerked him back by the neck. The fact that the kid was twenty feet away did not escape Brooks.

The youth was a foot taller than Mrs. Kelly. He took a good swing, but she caught his hand and held it. At the same instant, the blaster’s twin speakers went silent.

After a moment of scowling intensity she lightened up and said, “This is your lucky day, Darryl. You don’t deserve it, but I’ve decided to let you go.” She released her hold on the scared youth, then cracked him on the elbow with her cane. “But mark my words: I’ll give you a good thrashing if you don’t behave yourself. Well?”

Darryl’s eyes flared so wide they were more white than black. He nodded vigorously.

“Can’t hear you, Darryl.”

“Yes, ma’am—I mean, no, ma’am. We gonna stay away from Allmand’s Grocery. Promise.”

Mrs. Kelly rubbed her bruised eye open and gave the boy a warm, motherly smile. When the CD reactivated itself, she declared in rap-like verse: “*Hey, Darryl, rap is crap. Ain’t no one ever tell you ‘dat?’*”

Brooks had his damaged hand jammed tight under his left armpit to help squelch the pain. He was half-sitting back against the garbage container, deeply in shock. He had just seen things happen that were not possible.

A bewildered Greek hairdresser and his young wife stood in the doorway of their nearby shop, watching the action. Mrs. Kelly reached up and extracted Brooks's hand. The moment she touched it, the pain vanished.

"A little penance wouldn't go astray, lover boy."

Brooks was not real surprised to see that his hand looked good as new. In a fervent whisper he said, "Listen here, Mrs. Kelly, you want to tell me what the hell's going on?"

Donning a strange, half-twisted smile, she replied, "Hell is one thing that is definitely not going on. Why don't you tell me, Brooks Hennessey? Go ahead, give it your best shot."

The big Irishman sensed the new vitality, noticed that the puffed eye was almost completely healed, the bruises already withdrawn. He was very aware that he had just witnessed a miraculous event. Three or four, more likely.

Thoughtfully, but with his heart racing a lot faster than it should, he said, "We figured you were a goner in church. Mrs. Cantwell was sure of it. Then you popped up off the floor like Lazarus, walked down the steps without any problem, flattened my hand like it was a baby's. And you just pulled that kid back from twenty feet away with a two-foot cane. Now I see your face is nearly fixed up. Something happened in there, didn't it?"

Smiling vaguely, her newly rejuvenated eyes continuing to register the activity along the street, she replied, “Go on.”

Aside from his weakness for the opposite sex, over the years the editor of the *Village Review* had come to adopt a relatively devout lifestyle: heavily involved with church functions, personal friends with half a dozen priests, on a first-name basis with Bishop O’Rourke. He read his Bible, said a few prayers most days, contributed more than his share in the collection, and regularly shelled out a few bucks to the local bums.

Above all, Brooks Hennessey was a believer. He knew that something very wonderful and very remarkable had just taken place right under his nose. And whatever it was, he was part of it.

He stared down at her: eighty-two-year-old Kathleen Kelly. A tiny, frail-looking creature with a narrow, triangular face covered with patchy brown age spots and inundated with wrinkles. Sunken cheeks, a pointed nose, dentures stained brown from all the tea she drank. Her hair was white and without body, done up in an odd-looking bun piled on top of her head. The only saving grace were her eyes, clear and blue as a summer’s sky, and it was those eyes that dominated Kathleen Kelly’s appearance.

Brooks shrugged his great stooped shoulders. “You were real mad up on the altar, yelling out that everything was a big farce. Then you dropped deader than a Thanksgiving turkey. A few minutes later you come back to life all full of piss and vinegar and began doing impossible things. I believe . . . well, even though you were being disrespectful, I think God answered your prayers, gave you all this strength—to do what, I can’t guess. Scary, it is.”

She caught his arm, urging him off the trash container and south along the sidewalk. “No doubt about it, God does work in mysterious ways. Even a bit of a mystery to me, to tell the truth. Anyway, I have a little matter to attend to, then we’ll go by my place, pick up a few things. You suppose Rachael would mind if I moved in with you?”

This caught Brooks off guard. But he wasn’t about to question what was taking place. “Boy . . . do you know Rachael?”

“Never met her, but, well, let’s say I heard about her. Ice water in her veins. I admit it might take a bit of doing: you bringing home this pathetic old granny, one foot in the grave, threatening her lifestyle. Umm . . . what if you told her God asked you to look after me. Think she’d buy that?”

“Not a chance. But . . .” Brooks grinned at the idea racing through his oversized skull. “Rachael works out, keeps in real good shape. If you were to pull the same wrist stunt on her, that’d knock her down a peg or two.”

“Bang on the money, Brooksie.” Mrs. Kelly smiled, stuck her nose in the air, sucked in another lungful of atoms, did a major reshuffling of the trillions she already had, then proceeded to spin her cane around and around in her left hand with all the finesse of a professional baton twirler.



0810 HRS

For sure, Mildred Manuel was a dowdy old thing, short and plump, without a look to bless herself. Even on a good day she looked befrazzled. Wild gray hair, and the cheap makeup she plastered onto her broad, flat face usually in a hurry, often looked like the aftermath of a small battle. She had wide-spaced, poppy brown eyes, without any lashes to speak of. Her eyebrows, plucked to death at an early age, were only pencil lines, and smudged at that. But Millie had a heart as big as a football field, a smile that would melt a banker's heart, and one glance into those big doe eyes oozing with compassion, you knew right away that God had sent her into the world for the specific purpose of taking care of His less fortunate.

Since she lived only two doors away from Kathleen Kelly in an old but respectable brownstone just three blocks east of St. Andrew's, Millie knew absolutely everything that went on in the older woman's life. And there had certainly not been the

slightest hint of any involvement with the editor of the *Village Review*. Having spotted the unlikely smile on her friend's face from half a block away, the one frail arm intimately linked into Brooks Hennessey's, the cane twirling away, Millie reacted to this peculiar sight by planking herself in their path.

“Where are your glasses?” she demanded to know.

“Threw 'em away.”

“That a fact? I happen to know, my dear, that you're blind as a bat without them.”

“Not anymore,” answered Mrs. Kelly with a proper tilt to her chin.

“Hmph! And what about your face?”

“Fell out of bed. But not to worry, because it so happens that this lovely young man has been kind enough to invite me to move in with him. Doesn't that just blow the air out of your drawers?”

Millie was twenty years younger than Mrs. Kelly, but looked more like ten years younger. Their friendship went back fifty years, and even though they loved and cared for each other without reserve, they often teased each other mercilessly. Her usual flippancy dulled for the moment at this news, Millie's face paled at the thought of Rachael Hennessey looking after her friend. How many days before the push over the staircase or a quick shove into the pool?

“God love us all, Kathy. I hope Brooks don't take offense, but Rachael Hennessey can't take care of a cat. How is she going to look after the likes of you?”

Brooks did not see the necessity of joining in the discussion, and therefore kept quiet, even if it was his wife they were badmouthing. The two women chatted away while

Brooks tried real hard to figure out the purpose of the exercise. Did Kathleen Kelly really die? Had God allowed her to come back with some special powers? If so, why?

The discussion ended with a promise to meet later in the day. Moving along the sidewalk, Mrs. Kelly surprised Brooks again when she abruptly swung right into a dark alley.

“What now?”

With tiny feet moving so fast Brooks had to stretch out to keep up, she replied, “We’re going to drop in on some old friends.”

Seconds later Brooks spotted three young men propped up against a crumbling brick wall at the rear of Harry Shuster’s restaurant smoking some cheap pot. Mrs. Kelly stopped when the trio came into view.

“You stay here, Brooksie. Watch the fireworks if you want. Little friggers will scamper away for sure if they catch sight of the likes of you keeping me company.”

The three were not at all little, but long, skinny Puerto Rican dudes, early twenties, squinty eyes, scruffy beards, ponytails, silver rings dangling for one ear lobe, orange leather skull and crossbones vests—real meanies. Deafening rap music reverberated off the brick walls surrounding them. Hugging the wall so he would not be seen, Brooks knew instinctively that these were the ones who had earlier pounded the hell out of Kathleen Kelly. For some inexplicable reason, he felt sorry for them.

“Well now,” drawled the leader, one Juan Guzman, as he slowly straightened up, “if it isn’t that ugly hag again.”

His cronies grinned at each other, automatically spreading out to surround the old woman. Each man registered the fact that their victim’s face looked as good as new,

better even, which was strange, considering they had knocked her about barely an hour earlier. Although this registered a note or two of confusion, it quickly became lost inside their squishy brains.

Mrs. Kelly walked right up to Guzman, tapped her cane lightly against his forehead, smiled, and said sweetly, “Time’s up, Juan.”

The boss man grabbed at the cane, missed, then made a vicious swipe at the old lady, who moved beyond his reach faster than the eye can follow.

“Twenty-seven years old, with the last ten spent wreaking havoc in this neighborhood. You’re a real bad one, Juan—a complete waste of a life. You got nothing at all going for you. Nothing.”

Kathleen Kelly’s eyes grew as cold as cold can be. “Never picked a fight with a grown man, have you? Raped that nine-year-old Virginia Walters over at the old Mason warehouse last month. Girl’s a real mess now, her mind all broken into little pieces. In fact, Juan, you might be interested to know that you have the distinction of being the lowest scumbag in the entire lower west side, and that’s saying something. I see no reason why you should be allowed to continue preying on the old, the weak, people who can’t protect themselves.”

The other two remained still, awaiting orders. The little old woman turned to them and said quietly, “Better don your asbestos suits, boys. The party’s over.”

Brooks never did figure out what happened next. In essence, the three hoodlums vanished before his eyes. After waiting a minute or so to make certain his vision wasn’t playing tricks on him, he walked over and stood beside a very serious Kathleen Kelley.

He took a cautious look around, saw no sign of the Puerto Ricans, then reached down to shut off the ghetto blaster. “Where did they get to?”

Mrs. Kelly didn’t answer for a few moments, seemingly deep in thought. She finally looked up at him, her forehead etched with concern. “I wasn’t sure how that would go down with the chief.”

She shook her head several times, her tidy little hair bun flopping back and forth. More to herself than to Brooks she added, “I think they’re losing interest. Not a good sign, Brooksie, not good at all.”

Then Brooks noticed a small pile of white ash at his feet. A tiny pyramid. He had nearly stepped on it. A thin wisp of smoke rose from the ash. Although his sense of logic rejected the swift and terrible conclusion he reached, this same sense of logic was completely shattered when, upon glancing around, he spotted two more identical pyramids.

When Brooks looked hard into the old woman’s sky-blue eyes, his heart jumped into his mouth. In a croaking voice, he said, “You’re not Mrs. Kelly, are you?”

Sarius was giving serious consideration to the potential fallout from his provocative actions. A few moments went by before the angel replied, “Do I look like Betty Grable, maybe?”

“*I’m out of here!*” Brooks declared in a louder voice than he had intended, then turned around and took off down the alley.

1430 HRS

Rachael Hennessey's husband made his real money on the stock exchange, the newspaper thing being partly a hobby and partly the fulfillment of a boyhood dream. Most weeks it brought in barely enough cash to pay the sixteen people who ran the operation.

While Rachael was heavy into creating a certain lifestyle for herself, that is to say hobnobbing with the rich and famous, or at least as far up that ladder as she could climb, Brooks's insistence on keeping his pathetic little weekly going was a constant source of embarrassment in her life. At the many social functions she attended, her name was often linked to the *Village Review*, and more often than not the discovery of this relationship was a cause for mockery among the group. She'd gladly leave the man, except for two major reasons: Brooks gave his wife all the cash she wanted to play the kind of games she thought were important to her and, while she harbored little respect for her husband,