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## One

### The First Thing That Happens

The Miami Dade Police left a message on my answering machine at nine in the morning. “If you know William Cohen, please contact Sergeant Diaz at 305 . . .”

*Oh no! Billy must have been arrested. Not prison. Not again. Not this late in his life.*

It still made me queasy to think about the time my brother was arrested almost thirty years ago; the thud of the gavel, the words “twenty-five years to life,” my mother crying in my arms, begging the judge to change his mind. The day I watched the police handcuff Billy and drag him off to Sing Sing for selling cocaine was probably the worst day of my life.

I was shaking when I punched in the phone number of the Miami Police.

“This is William Cohen’s sister. Has he been arrested?”

“No,” Sergeant Diaz said in a soft voice. “He was hit by a car at two-thirty this morning. I’m sorry. Your brother is dead.”

My heart went cold. Dead? My head spun. I was dizzy. I reached for a chair and sat down.

“What happened?”

“William was coming from the emergency room at South Miami Hospital. He was drunk and ran out onto the highway,” the sergeant reported.

“Were you there?” I asked.

“Yes, ma’am. I was called to the accident scene.”

“Was Billy injured?” *Injured? What am I thinking? He’d been run over by a car!*  
“I mean, was he taken to the hospital?”

“No, ma’am. Your brother never knew what hit him. Died instantly. Didn’t suffer at all.”

*Died instantly? Didn’t suffer? How on earth could he know that? The sergeant was trying to cushion the blow, but it wasn’t working.*

“William was wearing a hospital ID bracelet. We got your name and phone number from their records.”

*So that’s how they found me! Billy always wrote me in as his “in case of emergency” person.*

Sergeant Diaz cleared his throat. “Listen, ma’am, you don’t have to identify the body. The bracelet is good enough. Better to remember him as you do now.”

*Better to remember him as you do now? Oh my God!*

The sergeant must have heard me start to cry, because the next thing he said was, “It’s kind of against regulations, but if you give me your address I’ll send you the things your brother had on him.”

Since I didn’t have to view Billy’s post-accident body, there was no reason to fly from New York to Miami. By the time my sixty-two-year-old brother died, he was homeless, so everything he owned was in his pockets. My brother had left things neat and tidy for me—not like when he was alive. What I had worried about for years had now happened. Billy was dead.

I called Billy’s drug counselor at South Miami Hospital. Eddie’s voice was edgy.

“Billy showed up at the ER last night, high and coughing up blood. He wanted to be admitted to the hospital so when the nurse told him he’d have to go to the detox unit instead, he got belligerent, picked up a chair, and threatened her. She called the cops, Billy ran out, and, you know the rest. Your brother just didn’t trust his Higher Power. I’m really disappointed in him.”

Disappointed? Billy was dead. And Eddie was *disappointed*? I hung up on him and threw the phone across the room to get his words as far away from me as I could.

*Oh God, Billy is dead!* My body ached so much I felt like I was the one who'd been run over. I got into bed with my clothes still on and pulled the covers over my head. Then I remembered the incredibly strange thing I'd done the day before.

Although we hadn't spoken in months, for the last week I'd been thinking obsessively about Billy. I wanted to phone him, hear his voice, tell him I loved him, help him in some way. But I didn't know how to reach him. Part of me was afraid to reach him. I was sure he was in bad shape.

The day before Billy died, a bitterly cold January morning, I layered on two sweaters, a down jacket, and two wool hats and ventured into the raw air. I walked across the frozen brown leaves, through the bare winter woods, and climbed down the wooden staircase that led to the bay. I never ask God for favors, but that morning I looked up at the silvery sky, raised my arms, and imagined pushing Billy into the hands of the great Divine. "Take care of him for me," I whispered.

Hours later, Billy was dead.

The next few days I stayed in bed, unable to do anything but drink tea. They say there are different stages of grief—shock, guilt, anger, depression. But all those feelings collided and came crashing in on me at once.

Three days after Billy's death a monster storm moved through Long Island. I pushed the foot of my bed up against the window and watched the blizzard tear up the world outside. Billy loved wild, turbulent weather, and as the storm obscured everything, I felt a kind of satisfaction. The snow was "whiting out" my world, just as death had "whited out" Billy's. I've always believed something exists beyond death, but what that something was, I had no idea. As the wind screamed through my windows, I was sure it was Billy's spirit, making his usual racket, knocking around the sky, trying to find his way.

The storm passed and the winds subsided. I spent my days mostly in bed, crying. The rest of the time I was swallowing Valium until I was a walking zombie. My long,

dark, wavy hair was lank and uncombed, my eyes puffed into slits, my skin haggard. I didn't look forty-something anymore, I looked a hundred

Three weeks of post-death misery later, it was my birthday. Just before sunrise, as I was waking up, I heard someone calling my name from above me.

*Annie! Annie! It's me! It's me! It's Billy!*

It was Billy's unmistakable deep, mellow voice. I was startled, but not at all afraid. In fact, I felt comforted.

"Billy?" I said, half asleep. "You can't be here. You're dead. I must be dreaming."

*You're not dreaming. It's me! Get up and get the red notebook.*

Suddenly, I was very much awake. I'd completely forgotten about the red leather notebook Billy had sent me last year for my birthday. I was touched that he had made the effort to send me a gift even though he was becoming overwhelmed by his addictions.

I jumped out of bed and found the red notebook on a shelf in my bedroom closet. The pages were blank, except for an inscription written on the first page.

*Dear Annie,*

*Everyone needs a book dedicated to them.*

*Read between the lines.*

*Love,*

*Billy*

What a strange thing for Billy to have written! *Read between the lines?* I ran my fingers over the familiar handwriting. Then I heard him again.

*It's really me, Annie. And I'm okay, it's okay because . . .*

I grabbed a pen and wrote what he was saying in the red notebook.

*The first thing that happens is bliss; at least it was like that in my case. I don't know if it's that way for everyone who dies. As the car hit me, this energy came and sucked me right out of my body into a higher realm. I say "higher" since I had the feeling of rising up and suddenly all my pain was gone.*

*I don't remember hovering over my body or looking down on it or anything like that. I guess I was pretty anxious to get out of there. I knew right away I was dead, and went with it, more than ready for whatever was waiting.*

*I wasn't aware of traveling at any particular speed. I just felt light and unburdened as the sucking motion drew me up inside a chamber of thick silvery blue lights. People who have near-death experiences sometimes say they went through a tunnel. I'm using the word "chamber" because a tunnel has sides, but no matter what direction I looked, there was nothing but light for as far as I could see. Maybe the difference is I had a one-way ticket and theirs was a round-trip.*

*And even though I didn't have my body anymore, it felt like I did and that it was being healed. The lights in the chamber penetrated me and made me feel better and better as they pulled me up. It wasn't just the wounds from my car accident that were being healed. In the first nanosecond that the lights touched me, they erased any harm I suffered during my lifetime: physical, mental, emotional, or otherwise.*

*Soon, Daddy appeared right there beside me, young and smiling and handsome as ever. He was making jokes and asking, "What took you so long?" It was so great, seeing Daddy, but I'm guessing he was there to be a familiar landmark in foreign territory. I'm saying that because he was only with me for part of the ride and Daddy definitely wasn't the main event.*

*The main event was the silvery lights and their party atmosphere. Those healing lights had a festive feeling, like they were cheering me on, saying, "Welcome home, Son."*

*I can't say how long I was floating up the healing chamber, because I no longer have a sense of time. But I can say that chamber was some kind of cosmic birthing canal that delivered me into this new life.*

*I want you to know, darling, there's nothing hard or cruel for me anymore. I glided from the chamber right out into the glorious Universe. I'm drifting weightlessly through space with these gorgeous stars and moons and galaxies twinkling all around me. The whole atmosphere is filled with a soothing hum, like hundreds of thousands of voices are singing to me but they're so far away I can just barely hear them.*

*And although I can't exactly say anyone was here to greet me, as soon as I came out of the chamber I felt a Divine Presence; a kind, loving, beneficent presence, and really, that was enough.*

*In addition to the Divine Presence I also feel beings around me—Higher Beings, I guess you would call them. I can't explain why I'm using the word "beings," and not the singular; I just know there's more than one. I can't see or hear them, but I can feel them moving about, swooshing by, doing different things that concern yours truly. And although I haven't got a clue what these things might be, I'm guessing that floating out here in space is euphoric instead of terrifying because I'm being attended to by this celestial crew.*

*I'm looking down on the earth, and it is down. It's like there's a hole in the sky, a hole between our two worlds I can look through and see you. I know how sad you are about my death. Sad is too small a word. Bereft is more like it. But death isn't as serious as you think it is, honey. So far, it's very enjoyable. Couldn't be better, really. Try not to take death too seriously. As a matter of fact, try not to take life too seriously. You'd enjoy yourself a lot more. That's one of the secrets of life. You want to know another secret? Saying goodbye isn't as serious as it seems either, because we will meet again.*

As suddenly as it came, Billy's voice dissolved. I was sitting on my bed, the red notebook resting against my knees, its first pages filled with Billy's words in my

handwriting. Had I just imagined his voice? Maybe. But where did these words come from? They definitely weren't mine.

Inside the front cover of the notebook I found a card my brother had sent along with it—a cartoon of a big orange tomcat hugging a girly little purple kitten. The card's message was uncanny. *Are you real or am I dreaming you?*

Was I having some weird dream-like grief reaction? How could I know? I couldn't, and at that moment I didn't really care. For the first time since Billy's death I felt happy . . . more than happy. Billy was okay. And as he described floating blissfully through the stars, the atmosphere of his world had somehow flowed into mine. I was almost euphoric.

And all of a sudden I was hungry. I got out of bed, went to the kitchen, and made a pot of tea. As I sat at the table gorging myself on biscuits and marmalade, I opened a magazine. Staring at me was an ad for White Cloud bathroom tissue. It featured a cloud with a piece cut out that made it look like a hole in the sky. Hadn't Billy just said he saw me through a hole in the sky? I got chills. Maybe the ad was some kind of sign.

"That's ridiculous," I told myself. "I really *am* going a little mad." But some part of me wondered if there really might be a connection.

*Are you real or am I dreaming you?*

Everything was so strange but it all fit together—Billy's appearance, the forgotten red notebook, its inscription, the card's message, the picture of a hole in the sky. And before I heard from Billy, I was so depressed I could barely raise my head off the pillow. Now, I felt completely serene.

Had Billy appeared just this one time to let me know he was okay? Was that the end of it? I hoped not. If he visited a second time, I would be ready. I would be objective and alert so I could figure out if he was real. I decided to lure him back by keeping the red notebook and a pen with me all the time.

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## Two

### Still Billy

I decided not to tell anyone about Billy. Ten years ago, when I was taught how to meditate on the light within, my teacher instructed me to keep my spiritual experiences to myself; otherwise, I might lose them. Hearing from Billy in the afterlife was a spiritual experience, wasn't it? If this was real, it wasn't something I wanted to risk losing.

Five days after my birthday, as the sunrise cast my white bedroom into shades of rosy pink, I heard Billy's voice again. Blurry-eyed, I reached under my pillow for the red notebook, propped my head up, and started scribbling.

*Hey, Princess. Good morning.*

When Billy was alive, his calling me "Princess" was never a compliment. From the beginning, my life seemed charmed compared to his, and he held that against me. Billy was a "problem child" —and I was a "little angel." I sang and danced in school plays—he tried to sing in a band but couldn't carry a tune. Billy flunked out of high school—I was a straight-A student. The better I did, the worse he looked, and felt. Feeling guilty, I tried to win his affection, but that was something I couldn't succeed at.

Was Billy now using the nickname "Princess" because he was still holding a grudge? It didn't seem like it. The light that came along with his voice filled me with love.

*I like the idea of you, or me, writing a book. I think maybe I should get permission, but I'm floating in space and there's no one to ask. No one, that is, except the invisible Higher Beings I mentioned before, and I don't want to disturb their benevolence by asking for favors too soon [laughs].*

*I never got permission for anything in life. That's because it was a different deal. Those in power here should be in power. Not like on earth. There's such a lack of kindness on your planet.*

*It's hard to be kind all the time where you are, because if you don't toughen up you go under. The nature of existence there is harsh. You fix one hole and another pops up. It's supposed to be like that, though, so don't be too concerned about it.*

*I was done with my life, Annie. I paid my debt, although it's not what we usually think of as payment. It wasn't some price for my so-called sins. It was more a learning thing.*

*How do I know my life wasn't some punishment for my past transgressions? Well, because there's no such thing. You're not on earth to be punished. It's not about sin and punishment. That's a human concept. Something man made up. Humans make up stuff and then they believe it.*

*Sure, there's a lot of pain in life, but not because you've done anything to deserve it. Here's another secret for you, baby sister. Pain is just part of the human experience, as natural as breath, or eyesight, or blood moving through your veins. Pain is part of the earth deal so don't be overly concerned about it. Although I admit I wasn't exactly fond of pain myself.*

*And how do I know all this? Honestly, I don't know. All of a sudden I know a bunch of things I didn't know when I was alive. When you're born, when you pop out, that big pop gives you a kind of amnesia. One of the main things we're doing when we're alive is trying to remember the things we forgot.*

*There's a different kind of knowledge here. You're really understood, and what a relief that is. So many problems in life come from not being understood or known. People on earth sometimes get glimpses of each other's souls, like when they fall in love. The difference is, here, I am my soul. I'm still Billy but without my body.*

*I imagine it could be hard for some people, not having a body. When you realize you just died, with all the mumbo jumbo you've heard on earth about what might be*

*waiting for you, I guess you could be feeling apprehensive. Not me. I dove into being dead. Felt right at home.*

*I know, my sweet sister, you're wondering if all this is just a figment of your imagination, something your mind made up to help you feel better about my recent departure from earth. How will you know the reality of this? Well, because I will give you evidence—let's call it proof—so you will know for sure this is not your imagination and that it's really me, Annie. It's Billy.*

*And do something for me, honey. Give Tex a coin.*

While Billy was speaking, I understood everything he said. But after his voice faded, I couldn't remember a single word. Once again, Billy had put me into a state of euphoria. Communicating with his soul had caused my own to open up, and the whole world was changed. I no longer cared about being objective. Billy had returned. That was all I cared about. I lay down for a while to concentrate on my breathing and ground myself a bit.

After that, I went downstairs, lit some logs in the fireplace, and tried to re-orient myself. My mind threw out a barrage of questions: Was this really happening? Why was I able to hear my dead brother speaking to me? Had I just gone through some kind of out-of-body experience? I didn't think so. I hadn't traveled off somewhere. The somewhere had come to me.

I opened the red notebook and read over what I had written. It sounded like Billy, at his wise and charming best—Billy when he was clear and sober.

And he seemed to be able to read me. He knew I doubted that he was real.

Suddenly, it didn't seem logical that I was having delusions. Delusions don't acknowledge your doubts. Maybe the Billy phenomenon was like a phantom limb, something that seemed as though it was still there even though it wasn't. Or maybe I was hearing his voice inside my head, like when someone says, "I can hear my father's voice in my head telling me . . ."

Only this voice wasn't *inside* my head—it was *outside*, and it sounded as if I was standing at the bottom of a long staircase and he was at the top. Both times I'd heard him he was above me, and to the right.

Even more strange was that he had told me to give my friend Tex a coin. Why? How did he even know her name? He'd never met Tex. And now he wanted me to tell her about him. All my life I did things for Billy I didn't want to do—lie to my parents, give him money, let him crash on the sofa in my tiny apartment for weeks at a time. Did I still have to do what he wanted now that he was dead?

The thought of telling Tex about Billy made the magic of his dimension fade. As my mood fizzled, the mundane world seemed even more mundane than before. But still, something exciting had happened. Something way beyond my routine, everyday existence.

I took out the manila envelope Sergeant Diaz had sent me after Billy's death. It contained his few remaining possessions: a beat-up address book, a key card from a Ramada Inn, two pairs of dirty glasses, a torn leather business card holder, and seven dollars and change. Was this all that remained of my brother's life?

I spread the change on my kitchen table. What coin was I supposed to give Tex? A quarter, a nickel, a dime? Just then, I heard Billy's voice.

*Find . . . my . . . car.*

That shook me up. This wasn't like hearing Billy's voice while still in bed, half asleep—I was in my kitchen in the middle of the day. And his voice was louder—robotic and commanding. I got scared.

Even though I was shaken, I needed to know if Billy was still around and if he'd answer my questions. I looked up at the ceiling and asked out loud, "How can I find your car, Billy?"

*My . . . card . . . holder.*

Barely breathing, I pulled the cardholder from the manila envelope, and found a business card from a Mercedes dealer.

*Get . . . the . . . things . . . from . . . my . . . car.*

“What things?” No answer. “What things, Billy?”

He was gone.

Trying to sound composed, I called Hans, the Mercedes dealer whose name was on the business card I now had in hand. I almost fell down when he told me that he did have my brother’s wreck! Either I had suddenly become psychic or Billy actually was communicating with me. When I asked Hans to send Billy’s things, he said he’d do it right away.

The next few mornings, as I woke up, I whispered Billy’s name, but there was no sign of him. In a way I was glad I couldn’t conjure him up. He was in charge of this affair. He was the responsible one . . . for a change.

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