

Blood Brothers

Jody Zimmerman

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Chapter 1

Billy is so much like Mother—the smile; the green eyes; the long, thick, auburn-brown hair; the flawless, warm-olive skin; the chaotic, anxious, angry moods; but most of all, the gift with canvas.

I pick up his limp, warm, right hand to kiss it tenderly. My tears fall on his fingers, rolling off onto the harsh, crisp-white linens. I study his hand—the slender, long fingers; pink nails topped with white crescents, speckled with bits of dried red and yellow oil paint underneath them; the faintly green veins on the back of his hand; the downy covering of brown hair on the tops of his fingers and hand, becoming thicker and slightly curled on his wrist and forearm; and the thumb he sucked until he was four years old. There is no expression on his face. Stubble sticks out in sharp contrast to the etiolated complexion.

“Please God, please God, let this hand paint again,” I beg.

“Oh please, let my brother wake, pick up his brushes and paint again,” I plead.

“Mother, I’m so sorry, forgive me,” I rub Billy’s hand all over my wet face.

“I’ve tried my best to look after him. You know I have. Dammit, Goddammit, don’t you Mother? I miss you so much. I miss you so, so much.” Futile queries spark through my mind. How would she react if she were to see her baby boy lying here in a coma? How would age have affected her beautiful face? Would I have turned out the same? Would she and Dad have stayed together? Would Billy be lying here now?

“Please don’t leave me, Billy,” I whimper, hands trembling, nose dripping. I rub my nose on my right shoulder. Fear hammers through my soul with each beat of my heart. My connection with Billy began the day Dad brought Mother home from the hospital with a tiny, pink creature, eyes shut tight with a head full of dark brown hair, squirming, reeking of sweet, silky Johnson’s Baby Powder, his tiny little fingers grabbing tightly around mine, leaving me breathless—the first vivid memory I recall, though I was only two years old.

I’ve been sitting for hours willing that my touch and voice might get through to him, that his fingers might once again grab mine. I visualize my love for him to be a life-giving force emerging from my body through my hands, permeating his body, repairing all the damaged cells, nerves, and tissue in his brain. I focus all my consciousness into him, communicating to him that I am here with him, that together we will make him well. I imagine that he opens his eyes—imploring God to make it happen. I remember my lucky rabbit’s foot. I fish it out of my left pants pocket, put it in his hand and fold my hands over his.

“How could this be?” I ask myself over and over. “How could you have overdosed, Billy? You’ve gotten your life so together the past few years. What were you doing taking GHB? You never mentioned that drug to me before.”

My brother is attached to life through an array of plastic tubes. Electrodes monitor all the electrochemical pulses emanating from his heart and brain. Machines surround him. The metronomic sound of a ventilator pumping oxygen through a white, plastic tube inserted into his trachea through his mouth sends stinging waves of adrenaline-laced fear through my body. This high tech cubicle in the neurological intensive care unit at St. Vincent’s Hospital is one of several fanned out in a circle around a central operations post manned by technicians and nurses overseeing dozens of panels, monitors, and computers. The area looks like mission control, and I think about how Billy loved to play space travel when we were kids.

Armed with a walkie-talkie and a laser firing cap gun, he would set out from my bedroom—mission control—to explore outer space—our back yard. I would direct him on his journey and he would report back his findings. We were careful to steer clear of Planet X—Mother’s cottage studio, whenever she had shut herself in to paint.

“Mr. Hampton, Mr. Hampton,” a soft, high pitched female voice interrupts my thoughts. I look up to see a short, obese, middle-aged woman in a large blue and green flowery smock looking down at me, her brown eyes full of compassion.

She bends over, gently takes Billy’s hand from mine, gently placing his hand on the bed. She smiles when she sees the rabbit’s foot as it rolls from Billy’s hand onto the bed. Her bosom is huge, so I am unable to read her nametag that faces upward. She takes both my hands in her right hand and puts her left arm around my shoulders pulling me into her large body. I collapse into the warmth, sobbing like a lost, frightened child. The scent of fabric softener crawls through my swollen nasal passages, my eyes fix on her perfectly manicured red nails, dwarfed by the circumference of her fingers. Her breathing is labored. After a while, she slowly releases me.

“Mr. Hampton, they tell me you’ve been sitting here since noon yesterday,” she informs me as she hands me a wad of tissue.

“You should go get some rest. We’ll notify you the second there is any change in your brother’s condition. I promise you,” she says. I stare into her eyes that tenderly acknowledge the desperation in mine, yet reflect no solid hope for me to grab.

I try to speak; nothing comes out. I blow my nose into the tissue and try to clear my throat but it clenches shut emitting a raspy dry cough.

“Water?”

“No.”

“We have a nice lounge where you could rest. We can also offer you something to eat if you are hungry,” she says. “If you prefer, you can go home and get some rest there. Do you live here in town?”

I shake my head back and forth.

"I see," she says. "Well, we have a family coordinator who can help you make arrangements," she adds in muffled, gentle soprano tones. Her face is full and round, framed by cropped brown hair, with penciled in crescent eye brows, and red lips stretched into a slight smile over large jowls, resting under ample earlobes, hanging like beagle ears over her neck. She exudes compassion, and I wonder if she is a hand picked harbinger carefully groomed and trained in the skill of gently relaying devastating news.

"Where's the restroom?" I ask.

"This way." She pulls me up, and I look down to read her nametag—Janet Ostro, RN.

My knees lock, my lower back hurts, and my bladder aches. I bend over to gently kiss Billy's face.

"I love you," I whisper into his right ear.

She picks up the rabbit's foot and hands it to me. "It's beautiful. I've never seen one with a gold cap and chain. Are these your initials, Mr. Hampton?"

"Yes. My grandmother gave us each one for Christmas when we were kids," I struggle to get the words out as I stuff the rabbit's foot in my pocket, desperate for its magic to work.

Slowly, we walk out of the intensive care unit and down a corridor. She leads me by my right elbow. We come to a men's room, and I go in. It is dark. She reaches her right hand in and turns on the light. I go to the urinal and begin to pee. My concentrated urine splashes my hands, overpowering the pink urinal cake, its odor illuminating the memories of Billy and me engaging in pee contests in grade school to see who could back away farthest from the urinals without hitting the floor. I feel tears running down my face again. If his brain is damaged beyond repair, how can I let him live that way? How could I ever let him not live? Dear God, how could I make such a decision? I finish peeing, move to the sink, turn on the cold water, soap my hands, rinse them, then bend over splashing water on my face several times. I stand up, water dripping down my face and neck onto my green Polo shirt, and look at myself in the mirror—swollen face thick with stubble and stinging red tear trails, dark semicircles under blue-grey eyes, my curly, dark blonde hair in disarray. I gaze at my face distinguishing Mother's features, Dad's features—the genetic commingling producing indisputably recognizable brothers. I grab my neck with my left hand, apply pressure on my carotid arteries until I feel the thump of my heart in my throat, startled by a feeling of déjà vu that sends rings of shivers over my skin like the iridescent rings of color accelerating from a drop of gasoline on a sunlit mud puddle.

"My God, I've got to get out of here," I mumble. I release the grip on my throat, grab some paper towels, wipe my face and hands and emerge to find Janet waiting.

"I'll, I'll stay at my brother's, at Billy's," I hear myself say.

“He lives in Tribeca. Could you find out where they put my duffle bag and please call me a cab? I have to get out of here now.”

Puzzled, she says “Why certainly.”

I follow her to a closet. She takes out a set of keys from a pocket in her smock, unlocks the door, reaches in and pulls out my black duffle. I grab it.

“Wait a second Mr. Hampton. I also need to give you your brother’s personal items. They are locked up in an office. Please wait here, I’ll be right back.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Oh, I almost forgot. The man who accompanied your brother in the ambulance left this note for you,” she says, almost in a whisper and pulls a small, white envelop from her smock pocket and hands it to me.

“Thank you, thank you very much,” I say looking down into her eyes. She hesitates a moment and looks at the note. I look at the note and look back at her.

“Yes, well, I’ll be back in a minute,” she turns, breathing heavily. Stride induced echoes of rubbing fabric resound and slowly fade.

I tear open the sealed envelope to find extraordinary penmanship: consistent, uniform letters and numbers printed by a steady hand with a black felt tipped pen.

7 April 2006, 8:00 am

Philip:

I am the friend of Billy’s who called you this morning. As you may know, we’ve been dating for the past couple of months. I am so sorry this happened. I really don’t understand it and cannot explain how this happened. He went looking for some coke and that was the last time I saw him. I think someone must have slipped him something. I’m sorry I can’t meet you here, but I have to fly to Bermuda in a couple of hours for an important shoot. I feel like a bastard for leaving him, but I know you’re on the way. This is the biggest shoot of my career. Billy would want me to go, I believe. He is getting the best medical care in the city and they tell me there’s nothing we can do now but wait. I’m afraid his situation is not good at all. My cell phone number is 212-555-1432. Please call me if there is any change at all in his condition. I’ll be back in town on Wednesday.

Elliott Fields

“Christ, how could you leave him here and go off to some fucking shoot, you bastard?” I whisper through clenched jaws. I reach into my left pocket and pull out my cell phone and dial the number. I hear faint ring tones through crackling static, then nothing.

“Damn.”

I look at the number and dial again. I stick the note in my back pocket, rest my back against the wall, bending my knees, sinking to the floor. I clutch my forehead with my left hand, press the phone against my right ear, close my eyes and rest my elbows on my inner thighs. I hear more crackling static, a couple of rings, then silence.

“Mr. Hampton, are you alright?”

“Huh? Oh shit!” I look up and recognize Nurse Ostro looming over me.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you,” she expresses concern in her eyes as she stands there holding a large white bag with handles and a clip board holding some kind of forms.

“Here are your brother’s personal belongings.” She sits the bag down beside me as I struggle to get up. My cell phone slips out of my hand, slams against the floor and slides down the terrazzo hallway, spinning like a top.

“Oh dear, I hope it’s not broken” she says moving toward the phone.

“It’s okay. I’ll get it. I go through a lot of cell phones in my line of work, so I always insure them,” I reply as I walk down the hall to pick up the phone. It appears to be all right, just a few more scratches added to the existing array.

“What do you do?” Her eyes brighten.

“I’m a free lance journalist—a rogue reporter of sorts.”

“A rogue reporter?” She smiles arching her right eyebrow.

“Yes, it’s my way or it’s the highway.”

“I see,” she replies in a softer tone with her head tilted toward the floor.

“What I mean Miss Ostro,” I add as my eyes dart to her left hand, but I see no ring. Perhaps ICU nurses aren’t allowed to wear rings I surmise.

“I’m sorry, is it Mrs. Ostro?”

“I’m not married,” she replies, shifts her weight from leg to leg, clasps her hands together and sighs.

“Yes, well, what I meant to say is that I have been fortunate enough to fashion my career so that I can pursue the challenges that appeal to me most—not really a rogue at all.”

“You are indeed fortunate,” she smiles.

I nod, looking into her big brown, intelligent eyes and realize they have guided me back to a brief emotional respite. I am thankful, yet I feel the tears working their way out as my mouth tightens and puckers.

“Mr. Hampton, if you feel this is not the time, just tell me and I’ll stop. But, since you are your brother’s medical surrogate, you probably know his desires about organ donation,” she sighs, squints her eyes, and shakes her head.

“Yes, I know. He would gladly donate; we’ve discussed it before. Are those the papers?”

“Yes. Do you feel like signing them now?”

“Is he really going to die so soon, Miss Ostro? I better stay with him.”

“No one knows for sure. But he has an extremely high chance of experiencing a life-terminating event at any time. I’m so sorry.” She pulls a tissue from her smock and hands it to me.

“Yes, yes, the doctors all told me that. I’ll sign them.”

“Sign in these three places.” She hands me a pen, holding the clipboard up for me along with the white shopping bag like sacrificial offerings. Her expression is calm, and I sense her warmth of soul. I dab my nose with the tissue, steady my hand, sign the forms, hand her the pen back and take the white bag in my hands.

“The man who accompanied Billy, Elliott Fields, says in this letter that he thinks someone may have slipped Billy something.”

“Yes, his chart shows that. We have reported it to the police department. I expect they’ll be contacting you and Mr. Fields,” she replies as she witnesses my signatures, then tears apart the forms to give me a copy.

“Please try to get some rest. I’m on a ten-hour shift so I’m here until ten in the morning. I will call you if there is any change at all with your brother.”

She picks up my duffle and says, “I’ll walk you to the elevator.”

We walk down the hallway and make a couple of turns in silence. As we approach a bank of stainless steel elevator doors, she hesitates a moment and says, “Mr. Hampton, I’d like to tell you that I know the art of your brother and mother. They both have inspired me—I love their work. I’m a bit of an amateur painter. I work night shifts so I can take art classes and paint during the day.” She looks down at the floor as she finishes speaking.

My tears release themselves again. She presses the down button. I’m speechless. The elevator door opens. I get in and turn around.

“Go to the information desk in the lobby. They’ll show you how to get to the cab stand,” she says, and I notice a single tear trail from her left eye down into the folds of her neck.

“Thank you,” I whisper as the door closes.

Outside the April air, engulfed with a fine mist falling through the night sky, is crisp and fresh on my face. I spot a cab at the stand, throw in the bags, climb in the back, and ask the driver to take me to Billy’s condo on Warren Street in Tribeca. The lights and sounds of the city fill my head. I put my face in my hands, feeling the texture of my stubble. I look at my watch—4:30 am. It is Monday. The nightmare of the past twenty-four hours replays in my head—the shrill ringing phone at 5 am; the muted voice of a stranger—I realize it must have been Elliott Fields—calling from a hospital in New York informing me that my brother had been admitted in a coma from an apparent drug overdose; the mad dash through my house trying to get ready to go to the airport; the frantic, dawn cab ride from my house to Hartsfield; the call to my best friend Luscious,

the scrambling at the airport to get on the first Delta flight; the sick anticipation in my stomach and heart as I flew to New York; the unending cab ride from LaGuardia to the hospital and the breathless anxiety, uncontrollable, enveloping me almost to the point of hyperventilation; the cell phone call to Dad in St. Louis only connecting with his voice mail; the matter-of-fact, heavily accented, rapid staccato in which the young neurosurgeon of Indian origin explained to me that my brother had ingested large amounts of alcohol, cocaine, GHB (a strong respiratory depressant), and possibly some other drugs rendering him unconscious, leading to aspiration of vomit and the onset of seizures and cerebral hypoxia, depriving his brain of oxygen for sufficient time to cause a state of stage three coma, and that, recovery from the persistent vegetative state would be unlikely, and, as the patient's designated legal health care surrogate would I consider donating Billy's organs should he die or should the decision to remove him from life support be made; and, finally, the walk through a maze of corridors, walk-ways, and rooms to Billy. The nausea I felt yesterday afternoon when Dr. Seng asked my permission to let him bring several residents to observe Billy stirs in me. Trying to get any reaction from Billy at all, Dr. Seng poked his chest and shouted his name, squirted cold water into his left ear, shined a bright light into his eyes, squeezed the quick of his finger nails and toe nails, and moved his head back and forth rapidly. He pointed out that brainwave activity was evident, but had decreased during the day, indicating that the most likely scenario in this case would be a steady decline into a persistent vegetative state. He thanked me profusely as he left. Three of the residents thanked me and the other one, also of Indian origin, gave me an embarrassed look as she walked out.

I feel suffocated. I roll down my window to let fresh air into the stale cab. I remember the note in my back pocket, pull it out, and reread it in the mottled light of streetlights and signs we pass. I pull my cell phone out to dial Elliott's number again. The phone doesn't work at all.

I realize Elliott must be another one of Billy's sexual conquests. They rarely last more than a couple of months. Billy usually prefers men, and there have been a lot of them, but occasionally he encounters a woman who fascinates him either by great beauty, by great talent, or by great wealth or some combination of the three, and he enters into a hasty but passionate relationship, often ending when the woman finds Billy in bed with a man. Neither Billy nor I have ever been able to maintain long term relationships of a romantic nature, another legacy from our past, I believe. My relationships with women have been sporadic, tumultuous, and brief. Except for Luscious, I have only been able to connect with women on a sexual level—a definite prerequisite for rapid relationship deterioration. Nonetheless, this pattern seems to complement my work as a free-lance journalist—forever chasing the next story.

My brother not only inherited the artistic talent from my mother, he also inherited the best looks from both sides of the family. Billy is in his prime at thirty-one years old,

standing six feet two inches, with long muscular limbs, long, thick auburn-brown hair, and unforgettable crystal-green eyes. The symmetry of his facial features is remarkable and bankable.

He started modeling when he first moved to Manhattan after graduating with a degree in fine arts from Syracuse University ten years ago and managed to make more money in five years than most people make in a life time. We equally inherited the estates of our Mother and our Grandmother, Fatgram, which made us both teenage millionaires, although Fatgram structured it so that we would not gain control of our entire inheritance until we each reached thirty years of age. I took over the financial duties for us both after Fatgram died and kept up the contact and meetings with our trust officer, Mr. Barksdale, from the Citizens and Southern Bank in Spartanburg, South Carolina, which by then had been purchased by Nations Bank and now is part of Bank of America. Billy's modeling success earned him five-fold the amount he inherited. Thank God he invested most of those earnings in his co-op and a healthy portfolio of stocks and bonds. It came as no surprise to me when the glamour life succumbed to Billy's deepest calling—one that relentlessly pursues his soul, his entire being, generating cycles of low and high, of creativity and sterility, and of volatile, discordant rhythms of emotions and feelings, forming the fishbowl world peculiar to each and every artist—a calling many people have said drove Mother to suicide, an act my brother has attempted twice before, once as a freshman in college and once during his transition from super model to artist. Few people know that both incidences were botched episodes of autoerotic asphyxiation. Billy is now on the brink of international success in the art world. Art critics and collectors have praised the contemporary, impressionistic paintings he has produced over the past five years—in my mind he has extrapolated from the raw sensitivity in Mother's best works. My whole body tingles with a blast of anxiety-laced adrenaline, and a sick, gnawing feeling spawns a spasm of nausea in my throat as I reconnect to the present. I attempt to calm my insides by taking deep, slow breaths.

The cab pulls up in front of Billy's building. It is not one of the renovated factory buildings, but a new twenty-story luxury building where each floor comprises one unit. Billy has the penthouse with incredible views of the Hudson River and the City. The cab driver is a small, coffee-colored man with dark, beady eyes, greasy dark hair slicked back, and a ratty goatee. He turns toward me and barks at me in a high voice, thick with a Middle Eastern accent, "Tweluv feefty." I swallow hard, pull my money clip from my front pants pocket, push a twenty through the Plexiglas panel and catch a whiff of body odor and wonder if it's from him or me. He glances back at me to see if he owes me any change.

"Keep it," I say, grabbing my bags. I get out and shut the door. He drives off without a word.

I walk up the stairs and push the doorbell. The electric lock immediately slides open; I pull open the heavy glass door and enter the foyer of the building.

"Nice to see you, Mr. Hampton. Late one tonight," stutters Tim, the boyish, blonde doorman, who greets me from behind a mahogany counter concealing security monitors for the building.

"Right," I reply as I walk past toward the elevator.

"Is Billy still out on the town?" Tim stammers with a big smile.

"What? No. He's in the hospital."

"Oh my God, is he alright?" Tim spits out a line of Gs before he hits God then stands up and leans toward me. He is wearing a grey jacket with brass buttons and gold epaulets. Anger flashes through my body like an anaphylactic shock as I recall Billy often buys drugs from Tim. Enraged, I turn toward Tim.

"No, he's not. He's in a coma. They found him unconscious lying in a bathroom stall at Splash," I scowl, tensing with anger which extinguishes the sick feeling in my gut.

In a reflex I sit the bags down and reach over the counter and grab Tim's jacket at the collar, pull him up to my face, gritting my teeth, "Goddamn you Tim. Did you sell him some bad shit?"

I shake him hard and his eyes pop open wide, his stuttering intensifies as he tries to answer me. I think if he is the perpetrator, I'll choke the life out of him.

"No Sir! No Sir! Only good stuff," he is barely able to get out recognizable words. I feel flecks of his spit on my face as his stammering intensifies. He begins to gasp for air and veins bulge on his forehead and throat. He tries to free himself by pushing my chest with his hands.

"Did you ever sell Billy GHB?" I scream, shaking him harder, increasing the pressure on his throat.

"Never," he gasps, turning redder in the face, then grabs my hands to try to remove them from his neck. "Just pot, coke, and E," he stutters almost in a whisper.

I stare into his blue eyes thinking about how fond Billy is of Tim, even calling him sweet little Timmy. "So what if the kid deals a little on the side to make ends meet?" I think, quickly releasing him. He folds over the counter, bursts into tears, gasping for air.

"My God, I almost choked him to death," I think.

Tim cries like a child, his chest heaves and convulses, his mouth opens spasmodically sucking in air with a gurgle. He tries to speak, but only drools. One night a couple of years ago while I was visiting Billy for one of his openings, Billy invited Tim up to have drinks with us. After several martinis and a puff or two on a joint, I fell asleep on a sofa and woke up sometime before dawn. As I passed by Billy's bedroom, I noticed lighted candles on the dresser and bedside tables. Some were dripless and some had burned down into amorphous gobs of wax. I tiptoed in to blow them out and saw Billy

sound asleep with his arms wrapped around Tim. They were both naked and looked so peaceful. Tim opened his eyes and smiled at me as I blew out the last candle.

“Goddammit Hampton, you stupid son of a bitch. This kid loves Billy, he’d never do anything to hurt him,” runs through my mind. Then I wonder if Timmy could be jealous of Billy’s constant string of lovers, but this makes no sense. I know Billy often includes Tim in three-ways, and Billy has told me that Timmy turns tricks and gets three-hundred dollars or more an hour from his clients, so why would he be out to get Billy?

“Tim, Timmy I’m sorry,” I offer and walk behind the counter, turn him towards me and hug him. I draw him close to me and feel his small, but muscular body heaving with sobs. He lays his head on my chest, collapses into me, and I stroke his head.

“Hush, hush,” I whisper. “It’s alright. Hush, hush...”

I stand rocking Timmy gently. Slowly, his sobs subside and my mind wanders. I hear Mother singing to me in her sweet, soft soprano.

“Hush, hush. Hush, hush, little man. Hush, hush, sweet darling. Hush, hush, little baby, don’t say a word. Mother’s gonna buy you a mocking bird. If that mocking bird won’t sing, Mother’s gonna buy you a diamond ring. If that diamond ring don’t shine...” I can smell the Chanel No. 5 and feel the softness of her dress. She is rocking me in her wooden rocker. I am eight years old and have just skinned my knees badly—the Bactine® stings. Little Billy has a hurt look on his face, and he gently holds on to my legs and kisses my knees every so often as Mother rocks and sings.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I’m just so scared, so scared. Why did this have to happen to Billy? Why did this have to happen to my little brother?” I am crying now. As Timmy and I hold each other, swaying and sobbing, the same coldness I came to know so well after Mother’s death enters my spine and begins to wrap around my soul, and I look into the monitor showing Timmy and me. I become weak in the knees and feel faint.

“I need to go upstairs, Timmy.”

He pushes the elevator button, the door opens, and he guides me in with his hands on my back and shoulders. He pushes the hold button and gets my duffle and Billy’s clothes. He sets the bags down, retrieves a plastic card from his jacket and then inserts it into a slot, the door shuts, and the elevator rises to the twentieth floor, stops, and opens directly into Billy’s foyer. Low light emanates from antique Venetian sconces on the mirrored walls, reflecting the limestone floor and the lightly gilded barrel-vaulted ceiling. Clark, Billy’s mongrel dog, sits on the floor smiling at us the way dogs smile, wagging his tail furiously.

“Hey Clark, poor little lonely guy,” I drop to my knees and receive several licks on my face as I hug and stroke Clark’s ruddy-brown coat. He licks my ears and slips a quick lick on my lips. I chuckle.

“Mr. Hampton, I’ll take him out to the terrace,” Tim offers.

“Thanks. Tim, just call me Philip, please.”

“Yes sir, I mean okay, Philip.”

“Where do you want to rest?”

“In Billy’s room, please,” I muster with what little energy I have left.

“Okay, I’ll put your things in his room and then take care of Clark. Come on Clark. Come on boy; let’s go.” Timmy heads off. Clark turns around, gives me a quizzical look, his tail wagging, then trots after Tim.

I walk slowly through the large, exquisitely decorated living room, frequently stopping, remembering my past. Billy created this room as a tribute to Mother and Fatgram. He calls it the museum of our lives. I always feel grounded when I’m in here. Groupings of richly upholstered chairs and sofas sit atop large Oushaks woven from wool dyed with muted shades of yellows, oranges, and blues. Several of Fatgram’s prized early American pieces, including a beautiful Philadelphia highboy chest in the Chippendale style, a lovely pair of Hepplewhite mahogany inlaid Pembroke tables, and a trick leg card table with a carved swag panel, all of which I remember so well from her antebellum mansion—where our father deposited us to live after Mother’s death, just four blocks down Maple Street from our own home in Union, South Carolina—are situated in the room along with some of Fatgram’s best silver pieces. A black Steinway grand piano sits in the northwest corner of the room framed by large Palladian windows, which reveal incredible views of the Hudson River and Manhattan. Antique Chinese blue and white porcelain Mother collected, cherished, and included in her still life works is scattered throughout the room, and major works of art adorn the walls. I glance up at Mother’s painting of Billy and me playing on the beach at Pawley’s Island. It hangs over the large, white wooden mantel with carved columns and black marble facing. It is one of her largest paintings, forty-eight inches wide by thirty-six inches tall, and my favorite. This painting took first place in a major international art competition in 1980, after which her works became highly sought in the art market and regularly brought tens of thousands of dollars each. The painting is framed in a hand-carved, gilded frame that Mother had custom made in Florence. Billy is seated in the sand, legs crossed Indian style, in short red trunks, long lashes pointed toward the drip castle he is building. I’m kneeling down beside him in blue trunks, digging a hole with a green sand shovel to supply fresh wet sand for him. Through an array of small, thickly applied crosshatched patterns using the spectrum of visible colors, Mother painstakingly replicated the light patterns created by the mid afternoon sun on the ocean that bounce from the painting with such intensity that you can feel the August heat radiating. The sound of the crashing waves, seagulls’ cries, and the shrill laughter of playing children fill my mind, and I’m carried back to those long days on Pawley’s where Billy and I spent our summers seining for shrimp in the marshes, fishing off of docks and piers, collecting sand dollars and shells, crabbing using chicken necks and backs for bait, wandering the beaches, and occasionally, when we had

behaved especially well and Mother was in a bright mood, making the trip up to Myrtle Beach to the amusement parks. Ala Mary, our maid, managed the household, kept us from disturbing Mother's drawing and painting sessions, and from interfering with the constant string of guests from the world of art, few of whom ever arrived with children who might offer us new excitement in the summer. Dad would come in off the road from his job as a furniture salesman for weekends once or twice a month and would spend most of his time with us playing on the beaches and fishing, crabbing and clamming in the marshes. Mother would host her little cocktail soirees two or three times a week, which would often prolong late into the night. Billy and I spent most nights out on the sleeping porch attached to our bedroom. We would talk, ponder the enormity of the starlit sky, search for shooting stars, and try to decipher bits of speech, often slurred, from the grown ups which intermittently rose up over laughter and between the rhythmic crashes of the waves, carefully listening for and desperately hoping not to hear the familiar screaming accusations from Mother that signaled a bad fight between my parents. Whenever this occurred, Ala Mary, sometimes still in her white dress she always wore as a uniform or sometimes in her night gown, depending on the lateness of the hour, her large brown eyes and ageless face offering love and compassion, would slip onto the sleeping porch to check on us and offer us reassurance and comfort.

"You chillren okay out here?"

"We're okay," I'd reply followed by Billy's "Yep, just fine Ala Mary."

"They're really going at it tonight, ain't they Ala Mary?" Billy would ask.

"Aren't they, not ain't they," I would correct Billy.

"Don't say ain't or your Mother will faint and your father will fall into a bucket of paint," Billy would sneer back at me.

The sound of breaking glass, Mother's screams, or Dad's bass voice pleading, "For God's sake give it a rest, Eva," would punctuate the night ocean sounds.

"Lawd, lawd-a-mercy, mmmm,mmmm,mmmm," almost in her singing voice with the final "mmmm" in crescendo to a high note, Ala Mary would reply, looking out at the foamy whiteness of the breaking waves, a vision only the thickest fog could hide from our view.

"You boys better promise me to never let that evil booze lay holt a you. It ain't never done yo Mamma no good. No sir. Make her say thangs she don't mean, don't even know she be saying. Sweet Jesus gonna help us, I know he is."

"Are they going to get divorced Ala Mary?" Billy would ask. "If they do can Philly and I come live with you and Newt?"

"Oh, sweet baby, my little man. Dey jes gettin the bad blood out. Yo Mamma and Daddy loves you both a lot. Dey ain't gonna let nuthin bad happen to you." Ala Mary always fabricated something to make us feel better.

“Now go on and go to sleep and have you some sweet dreams. Mornin’ come and I’ll make you buttermilk pancakes. Okay sugars?” She’d kiss us both and head back to her bedroom on the top floor. Ala Mary’s room had a porch too, and sometimes I’d wake up in the night to see her looking down at us or staring out into the Atlantic.

I walk down the hallway into Billy’s bedroom. I sit on his bed adorned with luxurious spreads, linens, goose down pillows, and bolsters in varying shades of green and blue. Mother’s painting of Willie B, Ala Mary’s oldest son, loading a bushel basket of peaches onto a flatbed truck hangs by the entrance to the bathroom. The recessed ceiling light shining down on the painting illuminates Willie B’s muscular arms, the dark shades of his skin in stark contrast to the white tank top he wears. Sweat pours from his forehead and the front of his tank top is soaked with perspiration. The expression on his face is one of satisfaction, even enjoyment of this labor. Billy says this painting is even more sensual and sexual than most of Mother’s nudes. I vaguely remember Willie B and his younger brother, Clevis. They both died in an industrial accident at a toilet factory where they both worked when I was in the first grade. What I remember most about Willie B was the almost alarming contrast between his great strength and gentle demeanor as he meticulously went about tending to Mother’s prized camellias, azaleas, gardenias, and rose bushes in the evenings and on weekends. Some of Mother’s most acclaimed and sought after paintings depict the everyday life of African Americans in the South Carolina piedmont region. Timmy enters the room and removes most of the pillows to a large, ornately carved antique French armoire and stretches me out on top of the covers. He unlaces my Timberlakes and slides them off my feet. He goes into Billy’s bathroom and fills a glass of water and opens the medicine cabinet. I hear the steady clinking rhythm of Clark’s toenails on limestone echoing in the hallway. He comes into the room and with a graceful leap lands by my left side, curls himself up, rests his triangular shaped head on my chest, sighs, moans, and searches in my eyes with his.

“Here Philip, take one of these sleeping pills to help you rest.” Timmy hands me the pill, raises my head, puts the glass to my mouth, and I wash it down. Clark raises his head to observe Timmy and then puts it back down on my chest. The last thing I remember is the fading of Timmy’s syncopated stammering as I fight the dread of waking up.

Chapter 2

“Philip, Philip darling. Wake up, Philip. Wake up darling.” I hear Mother—her sweet soft voice tinged with a slight, but sophisticated southern drawl beckons to me. Deeply asleep, I try to force myself to begin the climb back to lucidity.

“Philip, darling. Wake up. Mother needs to talk to you darling.” Her voice is much louder now, with more energy—urging in reverberating tones. I bolt upright in bed, shivering. I notice I have on only a pair of red and grey striped, flannel Calvin Klein boxers. I look around to find a tee shirt, a sheet, anything to cut the chill, but the bed is gone, and I am sitting on a cold stone floor in a dark hallway.

“Please, I need to speak with you. Please come to Mother.” Her speech is now slurred, drawn-out, out of phase, deep, now moving fast and high pitched, time warped like a record spinning from 33 to 78 rpms, up and down. I look up at a strip of light shining through a doorway at the end of a long hallway.

“Philip darling, please listen to Mother. Philip, come to Mother!” I jump up and sprint down the hall. My senses read old mausoleum, and I bristle. The sound of my flat, bare feet slapping the cold stones overlaps Mother’s beckoning calls. The strip of light does not seem to be getting any closer, but I keep running hard. My heart pumps madly as I sprint towards Mother’s voice. The mist thickens. I am startled—something feathery brushes my face.

“What the hell was that?” I spit out. I keep running. I hear a primordial screech far down the hall. The sound is unfamiliar, threatening and demonic.

“Mother, Mother, are you down there?” I scream as I run. Something dark flies past my head, and I feel another brush of a feather followed by a sharp pinch on my left side. Another screech resounds, then another and another—a blood chilling cacophony.

“What the fuck?” I choke out, hyperventilating, still running. I look back to see nothing but the dark mist. I look forward again, and, to my horror, the light is gone as is Mother’s voice. Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh—I sense things flying all around me now, brushing all over my body, pecking at me and drawing blood.

“Oh shit, oh God, Mother!” I scream out covering my head with my arms. I keep running, but I’m out of breath and the screeching, dark winged creatures have descended upon me, smacking directly into me from all sides, tearing my boxers off in pieces with their beaks and talons.

“Help me!” I scream and stumble over a dark winged creature. I cover my head again and crouch down, burying my face into my thighs. I feel them land on my back and all around me, pecking me, feasting on me, ripping the flesh off my back and arms.

“Why me God? Why me?” I whimper.

Suddenly, I feel an incredibly warm sensation all over my body—blood oozing over my torn flesh. I sense a strong light.

“Philip, darling, where have you been, sweet heart? I’ve been calling you for such a long time.” I open my eyes and look up. The sun is bright and warm; the terrible birds are gone. I am unharmed.

Standing up, I look around in disbelief. I am home, back in Mother’s garden beside her cottage studio. Mother stands in front of her easel deeply engaged in a landscape. She holds her round palette board in her left hand and dabs at it with a brush in her right hand. It is April because blooming azaleas and climbing roses are abundant; the sweet fragrance of honeysuckle hangs on the breeze. The sun sparkles throwing shadows over the thick spring grass. My ears rejoice with the calls of cardinals, robins, wrens and mockingbirds. Mother wears a white sleeveless blouse and a beautiful pink skirt. I know she is barefoot; I know her toenails glisten bright red. She turns toward me smiling, motioning with her brush for me to come to her.

I feel embarrassed because I do not want her to see my naked body. She has never seen me as a grown man, especially a naked one. I start to cover my genitals and look down to discover that I am not a grown man at all, but a boy dressed in khaki shorts with white Buster Browns, white knee socks, a white shirt with a clip on yellow tie with blue stripes and a blue blazer with gold buttons—my Easter Sunday outfit when I was seven years old. Everything is moving in a type of slow motion—video clips playing with frequent pauses. Diaphanous, gossamer-like, fabric panels, in an array of tinted pastels, stir and float in the breeze, gently brushing my face and legs. I run toward Mother. It takes an eternity to get closer to her. Mother looks out over her garden and continues painting. I look at the painting, but it is not a painting of the garden at all. It is a beautiful water scene, a river flowing through a wooded area. On the near bank of the river is a sort of small fishing pier. On the far side is a blue shack. The reflections of the shack, the trees, and the sky in the water are extraordinarily beautiful. Mother’s water scenes are my favorite—this is one I do not recall ever seeing.

“Mother, I’ve missed you so much,” I cry out and run with my arms outstretched toward her. She puts the palette and brush down on her red Adirondack chair and picks me up, hugging me, and twirls me around. I bury my face in her neck and my whole body absorbs her warmth, her essence, her force of life. I hear the screen door on the back porch slam shut and look up to see Ala Mary, Billy, and Bonnie Belle, Mother’s fat beagle, walking toward us. Billy is five years old and in his Easter outfit also. Ala Mary is dressed in her usual white dress with white shoes and is carrying a plate of chocolate chip cookies and a glass pitcher of milk. The smell of freshly baked cookies envelops me. My mouth waters. Mother puts me down and runs toward Billy and Ala Mary. She picks up Billy, hugs and kisses him and twirls him around. I run over to them. I lean over to pet Bonnie Belle whose tail and back end wag as she licks my face.

“Miss Eva, I told you if I was to mix up a fresh batch of chocolate chip cookies, these little uns be coming out the woodwork for them,” Ala Mary says grinning.

“What would I ever do without you Ala Mary?” Mother smiles at Ala Mary, picking Billy up as he reaches his arms up to her.

“You never have to worry bout that purty chile,” replies Ala Mary in the same loving tone Mother must have known her entire life.

Mother, holding Billy with his sleepy face resting on her right shoulder as if he’s just awakened from a nap, Ala Mary, and Bonnie Belle turn away from me and walk toward the house. I immediately start to follow, but the faster I walk, the farther away they are from me. They are getting closer to the house now, yet I am no closer to them.

“We love you Philip,” Mother’s voice echoes.

My feet start pounding the ground furiously.

“Mother, wait for me!” I scream as loud as I can. They do not turn around, but walk up the back porch steps.

“Wait! Mother! Ala Mary! Billy!”

“Don’t leave me!” My throat clutches and aches. Tears stream down my face, and I keep running, getting no closer to the house. Suddenly, two of the sheer panels curl around my wrists tightly, pulling my arms back. I can no longer run. A panel curls around my neck and constricts like a boa. I scream to Mother as everything turns cold, fading to black, and I am running once more down the dark hall. I am running and running, and I hear an excruciatingly loud blast of a horn or a siren. My eyes fly open; I look over to my left. Billy’s telephone is ringing. The digital alarm clock reads eleven am. I am shivering, my shirt soaked in a cold sweat. Adrenaline rushes into my bloodstream. I am fully dressed except for shoes. My erection pushes against my pants; my bladder is painfully full. I am shaken to my core by the dream. I reach over Clark who looks at me with sleepy eyes and pick up the phone but cannot speak.

“Mr. Hampton? Mr. Hampton are you there?” I recognize Nurse Ostro’s soft voice, which hits me like a sharp punch in the gut and strangles my throat. I can’t breathe.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“I’m so very sorry. Your brother passed away about twenty minutes ago,” she says. My mind recalls the smell of her fabric softener and creates the image of this large, peaceful woman, with tears in her eyes delivering this news to me, which somehow relieves my tight throat. I gasp for air.

“Oh God,” I say into the phone and begin to cry out loud. Clark pushes his cold black nose to my face, licking my tears.

“I’m so, so sorry,” she says softly and then remains silent until my crying subsides.

“He went into a convulsive state, that is, he started having severe seizures nearly an hour ago. We tried our best. I tried your cell phone several times, but just got your voice mail. I finally found your brother’s number in our records.”

“Were you? Were you with him when he died?”

“Yes, he was not alone. We had a team of doctors and nurses and technicians in with him. I, I held his hand as much as I could. He was not alone,” she replies, and I hear her sniffing back tears.

“Thank you Miss Ostro.”

I hang up the phone, Clark whimpers, wags his tail slowly, looking into my eyes. I pull his compact, muscular body next to mine, cuddle around him, letting his soft fur absorb my tears. A sigh rocks his entire body, then he relaxes into my pain—his pain.

Chapter 3

The night mist has dissipated leaving the city framed in a pale blue sky, tinged with shades of pink. A chilly breeze rustles the potted evergreens on Billy's expansive rooftop terrace. I remember teasing him that the only reason he wanted this unit was so that he could land a helicopter up here. City noises fill my head as I watch Clark sniffing the tender young blades of grass emerging on the lawn area Billy created for him. The coffee mug warms my hands, and I crave a cigarette. I haven't smoked in years—Billy does occasionally. I start back inside to search.

"What am I doing? The last thing I need to do is start smoking again," I tell myself. I feel numb all over, zombie-like. I inherently sense the nicotine will somehow assuage the pain in my body, in my soul. When I had a painful case of shingles around my neck several years ago, the only thing that gave me relief was smoking. I smoked until they went away, about three weeks, and then no longer craved nicotine. I head back inside. Clark hunches up on his haunches on the grass, splays out his back feet, sticks his tail straight up, makes a 360 degree turn so that he resembles a hovering helicopter and initiates his morning constitutional, as Fatgram would call it, so I leave the terrace door open for him.

I find a couple of unopened packs of Marlboro reds, a sleek, onyx butane lighter, and a stash of European chocolate bars in a drawer in the wet bar. I smile, Billy is such a chocolate whore, and I grab a pack of the Marlboros, instinctively pound it on my left wrist, peel it open, pull out a cigarette and light it. The lighter emits a steady rushing sound sending up a uniform, intense, compact blue flame—a mini welding torch. I inhale deeply. An instant nicotine rush cascades through my body. After a couple of puffs and sips of coffee, I begin to focus on the things I must do. Clicking toenails on limestone divert my attention. Clark arrives looking up at me, wagging his tail.

"Bet you want some breakfast, boy?"

He jumps up planting his front paws on my waist.

"Okay, let's go get you some food."

He jumps down. I snuff out the cigarette in an ashtray and bend over to scratch his back. He performs a little dance by curling his rump around toward his face, wagging his tail, repeatedly sticking out his tongue, and making intermittent grunts. I smile, thankful he is here with me.

"What am I gonna do with you now?"

Clark continues his dance and then pops a lick right on my mouth. I laugh out loud—a small joy. Some internal dam temporarily holds my tears back. I get up and walk to the kitchen trying to remember in which cabinet Billy keeps Clark's food. The kitchen is

large by New York standards with stainless steel appliances, black granite counter tops with flecks of sparkling gold, and beautiful wooden cabinets stained a light golden color. It has the most contemporary feel of any room in the condominium. I look inside several cabinets before I find his food in a concealed pantry. He waits patiently beside his bowl while I pour in some of the dry food. When I'm finished he begins to eat, and I wonder how a mutt from the projects of Louisville got such good manners. I pick up a phone on the counter and dial Luscious's number.

"Hello, Philip?"

"Hi Lush, Billy's gone. He died around ten thirty this morning," I say as I squeeze the muscles in my face and push my left fist into my forehead.

"Darling, I'm so sorry. I just can't believe this has happened—it's so unfair," her voice cracks.

"I, I feel so lost. I keep hoping it's all a bad dream.... that I'll wake up any second, but, I know it's real."

"You know I'm here for you. I'll be up this afternoon. I'll take the three pm nonstop—US Air," her words are interlaced with sniffles and sobs.

"Thanks, I hate to impose, but it would mean a lot to me to have you here."

"It's done. I'll go pack right now."

"What about David? Won't he mind?"

"Fuck David. He's a big boy, he can fend for himself," she asserts followed by a big sniff and loud throat clearing.

"Sounds like you two are getting along well."

"I'll fill you in tonight."

"Okay."

"I've been dialing your mobile all morning and just got your voice mail. I guess you were with Billy."

"No, I came back to his place to get some rest around four this morning. I dropped my phone and busted it at the hospital. I got a call at eleven this morning that he had gone into seizures and then died."

"Oh, God."

"Lush, this is so weird. When I got that call I was dreaming that I was at home again watching Mother painting in the garden. Ala Mary came out with Billy and Bonnie Belle. Then they all went into the house. I tried to follow, but couldn't, and they wouldn't wait for me. It was awful."

"Oh my."

"Yeah, well, can you get a cab to Billy's?"

"Sure."

"Need the address?"

"No, I know it."

“Good. Well, I need to get in touch with Dad. I couldn’t reach him yesterday.”

“Okay. Philip, I’ll stay as long as you need me.”

“Thanks Lush.”

“How’s Clark?”

“He’s sitting right here waiting for you.”

“Good. See you tonight.”

“Bye.”

I hang up the phone and bend down to pet Clark again.

“Clark, your mommy’s coming to see you tonight,” I say as if talking to a baby. He wags his tail and pants.

“Aren’t you the lucky one? She saved you from the streets. Yes she did.” He seems completely happy as he jumps up putting his front legs on my thighs and positioning his face next to mine. I give him a bear hug, and then stand up to call Dad.

“Hello,” Dad answers his cell phone after the first ring.

“Where are you?”

“We’re just walking off the plane.”

“Brenda’s with you?”

“Yes. How’s Billy?”

“Dad,” I break into sobs. “He died this morning.”

I discern the sound of Dad weeping through the recitation of boarding instructions by a woman of Hispanic origin.

“Dad are you there? Dad?” There is no answer, just more announcements and shuffling sounds.

“Philip, it’s Brenda. I’m so sorry. It’s almost incomprehensible.”

“Yes it is. Is...how’s Dad?”

“He can’t talk right now.”

“I guess y’all were going straight to the hospital?”

“That’s right.”

“Did you book a hotel yet?”

“No, it all happened so fast. Charles didn’t get your message until late yesterday afternoon. We had just arrived at Disney World with the kids for Spring break. We got the first flight we could this morning.”

“Are the kids with you?”

“No, we put them on a plane back to St. Louis. My sister-in-law will keep them.”

“I see. Well, why don’t y’all just come here to Billy’s first?”

“Yes, I suppose that’s the best thing to do now. We’ll see you in a bit.”

“Okay, bye.”

“Bye.”

“Shit,” I say to Clark. I have not seen Dad since one of Billy’s openings a couple of years ago. I dread this encounter, but I resolve as I light another cigarette that I will try not to let my bitterness towards Dad thwart my responsibilities to Billy. I walk back into Billy’s bedroom and find my backpack. Holding the cigarette between my teeth, I unzip the pack and search for the will. A dark shadow crosses my mind.

“Did going into my office at the last minute early Sunday morning, getting the copy of Billy’s will and stuffing it into my back pack constitute the karmic ‘straw that broke the camel’s back’ resulting in his death today?”

I cannot pursue this pattern of thinking. Luscious says I’ve always exacerbated my feelings of filial responsibility to an unhealthy realm. If I tell her this newest fear, she would call it ludicrous and tell me how conceited I am thinking my taking the will would contribute to Billy’s death. Now my brain is telling me that if I had not insisted that we both hire estate-planning attorneys while only in our mid twenties, this would not have happened. The ash of the cigarette has grown and falls to the floor. I go into the bathroom, turn on the faucet, stick the lit cigarette under it, and then toss it into the toilet and flush. My face is red and puffy again. I set the will on the counter and splash cold water onto my face.

“Dad and Brenda will be here within an hour. Pull yourself together, Hampton.”

I dry my face with a towel, pick up the will, and go sit on a chaise lounge in the bedroom. Clark hops up beside me and sniffs the will. I think about how my teenage years were punctuated by death—thirteen years old, mom; sixteen years old, Ala Mary; and nineteen years old, Fatgram. Dad might as well have been dead as little as we saw of him during those years. These deaths drew me closer to Billy yet away from my core self. Billy grew more defiant and reckless with each death, seeking a realm of emotionless feeling that I believe drove him to so many peaks and valleys. But my gut feeling is that he did not intentionally commit suicide. I thumb through the will and find the letter attached to it where Billy tells me his desires. My own will has a similar letter for Billy. I read the letter, even though I already know what it says.

May 23, 2000

Dear Philip:

This letter sets forth my wishes in the event of my death.

It is my desire, upon my death, to have my body cremated and my ashes put into Mother’s large Kangxi Blue and White Ginger Jar with the Three Friends of Winter scene, which is usually kept in my living room and is cataloged in our collection of Chinese porcelain as C-1044 (marked on the bottom of the piece). Within a week of my death, I desire that a wake in the form of a cocktail buffet be held at my residence in New York. At a

minimum those people listed in my Mac's Address Book database as Friends, Family, or Business Associates should be invited. Should you survive me, I ask you to carry out these instructions as you see fit. Should you not survive me to implement these instructions, the designated Executor, who shall be my trust company, Bank of America, shall carry out my wishes.

I desire for this wake to be a memorable event with the same high level of entertaining utilized for which I am generally known. No expense should be spared for food, drink, and flowers.

Within six months after my death, I desire that my ashes be taken and scattered in thirds at the following places: 1) over our beloved swimming hole at Harmon's Fork Creek on the farm formerly owned by our late grandmother, Ina Robertson Eades, in Union, South Carolina; 2) over the Marquesa Atoll off the coast of Key West, Florida, transported on a flats fishing boat by my trusted fishing guide, Stan Shultz, should Stan survive me; and 3) along the shore of Gouverneur Beach in St. Barts. My preferred wish is that my ashes be scattered in the order I have listed above and within a period of two weeks. My estate will provide the funds for all aspects of the trip with only first class travel and accommodations, including all meals and drinks, allowed.

My intent is that the wake be a joyous celebration of my life. Should you be the one dispersing my ashes, Philip, I hope you see it as a celebration of three places I dearly love.

Your loving brother,
Billy Hampton

Heaviness descends upon my chest, like a big iron hook waiting for some force to manipulate it into action—an action I sense will result in my evisceration and the leaking out of my soul. I hug Clark again and swallow hard.

A page showing Billy has previously contracted with Riverside Funeral Home for his cremation follows the letter. I force myself to get up, grab the telephone off the bedside table and dial the number.

"Riverside Funeral Home. How may I help you?" The voice of an elderly woman greets me.

"Yes, I'd like to make cremation arrangements for my brother." I feel hollow and emotionless as I say these words.

"Certainly. One moment while I transfer you to one of our counselors."

"Thank you."

"This is Mr. Henderson. May I help you?"

“Yes, my name is Philip Hampton. My brother, William Hampton, died this morning. He has made arrangements with your funeral home.”

“Please allow me to express my deepest condolences, Mr. Hampton,” he says in a rehearsed baritone.

“Thank you.”

“One moment sir while I pull up his account.”

“Yes, Mr. Hampton, your brother has arranged for a simple cremation.”

“Yes, that’s right. He is at St. Vincent’s Hospital.”

“Fine sir, we will take care of everything.”

“Thank you. Would you be able to deliver his ashes to his residence by Thursday?”

“Of course. We can do it on Wednesday if you prefer.”

“That’s fine. What time?”

“Whatever you choose, sir.”

“Let’s say 2 pm.”

“Yes sir. Is his residence still on Warren Street?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Will you need any permanent receptacle?”

“No thank you.”

“May we assist you with any arrangements for a memorial service?”

“No thank you.”

“Fine. We’ll see you Wednesday at two pm. Again, may I express my deepest condolences.”

“Thank you.” I hang up quickly, thankful that call is out of the way.

“Okay Clark buddy, let’s go check his address book on his Mac.”

Clark hears the “let’s go” part and must think I’m going to take him for a walk because he starts prancing around, whimpering with an urgent high pitch, then dashes out of the bedroom. I proceed out of the bedroom, down the hall, toward the living room. Clark runs towards me with his leash in his mouth.

“What a smart dog you are! Hey buddy, we aren’t going out just yet. I’ll take you after while.”

His head drops a bit and the speed of his tail wagging slows.

“Come on, let’s go into the kitchen. I’ll get you a treat.”

Clark follows me, still holding his leash in his mouth. I go to the pantry containing his food and retrieve a rawhide bone from its package and hand it to Clark. He smells the bone, drops his leash, takes the bone and disappears. Closing the pantry cabinet I see a package of plastic bags made for picking up dog feces, and I remember Clark’s morning constitutional. I grab a bag, pick up the leash, put in on a counter and head out to the terrace, but I think about Elliott Fields. I reach into my back pocket. The letter is still

there. I head back to the kitchen and grab the telephone and dial his number. I hear faint ringing and lots of crackling noise.

“Hello?” I hear the faint sound of a man’s voice.

“Elliott? Elliott? Can you hear me?” I inquire in a loud voice.

“Yes, bad connection, But I can hear.”

“It’s Philip Hampton—”

“Is there any change with Billy?”

“He died this morning—”

“Christ no. I—” The connection sounds like bacon frying, and I can’t make out what Elliott is saying.

“Elliott, I’m having trouble hearing you.”

“Can you hear me now? Philip—”

“Yes, that’s better—”

“Philip, I’m so sorry. I feel like a jerk. I, I should’ve stayed with him. But, but the doctors told me it was unlikely his condition would change—he seemed stable. They said he would probably be in a vegetative state for years. Unless, unless the family decided to...to take him off life support.”

“Yes, I know—”

“This is the biggest shoot of my career—I’m the feature model for next year’s Ralph Lauren Men’s Resort Collection—I’m under contract—I...I just had to go—”

“Elliott, it’s okay. Billy would’ve wanted you to go—”

“I kind of thought the same thing. What a guy. We’ve just been dating a couple of months and now this—” The sizzling sounds intensify. I wait a moment as they fade.

“Elliott, can you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“Well, Billy had been working all day long, and I was getting ready for this shoot—to leave on Sunday. We went out to dinner Friday night—we’d already said our goodbyes. I mean I stayed at his place Friday night. We got up Saturday morning, took Clark for a walk, grabbed a bagel and coffee on the way, and then I went home.”

“I see.”

“Well you know how spontaneous Billy is.”

“Oh yes—”

“Well, he calls me just before midnight on Saturday. He’s ecstatic. He’s just completed the final painting of his series on sexuality he’s been working on for the past couple of years. He says he now understands the key to this series. I mean, I’ve never heard him sound so happy. He tells me to throw on my clothes and dancing shoes and meet him at Splash in forty-five minutes. I say okay.” As he talks, I walk into Billy’s

studio to observe the painting. I gasp audibly when I see it. Clark looks up from chewing his bone in his dog bed.

“My God, this painting—”

“Yes, it’s incredible. I saw it Saturday when it was almost finished. He called the painting Blood Brothers. It’s almost abstract, isn’t it? He’s so protective of his work; it’s the only one in the series he let me see. I think there are about fifty others.”

“Yes, he told me that too.”

“I guess that’s why he was in such high spirits. Anyway, I arrived at Splash about one-fifteen a.m. The place was packed. Billy was at the bar, talking to some people and drinking a martini. From his looks, I’d say he had already had a couple. Anyway, he hugs me, grabs my hand—I didn’t even have time to order a drink. We go to the dance floor and start dancing. He is wild—such energy. After dancing for about half an hour, we’re both covered in sweat. I tell him I need to rest and get some water. He says no water, champagne to celebrate his new painting and the end of the series. I tell him maybe one glass because I don’t want to be hung over for my trip.”

“It sounds like he was on a roll—” I cannot stop looking at the painting.

“Definitely, but a good one—”

“Was he doing any drugs, coke, E?”

“Well, well we go stand at a table and he orders a bottle of Cristal and two waters. The whole time he’s telling me the significance of this painting—how it’s unlocking his fucked up childhood. Sorry, but that’s what he said. You know he’s been in therapy the last couple of years. You probably know he hated it at first, but lately I think he was getting a lot out of it. Anyway, he said he wouldn’t mind having a little snort or two to celebrate. The champagne came and we toasted the painting and my big shoot. Some friends came over to see what we were celebrating. Billy tells them and orders another bottle so they can join us. Then he whispers to me that he’s got to pee and find a little coke. I tell him okay, but that I can’t stay too much longer. He smiles, says okay, kisses me on the cheek and says he’ll be back in five minutes. That, that was the last thing he ever said to me,” I hear Elliott weeping as the crackling intensifies again.

“Elliott, it’s okay. Are you there?”

“Yes. Well anyhow, he doesn’t come back in five minutes. I drink my glass of champagne and keep talking to our friends. The place just keeps getting more packed. I look at my watch, it’s three a.m., so I go searching for Billy. I look everywhere: in the bathrooms, on the dance floor, other sections of the club—nothing. I get a little pissed and think if he’s ditched me, especially for drugs, I’m gonna leave and just not call him until he calls me.”

“That sounds like my brother, especially when he’s having a good time.”

“Yeah, well all the sudden I see commotion around one of the men’s rooms. I don’t know, but I just had a bad feeling. So, I push through the crowd and into the rest room.

There are several people by the handicapped stall. I look in and see Billy slouched back by the toilet. Two guys are trying to slap his face to revive him—there's vomit on his chin and on his shirt. Some guy who was a doctor takes over. We pull him out and the doctor starts CPR. He wasn't breathing—"Elliott begins to cry again. The tears flow from my eyes as I look at Blood Brothers.

"The doctor is working furiously, breathing into his mouth, pounding his chest, but he will not breathe. I don't know what to do. Suddenly the paramedics arrive. They stick a needle in his chest—it was so awful." Elliott's speech is interrupted by sniffs and gurgling sounds. My tears stream to the floor. Clark stands beside me looking up at me.

"They get a faint pulse and keep applying some kind of mask—oxygen I guess. They put him on a stretcher and take him out. They're asking me all kinds of questions. I answer as best as I can. We get in the ambulance and on the way they have to do a tracheotomy and put him on a mobile ventilator. They've given me his wallet so I go talk to the admissions people in the emergency room while they take him away. By four twenty a.m., the doctor, Dr. Seng, is telling me that Billy is essentially brain dead from lack of oxygen—they expect from ingesting GHB. I call 411 and thank God you're listed in Atlanta, so that's when I called you."

"Yes."

"Well, they put him in the ICU, and I stayed with him until ten o'clock. I called my agent to explain—to see if she could get them to postpone the shoot. She was sympathetic, but she said the shoot couldn't be postponed and that they would simply use an alternate if I didn't show up. So I wrote you a note, and I left. I'm really sorry; I should've stayed." The sound of a man weeping pulses through the static on the line. He sniffs, and I imagine him wiping his nose on his sleeve. He must have extraordinary looks, and I try to picture what he looks like.

"Elliott, Elliott, it's okay. It's not your fault. Please, it's okay."

"You really think so?" His voice is childlike.

"Yes, I do. Listen, did you and Billy ever take GHB?"

"No, never. Just some coke and pot, not even ecstasy."

"That's what I thought. Where do you think he got the GHB?"

"Don't have a clue. I wonder if someone could've spiked his drink? It happens, you know."

"Yes, I know. Usually it's a case of a guy doing that to a girl so he can have sex with her—the so-called 'date rape drug'. Isn't that right?"

"Yeah, I believe. I just don't know how it happened, Philip. I should've gone looking for him earlier. I should've—"

"No, don't go there, it's not your fault."

"Well, I guess...."

"When are you coming back, Wednesday?"

“We’re running behind—they say Thursday now, but I can—”

“No, finish your shoot. We’re having a wake at Billy’s at six o’clock on Friday. I hope you’ll come.”

“Of course. When’s the funeral?”

“There won’t be one. He wanted to be cremated.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Well, thanks for talking to me, Elliott. I know how hard that was.”

“Oh, well, sure. I mean, it’s just so sad—”

“Yes. Well, I’m looking forward to seeing you on Friday.”

“Right. Me too.”

“Listen, Elliott, take my cell number.”

“Okay, I’ll program it in my phone, go ahead.”

“404-555-0123. Got it?”

“Yes.”

“Good luck with the rest of your shoot. Goodbye.” I start to hang up the phone.

“Hey Philip, Philip, you still there?”

“Yes.”

“Well, uhm, well, that painting Blood Brothers?”

“Yes.”

“Well, uhm, Billy told me it is about you and him having sex together as children.” I’m stunned, almost speechless.

“Jesus. Well lots of brothers beat off together as kids. I guess that’s what he was talking about.”

“Yeah, but he went into it a little deeper than that. I just thought I ought to let you know what I know.”

“Right. I mean sure. Uhm, let’s talk more about this when you get back to New York,” I offer in a weak tone.

“Oh sure. I’m not trying to pry or anything. I just wanted to let you know what Billy told me. One other thing, Philip. Billy gave me a small package. It looks like a necklace case, and it’s wrapped in silver wrap with a white ribbon. He asked me to leave it with the concierge here, but not before ten in the morning on Tuesday. I am to leave it for someone to pick up. He said he was returning something to a friend he had borrowed. Do you know anything about that?”

“No, I don’t. I don’t have any idea, but I guess you better drop it by the desk in the morning like Billy asked.”

“Right, I’ll do it. Philip, I’d really like to sit down and talk with you when I get back. This is all so weird.”

“Okay. We’ll do that. I appreciate everything you’ve done, Elliott. See you on Friday. Good bye.” I hang up the phone. I feel washed out, drained, weakened beyond

repair. I sit on a stool staring at Blood Brothers. The large painting conveys motion and is awash in red shades of blood that appear to flow over and through the painting. Three figures are holding hands as if in a circle playing ring around the roses or something. The figures are abstract, but definitely two small boys and one tall man—they all have manifestations of penises and hearts, all interconnected by very faint blood vessels. The faces are less abstract, but each face is painted as a moving image and portrays a varying range of emotions from dejection to ecstasy. I recognize my face as a boy, Billy's face as a boy, and undeniably, Uncle Adrian's face as the man. Chills race up the back of my neck as I realize the figures are circling a camera on a tripod and are at the edge of a creek. I let myself go back there. The buzz of dragonflies, chirp of birds, and rush of water resound; the summer sun beats down; the dense smell of the wet, red, creek bank clay hangs in the air. This is the place where we became Blood Brothers.

“Boys, this heat feels as if we're on the Indian subcontinent; it's just as oppressive,” Uncle Adrian exclaims as he turns knobs and adjusts the aluminum (Uncle Adrian pronounces this as aluminium which always makes Billy and me laugh) legs to level out his tripod on one of the large boulders surrounding our swimming hole. He looks up at us, squinting his pale blue eyes in response to stinging sweat and glaring midday sun, pulls a blue bandanna from his right pocket and mops his forehead and eyes.

“Yep and you're white as a lily, Uncle Adrian. You're gonna get a bad burn out here,” I say.

“Right. I'll try to keep to the shade. Ala Mary was kind enough to send along some sunscreen lotion. Perhaps you can rub some on my back in a bit?”

“Okay.”

“Why is India called a subcontinent, Uncle Adrian?” Billy asks in a loud voice without turning around to look at us as he squats in the shallows poking around for crawdads with a stick. I'm almost ten years old, going into the fifth grade, Billy's just going into the third grade, and I rush to say, “It's because it is the bottom part of the continent of Asia, the part below the tallest mountains in the world, the Himalayas.”

“Oh, I know about the Himalayas,” Billy looks up with a twisted expression on his face, annoyed that I spit out the answer. “That's where the world's tallest mountain, Mount Everest is, and I'm gonna climb to the top of it when I grow up.”

“Both of you chaps are right. The Indian subcontinent is the vast peninsula surrounded by the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal which lies south of the Himalayas, which, in turn, indeed make up the world's highest mountain range where that most magnificent and tallest of all the mountains, Mount Everest, sits.”

Billy and I look at each other and break out in belly laughs.

“What's so funny you little scoundrels?”

“You said Himalias when it should be Himalayas,” I say still laughing.

“Ah, how many times do I have to tell you that Brits pronounce things differently than you Yanks,” he replies with a big smile that reveals his teeth, crooked and nicotine stained.

“Fancy a crisp, Billy, or perhaps a sweet?” I say, continuing to mock Uncle Adrian who is looking at Billy who holds up a large crawdad, its legs and claws combing thin air.

“Look how big this one is!” Billy stands up and brings the specimen to me for closer inspection.

Uncle Adrian walks over with a worried expression on his face, “Yes, quite big isn’t it Billy? But, for Heaven’s sake, put the poor bugger back in the creek. You’re scaring the wits out of it.”

Laughing, Billy thrusts the wriggling crawdad towards Uncle Adrian’s face. Uncle Adrian gasps and jumps back, “You nasty devil, I said put that little langoustine back in the creek.”

Billy wrinkles his forehead, shades his eyes with his left hand, looks up at Uncle Adrian, and says, “This ain’t no langoustine; it’s a craw daddy, a granddaddy craw daddy.”

“Langouste is the French word for crawfish, and you better not let your grandmamma hear you using that bastardly contraction, ‘ain’t’,” Uncle Adrian walks back to his tripod. “Now put him back in Billy. Be a good chap.”

“Okay, okay, but he’ll just end up being supper for some old fat daddy coon anyway.” He shrugs, walks back over to the shallows, kneels down, and lets the crawdad go. It quickly scampers under some submerged decaying leaves. Billy starts turning over rocks in the creek, exploring for other creatures. I pick up some pebbles and start skipping them over the swimming hole. A Belted Kingfisher swoops over the swimming hole protesting our presence with its loud trill.

“Uncle Adrian, when can we get in? It’s hot enough to fry an egg out here,” I complain as I try to get a pebble to skip more than four times.

“Yeah, we shudda got an egg, Philly, and cracked it on one of these rocks. I betcha a dime it’ll fry today,” Billy says.

“No need to bet, it’ll fry alright,” I reply.

“You boys hang on a bit. Let me get the Hasselblad set up here, and then we’ll get in. I want to document our historic ceremony today,” Uncle Adrian smiles as he mounts the camera on the tripod. His shirt is unbuttoned and I see glistening trails of sweat running through the light red brown hair on his chest. This spring I began developing a fine layer of peach fuzz along my upper lip, and a few darker blonde hairs had appeared in my pubic region and under my arms. I wonder if I’ll have a hairy chest like Uncle Adrian and Dad. I wonder when I will sprout a beard and get to shave.

It's a Sunday morning, a special Sunday, the fourth of July, and Uncle Adrian just arrived a couple of days ago. We are going to have a big party with fireworks tonight at Fatgram's. Billy and I are so excited but we are also excited because this summer Uncle Adrian says Billy and I are old enough to join a top-secret club just for guys. It is called The Blood Brothers Club. Today is the special day we will conduct our initiation ceremony at Fatgram's swimming hole. Billy and I have been full of excitement and anticipation all day, lying awake last night, speculating about all aspects of the club.

"Are we gonna go skinny dipping today?" Billy asks as he pees into the creek, aiming to hit some exposed rocks in the middle. I hear the camera shutter clicking.

"Oh yes, that's part of the secret ceremony. Let me just get some test shots here, then we'll get started. I think the light will be perfect on the other side of the swimming hole." Uncle Adrian makes some final adjustments to the camera, attaches a long black wire to it with a button on the end, and begins to unroll the wire.

"What's that cord?" I ask as I observe him placing it on the bank, heading to the other side of the swimming hole.

"It's a shutter release. I can take pictures of the ceremony over here while the camera remains on the other side of the pool."

Uncle Adrian takes black and white photographs with this old camera and develops them himself. He has a dark room in his apartment in New York City. Sometimes, he lets Billy and me help in the dark room, which is great fun so long as we don't touch anything. Mother says Uncle Adrian is known for his fine art photography.

"You boys go grab the lunch basket, the blankets, and my leather attaché. Put them on this big rock in the shade here. Then we'll get started."

"Yippee!" Billy yells and we both run up to Mother's red Alpha Romeo Spider parked up on the dirt road. I grab the large basket which Ala Mary has filled with cold, fried chicken, potato salad, slices of cantaloupe, biscuits and honey, pecan pie and a thermos filled with sweet iced tea. Billy takes the blankets and the briefcase and we scamper down the side of the creek bank as fast as we can.

"Hand me the satchel, love," Uncle Adrian says to Billy. "Spread the blanket there on the sand in the shade. Philly, you put the basket over on that rock."

"Okay," I say. "Uncle Adrian, I've gotten really good at archery this summer," I boast.

"Oh have you?" he replies as he opens the briefcase, peers in, sticks his right hand into it, moving it around as if he's searching for something.

"Yes, I have, haven't I, Billy?"

Billy, on his knees in the sand spreading out the blanket with his hands, turns his head toward us, sighs and says, "Yeah, he's pretty good." I am thrilled at his response because, even though Billy is younger than I, he's blessed with physical coordination and is much more of a natural athlete than I, especially in sports involving balls. Everyone

was amazed last autumn, when Dad first exposed us to archery, that I could consistently hit the target more than Billy could, and I enjoyed a great deal of satisfaction in that revelation, so I've practiced whenever I can, which hasn't been that often because Dad won't allow us to use the bows and arrows without adult supervision.

"Really, you're quite the little toxophilite," Uncle Adrian replies as he continues to fish around inside the case.

"Little what?" I ask.

"Toxophilite," he replies.

"What's that?" I ask.

"Oh, just a word describing a lover of archery," he replies with a slight grin on his face.

"Wow that's a strange word," I observe.

"Not really," he replies, "It's from Greek, you see. *Toxon* means bow and *philos* means love. That gives you bow lover, and that's what you are, no?"

"Well, I guess," I reply. "Gee, you are the smartest person I know, Uncle Adrian."

"Yeah, pretty smart," Billy says as he joins us.

"Anyone can learn who has the desire. Anything is possible with knowledge. Now, moving on boys, are you quite certain you want to go through with this secret ceremony?"

"Yes, yes," we eagerly reply.

"Now this is the type of secret ceremony that customarily is engaged in by fathers and their sons. But, since your father is so often away, I've agreed to do this on his behalf." His eyes move from mine to Billy's and back. We both can hardly breathe.

"You must swear on this Bible," he pulls a small black Bible from the case, "that you will never breathe word about this ceremony to anyone, outside of yourselves, for as long as you live. If you do, our secret pack will immediately become null and void, but especially, if your Mother finds out, it would upset her terribly because she thinks that it is your father's responsibility to do this, which it rightfully is. As I said, I've made a secret pact with him to do this on his behalf, since he has to be away so much of the time."

Billy and I look at each other. I am thrilled to the bone that Uncle Adrian is entrusting us with such a wonderful secret.

"I promise, Uncle Adrian. We won't tell anyone, ever, not even Ala Mary or Fatgram," Billy exclaims putting his right hand on his heart.

"Good, you certainly don't wish to upset your dear old grandmother. Yes, you see, if this gets out, I think it might cause your parents to divorce," he states with great authority, giving us a stern look.

"Divorce?" I say and look anxiously at Billy.

"Yes, divorce," Uncle Adrian replies.

“Philip, put your left hand on this Bible, hold your right hand up, and repeat after me.” I do as he says and look up at him. A slight breeze rustles through the poplars and sycamores overhanging the banks of the creek, and several crows sound off in the highest branches of a dead sycamore. Their loud, shrill warning caws bounce off the stark whiteness of the limbs and blend with the gurgle of the water as I repeat after Uncle Adrian.

“I, Philip Robertson Hampton, do solemnly swear on the Holy Bible of our Lord and God that I will never reveal the secret purpose of the Blood Brothers Pact nor shall I reveal the members of the pact or any of the reasons why the pact exists. This I promise until my death, so help me God.”

I feel as if I’m being inducted into the knights of the roundtable as Billy begins his recitation. When he is done, Uncle Adrian pulls out a Swiss Army knife, and opens the blade. “We must each cut our hands and mix the blood together, the blood of real brothers, the blood which makes us blood brothers,” and he hands the knife to me.

“Oh darn, do I have to go first?” I blurt out.

“Philly, it’s really no problem with the palms of your hand; there are very few nerves there. You’ll barely feel it. The tips of the fingers have all the nerves. It would be painful if you cut there.” I grab the knife with my right hand and lightly jab the blade into the meaty part of my left palm. Nothing happens.

“Sissy pants,” Billy yells, “You’ve got to poke it harder than that.”

“Shut up, Billy, I know how to do it.” I swallow hard this time slowly pressing the tip of the blade into my left palm until I see the skin sever. I pull it out and feel a sharp stinging sensation, no pain, and then a lot of blood pours forth.

“Brave one, Philly. Your turn, Billy,” Uncle Adrian says.

Billy grabs the knife from my right hand with his right hand and plunges it into his left palm, blood immediately oozes out and runs on the ground. He winces, though with a half laugh.

“Okay, Billy, but maybe a little too hard,” Uncle Adrian advises and raises his right eyebrow, a gesture he often makes.

Uncle Adrian takes the knife from Billy and starts to cut his right hand, when I say, “Hey, you haven’t sworn on the Bible yet. You have to do it too for it to count,” I emphatically add as I hold my bleeding hand. I take the Bible in my bleeding hand and hold it out to Uncle Adrian who solemnly recites the pledge. He then takes the knife and cuts a small slit in his right palm as if he were opening a package. The blood flows quickly and he states, “Dear noble comrades we rub our blood together to create a power larger than each of us, larger than the sum of the three of us. Henceforth, the tenets, beliefs, rights, rituals, and practices that we may conduct as men will remain forever consecrated and shall remain secret until eternity within the confines of our group, The Blood Brothers. Death shall result to any one who betrays or interferes with this pact.

This is the Word of our Supreme Master, his ancient spirit watches over us and knows all and sees all and will follow us throughout our lives.”

Uncle Adrian takes our bleeding hands and rubs them together with his. Then, we each put a bloody thumbprint by our name printed on a proclamation Uncle Adrian pulls from the case. The proclamation has a big gold seal on it, and I recognize Uncle Adrian’s perfectly neat handwriting on it. He puts the proclamation back in his case and says it is time to disrobe and enter the holy waters. Billy and I immediately strip off our swimsuits. I hear the camera shutter open and close. Uncle Adrian takes off his shirt, shorts, and boxers and tells us to wash our hands in the creek. He then sits down on a boulder. Sweat runs in little trails through the hairy part of his upper chest and emerges from his sternum, running straight down to his navel, then down the line of hair that leads to his bushy pubic hair. A dark red birthmark, shaped like the boot of Italy, about the size of a quarter adorns the area just in front and below his right hipbone. Billy calls it his tattoo, which always makes Uncle Adrian laugh. I have a much smaller, lighter birthmark about three inches above my left nipple. Mother says that is where an angel kissed me when I was born.

“Alright laddies, it’s time for our official pictures. Billy, you climb up here on my left knee and Philly, you sit on my right one,” he says and slaps his hands on his knees. We both crawl up and sit on his legs.

“Yuk, you’re all sweaty, Uncle Adrian,” Billy complains.

“I know, just hang on a minute. Let’s get these photos, then we’ll go swimming.”

“Okay, but will you flip us today?” Billy asks, referring to Uncle Adrian’s game of squatting in the water, letting one of us climb up on his thighs, turnaround, facing outwards, with his hands under our feet, as he stands up quickly, pushing us up with his hands to give us enough momentum to cut a flip into the water.

“Right oh, I will. Now look at the camera, I’m going to take several pictures and I’ll give you each short directions, like smile, look left Billy, etcetera, etcetera.”

“Everyone smile now,” the shutter fires. I feel Uncle Adrian’s leg tensing.

“Look at each other, boys.” Click, click goes the camera.

“Each of you scoot back a bit and lay back on my chest.” Click. “Nice.”

“Nice, scoot back just a bit more and move a little towards each other. Oh yes, that’s very good.”

“Uncle Adrian, your todger’s sticking into my butt,” Billy suddenly exclaims and jumps off his leg.

“Sorry ole chap, all this wriggling around and touching is bound to make a fellow’s todger grow a bit, even get a little angry,” he offers.

The same thing is happening to me, so I have covered my todger with my hands. Billy sees this and laughs, “Look Uncle Adrian, Philly’s todger is growing too. Rusty Murphy says that’s called a hard on.”

“Right, right,” Uncle Adrian says and gently lifts my hands, leans over my shoulder and looks at my genitals.

“You see boys, this is all part of the initiation process of the Blood Brothers. It is a way we learn about ourselves, how we as men are different from women, and how we learn to take care of ourselves, including our todgers,” he says as places his right hand on Billy’s left shoulder.

“Do you fellows know how babies are made?”

“I think I do,” I say in a soft voice.

“Fatgram says a stork flies in with them,” Billy interjects.

“No, that’s just like a fairy tale for little children,” Uncle Adrian smiles and rubs Billy’s left cheek.

“I think the man puts his private parts, his todger, into a woman’s private parts, and pees. Then that makes her pregnant,” I say looking at Billy whose mouth falls open.

“Well that’s just about right, Philip, you’re really close. See how my todger has gotten long and hard,” he scoots me off his knee and thrusts his pelvis forward. His todger looks huge and angry. The head of it is big and red, with clear syrup seeping out the pee hole. The whole thing throbs as we both stare at it.

“You gents will have this soon enough,” he laughs and says, “Here, go ahead and touch it. It won’t hurt you. This is all part of the Blood Brothers’ initiation.”

Billy immediately grabs it and squeezes it several times. Uncle Adrian lets out a weird sounding moan.

“Wow, it is as hard as a bone,” Billy says and asks, “Uncle Adrian, does your todger have a bone in it?”

“No, Billy, it is just pumped full of blood, that’s what makes it so long and hard.”

“Don’t you want to touch it, Philly?” Uncle Adrian looks into my eyes.

“Uhhh, I dunno,” I say.

“Oh come on and be a sport,” he smiles, looking into my eyes. I grab the shaft. It is very hard, and it feels as if it has its own heartbeat. I feel a strange sensation in my groin area, and I look down to see my own todger sticking straight up towards my navel.

“See there, you already have a good size cock, Philly.”

“Cock, Uncle Adrian?” I ask.

“Just another word for todger, but let’s stick to todger. Remember that’s what Brits call it. And remember that when I taught you all that word last year we agreed to keep that a secret too.” We nod our heads in agreement.

By now, Billy has been playing around with his todger and, to my amazement, it is as big as mine, maybe even a little bigger.

“Now there’s a wee lad growing,” Uncle Adrian says with a chuckle.

“What’s that clear stuff coming out of your todger?” Billy asks.

“That’s what we call pre ejaculate, or pre-cum. You see, a woman gets pregnant when a man inserts his hard todger into her receptacle part that is called a vagina, and the man pumps his todger into the woman, and after a while, his todger ejaculates semen, or sperm. Ejaculate means to shoot or shoot off.”

“Like a gun?” I ask.

“Precisely, but in this case, white, liquid sperm or semen is shot from the man’s todger.” He takes a finger and rubs the liquid all over the head of his penis. “Mmmmm,” he moans and says, “This pre-cum helps to lubricate the woman’s vagina so insertion of the todger is easier, smoother and feels better.”

“Go ahead boys, rub the head here to see what it feels like.” We each do and Uncle Adrian moans again.

“Slimy and sticky,” Billy observes.

“Yeah,” I say, “But why do you keep moaning, Uncle Adrian?”

“Because it feels really good. Mother nature has made all this feel pleasurable so that we will mate and continue to reproduce our species.”

“Now, gently rub your own todgers and see how it feels.”

“Nice, eh? Now let’s all take a turn rubbing each other’s a bit.”

We do this for a while until Billy says, “But it feels like my todger’s gonna break off it’s so hard.”

“Mine too,” I say, and then gasp, “Look guys, I have a drop of pre-cum coming out of my todger.”

“Yes, you do Philly. That means you are growing into a man.”

I blush a deep red all over and Uncle Adrian laughs.

“How long will it take me to pre-cum too?” Billy asks.

“Well at the rate you’re growing and the size of that todger of yours, probably not too long,” Uncle Adrian states.

“See, isn’t being Blood Brothers great fun, boys?”

We both agree that it is, but deep down inside, something just doesn’t seem quite right to me.

“Well, boys, just a couple more things to learn and practice today, then we’ll swim and then eat,” Uncle Andrian says, smiling. “One of the best feelings a man can have is to have another person, a man or a woman, suck on his hard todger. Who wants to go first?” Billy’s hand flies up and Uncle Adrian bends over and puts his mouth on Billy’s penis and begins to suck it. Billy winces and tries to pull it out, but Uncle Adrian grabs him by the waist and continues to suck. After a while, Billy’s face relaxes, then he smiles and Uncle Adrian pulls back and looks up at him. “Billy, you just had your first orgasm, I believe. We call that feeling, Nirvana.”

“Well, it was a weird burning feeling in my balls and right here.” He points to the area above his penis.

“Billy, why don’t you try to suck off your brother?”

“Suck off?” I ask.

“Yes, that’s what you call what I just did to you.”

To my surprise, Billy falls down to his knees and takes my todger in his mouth and begins to suck. The feeling is indeed pleasant, and I soon feel a warm burning climbing through my rear end and balls up through my todger and before I know it, my todger is throbbing violently in Billy’s mouth and Billy pulls off, spits and says, “Yuk, what’s that salty stuff coming out of your todger?”

“That, my boys, is sperm. Congratulations, Philip, you have just ejaculated, probably for the first time in your life.”

“Nirvana?”

“Yes, Nirvana. Now, you two take turns stroking my todger, and I’ll demonstrate how a grown man reaches Nirvana.”

We each take turns stroking Uncle Adrian’s long penis. After a while he asks Billy to rub his balls and asks me to rub his nipples. We do and Uncle Adrian rapidly rubs his todger up and down with his left hand until he groans like an animal and white sperm shoots like a fountain out of his todger, spraying warm stickiness all over us.

“How perfectly wonderful,” he says. “Don’t forget boys, all this is top secret. No one must ever know.”

“Okay,” I say.

“Scouts honor. No, Blood Brothers honor,” Billy states.

“Very good. Let’s swim now. We’ve got the rest of the summer to have more Blood Brothers meetings.”

Billy makes a perfect cannon ball entry into the swimming hole, splashing Uncle Adrian and me with cold water. I look up at Uncle Adrian, the semen and water droplets on his face and chest glisten, and even though he is smiling at me, his pale blue wolf-like eyes peering into mine frighten me. I turn around and dive into the cool, dark deepness of the pool.

I pick up the canvas, letting my eyes flow over it. The three figures are holding hands, I’m certain of that. Billy holds my left hand with his right hand, but there is something else in his right hand. I look closer, squinting my eyes a bit until it comes into focus—the Swiss army knife we used to cut ourselves in the ceremony. A wave of repulsion, then nausea sweeps over me. The blade of the knife is pointed straight toward the heart of Adrian. I pick up the canvas and slide it back into one of the storage bins. I need some air, so I walk out through the French doors in the studio to the terrace.

The mist has burned off completely, the temperature is climbing to a pleasant level, and I turn my face toward the sun closing my eyes. Billy loved the sun, and he loved the

water. Memories from all the good times we have spent together at creeks, lakes, and beaches spill through my mind. I am still holding the plastic bag. I smile and open my eyes, looking down at a big pile of dog shit already covered with several flies, their shiny black-green and violet bodies glimmering as they crawl.

Chapter 4

Sitting at Billy's desk in the large room that serves as his office and studio, I click his Address Book icon to scan the contacts. With a few clicks of the mouse I determine that he has 512 contacts noted as Friends, Family and Business Associates—most of the contacts are in the Friends and Business Associates categories. I wonder who are all the people who are not classified at all. My shoulders are arched up and tight. I heave a large sigh slumping back into the chair.

"Dear God, are we gonna have five hundred people here on Friday?" I ask out loud. Clark, sprawled out on his belly in his large suede dog bed, with his hind legs sticking straight back and the rawhide bone held between his front paws, interrupts his rhythmic gnawing to look up at me. He sighs as if to answer in the affirmative, and then resumes his bone chewing. I peer out into the room, my brother's inner sanctum, where he spent innumerable hours intensely focused on his creations. His desk is a large, beautiful, nineteenth century Boule desk with bronze doré. The doré includes Cardinals or popes on the cabriole legs and the top of the desk is inlaid with leather. His desk chair is a high back leather office chair, of the same deep burgundy as the leather in the desk, with bronze button tufting. The only items on the desk are the screen and keyboard of his Mac, a telephone, and a Tiffany desk lamp with a bronze base shaped like a tree trunk and an intricately designed stained-glass shade covered with leaves in varying shades of green and violet. The room is rectangular and larger than the living room and is arranged into two sections: a study/library section and a working studio that is specifically designed to admit sunlight. The ceiling is high, slanted, ribbed with huge oak beams and contains four large skylights. The long eastern facing wall is covered with floor to ceiling windows and three separate sets of French doors leading to the terrace. A large fireplace and a massive fieldstone chimney, rising up to the highest point of the sloped ceiling, bisect the western wall. A large, ornate wooden chandelier, finished in antique blue with speckles of gold leafing, hangs from the ceiling in front of the fireplace. Billy told me the chandelier came from an old hotel in Havana. Zone controlled recessed lighting covers the ceiling. The northern half of the room comprises the study/library, richly paneled in warm English Oak, with floor to ceiling bookcases and a large, wooden, library ladder. The floors are twenty-four-inch wide heart of pine planks stained a rich dark brown. The planks were cut from logs from virgin pine forests felled in the mid-1800's that sank to the bottom of the Cape Fear River in North Carolina. An entrepreneur recovered the perfectly preserved logs in the early 1990's. Billy could not resist them for his studio floor. There are three groupings of furniture in this area: one surrounding his desk which sits in the northeast corner, one in front of the large fireplace, and one facing the windows

to the east. The furniture consists of an eclectic mix of American, English, and French antiques mixed with sumptuous upholstered chairs and sofas dispersed over three large oriental rugs. The south half of the room is his studio where he has three large easels in front of the windows. Storage bins constructed of the same oak as the bookshelves line the western wall and built-in storage cabinets are located in front of the bins. Several large pieces of sculpture are dispersed throughout the room. The room contains two large ficus trees, a couple of large false aralias, and two tall Palmetto trees, the state tree of our home state. A large guest suite, complete with its own kitchenette, is located off of the south end of the room.

“Billy has a good friend who always caters his parties. Shit, what’s his name, hickamagig—Ricky. Ricky what? What’s the name of his firm?”

I type in Ricky in the search box in the Address Book and five Ricky’s pop up. Immediately, I spot Ricky Wallitsch and Upper Crust Events, LLC.

“Bingo Clark, we’re saved!” I shout.

Clark drops his bone, hops up, trots over to me, jumps up into my lap and licks my face. I laugh and hug him.

“Goddamit Clark!” I gasp in pain as he pushes his right front paw into my left nut. I push him to the floor. His tail goes between his legs; he lowers his head, looking at me with big, sad eyes.

“It’s okay, boy,” I whisper. His head lifts and his tail slowly begins to wag. Still reeling in pain I dial Ricky’s cell phone number.

“Hey Billy, how are you?” Ricky answers his phone with an energetic, high tenor.

“Uhm, uhm, Ricky, this is Philip Hampton, Billy’s brother,” I deliver and swallow hard.

“Hi Philip. Are you doing well?” he cheerfully asks.

“Yes, nice to speak to you again,” I return, thinking how stupid this sounds.

“What’s up Philip? You visiting your brother?” He sounds confused at this point.

“Ricky, Billy died this morning at St. Vincent’s,” I reply flatly.

“Dear God, what? How can that be? I just saw him last week. I mean—”

“He somehow ingested an overdose of a drug called GHB Saturday night at Splash.”

“Oh, my God—”

“Yes, he was found unconscious in a bathroom stall and by the time they got him to the hospital he was brain dead. He died around ten-thirty this morning after suffering a round of bad seizures.”

“I’m so sorry, Philip. I don’t know what to say—”

“You don’t need to say anything, but you can help me out.”

“Of course, I’ll do whatever you need.”

“Billy’s last wishes were to be cremated and to have a very large wake slash cocktail buffet with his remains in one of our Mother’s old Chinese urns.”

“I see—”

“That wake needs to happen this Friday, and I think we’ll be inviting upwards of five hundred and fifty people. Can we make this happen on such short notice?”

“Not a problem. You leave it to me. I’ll take care of everything.”

“You sure it can be done?”

“Philip, this is what I get paid the big bucks for. Oh shit, I didn’t mean it like that. I won’t charge you for my time or any mark up at all for this—”

“No, no! Ricky, Billy has explicitly requested that this be the mother of wakes, so

I want you to go all out with food, drinks, champagne, flowers. Yes, yes, the best flowers you can find. You know how much Billy loved flowers, especially white orchids.”

“Right—”

“And staff, as much as you need. It will all be covered by Billy’s estate. And

Ricky, I absolutely insist that you not work for free and that you put in your normal mark-ups. And, I don’t mind if you charge a premium. I mean, gee, look at the short notice.”

“Okay, Philip. I am happy to do this for Billy. Do you need anyone to help you contact people or make any other arrangements?”

“No thanks. I have a good friend coming into town tonight. She’s a pro at all that. In fact, I’ll have her call you tomorrow to firm up the number and go over everything you’re planning.”

“Great, just have her call me before ten in the morning. Okay?”

“Okay! You’re a great help.”

“Sure thing. Oh, what’s your friend’s name?”

“Oh yeah, it’s Luscious.”

“Oh, I’ve met Lush before, at one of Billy’s openings—attractive woman, and of course, you don’t forget a name like that. Well, I’ll look forward to talking to her in the morning. And Philip, I’m so sorry about Billy. It just doesn’t seem possible.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, is it okay if I pass the news along to some of our friends?”

“Yes, in fact, I’d appreciate that.”

“Right. I’m glad to do it. He is loved by so many people.”

“Thanks, Ricky.”

“You bet, bye.”

“Good bye.”

I hang up the phone feeling great relief. “Now I have to get out the news and invitations, but by what method? Luscious will be able to help out with that. And then there’s the obituary that has to be written. I’m sure his death will make the evening news and the papers tomorrow.” The telephone rings.

“Mr. Hampton, your father is here to see you,” Rodney, one of the daytime doormen, states peremptorily in his Bostonian accent.

“Thank you. Please let them up.” I hang up and head out into the living room and into the foyer. Clark sits in front of the elevator door, wagging his tale, and intermittently turning his head to look up at me. I look at myself in the mirrored walls and realize that I have not changed clothes, shaved or bathed since early Sunday morning. I’m a wreck, and I can smell my own body odor. The door opens and Brenda and Dad emerge. Clark immediately jumps up to greet Brenda.

“Oh, oh my,” she says.

“Clark, no, boy, down, down,” I say as I grab his collar, pulling him down off Brenda.

“Sit Clark, you stay down.” He obeys.

“Sorry Brenda. Hello. Hi Dad,” I say looking back and forth between Brenda’s and Dad’s faces. Dad’s face is puffy and red. The lines in his forehead seem more pronounced than I remember; his eyelids are heavy, partially concealing his blue eyes, the whites streaked with red. His black hair has become completely flecked with grey, and he is wearing it longer than I ever remember. His dark complexion appears faded, splotted. I feel awkward. Brenda senses this and moves forward to hug me.

“Philip honey, we’re so sorry,” she says as she hugs me tightly. I bend down to embrace her and am enveloped in her softness and her appealing floral perfume. Clark lets out two rapid barks, followed by a short growl.

“Hush, Clark, it’s okay. Sit!” I say in a firm tone. He whines and obeys. I turn to look at Dad. I recognize the same lost, hopeless look he expressed after we learned of Mother’s death—the look I always associated with his withdrawal into himself and away from Billy and me, sporadically during the first year after Mother’s death, then permanently after he turned us over completely to Fatgram. My emotions toward Dad are mixed, but I sense that I have the advantage of strength at this point, so I embrace him. He embraces me back. We are the same height and he leans his head over my left shoulder and weeps. Tears begin to fall from Brenda’s eyes, and she opens her purse to retrieve a Kleenex.

“Dad, I’m sorry. It’s okay. Come on in and sit down,” I offer in a soft voice. I guide Dad into the living room with my right arm around his waist. Brenda and Clark follow. I steer him onto one of the large sofas and sit down beside him. Brenda sits on the other side. Clark lies down at our feet. Dad says nothing, staring down at the floor. A tear runs down to the tip of his nose and jiggles. Brenda gently dabs it with a Kleenex. I know she deeply loves my Dad, and I am remorseful that I have never been able to accept it or to accept her.

“Dad? Billy and I both have had our estates planned and our wills done for quite some time now. I guess I pushed it because we’ve had so much loss in our family, and our trust officer certainly encouraged it.”

He doesn’t seem to acknowledge what I’m saying, but I decide to go on.

“Well, it was Billy’s desire to be cremated and then to have a wake here. I’m in the process of arranging the wake for this Friday. Luscious, you know my friend Sarah Richardson from Louisville, is coming up this evening to help out.”

Dad turns his face toward mine and looks into my eyes and turns up the corners of his mouth in a slight smile. He takes my left hand in both of his and squeezes it slightly.

“Son, you’re the best brother Billy could have ever asked for,” he says. I see his eyes are filling up with tears.

“When you were just a little tot, maybe four years old, Billy fell against a chest of drawers and hit his head hard. He screamed and cried and cried and wouldn’t stop. A big red bump popped up on his forehead. You were so concerned and wanted to make the pain stop for him. You promised your mother and me that you would take care of him, always. And you have.” He looks at me with a kind of smiling frown, and I feel my eyes welling up with tears.

“Philly, I just can’t believe our little Billy’s gone—my pretty little boy, fearless, tough, determined, talented, who grew up to accomplish so much.” He lets go of my hand and puts both hands on his knees, weeping. Clark stands up and sticks his head into Dad’s lap. Dad strokes his head. Brenda is weeping audibly.

“You know Philip. Brenda met me in those years I was tortured after your Mother’s death—staying on the road working, running away from everything, from the pain, from my children, relying on alcohol to get me by.” Dad speaks slowly and deliberately, occasionally repeating words when the tears get in the way.

“She pulled me out of my gloom, got me on my feet again, married me, gave me hope and now we have a beautiful family.... But.... But, I didn’t listen to the one thing she pleaded with me to do over and over.... Get right with my boys...” I am stunned listening to Dad. I see my Dad’s heart is broken and that he is trying to make amends—to somehow try to explain his actions toward Billy and me.

“I tried many times, son, but it’s a simple truth: I was never man enough to do it. I, I felt so at fault for your Mother’s death. I felt that I had driven her to suicide. I just couldn’t face you and your brother feeling that way. Fatgram made it easy for me too. You know what a strong willed woman she was. She always thought Eva had married beneath her. She never said it, but I sensed it, everyone knew that was what she felt, and she was especially happy to take you guys in. God knows she was a much better parent than I could ever have been at that point.”

“Dad, it’s all right, you don’t have to get into this now,” I interject, not wanting to be put on the spot, not wanting to feel compelled to forgive him at this moment.

“No son, I have to finish this. Your mother loved you boys more than you know, and I love you and Billy so very, very much. And now, I’ll never be able to say that to Billy. But, I will say it to you. I have never stopped loving you for one minute, and I never will stop loving you.” I give in completely and hug my Dad, putting my face against his, crying. Clark whimpers and tries to climb into Dad’s lap. We all laugh even though we are crying.

“Stay down, Clark,” I say, gently pushing him back. We all sit without speaking for a while.

I stand up and say, “Look, we’re all emotional wrecks and tired. I need a shower and a shave in the worst way. I’m going to send down for your bags, and y’all are gonna stay here with me.”

“Oh Philip, that’s sweet of you, but maybe we better stay in a hotel. We don’t want to be in the way of all you have to do,” Brenda says in a conciliatory tone, and I know she is providing me with an easy way out of this situation should I so choose.

“Nonsense, y’all are staying here, there’re five bedrooms, and you can help me and Luscious get Billy’s wake together. You know Billy would want this to be a splendid affair and a splendid affair it shall be. Why, he’s having over five hundred people to this wake.”

“Good heavens,” Brenda exclaims as she stands up, “We’ve got work to do, gentlemen.”

Spontaneously Brenda grabs Dad’s right hand, and I grab his left hand and we pull him up off the sofa.

“Follow me, let me give you a refresher tour of the place and show you your room. I want you to make yourselves completely at home. Y’all can have the guest suite off the studio, and I’ll put Luscious in one of the bedrooms down the hall from Billy’s. Just keep your door closed if you don’t want Clark nosing around.” We follow Clark through the living room into the kitchen.

“My, I forgot how exquisite this place is,” Brenda observes, and I regret that in fifteen years I have never given this woman the time of day.

Chapter 5

After making certain Dad and Brenda have their luggage and are settled in the guest suite, I excuse myself to get a shower and shave. My little shadow Clark trails me, and I wonder what the future holds for both of us. As I take off my clothes down to my boxers, I realize I have only brought a couple of pair of jeans, one pair of khakis and a few shirts. I go into Billy's huge walk-in closet and turn on the lights—everything is in perfect order. Overcoats, jackets, suits, sport coats, dress shirts, casual shirts, dress slacks, and casual slacks are arranged by color and hang in neat rows. Belts and ties are arranged in the same manner. Custom made shelves contain dozens of pairs of shoes. Built-in drawers hide everything else. Billy and I are virtually the same size, even in shoes, and I know all these clothes are now mine—I wonder if I will be able to wear any of them and what shall I do with all the rest. My taste in clothes is simple—Billy possesses the wardrobe of a supermodel. I approach the rows of hanging suits, sport coats, and shirts. I touch the fabrics and think about him wearing the clothes I recognize. I gently grab the sleeve of a white dress shirt and pull it to my nose—no scent of Billy, just a fresh starch smell. I remember the white bag from the hospital containing his clothes, and I go back to the bedroom to get it. Clark beats me to the bag and sticks his head in and sniffs vigorously—my intentions exactly. I pull out the white shirt which has a few flecks of dried yellow vomit on the front and breath into it deeply, immediately recognizing Billy's scent, a subtle earthy smell with a distinctive tinge, like a wood fire on a crisp autumn day. I take the shirt back into the closet and place it on a hanger and zip it up in a plastic garment bag. I pick out a pair of khaki pants and a white button down collar dress shirt along with a brown pair of Cole Hahn loafers and a brown belt, place them on the bed, and I smile as I recall how Billy always said that my sense of fashion in clothes was perpetually stuck in the preppy mode. I grab my toilet kit and head in the bathroom. A cell phone begins to ring. I realize it's coming from the closet. I go back in and see Billy's cell phone in a charger on one of the shelves. I wonder why he didn't take it with him Saturday night. The caller ID shows a blocked number. I answer the phone. No one responds, and I hear a click. I shut the phone and take it with me to the bathroom and set it on the counter.

I adjust the dimmer so the lights are not too bright as I gaze at myself in the mirror.

“How fast life can change—two days ago I was getting ready to leave for a month long trip to China for research; now I'm standing in my dead brother's bathroom in my underwear having just reconciled with Dad. How does this make me feel? How the hell do you think it makes you feel Hampton? I feel wasted, almost used by Dad to ease his own pain, and my soul hurts.” I look into my eyes. All at once I feel as if I'm about to

cry, then I laugh, then I scream out, “Goddamn you Billy, Goddamn you.” Clark nudges my left leg.

“It’s okay boy. I’m just venting and wondering what fucked up your daddy enough to make him kill himself or get in the position to be killed by someone. Oh, God Clark, he’s really gone. He’s left us, boy.” Clark quizzically cocks his head, sticks out his tongue, pants a bit, then turns around, walks into the bedroom, jumps up on the bed, lies down beside the clothes I placed there, sighs, moans, and stares into the bathroom.

“I’m going to shower, you stay there,” I say as I shut the door to the bathroom. The truth is I do not feel comfortable masturbating in front of Clark. By the time I turn back to the mirror, my cock is hard and throbbing through the boxers. I drop the boxers and look at my naked body in Billy’s mirror.

“Not bad for thirty-three.” I grab my cock with my left hand and begin to stroke it. I close my eyes and focus on the pleasure of the sensation and let my mind wander. I picture a slim oriental beauty riding my cock with her head thrown back in ecstasy, long silky black hair whipping through the air as I fondle her firm breasts and drive my cock up into her. Usually, when I’m in Hong Kong, I’ll hire just this sort of prostitute for an hour or two of fun. My cock is slippery with pre-cum, but I spit on it anyway to increase the wetness and warmth. As I get closer to ejaculation, I picture myself rolling the beauty on her back, spreading her legs wide and thrusting my cock in her. She begs for more, screams for me to fuck her harder. As I pump furiously she grabs hold of my throat, screaming with pleasure. As I ram her, she chokes me, begging me to blow my load into her. My left hand pumps wildly, and I moan and stand on my tiptoes as I shoot all over the counter and onto the mirror as a vision of me, Billy, and Uncle Adrian—Blood Brothers—standing in a circle naked with erect cocks at the swimming hole, precipitates in my mind, calming me like the serenity of a first snowfall. Exhausted and relieved I open my eyes to see myself holding my cock with my left hand and holding my throat with my right hand.

“Way to go, Hampton, you’re as fucked up as anybody.” I begin to cry as the truth oozes forth like blood from a bad cut. Billy and I were victims of our beloved Uncle Adrian. It has always been a part of me, and Billy too, I think, but unavailable, only pulled out in dreams, and contorted into unusual sexual behavior. I’m overcome with guilt, dread, and a futile hollowness in my chest as memories of that night in St. Barts, eight years ago, spread through my mind and body like an evil, verdant, voracious kudzu, feeding on my soul, choking my essence until I’m completely covered and unrecognizable as myself. And now I can feel his touch, his hot breath smelling of cigarettes, gin and marijuana, the woodland, musky smell of his body pressing into mine.

“Come on, Philly, you know you want it as much as I,” his right arm is around my waist as we stumble from the cab and up the walk to the villa he has rented in Anse de Gouverneur. I hear the pound of the surf as I glance down at something small moving, illuminated in the landscape lighting, in front of us on the walk.

“Oh my God, look, Billy, it’s a scorpion,” I say as I stop, stooping over to observe the inch long yellowish creature. Billy reaches for it, and I pull him back abruptly.

“Billy, don’t, you fool, it will sting you,” I exclaim as the little creature faces us with its quivering tail raised.

“Sting, schming,” he quips, “that little stinger couldn’t hurt a flea,” he looks at me and smiles, “But I bet yours could.”

“You’re crazy, drunk, and stoned. That little stinger can probably deliver a nasty poison. Let’s give him room. Just let him alone.” I laugh, trying to bear Billy’s weight and keep my balance as I move him forward around the scorpion and guide him up the stairs past a long stucco wall with a recessed planting area in which a carved stone Buddha, his blind eyes staring into infinity, sits among various types of succulents.

He puts his mouth on my neck and blows out a hot stream and rubs his face against my neck while emitting a soft guttural moan. I pull back a bit and say, “Hey, get off bro. I’m not one of your pretty boys here.”

“Get off. Yes, just what I had in mind, brother.” He hesitates a moment then strokes my cheek with his left hand, “But you are, Philly, you are. You were always the prettiest, and the nicest to me, and you always took the best care of me,” he replies with a gentle whine in his voice.

“Geez, I haven’t seen you this drunk in a long time,” I say as I punch in the code to the electronic lock. Nothing happens.

“Shit, I thought the code was 464646.”

“No, you ninny, it’s 484848 pound,” he says, quickly pulls me around into him, presses his groin into mine, looks into my eyes, smiles, and while I focus on his beautiful white teeth, he lightly kisses me on my lips.

“Now you’re the ninny. Move aside and let me get this lock open,” I say as I withdraw from his embrace and punch in the number. The lock releases making the sound of a camera shutter.

“No more photos today, I’m off work now,” Billy laughs, and leans toward me. The long gold chain with a big gold charm, which he says symbolizes ‘man and woman’, slips out of his white shirt and hits my chest.

“Let’s get inside. We both need sleep. You worked all day, and I traveled all day,” I say as I pull open the glass door and direct him inside.

The sprawling villa is large and secluded, precariously hanging off the steep mountainside overlooking Gouverneur Bay. The house is shaped like a segmented crescent framing a large infinity pool that appears to meld into the ocean. The main living

room overlooks the pool and is filled with large overstuffed sectionals and sofas, all covered in fabrics in shades of white and off white. The Polynesian style roof slants up sharply culminating in ceilings that must be at least twenty feet tall. The wall facing the pool and bay is comprised of a series of large sliding glass doors, mounted in between round white columns, leading onto a covered porch that runs the length of the house. Electronic shades hang on top of each door. Dark, tropical hardwood coffee tables, designed in a Ming Dynasty style are scattered about the groupings of the white furniture. Behind the living room is a large eating area with an immense wooden dining table surrounded with oval-back wooden chairs upholstered in zebra skin. Directly behind the dining room is a large kitchen with stainless steel appliances and darkly stained mahogany cabinets and woodwork with a mirror glazed finish. A long bar separates the kitchen from the dining area. The bar counter is a highly polished white granite with grey veining, in sharp contrast to the shiny, dark cabinetry. Eight stainless bar stools with white leather cushioned seats line the bar.

“Oh come on, Philly. Let’s have a nightcap on the porch. I mean, look at the moon on the water. It’s a shame to waste that view.”

“Okay, but maybe you should have water instead. Don’t you have another shoot tomorrow?”

“Yes, last day, but it’s not until late afternoon. Nigel wants the golden light at Rockefeller’s Beach for the shoot. We can sleep in.”

“I see. How are you and Nigel getting along these days?”

He sighs, rolling his eyes, “As well as can be expected.”

I laugh, “Who would have ever thought your college roomie would become the hottest fashion photographer going?”

He laughs, “Yes, but would you have ever thought I’d become one of the hottest fashion models?”

“Little brother, with your looks, I don’t think that surprised anyone,” I reply and pat him on the right shoulder.

He smiles and heads to the wet bar, opens a cabinet and pulls out a bottle of 30 year old Macallan Single Malt.

“Let’s finish off with a bit of this, Philly?” Billy says as he grabs two crystal glasses.

“Damn, that’s got to be five-hundred dollars a bottle,” I exclaim.

“More like six,” he replies as he pours two drinks, neat, and hands me a glass.

“Cheers, Philly, and welcome. Here’s to a week of solitude in paradise. Just you and me, brother.”

I smile at him and we clink glasses and each take a sip. He gives me a look that lets me know he has something on his mind—God only knows what, I think to myself as we walk out to the porch and sit on two cushioned lounges.

“Oh my God, Philly, look out there, it’s a moon bow, how beautiful.”

I look out over the infinity pool and out over Gouverneur Bay. Mist is rising up off the hillsides sloping into the water and the moonlight filtering through has created the faintest of rainbows, arching over the bay.

“Wow. That’s magnificent, Billy. It doesn’t look real.”

“No it doesn’t. I wonder how you could capture that on canvas?”

“Have you done any painting lately?” I ask.

“Just a little. Too much travel. But some day,” he says. I hear the longing in his voice.

“Yes, you’ll get there when the time comes,” I add.

“I suppose so,” he says, pulls out a joint from his silver cigarette case, lights it, and inhales deeply. He looks over to me and offers the joint.

“What the hell, I’m on vacation,” I say, take the joint and inhale. The weed is smooth but strong. Almost immediately I feel the slight pressure behind my eyeballs that always tells me I’m going to get really stoned.

“Good, isn’t it?”

“Whew,” I sigh as I blow out a stream of smoke and begin to cough in short fits at first, but quickly escalating into a guttural, deep-lung cough. I feel my face burning as I gasp for air, so I take a sip of the warm scotch. The mellow oak flavor warms my throat and quells the cough. “Yes, damn good I’d say. A toké or two of that and I’ll be wasted,” I add.

“That’s the idea, isn’t it?”

“Well, I suppose. Where did you get this?”

“The bartender, Alejandra, at LaTi.”

“So that’s where you disappeared during dinner for such a long time?”

“Yes, sampling his goodies. He keeps me well supplied whenever I’m in St. Barts.”

“And what else did you sample tonight, hum?”

“Just a little coke, but I know you don’t approve of that, so I didn’t buy any.”

“So I thought. No wonder you were in such a dancing mood after dinner. You had those girls from Seattle drooling all over you.”

“Yeah, well you know good and well you could have laid anyone of them, Philly.”

“So, I’ve fallen to the level of your sloppy seconds?” I ask with a smile.

“Yeah, right. Like hell. It didn’t take them too long to figure out that I’m more interested in pretty men than pretty women. They could tell you’re straight from a mile away.”

“Am I that obvious?”

“Oh, go to hell. You probably have twice as much sex as I do.”

“Yeah right. And when is the last time you had sex?”

“Well, as best as I can remember, last night.”

“A ha, just what I speculated. Well, I haven’t had sex in, geez, well, well.”

“Well when, Philly?”

“I’m ashamed to admit it, but about six weeks ago in Hong Kong.”

“You’re still into those oriental hookers?”

“Don’t knock it unless you’ve tried it.”

“I have.”

“I figured as much, and...”

“Well, it was okay, but nothing I’d write home about.”

“And who would you write to?”

“Fatgram, of course, if she were still alive.”

“Yes, dearest Fatgram,” I say taking in the beauty of the night as I ascend further into a stoned blissfulness, and I find myself desiring to go higher and higher.

Billy takes a couple of drags off the joint and passes it back to me. This time I take it without hesitation, and I inhale as deeply as I can, inviting the smoke to carry me into a world of no worries or inner-demons.

“I hope this shit is not the kind that makes you paranoid?”

“I can assure you it’s not. Alejandra knows my tastes.”

“So I suppose you know how he tastes?”

“Philly, this pot brings out your true colors!”

“Well, I saw how he looked at you. He’s straight isn’t he, yet you seduced him?”

“Okay, he’s basically straight, but bi-curious. Anyway, I went to his pad last week to pick up some coke. What the fuck, you caught me. It’s hard to get through this goddamned high fashioned life without it. Anyway, his girlfriend was there, a slim, brown babe from Paris, and we all had a few drinks, smoked some pot and snorted a bit of coke. Before I know it, she is all over me. I think to myself, Holy shit, Alejandra is a hot-blooded Mexican. He’s going to pull out a machete and cut off my pecker. Wrongo was I. It totally turned him on. You should’ve seen the major hard-on showing through his balloon pants. I was sucking his beautiful cock in a flash. Well, that just turned on his girlfriend even more. The next thing I remember is that I was eating his ass out, he was moaning like a French whore, and she was riding my cock. My God she screamed louder than he did as she came, really quickly too. Then, after a while, he let me fuck him while he ate her pussy. This turned her on so much she came again. Then I asked him if he would like to try fucking me. He said that would be nice, so I let him fuck me while she masturbated me. Boy did I shoot a load. Our petite orgy went on for quite some time. I woke up entwined with their bodies the next morning. We’ve all been on the best of speaking terms since.”

The mental picture of the orgy, combined with the pot, is making me exceedingly horny, and my cock is throbbing against the baggy, white linen pants tied at the waist with a drawstring that Billy gave me and insisted I wear tonight. I see him looking at my

crotch with a grin on his face, and I start to turn my pelvis away from him, but before I can he reaches over and starts rubbing my cock through the pants.

“Hey Billy, this is not a good idea. You better stop.”

“Oh what’s the big deal, Philly? It’s just a little sex,” he says as he presses his hand harder against my cock. “I mean, it’s not like we’ve never done it together before. You used to really like it,” he adds.

“Yeah, but that was a long time ago, in a far away place.”

“This is a far away place, brother. And it’s just you and me, and I want to make you feel things tonight no hooker in Hong Kong or Thailand can make you feel.”

“You’re forgetting I’m straight, Billy,” I say as he sits on the side of my lounge and begins untying the drawstring on my pants.

“Not forgetting, Philly. But remembering, remembering how good we used to make each other feel.” My cock throbs intensely as he finishes the sentence, pulls down my pants and boxers, and puts his mouth on my cock. At first he licks it like an ice cream cone, playing with the head with his tongue and sucking up my pre-cum. Then, he runs his nose up and down the shaft and then down into my balls while he moans and says, “God, Philly, I’ve always loved the way you smell—so rich, so manly, it drives me wild. Sometimes I jerk off remembering your smell.”

I’m overcome with uneasiness and guilt. I do the same thing, but I’d never have the courage to admit it to him. After all, I’m straight. He’s the gay brother. Nonetheless, I am totally overcome by him as he presses his chest into mine, his shirt now open, exposing the incredible pectorals and abdominals, covered in short brown hair, revealed to so many people around the world in magazines and on billboards. His job requires him to maintain an absurd body building work out schedule, and I can feel the sinewy muscles in his legs as he kisses me deeply, his own hard cock pulsing within his pants. After a while he sits up, smiles, takes the last sip of his drink and says, “Just sleep in my room tonight, Philly. It’ll be like old times.”

I nod okay and he grabs my hands, pulls me up, and leads me into one of the two identical king suites which flank the kitchen and dining area. The room is spacious with a hand carved mahogany four-poster bed as the focal point. Two overstuffed chairs with ottomans face the sliding doors offering a splendid view of the bay and moon bow. White fabrics adorn the furniture in this room also, along with several plush white rugs of varying shapes, which look like the hide of some mythical sheep only tended for the wealthy, strategically scattered along the logical pathways from the bed to the bathroom, from the bed to the porch and from the bed to the bedroom entrance to protect bare feet from the cold stone floors. A large flat screen TV is mounted on the wall facing the bed. Graphite works of nudes hang behind the bed. The bathroom is large with his and hers sinks, two commodes in separate closets, and a bidet. The shower is constructed of white marble tiles with swirls of grey veins laid from floor to ceiling in a recessed area of the

room that is completely open. An array of brushed nickel sprayers, nozzles, and overhead fixtures that mimic rainfall protrude from the marble tiles like sculpture. A large sunken tub, more like a small pool, with Jacuzzis, is installed in front of glass doors overlooking the bay.

Billy leads me into the bathroom and says, "Let's take a bath. We're both sweaty, it'll make us sleep better." At this point, I'm so stoned that I'm putty in his hands, so I shake my head in agreement.

"I gotta pee," I say.

"Well, go ahead, there's the john. I'll run the water."

I go into one of the closets, turn on the light, pull out my cock, and try to pee, but I can't because my cock is still too hard. "Fuck, my bladder is about to burst," I say out loud.

"What's that?" Billy asks over the sound of water running into the tub.

"Nothing," I say as I pull down my pants, turn around and sit down on the john to try to think of anything but sex so my cock will go down allowing me to release my bladder. I notice magazines on a small chest beside the toilet, so I grab one and start thumbing through the pages. It's amazing how enjoyable a magazine can be when you are stoned. I seem to notice more details about photographs and even nuances in the text that I would never otherwise uncover. This particular magazine is rather touristy in that it is exclusively about St. Barts. Nevertheless, before long I am engrossed in an article about a woman from Paris who has recently opened a modern art gallery in Gustavia. The woman's name is Isabella de la Croix. She is the daughter of the famous Parisian avant-garde painter, Janine de la Croix, who died in a car crash in Paris in the 1970's. Isabella operates a gallery in Gustavia during the season from Thanksgiving until March. From April until Thanksgiving she operates a gallery in Santa Fe. "This chick has got it down, and she's a babe to boot," I say as I observe the photograph of her in front of one of her mother's paintings. She has an oval face with sharp features and thick, straight brown hair that hangs to her shoulders. She has on a light blue dress with a white shawl over her shoulders. Her arms are crossed just under her breasts forming a modest and lovely cleavage. The slight smile does little to cover the sadness emanating from her large brown eyes. "Damn, I'd like to meet her. I mean we both have mothers who were famous artists and are now deceased. I bet we'd hit it off," I think to myself. I am in the middle of perusing Isabella's life story when Billy raps loudly on the door.

"Damn, Philly. What are you doing in there? Taking a big girl sit-down?"

I laugh. I haven't heard this particular expression of Fatgram's for a bowel movement in a long time. It was a term she used to toilet train Mother, and I guess it just got carried over to us, although Mother changed it to big boy sit-down. "No, just reading a magazine. I'll be right out." I realize that I have completely emptied my bladder while reading, so I put the magazine on the table, stand up, pull up my pants, flush the toilet and

head out. Billy is standing by the tub wearing a white terry cloth bathrobe made of a luxurious Egyptian cotton. He is taking a toke from another joint. I notice a crystal champagne bucket full of ice covering a bottle of Cristal. The lights in the room are very dim, and he has lit pillar candles and placed them around the tub. Two tall crystal champagne flutes sit beside the bucket. He smiles at me, and his robe falls open revealing his beautiful body. His cock is half hard and I think it really doesn't bother me that I'm the older brother and that his cock is longer and fatter than mine. I apprehensively approach him and sigh.

"I think I'll just turn in. I'm really tired."

"Oh, no you don't. I mean, please, Philly. Just take a bath with me. Come on."

He grabs my hand and pulls me toward the tub. He lets his robe fall from his shoulders and off. Then he reaches over and begins unbuttoning my shirt. Each time he unfastens one button he kisses a part of my face. On the last button, he slips my shirt off and kisses me on the lips. Then he pulls off my pants and squats down as I step out of them. He reaches over, grabs the joint he put in a marble ashtray beside the ice bucket, stands up, puts the burning end of the joint in his mouth, aims the other end toward my lips, and gives me a major shotgun. The strong stream of smoke rushes into my lungs, and even though I'm already stoned, I feel my eyes bulging again. I hold the smoke in as long as I can, then blow it over his right shoulder. I realize that I am holding on to his waist. He smiles, takes the joint out of his mouth, turns it around, inhales deeply, all the while staring into my eyes with his deep green eyes. He has released his long hair from a ponytail, and it cascades about his shoulders. His face is covered with a perfectly manicured three days growth of beard, and I know he knows I'm thinking how beautiful he is. He turns around and bends over to put the joint down. Even his ass is perfect, well muscled, covered in brown down, transitioning into large sinewy hamstrings. The hair covering his legs is thick, but light brown from the sun. His balls hang low and appear through the backs of his legs as he bends over. His waist seems so tiny, almost like a woman's, yet it angles up dramatically into the perfect masculine chest and back. I think to myself, I am a similar, but less perfect version of him, and I look down and feel ashamed that I'm starting to get a small accumulation of fat around my own belly. "More running and weights from now on," I think to myself. Billy turns around, stands up, takes my hands and leads me into the warmth of the churning waters. At first we just stand there looking into each other's eyes. Then he takes our cocks in his hands and rubs them together. The physical sensation, the sound of the churning water, the smell of my brother take me back. I give in to him completely. I almost expect to look up to see Uncle Adrian descending into the tub with his white, skinny body covered in reddish-brown hair, his cold blue eyes peering into mine, the smile showing his crooked teeth, the large white cock with the red-purple head throbbing. Then I look down at the beauty of my brother as he sucks my cock, and I wonder what Uncle Adrian would say, would feel, and would do,

if he could see us now. I close my eyes and am lost in the sensation and the spontaneity of passion—he runs his tongue up to my navel, then up my chest and softly bites my right nipple sending a wave of pleasure through my groin. I moan. He growls softly, then bites my other nipple. I grab his hard cock, he grabs mine, and we kiss deeply, running our tongues over each other's. The sensation of having sex with someone who is stronger, more powerful, more forceful than I am is new to me, but intriguing, and I wonder fearfully if he will try to fuck me. I begin to explore, so I bend over and bite his left nipple. He immediately flexes his chest out to meet my bite and says, "Oh God that feels so good."

I bite his other nipple and stroke his rock hard cock, pulling it horizontal from its vertical stance. He moans loudly and reaches down and grabs me below my ass and picks me up out of the water, holding me up as he sucks my cock like a glutton with a juicy turkey leg.

"Shit, you are strong," I laugh as he slides me down his chest, bringing my mouth to his. He kisses me lightly, brushes the sweat off my face, and backs me up to the side of the tub beside a big stack of fluffy white towels. He arranges a thick layer of towels on the tile floor, grabs hold of my thighs, and lifts me to the side of the tub on top of the towels. He spreads my legs a bit and goes down on my cock. A few times he grabs the shaft, squeezing it with his right hand as he sucks. Mostly, he just sucks it, his mouth going all the way down to my balls. After a while he works my legs over his shoulders and begins licking my shaft and balls. I lay back resting on my elbows watching him. Gradually, he works his mouth and tongue under my balls and pushes my legs back, exposing my asshole. His tongue flicks around the outside, slightly grazing my asshole. I haven't been rimmed in a long time and the sensation is wonderful. I moan as his tongue pushes into my asshole. He has managed to open a bottle of oil, pours some into his hands, and begins stroking my cock as he continues to tongue my asshole. The feeling is wonderful, and I think to myself maybe this means he doesn't want to fuck me after all because he is definitely going to make me cum.

"Oh shit, Billy, I'm gonna shoot," I say as I lean back in ecstasy. He immediately pulls his tongue out and stops stroking my cock. He pulls me up to him in the water and thrusts his tongue into my mouth and kisses me deeply for a while.

"That's what you taste like, big brother."

"Hmmp, well, that's a first for me."

"Oh, no it's not," he says."

"What do you mean?"

He gives me a strange, hurt look, starts to say something, stops, and then asks, "No women have ever given you a decent rim job?"

"Never."

"You're just not moving in the right crowds."

“Guess not. But why did you stop? I was just about to blow?”

“Because, it’s my turn now.”

“Oh, geez, uhm, I can suck your cock, Billy, but, I don’t think I want to rim you.”

“That’s fine. No use traveling down memory lane, brother, I’ll take what I can get,” he says as he gets out of the tub and sits his butt down on the towels. I push his legs open, take his cock into my right hand, and start to suck it.

“Jesus,” he pulls back quickly, “Watch those teeth, brother! It’s like you still have braces on.”

“Sorry, it’s been a long time since I’ve done this.” I pull my lips over my teeth and start again. He bursts out laughing.

“Don’t do that. Just purse your lips a bit and your teeth will stay out of the way.”

I lick my lips, smile at him and try again. This time he groans giving me more confidence in my blowjob skills. His cock must be at least eight and one-half inches long because mine is seven. I’ll never be able to get it all the way into my mouth, but I continue to try because he is enjoying it so much. Finally, I hit my limit, and I spontaneously gag. Billy is laughing as I bend over, coughing into the water.

“Good try, Philly. Here, sit up here beside me,” he pats the layer of towels. I push up out of the water onto the soft towels. He grabs more towels and drapes them over our bodies, drying us off. There are so many towels on the floor that it feels like a soft mattress. He scoots back to lean his back against the window so I do the same. He takes the oil, pours some into his right hand and puts it on his cock. He hands me the bottle, and I put some on my cock, then turn around to face him, putting my legs over his. We stroke our own cocks, looking at each other.

“Just like we used to do at Fatgram’s, todger to todger.”

“Yeah,” I say, a bit embarrassed, remembering how we did this just about every day for most of our early teenage years.

“Feels so good to be here with you like this,” he says. I smile at him. We each continue to masturbate, looking into each other’s eyes.

“You close, Philly?”

“Yeah, I’m close.”

He scoots up closer to me until our balls are touching. He begins rubbing his balls into mine as we continue jacking our cocks.

“It feels really good, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, Billy, it does.” He leans back a little, pulls his balls up with his left hand and starts playing with his asshole.

“Try doing this, Philly,” he directs. I do. It feels really good. We continue this for a while, then Billy lays on his back, pulls his legs back, exposing his asshole to me.

“Philly, just rub my asshole with your fingers.” I hesitate, then oblige. He moans loudly.

“Oh yeah man, now just stick your index finger in my ass.” I do.

“Yeah, now fuck me with your finger.”

I begin finger fucking him. His asshole grips my finger tightly, and he begins to thrust into my finger, moving his ass around as he alternately jacks himself and pinches his nipples. His cock gets even bigger, and I notice his balls begin to climb up toward his cock. I become very aroused and stand on my knees as I insert my middle finger alongside my index finger.

“Fuck yeah,” he screams out as I fuck him with two fingers. My cock is throbbing and dripping pre-cum. He grabs the head of it with his right hand and starts rubbing it. He looks up at me with an expression of passionate desire, neediness, and begging all rolled into one.

“Philly, just stick your cock in me. Just stick it in.” I pull my fingers out of his ass, and he grabs the back of his thighs with his hands and offers his asshole up to me. I push the head of my cock on it and rub it around. His eyes roll back in his head, and he says, “Oh yeah, Goddamn, that feels good.”

I push my cock head into his ass and am amazed, “Damn, your ass is so tight. Am I hurting you?”

“Fuck no, brother. Stick it in.” I lean forward, planting my hands on either side of his chest, push up off my toes and slide my whole cock into his ass. His head rolls back.

“Fuck, yeah.” I watch his face and begin pumping slowly. The tightness, warmth, and slippery feeling are intoxicating. I begin pumping harder.

“Oh shit, Philly, fuck my ass, brother. Yeah, fuck me harder.”

I pump harder. I kiss him. I bite his nipples. I jack his cock. I rub our sweaty, hairy chests together, and I fuck him harder and harder. I pin his arms down, growl at him like a deranged animal fucking him harder. He succumbs to my cock, gives himself to me completely, as much as any woman ever has. He senses I am close, and he begins beating his cock. I fuck him harder. I feel and hear my balls slapping his ass. He begins to grunt with each stroke of my cock into him. I hear myself yelling, “Yeah, little brother. Big brother is fucking the shit out of you.”

“You like it?” I scream.

“Yes, fuck yeah,” he screams back.

“Fuck yeah, you do,” I say as I let it all go, nailing him with all my strength. I feel the semen rising through my shaft. I begin shooting off uncontrollably into his ass. He groans as his own cock goes into spasms. He shoots cum everywhere on his chest, my chest, his face, my face, and into my panting mouth. The saltiness surprises me, disgusts me, and I instinctively spit it out over his left shoulder. I collapse onto his chest. We are a heaving, sweaty, clump of sticky, hairy flesh. I roll onto my side withdrawing my still pounding cock from his ass. I see that it is covered in a liquid brown substance. The unmistakable odor of shit fills the room.

“Oh shit, how fucking gross,” I say and roll into the warm waters of the Jacuzzi and put my cock in front of one of the jets to clean it off. Billy is laughing his ass off. He rolls into the water, pulls me up close to him, and says, “Thanks, Philly. I really needed that.”

I look at him, and he adds, “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I say, “just spent.”

“Relax, I’m gonna clean you up.”

“No, that’s okay.”

“No, I know you just want to run away from me as far as you can go right now, but, please, please let me bathe you.”

I am overcome with shame, guilt, and fear—all those things that caused me to stop beating off with him so long ago. I just want to get the hell out of there, out of St. Barts, right now. I look into his eyes, and I see Mother. It’s almost as if she is there asking me to stay. I’m emotionally torn. He senses this. I freeze, looking down into the water. He walks behind me, puts his strong arms around me, and hugs me tightly. Tears seep from my eyes. He takes a sponge, puts some bath gel that smells like the peaches from Fatgram’s orchards, and begins to bathe my chest very gently. Images of Mother, Dad, Uncle Adrian, Billy, and Fatgram churn through my mind. I am overcome with exhaustion. I cannot focus on any one thing, and I am almost oblivious as Billy tenderly bathes my entire body. After a while I hear Billy singing, and I realize I am floating on my back.

“Hush little Philly, don’t say a word, Billy’s gonna buy you a Mocking Bird, and if that Mockingbird don’t sing, Billy’s gonna buy you a...”

Billy is singing softly to me as he holds me up in the water with his hands under my back, slowly spinning me around.

“Now that we’re all fresh and clean, let’s dry off and get to bed,” he whispers as he leans over me letting his long wet hair brush my face. I smile and nod. We get out of the tub. Billy hands me a large, white, fluffy towel. I rub my hair and face, then work my way down my body. Billy smiles as he does the same. He pours the remaining champagne in our glasses then takes them to one of the vanities made of black granite streaked with white veins. He motions for me to join him. I do. He faces us toward the mirror, picks up an electric blow dryer and begins to alternately blow my hair and his hair, all the while looking at me in the mirror. My short hair dries quickly so he puts his left arm around my waist as he continues to dry his hair until the long locks release the dampness and began to blow wildly around his face and mine. He turns the blow dryer off, puts it down, picks up the flutes, hands me one, smiles, and says, “Here’s to brotherly love.”

We clink flutes, and I follow his lead as he guzzles the entire glass. We put our glasses on the vanity and turn to go into the bedroom. The lights are very low, and I hear soft music playing which sounds familiar to me, so I ask, “What is that playing?”

“Julee Cruise,” he replies.

He sees the quizzical look on my face, “Remember, it’s from the series *Twin Peaks*? It’s called *Falling*.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Go to sleep now,” he says.

An ethereal voice sings in echoes, “Don’t let yourself get hurt this time.” I crawl into the soft mass of whiteness and quickly fall asleep. During the night I dream that the dancing midget from “*Twin Peaks*” is dancing around Uncle Adrian, Billy and me as we jack off at Fatgram’s swimming hole. When I wake up in the morning, Billy is not around. I put on one of the white terry cloth robes and go into the kitchen. A beautiful young woman with long brown hair and dark complexion mops the floor.

I clear my throat, “Good morning.”

“Oh, good morning sir. Your brother has gone wind surfing. He says he’ll be back for lunch. Can I fix you some breakfast?” Her accent is thick, but not French. I cannot place it.

“No thank you. I’ve received a call—business emergency. I must get back to Atlanta today. Could you get me a cab to the airport?”

Her brow wrinkles. “Now?”

“Yes, please. I didn’t even unpack. I’m ready, just have to get dressed.”

“Yes sir, I’ll call now.”

Twelve hours later, I’m sitting at the Oak Bar at the Plaza in New York, nursing a bourbon, which is as close to Atlanta as I could get today, when my cell phone rings.

“Mr. Hampton?”

Cold chills run up my spine as I discern a French accent.

“Mr. Philip Hampton?”

“Yes. This is he.”

“This is Inspector Girard Dupris with the national police in St. Bartholomy. Mr. Hampton, there’s been an accident. Your brother, well, he is in the hospital in Gustavia.”

“What? Is he alright?”

“The doctors say he will recover fully.”

“What happened? Wind surfing?”

“No. You see. I’m sorry to say, we believe he tried to commit suicide by hanging himself.”

“Oh my God.”

“Can you come down here?”

“Yes. I can get there tomorrow. I’m in New York.”

“Yes. That’s good. We’ll see you tomorrow at the hospital.”

I grab some Kleenex, wipe up my semen, flush it, grab my razor, and head into the shower feeling more alone than I can ever remember feeling. I have another crying spell as I soap up all over and scrub my body with a washcloth. I put shampoo in my hair, lather up, rinse, and repeat while Billy's cell phone begins to ring again.

"Why the hell do I always repeat?" I ask myself and answer. "Because it says so on the damned shampoo bottle, another way to sell more shampoo."

I look into the shaving mirror and cover my face and neck with shaving gel that does not lather up the way I'm used to. I shave automatically, watching my eyes in the mirror. I'm haunted by the image of Billy's painting and the memories from St. Barts, but I force my thoughts away from them. I rinse off, turn off the shower, take one of the luxurious bath sheets folded on the counter, dry off and head back into the bedroom.

"Nothing like a good hot shower to revive a man's soul, Clark," I say to him as I stand by the bed. Clark immediately stands up and sniffs my penis.

"Hey boy, I'm not a dog. Next thing you know, you'll be wanting to sniff my ass." He wags his tail, sits down, looking up at me in anticipation. "Not on your life, you trashy street dog," I joke as I plop down on the bed and roll Clark onto his back and rub his tummy vigorously. He play bites my hands and pushes at them with all four feet as he growls in his playful tone. I decrease the rubbing to gentle strokes; he relaxes completely; his hind legs splay out; he closes his eyes and sticks out his tongue. A chunk the size of a pea is missing from the left side of his tongue. That must have been a horrible fight. When Clark first went home to live with Luscious after she had rescued him, she hired a canine behavior specialist to assist her in Clark's transition from street dog to country club dog. The specialist told Luscious that Clark had most certainly been bred for fighting—a common but illegal parimutuel sport throughout rural Kentucky and in the projects of Louisville—as evidenced by the large scars on his legs, his head, the relaxed ear which had resulted from torn ligaments, and the tear in his tongue. The specialist classified Clark as a pit bull mix, but said he was extremely intelligent, willing to please humans, and would make a fantastic pet. Luscious was delighted, but her husband David was appalled. His exact words were, "I'm not having some goddamn project nigger's pit bull in my house. Out he goes to the pound, immediately." Luscious was devastated because she had already fallen in love with Clark who had become house broken on his first day at her house. She demanded that David let her keep him until she found a suitable home. He, in turn, gave her exactly two weeks and insisted that the dog be crated whenever he was at home. She called me; I called Billy who had told me he wanted to get a dog. Billy flew to Louisville, rented a car, and made a new friend as he drove Clark back to New York. Before Billy's arrival to pick up Clark, Luscious was so intent on finding out more about Clark's origins that she took him to a psychic specializing in dogs

who informed her that Clark had been the runt of a litter of fighting dogs. He had been used as a bait dog to teach other larger pups how to fight. She said people who train these dogs use runts, kittens, and other stray pups to throw into a pen of aggressive fighting puppies who are encouraged to rip the bait animal to shreds. She said though severely wounded, Clark survived several of these bait sessions by holding his own through sheer courage and a superior intellect. One day while being the bait dog to a group of pit bull pups from a line of champion fighters, Clark severed the throat of the pick of the litter while defending himself. The owner was so mad at losing the prize pup that he went after Clark with an axe. Clark narrowly escaped and eked out a life on the streets, mainly taking handouts from the homeless. He survived this way from six months of age until Luscious coaxed him into her car when he was just a year old. The psychic said that Clark wanted Luscious to know all that he had been through and that he pledged to protect her and be a very good dog, but that he understood if she didn't want to keep a street mongrel like himself, but could she find it in her heart to help him find a good home. I was skeptical about the whole psychic thing, but I'm a dog lover, Clark turned out to be an incredibly smart and loving dog, and the psychic's story does seem to explain everything. Maybe I should do an article on psychics who specialize in animals—I can see Florence's expression when I pitch that one, but as any good agent knows, animal stories sell lots of newspapers and magazines.

Clark is fast asleep now and I can see his eyeballs rapidly moving from side to side under his eyelids. I quietly get up, put on the pair of boxers and proceed to put on Billy's clothes, which fit me perfectly, but I'm uncomfortable in a shirt and pants that have been starched and ironed to perfection. I twist and beat on the shirt with my hands and do a couple of deep knee bends to relax the fabrics, movements which resurrect Clark from his deep sleep and he rolls onto his left side and looks at me as if I am deranged.

"Yoga, I need to get to yoga, more than ever now," I tell myself. I started doing Bikram Yoga five years ago after developing severe pain in my left knee as a result of years of running and one too many marathons. After two months of doing this yoga four to five times a week, my knee pain subsided. I became a devotee to the 26 poses done in an exact sequence in 90 minutes in 105°F heat and high humidity. I also began doing another type of hot yoga called the Barkan Method that is more of a flow of postures and includes postures great for upper body strength that allowed me to tone and develop my upper body without having to lift weights. Another unexpected but extremely pleasant side benefit of these types of yoga for me was a large and varied supply of women willing to go from the yoga room to the bedroom—I estimate the ratio of men (especially fit, somewhat attractive men) to women is about 1 to 15. Of course when one is bedding more than one woman in the same yoga class, complications may arise from time to time. My mood brightens as I think about the many good yoga studios in New York, and then my stomach growls audibly.

“Clark, I bet Dad and Brenda are starving too. Let’s go see what we can find to eat.”

I enter the kitchen to find Brenda in complete control of the lunch preparation.

“I hope you don’t mind Philip. I know everyone is hungry,” she smiles at me.

“Not at all. I see it doesn’t take you any time to find your way around a kitchen. My culinary skills peaked with mastering peanut butter and grape jelly on white bread.”

“Well, with three children, kitchen skills are a necessity.” She pauses and looks up from tossing a large bowl of mixed salad greens with an expression that reveals she senses that the subject of my half brothers and sisters should probably be avoided. I feel a knot in my throat.

“It’s alright, Brenda.” She smiles as I look into her blue eyes and take in her entire petite frame that reeks with sophistication.

“I barely know their names. I’m so ashamed.”

“According to your father Peter is a lot like you; Andrew’s got Billy’s temper and ‘joie de vivre’; and little Emma is the spitting image of your father. Not to worry though, I see plenty of my side mixed in them too.” Brenda finishes tossing the salad, grabbing a bit to taste as she talks.

“How old are they now?”

“Peter is twelve—on the brink of puberty,” she rolls her eyes. “Andrew, we call him Drew, is ten, wishing he were thirteen,” she chuckles. “And sweet Emma is eight, a perfect little lady, unless you get on her bad side,” she chuckles, and I notice her small, delicate ears, each lobe pierced and sparkling with a diamond stud.

“Brenda, let them come for the wake. I’m sure Billy would want them here,” I interject.

She hesitates a moment, smiles, and says, “It’s fine by me, but we better see what your father thinks about this—”

“Thinks about what?” Dad is staring at us like he just caught us sticking our fingers in the icing bowl. Brenda and I look at each other with eyes agape.

“Dad, let the kids fly up for the wake. Let them come up tomorrow, there’s plenty of room here. I know a wake is a morbid way to spend spring break, but y’all can do other things in the city, and—”

“Son, I don’t think it’s such a good idea—”

“Dad, I’ll pay for their tickets.”

“It’s not that son, I just don’t know, they barely knew Billy and—”

“Dad they’re Billy’s blood, they’re my blood, they’re your blood and Brenda’s blood. Shouldn’t we all be together as a family to say goodbye to Billy?”

We all look at each other, tears welling in our eyes, the agreement unspoken.

“I’ll call my sister-in-law after lunch, but first you gents are going to eat this divine meal I’ve prepared,” Brenda wipes away a tear and directs us to help her carry out the

food and heads out to the terrace. “It’s a lovely afternoon, let’s enjoy the terrace. Billy has a wonderfully stocked Sub-Zero.”

We take the bowl of salad, a large plate of fruit and cheeses, and a large platter of sandwiches Brenda has neatly prepared from chicken salad, ham salad, and pimento cheese. We walk out to the terrace to find that Brenda has set one of the wrought iron tables with crisp pastel linens and sterling, an arrangement of fresh tulips in the center, and a bottle of Chardonnay chilling in a silver ice bucket.

“Wow, this is beautiful Brenda,” I say.

“It’s a simple task with the plethora of beautiful things your brother has. Look at this view. What a glorious spring day.” She smiles at Dad and me as we sit down. Clark sits down beside my chair and begins to patiently wait, never begging.

“I have to say Clark is one of the most well behaved dogs I’ve ever seen.” Brenda blows him an air kiss followed by “Sweet, sweet, Clark.” His tail wags.

“Y’all know his story don’t you?”

“Didn’t Luscious find him starving on the street?” she asks.

“Pretty much, and she never even had to train him. He’s just that smart.”

“Amazing, isn’t it, Charles? I never would have thought a pit bull could be so charming and such a good pet. Does he like children?”

“Loves them. The family on the floor below has a boy and a girl and they spend as much time as their parents will let them with Clark. They even keep him when Billy goes on trips.”

Dad opens the wine and pours everyone a glass. They see the puzzled look on my face.

“AA saved me, son. Well, of course that and Brenda. I’ve arrived at a point in my life where I am comfortable with moderation.”

“That’s cool Dad, I just haven’t seen you with a drink for years.”

Dad smiles and holds up his wine glass, “I propose a toast. To our family—to those with us and to those we have lost—long may we remain a family! And that includes you too, Clark.”

“Elegant Charles,” Brenda adds.

“Indeed,” I say.

Chapter 6

“My, Philip, and I thought my Peter could eat,” Brenda laughs as I devour my fifth sandwich.

“Sorry,” smacking my lips, “no food in my tummy since Saturday night.”

“You poor dear, no wonder.”

“Darling, you and Philly stay out here and enjoy this sunshine. I’ll go in and make travel arrangements for the kids.”

“Splendid Charles. I’d love to visit with Philip. I’m sure the two of us can polish off this wonderful Chardonnay?” She looks at me with a mischievous, girlish expression.

“Perhaps we’ll open another?” I add.

“Oh dear, well, being the light weight drinker I am,” Dad says as he stands up, “I shall now leave you two to the company of yourselves.” He takes the last sip of his one glass of wine and walks away.

“What’d a ya say, Clark? Wanna come with me boy?” Clark jumps up, tail swinging in anticipation.

“Is it alright if I take him for a W-A-L-K after I make the travel plans?” Clark immediately starts a chirping sort of bark and stamps his front feet, looking up at Dad.

“Well I see he can spell too. Come on boy.” They trail off in to the kitchen while Brenda refills our wine glasses.

“You bring out the best in Dad. I mean that’s the Dad I remember and loved.”

“Charles brings out the best in me too.”

“Until Mother’s death,” I say, “Dad was the best Dad you could imagine, that is, when he was at home. He traveled most of the time. Mother was certainly a challenge for Dad. Does it bother you if I talk about her?”

“No, Philip, not at all. Eva was a remarkable and gifted woman, and I know she must have loved you and Billy a great deal.”

“She did. But she wasn’t the glue in our family; it was Dad and Ala Mary. I’ve come to realize that Mother most probably suffered from depression and some kind of bipolar disorder.”

“Yes, Charles has said the same thing.”

“When she was up she was up—sometimes she would paint for three weeks straight, hardly coming out of her studio. Other times, she’d sink into an alcohol induced rage, followed by deep depression, after which she might go to bed for three weeks.”

“I’m sorry you had to experience that; it must’ve been extraordinarily difficult for you and Billy.”

“It was, but you know we stuck together. We managed. Ala Mary was always there, Dad on many weekends, and, for several years, Uncle Adrian,” I say and lapse into thought. “Shit, why did I mention his name? Did he really love Billy and me or did he just use us for sex? Fuck, how can I sort this all out now? Is that really why I spent so much time covering the sex trade in Thailand? Could I have been trying to subconsciously justify Uncle Adrian’s actions? My God, it took Billy’s painting to bring all this to the surface. Billy went to his death with this on his mind. I wonder what all he knew about this?”

“Philip? Philip, dear, are you alright?” Brenda’s soft voice alarms me.

“What? Yes, I’m sorry. Just thinking. I’m fine.”

“I was just asking you about Adrian. Charles doesn’t have a lot to say about him. I believe he thinks he somehow contributed to Eva’s use of drugs and alcohol.”

“It’s hard for me to say, but he was the one person on earth Mother would listen to. They were like two magnets, not sexually, but creatively. I believe he encouraged some of her greatest paintings.”

“Yes, I’ve read that too.”

“I always thought Dad and Fatgram were a little bit jealous of Adrian because he was so close to Mother and because....”

“Because what Philip?”

“Because Billy and I adored him so.”

“Really, Philip?”

“Oh yes. He was the ultimate ‘Uncle’. There was nothing he wouldn’t do for us—not just toys, treats, and such, he spent real quality time with us and took a great interest in everything we did. He was also one of the most intelligent people I’ve ever met, and it seemed important to him to make sure Billy and I understood things. He knew a lot about a lot of things, yet he could break it down simply enough for a child to understand. It was uncanny. Dad was great with helping me with homework, but when Adrian did it, I always caught on much faster.”

“Interesting,” Brenda says, moving her wine glass toward her lips, so attractive in their fullness, their deep pink shade, their shape as she speaks.

“Ala Mary always said it wasn’t natural for a ‘full growned’ man to act like a little boy. But, really that’s what he was like at times. He played our games, took us to movies, did our homework with us, and took us to friends’ birthday parties.”

“I didn’t realize he spent so much time with you all.”

“Well, when he visited, it always coincided with Mother preparing for an opening or some large commission, so he often stayed for weeks. Mother even let us come to New York alone to stay with him several times. He took us to museums, shows, and concerts. Really, any culture that sticks with me today is due to him.”

“Oh, but your Mother and Grandmother were extremely cultured women.”

“Absolutely, but Uncle Adrian could relate art to us on our level.”

“Fascinating.”

“Yes, but then Mother killed herself in France while on that painting trip with Uncle Adrian. I’ve always believed that he felt so bad about that that he could never face Billy and me. There was this giant guilt like a noose around his neck. After Mother’s funeral we saw him only a couple of times and that was it—gone. It was as if he died along with Mother. He abandoned us kids when we needed him the most. I always meant to go see him in New York, sort of confront him about the whole thing, but, I guess Dad told you how he died?”

“Yes, in a fire?”

“Yes, he was agent and mentor to Dyanne O’Bryan. They both died in a house fire at her farm in Bardstown, outside of Louisville.”

“That’s right. Isn’t she the one who outraged the Catholic Church with her paintings?”

“Yes, very famous, and a great artist. MOMA paid twenty five million dollars for three of her religious paintings, including the famous *The Crucifixion of the Madonna*, in the late nineties—an extremely controversial purchase, but a brilliant sale by Uncle Adrian.”

“When did they die?”

“Well, it wasn’t long after Adrian sold the paintings to MOMA. It must have been in the summer of 1998. Billy’s art was just getting attention then. He told me he had visited with Uncle Adrian a few times. Adrian was taking an interest in his work, and then he died.”

While I’m wondering if Billy ever confronted Uncle Adrian before he died, Brenda reaches over and gently puts her right hand on top of my left hand, “You and Billy experienced horrible losses as children. I can’t even imagine it. But somehow you both survived and became successful men.”

“Yeah, but look where it’s taken Billy,” I say, thinking that he surely would have confided in me anything he discussed with Uncle Adrian, but I don’t remember anything significant besides art talk.

She sighs. “I suppose.” She squeezes my hand. “You are a good brother, Philip.”

I smile at Brenda, “Care for a cigarette?”

“Why yes. How did you know I might want one? I so seldom smoke nowadays—certainly never in front of the kids.”

“I remember when Dad brought you to Billy’s first big opening—I would barely speak to you. Forgive me?”

“That’s in the past. It is okay Philip,” she replies, smiling.

“No, it’s not. Really, it’s not. Billy and I did our best to make you feel unwelcome and uncomfortable.”

“Yes, I remember a few snide comments.”

“More than a few. And then at some point during the evening I noticed you standing alone on the terrace at the gallery, holding a glass of champagne, and smoking. You looked like a million dollars—smart, black cocktail dress, pearls—a bit bored, undaunted by our juvenile jealousies, reeking of a privileged upbringing. And I thought to myself, ‘There’s a woman Mother would’ve liked, no wonder Dad married her’.”

“Really?” Her eyes widen, the corners of her lips turn up into a smile.

I stand up to go get the cigarettes, “Yes. Another bottle?”

“Let’s,” she says, smiling as she rearranges the tulips.

I return with cigarettes and more wine and pull out two cigarettes from the package and hand one to Brenda. She takes it, places it between her lips, and I light it with the onyx lighter.

“Thank you,” she says after I light it and she exhales her first puff. Then, she tilts her head back, shakes back her shoulder length blonde hair, and inhales deeply. I see the tip of the cigarette glow bright red against slender, manicured fingers, and I focus on her profile—porcelain skin, blue eyes, perfect nose, and lovely smooth throat.

Aware of my stare, she exhales the smoke straight up into the air and turns to face me, “Shall we have more wine?”

“Of course.” I pick up the bottle, twist the metal foil off with my hands, grab the corkscrew and begin to open it. Suddenly I hear the hissing of the onyx lighter and turn to see Brenda holding the flame toward the unlit cigarette hanging from my mouth. I smile as she lights my cigarette. I pull out the cork.

“Thank you.” I pour each of us another glass.

“Philip, you really are a lot like your father.”

“I’ve heard that all my life. But I believe there’s greater similarity between Billy and Mother,” I say trying to divert her attention away from the fact that I’m thinking how nice it would be to lean over and blow into her ear and gently caress her right breast which is creating the most beautiful mound in her pink cashmere sweater. I wonder if she is attracted to me, and I surmise the answer must be yes because, after all, I’m a younger version of my father.

“Yes, Charles says the same thing. He never talked much about Eva when we first starting dating and early in our marriage. But, as the years have passed, he talks about her more.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I think as our relationship has become stronger, more secure, and the children have grown, he’s better able to process his tumultuous relationship with Eva.”

“That makes sense,” I respond, disguising my crestfallen mood.

“Well, it has also been easier for me to talk about my first marriage as time has passed.”

“I had no idea you were married before meeting Dad.”

“Oh yes, at twenty-one, just graduated from Sweet Briar.”

“Hah!”

“What?”

“I knew you were a spoiled rich kid!”

She raises her eyebrows and replies, “As if you weren’t also. Spoiled, well, I was a Daddy’s girl.” She inhales again, and I focus on the large canary diamond on her right hand.

“Humph, I bet you are,” I reply, my enthusiastic tone tinged with sarcasm.

“Now, now, what are you implying?”

“Nothing, I’m just teasing you. How long did your first marriage last?”

“Only two years.”

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Why did it end?”

“Talk about spoiled brats. Darren’s family owned one of the largest rubber gasket businesses in the world. He was the handsome, party loving, Kappa Sig from UVa. I fell for him completely. After we were married, he continued the partying, and never reported to work at his Dad’s business. This suited his Dad, because an older brother already had the reins of the business. So, Dad kept the money coming, and Darren kept partying. After the first year, he started beating me. I put up with it for another year until he broke my left arm one night. That was it.”

“My God, I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you. I came from such a loving family. I was pretty sheltered, so when the beatings started, I was so embarrassed I wouldn’t tell anyone, not even my mother or my best friends. But it all came out with the broken arm. My brother Harry confronted Darren. Darren has four false teeth as a result of that meeting.”

“Good for Harry,” I say.

“Anyway, after that, I poured my efforts into the family furniture business, and that’s how I met your Dad in High Point.”

“Yes, I remember, I was just a freshman at Chapel Hill.”

“It’s hard to believe we’ve been married for fifteen years.”

Dad comes back onto the terrace with Clark on a leash.

“Oops, you caught us smoking, darling. Going for your walk?” Brenda smiles at Dad.

“I was, dear. Philip, I ran into two detectives from the police department in the lobby. They talked to me a bit, now they want to ask you some questions about Billy. They’re waiting in the living room.”

“I see.” Startled, I’m knocked back into reality once again. “Okay.”

“Brenda, why don’t you join Clark and me for a stroll?” Dad asks.

“That would be lovely, dear. Let’s go. I’ll clean all this up when we get back.”

We walk out into the living room and two plain-clothes detectives, a young female with brown hair and olive skin and a middle-aged African American man with closely cropped, graying hair, stand to greet me.

“Mr. Philip Hampton?”

“Yes.”

“I’m detective Frederick Johnson, New York City Police Department,” he says and extends his right hand. I shake it. He adds, “This is my partner, detective Bren Bell.” Detective Bell extends her slender right hand, and I shake it. She is a young, attractive woman. Her clothes surprise me—a highly tailored, double-breasted wool jacket in light blue and brown houndstooth pattern, dark brown slacks, expensive shoes and a large brown leather purse. She looks as if she is headed to Barney’s or Bergdorf Goodman for lunch and shopping. Detective Johnson wears an off the rack grey, pen-stripe suit. I introduce them to Brenda, and Brenda and Dad excuse themselves to walk Clark.

“Sorry to intrude at such a time, Mr. Hampton, but we are doing a routine investigation of your brother’s death,” Detective Johnson, a tall man, looks down into my eyes, stretching his lips out horizontally after he speaks.

“No problem, detective.”

“Thank you, sir.” He replies.

“Mr. Hampton,” Detective Bell asks in a smooth, forceful voice, “Was your brother a habitual drug user?”

“Good heavens, let’s jump right in,” I reply noticing that Detective Bell is as sleek and muscular as a cheetah.

“Your brother is very high profile; we just need to get to the bottom of his death, sir,” she says.

“Well, mostly he used alcohol and drugs in moderation. At times, he partied a bit too hard, but not often,” I reply, feeling my shoulders tightening, and a dull pain awakens somewhere in my cervical spine.

“I see,” she replies, “What sorts of drugs did he use?”

“He smoked pot, probably a couple of times a month, and snorted a little cocaine every now and then, every other month or so.”

“Anything else?” Detective Johnson asks in a baritone voice.

“I’m pretty sure he tried ecstasy before and crystal meth, but I don’t think he used them much.”

“You’re describing a pretty calm existence for a super model, A-party list guy,” Detective Bell interjects with a sneer.

“Ex-supermodel who had calmed down a lot in order to pursue his art,” I return with a stern tone.

They say nothing and look at each other.

“Mr. Hampton, do you think your brother committed suicide?” Detective Bell abruptly asks.

“Absolutely not!”

“Why not? He’s tried at least twice before,” she throws out.

“I don’t think he was really trying to kill himself those times,” I offer.

“Oh, just the ‘cry for help’ type of thing from a rich kid and a supermodel?” she lobs back.

“Jesus Christ, who the hell do you think you are talking to me like that?” I ask, turning my body directly toward her.

“I think I’m a detective with the New York City Police Department trying to determine if your brother overdosed himself, purposely killed himself, or if we have a homicide here,” she states like a drill sergeant, not backing down one bit. Detective Johnson is stretching his lips again so much that his ears wiggle. I break out in a cold sweat.

“Look, my brother is dead. I knew him better than anybody. He didn’t kill himself. He wasn’t experimenting with GHB. He was pulling his life together, and creating great works of art.” I realize I’m crying again as I am speaking.

They seemed stunned by my outburst of tears. I sniff hard and wipe my face with my left sleeve.

“Mr. Hampton, we’re sorry to upset you, just doing our job,” Detective Johnson says in a gentler voice. “Who were your brother’s closest associates?”

“Well, other than myself. There’s Julianna Morgan—the gallery owner who reps his work.”

“Yes, we plan to talk to her,” Detective Bell states.

“She’s Billy’s closest friend, besides me,” I reply, trying to hold back my tears.

“Do you think you really know your brother that well, Mr. Hampton?” Detective Bell questions me as though she doesn’t believe a thing I’m telling her.

“To his core,” I reply, blinking through my tears, trying to stare back at her. She blinks, and the corners of her lips turn up, almost imperceptibly.

“Elliott Fields?” Detective Johnson booms out again.

“Never met him. They’d only been dating a couple of months. I talked to him quite a while this morning. He told me everything that happened at the bar. I have his cell number—”

“We have it,” he states.

“Mr. Hampton, was your brother sexually promiscuous?” Detective Bell asks.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean did he have a multiplicity of sexual partners?” She stares at me with a slight furrow in her brow.

“I don’t see what his sex life has to do with this.”

“Mr. Hampton, just answer my question.”

“You just have to know Billy. I wouldn’t call him promiscuous. He never really had a steady partner and sometimes, when he was down or when he was totally absorbed in his work, he wouldn’t have sex for long stretches—months, even. You all know he has the looks, but when he’s on, his personality is mesmerizing. He could usually get anyone he wanted in bed, gay men, straight women, even straight men and gay women.”

“I see,” Detective Bell says, and I can sense her mentally comparing me to my brother. “I’ll take that to mean he had a lot of sexual partners.”

Detective Johnson rubs his chin and adds, “Mr. Hampton, I would appreciate it if you could take some time and provide us with a list of everyone you know or suspect your brother may have been intimate with.”

“Now?”

“No, not now, but in the next couple of days. I’m sorry, but it could really be useful to us,” he replies, crossing both his arms in front of his chest.

“Right, but do you all know something about my brother’s death you aren’t telling me?”

Detective Johnson grimaces, shakes his head, and replies, “As I said earlier, this is routine on very high profile people.”

“Mr. Hampton. Does your brother have a will?” Detective Bell asks.

“Yes.”

“Do you have a copy of it?” she asks.

“Yes, I do.”

“Who’s the primary beneficiary of his estate?” She looks directly into my eyes. I bristle when I realize what she’s implying.

“I am, but if you think for one minute that I had anything—.”

“Mr. Hampton, Mr. Hampton, please calm down,” Detective Johnson says in a demanding tone. “These are routine questions, and you are in an extremely stressed state. Please, just try to answer our questions without supposing anything. Our job is to determine who and what caused your brother’s death.”

“You’re the only beneficiary aren’t you?” she asks.

“Yes I am,” I say and swallow hard. “Would you like me to make you a copy of it?”

“That won’t be necessary, we’ll get an official copy from his attorney or trust company,” Detective Johnson snaps. I am amazed, but not surprised, at how much these people already know about my brother. He’s only been dead a little over five hours.

“Mr. Hampton, do you know of anyone who would want to harm your brother?” Detective Bell asks.

“No.”

She looks at me dead on and asks, “Was he in any kind of trouble at all?”

“Not that I know of.”

She looks up at Detective Johnson who says, “We let the hospital have his organs as you requested, but we are going to perform a routine autopsy.”

“I see. How long will that take?”

“The body should be released by tomorrow afternoon. We’ll contact the funeral home. Your dad told us about the wake on Friday, so we’ll get this done fast,” he replies, studying me carefully.

“Thanks.” I reply.

They give each other a quick glance, and Detective Bell says, “Thanks for your time, Mr. Hampton. We’ll let you know what we find.”

“Yes,” adds Detective Johnson, “Here are our cards. Call us if you think of anything else you feel we might need to know and you can email that list to us when you complete it.”

“I will,” I say and I escort them to the elevator and press the button. The door opens, they walk in, turn around, saying nothing. Detective Johnson pushes the button, looks down at Detective Bell, and the door closes.

“Dear God,” I say out loud, rubbing my temples with both hands.

Chapter 7

I head through the living room out to the terrace to start clearing up the lunch dishes and am overcome with a confusing state of weariness—I feel some sort of gnawing bleakness inside, part of me wants to get drunk or stoned, the other part wants to curl up in a corner and hide and cry. I sigh at the lunch table and walk back through the kitchen and into Billy's studio. A large sofa covered in beige silk embroidered in white silk thread with delicate, intricate designs of Chinese fishermen invites me. I slip off the loafers and lie on my back letting the softness of the cushions absorb me. I study the volumes of books in the cases attempting to clear my mind of all thoughts. I drift off to sleep. At some point I'm aware of something licking my face and then a warm, furry presence settles against me, and I instinctively cuddle around it. I sleep soundly, void of thoughts and nightmares.

A sharp bark, followed by a thud awakens me as Clark jumps down off the sofa. I crave him back with me, back into my arms into the sweet, painless world.

"Clark, come back up here, buddy?" I weakly call out. I hear his barks in the living room heading to the foyer. The sky has dulled and the light entering the study is indirect and diffuse.

"I see you're awake," Brenda says as she comes into the studio from the kitchen.

"Yeah, what time is it?"

"It's almost seven o'clock. You were sleeping so soundly; we thought it best to leave you alone. Luscious is on the way up now."

"Oh." I put my feet on the floor, rub my eyes, comb my fingers through my hair, slip on the loafers and stand up.

"Can you tell I've been napping?"

Brenda laughs, "Well yes I can, but I'm glad you have. You need the rest." Clark's barks rise in pitch and frequency, so I know Luscious has ascended.

"Let's go greet her," I say to Brenda.

"Certainly, your dad's already there."

We walk down the hall into the foyer where Luscious is sitting on the floor hugging Clark. He licks her face and ears, displaying his biggest smile and most fervent tail wagging.

"Lush," I say with my arms outstretched. I pull her up off the floor, embrace her tightly and start convulsing with sobs.

"Oh, don't cry, baby, I'm so, so sorry," she replies, and I feel her beginning to cry. We just hold each other for a while.

Clark sits down and whines loudly, then starts pawing my right leg with his right paw.

“It’s okay boy,” I push away from Lush, looking down at Clark.

“Darling, I just don’t know what to say.” Luscious squeezes both my hands and looks up into my eyes. Tears, with a slight tinge of mascara, are running down her face.

“I know Lush. Thanks for coming up.”

“Don’t even think about it,” she replies.

“Luscious, this is Brenda Hamp—.”

“Yes, of course, we met several years ago at one of Billy’s openings,” Lush quickly replies and extends her right hand to Brenda. They shake and Brenda offers her a tissue from a box she is holding.

“Thank you so much,” Luscious smiles at Brenda, takes a couple of tissues, dabs her eyes, and gently blows her nose. Lush is dressed in a black sweater dress with a dark green silk jacket. A lovely jade buckle clasps together the black belt that encircles her slim waist. Her auburn hair is pulled back and up and fastened by some sort of tortoise shell clip—it has always fascinated me how she handles her long hair without even looking at it, just twirling it around with her hands up and behind her head, securing it with strange looking clasps, sometimes sticking in a few bobby pins or whatever type of fastener she holds between her teeth as she continues whatever conversation she’s having. She wears thin black hose and black leather shoes with flat heels, at five feet, ten inches she avoids high heels. She carries a black Hermes Birkin bag. Dad holds on to two large black suitcases on rollers and a computer case.

“Lush, I’m in Billy’s room. I’ll put you in the guest room next to his. Dad and Brenda are in the suite. Their kids are coming up tomorrow—Peter and Andrew can share a guest room and Emma can have her own.”

She gives me a quizzical look that resolves into a smile, then she says, “Great, we’ve a full house, and we’re going to need all the help we can get to pull this wake off by Friday. Charles tells me we’re inviting five hundred and fifty people.”

“That’s what Billy wants,” I add.

“Then, he shall have it,” Lush states and looks at me. “Well Todge, who’s in charge of this show?” Dad and Brenda give me a surprised look.

“Uhm, that’s Lush’s nickname for me. It kinda got started the same time I came up with Luscious,” I explain. No one says anything.

“Anyway, Luscious is the ultimate organizer, so I hope I’m not offending anyone by putting her in charge?” I ask.

“Certainly not, I’ll do whatever I can,” Brenda responds. Dad just smiles shaking, his head signaling that it’s all right by him.

“Wonderful! Brenda, I’ll bet you could cash you know your way around caterers and party set up,” Lush beams at her.

“As a matter of fact, I do—” she replies.

“I’ve already hired the caterer, he’s the best, he’s a good friend of Billy’s—Ricky Wallitsch with Upper Crust Catering,” I interject.

“Yes, he telephoned while you were napping, Philip. He is so kind. He’s delivering dinner to us tonight at seven-thirty. I told him there would be four of us,” Brenda says.

“That’s great,” I reply.

“Perfect,” says Lush.

“Brenda, you handle all the food, drinks, set-up and flowers with Ricky,” Lush directs.

“Philip, you finalize the guest list in the morning. We’ll send out email invitations along with personal phone calls. Charles, you and the kids can split up the list and make the calls tomorrow. Is that okay?”

“That’s fine, Sarah, the kids will want to help,” he replies.

“Charles, call me Luscious or Lush or I’ll start calling you Mr. Hampton,” she returns, smiling and arching her eyebrows.

“Of course, Lush.”

Luscious clasps her hands and looks at me. “Have you issued any kind of press statement yet?”

“Well, no, I was waiting for you,” I reply.

“Oh dear, where’s the closest TV. Turn it on, quick!”

“In the kitchen, but why?” I ask.

“Honey, this is the kind of thing those vultures just love. We need to release a statement from the family immediately. Where’s my laptop?” Dad hands Luscious her computer case, she grabs it, hurrying into the kitchen, motioning us to follow.

“I’ll put Luscious’s bags in the bedroom,” Dad offers.

“Thanks Dad,” I reply as Clark, Brenda, and I follow Lush into the kitchen. I find the clicker and direct it to a large plasma TV on the wall. CNN is on.

“Turn it to local news,” Luscious orders. I do so and the local weather report comes on.

“Just leave it there, hon, and we’ll see what comes on,” Luscious says as she puts her computer on the counter, sits on a bar stool and starts looking through her purse. She pulls out a pack of her trademark Treasurer Black cigarettes and a slim, gold lighter on which her initials are engraved and puts them on the counter.

“As I recall, Billy doesn’t mind if I smoke in here, do y’all?” she asks as she adjusts the tortoise shell clip holding back her hair.

Brenda and I both break out laughing.

“What?” Lush looks at us both.

“Nothing, it’s just that Philip and I have been sneaking Billy’s cigarettes today,” Brenda explains.

“Well, I wish I could get by with just sneaking. I’ve never been able to quit, but at least these Treasurers come in slim now, and if I’m going to smoke, it might as well be the best damned tobacco money can buy.” Lush replies.

She pulls out one of the elegant, long cigarettes with a gold tipped filter, lights it and inhales. I get a heavy pink marble ashtray from a cabinet and put it on the counter.

“Oh damn!” Luscious screams out pointing at the TV.

A full color headshot of Billy is on the screen. Yellow script scrolls on the bottom of the screen, flashing ‘Breaking news, ex-Supermodel and artist Billy Hampton is dead at 31 years of age’. The camera zooms in on a pretty blonde reporter in a business suit.

“We have breaking news from our city reporters. It has been confirmed this evening that former Supermodel and current well known artist, Billy Hampton, died this morning at St. Vincent’s Hospital from an apparent drug overdose,” she delivers with a bit of urgency. We are glued to the screen as we watch famous pictures of my brother in everything from white briefs to tuxedos flash on the screen.

“News Alive’s sources tell us that Hampton, who frequently appeared at A-list parties in New York, was seen celebrating with Supermodel Elliott Fields (a headshot of a wide grinning Elliott Fields flashes up) Saturday night at Splash, a well known Gay Bar in the West Village. Hampton was found unconscious in a stall in the Men’s Room around 3 am Sunday morning when he was taken to St. Vincent’s. He died sometime before noon today. Authorities are not yet confirming the exact cause of death.”

“Okay, not to worry. Have a seat, Philly and let’s write a statement for the press,” Lush motions for me to sit down.

Brenda sighs, “I think I’ll go find Billy’s cigarettes. Anyone want a drink?”

“Can you make a perfect Manhattan, Brenda?” Luscious asks.

“Certainly, dear,” Brenda returns with a smile.

“Divine, straight up with a twist, please. And you are welcome to these Treasurers, Brenda.”

“Oh, let’s not waste that expensive tobacco on me. I just need the nicotine high. Philip, what would you like?” Brenda looks my way.

“Well, how ‘bout a Grey Goose on the rocks with a twist, please.”

“I’ll be right back,” Brenda turns to leave. Clark follows her.

“Okay Philip, I think we need a short, straight forward statement from you concerning Billy’s death. I’ll email it to the Associated Press. We’ll deal with the rest of the press tomorrow.”

“Fine. Just write it, Lush, I’m drained to the bone. You’re the better writer anyway,” I say rubbing my forehead with my fingers.

Her fingers dart over the keyboard, and I watch her face as she types, taking breaks every thirty seconds or so to take a drag off her cigarette and review what she’s written. Brenda returns with a tray with Lush’s and my drinks and what appears to be a dirty

martini. She sets the tray down, passes around the drinks and hands me the Marlboros and the onyx lighter.

“May I propose a toast?” Brenda asks. “To old friends and new friends and all those in between.” We clink our glasses together and take a sip.

“Mmmm, Brenda, you make a damn good drink, girl!” Luscious looks at Brenda who soaks up the compliment with a smile.

“Thanks.”

“All right, I’m done,” Luscious states. “Listen, tell me what you think.” She sits up straight, wiggles her bottom on the stool and begins, “The family of William B. Hampton is saddened to announce his death. Billy died unexpectedly this morning, April 7, 2006. Although he leaves us so soon at 31 years of age, he touched many of our lives during his career as a model and, afterwards, as a renowned artist. The family asks that any expressions of remembrance or sympathy be made to the Humane Society of New York City in care of the Clark Hampton Fund for Animal Rescue.”

“That’s great, Luscious. How did you know about the Clark Hampton fund?” I ask.

“Billy sent me a note when he endowed it a couple of years ago. I’ve contributed to it, rather generously, I’ll have you know.”

“Hmm, I bet David had a thing or two to say about that,” I add.

“Fuckwad?” She asks. “He can go to hell,” her eyes narrow as she says this and Brenda’s eyebrows raise.

“Oh, don’t mind me, Brenda. I’m just in a marriage that has seen its better days, and I just haven’t had the strength to get out of it. But that’s going to change and soon.” She takes a drag, blows out a stream of smoke and grinds out the cigarette in the ashtray.

“Dear, sorry to hear that,” Brenda replies as she takes a Marlboro and lights it.

“Well, it’s just a vestige from my twenties. Mother was dying from breast cancer and really wanted to see her only child married before she died. David had the prerequisite pedigree but no money. That was fine by mother because my father was running her family’s drug store business and she wanted my future husband to relieve Dad. It all seemed so simple.” Luscious sighs then sips her Manhattan.

“Do you have any children, Luscious?” Brenda asks.

“No,” she sighs, her eyes cast down. “David’s sperm count is extremely low, and he would never consider adoption. He wouldn’t even let me keep Clark.”

“Yes, I’ve heard about Clark,” Brenda responds with a look of concern. Clark lets out a couple of attention seeking whines and then two alert barks.

“It’s turned out to be a blessing in disguise. I mean, if I had his children, I’d be tied to him in some regard for the rest of my life.”

“Why haven’t you divorced him?” Brenda asks.

“I ask myself that every day. I’m not codependent. It’s just that everything is so easy this way. I mean, we’re accepted everywhere: church, country club, parties, charity

events, business circles, you name it. I will say David is one for keeping up the appearance of the perfect husband and wife. He is also a hard worker and led the takeover of the drug stores by a big national chain.” Luscious looks dejected as she delivers this soliloquy I’ve heard so many times before and starts pecking at her keyboard with her fingers.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me, Todge,” Luscious exclaims as she looks up at me.

“I’m not rolling my eyes, it’s just that you’ve said for years you’re going to end this and you never do,” I reply, reaching for a cigarette.

“Now that Dad’s gone, it’s going to end soon. I’m sure David senses this,” she replies to me.

“Oh, did your father die recently?” Brenda asks.

“Yes, unfortunately last year. He seemed to be in good health, but one day he just slumped out of the golf cart at the country club—massive coronary, dead almost instantly. The sad thing is it was just two years to the day from the closing of the sell of the stores and Dad’s official entry into retirement. He had planned to play golf, go on a couple of world cruises, even learn Spanish,” she wiggles again as she speaks. I observe Luscious. She is still the slender, firm, ball of fire whom I met at freshman orientation in college. My mind drifts and I picture us having sex the first week of classes—I was in heaven. This bold southern beauty was as horny and as sexually curious as I was. We tried everything in bed. I’ll never forget the Friday night, about two weeks after we had first slept together, I got off seven times and she got off nine times. I still get a hard on just thinking about that night. We were inseparable until mid-term. As the newness of the sex wore down, she began talking about a long-term relationship and how we might spend our lives together. The more she talked along these lines, the more I found myself withdrawing from her. I felt trapped, I couldn’t explain it to her, but that’s the way I felt. I didn’t know what to do, so I finally made out with another girl in front of her as she walked out of the bathroom one night at a pub. She didn’t speak to me again for three years. We were both journalism majors and ended up in a senior seminar together in the same work group. Over the course of that semester, working together in the group, we began speaking and communicating again. By the end of the semester, we were friends, not lovers. We each decided to stay on and get our masters during which time we became close friends and confidants.

“Well, I want to know where Todge comes from. I can guess Luscious by simply looking at Sarah, but Todge?” Brenda directs the question to me.

“It’s British slang for penis, Brenda. Billy and I called our penises Todgers when we were kids. I guess we picked it up from Uncle Adrian,” I reply feeling heat shoot up my neck into my face.

“I see,” says Brenda and she gives Luscious a questioning look.

“I’m afraid the nickname was my doing. Philip was the first man I ever slept with, and I became quite enamored, even to the point of fascination, with his penis. So when I heard him call it his Todger, the name just stuck. Besides, he was already calling me Luscious in front of my friends and it stuck with them, so I just had to have a nickname for him,” Luscious explains this as if she is a defendant on the stand.

Brenda laughs and says, “And I thought the UVA coeds were the sexperts.”

“All coeds wanna be sexperts, Brenda,” Luscious replies, “Just wait until your boys hit high school.”

“Yes, I know we have quite the road ahead of us,” she replies.

“Any idea what Billy’s password is into his wireless?” Luscious looks my way.

“Yes, it’s Clarkham2, altogether,” I reply.

“Great. Philip, I’m sending this statement out, and I’m instructing the press that I am the contact point for all communications concerning Billy’s death. I hope that’s okay with you,” Luscious sees me shake my head. “Good, I’ll give them my mobile number and email, so I expect the onslaught to begin soon. I hope the food comes and we can eat first though, I’m starved.”

“Did I hear someone say food?” Dad asks as he walks in with two young men from the Upper Crust Catering Company who roll in a cart wafting wonderful smells.

“Perfect timing,” Luscious exclaims. Clark walks over and starts sniffing the skinny, Asian guy’s shoes who immediately freezes, a look of terror pasted on his face.

“Oh, he don’t like Benny,” the guy with the nametag Luka smiles. “Come here Clark,” he says. Clark looks at Luka, but continues sniffing Benny’s shoes and legs.

“We know Clark. He don’t like Benny. We verked for Mr. Billy before. I sorry to hear he died,” Luka directs his comments to me.

“Thank you. Clark, get over here. Leave him alone,” I direct. Clark turns around, looks at me, turns back for one more quick sniff and then comes to me wagging his tail. He sits down, turns his head back toward the man, yawns, pulling his lips back revealing an intimidating set of sharp, shiny white teeth and four, inch and one-half, dagger-like canines. He emits a high pitch whine as he yawns. He turns his head back toward me looking into my eyes.

“What all do we have here?” Brenda asks Luka, who has cropped black hair, a couple of days of beard growth, and a pierced left eyebrow.

“Madam, they are the appetizers, they are caviar toasts wid cream fraiche, fried chili won ton wid motzarella cheese, and cold shrimps cocktail. For your zoup, we have chanterelle mushroom wid chicken stock, then freezay salad with herbs and creamy saysar dressing. For main coarse they are feelet minion wid béarnaise sauce, they are sallmon feelets with dill sauce, and they are baked chicken with curry sauce and basmati rice. Ve have assorted steamed vegetables and roasted potatoes wid the rosemerry. Three pies for desert. They are bananna crème, dutch apple, and chocolate decadence.” He

proudly points to each container as he speaks, thick accent revealing his newness in America from, my guess is, somewhere in Croatia. They are smartly dressed in black slacks, white shirts, black bow ties and vests with rich burgundy brocade.

“Thank you, my, how nice. Just put them here on the counter and we’ll take care of the rest,” Brenda directs.

“Madame, Mr. Ricky say we stay to serve you and clean up,” he replies to her with a puzzled look.

“Oh, I see, well, in that case, Philip, what do you think?” Brenda looks at me.

Luscious chimes in, “Why that’s divine. These fine gents can serve us, clean up, which will give us more time to get caught up and plan.”

“Yes, that’s fine,” I say, “Let’s eat in the dining room. Brenda, can you show them where everything is here in the kitchen, and I’ll go set the dining room table?”

“Certainly,” she says, “Charles, can you help me in here?”

“Dad, would you mind feeding Clark? There’s his bowl. He gets one large scoop of dry food kept in that concealed pantry over there by the entrance to the studio.” Clark looks up at me with a hopeful expression wagging his tail. “Clark, go follow Dad, he’s gonna feed you.” I point to Dad. Clark immediately follows him to the pantry.

Luscious closes her laptop, and we take our drinks into the large dining room that is adjacent to the north side of the kitchen. This room has the same heart of pine floors as the study, but is a smaller room. Its west entrance is into the living room and the eastern side is comprised of floor to ceiling windows and French doors leading out to the terrace. The northern wall contains a large fireplace. The fireplace is faced with pink marble with a black granite threshold. The mantel is wooden with pairs of fluted columns on each side that run through the mantel up to an intricate cornice. This structure is built around a large, old pier mirror from Fatgram’s foyer in Union. Two large candelabra in the shape of trees—the trunk and limbs are made of sterling silver and the tiny leaves are gold—flank the mantel. Each candelabrum holds six slender white candles. There is a pair of Kangxi period Blue and White baluster vases on the mantel with scenes of small deer. Mother called the ‘100 deer design’. Fatgram’s large mahogany dining room table with inlaid bands of rosewood is centered in the rectangular room, surrounded by twenty-four matching ribbon back chairs with large saddle seats covered in a soft grey leather. The table sits on an immense Tabriz rug with curvilinear floral designs in orange, grey, and tan on a cream background. This too came from Fatgram’s front foyer. A large oval, mirrored, sterling plateau is centered in the table. It contains two large sterling candelabra, each with three arms, a sterling silver coffee and tea set, and several pairs of sterling salt and pepper shakers. The large bohemian crystal chandelier from Fatgram’s dining room remains above this table where it has hung for the past one hundred and fifty years. No one in our family ever wanted this electrified, so it still holds forty-five small candles. Billy has dripless candles custom made for it. The walls and ceiling of the room

are the same oak used in the studio, stained a lighter shade of brown and contain more ornate moldings and facings. The ceiling is divided into eight equal rectangular sections each of which has rectangular sections of molding ascending and decreasing in size giving an appearance of looking up inside a pyramid. Recessed halogen lights are symmetrically dispersed in the uppermost panels as well as sprinkler heads and security devices. Gilded French sconces in the shape of robed cherubs holding torches flank the French doors of the south and west entrances to the room. The room contains two paintings by Mother as well as a Picasso and a Klimt. Hidden paneled doors, built in the western and northern walls, cover cabinets containing silverware, china, crystal and table linens. One of the doors leads to a private powder room, another leads to the hallway containing Billy's bedroom. I bring the lights up and head toward the door where the silverware is located. We set our drinks down on the table.

"Let's see, there are four of us, let's eat with something plain," I say to Luscious.

"My dear, there's nothing plain in this place. Plain was not a word in your brother's vocabulary," she replies.

"I reckon you're right, Lush."

"Reckon? Don't hear that word much anymore," she smiles.

"I know. Fatgram used it a lot, and Billy loved it." I open a silver drawer. Everything in it is ornate. I open another and find something fairly simple. "Here, this looks good." I get out four place settings and hand them to Lush.

"You wanna do two facing each other at one end of the table?" she asks.

"Sure that's fine. Let's do the end closest to the kitchen."

"Let me find some placemats and napkins," I say and begin opening other drawers. I spot some light yellow linen placemats and grab four. I can't find matching napkins, so I settle for plain white linen. I walk back to Lush.

"Two for you and two for me," I say as I reach across to hand her two placemats and napkins. We each start setting the table.

"Todge, what do you think really happened to Billy?"

"I wish I knew, but I know he didn't deliberately overdose. GHB is not the kind of drug he used for partying. The police were here earlier this afternoon."

"You're kidding. Do they think it's a homicide?"

"Pretty tight lipped they were—an older black man and a sexy little vixen type—both rather rude."

"Dear, don't tell me you're after a police woman now."

"Whatever," I deliver back.

"Sorry, you know me, always trying to keep tabs on your love life."

"It's okay, what would I do without you to look out for me?" I walk over and give Lush a bear hug, lifting her off the floor. She laughs.

"What's going on in here?" Brenda asks, smiling, as she enters the room.

“Just two old friends glad to be together,” I offer.

“Philip, I wondered what kind of wine you wanted for dinner? Billy has an incredible selection. He must have five hundred bottles in those coolers in here.”

“Pick out whatever you like, Brenda. Do a white and a red, I guess.”

“Brenda, get a Zinfandel. I’m craving a good Zin,” Luscious coos.

“Yes mam, you got it.” She turns back into the kitchen. Lush watches her walking away.

“She is certainly put together well and in great shape. How old is she, Todge?”

“I believe she is around forty-two.”

“Looks more like thirty-two to me. My God, our age,” she replies.

“I know. She’s a good person, too. Loves Dad, their kids. At first she insisted they not stay here. She knew my feelings about Dad and her were strained. She gave me plenty of room.”

“But you asked them to stay here and bring their kids?”

“Yeah, Dad kind of broke down when he got here today. Treated me in a way like he used to before Mother died and he started drinking so much. Told me how much he loves Billy and me. Somehow all those years of bad feelings melted away.”

“That’s great, Philip.”

I feel myself getting teary and I say, “I know, but it’s just so awful that it took Billy’s death to make it happen.” We look at each other, sigh, and take a sip from our drinks which both have left little wet rings on the table.

“Damn, let me get some cocktail napkins. Billy would cuss a blue streak if we leave rings on Fatgram’s table,” I smile at Lush and she smiles back with full red lips and dazzling white teeth.

I find the cocktail napkins while Luscious chooses the crystal. We are both silent with our own thoughts for a while as we finish setting the table. Dad and Brenda enter the dining room with the wine, followed by Luka and Benny carrying trays with the food. Clark scurries through and disappears under the table.

“I thought we’d start with the soup and a little white wine, then just pass around everything else,” Brenda says.

“Sounds great. Lush and I will sit on this side and you and Dad sit on that side,” I say and motion to Brenda. Luka pulls out Brenda’s chair, gives Benny a stern stare causing him to quickly pull out Luscious’s chair. We all sit down and Luka serves us the mushroom soup while Benny pours the Sauvignon Blanc Brenda selected. We begin eating without a toast. Luka and Benny station themselves on either side of the kitchen door and freeze with their arms behind their backs. I notice that Benny is extremely handsome, with a fragile, boyish, feminine appearance. He wears white gloves, Luka doesn’t. I think how much Billy would enjoy this scene. He’d say to Luka and Benny, ‘Hum, I think I’ll gild you both and add you to my collection, but only after I’ve had each

of you, or maybe the both of you together.’ My ears feel heavy and hot as an image of Benny, Luka, and Billy, naked limbs entwined into a lecherous tangle, Billy eating the young Asian’s ass who is licking the thick cock of Luka who, in turn, is sucking Billy’s cock. I hear the moans of pleasure emanating from the trio, and I feel my cock growing. I shift in my chair, stretch my legs out under the table, smile, and look over at Lush as she tastes her soup.

“Mmm, this soup is excellent,” Lush exclaims.

“Yes it is,” Brenda says as she takes another spoonful.

“Son, have you heard from the man who took Billy to the hospital?”

“Yes, I called him today. He’s still in Bermuda at a photo shoot.”

I continue to tell everyone about my conversation with Elliott Fields after which they are all curious about my conversation with the two detectives. At this point, we are well into the main courses and are drinking the Zinfandel. Luscious graciously changes the subject for a while and asks about Dad and Brenda’s furniture stores in Iowa. Dad, in turn, is curious about the sale of Lush’s family drug stores.

“The sale was completed two years ago, and as I was telling Brenda earlier, Dad finally was able to retire completely and he had planned to do nothing but play golf and go on some world cruises in the winter. He poured himself into that business after Mom died, spent all his time grooming David and expanding the stores. We had seventy-five stores in Kentucky and Indiana by the time of the sale. Then dad died two years later, on the anniversary of the closing.”

“Oh, how awful, Luscious,” he replies, “Did you ever work in the business?”

“No, Charles. I know this may sound strange, but the business came to us through the maternal side of my family. My great grandmother’s father started it right after the Civil War. There were never any male children born in that line, so husbands always ran the business. My parents encouraged me to follow suit.”

“How interesting,” Dad replies.

“Anyhow, as you know, I wanted to pursue a career in journalism, but after I got my Masters, mother got breast cancer. I married David, mother died, and the next thing I knew, I was a bored country-club housewife who couldn’t get pregnant. I couldn’t get a job in journalism in Louisville, so one day I decided to take a real estate course, and I ended up getting my license. The next thing I knew I was selling the homes of my parents’ friends, and then finding houses for my friends. It’s been a great career for me. I am my own boss, and, thanks to your lovely son here, I’ve even managed to get a few essays and articles published over the years.”

“You’re being modest. She’s the queen of high end residential in Louisville,” I add with a big smile.

“Oh, Todge, you are so full of you know what—”

“Oh my, I apologize everyone—that horrible smell. It must be Clark,” I say as I stick my head under the table where the smell is so awful I can’t breath. The offender just lies there with sad eyes, slowly wagging his tail.

“Rank. That’s some real ghetto gas, Clark boy,” Luscious says, “Let’s open these French doors up.”

She stands but Luka, who is trying his best not to laugh, runs over and says, “Allow me, madam.” Lush sits back down. Luka unlocks and opens the set of French doors nearest to us. A cool breeze rushes in, and Clark heads out on the terrace to his grassy spot.

“Well, I guess he was just trying to tell us something,” Dad offers. We all laugh, except for Benny, whom I guess doesn’t understand much English.

Billy’s telephone begins to ring. There is a portable unit on one of the kitchen counters, and Luka asks me if he should bring it in. I hesitate, and then tell him to get it. He does and I answer it.

“Hello. Yes, this is Philip Hampton.” I sense everyone watching me carefully. I listen to the caller, but can hardly believe what he’s saying to me.

“I see. No, I haven’t noticed anything out of the ordinary here. Is there anything else I need to do tonight? Right. Well, I suppose that’s okay. Thank you. Goodnight.”

I click the phone off, put it on the table and look at everyone. I feel the tears pressing from inside my eyeballs as I say, “That was Detective Johnson. The hospital notified him that when they tested Billy’s blood prior to releasing his organs for donations they found extremely high levels of GHB. He said low levels of GHB naturally occur in everyone’s blood, and that the higher levels Billy ingested yesterday would have been fully metabolized. The only explanation is that someone injected a concentrated solution of GHB into his bloodstream this morning. Someone murdered Billy in the hospital this morning.”

