

GOLD STREET

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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For Bill

It is well enough the people of the nation do not understand our banking and monetary system, for if they did, I believe there would be a revolution before tomorrow morning.

– Henry Ford

1

Let me issue and control a nation's money and I care not who writes its laws.

—Mayer Amschel Rothschild

SATURDAY OCTOBER 18

The call came before dawn, breaking the silence of the old house in the nation's capital where Jill Madison lay dreaming. "Happy Birthday Mommy," her daughter said, and in her sleep Jill smiled and pressed the receiver against her ear. Then the shrill second ring came and Jill was instantly alert.

Her husband snapped on the overhead light and answered the call. "Blaze Madison," he said, in the senatorial tone reserved for colleagues and constituents. "Good morning." It was five-forty.

Jill eyed her husband as he frowned at the phone. He was fifty-six, but looked younger, even though his hair and eyebrows were white. His eyes were dark brown and so shiny they looked liquid. He had a golden stubble and a perennial tan, but in the harsh light he looked pale. His brow was furrowed, showing deep lines that were seldom noticeable.

"Come again?" he said, as his voice broke and rose in tone.

Jill sat up and rearranged the blanket, feeling the mid-October chill.

Looking ten years older, Blaze said goodbye and folded the phone. "That was the police. Tyler's been hit by a car."

A weight fell on Jill's heart, which made it hard to breathe, hard to talk, hard to think of her vital and athletic twenty-four year old son run over by a car. "How is he?" she asked in a hoarse voice.

"Unconscious. He's in New York Downtown Hospital."

Jill was instantly cold, the room's autumn air now inside her bones.

"He was hit Thursday night." Blaze pulled at the stubble on his chin.

Today was Saturday. Tyler had been unconscious for two days and she hadn't known. "Why are they just telling us now?"

"They just learned who he was. His phone broke in the accident. He had no wallet, no ID, and no money."

Jill closed her eyes. She thought she had already lived through the worst possible nightmare.

"You have to go to New York." Blaze got out of bed pulling on his jockeys. He went to the north window and threw open the curtains. No light came in.

Jill didn't move. She wanted to go back to sleep, have *this* be the dream.

"I can't go," he said. "Not now, not with the vote. I've got to be in chambers at eight. If we don't fix this Vermont crisis, we'll lose the election." He sighed deeply, as if in contemplation of this. "I'm sorry this had to happen on your birthday."

Jill shivered and pulled the covers up over her shoulders. Today she turned fifty. The old boxer stared up from her doggie bed and looked worried, as if she sensed trouble. Tyler was unconscious and that meant a brain injury. He could be a vegetable, never able to walk or think again. Jill drew in a deep sharp breath. She wanted a drink; it would turn down the dial of her mind, dull the sharp edges of her thoughts, make things manageable.

"I'll drop you at the airport on my way downtown and come as soon as I can," Blaze said, as he strode to the closet.

Outside, a police siren wailed as it went screaming down Wisconsin heading toward the White House. The dog had gone back to sleep

and Jill knew a drink would not change anything. Somehow, she had to find a way to deal with this straight and sober.

A crash from the closet got Jill out of bed. Cinching the belt on her robe, she crossed the floor, the bare wood cold on her feet. A pile of suitcases had fallen from the overhead shelf and lay on the closet floor. Blaze was rubbing his head. He picked up a black carry-on from the pile. "You'll have to fly standby. Don't check any luggage."

His cell phone rang and he rushed to get it. She stood in the closet doorway, clutching hangers and listening to his end of the conversation. He was evidently talking to the doctor, but doing more listening than talking. Jill hugged her clothes and held her breath. Let Tyler be awake, fully functional, cognitive, and miraculously recovered.

But Blaze said, "Let me know if there's any change." He gave the doctor two phone numbers where he could be reached and tossed the phone on the bed. "That was the neurologist, Dr. Patel. The prognosis is good. Tyler was hit close to the hospital and got there within ten minutes of the accident. They did an MRI and there was no swelling of the brain. He injured his shoulder, broke his clavicle, and has minor bruising. He's unconscious, but Patel thinks he'll snap out of it."

Jill knew with a brain injury there wasn't much you could do besides wait. It was like chemotherapy, when all you could do was hold your breath and hope. Nothing was in your control and you were as powerless as the doctors, who tried hard not to let it show.

"He's young," Blaze said, "he's healthy. He has that going for him." Her husband was a master of positive thinking.

He was on his way to the shower when the phone rang again. This time Jill couldn't tell who was on the other end, but it didn't sound like a doctor. Blaze listened intently, answering questions in terse reply, yes or no. He was staring out the window at the backyard, where the wind shrieked, shaking the trees. The melodic wind chime on the patio beneath them clanged and clattered.

Jill waited, clutching her clothes, numb and cold. The stone house was a hundred years old, solid but drafty. The bedroom was on the west side, with large windows on three walls and it often felt as if the

wind blew right through. The room would be bright once the sun rose, but now it was dark, in spite of the white duvet, white bed sheets, white walls and oak furniture intended to lighten it.

Blaze closed the phone and turned around. He was still in his jockeys, not seeming to feel the cold. He could block parts of himself off. That was how he kept functional. She had done it by drinking, but not any more. Not for nine months, two weeks, and three days. She would need a miracle to get through this sober.

“That was the FBI,” Blaze said. “They’re looking into the accident.”

“Why not the police?”

“It’s routine.”

Because he was a U.S. senator and there was power that came with being an elected official.

“He was hit on Gold Street. Down in the financial district. A hit and run.”

Jill’s mouth dropped open. “They just left him lying in the road?”

“He probably didn’t look both ways when he crossed the street.”

Jill looked at Blaze dubiously. “Are you kidding?”

He shrugged. “It’s what the police thought.”

Jill shook her head. Every fiber in her body fought that conclusion. From the time Tyler was young, she taught him to look three times before he crossed the street: first one way, then the other, and then the first again. And this on their quiet road! When he went to grade school, she walked with him every day. Even when he was too old for it, he held her hand tightly and always looked. Now he lived in New York where traffic was a nightmare. He ran marathons and didn’t listen to music when he trained so he could hear the cars. So, no, she did not believe he would just step out into the path of a car without looking where he was going. It was unthinkable. “That’s not possible. Maybe he was mugged and pushed into the road.”

“He doesn’t have any money.”

“I know he didn’t just step into the road without looking.”

Blaze shrugged. “What’s the alternative? He was hit on purpose?”

“He thought he was being followed.”

Blaze dismissed that with a sweep of his hand. “He probably drank too much and stumbled into the street.”

“He doesn’t drink.”

“Maybe not around you. Maybe he went to visit Julie.”

Jill’s older sister was a stock broker who lived near Wall Street, but her son and Julie lived in two different worlds. “I doubt it.”

“It could be drugs. Face it, we don’t know what he’s into. He hasn’t been home in months.”

“Were you having him followed?”

“Me?” Blaze was taken aback. “Of course not.”

“You did before.”

“For a good reason. We agreed it was best.”

No, Blaze thought it was best, and on the advice of his lawyer, he’d hired a private investigator.

“We’ll leave at six-thirty.” Blaze picked up his phone, dialed a number, and Jill knew who he was calling even though he identified himself only as, “It’s me.” He was calling Austin, and his ex-wife, rubbing salt in Jill’s wound.

Reagan National Airport was a zoo even on Saturday at 6.45 A.M. Long lines snaked around the ticket counter with even longer lines at security. Flights were being canceled and delays were probable, thanks to an advancing front, the first one of the year, arriving early and bringing cold, blustery wind, gray skies and torrential rain.

Through security, Jill bought a disgusting cup of coffee and a *Washington Post* and sat near the window. Outside, the waiting plane was being shaken by the wind and drowned by the storm. The 8:00 A.M. departure time had already been delayed to 8:30.

She drank the weak coffee, as awful as it was, and read the paper, trying not to think about Tyler lying alone in the hospital with no visitors, no friends, and no family to show the medical staff he was loved and that people cared deeply about his progress and his treat-

ment. Blaze had promised to call as soon as he heard anything, and she checked her phone again, but there were no calls. Phones weren't allowed to ring in chambers, but Chase, his top aide and campaign manager, was supposed to keep her posted. She put the phone on her lap within close reach.

The headline on the front page was: 'Vermont Near Bankruptcy'. According to the article, the trouble could be traced to a failing nuclear facility. Twenty-five million had been borrowed to get the plant fixed and modernized, only the job had been botched and the plant was still off-line, generating neither power nor revenue. The state needed the electricity and was currently buying power from New Hampshire. Short of cash, the government was unable to pay its employees and pensioners, or repay other debts. The state sought a paltry fifty million from Congress to fix the plant and keep the state afloat.

The crisis couldn't have come at a worse time. The presidential election was seventeen days away and Vermont had become the central issue. Blaze was up for re-election and did not need an economic crisis when he was already seen as a tax-and-spend liberal. At the moment, he was ahead of his Tea Party opponent, but just barely. During his twenty-four years in Congress, he'd never had an opponent this close. Privately, Blaze was musing about what they would do if he lost. They had a house in Austin, but Jill had no desire to go back there. They'd raised their family in D.C. Her memories were here.

Despite the advantage of incumbency, things had recently taken a bad turn for the Democratic President. Until the current emergency, he had been the favored candidate. Three months of positive employment and housing reports, and a robust stock market, showed a country in rebound and heading for prosperity.

Now, the crisis reminded voters of his fiscal irresponsibility. The President was calling for a bailout, and for Congress to immediately pass a bill to lend Vermont the money. Hence, the rare Saturday vote on the Hill.

It would be contentious because Republicans weren't going along with it. The Tea Party claimed the problem in the blue state of Ver-

mont was emblematic of the problem facing the country; government just wanted to spend, spend, spend. The Republican presidential candidate, Rich Tumblin, a corpulent billionaire hedge fund CEO from Wall Street was also denouncing the bailout. Why should taxpayers in other states give away their hard-earned dollars to slackers in Vermont? The federal government couldn't solve everything. Vermont needed to grow up and fix its own problems. If it had to go bankrupt, so be it.

Which showed how much he knew about the law, for it was currently illegal for states to go bankrupt. So, today, the vote was for the bailout, and as usual, it was expected to split along party lines. The bill was expected to pass in the Democratic dominated Senate and fail in the Republican dominated House. With many members up for reelection, the response to the economic crisis would determine the fate of many political careers.

Jill read the positions outlined in the editorial pages as she waited to board. Take-off was delayed until 9:00, and she was sure it would be delayed again, but then the flight was called. Normally she flew business class and got to board first, but today she had a seat in economy and was lucky to have that for the flight was overbooked.

Her seat was in the last row of three and two overweight travelers sat on either side of her hogging the arm rests. She hugged her arms together, holding herself tight, phone close at hand. Soon she would have to turn it off, but would do so at the last moment. She was still trying to decide whether to call her daughter, Alexandria, who was a first year medical student at Harvard. She was in the midst of mid-terms and Jill was loath to worry her. Alexandria had wanted to come down for the weekend to celebrate Jill's birthday, but couldn't because of her exams. She had sent a nice card. Tyler, who could have come, said he was too busy. Doing what, he never said. Something that would cause him to be followed, mugged, and run over? Jill looked at her watch. He had been unconscious now for thirty-five hours.

She wanted a drink. She craned her neck looking for the flight attendant. Despite the overhead warning, Jill unclasped her seatbelt and

stood up at a crouch. The aisle was empty. Just one small drink, a vodka with orange juice; no one would ever know. She would just have one, enough to calm her thoughts, sedate her fears. There was no sign of the drink cart or the stewardess and she sank back down.

The man on her right turned and peered at her. "Are you Jill Madison? The senator's wife?"

"Yes." Jill forced a smile. Since she had quit drinking, it was increasingly hard for her to be out in public and she preferred to be home, protected behind a big sturdy fence and a locked gate. Out here she was a walking target, a public figure through marriage. Without alcohol, she found this nearly intolerable. Her therapist said it would pass, but for the moment advised Jill to stay home, keep stress to a minimum, and not do anything new to invite temptation.

"Will they bail out Vermont?"

"Eventually," she said, wondering why people thought they could ask her anything they liked.

"Why should we bail them out?"

"It's the right thing to do," she said, without much conviction.

"No one bailed me out when I lost my house."

"Sorry."

"Will he be re-elected?"

"Yes." Jill nodded emphatically. Always exude confidence, she'd learned. You never knew who you could be talking to. She didn't want tomorrow's headline in the *Washington Post* to be: 'Senator's Wife Doubts Win'.

"You're the one with the daughter who died, aren't you?"

"Excuse me, I have to go to the bathroom." Jill stood up, hunched over, waiting for the man to move.

"You have to keep your seatbelt on." He pointed to the sign.

"I'm going." She spoke so stridently, he was quickly up on his feet and in the aisle.

There was no line for the bathroom and no flight attendant to shoo her back to her seat. Jill went into the stall and locked the door. She looked in the mirror and was appalled. She had got her hair cut for her

birthday and it was horrible, a stupid unflattering cut that was too angled around her chin and chopped at the back. She combed it with her fingers. Her hair was light brown, thick and wavy, not suitable for this style. The gray was coming in quickly, but she let it come, too apathetic really to do too much about it. She had dark blue eyes, which had once been bright and shiny, but now looked dull and without luster. She was aging fast and didn't care. At least she still had her figure, not that she worked on it. She walked three miles with the dog every day and ate healthy food because Blaze had high blood pressure and needed to watch his weight. She had expected to feel healthy after she quit drinking, but after nine months of sobriety, she felt worse. She couldn't sleep, she worried incessantly, and grieved the loss of her younger daughter.

She returned to her seat, hoping her seatmate would have found something else to do in her absence, but he was at it again as soon as she sat down. "Is it right for the government to lend money that it doesn't have? To borrow money just to give it away?"

"It's a difficult situation." Jill reached for the in-flight magazine, reminding herself she had to be nice. Every person was a potential voter or a potential threat. Anyone could write anything and have it end up in the paper: 'Senator's Wife Tells Voter To Fuck Off'. She got out her reading glasses. "Excuse me."

The man nudged her with his elbow. "You're reading upside down."

"I can read upside down." She turned a page.

"You're kidding?"

"Yes." She turned the magazine around and stared at an ad for perfume and thought about her son. She knew he could be doing a number of things that would get him into trouble. Unlike Blaze, she didn't believe that Tyler was into the kinds of things that normal college age students were into, like drinking and dope, girls and sex. He wanted to make the world a better place.

He hadn't finished university, and so far he had been to three. He always wanted to be a doctor and had been enrolled in pre-med at

Georgetown. Then Hope got sick. It didn't take him long to decide he wanted no part of the health care system, but he stuck it out for a year. He transferred to the University of Maryland as a sophomore and enrolled in Computer Science. That lasted two semesters; the classes were too boring, the programming too juvenile. In his junior year he went to Howard University and took Economics and History. He liked the history – the black people's version – but he questioned the economics.

Some time during the year he applied to the Peace Corps and although they didn't normally accept volunteers without university degrees, he talked his way in. He was posted in West Africa, in a small town in a coastal country that had no oil. The country was poor, with an average per capita income of fifty cents a day. Tyler's job was teaching green agriculture to low income subsistence farmers. He'd been there fifteen months when the government arrested him for sedition.

Tyler's defense was that there'd been a serious drought and crops were ruined and food prices were rising, there were shortages and people were starving. Typically, at this point, the International Monetary Fund would come in with a loan, but the country was behind in its debt repayment and the IMF refused to lend more money. The government printed money, resulting in hyperinflation and the value of the country's currency plunged. The cost of imports, especially oil, skyrocketed. Business in the country came to a near standstill. People were starving. They died by the thousands.

Finally, the government agreed to a strict repayment plan and austerity measures for its people, and the IMF came back with new funding. Now, government services and workers' pay were cut. Taxes were raised. The people rebelled. Workers across the country went on strike. In the capital city an early curfew was imposed, stores were closed and university classes canceled. People marched in the streets and Tyler marched with them. He was quickly arrested, thrown in prison and could have been there for years had the ambassador not intervened.

Tyler was shipped home in time for Christmas and moved to New York in the new year. He lived with Jill's sister for two days and then got a room in a boarding house where he'd been now for ten months. He tried to get a job, but with official unemployment nearing ten percent, and unofficial unemployment over twenty percent, he couldn't find work. He didn't want to go back to school and had trained for the New York Marathon, was volunteering in a soup kitchen, learning Portuguese and advanced French, with a plan to return to Africa.

He would have already gone, but he was arrested in June for harboring two Zimbabwe dissidents who were wanted at home on felony charges. That was when Blaze had him followed. Their lawyer didn't want any surprises and there weren't any. Tyler didn't drink, didn't do drugs and didn't gamble. There was apparently a girl, but he never spoke of her, and in any case, she didn't last. Although the felony charges were bogus, the judge sent the Zimbabweans home and gave Tyler six months probation. He couldn't leave the country for another two months.

Maybe now he could never leave. This was what she had wanted, but not at this cost. *Be careful what you wish for, you might just get it.* Tyler might never wake up, never walk, never smile, never talk, never run another marathon or save the world.

Recognizing a downward spiral, Jill ordered herself to find good thoughts. Her therapist said that it was as easy to think good thoughts as it was to think bad ones. Jill told herself that Tyler would wake up, he would be fine. Thanks to spectacular medical treatment, he would return to university and become a doctor after all. The accident would shake him up, make him see what was important. He would fall in love, get married, have kids and get a normal life and forget about fixing the world.

The pilot came on over the loudspeaker. The plane was ready to depart. Jill applauded along with the other passengers. Her desire to drink was gone, until the pilot announced they were number thirty-seven in line for take-off.

2

Economics is a dry and forbidding subject that has been made intentionally complex by banking interests intent on concealing what is really going on.

—Ellen Brown, Web of Debt

New York, as always, was busy, crowded, noisy and frustrating. There were too many people, all wanting to be first, which caused a logjam that slowed everything and raised tempers. Under gray threatening skies, traffic was bumper to bumper along the freeway, and the taxi ride from the airport to lower Manhattan took Jill over an hour. Downtown Hospital was on the corner of William Street and Ann, but there was no way to get off Broadway and get to it. The side roads were closed, and no cars or people were allowed past police-taped intersections. The cab was stuck on Broadway, and the cabbie, who kept up with traffic reports, didn't know what was going on.

Jill ended up getting out at Maiden Lane and headed for the hospital on foot, pulling her suitcase behind her. Campaign signs were everywhere, tacked to electric poles, stapled to trees and on posts shoved in brown patches of dirt. The street was packed with pedestrians streaming in each direction, walking three abreast. The wind blew against her back, the storm on its way from Washington. No sun shone. She passed a tavern and slowed, wanting to stop in, but thoughts of Tyler spurred her on.

She reached Fulton and another barrier. She looked around, saw no police, and side-stepped the barrier. She was hurrying along the

sidewalk when she heard from behind, “Ma’am, Ma’am. You with the suitcase.”

She stopped and turned.

An officer marched toward her. “The road’s closed.”

“I’ve got to get to the hospital. It’s just over there.” She pointed vaguely to the northeast. “My son’s been hit by a car. He’s unconscious.”

“What’s in the suitcase?”

“My clothes.” She tried to smile, to appeal with good looks that she knew were in short supply. “I just came from D.C. My son is only twenty-four. He was hit on Thursday night. We just found out this morning. I came as fast as I could. I don’t know how to get to the hospital with the roads blocked off. I –”

Her long story was interrupted by a volley of three shots. The officer looked in the direction of the sound. His radio crackled, “Code 3, code 3.” Sirens started screaming and he waved her on. He turned around and loped off in the opposite direction.

Inside the barricaded streets, the sidewalks were empty and it was a welcome relief. She followed the Maps app on her phone and got to the hospital in ten minutes. It was a long rectangular brick building that was undergoing renovations. Big panels of plywood blocked off the windows and doors. She went down a hallway and realized she’d gone in a back door. She passed a closed Starbucks and headed for the entrance. The reception desk was staffed by an ancient volunteer with blue hair and a hearing aid. There was no record of a Tyler Madison in the hospital.

Jill leaned forward and spelled out her last name one more time, wishing she had stopped at the bar. It was hard to hear herself speak over the ear-splitting pounding of loud hammering.

A glimmer brightened the old woman’s eyes. “One moment.” She picked up a phone and pushed a button.

The next thing Jill knew, a young, sharp-looking woman appeared and shook her hand. The director of the hospital was going to escort Jill up to Tyler’s room personally. Ms. Jones explained that Tyler

wasn't listed in the system at the suggestion of the FBI. "We don't need the press. I thought your husband concurred."

"Yes," Jill said, though it was news to her. She fell in step with the director.

"We have Tyler in ICU. Not that he needs to be there, just so we can keep a close eye on him."

"I'd like to talk to his doctor."

"I paged him. He's in surgery now, but he'll speak with you the moment he's finished."

"Thank you," Jill said, cognizant of and grateful for the special treatment. Despite the invasion of privacy that came with Blaze's position, it had its perks.

ICU was up on the 4th floor and the elevator doors opened onto a hallway covered with plywood. The director apologized for the construction and promised that it in no way hampered patient care. Jill wondered about patient comfort. All the banging and power tools were giving her a headache.

They followed a maze of corridors to a hallway that ended with double black doors and the letters ICU. The director pushed a large button the size of her palm and the doors sprang open.

ICU was a big square room with a nurses' station taking up a huge center block and rooms arranged along the perimeter. Nurses milling about the center snapped to attention when the director stopped. A heavy nurse in pink scrubs and black cros hurried over. He was Vincent, Tyler's personal intensive care nurse.

The trio walked down a wide corridor. The doors to the rooms were open and glass windows offered no privacy. Jill saw sleeping patients surrounded by family members, while Tyler was alone. She quickened her pace.

They turned a corner and Vincent pushed ahead to lead the way. He stopped in a doorway and Jill rushed past him into the room. Tyler lay on his back in bed, looking pale and still. Tubes snaked across him. An IV fed the back of his wrist and he had a clamp on his thumb and a blood pressure cuff around his bicep. She bent over the rail and laid

her cheek against his. His skin was cold and his lips were tight. He wore a blue checkered gown and his left shoulder was heavily taped. Other than that, he looked good. His face wasn't smashed and his skull was intact.

There was a flurry of activity behind her and Jill straightened. A tiny Asian man in starched baby blue scrubs swept into the room attended by a crowd, which turned out to be neurology residents and interns. The director made introductions and Jill met Dr. Patel fresh from surgery.

The director retreated, bidding a regretful goodbye. Dr. Patel tapped at a tablet and spoke in a happy voice, "Miraculously, there is no internal damage. He did break his clavicle, but other than his brain, there are no more injuries."

It was a huge *but*. Jill faced the neurologist. "He feels cold."

"I'll get him another blanket." Vincent hurried from the room.

"He's pale," Jill said.

"Actually, his color looks quite good," said the neurologist. "Much better than previously."

"Not for him," Jill said. She was used to seeing her son tanned and glowing with the good health that came from running ten to fifteen miles a day. She stared at the monitor by the bed. "His temperature is only ninety-six. Why is it so low?"

"It is being in the normal range."

"His blood pressure is only 110/60? Isn't that low?"

"Again, I am afraid it is normal. Considering. Your son actually is in very good condition."

Jill wanted the truth. She would not be appeased. She frowned at the monitor. "He could have low blood pressure if he was bleeding internally, right?" She had learned a thing or two about medicine when Hope was in the hospital.

"I can assure you he is not bleeding internally," the neurologist said, as Vincent returned with a cheery yellow blanket and draped it over the bed. "We are taking blood twice a day to monitor organ function and detect infection and his blood work is consistently good.

We are giving him fluid to keep him hydrated. As you can see, he is breathing on his own and that is a very good sign.”

The neurologist took a penlight from his pocket, leaned over the bed and pried open one of Tyler’s eyelids. He shone the light in his eye. He did the same to the other eye. “He has good pupillary reflex,” Dr. Patel said. “Which means his pupils contract with the light. It is another positive sign.”

“But that’s just a reflex, right,” Jill said. “It doesn’t mean his brain is working.”

The neurologist patted Jill’s arm. “Trust me. It is a good sign.”

“Please be straight with me,” Jill said. “What are his chances of a full recovery?”

The neurologist was hesitant to name a figure.

“Fifty percent?” Jill said.

“At least.”

“So there’s a fifty percent chance he’ll be a vegetable or will never wake up.”

The students suddenly found something interesting to see out the window. Dr. Patel looked uncomfortable. He slipped the tablet under his arm and said, “He is young. Very healthy. His chances are very good.” Then the neurologist had to go, there were other patients to see, but if she had any more questions she could page him.

“Where are Tyler’s clothes?”

“I’ll get them.” Vincent pulled open the bottom drawer of the bedside dresser and grabbed a plastic bag.

“Where’s the bar?” Jill asked.

The surgeon, nurse, and students gawked with surprise. There was an awkward moment until she realized her error and corrected herself. “I mean, the bathroom.”

There was one in the corner of the room.

After everyone had gone, Jill drew the curtain across the front window for privacy. She dragged an armchair from the corner to the bed, dropped the side rail, sat down and took Tyler’s hand. She wanted to climb into bed with him, like she did when he was small,

back when she had the power to chase away monsters and make his world happy and safe. Now all she could do was hold his hand and hope his glass was half full instead of half empty.

There was a puff, and the blood pressure cuff automatically began to inflate as it recorded Tyler's blood pressure. She read the numbers off the monitor: 118/70. His blood pressure had gone up, inching toward normal. Did Tyler know she was there? She squeezed his hand, looking for a response, but there was none. He felt cold and far away.

Jill glanced around the room. As far as hospitals went, it wasn't bad and that was something. It didn't smell of antiseptic or sick people. The walls were forest green with a rainforest trim as if bright monkeys and parrots could make people happy. A row of windows flanked one wall and she could see the East River. She heard what sounded like loud drumming, a power saw, and the noise of heavy traffic. For an insomniac like her, it would be disturbing, but Tyler slept through it all. He had always slept well. It was Hope who'd had trouble sleeping.

Jill picked up the remote clipped to the side of the bed and turned on the TV. It was tuned to a local station and the weather report was on and rain was coming. No explanation was given for the closure of the streets near the hospital.

She got up, opened the plastic bag with Tyler's clothes and emptied it at the foot of the bed between Tyler's outstretched legs. There was a whooshing sound as the mattress redistributed air to account for new weight. She went through his things. There were jeans that had faded to white and were ripped in the knees. There was nothing in the pockets, no wallet, no money, no ID. He'd been wearing a thin gray henley, the color of a used dish rag that was frayed at the hem, along with a navy sweater that looked too small and had a hole in the elbow and knots in the wool. It was sticky and bloodied. She picked up a green Nike and turned it over in her hand. It was a specialized lightweight running shoe with cushioning air pockets and yellow stripes. She pushed the clothes aside. She couldn't find the other shoe. He had no jacket and no socks.

She picked up his cell phone. It was the smart phone she had bought him for Christmas. Wistfully, she remembered going with him to pick it out. The store was having a two-for-one sale and he picked one out for her too. He was excited about the advances in technology that had transpired when he was in Africa and the phone made him happy. It had been nice to see. He had come back from overseas depressed and disillusioned.

She slid the on button and nothing happened. The police thought the phone was damaged, but the battery could be dead. She wondered how the police finally identified him and why it had taken them so long. Was Tyler a low priority because of his clothes? Did he look poor, irrelevant, unloved? It couldn't be further from the truth. She put the phone in her purse, shoved his meager belongings back in the bag and returned it to the drawer.

She sat back down. Tyler hadn't moved. She tried to envision his last conscious movements on Thursday night. He lived in the South Bronx and had come downtown. He didn't have a car, so someone either drove him or he took the subway. What would he be doing in the financial district at nine o'clock at night? What had he planned this weekend that prevented him from coming home? Did he leave his wallet with his money and ID at home, or had he been robbed? Was the accident random or deliberate? Was someone really following him? Did they come after him? Did they think they got him, or were they after him still? Then there was the biggest question of all: what was he doing that could get him killed?

The afternoon passed slowly. Jill sat by Tyler's bed watching CNN. Rain came with thunder that sounded like gunshot, but didn't last. Vincent came every hour to check on Tyler, but nothing changed. Dr. Patel came at five on his last rounds of the day and reiterated his assessment that Tyler looked very good. Blaze called at five-thirty to tell her he was leaving chambers. "We voted for the bailout, but the House didn't. We're going to have to meet tomorrow. See if we can find a compromise."

“I know.” CNN had already reported it. Blaze’s vote for the bailout was on the record. His Tea Party opponent, Candy Turner, who had never held any elective office, considered it ill-conceived. She made it sound as if Blaze were personally responsible for giving away the money of hard working people to government loafers and lazy retirees in Vermont. Blaze was clearly a socialist, bent on turning the U.S. into a communist country.

It was incredible to Jill that Candy was doing so well. She was far right, an ultra-conservative, albeit attractive, but with questionable ideas. She didn’t think carbon dioxide was harmful because it was a natural compound. She thought wolves were dangerous and therefore shouldn’t be protected. She wanted to fence in the whooping cranes, thwart their annual migration, and build a theme park for them in the unspoiled wetlands of Aransas. And, she wanted to cut taxes and decrease government regulation. The Tea Party loved her, as did its Wall Street backers. In September, money had begun pouring in to her campaign and now Blaze had a tenth of what she had. It was amazing she wasn’t further ahead in the polls instead of almost even.

“How is Tyler doing?” Blaze asked. “Patel called and said he looked good.”

Jill glanced at her son “There’s been no change all day. What if this is it? What if he doesn’t wake up? If he doesn’t get any better?”

“Did you ask for a second opinion?”

“Should I?”

“It can’t hurt. What about the brain trauma center in Houston?”

“What about it? Is it better? Should we try to move him?”

“We need to consider all options.”

Which was exactly why he needed to be here and not wasting his time in chambers. But it was always this way, whenever she needed him, he was elsewhere. “I’ll talk to the doctor,” Jill said. But it wouldn’t be until morning when Dr. Patel returned.

“Have you called Alexandria?” Blaze asked.

“No, she’s got midterms next week and I don’t want to tell her. She’d drop everything and come.”

“Did you call your sister?”

“I want to stay with Tyler. I don’t want Julie to know I’m here.” Jill’s sister had a way of moving in, taking over, taking charge. But that wasn’t all. Jill hadn’t seen her since she quit drinking and wasn’t sure how they’d get along now that she was sober. She changed the subject. “Have you talked with the FBI?”

“Not since this morning. Why?”

“I wondered if they found Tyler’s wallet. He’s also missing a shoe.”

“They’re going to call me with an update and I’ll ask them.”

In the background Jill heard noises, bells ringing and Blaze had to go. They said their goodbyes. He was heading home to their warm cozy house, while she was stuck in the hospital getting ready to settle in for an uncomfortable night. Though visiting hours ended at nine, she had permission from the director to spend the night. It would be unpleasant, that much was clear. The armchair was already hurting her back.

Night-time at the hospital was pretty much like the day-time only the bright overhead lights were dimmed and the curtains were closed. The staff thinned, though Vincent stayed on to work a double shift. Jill was settling into the hard chair, bracing herself for an endless night, when her phone rang. It was her sister.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were in New York?” Julie demanded. “That my only nephew was in a coma?”

“He’s unconscious.”

“Is there a difference?”

“How did you find out?”

“Excuse the noise, I’m at a party. Blaze told me. I called your house to wish you happy birthday and he answered and said you couldn’t come to the phone. Obviously, I asked, why not.”

Even Blaze couldn’t stand up to her.

“You’re spending the night, I presume,” Julie said.

“With Tyler, yes.”

A phlebotomist came in pushing a blood cart and nodded to Jill.

“I meant with me. They won’t let you stay overnight.”

“I have permission.” Jill got out of the chair to give the technician space.

He grabbed a tourniquet, wrapped it around Tyler’s arm, tapped, then swabbed a vein and withdrew blood. Jill walked to the window, lifted the curtain and looked out.

“I’ll come pick you up,” Julie said. “Leave your phone number at the nurses’ station. They’ll call if anything happens. You can be back in ten minutes.”

Jill stared out at the water. The bridge, sparkling with lights, looked surreal, like a painting. None of what was happening seemed remotely possible, and Julie would not give up.

“Blaze said Tyler’s been out of it for two days and there’s no change. He’s not a baby. If he wakes up and you’re not there, he won’t start wailing.”

The phlebotomist had his blood and was leaving. Jill nodded goodbye, as her sister continued.

“I haven’t seen you in months. You haven’t been to New York in over a year and when you come, you don’t call and would rather sit with someone who doesn’t know you’re there, than with me, who does.”

Jill exhaled loudly. Her older sister never married and had no children. She lived a free, but lonely life. Jill was the only family she had left. And Julie did have a point; her apartment was nearby, and she had comfortable guest rooms. Jill could be back quickly if there was any change. Besides, it was a long shot, but Julie might know how Tyler spent his days. “Okay, I’ll come.”

“Don’t make it sound like torture. Meet me downstairs in half an hour.”

At nine o’clock, Jill kissed her cold, still son and left ICU along with the other visitors. A crowd huddled at the elevator and when it finally came, there wasn’t enough room for everyone. She didn’t fight her way

on. She and a burly man waited for the next one. He wore a beige trench coat and spoke on a cell phone in a thick accent that sounded German. He had dirty blond hair that might have been dyed. A long, ugly bulging scar ran from the corner of his eye down across his left cheek to his mouth. He seemed rough, out of place, more like a thug than a worried visitor.

He caught her eye and she looked away. He snapped his phone closed quickly; in mid-sentence it seemed. There was a loud uncomfortable silence. He was standing too close to her. She shifted her eyes to look at him askance. He was staring at her carry-on. Christ, could he read her name tag? She jerked her suitcase away, whirled around and hurried down the hallway. She wasn't getting on the elevator with him.

Her heart was pounding. Was he a foreign reporter looking for a scoop? It wouldn't be the first time she was followed, or had photos rudely snapped. Though sober, she did offer less fodder for the tabloids. Was he the man following Tyler? Her body stiffened and she sped up, hurrying through a doorway that led to a deserted corridor. She glanced down at her suitcase. There, in big letters, was her name and address in D.C. He would know who she was and where she lived.

She got lost in the construction. Each footstep echoed noisily. The wheels on her suitcase squeaked loudly. She had never been followed when she was sober, and drunk it seemed like a joke, but there was nothing funny about this.

She reached a different elevator, pushed the button and the doors opened and an elderly couple was there. She caught her breath and began to calm down. It could have just been a man with a scar. He hadn't come after her; he hadn't made any threatening advances. He could have been looking at the floor, not necessarily her suitcase. Jill's palms were sweating. Her therapist had warned that her emotions could overwhelm her without notice. She had spent years sedating them with booze and needed to learn how to handle them sober.

The elevator reached the ground floor and the elderly couple stayed put and Jill got out. The corridor was empty. She headed for

the exit, passing the Starbucks and the information desk. There was no one hiding in dark corners or lurking in the shadows. She reached the exit and the automatic revolving doors wouldn't budge. Panic instantly rose until she turned to the side door, leaned on the bar and the door opened. She stepped out into a biting wind.

A voice cried out. "Wait!"

Her heart was slamming again. Three men in the shade of the building slunk out from the bushes. She froze. They came closer and she saw that they were ragged and dirty, down and out. She yanked her suitcase to her side and hugged her purse. One yelled, "Please hold the door."

They came into the light and she saw they were young, Tyler's age. And polite. She lunged for the door and caught it just before it closed.

"Thank you." Now, an arm's distance away, she saw the man in the middle was slouching, supported on each side by his friends. He had flip-flops, torn jeans and his head hung down. Long, bright blond hair hid his face. He wore a grimy unzipped jacket, and held his hand above his heart. Blood seeped through his fingers. Their eyes met as she stepped back and gave them room to pass.

From the street, a horn hooted and high beams flashed. Julie's Jaguar was idling at the curb. The car door opened and a squat, round man of about sixty stepped out and came toward her. "Good evening," he said in a strong British accent. "Did you actually just let that riff-raff in the door?"

Jill didn't answer. She extended her hand to Julie's new butler. "You must be Charles. I'm Jill Madison."

The balding expatriate was going gray and swept what hair he had across his crown. The whites of his small bland blue eyes were tinged with red. He wore tight black slacks, a navy silk shirt and a leather bomber jacket. Instead of shaking her hand, he wrestled away her suitcase, slammed the handle closed and picked it up. "And I'm Tea Party."

"You sound British."

"Thank God."

Jill was taken aback by his rudeness. Because of Blaze, strangers thought they knew her politics and where she stood on every issue, which obviously had to match her husband's. She already missed the respectful and hard-working Christophe who had retired in the summer after twenty years of service.

The back door flew open and Julie was there, arms open. The scent of booze assailed Jill as they hugged. Julie was five years older, though routine cosmetic touch-ups made her look younger and strangers always guessed Jill was older. Julie was taller, smarter, prettier and richer. Julie was six feet tall and at five-nine, Jill was the runt. They both had brown hair and blue eyes and similar facial features, but Julie's looks were cranked up a notch. She had blond highlights and wore her hair rakishly short and feathered to the back. Big diamonds hung in her ears and a larger diamond sparkled on her neck. She had a French manicure and wore a striking white designer pantsuit. She worked at Sandford-Gallagher, one of the top financial firms in the country and made millions. How she had complained when the backlash against bankers threatened her annual bonus. Growing up poor, having and flaunting money meant everything to her.

Now Julie was peering at the hospital. "Who the fuck were those guys? Why'd you let them in?"

"They asked me to hold the door."

"They could have gone around to the ER," Julie said. "There's no security here. With the cuts in the police force, crime is off the charts. There's no telling what they're up to."

"They were young," Jill said. "Not much older than Tyler."

"Well, how is he?" Julie asked, as she tapped the glass dividing the front and back seat. The butler was in the drivers' seat and the car shot forward.

Jill hurried to get on her seatbelt. "He's unconscious. The doctor hopes he'll wake up. There's nothing we can do but wait."

"Blaze said it was an accident. Tyler had too much to drink. By the way, he does drink."

That was another thing about her sister. Julie always had to be right. There was no compromise with her. Small wonder she never married, though she claimed it was by choice. "It was a hit and run," Jill said. "Tyler was being followed."

"Christ, he's not in trouble again, is he?"

"I don't know," Jill said. "Have you seen him recently?"

"We had a fight."

Which was not unusual, given Tyler's antibourgeois inclination, and Julie's tendency to live like she was blessed by the gods and beyond reproach. "What did you fight about?" Jill asked.

"I'll tell you upstairs."

They had reached Julie's building and the butler pulled up to the curb. She lived on White Street just off Broadway, and the butler had got them there in five minutes. He opened Julie's door and Jill got out on her own. He went to park the car.

"You got your hair cut," Julie said, as they crossed the sidewalk.

Jill raised a hand self-consciously. "Worst I ever had."

"It's horrific," Julie agreed. "Who could do such butchery? You'll have to see my stylist."

Jill let this go. Julie wanted Jill to see her cosmetic surgeon, her personal trainer, her dietician, her clothing designer, and now her hairdresser. It would never happen. A stench of garbage assailed her and Jill wrinkled her nose. "What's that smell? A sewage leak?"

"Garbage pick-up's late." Julie pointed down the street where rows of garbage bags and bins lined the sidewalk. "We only get pick-up once a week now. The city is cutting back. Saving money. It stinks."

They climbed the front steps to a glass building. A doorman in uniform opened the front door. The lobby was bright with crystal chandeliers and modern furniture artfully arranged. It smelled fresh, of floral baby powder. They went down a thickly carpeted hall to an elevator that rose swiftly up to the penthouse, then down another stretch of carpet to a steel door.

Julie hit the entrance code and they went in. If there was one thing worse than Jill's appalling haircut, it was her sister's apartment. It

looked like a fishbowl. There was glass everywhere and nothing to look at; no nature in sight, no grass, no trees, unless you counted the astroturf and fake schefflera that filled a blind hallway. The penthouse was one-story, with floor to ceiling windows that were twenty feet high. The glass went on forever supported by thick steel beams. The lights of Broadway were visible from the dining room and ugly buildings spanned every direction. Even the ceiling was glass, which would have been good for star-gazing, except the city was so polluted the stars were hard to see.

If the architecture was awful, the furniture was worse. Julie liked modern furniture made out of steel and chrome with square straight lines and a minimum of color. The chairs and sofas were low and the coffee table looked as if it were laminate, though it cost more than ten thousand dollars. White pedestals of various heights and thicknesses were placed strategically throughout the rooms and held expensive sculpture and artwork of questionable taste.

They sat down in the living room on an uncomfortable beige sofa. Julie kicked off high pointy heels. "Drink?" She quickly corrected herself. "Sorry."

"What? I drink. I'll have orange juice."

"I couldn't imagine quitting. I'll never quit. I bet you go back."

"It's been over nine months."

"That long. Wow. I'm surprised you lasted a week. I'm going to have a martini. Work hard, play hard. That's my motto. You never had an excuse."

Jill said nothing, and Julie made no effort to go get the drinks. That was what a butler was for. Instead, she took out her phone and checked her messages. Jill looked out the window at a construction crane. How far they had come from Galveston, Texas, where they grew up. Their father, now dead, had worked on oil rigs out on the gulf. Their mother walked out when Jill was four and they had never seen her again. They were raised by babysitters, though Julie claimed the responsibility had fallen on her.

Of her childhood, Jill remembered Julie ordering her about, constantly telling her what to do, how to improve herself and 'be someone'. In Julie's mind, it was Jill's fault their mother had left.

In high school, Julie had been a star, the head cheerleader, the prom queen, the valedictorian. She got a full scholarship to Brown and made the dean's list every year. She graduated with an MBA and by the time she was twenty-three was working for the top investment bank in New York. In contrast, Jill received a partial scholarship from the University of Texas and worked in a book store to make up for the shortfall. Against Julie's advice that it was a 'stupid career', Jill majored in journalism. After graduation she landed a job at the *Austin Tribune* working at the political desk where she met Blaze, a Texas Congressman. He was already married.

There was a rap at the front door and Charles appeared with Jill's suitcase. "And in which room will madam be staying?" he asked, with obsequious politeness.

There were three guest rooms, each with their own bathroom and whirlpool tub. "The pink one," Julie said.

Charles nodded formally and Julie ordered the drinks. Soon, from the kitchen, Jill heard the tinkle of ice. Julie liked the open concept and the first thing she did when she bought the place was to tear down the walls so everything flowed. However, gone was privacy. Jill watched Charles shove strawberries into his mouth as he shook a stainless steel drink shaker.

Julie covered a big yawn. She'd had a busy day. She'd just come from the party on Park Avenue that had started at three. She ran through the list of people who attended and Jill didn't know any of them. Julie had slipped out after the fifth course, and Jill wasn't to feel guilty for dragging her away. Family came first.

"You were going to tell me about Tyler," Jill said, steering the conversation back to her son.

"Was I?" Julie looked longingly to the kitchen. "I was surprised when I called your house and got Blaze. Shouldn't he be in Texas campaigning?"

“He had to come back for the vote.”

“You must have been happy about that.”

A veiled reference to Blaze’s ex-wife, still in Austin. She was a banker, a woman of means and power.

“You should campaign with him,” Julie added. “Support him. She does.”

Jill shook her head.

“You make it too easy for her.”

Jill didn’t say anything.

“I warned you she’d never let him go.”

Jill stared out the window and said without conviction, “I trust him.”

“I’ll never know why.”

Charles came in bearing a small tray with drinks. The martini came in an oversized triangular glass and the orange juice in a small shot glass. Julie took her drink and told Charles to go though it was evident he wanted to stay.

After he left, Jill turned the conversation back to her son. “You mentioned an argument. What was that about?”

“I said a fight. Don’t be putting words into my mouth. As a journalist you should know better.” Julie tilted her head back and took a healthy swallow. She cradled the glass in her fingers. “I had a computer problem and he came over and fixed it. To show my appreciation, I took him to Bok Choy. That’s the sushi place on Warren, in case you’re wondering. Usually you need to make a reservation two weeks in advance, but I know the owner, Chan, intimately.”

Jill wasn’t interested in any of these details. “How did he seem to you?”

“Horny, but what’s past is past.”

“I’m talking about Tyler.”

“Oh. We ate dinner. He was starving.”

Jill hated to think of her son hungry.

“He drank three cups of saké. For your information he was looped.”

Jill did not begrudge her son a few drinks. “Is he working at the soup kitchen?”

“He didn’t mention it.” Julie was playing with the diamond on her necklace, sliding it back and forth along the chain. It was the size of an acorn and perfectly round.

“Is he seeing anybody?” Jill asked, with too much hope.

“Not that he said.”

“Is he still running?”

“Not after the marathon. He’s too busy.”

“What’s he doing?”

“He was planning a march outside the Federal Reserve to protest a non-existent meeting that was supposedly today. He’s pissed that the Fed bailed out the banks and won’t bail out Vermont and forty-two other states.”

“And that’s what you fought about,” Jill said.

“Of course not. Obviously the Fed won’t bail out the states. That’s hardly its mandate.” Julie took the last sip of her drink and stared longingly into her empty glass.

“Do you want a refill?” Jill asked.

Julie handed over her triangular glass.

Jill refilled the drinks and returned to the living room.

“If you want to know what he’s up to, read his blog,” Julie said. Her cheeks were flushed with two high spots of color.

He had a blog? That was news to Jill. “What’s it about?”

“He wants to end the Fed. He doesn’t believe in the value of trickle down wealth. He thinks the rich are immoral and don’t deserve money for working hard. He thinks we should pay more tax, support everyone who doesn’t want to work. He thinks economic science is wrong. Can you fucking believe that?” She paused to take a sip. “If you must know, that’s what we fought about. I don’t see his degree in economics hanging on the wall next to mine, yet he thinks he can tell me how to fix the economy.”

“And that’s it?” Jill said, thinking that a march was nothing to be run over for.