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There was nothing left to say.

He covered her body with his, and as she put her arms around him she could picture him in all his incarnations: age five, and still blond; age eleven, sprouting; age thirteen, with the hands of a man. The moon rolled, sloe-eyed in the night sky; and she breathed in the scent of his skin. "I love you," she said.

He kissed her so gently she wondered if she had imagined it. She pulled back slightly, to look into his eyes.

And then there was a shot.

Although THERE had never been a standing reservation made, the rear corner table of the Happy Family Chinese restaurant was always saved on Friday nights for the Hartes and the Golds, who had been coming there for as long as anyone could remember. Years ago, they had brought the children, littering the crowded nook with high chairs and diaper bags until it was nearly impossible for the waiters to maneuver the steaming platters of food onto the table. Now, it was just the four of them, blustering in one by one at six o'clock and gravitating close as if, together, they exerted some kind of magnetic pull.

James Harte had been first to arrive. He'd been operating that afternoon and had finished surprisingly early. He picked up the chopsticks in front of him, slipped them from their paper packet, and cradled them between his fingers like surgical instruments.

"Hi," Melanie Gold said, suddenly across from him. "I guess I'm early."

"No," James answered. "Everyone else is late."

"Really?" She shrugged out of her coat and balled it up beside her. "I was hoping I was early. I don't think I've ever been early."

"You know," James said, considering, "I don't think you ever have." They were linked by the one thing they had in common—Augusta Harte—but Gus had not yet arrived. So they sat in the

companionable awkwardness caused by knowing extremely private things about each other that had never been directly confided, but rather blurted by Gus Harte to her husband in bed or to Melanie over a cup of coffee. James cleared his throat and flipped the chopsticks around his fingers with dexterity. "What do you think?" he asked, smiling at Melanie. "Should I give it all up? Become a drummer?"

Melanie flushed, as she always did when she was put on the spot. After years of sitting with a reference desk wrapped around her waist like a hoop skirt, concrete answers came easily to her; nonchalance didn't. If James had asked, "What is the current population of Addis Ababa?" or "Can you tell me the actual chemicals in a photographic fixing bath?" she'd never have blushed, because the answers would never have offended him. But this drummer question? What exactly was he looking for?

"You'd hate it," Melanie said, trying to sound flippant. "You'd have to grow your hair long and get a nipple ring or something like that."

"Do I want to know why you're talking about nipple rings?" Michael Gold said, approaching the table. He leaned down and touched his wife's shoulder, which passed for an embrace after so many years of marriage.

"Don't get your hopes up," Melanie said. "James wants one, not me." Michael laughed. "I think that's automatic grounds for losing your board certification."

"Why?" James frowned. "Remember that Nobel laureate we met on the cruise to Alaska last summer? He had a hoop through his eyebrow."

"Exactly," Michael said. "You don't have to have board certification to create a poem entirely out of curse words." He shook out his napkin and settled it in his lap. "Where's Gus?" James checked his watch. He lived by it; Gus didn't wear one at all. It drove him crazy. "I think she was taking Kate to a friend's for a sleepover."

"Did you order yet?" Michael asked.

"Gus orders," James said, an excuse. Gus was usually there first, and as in all other things, Gus was the one who kept the meal running smoothly.

As if her husband had invoked her, Augusta Harte rushed through the door of the Chinese restaurant. "God, I'm late," she said, unbuttoning her coat with one hand. "You cannot imagine the day I've had." The other three leaned forward, expecting one of her infamous stories, but instead Gus waved over a waiter. "The usual," she said, smiling brightly. The usual? Melanie, Michael, and James looked at each other. Was it that easy?

Gus was a professional waiter, not the kind who carried food to tables, but the one who sacrificed time so that someone else would not have to. Busy New Englanders solicited her business, Other People's Time, when they didn't want to wait in line at the Motor Vehicles Division, or sit around all day for the cable TV repairman. She began to tame her curly red hair. "First," she said, an elastic band clamped between her teeth, "I spent the morning at the Motor Vehicles Division, which is awful under the best of circumstances." She bravely attempted a ponytail, something like leashing a current of electricity, and glanced up. "So I'm the next one in line-you know, just in front of that little window-and the clerk, swear to God, has a heart attack. Just dies on the floor of the registry."

"That is awful," Melanie breathed.

"Mmm. Especially because they closed the line down, and I had to start from scratch."

"More billable hours," Michael said.

"Not in this case," Gus said. "I'd already scheduled a two o'clock appointment at Exeter."

"The school?"

"Yeah. With a Mr. J. Foxhill. He turned out to be a third-former with a lot of extra cash who needed someone to sit in detention for him by proxy."

James laughed. "That's ingenuity."

"Needless to say, it wasn't acceptable to the headmaster, who wasted my time with a lecture about adult responsibility even after I told him I didn't know any more about the plan than he had. And then, when I go to pick up Kate from soccer practice, the car gets a flat, and by the time I change the spare and get to the playing field she's already found a ride to Susan's house."

"Gus," Melanie said. "What happened to the clerk?"

“You changed a tire?” James said, as if Melanie hadn't spoken. “I'm impressed.”

“So was I. But just in case it's on backwards I want to take your car downtown tonight.”

“You're working again?”

Gus nodded, smiling as the waiter delivered their food. “I'm headed to the box office for Metallica tickets.”

“What happened to the clerk?” Melanie said more forcefully.

They all stared at her. “Jeez, Mel,” Gus said. “You don't have to yell.” Melanie flushed, and Gus immediately gentled her voice. “I don't know what happened, actually,” she admitted. “He went off in some ambulance.” She spooned lo mein onto her plate. “By the way, I saw Em's painting today in the State building.”

“What were you doing in the State building?” James asked.

She shrugged. “Looking for Em's painting,” she said. “It seems so ... well, professional, with that gilded frame and the big blue ribbon hanging underneath it. And you all made fun of me when I saved the crayon pictures she used to make with Chris over at our house.” Michael smiled. “We laughed because you said they were going to be your retirement income one day.”

“You'll see,” Gus said. “A statewide art champion at seventeen; a gallery opening at twenty-one ... she'll be hanging in the Museum of Modern Art before she's thirty.” She reached for James's arm, and twisted the face of his wristwatch toward her. “I've got five more minutes.” James let his hand fall back into his lap. “The Ticketmaster's open at seven at night?”

“Seven A.M.” Gus said. “Sleeping bag's in the car.” She yawned. “I'm thinking I need a career change. Some position with a little less stress ... like an air traffic controller or the prime minister of Israel.” She reached for a platter of mu shi chicken, began rolling the pancakes and passing them out. “How are Mrs. Greenblatt's cataracts?” she asked absently.

“Gone,” James said. “Chances are she'll wind up with twenty-twenty vision.” Melanie sighed. “I want cataract surgery. I can't imagine waking up and being able to see.”

“You don't want cataract surgery,” Michael said.

“Why not? I'd get rid of my contacts and I've already got the name of a good surgeon.”

“James couldn't operate on you,” Gus said, smiling. “Isn't there some kind of ethical law against it?”

“It doesn't extend to virtual family,” Melanie said.

“I like that,” Gus said. “Virtual family. There ought to be a statute ... you know, like common-law marriage. If you live in each other's pockets long enough, you're related.” She swallowed the last of her pancake and stood up. “Well,” she said. “That was a sumptuous and relaxing dinner.”

“You can't go yet,” Melanie said, turning to ask a busboy for fortune cookies. When the man returned, she stuffed a few in Gus's pockets. “Here. The box office doesn't offer take-out.” Michael picked up a cookie and cracked it. “ 'A gift of love is not one to be taken lightly,' ” he read aloud.

“ 'You are as young as you feel,' ” James said, scanning his own fortune. “Doesn't say much for me right now.”

Everyone looked at Melanie, but she read the thin strip and pocketed it. She believed that if you spoke it aloud, your good fortune had no chance of coming true.

Gus took one of the remaining cookies from the plate and cracked it open. “Imagine that,” she said, laughing. “I got a dud.”

“It's missing?” Michael said. “That ought to be worth a free meal.”

“Check the floor, Gus. You must have dropped it. Who ever heard of a fortune cookie without a fortune?” Melanie said.

But it was not on the floor, or beneath a plate, or caught in the folds of Gus's coat. She shook her head ruefully and lifted her teacup. “Here's to my future,” she said. She drained the tea, and then, in a hurry, she left.

Bainbridge, New Hampshire, was a bedroom community populated mostly with professors from Dartmouth College and doctors from the local hospital. It was close enough to the university to be considered attractive real estate, and far enough away to be deemed “country.” Interspersed between old holdout dairy farms were narrow roads that branched off into the five-acre parcels of land that had

settled the town in the late seventies. And Wood Hollow Road, where the Golds and the Hartes lived, was one of them.

Their land, together, formed a square; two triangles meeting along a common hypotenuse. The Hartes' land was narrow at the driveway and then opened up; the Golds' land did the reverse, so that the houses were only about an acre apart. But they were separated by a small thicket of woods that did not completely block out the view of the other home.

Michael and Melanie, in their separate cars, followed the gray Volvo that belonged to James as it turned onto Wood Hollow Road. A half mile up the hill, at the granite post that announced number thirty-four, James went left. Michael swerved into the next driveway. He turned off the ignition in the truck and stepped out into the small square of light liberated from the passenger compartment, letting Grady and Beau leap up against his hips and chest. The Irish setters danced circles around him as he waited for Melanie to get out of her own car.

“Doesn't look like Em's home yet,” he said.

Melanie stepped out of the car and closed the door in one fluid, economical motion. “It's eight o'clock,” she said. “She probably just left.”

He followed Melanie through the side door into the kitchen. She set a small stack of books on the table. “Who's on call tonight?” she asked.

Michael stretched his arms over his head. “I don't know. Not me. I think Richards, from Weston Animal Hospital.” He went to the door and called to the setters, who stared at him but then made no effort to stop chasing leaves in the wind.

“That's a travesty,” Melanie said. “A vet who can't control his own dogs.” Michael stepped aside as Melanie came to the door and whistled. The dogs barreled by him, bringing inside the brisk scent of night. “They're Emily's dogs,” he said. “It makes a difference.” WHEN THE TELEPHONE RANG at three in the morning, James Harte was instantly awake. He tried to imagine what could possibly have gone wrong with Mrs. Greenblatt, because she was potentially his emergency case. He groped across the bed, across where his wife should have been, for the telephone. “Yes?”

“Is this Mr. Harte?”

“This is Dr. Harte,” James amended.

“Dr. Harte, this is Officer Stanley of the Bainbridge police. Your son has been injured, and he's being taken to Bainbridge Memorial Hospital.”

James felt his throat working up sentences that tangled around each other. “Is he ... was there a car accident?”

There was a brief pause. “No, sir,” the officer said.

James's heart twisted. “Thank you,” he said, hanging up, although he did not know why he was thanking someone who had brought him such horrible news. The moment the receiver was back in place, he had a thousand questions to ask. Where was Christopher hurt? Critically or superficially?

Was Emily still with him? What had happened? James dressed in the clothes he'd already thrown into the hamper and made his way downstairs in a matter of minutes. The hospital, he knew, would take him seventeen minutes to reach. He was already speeding down Wood Hollow Road when he picked up the car phone and dialed Gus.

“WHAT DID THEY SAY?” Melanie asked for the tenth time. “What did they say exactly?” Michael buttoned the fly of his jeans and stuffed his feet into tennis shoes. He remembered, too late, that he didn't have on socks. Fuck the socks.

“Michael.”

He glanced up. “That Em was injured, and that she'd been taken to the hospital.” His hands were shaking, yet he was amazed to find himself able to do what was necessary: push Mel toward the door, find his car keys, plot the fastest route to Bainbridge Memorial.

He had hypothetically wondered, what would happen if a phone call came in the middle of the night, a phone call that had the power to render one speechless and disbelieving. He had expected deep down that he'd be a basket case. And yet here he was, backing carefully out of his driveway, holding up well, the only sign betraying panic a tiny tic in his cheek.

“James operates there,” Melanie was saying, a soft, slurred litany. “He'll know who we should contact; what we should do.”

“Sweetheart,” Michael said, groping for her hand in the dark, “we don't know anything yet.” But as he drove past the Hartes' house he