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Now

November 1997

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 hypoteneuse. 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 took in the absolute quiet of the scene, the peaceable lack of light in the windows, and he could not help feeling a stab of jealousy at the normality of it all. *Why us?* he thought, and did not notice the brake lights of a car at the end of Wood Hollow Road, already turning toward town.

★ ★ ★

Gus lay on the sidewalk between a trio of teenagers with spiked green hair and a couple that was coming as close to sex as possible in a public venue. *If Chris ever does that to his hair*, she thought, *we would* . . . Would what? It had never been an issue because, for as long as Gus could remember, Chris had had the same slightly-longer-than-crew-cut hairstyle. And as for Romeo and Juliet here, on her right – well, that was a no-brainer also. As soon as it had begun to matter, Emily and Chris had started dating, which is what everyone had been rooting for in the first place.

Four and a half hours from now, her client's sons would have prime seats at a Metallica concert. She'd go home and sleep. By the time she got back there, James would have returned from hunting (she assumed something was in season), Kate would be gearing up for a soccer game, and Chris might just be rolling out of bed. Then Gus would do what she did every other Saturday that she didn't have plans or an invasion of relatives: she'd go to Melanie's, or have Melanie come over, and they'd talk about work and teenagers and husbands. She had several good female friends, but Melanie was the only one for whom the house didn't have to be cleaned, for whom she didn't have to wear her makeup, and around whom she could say anything without fear of repercussions, or of looking truly stupid.

'Lady,' one of the green-haired kids said. 'You got a smoke?'

It came out in a rush, *Yagottasmoke*, so that at first Gus was stunned at the audacity of the statement. *No*, she wanted to say, *I do not gotta, and you shouldn't either.* Then she realized he was wagging a cigarette – at least she hoped it was just a cigarette – in front of her face. 'Sorry,' she said, shaking her head.

It was impossible to believe that teenagers such as this existed, not when she had one like Chris, who seemed another breed entirely. Perhaps these children, with their stegosaurus hair and leather vests, only happened to look this way on the off hours, transforming themselves into scrubbed, well-mannered

adolescents during the time they spent with their parents. Ridiculous, she told herself. Even the thought of Chris having an alter ego was out of the question. You couldn't give birth to someone and not sense that something so dramatic was going on.

She felt a humming against her hip and shifted, thinking that the amorous couple had gotten a little too close. But the buzzing didn't stop, and when she reached down to find the source she remembered her beeper, which she'd carried in her purse ever since she'd started up Other People's Time. It was James who insisted; what if he had to go back to the hospital and one of the kids needed something?

Of course, in the way that most preventative medicines work, just having the beeper had managed to ward off emergencies. It had beeped only twice in five years: once, when Kate called to ask where she kept the rug-cleaning supplies, and once when the batteries were low. She fished it out of the bottom of her purse and pushed the button that identified the caller. Her car phone. But who would be in her car at this time of night?

James had driven it home from the restaurant. After crawling out of her sleeping bag, Gus walked across the street to the nearest phone booth, graffitied with sausagelike initials. As soon as James picked up, she heard the hum of the road beneath the tires.

'Gus,' James said, his voice catching. 'You've got to come.'

And a moment later, leaving her sleeping bag behind, she started to run.

They wouldn't take the lights out of his eyes. The fixtures hung over him, bright silver saucers that made him wince. He felt at least three people touching him – laying hands, shouting directions, cutting off his clothes. He could not move his arms or legs, and when he tried, he felt straps lacing across them, a collar anchoring his head.

'BP's falling,' said a woman. 'It's only seventy over palp.'

'Pupils dilated but unresponsive. Christopher? Christopher? Can you hear me?'

'He's tachycardic. Get me two large-bore IVs, either fourteen or sixteen gauge, stat. Give him D-5 normal saline, wide open for a liter to start with, please. And I want to draw some bloods . . . get a CBC with diff, platelets, coags, chem-20, UA, tox screen, and send a type and screen to the blood bank.'

Then there was a stabbing pain in the crook of his arm and the sharp sound of ripping adhesive tape. 'What have we got?' asked a new voice, and the woman spoke again. 'A holy mess,' she said. Chris felt a sharp prick near his forehead, which had him arcing against his restraints and floating back to the soft, warm hands of a nurse. 'It's okay, Chris,' she soothed. How did they know his name?

'There's some visible cranium. Call radiology, we need them to clear the C-spine.'

There was a scurry of noise, of yelling. Chris slid his eyes to the slit in the curtain off to his right and saw his father. This was the hospital; his father worked at the hospital. But he wasn't in his white coat. He was wearing street clothes, a shirt that wasn't even buttoned right. He was standing with Emily's parents, trying to get past a bunch of nurses who wouldn't let him by.

Chris flailed so suddenly he managed to rip the IV out of his arm. He looked directly at Michael Gold and screamed, but there was no sound, no noise, just wave after wave of fear.

'I don't give a fuck about procedure,' James Harte said, and then there was a crash of instruments and a scuffle of footsteps that diverted the attention of the nurses enough to let him duck behind the stained curtain. His son was fighting backboard restraints and a Philadelphia collar. There was blood everywhere, all over his face and shirt and neck. 'I'm Dr Harte,' he said to the ER physician who was barreling toward them. 'Courtesy staff,' he added. He reached out and firmly grasped Chris's hand. 'What's going on?'

'EMTs brought him in with a girl,' the doctor said quietly. 'From what we can see, he's got a scalp laceration. We were about to send him to radiology to check skull and cervical vertebral fractures, and if they report back negative, we'll get him down to CT scan.'

James felt Chris squeeze his hand so tightly his wedding band dug into the skin. *Surely*, he thought, *he's all right if he has this strength.* 'Emily,' Chris whispered hoarsely. 'Where'd they take Em?'

'James?' a tentative voice asked. He turned around to see Melanie and Michael hovering at the edge of the curtain, horrified, no doubt, by all that blood. God only knew how they'd gotten past the dragons at triage. 'Is Chris all right?'

'He's fine,' James said, more for himself than for anyone else in the room. 'He's going to be just fine.'

A resident hung up a telephone receiver. 'Radiology's waiting,' she said. The ER doctor nodded toward James. 'You can go with him,' he said. 'Keep him calm.'

James walked beside the gurney, but he did not let go of his son's hand. He began trotting as the ER staff wheeled it more quickly past the Golds. 'How's Emily?' he remembered to ask, and disappeared before they could answer.

The doctor who'd been attending Chris turned around. 'You're Mr and Mrs Gold?' he asked.

They came forward simultaneously.

'Can you step outside with me?'

The doctor led them to a small alcove behind the coffee machines, decorated with nubby blue couches and ugly Formica end tables, and Melanie instantly relaxed. She was a professional expert when it came to reading verbal or nonverbal clues. If they weren't being led to an examination room on the double, the danger must have passed. Maybe Emily was already up on a patient ward, or off to radiology as Chris was. Maybe she was being brought out to meet them.

'Please,' the doctor said. 'Sit down.'

Melanie had every intention of standing, but her knees gave out from beneath her. Michael remained upright, frozen.

'I'm very sorry,' the doctor began, the only words that Melanie could not rework into anything but what they signified. She crumpled further, her body folding into itself, until her head was so deeply buried beneath her shaking arms that she could not hear what the man was saying.

'Your daughter was pronounced dead on arrival. There was a gunshot wound to the head. It was instantaneous; she didn't suffer.' He paused. 'I'm going to need one of you to identify the body.'

Michael tried to remember to blink his eyes. Before, it had always been an involuntary act, but right now everything – breathing, standing, being – was strictly tied to his own self-control. 'I don't understand,' he said, in a voice too high to be his own. 'She was with Chris Harte.'

'Yes,' the doctor said. 'They were brought in together.'

'I don't understand,' Michael repeated, when what he really meant was *How can she be dead if he's alive?*

'Who did it?' Melanie forced out, her teeth clenched around the question as if it were a bone she had to keep possession of. 'Who shot her?'

The doctor shook his head. 'I don't know, Mrs Gold. I'm sure the police who were at the scene will be here to talk to you shortly.'

Police?

'Are you ready to go?'

Michael stared at the doctor, wondering why on earth this man thought he ought to be leaving. Then he remembered. Emily. Her body.

He followed the doctor back into the ER. Was it his imagination or did the nurses look at him differently now? He passed cubicles with moaning, damaged, living people and finally stopped in front of a curtain with no noise, no bustle, no activity behind it. The doctor waited until Michael inclined his head, then drew back the blind.

Emily was lying on her back on a table. Michael took a step forward, resting his hand on her hair. Her forehead was smooth, still warm. The doctor was wrong; that was all. She was not dead, she could not be dead, she . . . He shifted his hand, and her head lolled toward him, allowing him to see the hole above her right ear, the size of a silver dollar, ragged on the edges and matted with dried blood. But no new blood was trickling.

'Mr Gold?' the doctor said.

Michael nodded and ran out of the examination room. He ran past the man on the stretcher clutching his heart, four times older than Emily would ever be. He ran past the resident carrying a cup of coffee. He ran past Gus Harte, breathless and reaching for him. He picked up speed. Then he turned the corner, sank to his knees, and retched.

Gus had run the whole way to Bainbridge Memorial clutching hope to her chest, a package that grew heavier and more unwieldy with every step. But James was not in the ER waiting room, and all of her wishes for a manageable injury – a broken arm or a light concussion – had vanished when she'd stumbled upon Michael in the triage area. 'Look again,' she demanded of the triage nurse. 'Christopher Harte. He's the son of *Dr* James Harte.'

The nurse nodded. 'He was in here a while ago,' she said. 'I just don't know where they've taken him.' She glanced up sympathetically. 'Why don't I see if anyone else knows something?'

'Yes,' Gus said as imperiously as she could, wilting as soon as the nurse turned her back.

She let her eyes roam over the serviceable Emergency entranceway, from the empty wheelchairs waiting like wallflowers at a dance to the television shackled to the ceiling. At the edge of the area, Gus saw a swatch of red fabric. She moved toward it, recognizing the scarlet overcoat she and Melanie had found for eighty percent off at Filene's.

'Mel?' Gus whispered. Melanie lifted her head, her face just as stricken as Michael's had been. 'Is Emily hurt too?'

Melanie stared at her for a long moment. 'No,' she said carefully. 'Emily is not hurt.'

'Oh, thank God—'

'Em,' Melanie interrupted, 'is dead.'

'What's taking so long?' Gus asked for the third time, pacing in front of the tiny window in the private room that had been assigned to Christopher. 'If he's really all right, then how come they haven't brought him back yet?'

James sat in the only chair, his head in his hands. He himself had seen the CT scans, and he'd never looked over one with such a fear of finding an intracranial contusion or an epidural hemorrhage. But Chris's brain was intact; his wounds superficial. They had taken him back to the ER to be stitched up by a surgeon; he would be monitored overnight and then sent for additional tests the next day.

'Did he say anything to you? About what happened?'

James shook his head. 'He was scared, Gus. In pain. I wasn't going to push him.' He stood up and leaned against the doorframe. 'He asked where they'd brought Emily.'

Gus turned slowly. 'You didn't tell him,' she said.

'No.' James swallowed thickly. 'At the time I didn't even think about it. About them being together when this happened.'

Gus crossed the room and slipped her arms around James. Even now, he stiffened; he had not been brought up to embrace in public places, and brushes with death did not alter the rules. 'I don't want to think about it,' she murmured, laying her cheek against his back. 'I saw Melanie, and I keep imagining how easily that could have been me.'

James pushed her away and walked toward the radiator, belching out its heat. 'What the hell were they thinking, driving through a bad neighborhood?'

'What neighborhood?' Gus said, seizing on the new detail. 'Where did the ambulance come in from?'

James turned to her. 'I don't know,' he said. 'I just assumed.'

Suddenly she was a woman with a mission. 'I could go back

down to Emergency while we're waiting,' Gus said. 'They have to have that sort of information logged.' She strode purposefully toward the door, but as she went to pull it, it was opened from the outside. A male orderly wheeled in Chris, his head swathed in thick white bandages.

She was rooted to the floor, unable to connect this sunken boy with the strong son who had towered over her just that morning. The nurse explained something that Gus didn't bother to listen to, and then she and the orderly left the room.

Gus heard her own breathing providing a backbeat for the thin *drip, drip* of Chris's IV. His eyes were glassy with sedatives, unfocused with fear. Gus sat down on the edge of the bed and cradled him in her arms. 'Ssh,' she said, as he started to cry against the front of her sweater, first thin tears and then loud, unstoppable sobs. 'It's all right.'

Within minutes Chris's hiccups leveled, and his eyes closed. Gus tried to hold him to her, even after his big body went slack in her arms. She glanced at James, who was sitting in the chair beside the hospital bed like a stiff and stoic sentry. He wanted to cry, but he wouldn't. James hadn't cried since he'd been seven.

Gus did not like to cry around him, either. It was not that he ever told her she shouldn't, but the plain fact that now he wasn't as visibly upset as she was made her feel foolish rather than sensitive. She bit her lip and pulled open the door of the room, wanting to have her breakdown in private. In the hallway, she flattened her palms against the cool cinder block wall and tried to think of just yesterday, when she had gone grocery shopping and had cleaned the downstairs bathroom and had yelled at Chris for leaving the milk out on the kitchen counter all day so it spoiled. Yesterday, when everything had made sense.

'Excuse me.'

Gus turned her head to see a tall, dark-haired woman. 'I'm Detective-Sergeant Marrone of the Bainbridge police. Would you be Mrs Harte?'

She nodded and shook the policewoman's hand. 'Were you the one who found them?'

'No, I wasn't. But I was called in to the scene. I need to ask you some questions.'

'Oh,' Gus said, surprised. 'I thought you might be able to answer mine.'

Detective Marrone smiled; Gus was momentarily stunned at how beautiful that one transformation made her. 'You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours,' she said.

'I can't imagine I'll be much help,' Gus said. 'What did you want to know?'

The detective took out a pad and a pen. 'Did your son tell you he was going out tonight?'

'Yes.'

'Did he tell you where he was going?'

'No,' Gus said. 'But he's seventeen, and he's always been very responsible.' She glanced at the hospital room door. 'Until tonight,' she added.

'Uh-huh. Did you know Emily Gold, Mrs Harte?'

Gus immediately felt tears well in her eyes. Embarrassed, she swiped at them with the backs of her hands. 'Yes,' she said. 'Em is . . . was like a daughter to me.'

'And what was she to your son?'

'His girlfriend.' Gus was more confused now than before. Had Emily been involved in something illegal or dangerous? Was that why Chris had been driving through a bad neighborhood?

She did not realize that she'd spoken aloud until Detective Marrone's brows drew together. 'A bad neighborhood?'

'Well,' Gus said, coloring. 'We know there was a gun involved.'

The detective snapped shut her notebook and started for the door. 'I'd like to talk to Chris now,' she said.

'You can't,' Gus insisted, blocking the other woman's way. 'He's asleep. He needs his rest. Besides, he doesn't even know about Emily yet. We couldn't tell him, not like this. He loved her.'

Detective Marrone stared at Gus. 'Maybe,' she said. 'But he also may have shot her.'