



HarperCollins e-books



The Pact

Jodi Picoult

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The Pact
A Love Story

 HarperCollins e-books

DEDICATION

THIS ONE ' S FOR MY BROTHER, JON,

who knows the cost of the Space Toilet,
the spelling of *Tetris*, and the way to find a
chapter accidentally lost in the bowels of my computer.
I hope you also know how terrific I think you are.

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PART I

THE BOY NEXT DOOR

Who ever loved
that loved not at first sight?

—CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

Hero and Leander

Let us embrace, and from this very moment
vow an eternal misery together.

—THOMAS OTWAY

The Orphan

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 packages 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 a try? 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 a 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 Metallurgy 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 the 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 Westcott 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 in 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 dead on down that he'd be a basket case. And yet here he was, backing carefully out of his driveway, holding it 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. *What about 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 make-up 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 D5 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 vertebrae."

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 in 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 better than 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 now 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 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 wheelchair 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 the nurses 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 had 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 kept 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 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 had 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."

Fall 1979

From the way Melanie hefted the small brick of banana bread in the palm of her hand, her husband was not sure if she was planning to eat it or to throw it. She closed the front door, still shiny with new paint, and carried the loaf to the two cartons that were substituting as a makeshift kitchen table. With reverent fingers she touched the French-wire ribbon and untangled a card decorated with a hand-drawn horse. ““Welcome,” she read, ““to the NEIGH-borhood.””

“Your veterinary reputation has preceded you,” she said, handing the card to Michael.

Michael scanned the brief message, smiled, and tore open the cellophane. “It’s good,” he said. “Try some?”

Melanie paled. Even the thought of banana bread—of any food really—before noon made her queasy these days. Which was odd because every book she’d read on the subject of pregnancy—and she’d read many—said that by now, her fourth month, she should be feeling better. “I’ll call to thank them,” she said, retrieving the card. “Oh. My.” She glanced up at Michael. “Gus and James. And they sent baked goods. Do you think they’re ... you know?”

“Gay?”

“I would have said ‘embarking on an alternative lifestyle.’”

“But you didn’t,” Michael said, grinning. He lifted a box and started up the stairs.

“Well,” Melanie diplomatically announced, “whatever their ... orientation, I’m sure they’re perfectly nice.” But as she dialed, she was wondering again what kind of town they had moved to.

She had not wanted to come to Bainbridge; she’d been perfectly happy in Boston, and even there was a stretch from her native Ohio. But this town might as well have been on the edge of nowhere, and she had never been very good at forging friendships, and couldn’t Michael have found large animals to minister to somewhere farther south?

A woman answered on the third ring. “Grand Central Station,” the voice said, and Melanie slammed down the phone. She redialed more carefully, this time getting the same voice with a smile in it, crisply saying, “Hartes.”

“Yes,” Melanie said. “I’m calling from next door. Melanie Gold. I wanted to thank the Hartes for the bread.”

“Oh, great. You got it. Are you all moved in yet?”

There was a silence while Melanie wondered who this person was and what protocol was in that part of the country; if one went about revealing one’s whole life to a housekeeper or nanny. “Is James or Gus there?” Melanie asked quietly. “I, um, would like to introduce myself.”

“I’m Gus,” the woman said.

“But you’re not a man,” Melanie blurted.

Gus Harte laughed. “You mean you thought—wow! Nope, sorry to disappoint, but last time I checked I was female. Gus, as in Augusta. But no one’s called me that since my grandmother died trying to. Hey, do you need a hand over there? James is out and I’ve cleaned my living room to within an inch of its life. I’ve got nothing to do.” Before Melanie could demur, Gus made the decision for her. “Leave the door open,” she said. “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Melanie was still staring at the receiver when Michael came back into the kitchen, carrying a large

carton of china. “Did you talk to Gus Harte?” he grunted. “What’s he like?”

~~She had just opened her mouth to answer when the front door burst open, slamming back against its hinges on a gust of wind to reveal an extremely pregnant woman with a festival of wild hair and the incongruously sweet smile of a saint.~~

“*She*,” Melanie answered, “is a hurricane.”

MELANIE’S NEW JOB WAS as a staff librarian at the Bainbridge Public Library.

She had fallen in love with the tiny brick building the day she’d arrived for her interview, charmed by the stained-glass panel behind the reference desk, by the neat yellow piles of scrap paper waiting atop the card catalog, by the worn stone steps that decades of use had smoothed into curves, as if each one was smiling. It was a lovely library, but it needed her. The books were jammed pell-mell in the stacks, crushed against each other with no breathing or browsing room. The spines of some novels had cracked down the middle; the vertical file was littered with minutiae. Librarians, to Melanie, were somewhat on a par with God—who else could be bothered with, and better yet, know the answers to so many different types of questions? Knowledge was power, but a good librarian did not hoard the gift. She taught others how to find, where to look, how to see.

She had fallen in love with Michael because he stumped her. Michael had been a student at Tufts Veterinary School when he had come to her reference desk with two queries: Where he might find studies on liver damage in diabetic cats, and whether she’d like to have dinner. The first question she could have answered with her eyes closed. The second left her speechless. His neat, short hair, prematurely bright silver, made her think of riches. His gentle hands, which could coax a newly hatched bird to drink from a dropper, made her aware of her body in entirely new ways.

Even after their marriage and during the first few years of his small-animal practice, Melanie had continued to work at the college. She advanced through the library system, figuring that if Michael woke up one day and decided not to love a stuttering wren of a girl, he might still be impressed by her mind. But Michael had gone to school to tend to cows and sheep, to breed horses, and after several years of neutering pedigreed puppies and giving rabies shots, he told Melanie he needed to make change. The problem was, there weren’t very many farm animals in a big city.

With Melanie’s credentials, it had not been difficult for her to secure a position at the Bainbridge Public Library. However, Melanie was used to intense young men and women, to scholars bent into question marks over their texts, to kicking people out at closing time. At Bainbridge Library, the biggest draw was toddler story hour, because free coffee was served to the mothers. There were entire days when Melanie would sit at the reference desk and see only the mailman.

She longed for a reader, a true reader, like she was. And she found it in the unlikely form of Gus Harte.

Gus came unfailingly to the library on Tuesdays and Fridays. She would waddle through the narrow arched doorway, dumping off whatever books she’d borrowed days before. Melanie would carefully open them and match up the drawn cards and set them on the dolly to be reshelved.

Gus Harte read Dostoevsky, and Kundera, and Pope. She read George Eliot and Thackeray and histories of the world. Sometimes all in a matter of days. It amazed Melanie. And it terrified her. As a librarian, she was accustomed to being expert in her field—but she’d had to work at it. To Gus Harte this sponging up of knowledge, like everything else, seemed to come too easily.

“I have to tell you,” she said to Gus one Tuesday, “I think you’re the only person in this town who appreciates the classics.”

“I am,” Gus said soberly. “I do.”

“Did you like “Le Morte d’Arthur”?”

Gus shook her head. “I didn’t find what I was looking for.”

And what was that? Melanie wondered. Absolution? Entertainment? A good cry?

As if Melanie had spoken aloud, Gus looked up shyly. “A name.”

Inside, Melanie felt something snap with relief. Was it challenge she’d felt from someone like Gus, who devoured intricate historical novels as if they were pulp fiction? To find out that she was only skimming through, looking for something strong and classic to call her baby ... well, it should have depressed Melanie. But it didn’t.

“What are you going to name yours?” Gus asked.

Melanie started. No one knew she was pregnant; she wasn’t really showing yet and she was superstitious enough to leave it a mystery for as long as possible. “I don’t know,” she said slowly.

“Well, then,” Gus announced brightly, “we’re in the same boat.”

MELANIE, WHO HAD BEEN too bookish in junior high school to have much of a social life, suddenly had a seventh-grade friend. Somehow, instead of Gus’s exuberance overshadowing Melanie’s reserve, they complemented each other. It was not unlike the mixture of oil and vinegar—neither of which one wanted alone on one’s salad, but which together seemed such a natural twosome it was easy to believe they’d been made with each other in mind.

She would get calls from Gus first thing in the morning. “What’s it like out?” Gus would ask, although the same weather was visible out her own window. “What should I wear?”

She would find herself sitting beside Gus on the big leather couch, looking at Gus’s wedding album and laughing over the helmetlike hairstyles of her relatives. She would argue with Michael, and telephone Gus just to be told unequivocally that she was right.

Gus became comfortable enough to walk into the Gold household without knocking; Melanie borrowed baby-name books on interlibrary loan and left them in Gus’s mailbox. Melanie started to wear Gus’s maternity clothes; Gus bought Melanie’s favorite brand of decaffeinated coffee to keep on hand; they grew able to finish each other’s sentences.

“SO,” MICHAEL SAID, accepting the gin and tonic that James Harte had mixed for him. “You’re a surgeon.”

James settled across from Michael in a wing chair. From the kitchen, he could hear Gus and Melanie, their voices high and sweet as robins’. “That I am,” James said. “I’m finishing a fellowship over at Bainbridge Memorial. Ophthalmological surgery.” He took a sip of his own drink. “Gus tell me you took over Howath’s practice?”

Michael nodded. “He was one of my professors at Tufts,” he explained. “When he wrote to say he was retiring up here, I started thinking there might be room for another vet.” He laughed. “I couldn’t find a Holstein within twenty miles of Boston, but I saw six just today.”

The two men smiled uncomfortably and stared down at their glasses.

Michael glanced toward the women’s voices. “They’ve hit it off,” he said. “Gus is over so much, sometimes think she’s moved in.”

James laughed. “Gus needed someone like Melanie. I have a feeling she gets more support complaining about stretch marks and swollen ankles to your wife than she gets from me.”

Michael didn’t say anything. Perhaps James was ambivalent about pregnancy, but Michael wanted as many details as he could get. He had taken books out of Melanie’s library showing a blastocyst reconfiguring into a tiny human. He had been the one to sign up for natural childbirth classes. And

ashamed as Melanie was by her burgeoning body, he found it lovely. Pomegranate-ripe and lush, ~~was all he could do to refrain from laying hands on his wife whenever she breezed by him.~~ But Melanie undressed in the dark, pulled the covers up to her chin, batted away his embrace. Michael had, from time to time, watched Gus move about his house—five months more pregnant and unwieldy, but with a confidence and a vigor that lit her from within, and he would think, *This is how Melanie should be.*

He looked toward the kitchen, caught a glimpse of Gus's swollen stomach preceding her. "Actually," Michael said slowly, "I kind of like this whole pregnancy thing."

James snorted. "Trust me," he said. "I did an obstetrics rotation. Messy business."

"I know," Michael said.

"Mmm. But pulling calves has to be different," James insisted. "A cow doesn't scream out that she's going to kill her husband for doing this to her. A cow's placenta doesn't shoot across the delivery room like a silver bullet."

"Ah," Gus said, suddenly there. "You're talking shop again." She put her hand on James's shoulder. "My doctor husband is downright terrified of childbirth," she teased, speaking to Michael. "Would you like to deliver my baby?"

"Sure," Michael grinned. "But I'm most comfortable operating in a barn."

Gus took a cheese tray from Melanie's hands and set it down on the coffee table. "I'm flexible," she said.

Michael watched Gus settle on the arm of her husband's chair. James made no move to touch her. He leaned around her toward the cheese tray. "Is this the *pâté*?" he asked.

Gus nodded. "Homemade," she explained. "James goes duck hunting."

"Really?" Michael said. He took a cracker and tried the spread.

"And deer hunting and bear hunting and once, sweet-little-rabbit hunting," Gus continued.

"As you can see," James said, unruffled, "Gus isn't a big fan of the sport." He looked up at Michael. "I guess you wouldn't be, either, as a vet. But there's a real beauty to it—you're up before the rest of the world, and it's absolutely quiet, and you're putting yourself into the mind of the prey."

"I see," Michael said, although he didn't.

"JAMES IS BEING AN IDIOT," Gus said one snowy afternoon when Melanie called. "He told me if I don't stop walking down Wood Hollow Road I'm going to have the baby under a telephone pole."

"I would think you'd have more time than that."

"Try telling him."

"Use a different tactic," Melanie said. "Tell him the better shape you're in before the baby is born—the easier it will be to get your old body back."

"Who said I want my old body back?" Gus asked. "Can't I pick someone else's? Farrah Fawcett . . . Christie Brinkley . . ." She sighed. "You don't know how lucky you are."

"Because I'm only five months pregnant?"

"Because you're married to Michael."

Melanie didn't answer for a moment. She liked James Harte, with his cool New England looks, his effortless charm, the thread of Boston accent in his speech. Many of the characteristics that Melanie possessed James possessed also, but with a positive twist: She was reserved, he was level-headed; she was shy, he was introspective; she was obsessive, he was exacting.

He was also right. Gus's water broke three days later, half a mile down Wood Hollow Road, and if a passing telephone company vehicle hadn't stopped to ask if she was all right, she might very well

have delivered Christopher on the edge of the street.

THE DREAM WENT LIKE THIS: Melanie could see Michael's back as he crouched down in a stall, his silver hair glinting with the early sunlight, his hands moving over the heaving belly of a mare that was trying to foal. And she was standing overhead somewhere—in a hayloft, maybe?—water dripping down her legs as if she'd wet herself, yelling for him although no sound came out of her mouth.

That was how she knew she was going to have her baby alone.

"I'll call every hour on the hour," Michael assured her. But Melanie knew how Michael functioned: Once he got wrapped up in a colicky horse or a ewe with mastitis, time fell away for him. Most of the roads he traveled as a country vet didn't have a luxurious string of telephone booths.

Her due date came and went at the end of April. Then one night, Melanie heard Michael answer the phone beside the bed. He whispered something her mind did not register, and disappeared in the dark.

She dreamed again about the barn, and woke up to find the mattress soaking wet.

Pain made her double over. Michael must have left a note somewhere with a telephone number. Melanie walked through the bedroom and the bathroom, periodically stopping to sweat over contractions, but she couldn't find it. She picked up the phone and called Gus.

"Now," she said, and Gus understood.

James was operating at the hospital, so Gus brought Chris along in his car seat. "We'll find Michael," she assured Melanie. She placed Melanie's hand on the gearshift, telling her to squeeze when it started to hurt. At the Emergency pavilion, she parked the car. "Stay here," she said, grabbing Chris and running through the sliding doors. "You have to help me," she shouted to a triage nurse. "There's a woman in labor."

The nurse blinked at her, at Chris. "Looks to me like you're too late," she said.

"It's not me," Gus said. "It's my friend. In the car."

Within minutes Melanie was in a delivery room, wearing a fresh johnny and writhing in pain. The obstetrics nurse turned to Gus. "I don't suppose you know where the father is?"

"On his way," Gus said, though this was not true. "I'm supposed to stand in for him."

The nurse looked at Melanie, who had reached out to hold Gus's hand, and at Chris, who was asleep in a plastic bassinet. "I'll take him to the nursery," she said. "Can't have a baby in delivery."

"I thought that was the point," Gus muttered, and Melanie choked out a laugh.

"You didn't tell me this hurt," Melanie said.

"Of course I did."

"You didn't tell me," she amended, "it hurt this much."

Melanie's doctor had also delivered Chris. "Let me guess," she said to Gus, reaching beneath the johnny to check Melanie's cervix. "You had so much fun the first time you couldn't stay away." She helped Melanie sit up. "Okay, Melanie," the doctor said. "I want you to push."

So with her best friend bracing her shoulders and shouting in strident harmony, Melanie gave birth to a girl. "Oh, my," she said, her eyes damp. "Oh, look at that."

"I know," Gus said, her throat tight. "I see." And she left to find her own child.

The nurse had just finished packing ice between Melanie's legs and drawing the covers up to her waist when Gus returned to the room with Chris in her arms. "Look who I ran into," she said, holding the door so that Michael could pass through.

"I told you so," Melanie chided, but she was already turning the baby so that Michael could see her.

Michael touched his daughter's fine blond eyebrows. His fingernail was larger than her nose.

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